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Theological Aesthetics and Everyday Neoliberalism

A Estética Teológica e o
Neoliberalismo Cotidiano

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Abstract

Theological aesthetics in the present must turn toward everyday life, especially because of neoliberal capitalism's comprehensive deformation of the everyday. Karl Rahner's theology, with its emphasis on Jesus Christ's (re)configuration of everyday human life, proves dually advantageous for turning theological aesthetics toward the everyday and generating Catholic, theological-aesthetic discursive resistance to neoliberalism's pernicious everyday aesthetic. This article's first part explicates what constitutes a Rahnerian theological aesthetic: the embeddedness of Jesus Christ in everyday human life, which is "aesthetic" in its embodiedness. Part two switches focus to neoliberal capitalism, providing a brief account of how it distinctively shapes everyday human life, especially with regard to fragmentation of the self, tacit support for systemic cruelty toward others, and somatic manipulation. Part three suggests how Rahner's theological aesthetic, with its robust account of embodied aesthesis as expressive of deep spiritual freedom shaped by Christic transformation, proves resistant to everyday neoliberalism, which is an aesthetic shaped by marketization of the human person and punitive behavior toward people deemed "market

failures” (who in Christian parlance we would call “the least of these,” Mt 25:45).

Keywords: Aesthetics; Christology; Embodiment; Neoliberalism; RAHNER, Karl.

Resumo

A estética teológica, atualmente, deve direcionar-se ao cotidiano, especialmente em virtude da alargada deformação do dia-a-dia pelo capitalismo neoliberal. A teologia de Karl Rahner com sua ênfase na (re)configuração do cotidiano da vida humana a partir de Jesus Cristo, mostra-se duplamente vantajosa na medida em que direciona a estética teológica ao cotidiano e gerando uma resistência discursiva estética teológica católica à estética perniciosa do cotidiano do neoliberalismo. A primeira parte deste texto explica o que constitui a estética teológica de Rahner: a integração de Jesus Cristo no cotidiano da vida humana, que é “estética” e sua encarnação. A segunda parte foca o capitalismo neoliberal, provendo uma breve descrição de como ela molda a vida cotidiana, especialmente a respeito da fragmentação do ser, tácito suporte a crueldade sistematizada contra outros, além de manipulação somática. A terceira parte sugere como a estética teológica de Rahner, com sua robusta característica na estética encarnada como expressão da liberdade espiritual moldada pela transformação crística, se prova resistente ao cotidiano do neoliberalismo, que é uma estética formada pela marquetização da pessoa humana e pelo comportamento punitivo em relação as pessoas considerado como “falhas do mercado” (que em linguagem cristã seria chamado de “os pequeninos” Mt 25:45).

Palavras-chave: Estética. Cristologia. Encarnação. Neoliberalismo. Karl Rahner.

Introduction

Whether one celebrates or laments it, a certain end of art has occurred in recent decades.¹ Put simply, the boundary between art and life is now often blurred, with historical examples being Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes or John Cage’s 4’33”, and more recent ones

1. For representative celebration, see DANTO, Arthur. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Updated edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. For representative lament, see KUSPIT, Donald. *The End of Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

being Jeff Koons's "inflatable" toys and Damien Hirst's medicine cabinets. But perhaps the best example of the recent blurring between art and life is performance art, where the artist's body itself becomes the artistic medium and bodily manipulation becomes the message (e.g., Tania Bruguera). Because of recent shifts in art, aesthetics' task has shifted as well. Once the realm of rarified discussions of, for example, aristocratic taste (18th-century British), *Bildung* and idealism (19th-century German), and "quality" (mid-20th-century American), aesthetics must now contend with life, bodies, and thus with human selves—with everyday life. This is especially urgent not just because of developments in art, but also because of socio-cultural developments catalyzed by the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism. This latter point is the precipitating factor of the current article.

Like aesthetics more generally, theological aesthetics would do well to undergo a shift of emphasis, or at the very least to expand its purview. Theological aesthetics has availed itself amply of opportunities to pronounce on literature, poetry, music, painting, and sculpture. But in order to attend to the artistic, discursive, and socio-cultural-economic-political situation of our world, bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church to bear on it, theological aesthetics must, at least in part, make a turn toward everyday life.

