

Beauty Will Destroy the World? An Aesthetics of the Cross

Davor Džalto

“Beauty will save the world” is probably the most quoted sentence of Fyodor Dostoevsky. However, in *The Idiot* we also find another, quite different, statement on beauty. Commenting on the portrait of Nastasya Filipovna, Adelaida says: “Such beauty is power... With such a beauty one can turn the world upside down.”¹

In this paper I address two types of *beauty* that correspond, to some extent, to Dostoevsky’s aesthetic differentiation. The first type of beauty, which bears the potential to “turn the world upside down,” I call “entertaining” beauty. I shall argue that this type of beauty is dominant in our contemporary media culture. The second type, quite different, is the “ecstatic” beauty, which is inherent to what I would call *Orthodox Christian aesthetics*.

The Entertaining Aesthetics of Contemporary Media Images

We live in a highly *aestheticized* culture. This aesthetization is the result of the fact that our contemporary culture is primarily a media culture. We are surrounded by *beautiful* (aestheticized) images that mediate almost all of our experiences. They appear on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, in computer-games and video clips. They are a vital aspect of Hollywood movies, television shows and commercials.

The concept of “image” should be understood broadly here, not only as two-dimensional images (in form of photographs for example), but also as multimedia images (such as videos) and the more complex representations that appear out of the virtual

¹Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Idiot*. Chapter VII.

“interactions” between human beings and a particular medium (e.g. the Internet, especially in the case of so-called “social networks”). Most of these images, in spite of the variety of their appearances and their constant change, have some features in common that make it possible to speak about a specific type of contemporary media aesthetics – they are all created to be *attractive, seductive and entertaining*.²

The problem with such images is that they mediate not only our experience of reality but, as Jean Baudrillard constantly warns us, they are capable of *replacing* reality. Images have become hyper-real, they threaten to obscure “the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ and between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary.’”³ Media images have power not only to produce new appearances, but to change us and the way we think and act. After looking at billboards, television screens and websites, we start to interact with other people and our surroundings in a different way. We start consuming what the images tell us to consume, and consider good what they show us as good. Ultimately, we become addicts who cannot approach the world, others and even our “self,” without effective, entertaining stimulants. In fact, media images become the only appearance and content of the world with which we can possibly interface.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman brilliantly analyzes the entertaining properties of our contemporary media images and their capacity to passivize the viewer and turn him or her into a consumer of endless entertainment.⁴ Following Marshall McLuhan, Postman shows how properties of the television as a medium influence its content and result in attractive and entertaining images that do not call for any creativity or critical thinking. Most importantly, television images prevent the viewer from any authentic experience of the world and other people.

Postman’s critique is valid not only for television aesthetics, but also for the majority of our contemporary images whose

² We can find the contours of this aesthetics in Guy Debord’s concept of spectacle which is, in his view, “the chief product of present-day society.” (Debord G. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Zone Books. New York. 1995. 16.) Spectacle thus becomes “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord G. *The Society of the Spectacle*. 12.)

³ Baudrillard J. ‘Simulacra and Simulations. Selected Writings. Stanford University Press. Palo Alto, CA. 2001, 171.

⁴ Postman N. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Viking Penguin. New York. 1985.

aesthetics is based on attraction, seduction and entertainment. In a manner quite similar to that of modern pornography, the consumer of contemporary media images experiences and enjoys the beauty of these images precisely because the images enable him/her to face their own phantasms. The images function here as a mirror, reflecting our phantasms back to us. “The murder of the real,” to borrow again from Baudrillard’s vocabulary, happens with our approval; we permit the “entertaining” images to occupy such a prominent place in our interactions with our surroundings that they even dominate our “interactions” with ourselves. As Slavoj Žižek explains, the reason for rejecting the real, bodily contact in favor of images (in general) lies in our adherence to the fantasy-principle:

...any contact with a ‘real,’ flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching *another* human being, is not something evident but inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only in so far as this other enters the subject’s fantasy-frame.⁵

