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Excess, Artifice, Sentimentality: Almodóvar's Camp Cinema as a Challenge for Theological Aesthetics

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Abstract

Camp is defined as a style that is characterised by excess, artificiality, theatricality, exaggeration, sentimentality. What could this possibly contribute to Christian theological aesthetics, the study of God and theological issues through the aesthetic, art, beauty? This paper proposes, through a discussion of camp in its “incarnation” in Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema, that it has several aspects to offer. Camp uncovers and challenges the categories of truth and reality in theological aesthetics as well as the artforms in which this truth can be discovered. Its embrace of the superficial and material can be seen, in theological terms, as an incarnational aesthetics that offers redemption through the affirmation of the material, not its disruption or negation. Camp underlines the subversive power of pleasure and laughter against tendencies that dismiss pleasure as escapism, and challenges theological aesthetics to acknowledge the wisdom that lies in emotions and affects. It criticizes by fostering solidarity and empathy, rather than antagonism. Thus camp represents a challenge to self-critically reflect on processes of exclusion on an aesthetic and a social level, and challenges us to imagine a different world, a world of beauty, love and passion.

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Introduction: Issues and Approaches in Theological Aesthetics

Is there a place for camp in Christian theological aesthetics? Is there a place for abundant tears and dramatic flourish, a place for mannerisms and exaggerations, for sentimentality and artificiality in the reflection of “questions about God and issues in theology in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts,” as Gesa Thiessen (2004, p.1) very broadly defines theological aesthetics?¹ What can the camp style contribute to this thinking about God in the light of the aesthetic?

But first, what is theological aesthetics, what are its main approaches, interests, and goals? The above quoted definition of theological aesthetics might be dissatisfactory for some, but as a field of Christian theology it is not very well circumscribed; and thus as Oleg Bychkov admits, it is “difficult to define” (Bychkov, 2008, p.xi). The recent collection of essays edited by Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, provides a good overview of the *status quaestionis* and represents, as Bychkov describe it, “a cross-section of theological aesthetics in its current state” (Bychkov, 2008, p.xi). For this brief introduction to theological aesthetics, I will therefore draw on this volume and a few other prominent authors in the field.

Philosophical aesthetics that developed in the 18th century, after Alexander Baumgarten coined

the term “aesthetics” as the science of sensory perception in 1735 (Burch Brown, 1989, pp.21-24). Theological aesthetics can be considered a “modern” approach in theology, with Hans Urs von Balthasar providing the probably most systematic reflection of God in the light of beauty (von Balthasar, 1983-1999). However, another of the interests of contemporary theological aesthetics is to trace the theological-aesthetic study of God and of Christian beliefs in the work of earlier theologians, such as Duns Scotus or Thomas Aquinas, by examining their approach to sensory perception, imagination and categories relating to these (Pöltner, 2008; Ingham, 2008).

Richard Viladesau attempts to systematize the plurality of approaches in theological aesthetics into three main currents. First, reflection on the aesthetic dimension of theological discourse, such as Karl Barth’s notion that theology was the most beautiful of sciences, or Karl Rahner’s observation of the poetic element in theology, although both are quick to underline the distinction between theology and aesthetics and the overall predominance of conceptual reasoning over feeling or beauty (Viladesau, 1999, pp.11-13). Second, approaches that draw on the aesthetic as a source for theological reflection because it elicits implicit or explicit religious experiences or contains religious discourses that theology as a second-order discourse reflects upon. Particular attention is here paid to ‘the monuments of “high” ecclesiastical art,’ as Viladesau (1999, p.16) writes, but this approach is not limited to works with religious motifs or functions. And finally theological aesthetics as theory (Viladesau, 1999, pp.23-24), which includes according to Viladesau both the interpretation of God and Christian doctrine through methods of aesthetics (for example the reflection of beauty in relationship with God and as a quality of revelation), and the study of *aesthetica* (objects of aesthetics) from a theological perspective (such as the study of art and individual arts).

