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## AND BEAUTY WILL MAKE YOU FREE: ON THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF BEAUTY\*

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### ABSTRACT

In allusion to the famous Johannine dictum, this paper seeks to explore the relationship between beauty and liberation. Liberation is here understood in terms of a movement toward transforming all reality in accordance with the principles of the coming reign of God, ‘so that God may be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28). Complementarily, beauty is not interpreted merely as a matter of taste and preference but as something that permeates all dimensions of being human. The paper, therefore, argues that beauty not only gives expression to the human yearning for transformation but that both beauty and liberation represent the constitutive elements of Christian praxis. Thus, beauty provides a framework through which the current reality can not only be seen but also discerned, experienced, and performed in a new way, thus effectively opening up possibilities for transformation as God’s project of inaugurating a new heaven and a new earth. Therefore, it will be proposed that beauty represents a key theme for theological reflection (*locus theologicus*), having aesthetic, ethical, and ontological implications for Christian theology. This point will not only be discussed in conversation with various theological voices but also illustrated through engagement with cinema, namely, Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog*.

### Keywords

Aesthetics; Beauty; Christianity; Imagination; Liberation; Praxis, *The Power of the Dog* (film); Transformation

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The theme of this paper is beauty and liberation. I would like to argue that our human yearning for beauty seeks to be united with our desire for liberation in the human pursuit of – in the language of biblical imagery – a new heaven and a new earth. Whether inadvertently or deliberately, we as human beings perceive the ugliness of that which should not be here: the ugliness of injustice, discrimination, poverty, marginalisation, disenfranchisement, apathy, and unconcern. In a word, to use a theological shortcut, the ugliness of sin. We feel and often even strive to fathom that such ugliness has no place in God's good and beautiful creation. However, there is yet another quality involved in the relationship between God and creation, namely, truth. In Hebrew, truth (*emet*) refers to firmness, faithfulness, and stability. This stability, it is important to say, does not evoke a static structure. Rather, it implies reliability and desirability. In that sense, truth, in biblical understanding, indicates how 'things should be', both presently and eschatologically. From this perspective, again, the ugliness of sin signifies a tear in the fabric of creation.

The 'echoes' of the goodness, truth, and beauty of God's creation shine through the biblical account in Genesis 1, which enables the readers to exercise their imagination while making their way through the carefully structured text that introduces creation as a jewel of unmeasurable worth. Extending the narrative arc to the following book in the biblical canon, however, Exodus 1 makes us painfully aware of the plight of the people of Israel and its longing for liberation. The scriptural narrative is thus framed by (the marvelling at the) beauty (of God's creation) and (the seeking of) liberation (from oppression). Therefore, our quest for liberation is at the same time a quest for beauty. Yet, as both Genesis 1:28 and Exodus 3:8 suggest, this liberation-beauty nexus is not to be interpreted as static, as a mere return to the original state of things. To the contrary, for the purposes of this paper, liberation will be understood in terms of a movement toward transforming all reality in accordance with the principles of the coming reign of God, 'so that God may be all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). The latter quotation comes from the passage in which the apostle contemplates the resurrection of the dead and the age to come. Central to his argument is Christ, who liberates humankind from the power of death in order to inaugurate God's plan for the consummation of creation. It is about imagining, empowered by the Spirit, how things should be ontologically, ethically,

and aesthetically; it is an imagination for what can be approximated by the metaphor of *basileia tou theou* in which vision and praxis are united.<sup>1</sup>

I have already made a remark regarding the truth as an important aspect of God's creation and its consummation. To elaborate on this line of thought further, John has in the fourth gospel Jesus say to his Jewish interlocutors who have believed in him that they would know the truth, and the truth would make them free (John 8:32). The context to which this word is written is that of a small Johannine community that feels isolated in a hostile world. 'Envisioning itself as a light in the darkness', the community finds in the gospel reassurance that God is with them, loving them and providing them with a sense of belonging.<sup>2</sup> For the Johannine community, however, such imagining is not mere escapism nor a way to deal with their opponents. Importantly, it becomes for them a source of hope and a driver of change. The truth will make you free.