The beauty of *entertaining* images is capable, more successfully today than ever before, of keeping the necessary distance between the image and “rough” unpleasant reality. This distance provides space for our own fantasies to be manifested as “real” or “objective” because they are exteriorized (that is, they exist outside the subject, in the *image* itself). Such a “virtual real” is more attractive than the “naked real” because it is our fantasy which is made *objective* (“real”) without the disturbing aspects of reality we do not want to deal with. This distance allows us to experience the pleasure of being in virtual “contact” with the world and others around us, because the images we interact with are at the same time “aestheticized” (more enjoyable and attractive than the “naked reality”) and “objective” (exteriorized, effective fantasy, in the form of an image). Our fantasies require a suitable frame in order to bridge the gap between mere imagination and “subjective” desires on the one hand, and “objective,” “real” world on the other. It seems that the entertaining images are a perfect way to overcome the gap

⁵ Žižek S. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso. London-New York. 2008, 82.

while preserving the “reality” of the image from collapsing to mere reality. This way, “entertaining” beauty enables us to experience pleasure (even the pleasure of “contact” with the world around us) in our isolation and self-centrism, without the annoying intrusion of the *real* other.⁶

The situation becomes more complex when we move to the aesthetics of the images on the Internet. I will point here only to the logic and aesthetics of the most popular “social network” – Facebook – to illustrate the level of self-centrism that comes as a result of the seductive, entertaining beauty of our contemporary images.

Facebook presents itself as a medium that provides virtual space for people to meet and interact. However, we can also look at Facebook as a way of using the very means of communication to prevent authentic communication and personal interaction. The primary phenomenon under consideration here is the so-called “personalization” of the image (interface) that the user engages with while using the Internet. What Google or Facebook display for us on our screens is not any “objective” representation of events and data; they do not, for instance, show us data in accordance with the chronology of posts or any other “objective” relevancy. What we see is rather generated according to what we probably *want to see*, based on the data collected during our past websurfing. This mechanism is closely analyzed in Eli Pariser’s book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You*:

⁶ Žižek is right in his claim that if we remove images there is nothing left (see *Living in the End Times According to Slavoj Žižek*). This is actually a contemporary adoption of the famous words by patriarch Nicephorus in defense of holy icons (see: *Antirretics*, I, 244 D). However, if we try to remove these images and their beauty, we are not actually left with nothing, we are left with a different world deprived of these hyper-aestheticized images. One could, rightly, remark that their removal does not reveal any old-fashioned “rough” reality but rather just a different type of (non-attractive) image. My intention here is not to argue in favor of a “real reality” waiting to be unveiled behind the images, but rather to point to a different kind of aesthetic experience that neither corrupts the viewer nor fixes him/her in individuality and isolation. This aesthetic experience makes humans capable of a different experience of the “other” – where the other is the source of one’s own existence and identity. Thus, “real reality,” from an Orthodox Christian perspective, can only be constituted/created in this ecstatic movement outside the isolation of individuality.

In July 2010, Google News rolled out a personalized version of its popular service. Sensitive to concerns about shared experience, Google made sure to highlight the “top stories” that are of broad, general interest. But look below that top band, and you will see only stories that are locally and personally relevant to you, based on the interests that you’ve demonstrated through Google and what articles you’ve clicked on in the past.⁷

The result is that: “Without sitting down next to a friend, it’s hard to tell how the version of Google or Yahoo News that you’re seeing differs from anyone else’s. But because the filter bubble distorts our perception of what’s important, true, and real, it’s critically important to render it visible.”⁸

In a similar and perhaps even more radical vein, our Facebook avatar, as a desired image of ourselves, interacts with other avatars (also desired images), and participates in constructing a larger image that emerges out of this “interaction.” It is not only our posts, photographs or videos that constitute this larger image, but the entire “interaction” that is based on these “personalized” appearances (which also includes the history of our “likes” and chats, comments on other people’s posts, etc.).