Underlying these approaches are two different views of the function of the aesthetic and aesthetic experiences. One is the idea that aesthetic experience can reveal a hidden, underlying truth about reality, by allowing to see deeper, beyond the surface. Here, the aesthetic experience of beauty is used as von Balthasar used it, as an analogy for the revelation of eternal principles and thus knowledge about God based on the principle of the analogy of being between creation and Creator.² This revelation of truth in or through the aesthetic is seen as having a moral, transformative potential and thus opposes the idea, prevalent in modern aesthetics, of the disinterested, uninvolved nature of aesthetic experiences (Goizueta, 2013). The second is the awareness of the cognitive function of sensation (in contrast to a purely rational, conceptual view of cognition), that is the appreciation of the insight that aesthetic experience can contribute to theological reflection (Burch Brown, 1989). In this view, the aesthetic is

more than just an analogy for theological insight; instead theology is seen to work “*through and in the form of aesthetic patterns*” (Bychkov, 2008, p.xxv). For Bychkov (2008, p.xii), the three interconnected features of aesthetic experience most relevant to theology are thus the revelatory, transformative and participatory dimension, respectively pointing to the idea of aesthetic experience as analogy of revelation, as having an ethical potential and as involving the viewer in the process of reception in an immediate, intimate fashion.

In the ever-expanding and evolving field of theological aesthetics, there are a number of *desiderati* for its further development, and in this paper, I attempt to show how camp as an aesthetic sensibility or strategy can be seen as contributing to this development. First, George Pattison (2008, p.108) points out a limited and limiting view of beauty as the most prominent aesthetic concept used in theological aesthetics, and of the arts as the most privileged site of encounter with such b/Beauty, and wonders about what that means for the ugly, and its potential role in theological aesthetics and theology at large. Possibly, Paul Tillich’s view (1959, pp.68-75) that disturbing art, such as Picasso’s *Guernica*, provides a contrast experience in which the expression of the human predicament of finitude and mortality already transcends the human situation and evokes the ultimate concern, or Viladesau’s (2008) “contrast theology” as expressed in the “Beauty of the Cross” as symbol of both suffering and salvation, could be seen as inroads to answer Pattison’s concerns. As I will suggest later in this essay, I think that the particular way in which camp deals with marginalization and discrimination could also provide a way to qualify the focus on “beauty” to integrate suffering with pleasure in the complexity of human existence.

Pattison (2008, p.107) also mentions that while theological aesthetics is quite comfortable dealing with works of “high” art, the field of popular culture, including film, is still “controversial” in theological aesthetics.³ Indeed, as the indexes of works in theological aesthetics show, examples are generally taken from the canon of “(male) classics” in music, visual arts, or theatre (Viladesau, 1999; Bychkov and Fodor, 2008). This points to a problematic elitist tendency in theological aesthetics, in which only works of high art, accessible to and appreciated by a cultural elite, are considered to be able to provide access to the “truth” of reality, whereas popular culture, sometimes defined in contrast to high culture (Lynch, 2005, p.38), is implicitly regarded as inhibiting access to the truth or maybe even providing a delusional view of reality. Although unacknowledged, the Frankfurt School’s defense of high art as the site of resistance against the totalitarian and de-individualising powers of mass culture, thus preserving “the utopia that evaporated from religion” (Horkheimer, 1968, p.275) seems to linger in

the background of the choices made in theological aesthetics with regard to the *aesthetica* discussed. This is expressed in Gerhard Larcher's view (2008, p.21) that it is "art of high quality" and "authentic art" that is able to disrupt tendencies of aestheticisation and banalisation in media civilisation and thus become a useful "coalition" partner for theology in its attempts to rediscover both religious and metaphysical questions in society. Thus Gavin Hopps (2012) speaks of the need for a "Redemption of Kitsch." As I will argue with David Halperin (2012, p.209), the "egalitarian ethics" of camp provides a challenge to reconsider the "hierarchical aesthetics" of beauty and the criteria that shape the canon of acceptable works and genres in theological aesthetics.

Further, there is the question of what is meant when theological aesthetics refer to the truth of reality that is revealed in aesthetic experience, as von Balthasar did. The assumption seems to be that authenticity equals reality equals truth, all of which being unproblematically accessible in aesthetic experience. What is the reality these theorists refer to? What truth can be discovered in it? What does this truth relate to? Postmodern theory has sufficiently raised awareness for the partiality and contextuality of reason and the truth it might lead us to discover, a challenge that is also taken up in theology (Penner, 2005), and in the aesthetic realm, camp further questions the relationship between reality and truth with its focus on artifice and theatricality.