To pursue the main theme of the present paper while following this logic, Willie James Jennings calibrates our view on beauty as an aspect related to human liberation. More specifically, Jennings explores beauty as mediated through art. It is art, he maintains, that gives expression to the depths of human life and divine life. When 'giving voice to the depths', moreover, the artistic is bound to the prophetic in the process that Jennings refers to as 'the Spirit of God working on and through bodies'.<sup>3</sup> For both individuals and communities to realise and nourish a shared life in fullness and freedom, the artistic and the prophetic must join in synergy.<sup>4</sup> This dynamic, then, involves much more than simply 'giving expression'; rather, it brings beauty and liberation together through the category of performance, or praxis, as I will suggest below. Once again, engaging the category of truth alongside beauty in search of liberation, as Jennings says, '[i]t is essentially the performance of

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Sison helpfully explains that the New Testament term *basileia tou theou* implies two dimensions, the kingdom of God and the reign of God as 'two sides of the same coin'. While 'the kingdom emphasizes the vision, the reign emphasizes the praxis'. See Antonio D. Sison, C.PPS., 'Reign-Focus: Theology, Film, and the Aesthetics of Liberation,' *New Theology Review* 24, no. 3 (2011): 42–52, 45.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert E. Goss, 'John,' in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 548–65, 550.

<sup>3</sup> Willie James Jennings, 'Embodying the Artistic Spirit and the Prophetic Arts,' *Literature & Theology* 30, no. 3 (2016): 256–64, 257, doi:10.1093/litthe/frw022.

<sup>4</sup> See Jennings, 'Embodying,' 256.

the truth that could become a truth that sets us free and leads to emancipatory action. The artistic joined to the prophetic could set us free.<sup>5</sup> For a theology passionate about discerning God's work of transformation and becoming involved in liberating praxis, beauty, therefore, represents a major *locus theologicus*. Such a transformation-focused theology is not only instrumental for a transformation-driven Christian praxis but also helpful for reflecting on culture, as will become apparent from my engagement with cinema later in the paper. In fact, I maintain that theological attentiveness to both praxis and culture can helpfully go hand in hand to nurture a full-fledged Christian identity. Let us, therefore, explore some key features of beauty as a *locus theologicus*.

### 1. Beauty as a *Locus Theologicus*

When pondering on beauty from a theological perspective, one can hardly avoid considering the contribution Hans Urs von Balthasar made in this field. Rooted in the concepts of form and splendour (or glory), Balthasar's project of theological aesthetics addresses two main themes: revelation (i.e., how God discloses Godself and can be perceived by human beings) and human participation in the divine life.<sup>6</sup> Roberto Goizueta explains that, for Balthasar, God is "the Beautiful" and, as such, can be known only insofar as we surrender ourselves to its intrinsic power, a power utterly gratuitous and beyond our control.<sup>7</sup> Balthasar himself, therefore, understands 'aesthetics' as 'something properly theological, namely, as the reception, perceived with the eyes of faith, of the self-interpreting glory of the sovereignly free love of God.'<sup>8</sup> Christian existence, then, is seen as one of surrender to the Beautiful, with awe, worship, and discipleship being the appropriate response to the invitation by the loving God. For Balthasar, the Christian faith is of aesthetic nature.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jennings, 'Embodying,' 257.

<sup>6</sup> See Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss, 'Following the Traces of God in Art: Aesthetic Theology as Foundational Theology. An Introduction,' *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 1 (2013): 4–8, especially at 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta, 'Theo-Drama as Liberative Praxis,' *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 1 (2013): 62–76, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco, CA: St. Ignatius Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>9</sup> See Goizueta, 'Theo-Drama,' 67.