Thus, being more and more “together” in a virtual community of Facebook and more and more “in contact” with our “friends,” (i.e. disembodied avatars of others) we actually become more and more alone. Although we are alone, we do not feel lonely because the aesthetics of Internet images deprives us from feelings of loneliness even more effectively than television does. On the contrary, we feel happy as we become addicted to the stimuli of the Facebook interactions. The happiness of a Facebook-addict is similar to the happiness of any other drug addict. Because there is nothing outside of this “feeling good,” the sensation itself and the image of “me” that the drug produces must be repeated and expanded over and over. We feel happy in a universe where we are constantly exposed to virtual images of ourselves. To quote Pariser again:

⁷ Pariser E. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You*. Penguin Books. New York. 2011, 37.

⁸ Pariser E. *The Filter Bubble*. 16.

We're never bored. We're never annoyed. Our media is a perfect reflection of our interests and desires. By definition, it's an appealing prospect—a return to a Ptolemaic universe in which the sun and everything else revolves around us.⁹

The digital environment convincingly manufactures a sense of “reality” and “contact” with others that becomes our way to escape the obvious autism of constant and almost exclusive exposure to “myself.” But it provides no real escape from this pathology, only a consolation. Since the virtual “others” are not real, their images and our entire “interactions” with them produce pleasure because they reflect our fantasies as quasi-reality. The pleasure is total, and is totally autistic – it is not only “me” that exposes me to myself, but the “other” is “me” again! This hyper-ego-centric aesthetics replaces the real other not only in concrete cases, but also as a general principle.

We feel pleasure in looking at the entertaining beauty of images of ourselves because they show how attractive, good and smart we are. These tailored images function similarly to the mirror from the famous fairy-tale: every time we turn on our televisions, every time we surf the Web and open our Facebook profiles, we expect to hear the mirror telling us “who is the fairest one of all.” If we (by accident or due to the technological imperfections that still may exist) receive a response different from the desired one, we feel frustrated and turn to another mirror of a similar kind that will obediently fill its role.

By enjoying this virtual image of ourselves, the real “me” becomes more and more similar to the *virtual* “me,” not vice-versa. In other words, my personal identity is no longer the prototype of my image, it is the other way around – my real me is a simulation of the desired and attractive image of “me” offered by the medium. The reversal of the classical mimetic approach seems to be complete. As a consequence, our humanity is reduced not only to individuality, but to a hypertrophy of virtual individuality, which enjoys its isolation and enslavement within the sphere of the virtual. We stay in this humiliating position not only because of the

⁹ Pariser E. The Filter Bubble. 11-12.

physical or psychological effects of the drug, but primarily because all sorts of slavery, provide a sense of security and meaning in the world without any meaning *per se*.

The final result of the encounter between entertaining beauty and the viewer/user is isolation in a self-centric, impotent and individual world. And this is precisely what bears potential to harm the *personal mode of existence*, which, from an Orthodox Christian perspective, is the only *real* reality and the only true meaning of the world and each particular existence.¹⁰ Being a *person* means not existing simply as an individual, as an autonomous “self.” *Personhood* implies an authentic, free and unrepeatable particular human existence constituted in the communion with others (and thus with God).

To enter into this communion one must reject self-centrism not as a moral issue but as an existential one. Rejecting the existential loneliness of one’s individual “I” opens one’s being toward others. This is an *ecstatic* escape from the ontological nihilism of individuality. Its purpose is to reach a new existence based on love. This (personal) mode of existence can overcome all natural categories and the *reality* of “this world;” it establishes a “new being” as eschatological reality. In other words, personhood is a way of saving “this world” in its totality.. This is why harming the personal mode of existence literally results in “turning the world upside down.”