One further *desideratum* bears mentioning, and that is the need to reconsider the idea that aesthetic experience was uninvolved and disinterested (Bychkov, 2008, p.xii). Instead, aesthetic experience works precisely through the involvement of the spectator on a sensory-emotional level when a work literally "touches" a viewer. Indeed, it is only because of this participatory dimension that aesthetic experiences can develop a transformative and ethical potential. While these experiences are highly subjective and personal, they nevertheless depend on cultural categories and concepts in their reflection. Thus theological aesthetics is challenged to include the concrete social context in which *aesthetica* are experienced and unfold their power in its reflections (Bychkov, 2008, p.xvii; Bergmann, 2008). As a strongly emotional – even sentimental – style, camp counteracts the ideal of the uninvolved viewer, and uses the empathy that is evoked through the emotional involvement of the viewer to evoke a passion for justice and equality.

Because camp comes in all forms and shades – this is part of what camp is, as will be seen – I will focus on a particular "incarnation" of camp in my discussion of its challenge of and contributions to theological aesthetics, namely the camp cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, who is described by Marcia Pally (2004, p.81) as the "keenest architect of the camp esthetic in cinema today." By choosing to work

with film, i.e. popular culture, and with a filmmaker whose films are both entertaining and critical in this essay, I not only introduce a topic, camp, that so far has not been considered extensively in theological aesthetics (and only to a very limited degree in theology),⁴ but also challenge the elitism of theological aesthetics which so far has all but neglected the field of popular culture and its contributions. I argue that Almodóvar's whole work could be characterized as camp, starting with his first film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) to his last one, *I'm So Excited!* (*Los amantes pasajeros*, 2013), although his camp style changes with his increased technical craftsmanship as a filmmaker. To show both developments and continuities, I will therefore focus in particular on two of his films in the following, Almodóvar's second feature film, *Labyrinth of Passion* (*Laberinto de pasiones*, 1982), and *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*, 2011), his penultimate film so far, with briefer references to his other films.

After this brief discussion of issues and approaches in theological aesthetics that establishes the framework for my discussion of how camp challenges this theological field, and what it has to contribute to it, I will now turn to the discussion of camp, situating it historically and discussing its relation to queer theory as well as some of the open questions so far unresolved in theories of camp. I will then move on to the analysis of how the aesthetic strategies of camp are realized in Almodóvar's films and conclude by discussing in more detail the challenges and contributions of camp to theological aesthetics.

What is Camp? History and Theory

So what is camp? Derived from the French *se camper* or the Italian *campeggiare*, meaning “to posture boldly” or “to stand out”, the term was used in the early 20th century to describe exaggerated or theatrical behaviour associated with the English homosexual and transvestite/transsexual subculture, and with the movement of the aesthetes embodied by figures such as Oscar Wilde or Max Beerbohm (McMahon, 2006, p.10; OED Online, 2014). In spite of this association, camp itself has never been a clearly defined movement. Instead, Susan Sontag (1999, p.53) describes it as a *sensibility* that characterises a person in her famous “Notes on Camp.” With Fabio Cleto (1999, p.9) camp could also be defined as a *style* characterised by “aestheticism, aristocratic detachment, irony, theatrical frivolity, parody, effeminacy and sexual transgression.” As a style camp cuts across all genres and cultural forms, from literature to photography to cinema to interior decorating, although a certain affinity to

performative genres can be observed, for example in drag shows. Although still associated with the subculture of the queer movement and the aesthetics of drag, since the 1960s camp has also acquired a certain recognition in mainstream culture through the pop-art embrace of the superficial, the everyday and its critique of “high art.” Almodóvar pays tribute to this connection by including Warhol-style paintings (of saints or of pistols) in some of his films.

One paradigmatic figure of camp is the dandy, guided by Oscar Wilde’s motto (1966, p.371): “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.” Another is the drag queen whose artificiality is twice removed, because his/her performance is often not even based on real women but on filmic or theatrical versions of femininity (Pally, 2004, p.84). Almodóvar underlines this point in the concluding dedication of his 1999 film *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*): “To all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to men who act and become women [...].”