As we can see, from a theological perspective, beauty is not merely a matter of taste and preference. On the contrary, it permeates all dimensions of being human. Through our experience of beauty, a sense of wonder is awakened. Such an awakened sense of wonder makes possible not only an ‘aesthetic existence’ but also transformation. For Christians, this process ideally finds its expression in the worship and witness of the church vis-à-vis ‘the life of the world’.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, this sense of wonder, in turn, leads to desire: a desire for wholeness, for transcendence, for God. In this sense, Rubem Alves refers to the human desires that are beautiful as ‘fragments of the image of God’.<sup>11</sup> It is in the beauty that one can find the fragments of the divine.<sup>12</sup> Willie Jennings wisely reminds us that the starting point for the human condition is fragment rather than tradition and complete story. There is no whole here, ‘everything is in slices and slivers, pieces and shards’.<sup>13</sup> Working through our fragmentation, we strive to overcome ugliness, alienation, and objectification (commodification) and to attain beauty, relationality, and belonging.<sup>14</sup> The very fact of such fragmentation highlights the tension between human brokenness and the desire for wholeness. This tension is to be understood in terms of liminality where ‘uncertainty, fear and trembling for the unknown’ is confronted by ‘the discovery of new horizons, new meaning, new circumstances and a better future’.<sup>15</sup> In search of a life made free,

<sup>10</sup> See John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>11</sup> See Rubem Alves, ‘An Invitation to Dream,’ *The Ecumenical Review* 39 (1987): 59–62. Alves is quoted in Raimundo C. Barreto, ‘The Prophet and the Poet: Richard Shaull and the Shaping of Rubem Alves’s Liberative Theopoetics,’ *Religions* 12, no. 251 (2021): 1–14, 11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040251>.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this point see Rubem Alves, ‘Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation,’ in *Struggles for Solidarity: Liberation Theologies in Tension*, ed. Lorine M. Getz and Ruy O. Costa (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 32.

<sup>14</sup> Jennings himself distinguishes three kinds of fragments: fragments of faith (which we use to attune our senses to God’s presence), colonial fragments (which continue to shatter and plague our worlds), and commodity fragments (which negatively impact our view of relationality). As he argues, ‘fragments of faith can help us work with the colonial fragments and help us overcome the effects of the process that constantly creates the commodity fragment. We are fragment workers aiming at patterns of belonging.’ See Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon E. Dames, ‘Biblical Vistas of Brokenness and Wholeness in a Time such as the Coronavirus Pandemic,’ *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1–12, 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6160>.

fragments are revived by grace in ‘the processes of being created as a complete whole’.<sup>16</sup> Here, wholeness implies integrity and meaning. Since it is truly liberating, wholeness is, in this reading, not experienced as totalising but rather as divine and beautiful.

Truly, in beauty one encounters the divine. In particular, one is drawn into the whirlpool of creation, relying on the Spirit for discernment to affirm all that is good in the world and to clearly identify that which is in need of critique and/or transformation. This process of discernment and action seeks to emphasise the sacramentality of the human experience of beauty.<sup>17</sup> In his interpretation of theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Gordon Lynch similarly opines that our experiences of beauty have ‘a sacramental function in alerting us not only to the beauty of the object we experience but in pointing us beyond this object to the truth and goodness of God which is the ultimate source of all beauty.’<sup>18</sup> Theologians reflecting on beauty, then, essentially need to face a two-fold task: to account for the ways in which people relate to the beauty of God’s coming into the world (i.e., revelation) and to interpret how God, in this process, presents truth, goodness, and beauty to us, thus inviting and making space for human participation in their ‘production’. However, it is important to note that truth, goodness, and beauty do not emerge here as mere theoretical concepts. Furthermore, they are neither purely objective nor subjective. Rather, their birthplace, from a theological perspective, is to be found in the human experience of faith from which they arise as an embodied practice – or, as we will see below, praxis.<sup>19</sup> Herein also lies the core of Goizueta’s critique of Balthasar’s theological-aesthetic project. Goizueta argues that Balthasar, in his pursuit of the aesthetic, neglects the sociopolitical as he fails to appreciate the embodied experience, the lived faith (of the poor in particular). Instead, Goizueta proposes his own vision for a theological aesthetics of liberation that

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<sup>16</sup> Dames, ‘Biblical Vistas,’ 4. See also Johan Cilliers, ‘Between Fragments and Fullness: Worshipping in the In-Between Spaces of Africa,’ *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 2 (2013): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i2.1296>.