The “original sin” of individuality seems to be at the very heart of this entertaining aesthetics. Instead of facing the ugliness of the “rough” reality and developing its potential for personal existence, we turn our heads in a desperate attempt to amuse ourselves until the effective stimuli deaden all of our fears. After all, who could blame the “innocent children” (in the words of the Grand Inquisitor) for taking the broader and easier road? It takes less effort, and certainly less care for others and the world, to simply sit in our armchairs and watch another television serial or to chat via Facebook than to face the unpleasant *reality* of suffering, decay and death. At this point, the question of beauty ceases to be

¹⁰ In this “Orthodox personalism” I generally follow the religious philosophy of Nikolai Berdyaev and theology of John Zizioulas. For more on the Orthodox theology of personhood see: Zizioulas, J. *Being as Communion*. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. Crestwood, NY. 1985.

exclusively aesthetical in nature and also becomes ethical and ontological one.. The (false) sense of security, the illusion of meaning, the absence of care for others and the fear of the unpleasant keeps us locked in the *entertaining* aesthetics of our contemporary media images.

And here is the paradox of our contemporary aestheticized culture: although in a certain sense we live in *aesthetic times* par excellence, the *hyper-aestheticized* images cannot elicit authentic aesthetic (sensuous) experience. We are exposed to an abundance of aestheticizations that prevent authentic aesthetics. We are invited – almost compelled – to take everything we want as much as we want, because everything is becoming more and more deprived of its “dangerous” (aesthetically *real*) substance. We can enjoy artificial flavors, de-caffeinated coffee, humanoid faces with fake smiles that speak to us from the billboards and commercials, or virtual sex, since they are always *images* that effectively replace the reality. The more we consume them the more we become passive and isolated addicts. The aesthetics of entertainment does not allow authentic encounter or an experience of someone or something new and different. It continually brings to us our own phantasms that merely appear as something exterior to us while they actually keep us in a masturbatory isolation of self-amusement. Since we have allowed the images to manipulate our needs in such a manner that we cannot resist their seductive power, we are more and more compelled to make irrational and even self-destructive choices. The chance that a sudden intrusion of the real sensuous experience will wake us up is becoming less and less probable.

The Aesthetics of Ekstasis

From the point of view of Orthodox Christian anthropology, contemporary media aesthetics has the capacity to usurp human freedom by isolating the viewer. As an alternative to this *entertaining* beauty, I propose the *ecstatic* sensuous experience.

The main features of “ecstatic” beauty, in spite of the variety of forms it might take, is that it is not “aesthetically” compelling (i.e. seductive, attractive, etc.) and does not cause a person to lose his or her freedom. Rather, ecstatic beauty opens up the space for

dialog with the reality outside the individual self.¹¹ I call this type of beauty *ecstatic* because it leads a person to *ekstasis*, to the dynamic “getting out” of individuality and isolation.

We can see examples of “proto-ecstatic” sensuous experiences in the Dionysian or Orphic mysteries of antiquity.¹² One can also think of the ancient *symposia* that combined drinking parties and academic discussions as another manifestation of this aesthetics.¹³ The beauty of mutual gathering, processions, sacrifices, rituals, sacred texts, discussions, and eating and drinking together provoked an ecstatic “opening” of being. Here, the sensuous and spiritual experience was not divided, it occurred simultaneously and inseparably.

Even for the ancients, the ecstatic movement outside oneself represented an encounter and union with others where “true” knowledge could be acquired. By ecstatically overcoming one’s individual isolation (through mystical union with other humans and the natural world) we also become capable of acquiring “true” (mystical) knowledge. The encounter with reality thus takes place through an authentic sensuous experience as well as through a reflection (*theoria*) on the image of the reality. In this respect, the ancient mysteries, to some extent at least, anticipated Christian epistemology and aesthetics. From the Christian point of view, we gain true knowledge only through an ecstatic movement and co-(mm)union with God, other human beings and all God’s creation.

“Ecstatic” aesthetics has come to its fulfillment in the “aesthetics of the Cross” as a Christian aesthetics *par excellence*. Its foundations were laid already in the First Epistle to the Corinthians by Apostle Paul: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to

¹¹ This does not happen only because of the “objective” properties of certain “beauty” but also because of the way the viewer engages with that beauty.