I propose that Karl Rahner's theology, with its emphasis on Jesus Christ's (re)configuration of everyday human life, proves dually advantageous for turning theological aesthetics toward the everyday and generating Catholic, theological-aesthetic discursive resistance to neoliberalism's deformation of everyday life. Part one below explicates what constitutes a Rahnerian theological aesthetic: the embeddedness of Jesus Christ in everyday human life, which is "aesthetic" in its embodiedness. Part two switches focus to neoliberal capitalism, providing a brief account of how it distinctively shapes everyday human life, especially with regard to fragmentation of the self, tacit support for systemic cruelty toward others, and somatic manipulation. Part three suggests how Rahner's theological

aesthetic, with its robust account of embodied aesthesis as expressive of deep spiritual freedom shaped by Christic transformation, proves resistant to everyday neoliberalism, which is an aesthetic shaped by comprehensive marketization of the human person and punitive behavior toward people deemed “market failures” (who in Christian parlance we would call “the least of these,” Mt 25:45).

1. Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics of the Everyday

The prospect of a Rahnerian theological aesthetic has been much discussed, especially in English-language scholarship, with three trajectories emerging: Rahner’s relationship with Hans Urs von Balthasar (James Voiss), Rahner’s writings on art and poetry (Gerd Thiessen, Brent Little, Susie Paulik Babka), and Rahner’s theological-philosophical account of transcendental subjectivity and ontology (Richard Viladesau, Stephen Fields, Peter Joseph Fritz).² Largely lacking in such accounts is an appropriation of a key insight by one of Rahner’s students, and a Jesuit priest and masterful theologian in his own right, Harvey Egan, S.J., who calls Rahner the “mystic of everyday life.”³

In a compact yet brilliant introduction to Rahner’s work, which bears the subtitle “mystic of everyday life,” Egan describes Rahner’s theology as moving in two different though related directions: “compression” and

2.VOISS, James. *Rahner, von Balthasar and the Question of Theological Aesthetics. Finding God in All Things: Celebrating Bernard Lonergan, John Courtney Murray, and Karl Rahner.* Edited by Mark Bosco and David Stagaman. New York: Fordham University, 2007, 167–81. THIESSEN, Gesa Elsbeth. *Karl Rahner: Toward a Theological Aesthetics. The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner.* Edited by Declan Marmion and Mary Hines. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 225–34. LITTLE, Brent. *Anthropology and Art in the Theology of Karl Rahner.* *The Heythrop Journal* vol. 52, 2011: 939–51. BABKA, Susie Paulik. *Through the Dark Field: The Incarnation through an Aesthetics of Vulnerability.* Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017, especially 151–56. VILADESAU, Richard. *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art.* New York: Oxford University, 1999. FIELDS, Stephen. *Being as Symbol: On the Origins and Development of Karl Rahner’s Metaphysics.* Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000. FRITZ, Peter Joseph. *Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics.* Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014.

3.EGAN, Harvey. *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life.* New York: Crossroad, 1998.

“unfolding” (EGAN, 1998, 10). He explains that, on the one hand, Rahner compresses all of Christianity into the three major doctrines (realities!) of Trinity, incarnation, and grace, and on the other, Rahner “unfolds these mysteries into every dimension of human life, even into a ‘theology of everyday things’” (EGAN, 1998, 10). This latter direction of Rahner’s theology speaks to the “catechism of the human heart” (EGAN, 1998, 10). Egan’s reference to the heart cannot be overlooked by theological aestheticians. But of course, as we shall see, we must understand “heart” correctly. Whatever our proclivities toward sophisticated examinations of the fine arts, we miss the point of theological aesthetics—and slip into untoward aesthetic theologies⁴—if we fail to treat the human heart, embodied in everyday desires and movements, and the way that God reveals and manifests Godself to this embodied heart in everyday life. I should be clear: I am not making an appeal for theological aesthetics to reduce itself simply to discussions of popular culture (however helpful such discussions may be), but I am suggesting that theologians consider more carefully how “art” writ large relates to the everyday formation of human persons.

I shall make my case by examining a single text (or, properly, set of texts) from Rahner that I have not yet seen examined in theological-aesthetic literature. The book to which I shall confine my analysis was published originally as *Glaube, der die Erde liebt* (1966), and was translated in quick succession into English as *Everyday Faith* (1968). Three brief essays from this book will occupy our attention: the title essay, “A Faith that Loves the Earth,” “An Ordinary Song,” and “Seeing and Hearing.”⁵ The first is a Christological meditation on Easter, thus giving the theological dimension of theological aesthetics. The second, as it sounds,

4. For Hans Urs von Balthasar’s crucial distinction between theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology, which all too often goes unheeded by would-be theological aestheticians, see BALTHASAR, Hans Urs. *Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*. Trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis. Ed. Joseph Fessio, S. J. and John Riches. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, 79–117.