<sup>17</sup> See Stefanie Knauss, ‘Sensing the Other and Divine in Embodied Experiences,’ *Concilium* 1 (2018): 95–100, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 185. Lynch refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Behold the Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. 1, Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 118.

<sup>19</sup> See Zordan and Knauss, ‘Following,’ 6.

‘resists both the reduction of liberation to sociopolitical praxis and the reduction of theological aesthetics to an apolitical, merely affective experience of the Beautiful.’<sup>20</sup> Keeping this close connection between beauty and liberation, we will now try to sketch the outlines of what I refer to as ‘transformative praxis’.

## 2. Beauty and Liberation: Toward a Transformative Praxis

First of all, however, it is good to realise that at this point, we are already touching upon the epistemological significance of beauty. In short, beauty is part and parcel of the process in which we produce knowledge and make sense of, relate to, and participate in the transformation of the world.<sup>21</sup> The notion of culture represents a useful framework to situate this discussion. Robert Schreiter determines three major areas for the human construction and appropriation of culture. First, culture plays an ideological role. It stands for an embodiment of values, beliefs, and attitudes that provide necessary frames of reference for people to interpret the world and offer them guidance for living in the world. As such, culture is related to meaning production; it is through the culture that people make sense of their lives. Second, culture is associated with a performative role; through ritualised action, it binds people together and gives them participatory ways to embody and enact their shared stories and values. And third, culture has an artistic-symbolic dimension because various cultural artefacts, both material (e.g., food or clothing) and immaterial (e.g., music or language) in nature, have the potential to become a source of identity as well as engender transformation.<sup>22</sup> To appropriately reflect on and respond to culture – and, to be sure, beauty – Zordan and Knauss suggest that theology must become

a foundational theology that is not looking for ‘proofs’ of God’s existence in art or culture, but rather that is open to discover the ‘traces’ of a God who has always already passed, traces that can be found in all spheres of human

<sup>20</sup> Goizueta, ‘Theo-Drama,’ 62.

<sup>21</sup> See Knauss, ‘Sensing,’ 95. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 137 and Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 50.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert J. Schreiter, ‘Communication and Interpretation across Cultures: Problems and Prospects,’ *International Review of Mission* 85, no. 337 (1996): 227–59, especially at 230.

existence and experience. And in order to become a partner in a dialogue that is truly constructive for both sides, aesthetics will have to redefine its own specificities: for one, as a theory of *aisthesis*, of sensory perception, so as not to fall back into a mere philosophy of art; also as a reflection of the dimension of practice, in the sense of production and reception; and finally, as a new evaluation of the pure materiality of the work.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar vein, Goizueta employs the term ‘the aesthetic character of Christian truth’ when he refers to its power to draw people to the gospel message, to inspire and to transform groupings of terrified individuals into interdependent agents of new creation.<sup>24</sup>

The kind of epistemology that I am talking about here is not one of theoretical, intellectual cognition of truth. It evokes what is in liberationist theologies referred to as ‘praxis’, that is, a knowledge based on the continuous interplay between action and reflection on that action. Its origins can be traced back to the prophetic tradition in the Scriptures that emphasises ‘orthopraxy’ (or right acting) and not only ‘orthodoxy’ (or right thinking or right worship).<sup>25</sup> Revelation, in the view of praxis, is then ‘a presence of God in the world that beckons to those who believe to join God’s liberating and saving activity within the weave of human and cosmic history.’<sup>26</sup> Since ‘to believe is to be drawn into and surrender to the Beautiful’, the meaning of Christian faith is ‘revealed in praxis, in our interaction with creation, other persons, and God’.<sup>27</sup> The human mind as well as the heart and the body are dimensions of praxis and as such mediate God’s presence in and interaction with the world, both in its brokenness and beauty. In particular, the poor, the ‘crucified people’, represent an ‘inverted mirror’, a useful

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<sup>25</sup> Zordan and Knauss, ‘Following,’ 6, italics in the original. For a further discussion on the important concept of *aisthesis* see below.

<sup>24</sup> See Goizueta, ‘Theo-Drama,’ 64.

<sup>25</sup> Consider, for instance, the following words from Micah 6:7a-8 (NRSV):

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

(...)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God?