¹² It is, however, clear that many of the constitutive elements of ancient mysteries cannot be related to Christianity and the “ecstatic” beauty I have in mind. Such elements include human sacrifices (reported in respect to Dionysian mysteries) or chthonic and fertility cults and rituals that establish human-nature relations of quite a different quality compared to the Christian worldview. For more on ancient mysteries see: Cosmopoulos, M. B. (Ed.). *Greek Mysteries. The Archeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*. Routledge. London. 2003.

¹³ For more on the relations of modern parties, ancient mysteries and Christian liturgy see: Džalto D. ‘Ontology of Parties.’ *Plus Ultra*. Otačnik. Belgrade. 2011. 55-61.

proclaim the gospel, and not with *eloquent wisdom*, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”¹⁴ The message seems clear: there is no attraction, seduction or entertainment in the reality of the Cross, nor a need for them. With the Cross, in fact, a certain *ugliness* confronts us. As the reality (and not just symbol) of passion and death, the cross is ugly and frightening. It reminds us of the “last enemy,”¹⁵ which is our ultimate reality in this world. Paul rejects the “eloquent wisdom” of this world – meaning the *attractive beauty* (of a good rhetoric, for instance) and convincing arguments – to highlight this unpleasant reality that becomes our salvation. To reject this compelling beauty means affirming the reality human freedom.

The Cross transforms the question of beauty into an existential one. Aesthetics is not merely a matter of sensuous experience; it is deeply rooted in the problem of human freedom. Through the Cross, “naked,” “rough” and unpleasant reality can be perceived as “beautiful” indeed. Only in its unattractiveness and non-persuasiveness does it open up the space for our freedom and creative participation in it.

The “imperfection” of the aesthetics and epistemology of the Cross provides a “crack” that becomes our way to actively participate in it. “Perfection” and “completeness,” both formal and conceptual, have something compelling and totalitarian in their character. What can the viewer do in front of a “perfect” form but passively admire or *consume* it? “Perfection” can enslave the human being by turning him or her into a useful object that *perfectly* fits into a larger mechanism (it is always good to remember that the Christian God did not reveal His power in glory but in weakness and modesty. His glory will be revealed, but at the end, when “this world,” as the world of necessity, has passed away.). The very concepts of “perfection” and “completeness” point to something static and distant from us. For instance, “truth” understood as “perfection” comes from the ancient mindset where “perfection” was envisioned to be in the beginning (*in principio*), which means in the past (e.g. in the age of Saturn).¹⁶ The ancients searched for

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 1:17. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ 1 Cor.15:26.

¹⁶ A similar logic is present in our modern times as well. We find it in the modernist belief in “universal laws” that govern the universe, social and even psychological life of

“completeness” in the everlasting harmony of the *kosmos* as the supreme (though still natural and therefore compelling) order. Such “perfection” did not depend on the person; “objective truths” of the everlasting laws do not require our freedom and creativity.

Christians, on the other hand, seek “perfection” and “truth” in the *eschaton*. These are not “objective” data and compelling facts brought to light on their own. Rather, “perfection” and “truth” are aspects of personal reality brought about through active, creative participation of the human being. The truth of the world and its completeness cannot be achieved without effort. This is why the afore-mentioned “crack” is so important in the *ecstatic* aesthetics – it is only through a “crack,” a scratch on the surface of “perfection,” do we start partaking in the new reality. The “beauty” of the Cross does not try to convince, seduce us or entertain us – or, to put it simply – it does not take our freedom away from us. One must *struggle* with this reality to find beauty and pleasure in it. Just like Jacob, we affirm our freedom through active participation in creating a new (personal) reality.¹⁷ While the Cross is a symbol of suffering and death, it also becomes a means to overcome the necessities and corruptions of this world. It is not that “spiritual” pleasure is opposed to “sensual” pleasure; rather what is at stake here is the pleasure and excitement of free existence in communion with others – the existence liberated from the constraints of the fallen being.¹⁸

the human being. More importantly, we find it in the belief in truth as an “objective” and provable category.

