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# The “Catholic Sensibility” in “Non-Religious” Art

By Mark Scalese, S.J.

In the fall 2009 issue of *Conversations*, Dan Vaillancourt makes a well-articulated case for considering Catholic aesthetics to be a vital part of the Catholic intellectual tradition and a much-needed antidote to a pervasive “lookism” that values and rewards superficial attractiveness. However, I believe that his description of beauty from a Catholic perspective provides the basis for a much broader understanding of Catholic art than he suggests in his essay, one that can include subjects that are not explicitly religious at all but are informed by what we might call a “Catholic sensibility.”

I find Vaillancourt’s first sections on lookism and the Catholic view of beauty to be the most stimulating. Indeed, our commercial culture bombards us with images of people who are so

Walker Evans’s photograph of the unadorned walls and doorway of a room in the Burroughs’ home.



## Talking Back



A portrait of Floyd Burroughs as photographed by Walker Evans.

strikingly beautiful that they exert a seductive hold on our imaginations, never allowing us to feel thin or handsome or good enough on our own, thus reducing our sense of value to how we look instead of who we are. As opposed to this, Vaillancourt rightly grounds the Catholic view of beauty in both the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Because of the incarnation, the entire material world is ennobled and capable of disclosing the divine,

and is, therefore, inherently beautiful. The paschal mystery suggests that no matter how unattractive something or someone may appear to be on the surface, they embody a hidden beauty that is redeemed and bound for glory. More importantly, the example of Christ's self-giving love in his passion, death and resurrection offers us a lens for discovering beauty in similar acts of sacrifice.

All of this is pretty bracing. However, I feel Vaillancourt

stumbles somewhat when he goes on to consider Catholic art. He rightly points out that the Catholic church has an impressive record as a patron of the visual arts during the past millennium and even today is capable of fostering "a bridge between the secular world and spiritual experience." But when he catalogs artistic greatest hits to illustrate these points, I believe he falls short. While no one can deny that Gothic cathedrals, Michelangelo's frescos or Mozart's music are outstanding examples of Catholic art, his list suggests that such work is limited to religious subject matter produced by Catholics or sponsored by the Church. Even the two artists Vaillancourt cites as contemporary examples are both vowed religious. While Mary Southard's "Child of the Universe" is not as explicitly faith-based as Trung Pham's sculpture of St. Clare, much of the work shown on her website has holy subject matter or is installed in churches. (To be fair, much of the work on Pham's website is very abstract as are many of Southard's paintings.)

Vaillancourt's articulation of how Catholics discern beauty lays the groundwork for a much broader understanding of art that we can appreciate and embrace, one that includes work produced by people of different faiths or no faith at all, as well as work without overtly religious content. No one can stand in the presence of paintings by Mark Rothko and not be drawn into the mystery of his

subtle and ambiguous fields of color, much as one is drawn into the enigmatic stillness of Byzantine icons. Speaking of icons, one is similarly drawn into the quiet dignity of Floyd Burroughs' eyes or those of his wife, Allie Mae, in the black and white portraits taken by Walker Evans for James Agee's documentary masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Another photo by Evans in the same volume features the unadorned walls and doorway of a room in the Burroughs' home in which the unpainted wood reveals not only its grain, but the patterns of the saw that cut it. A Catholic sensibility finds in such attention to the mundane details of life the same divine disclosure as Gerard Manley Hopkins when he writes, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

At the risk of being accused of occupational bias, I find it striking that Vaillancourt doesn't mention any movies in his list of art works. A good case can be made that motion pictures have been the preeminent art form of the past 100 years and have done much to promote the culture of lookism Vaillancourt rightly rails against. The Church has been noticeably lacking in its patronage of filmmaking compared to artistic endeavors in earlier eras and for the most part, has limited its influence to that of criticism or censorship (the most notable example being the key role of

churchmen and other Catholics in the Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s-1960s). On the other hand, in addition to formal qualities such as cinematography or editing, film is above all a story-telling medium, and a rather compelling one at that. (As propagandists around the world know well, films are able to stir hearts and minds as few other media can.)

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ev ertheless, a Catholic sensibility can be found in movies with no evident religious subject matter. To take but one outlandish example, Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* caused a minor sensation in the early 1990s with its "secret twist." Featuring a thriller plot that includes the Irish "Troubles," kidnapping, cross-dressing, homosexual sex, political assassination and murder, the film at first blush seems to typify everything that can be morally troubling about the movies. But a closer inspection reveals that the main character undergoes a profound transformation

### *...in the mundane details of life*

throughout the film as he gradually overcomes differences in ideology, nationality, gender, race and sexual orientation, culminating in an act of self-sacrificing love at the end. (He doesn't kill anyone either.) Despite all appearances, a Catholic sensibility can detect traces of not only the paschal mystery in this film, but the theology of St. Paul as articulated in Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 13:4-11. This film certainly can be considered "beautiful" by the criteria Vaillancourt sets forth. In addition, it provides fitting grist for the mill of Catholic art criticism which he describes at the end of his essay.

In his article, Dan Vaillancourt gives us plenty of insights about the nature of beauty and art to keep us talking for years. I hope my meager emendations here are the first installment of that ongoing conversation. ■

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