<sup>26</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, ‘Contextual Methods in Theology,’ in *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), 1–29, 17. Lynch, *Understanding*, 104 in this respect speaks of orthopraxy as a capacity to promote right action.

<sup>27</sup> Goizueta, ‘Theo-Drama,’ 67.



epistemological corrective to the obfuscations of sin. Confronting the socially, politically, and economically powerful with the truth about the impacts of their actions, the poor illuminate the truth about society, thus elucidating Christ's presence in the world.<sup>28</sup> As Katie Grimes asserts, 'spoken aesthetically, until we see the crucified people as beautiful, we shall see neither the real Christ nor his true beauty.'<sup>29</sup> Drawing from our discussion so far, I would like to suggest that beauty (and/or our experience of a lack thereof) reveals the truth about human existence, which is the *conditio sine qua non* of liberation.

In this understanding, beauty and liberation, or the aesthetic and the ethical, are organically connected. While human beings are motivated and driven by beauty, the commitment to transform the world should, for Christians, never be lost to sight. Rubem Alves, himself deeply committed to both beauty and liberation, reminds us that 'if we want to change the world, we need first of all to make people dream about beauty.'<sup>30</sup> It is precisely in a world afflicted by various divisions, tragedies, exploitation, suffering, and death that we need to appeal to beauty for a vision of a different, better reality. Alves's is a holistic project that operates on a double principle of aesthetics and ethics. 'Through the ability to dream', Raimundo Barreto – in his interpretation of Alves – elucidates, 'beauty feeds a deeply rooted motivation to transform reality, not from outside, but from within broken bodies and hearts, which only beauty can move.'<sup>31</sup> This kind of 'dreaming' is far from indulging oneself with empty fantasies. Here, I believe, Barreto points to what is rendered by the complex term 'imagination'. Imagination thus accounts for 'a complex activity that engages body, mind, and affect', drawing upon 'a person's past history, present experience, and future projections in an effort to know and make meaning of reality'.<sup>32</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that imagination, in a theological perspective,

<sup>28</sup> The idea of 'inverted mirror' comes from Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), especially 261 and 245–46.

<sup>29</sup> Katie Grimes, "'But Do the Lord Care?': Tupac Shakur as Theologian of the Crucified People,' *Political Theology* 15, no. 4 (2014): 326–52, 330, doi: 10.1179/1462317X14Z.0000000082.

<sup>30</sup> Rubem Alves, 'From Liberation Theologian to Poet: A Plea that the Church Move from Ethics to Aesthetics, from Doing to Beauty,' *Church & Society* 83 (1993): 20–24. Alves is quoted in Barreto, 'Prophet,' 12.

<sup>31</sup> Barreto, 'Prophet,' 12.

<sup>32</sup> Sr Mary Karita Ivancic, 'Imagining Faith: The Biblical Imagination in Theory and Practice,' *Theological Education* 41, no. 2 (2006): 127–39, 127.

functions as both deconstructive (transgressive) and reconstructive (eschatological).<sup>55</sup> Theologians of liberation, such as Jon Sobrino, interpret this deconstructive-reconstructive process in terms of the coming of the reign of God:

The reign of God is not simply a utopia to be hoped and striven for. It is a utopia to be anticipated and constructed in opposition to historical realities, in opposition to objective sin. This sin is substantially whatever puts persons to death by structural means – by structural injustice, by institutionalized violence – in a word, by repression. The holiness that constructs the reign is altogether conscious of its struggle with this sin.<sup>54</sup>

Corrupted by sin, yet embraced by grace and empowered by the Spirit, the imagination can therefore enable people to confront the ugliness of the status quo and actively participate in God's bringing about the beauty of a new creation.