5. RAHNER, Karl, S.J. *Everyday Faith*. Trans. W.J. O’Hara. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968, 76–83, 193–95, 196–204.

relates to music, thus providing the aesthetic dimension in the conventional (though only partially correct) sense in which we now take the word “aesthetics,” i.e., as a theory of art. The third discusses the two senses mentioned in its title, thus bringing us around to aesthetics in the etymological, and ultimately more generative sense (the Greek word *aisthesis* = sensation). Taken together, the three essays can help us to figure out the parameters of a Rahnerian aesthetic of everyday Christian life so that, in the next part, we can contrast this aesthetic with the way neoliberalism shapes everyday life and, in so doing, constitutes a rival aesthetic to Christian theological aesthetics.

Rahner understands the human person as rooted in this world, yet somehow exceeding it. He discovers throughout his works that God’s plan of salvation, which culminates in the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, evidences God’s tailoring of salvation to this rootedness and excess.⁶ While it has become unfashionable to present Rahner in terms of his early philosophy, especially *Geist in Welt* (1939), I have insisted that this early philosophy, while one does not have to mark it as “foundational” for Rahner, does lend a distinctive tone to his theology, in terms of both its “compression” and “unfolding” dimensions. Of special importance as I see it are the ultimate pages, which suggest a Christological framing for Rahner’s account of Thomas Aquinas’s metaphysics of knowledge. Thomas’s view of distinctively human knowledge as rooted in, exceeding, and directed back toward the world (these are the three moments of the so-called *conversio ad phantasmata*) proves Christologically framed inasmuch as “it summons man back into the here and now of his finite world, because the Eternal has also entered into his world [as Jesus of Nazareth] so that man might find Him, and in Him might find himself anew.”⁷

6. See, e.g., RAHNER, Karl S.J. *On the Theology of the Incarnation*. Theological Investigations 4: More Recent Writings. Trans. Kevin Smyth. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966, 105–20.

7. RAHNER, Karl. *Spirit in the World*. Trans. William V. Dych. Foreword by Johann Baptist Metz. Introduction by Francis Fiorenza. New York: Continuum, 1994, 408.

Rahner's Easter meditation, "A Faith that Loves the Earth," continues this tack, declaring that the Easter message is "the most human news brought by Christianity" (RAHNER, 1968, 76). This is so because Easter does not concern merely the mind or the heart (comprehended as a purely spiritual reality), but instead the embodied existence of human persons. The message of Easter is a victory of God over evil, and precisely according to the whole of human reality. Jesus' bodily resurrection opens this total victory from the body outward. God has won this victory not just in the realm of "interior sensibility" (which here Rahner associates with the mind), "but where ... we are most really ourselves, in the reality of the earth, far from all that is purely thought and feeling, where we learn what we are—mortal children of the earth" (RAHNER, 1968, 76–77).

These remarks on the locus of God's Easter victory launch Rahner into commentary regarding the place of humans on earth, our belonging here. In condensed detail, he describes the "unhappy discord" between the beauty and the poverty the world offers people and, importantly for our purposes, "the sad mixture of life and death, exultation and lament, creative action and monotonous servitude ... [of] everyday life" (RAHNER, 1968, 78). He presents human life on earth as a bodily undergoing of existence, which, for reasons I shall soon provide, I believe qualify it as aesthetic. The Paschal Mystery consists in Christ descending into the final site of humanity's struggle, the "heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40), and from this point outward beginning "to transform this world into himself" (RAHNER, 1968, 80). In doing so, Christ establishes the life of freedom and beatitude in this world's heart. However much it may appear that death still reigns over life, the reality is that life on earth has begun to be glorified: "[Jesus] is there as the most secret law and the innermost essence of all things ... like the light of day and the air which we do not notice" (RAHNER, 1968, 82). Resurrected life is reality at its most basic and pervasive, if not immediately evident, level. It constitutes reality's depths, which everyday life—often unbeknownst to us—expresses.