Given that camp is all about artifice, style, inauthenticity, and superficiality, a clear definition of camp is against its “nature.” As Fabio Cleto (1999, p.3) writes, “The suspensive, indefinite ‘*et cetera*’, in fact, can be taken for the definitive mark of camp.” There is no possibility of knowing when one is looking at an “authentic” piece of camp. Instead, a number of theorists of camp would agree that camp is not something inherent to the object but rather lies in the eye of the beholder (Cleto, 1999, p.24). Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of pornography (*Jacobellis vs. Ohio*, 1964), “I know it when I see it”, is applicable to camp too.

The theorisation of camp, initiated by Susan Sontag’s already quoted essay, has gathered speed under the influence of queer studies. Camp could well be described as one of the aesthetic dimensions of queer theory, a queer aesthetics. Of course, this is due first of all to camp’s origin in the gay, lesbian, transsexual and transvestite subculture, the experience of exclusion, the desire to give the outcast a voice and agency, and the attempt to counter the bitterness of discrimination with a laugh and the parody of society and its exclusive categories (Willoquet-Maricondi, 2004, p.xii; Pally, 2004, p.83). On the aesthetic level, camp does what queer theory tries on the theoretical level: it challenges the norms of society and the exclusion of those who do not fit these norms, whether they do not desire the appropriate person in the appropriate way, wear different clothes than they should, use colour, material or form the wrong way, or prefer the artificial over the authentic. Camp’s critique of categorisations does not work by completely dissolving all categories, but by exaggerating conventions and norms in such a way that it becomes obvious just how artificial they are in the first place.

In the aesthetic style of camp, this social criticism extends to “high culture” and the art market,

combining its social critique with an aesthetic one. With its embrace of what is considered shallow, worthless or immature by the “cultured elite,” using cheap materials and clichéd motifs in an exaggerated fashion, camp questions supposedly universal criteria of high art and low art, and the idea that high art was the only form of culture capable of expressing human concerns in a meaningful fashion. Camp also challenges the institutions and authorities that establish and uphold these criteria in order to serve their own interests of cultural prestige and financial gain.

In this context, I would like to point out a few issues in the discussions about camp that require some more (self-)critical attention. First of all, although agreeing on the instability of any definition of camp, theories still strive for a clear description of camp, a set of defining features. Such attempts counteract precisely the way in which camp evades categories (Cleto, 1999, p.4). In particular the attempts to distinguish camp and kitsch (Booth, 1999, p.70; Ross, 1999, p.316) appear rather ironic: kitsch is described as shallow, slick and sentimental by Jack Babuscio (1999, p.122), for example, whereas camp is involved, passionate and evokes identification, but this distinction mirrors precisely the discussions about high and low art that camp criticises as judgemental and exclusive. Isn't camp, just like kitsch, all about sentimentality, shallowness and a slick superficial stylishness? Why should camp be “better” than kitsch or more involved, and who is to judge?

Another aspect that remains unresolved is camp's representation of femininity. True enough, the effeminate and feminine are celebrated in camp (usually by gay men), but nevertheless they are celebrated as something inferior or even abnormal that needs to be redeemed through parody and exaggeration. This also becomes obvious in the continued use of “effeminate” or “feminine” as value judgements (McMahon, 2006, p.41).⁵ Even if the terms are partially resignified and subversively reappropriated, the binary between masculine and feminine they evoke and the accompanying hierarchisation remain in place. David Halperin discusses the question in his recent book *How to be Gay* and underlines the intention of gay men to use the performance of excessive, ironic, abject femininity in camp as a way to embrace their position as outsiders while at the same time criticising the social norms that marginalize both gay men and women (2012, pp.377-378). While Halperin acknowledges that women might not always appreciate the representation of degraded femininity in camp, he notes that the embrace of “devalored femininity neither implies nor produces a continued insult to women” (Halperin, 2012, p.381). Pamela Robertson suggests a different, more constructive, approach to the (apparent or real) misogyny of much camp by underlining the so-far undertheorised presence of a tradition of feminist camp alongside gay camp. Drawing on the concept of masquerade,