Echoing the aforementioned conviction, the aesthetic and the ethical, beauty and liberation, also come together in the work of Stefanie Knauss, who argues that our experiences with that which is beautiful, pleasing, and delightful do not necessarily have to make us oblivious to suffering and injustice but rather turn us attentive to it, 'empowering us to imagine a different world of shared beauty and flourishing, and work towards realizing it'.<sup>55</sup> Human – and, indeed, cosmic – flourishing can thus be taken as the measure of beauty from a Christian perspective.<sup>56</sup> Christians can only escape the trap of turning beauty into abstraction if, as Goizueta proposes, we make sure that our 'Christian theology of beauty... be grounded in the particularity of the crucified and risen Christ and in our... solidarity with him as we encounter him today among the crucified victims of our own societies.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Pavol Bargár, 'The Role of the Imagination in Theology,' in *Poetry and Theology*, ed. Maroš Nicák (Jihlava: Mlýn, 2018), 213–29, especially at 217–28.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 129. Similarly, inspired by Schillebeeckx's concept of 'negative contrast experience,' Antonio Sison ponders on the paradox of the experience of human suffering and death becoming fuel for a praxis that galvanizes opposition against life-denying forces. See Sison, 'Reign-Focus,' 48.

<sup>55</sup> Knauss, 'Sensing,' 98.

<sup>56</sup> See also Grimes, 'But Do the Lord Care,' 329–30 as she draws a correlation between the beauty of Christ's cross and the liberation of the poor.

<sup>57</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 122.

This all points, I would like to suggest, to the redemptive or transformative power of beauty. The latter lies in beauty's ability to open doors to new and previously unheard-of dimensions of reality. This is done by providing images that contradict the inhuman, unjust, and evil and offering those that nurture positive, life-affirming alternatives.<sup>58</sup> To be sure, the measure of beauty is the flourishing of humankind and creation. From a theological point of view, the ideal is the working toward a Christian theology – and, indeed, faith and praxis – that, with regard to both beauty and liberation, must necessarily be committed, engaged, and empowering. In this respect, Stefanie Knauss develops outlines of what she calls 'aesthetic theology'. She turns to a classic notion of *aisthesis* in the sense of a concrete sensory, embodied experience (of the material reality, including human bodies, art, and nature) to make a case for theologising that is rooted in the everyday, with all its pleasures and delights as well as sorrows and sufferings.<sup>59</sup> Such theologising is embedded in webs of relationships, fosters the flourishing of humankind and creation, and encourages openness, diversity, and inclusivity. As such, aesthetic theology taps into the incarnational and sacramental character of the Christian faith as it situates people in the goodness of creation and zooms in on the central importance of relationships with the others and God.<sup>40</sup>

Here, again, the notion of 'praxis' comes to the foreground. To conclude this section, I would like to reassert that praxis is crucial for our topic as it seeks to introduce a moment of commitment to social, cultural, and religious change to the human quest for meaning, truth, goodness, and beauty.

<sup>58</sup> See de Gruchy, *Christianity*, 199–200.

<sup>59</sup> Knauss reminds us that to be faithful to its calling aesthetic theological reflection must consider not only museums and 'opera tickets' (high culture) but also dance and sports (low culture) and even 'the taste of mangoes and the smell of rain, the texture of tree bark or soft cotton.' See Knauss, 'Sensing,' 95–96.

<sup>40</sup> See Knauss, 'Sensing,' 94, 95, and 96. Aesthetic theology, in this understanding, comes close to various types of liberationist theologies. However, Knauss's proposal for *aesthetic* theology is not to be confused with what, for example, Roberto Goizueta labels as *aesthetic* theology. The latter, Goizueta contends, is nothing but reflection on religious experience in which beauty remains abstract and disembodied. He, for his part, therefore makes a case for a theological aesthetics of liberation that is rooted in the particularity of the crucified and risen Christ and the solidarity with those who suffer around us, thus making a demand on our believing, thinking, and action. See Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion*, 122.

### 3. Beauty and Liberation in *The Power of the Dog*

In what follows, my intention is to illustrate the point I have argued in this paper by theologically reflecting on beauty and liberation in a particular work of cinematography. New Zealand director and screenwriter Jane Campion, in her 2021 Netflix-produced film *The Power of the Dog*, undertakes the task of revisiting the Western as the genre that has had the lion's share in establishing a host of American myths with their distinct aesthetics and ethics. The Western is commonly perceived as one of the film genres dominated by hypertrophied masculinity. The focus is on the lonely, independent, and strong hero, the 'tough guy', who always knows what is exactly right and good and which side to take. It was not only in the American collective imagination that this character significantly shaped a particular ethos with its ideals of beauty and goodness.