Rahner applies this Christological vision in the two latter pieces,

“An Ordinary Song” and “Seeing and Hearing.” The former piece, which was originally published in the Catholic popular magazine *Orientierung*, unfolds a simple anthropological insight: that in addition to “great music,” which people would listen to at concerts and by recordings, each of us, with lesser or greater frequency, and less or more complexity, finds himself humming or singing songs of his own making. (I can corroborate this—as a young father, daily I sing songs of my own invention, often poor ones, to my children). Somewhat surprisingly, Rahner attaches deep theological significance to these “ordinary songs.” He states, in terms reminiscent of the closing lines of *Geist in Welt*, “Everyone can express himself in these and so come to know himself, and God himself does not forget them” (RAHNER, 1968, 193). Rahner continues throughout the reflection to elaborate this initial thesis. To put a finer point on it than perhaps he does, the key to these songs is not their aesthetic merit, understood in terms of theoretically-endorsed aesthetic taste and judgment. Instead, if we are to understand aesthetics (or theological aesthetics) from the standpoint of these ordinary songs, we must gage their expressive force. Ordinary songs are not baubles of everyday life, but indications that everyday life concretely expresses echoes of the heart (see RAHNER, 1968, 193).

When a person sings to herself, she “express[es] the ever unique human being which each one in his own way is” (RAHNER, 1968, 194). Here Rahner evokes a theme essential to his writings on Ignatian spirituality, especially his woefully under-consulted essay, “Die ignatianische Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis” (1956), which provides incipient gestures toward an Ignatian ontology of personal uniqueness, dignity, and freedom based in God’s distinctive call to each person.⁸ Rahner’s notes on ordinary songs have broad implications for the Christian religion. He performs these implications by contrasting ordinary songs with the often painfully stilted “religious” hymns people are made to sing in church, but

8. RAHNER, Karl, S.J. *Die Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis bei Ignatius von Loyola. Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen Existenz. Sämtliche Werke: Band 10.* Edited by Josef Heisbetz and Albert Raffelt. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2003, 368–420.

which touch little upon personal piety, and which suggest a certain kind of intellectual elitism over against the allegedly “sentimental” reality of lived faith (RAHNER, 1968, 194–95). Such hymns can have their place, but in this essay Rahner paints them negatively. Since the Word made flesh endured the narrow limits of our daily routine, Rahner reasons, Christians should apprehend that religion does not transpire only or even primarily in “great” music. People who have been led to believe so stand in danger of separating Christian religion from everyday life. In response, Rahner implies that recognizing the aesthetic power of ordinary songs can, with hope, help to heal this rift. Thus with this brief text we have a noteworthy reframing of at least a couple key components of theological aesthetics, not least its common tendency to operate at the Alpine heights when everyday life might be more appropriate.

“Seeing and Hearing” emerges from a 1960s context in which the proliferation of words was, for Rahner as a Christian theologian, a vexing problem. Rahner feared that new and diverse forms of print and broadcast media were crowding out the sense of sight, which he deemed indispensable for Christian life (see RAHNER, 1968, 203). The problem may be different in our day, with images overtaking our lives as never before, and online media insisting that fewer rather than more words (e.g., Twitter’s 140-character-count limit per post) express ideas better. Nonetheless, this brief essay, which was originally printed in a book on arguments regarding photography, has something to contribute to contemporary theological aesthetics.

The essay constitutes an appeal by Rahner that modern people formed by an admiration for science re-learn how to take the senses seriously. Rahner draws heavily from the metaphysics of knowledge detailed in *Geist in Welt* to make his case. Human persons “do not merely have sense organs, we are sensibility” (RAHNER, 1968, 197, emphasis original). Our unique mode of knowing, which starts always with the senses, is not incidental to who we are. If we are mind, which modern people will hardly gainsay, we must realize that the senses provide mind’s way

into the world (RAHNER, 1968, 197). Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, with their emphasis on imaginative composition of place, the spiritual senses tradition from the early through medieval churches, and before all these traditions, the First Letter of John all recognize that seeing and hearing cannot be viewed as "merely the spring-board which we leave behind in order to attain true knowledge of an abstract, non-sensory, and wordless kind" (RAHNER, 1968, 201). Instead, human knowledge comes from the senses. This is true for the natural sciences. It is true also of religion. For Christian theology and spirituality, as Angelus Silesius proclaims in the *Cherubic Wanderer*, God is seen, tasted, felt, smelled, and heard (RAHNER, 1968, 202).