Robertson points towards the utopian aspect of feminist camp and its potential use as a political tool, when “the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image [...] without losing sight of the real power that image has over her” (1999, p.277). This (re-)discovery of feminist camp could lead to a more complex view of camp and its parodistic treatment of gender roles, not least because of the difference it makes when a woman parodies abject femininity in contrast to a (gay) man doing the same. Almodóvar suggests yet another possibility in his films: while he offers multiple camp performances of abject femininity (for example the smothering mother, the desperate, clinging lover or the aging, narcissistic diva), he also includes positive images of alternative ways of performing feminine or masculine roles (such as non-biological motherhood and care which can be performed even by persons who are not biologically female, or women taking on positions of authorship).

Finally, discussions on camp also remain undecided regarding its political engagement and moral stance. Susan Sontag denies a political impetus in camp, saying that camp is “a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness” (1999, p.64). Mark Jordan argues that Sontag’s claim is not meant to de-politicise camp, but rather to distinguish camp’s political commitment from “tones of moral indignation” that often accompany politics: “Her remark is a judgement on what had happened to the speech of politics under the mass production of police power” (Jordan, 2010, p.186). Camp’s challenge of “high culture” and social exclusion and the “tender feeling” (Sontag, 1999, p.65) it expresses towards everything that is considered “lowly” or unworthy signal political commitment and moral attitude, although in a different, playful mode in contrast to the seriousness of politics.

The Camp Aesthetic Strategies of Almodóvar

I will now turn to a closer analysis of the aesthetic strategies of camp and their realisation in Almodóvar’s films. Camp has been defined as a style, but it is also primarily *about* style, about attention to external appearance and stylish accessorisation. In Almodóvar’s films, this attention to style is expressed in particular with relation to set design, costumes and colour scheme (Rennett, 2012; Nisch, 2012). While his style has changed over the more than 30 years of his filmmaking, not least because of the technological possibilities a larger budget permits, what has remained the same is his attention to style in each of his films, and the minute details that are necessary to produce it. The style of *Labyrinth of Passion*, for example, characterised by punk-rock-pop elements in music, setting and costume, is clearly part of the intention of the film to pay homage to the Spanish Movida, the

underground, counter-cultural movement in which Almodóvar was strongly involved, which developed at the end of Franco's dictatorship and was instrumental in the development of a new cultural Spanish identity. The film develops a rather convoluted, improbable plot about Sexilia, a nymphomaniac young female singer, and Riza, the son of the Emperor of Tiran, who is the object of a terrorist plot. The two fall in love with each other and realise that both her nymphomania and his homosexuality are the result of early childhood traumas in which his stepmother and her father are instrumental. Intersected with this story are at least four other, more or less developed plot-lines about a young female fan of Sexilia, Queti, who is abused by her father and then undergoes cosmetic surgery to take Sexilia's place when the latter escapes with Riza, and falls in love with Sexilia's father; about the Emperess of Tiran who is treated for infertility by Sexilia's father, the "father of artificial insemination"; about the events surrounding the terrorists and their plot (one of whom falls in love with Riza without knowing who he is); and about the jealousies and competition between different bands and their members. If this sounds confusing, this is partly intentional and a comment on the clearly developed and often predictable plots of more "classic" cinema, and partly owed to the fact that at this point, Almodóvar was still in the process of learning how to develop a sustained narrative for a feature-length film.

Stylistically, the costumes worn by the protagonists represent a counter-cultural mix of different materials, shrill colours and clashing patterns. The most outrageous is a dress that Queti wears, which covers her breasts with breast-shaped and coloured plastic inserts in the otherwise black and plain dress, obviously defying any idea of propriety and conformity prevalent in Franco Spain. The set design contrasts the bourgeois, dark interiors of Sexilia's father's medical practice with the colourful walls in Sexilia's room painted Picasso-style with figures engaged in various sexual activities or the glistening baroque-like lamp shop full of gold and crystal and light where Riza's identity is finally discovered or the seedy underground discoteque in which the bands perform. The soundtrack equally draws on the Movida style, using music performed by Almodóvar and his partner Fabio McNamara diegetically and extra-diegetically. The style of the film is thus characterised by the contrast between the bourgeois normality of the "old" Spain and the outrageousness of the Movida.