It is true in more than one respect that *The Power of the Dog* stands in line with classic works of the Western canon. Set in early twentieth-century Montana, the storyline concentrates on two brothers, Phil and George Burbank, running a major cattle ranch. It is especially Phil, who is a prominent figure and the true manager of the ranch. Interestingly, several contrasting personae are integrated in Phil. Yale-trained in classics, on the one hand, he displays a refined taste for literature, music, and painting. And yet, on the other hand, he at the same time embodies the stereotypical features of a cowboy as a tough, dominant male figure who seeks to pass this aesthetics and values on to ranch workers – truly, his 'disciples'. In the process, Phil – in an authoritarian manner – spreads toxic masculinity and is a source of subjugation and humiliation for those around him, especially his brother George and the latter's recently wedded bride, Rose. Here, beauty is disconnected from liberation due to the inappropriate exercise of power and control.

However, Campion goes on further to undermine such an image of masculinity as well as the Western as a genre.<sup>41</sup> Formally, her

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<sup>41</sup> My point here concurs with Antonio Sison's discussion of the concept of Third Cinema. Even though initially derived from the geopolitical notion 'Third World,' Third Cinema goes beyond the geographical origin of a given film in order to express the commitment to authentically represent the struggle of the marginalized to 'become agents of their own history in the postcolonial aftermath.' As such, Third Cinema effectively becomes a 'guerilla cinema' that both preserves popular memory and challenges dominant ideologies. See Sison, 'Reign-Focus,' 46.

auteur's intention is inconspicuously yet convincingly expressed, for instance, through the fact that not one gunshot is fired and, further, no firearm is displayed throughout the film. Even more subversive is Champion's treatment of the story and characters. For the purposes of this paper, a *pars pro toto* example will suffice. There is a new twist to the story when Peter, Rose's son from her previous marriage and a student of medicine, comes to spend his summer vacation at the ranch. A skinny and pale lad with a penchant for arranging flowers and engaging in scientific experiments, Peter obviously does not fit in the testosterone-laden context of the ranch. Ridiculed by the ranch workers for what they see as his effeminate visage and behaviour, he nevertheless eventually discovers a way to counter them – and break free.

It is important to note that Peter – with his subversive power and shrewd action – reminds us of biblical Jacob. Like for Jacob in his relationship with his mother Rebecca (Gen 25:28), Peter's mother is also his closest ally and 'soulmate'. Furthermore, Jacob is one who spends much of his time 'at home among the tents' (Gen 25:27, NIV) and thence in the vicinity of women. This feature sharply distinguishes the biblical patriarch from his brother Esau, a hunter and a man of the field. In an analogical manner, a similarly strong contrast can be drawn between Peter and the cowboys at the ranch, most notably Phil himself. Most importantly, however, it is their astute demeanour that Jacob and Peter have in common. Through their sly ways, they both navigate their lives and seize the opportunities that would remain unattainable for them through the means of conventional 'masculine' behaviour.

It is perhaps even to the greater extent that Peter's character shares commonalities with that of the psalmist due to an explicit reference to Psalm 22. In this psalm, the main protagonist self-identifies as a 'worm' (v. 6), an image intended to represent not only something of little value but also something ugly.<sup>42</sup> Still, this ugliness can be transformed into the beautiful and meaningful. The psalmist's hope in God is what makes all the difference. Therefore, to once again turn to the imagery employed by the psalm, it is not 'lions' and 'bulls' (vv. 12–13) but rather a 'worm' that has a future before God. Using theological language, the psalm shows us that God did not 'despise' or 'abhor' the 'affliction of the afflicted' (v. 24) but, I would argue, found the beauty in the *conditio humana* to liberate the psalmist.