Rahner reserves the essay's pivotal insight for its last page, where he teaches that not only do we apprehend God through the senses (here he speaks of sight), but that Christians must "learn to see" (RAHNER, 1968, 203–04). Certainly the senses are integral to the human person, always operating (barring, of course, disease or difference of ability). But one must not understand the senses as purely receptive and passive in their constant operation. Seeing, and other sensing, must be active, and when it is, it becomes expressive of human personality. Furthermore, sensing must be assumed as a task, even as a "Christian art" (RAHNER, 1968, 204). In this way Rahner acknowledges that "aesthetics" and "art," now broadly construed—and properly calibrated for theological aesthetics—necessarily include discipline, conversion, and, proper formation.

We have just examined three previously underconsulted selections from Rahner's book of essays on everyday faith. From these we have discerned the basic shape of a distinctively Rahnerian theological aesthetic of everyday life, which I have contrasted with conventional theological aesthetics, which tends to focus on "higher" cultural achievement. Rahner's theological aesthetics commences with Christology, Jesus Christ's transformation of humanity and the world from the heart outward, from sin and death to a life of beatitude. It proceeds through what we must call an account of human subjectivity, as expressed by

“arts” like ordinary songs and “aesthesis” or sensation, both of which testify to the as-yet-incomplete transformation of the human person and the earth on which human persons live every day. Finally, Rahner’s theological aesthetics understands (in a way similar to Balthasar) the roles of discipline, conversion, and shaping in aesthetics. Perhaps the difference between Rahner and Balthasar in this respect is the full-throated acknowledgement Rahner gives (and Balthasar elides, given his high-cultural commitments) to everyday, embodied shaping of human persons. These aspects of Rahner’s theological aesthetics of the everyday will all prove pertinent to our consideration of neoliberalism, which we shall see is a system without God (let alone Christ) that produces subjects who express this Godlessness according to their everyday, aesthetic shaping as empty, often sadistic subjects.

2. What is Everyday Neoliberalism?

Recently a Baptist minister, pastoral counselor, psychotherapist, and theology professor from the United States named Bruce Rogers-Vaughn published a book called *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (2016).⁹ He opens the book with a reflection on pervasive new tendencies in his clinical clients that have emerged over the past thirty years. He notes increases in self-blame and dread at perceived precarity in many clients, but just as often inflated confidence and self-assurance, even to the point of entitlement and defiance, in other clients. He points to pronounced superficiality in many of his clients, and marked upturns in addictive behaviors. His clients’ relationships are, more and more, seen as ephemeral and transactional. Perhaps most telling are these observations: “The people I now see tend to manifest a far more diffuse or fragmented sense of self, are frequently more overwhelmed, experience powerful forms of anxiety and depression too vague to be named, display less self-awareness, have often loosened or dropped affiliations with conventional human col-

9. ROGERS-VAUGHN, Bruce. *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

lectives, and are increasingly haunted by shame rooted in a nebulous sense of personal failure” (ROGERS-VAUGHN, 2016, 1–2). Rogers-Vaughn contends in his book that these shifts in his clients have resulted from the rise and the consequent hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, which has brought with it distinctive forms of human suffering (ROGERS-VAUGHN, 2016, 6). Just as neoliberalism has come to dominate global politics and economics, it has overtaken everyday life, with pernicious consequences.

Neoliberalism is perhaps best known as a political-economic project with hallmark public policy commitments like privatization of public goods, deregulation of businesses, and lowering of income taxes, all of which have the goal of rolling back welfare states and the power of labor and fostering free markets.¹⁰ Such a focus on public policy and fostering markets could lend the impression that neoliberalism abstracts from everyday life, disregarding it in favor of larger structures and greater struggles. Political economist Martijn Konings argues precisely the opposite, with special regard to the United States context: “The turn to neoliberalism hardly served to lift the market out of its social context, but, on the contrary, could only last for more than a few years precisely because its key organizing rules became organically anchored in the most everyday habits and cultural norms of American citizens. It represented a deepening of social connectedness rather than the abstraction of social life. Capitalist integration now advanced on a more cultural dimension.”¹¹ Konings designates a particular twofold character to such neoliberal cultural cohesion—it proceeds dialectically, between “affirmatively therapeutic” and “sadistic” sensibilities (given our discussion of theological aesthetics, this reference

10. Geographer David Harvey classically defines neoliberalism as follows: “Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.” HARVEY, David. *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction*. *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 610, n. 1, 2007: 22–44, at 22.