While the style of *The Skin I Live In* is completely different from this underground, counter-cultural film, it is obvious that here, too, stylistic preoccupations play a major role both in the set design, especially the doctor's villa, and in costumes that are carefully chosen to underline the points made in the narrative. Indeed, one might say that Almodóvar's style in production design is essential to his stories. *The Skin I Live In* tells an equally complex story as *Labyrinth*, but the plot is more coherent

and better developed. Through flashbacks, although occasionally being intentionally misled, the viewer learns about the tragic story of Dr. Robert Ledgard, an eminent surgeon and scientist, whose wife kills herself after having been badly burned in a car accident when she tried to elope with her lover. His daughter observed the suicide and remained traumatised by it. When she seems to get better, Robert takes her along to a wedding where a young man, Vicente, high on drugs of some kind, is attracted to her and attempts to have sex with her, an experience that upsets her healing process and ultimately drives her to suicide. Robert takes revenge by kidnapping Vicente and forcing him to have a sex-change and cosmetic surgery, so that he becomes “Vera,” a recreation of Robert’s wife (and maybe also his daughter). He continues to keep Vera captive and uses her as a human guinea pig for his research in the development of an artificial skin resistant to fire (inspired by his wife’s burns, apparently). After Vera was raped by the housekeeper Marilia’s son, Zeca, Robert and Vera become a couple, but Vera uses this new freedom to kill Robert and his housekeeper and to return to her family. The film ends when she tells her mother who she really is.

The style of this film is a mix of modern(ist) minimalism with strong colours and simple lines and the lush colours of baroque art. The artworks of different periods hung in Robert’s villa hint at the theme of female beauty and are occasionally directly quoted in Vera’s posture on her *chaise longue* when she is watched from the other room by Robert. When (supposedly) Robert and Vera begin to develop a passion for each other, the pastel-coloured drape over Vera’s bed is replaced by a dark red one. The theme of archaic revenge unrestrained by social norms undertaken by a highly developed scientific mind using hyper-modern biotechnology is further underlined by the setting: when Vicente is first kidnapped, he is held captive in a dark cave-like environment. His/her surgery and Robert’s scientific experiments are conducted in a high-tech environment that Robert set up in the ancient cellars of his house, with rough stonewalls contrasting with the hyper-modern technology, the soft, natural colour of the stones with the harsh blues and greens of the operating theatre. The theme of contrasting styles is further developed when Marilia’s son Zeca appears wearing a tiger costume that looks like a striped, brown-and-yellow version of a Superman costume, with tights, boots and cape. The trashy costume clashes with the refined interior design of the villa and sets up a contrast that implies a similar difference between the former drug-dealer and low-life Zeca (underlined by his lower-class accent) and the scientist Robert. Yet both appear equally deluded by fantasies of power and grandeur, although they realise them in different ways. Marilia sheds light on this when she tells Vera that both are her sons, although by different fathers, accusing herself of carrying an insanity inside herself that each of her

sons expresses in different ways.

The aesthetic appeal of the films through colour, costume, sound and production design underline the importance of the surface of things in camp and its denial of the idea of authenticity or the “natural.” Susan Sontag (1999, p.55) writes, “Nothing in nature can be campy.” Vice versa, one might add, in camp nothing is natural. Camp even challenges the idea that there could be any “original”, authentic subject hidden underneath the artificiality and theatricality of an individual’s performance. Instead, camp suggests that all there is *is* artifice. As Gary McMahon (2006, p.59) says, “in camp, the axiom ‘be yourself’ is an invocation to performance.” The question of authenticity and artificiality is a topic that returns in many if not all of Almodóvar’s films, in particular with regard to gender and sexual identity, issues of performance and theatricality, using the motifs of cosmetic surgery and false identities (Knauss, 2007).