<sup>42</sup> I use the translation according to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

In her reading of Psalm 22, Katie Grimes likens the psalmist – and, by Christian theological interpretation, the crucified Christ – to the crucified peoples of today. In her contemporary US context, the latter are by and large represented by people of colour who suffer disenfranchisement, institutional abuse, or unfair legal treatment. Psalm 22 supplies, for Grimes, ‘Christological checks and balances’ for identifying the crucified people.<sup>45</sup> It is on account of their commonly perceived ugliness that the crucified people, the ‘worms’ of today, have the potential to illuminate the beauty of the cross, thus pointing to God’s liberating action.<sup>44</sup> Here, I would reiterate the point I have made earlier, drawing from Katie Grimes’s theological-aesthetic reflections, that ‘until we see the crucified people as beautiful, we shall see neither the real Christ nor his true beauty’.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it is the crucified people who anchor beauty in the lived reality, shaped by ugliness and sin, thereby preventing Christian theological aesthetics from contenting itself with complacency and complicity in the status quo.<sup>46</sup> Making a Christological extrapolation from the kerygmatic focus provided by Psalm 22, one can say that by inverting the categories of beauty and ugliness, Christ’s cross – and, indeed, the event of his crucifixion and resurrection – does not merely stand for the victory of life over death but the victory of justice over injustice as it represents God’s vindication of the ‘worm’, of the innocent victim.<sup>47</sup> That certainly has implications for Christian praxis, embracing the categories of beauty and liberation. As Roberto Goizueta suggests:

If a Christian theological aesthetics takes as its starting point God’s own praxis as expressed in the Crucified and Risen Christ, then our own participation in the divine praxis, our own role in theo-drama, must be undertaken in solidarity with the innocent victims who daily are condemned to death.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Grimes, ‘But Do the Lord Care,’ 330.

<sup>44</sup> See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 261–62.

<sup>45</sup> Grimes, ‘But Do the Lord Care,’ 330.

<sup>46</sup> See also James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 35.

<sup>47</sup> See also Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 36–48.

<sup>48</sup> Goizueta, ‘Theo-Drama,’ 72.

In *The Power of the Dog*, ultimately, Peter seems to manage to be freed from toxic masculinity and establish his identity differently from the practice common for most men around him. It is admittedly a fragile but beautiful identity, symbolised by flowers that he likes to arrange. Importantly, it is one that nurtures hope for and a possibility of liberation (for Peter's mother and himself) and reconciliation (between Peter's mother and her in-laws).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to suggest that beauty represents an important theme for theological reflection on faith and praxis *and* arts and culture. More specifically, I believe to have shown that beauty belongs together with liberation as an indispensable part of God's project of transforming the whole of reality toward a new heaven and a new earth. The transformative power of beauty lies in its capability to provide images that challenge the evil and inhuman and help imagine the just and life-affirming. To be sure, it is in fact a divine-human project as humans are invited to become active agents in this transformation. Furthermore, this dynamic is to be envisaged as nurturing interdependency, bringing together both the individual and communal aspects of being human. To be in relation with others, Christians should insist, calls for a type of solidarity that transcends one's own social group and demonstrates that every human community has a role to play in the coming reign of God.

In conclusion, I would like to propose that theological-anthropological discourse on beauty and liberation can helpfully bring together three aspects.<sup>49</sup> First, the aesthetic aspect addresses how beauty is related to the experiences of transcendence in the quest for transformation. Second, the liberationist aspect is focused on a commitment to the flourishing of humankind and creation as envisioned, first and foremost, in the eschatological imagery of the Scriptures (e.g., a new heaven and a new earth – Isa 65:17, Rev 21:1). And, finally, the two are in a sense joined in what can be termed as the ontological aspect which offers a meaningful account of existence vis-à-vis the ultimate consummation of God's reign. It is essential to emphasise, however, that all three of these aspects are inseparable from everyday reality, including

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<sup>49</sup> For this insight I am inspired by Lynch, *Understanding*, 98.

its tears, sweat, and wounds. In other words, the Christian understanding of beauty and liberation is inherently incarnational, even while featuring a robust eschatological and transcendental focus. From a theological perspective, ultimately, this discourse – and the human yearning for transformation – must be carried on by a hope that the process of contemplation, critique, and construction of reality from the vantage point of beauty and liberation lies at the heart of Christian identity.

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