11. KONINGS, Martijn. *Rethinking Neoliberalism and the Subprime Crisis: Beyond the Re-regulation Agenda*. *Competition and Change*. vol. 13, no. 2, 2009: 108–127, at 119.

to “sensibility” should be duly noted) (KONINGS, 2009, 120). Such a dialectical sensibility evidences itself on daytime talk shows that celebrate celebrities’ success one day and berate down-and-out couples for their infelicitous financial choices the next day.

The neoliberal cultural sensibility constitutes, Konings avers, fragile narcissistic self-love. This corroborates what Rogers-Vaughn has found with his clients: how some brim with confidence, others feel crushed by self-blame, but all exhibit superficial regard for themselves and, of course, others. But Konings identifies that this fragile narcissism has even more dire implications, of which daytime talk shows are merely a symptom. “The dynamics of narcissism,” he writes, “must involve an active externalization of our insecurity, the opportunity to see others falter, and to disapprove of their lives” (120). Thus the fragility of the ephemeral self (again, such as Rogers-Vaughn sees in his clients) manifests itself as an impulse of cruelty toward others, hence Konings’s inclusion of “sadism” as constitutive of the neoliberal sensibility. One could say, based on Konings’s insights, that neoliberalism embeds itself in everyday life by constructing a shared, everyday aesthetic among people who live under its dominance.

Economic historian Philip Mirowski draws upon and corroborates Konings’s findings, and makes what he calls “everyday neoliberalism” a centerpiece of his account of neoliberalism’s staying power even in the face of the global economic crash of 2007–2008.¹² As Mirowski sees it, neoliberalism endures because it has reshaped how people (especially in the Euro-Atlantic world) think about their own freedom and identity, how they treat others in a way modeled by popular media, how marketing reinforces all this, and how, through all this, the interests of capital govern their lives, all the way down to humanity’s genetic code. Mirowski supports these contentions with a fivefold picture of everyday neoliberalism, which aims to capture the kind of human subjects that neoliberalism

12. MIROWSKI, Philip. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. New York: Verso, 2013.

produces and with which it reproduces itself. He calls this fivefold picture, “Five Vignettes from the Life of John Galt,” the reference being to the main character in Ayn Rand’s novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) (MIROWSKI, 2013, 107–54). I shall examine three aspects (the first, third, and fifth) of Mirowski’s account to supplement the material we have drawn from Rogers-Vaughn and Konings, with references to others along the way.

The first aspect of neoliberalism is what Mirowski calls neoliberalism’s “no self” doctrine. He states, “It is the sheer ordinariness of the expectation that the self should provide no obstacle to success because it is supple, modular, and plastic that is the germ of everyday neoliberalism” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 108). In the place of the kind of substantial self presupposed by liberal modernity (and Christian theology, including Rahner’s), neoliberalism puts a fleeting subject constituted merely by a bundle of market choices. The subject is purely variable, submitted to the whims of markets. Other theorists, especially Wendy Brown and Michel Feher, who elaborate the analyses of Michel Foucault, use neoliberal economic terminology to label such a fleeting subject “human capital.”¹³ In its basic outlines, this view of the human person holds that each person is a portfolio of investments, responsible for maintaining or, better, increasing its value. Wendy Brown explains that human capital’s “project is to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence” (BROWN, 2015, 33). Human capital has no intrinsic value, but entirely variable value. This may foster entrepreneurial initiative and creativity, and this is precisely the attractive aspect of human capital that has helped it become a dominant functional anthropology in the Euro-Atlantic world and elsewhere. But likewise human capital’s lack of intrinsic value leaves it “at persistent risk of failure, redundancy,

13. See BROWN, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015; FEHER, Michel. *Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital*. *Public Culture*, vol. 21, 2009: 21–41; FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2008.

and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is” (BROWN, 2015, 37).