¹⁷ Compare to: Gen. 33:24-29; Hos. 12:3-4.

¹⁸ An interesting topic for a future analysis would be the class-determinants and origins of Christian aesthetics. It seems to me that the early (pre-Constantine) Christian aesthetics can accurately be described as the aesthetics of the Cross, in the immediacy and simplicity of its experience and expression, which has to do with the (lower) social status of the early Christians and, probably, their intense eschatological expectations that both stood in a sharp contrast with “this world,” its beauty and truth. The proclamation of the “Heavenly Kingdom” over the “earthly” one, the rejection of the powers of “this world,” wealth and “eloquent wisdom” for the reality of the Cross, are certainly related to the early Christian skepticism toward the social and political power, but also toward the aesthetics of attraction and luxury. It can be argued that just as genuine Christianity is basically “anarchic” in its social and political dimension it is also “minimal” in its aesthetics, which is not preoccupied with formal beauty, material splendor and self-centric pleasure. However, in the post-Constantine era, we witness to different and even the opposite streams. The Church seems to be compelled to make compromises between the “heavenly” and the “earthly” kingdoms, which made it possible to adopt Christianity

The source of this ecstatic beauty is found at the very heart of the Christian faith – in *love*. Christian aesthetics and Christian love are ontological categories; they express a *mode of existence*. Christ's cross is *beautiful* not because it is attractive or entertaining but because it crucifies our self-centrism and points to the ecstatic overcoming of our being. This makes us capable of *knowing* the truth that “makes us free.” Christian truth is a personal category; “I am the way and the truth and the life.”¹⁹ The knowledge of truth is a communal act, not a rational analysis. It is not possible to acquire true knowledge except through *ecstatic* movement toward others. Moreover, the awareness of the truth as a personal category makes us realize that there is no reality or life outside the communion of love with God and others. This is why knowledge divorced from love, and ecstatic beauty bears a dangerous and even totalitarian potential, while beauty divorced from truth and love (i.e. truth *as* love) has a potential to destroy the world. It threatens in a very profound way our capacity to be(come) persons, which means beings who ecstatically overcome their own (natural) boundaries in order to find themselves in communion with others.

From a Christian perspective, it would be fundamentally wrong to criticize our contemporary culture as too *material*, too *bodily* or too *sensuous*. The problem is that it is becoming increasingly deprived of authentic sensuous experience.²⁰ It would be, therefore, also wrong to look for an authentic Christian aesthetics in the rejection of the “material” or sensuous aspects of our reality. On the contrary, a vital aspect of Christian aesthetics is the authentic experience of the other, including bodily “flesh and blood” contact. Authentic experience of the world and feeling its “taste” is positive as long as it does not become just a stimulus that turns human beings into addicts and corrupts their freedom.

as an imperial ideology. Aesthetics was also not immune to these processes; they led to new standards that valued gold, wealth and skill in the creation of particular “Christian” artistic expression.

¹⁹ Jn. 14:6.

²⁰ This deprivation might, in a paradoxical manner, face us with a simple fact that there is no immanent and a priori meaning to our reality. It seems to me that from an Orthodox Christian perspective “being” is not to be revealed, but to be created. Apart from a free and creative movement of the person toward the communion with God, there is no ontologically significant meaning per se.

The “ecstatic” aesthetics teaches us to try to approach everything as a potential to “get out” of our individuality and to enter the refreshing existence as freedom and love. Outside this existence, regardless of what the seductive and attractive aesthetics of our contemporary culture advertizes, is a big and compelling *nothing* which takes our freedom and our potentials away from us. The “ecstatic” beauty shows us that the only way to “save” the world is to actively participate in the creation of a new world as a personal and eschatological reality.