Feher’s unique take on human capital suits this article on theological aesthetics particularly well because of his characterization of human capital as a subject constituted almost entirely by feelings: of appreciation and depreciation, which Feher employs both in the sense of accounting, and in an aesthetic sense (the self’s appreciation, or not, for itself). Feher suggests that if one is to understand human capital properly, one should attempt to think this human subject in terms of psychologies of self-esteem (Feher, 2009, 28–29). The “no-self” subject of neoliberalism is feeling, through and through, no matter how much some neoliberal economists and politicians claim that success in the market demands rational calculation. It seems, then, that neoliberalism has learned the type of lesson Rahner developed in “Seeing and Hearing”: the aesthetic stratum (here understood as feeling) of everyday human life is just as consequential, and perhaps even more, than the noetic. Indeed, human capital is an aesthetic figure for human subjectivity, and as such shapes the neoliberal sensibility. But there is another half to this sensibility, which we first met through Konings but still demands a bit more treatment.

Mirowski calls the third characteristic of everyday neoliberalism “everyday sadism.” This idea corresponds to Konings’s discussion of the sadistic tendencies in the neoliberal sensibility. Mirowski adds an even more condemnatory diagnosis that neoliberal culture is a “theater of cruelty” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 134), a place where comparatively few successful neoliberal subjects are rewarded and most others are punished and ridiculed, to the pleasure of other neoliberal selves (successes and failures alike!). A taste for this theater of cruelty may awaken in neoliberal subjects in various ways. It may be stirred as a guilty pleasure at governmental austerity measures, similar Schadenfreude at the downfall of contestants on one’s favorite reality TV show, or feelings of righteous indignation toward people who have taken on debts they cannot afford (MIROWSKI, 2013, 130, 133, 132). Such sadistic feelings do not neces-

sarily issue in direct sadistic behavior, and Mirowski never says that they do. But He does believe, in concert with Konings, that sadism, even of an unconscious sort, becomes a structural feature of everyday neoliberal life. Everyday sadism is the “dark underbelly of the bright shiny neoliberal self” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 133). And the theater of cruelty, while it may seem to be simply twisted entertainment, is something more serious than that. The ubiquitous “spectacle of shaming” is “a technology for recasting economy and society” (MIRWOSKI, 2013, 134). Arguably this recasting of economy and society as sadistic represents the truth of the ostensibly more positive, entrepreneurial-human-capital dimension of neoliberalism. After all, we have read from Rogers-Vaughn, Konings, and Brown, each in his or her own way, how neoliberal superficiality, narcissism, and endless clawing after fleeting value can destroy the individual human person. It is fitting that interpersonal and societal interactions would be destructive as well.

We must treat one more aspect of everyday neoliberalism highlighted by Mirowski. He describes it using the heading “biopolitics is here to stay” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 148–54). “Biopolitics” describes the exertion of power by a state or state-like structure over every aspect of people’s lives, especially their bodies. The no-self teaching of neoliberalism extends all the way down to human organ, cells, and DNA, which all can be bought, sold, managed, altered, and replaced in marketable ways. Similarly, everyday sadism would dictate that any part of the human body that does not function optimally or that risks market failure must be punished and/or eliminate. Mirowski sums up these ideas: “Once the body is analogized to a firm, then every so often it needs to be reengineered like a firm, rendering it more lean and mean, which includes takeovers (hostile or otherwise), mergers, spinoffs, divestments, and ‘going public’” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 152). If everyday neoliberalism begins with the no-self doctrine, it ends with the interminably-replaceable-body doctrine. Nobody (no body) should be beholden to anything but “the incorporeal market” (MIRWOSKI, 2013, 154). With this quotation above all others, we

can come to see the fundamental conflict between a Christian theological aesthetic and the neoliberal sensibility, or the human capital–everyday sadism–biopolitics aesthetic. After all, we have read that Rahner centers his theological aesthetic on the Word made flesh, God taking on a human body, so a divinity that, at least in the Second Person of the Trinity, is corporeal. The incorporeal market, to whom all bits of human capital owe their allegiance, constitutes a direct antagonist to this God.

3. Rahner’s Christological Aesthetic

v. the Everyday Neoliberal Aesthetic

I ended the opening section on Rahner above with reference to the importance of personal shaping for his theological aesthetic. Let us study one more relevant quotation so we may resume this line of thinking and prosecute a theological-aesthetic critique of everyday neoliberalism: “According to scripture, in man’s eyes we read his fear, his nostalgia, his pride, compassion, kindness, wickedness, ill-will, scorn, envy and falsity. We make ourselves by seeing and form ourselves by gazing. But we have to learn how to see” (RAHNER, 1968, 204). Once more Rahner maintains the vital significance of sensation for human life: what one sees (and hears, etc.) forms who one is. What one sees (hears, etc.) will ramify in every aspect of one’s life.

Neoliberals have been wise in their understanding of the human person inasmuch as they recognize the conjunction between sensibility (or feeling) and its ramifications. The legacy of economists of education like Gary Becker (1930–2014) and Theodore Schultz (1902–1998), who pioneered theories of human capital, has not been relegated to the area of education only, but has diffused into every aspect of human life. Tacitly or explicitly, neoliberal economists, business leaders, producers and disseminators of media, and others have pursued the insight that if people are told enough times that they must invest themselves, they will see themselves as investments; that if people who not quite fitting market

needs are labeled enough times as culpable failures, they will come to be seen that way and will be punished for their guilt; that if people are convinced that their bodies are purely plastic, they will cease to afford the human body any respect. Margaret Thatcher, a famous neoliberal, famously said, “Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.”¹⁴ Change has occurred.

What I have called the human-capital–everyday sadism–biopolitics aesthetic is not fostered primarily in economic theory or high culture, but through Facebook profiles, TV programs like *Shark Tank* and *American Idol*, education both higher and lower, and everyday relinquishment by people of their basic political and social freedoms and solidarities in favor of what is sold to them as “economic growth.” Mirowski observes, “In [a] thousand and one little encounters spread over a lifetime, the average person begins to absorb a set of images, casual scenarios, and precepts that begin to add up to something approaching a worldview” (MIROWSKI, 2013, 154). From a Catholic theological point of view, we must contest this worldview, and a solid standpoint from which to do so would be theological aesthetics, particularly theological aesthetics based in everyday life.

Rahner concludes his essay “Seeing and Hearing” on the following note: “Those who have learnt to see with an eye which is ‘sound’ (Mt 6:22) have the true ‘view of the world’” (RAHNER, 1968, 204). This sound seeing, true view of the world must resist neoliberal formation by insisting upon the substantiality of human freedom, which is rooted Christ’s saving action and in each person’s unique, felt call from God; upon mercy and compassion, thus a participation in Christ’s saving action (and the diametric opposite to sadism of any sort); and upon the integrity of the human body, which according to ancient Christian tradition is the “hinge of salvation” (RAHNER, 1968, 83). These are the key components to a

14. THATCHER, Margaret and BUTT, Ronald. Interview for *Sunday Times*. *Sunday Times*. 3 May 1981. Accessed online on 26 April 2017 at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>.

theological aesthetic of everyday life, which every day proves more urgent in a neoliberal world.

Conclusion

This article has made two pleas. It has pled for a reorientation of theological aesthetics from the museum and the opera house toward the gritty reality of everyday life. It has voiced this request because of the cultural situation that has pervaded the Euro-Atlantic world and is rapidly being exported worldwide, which certain theorists have labeled “everyday neoliberalism.” The argument offered Karl Rahner’s theology, with its Christological focus and apposite commitments in theological anthropology as a point of departure for a theological aesthetic of the everyday that could be used to contest everyday neoliberalism. By the article’s third part, the discussion turned toward the question of cultural shaping. Neoliberalism forms people as superficial narcissists who relinquish their personal freedom to markets and, usually tacitly, lend approval or legitimation to structures of cruelty, especially to human bodies. These personal pathologies, which are diagnosable as such on Rahnerian theological-aesthetic grounds, comprise an aesthetic, a worldview that is felt and is disseminated throughout individual and corporate bodies. Beyond diagnosis of the everyday neoliberal aesthetic, a Rahnerian theological aesthetic of the everyday offers hope for alternative personal and cultural shaping.

Such shaping would occur in everyday ways, through prayers before meals and bedtime, popular devotions to Mary and the Sacred Heart (these hold enormous importance for Rahner, and should for anyone following in his wake), liturgical practice in local parish communities, and, of course, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Neoliberalism’s wager is that everyday acts will form human capital, bringing systemic change (markets everywhere); we Christians must reclaim our awareness of everyday shaping in a faithful life, with an analogous inclination toward

systemic change (away from neoliberalism). And this awareness must base itself in recognition of the truth of Christ: Resurrection, which has not yet fully arrived, but which glimmers even through the dullness of the everyday.

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