Almodóvar’s claim that authenticity can be expressed in artificiality is possibly nowhere made as explicit as by La Agrado in *All About My Mother*, when the pre-op transsexual Agrado describes in a theatrical monologue how s/he became ever more her authentic self, the more she became artificial through plastic surgery. There is no “natural” identity or authentic self; it is all a question of what one makes of oneself with the help of silicone, artificial cheekbones or fake Chanel dresses. In *Labyrinth*, the topic of authenticity and artifice is expressed in the false identity that Riza takes on to hide from the terrorists and in the side plot of Sexilia’s impersonator Queti who happily has plastic surgery to look like her idol and to “be” Sexi for all intents and purposes (even Sexi’s father doesn’t recognize her, not even when he “knows” her by having sex with her). The issue is also hinted at through the appearances of Almodóvar and his partner from the Movida, Fabio McNamara, who in one scene appear in drag on the stage to sing one of their songs. In another scene, McNamara acts in a exploitation, sadist photonovella, directed by Almodóvar, thus taking the question of acting and authenticity to yet another level. Almodóvar’s point here, as in later films, seems to be that authenticity of identity or feeling or being has nothing to do with nature, but can also – or maybe especially – be found in artifice, in acting or theatricality.

The Skin I Live In deals with this topic in a much less outrageous, more dramatic fashion: Vicente didn’t agree to have his identity changed, but was forced to, and refuses this change. Vera tries to kill herself slashing her wrists and, interestingly, her breasts as the signs of her fake identity. Both Robert’s experiments with a mannequin on which he patches pieces of artificial skin and Vera’s own fabric sculptures in the patchwork style of Louise Bourgeois underline the idea of identity as something

“made” and worn on the surface, like skin, or indeed, like the tight, black or flesh-coloured “body stocking” that Vera wears to protect her new skin, her new identity. The theme of nature vs. artifice is also taken up in Robert’s experiments that lead to the development of an artificial skin, so much better and more resistant than “natural” skin, and in a short scene when he is shown treating a set of bonsai trees turning and twisting them into shapes they would never achieve through natural growth. Here, Almodóvar seems nearly critical of the idea that artifice could be the real authenticity – in contrast to Algrado’s embrace of artifice –, was it not for the fact that Vicente’s “real” identity is questioned even before he has the vaginoplasty, when he is shown holding a dress against himself and dressing a manikin in his mother’s boutique as if he was using it as a surrogate for wearing feminine clothes.

True to the original meaning of “camp,” it is further characterised by exaggeration and excess, by being “too-much” (Sontag, 1999, p.59) in gestures, mimics, stylishness, aesthetics and not least, in the larger-than-life emotions of camp sentimentality. Almodóvar’s actresses and actors love, hate, live and die with camp flourish and excess, and the complex and improbable plots of his films serve to render these emotions both more unlikely and more intense, with surprise and discovery playing major dramaturgical roles, such as in *Labyrinth* with its game of false identities and their discovery, the tension raised by nearly missed opportunities, or in the final meeting of the terrorists, the Emperess and the band members at the airport, when Riza and Sexi just barely manage to escape them. But excess and exaggeration can work in different ways in Almodóvar’s films: there’s the outrageous and over-the-top excess of early films like *Labyrinth* or even his most recent film, *I’m So Excited!*, in which the gay, bisexual, drug-consuming, near-hysterical flight attendants of a plane threatened to crash because of a technical failure do their best to distract their passengers by a lip-synched song-and-dance performance in the cabin. But there’s also exaggeration in the way in which Robert’s revenge is represented in its most minute detail of lab instruments, blood from a pig still alive, surgical instruments etc. – an exaggeration of cold planning, if not flamboyant exuberance.

The same exaggeration is applied to the camp parody of social norms and expectations, especially as far as gender role behaviour or sexual desires are concerned. Almodóvar introduces this theme in the very title sequence of *Labyrinth* when both Riza and Sexi tour the Madrid flea market in search of sex partners, with close-ups of the crotches of various men they seem to find appealing. Their predatory sexuality is outrageous and critical of social norms in several ways: first, both a man and a woman are shown to exhibit the same kind of active sexuality, whereas norm-ally a woman would have to passively wait for the advances made by a man. Second, Riza is looking for a male partner, thus

counteracting heteronormativity, while Sexi is looking for several men, counteracting monogamy. Finally, the close-ups of men's crotches visualises their desire and forces the audience to identify with their perspective, defying norms of polite behaviour. The film also questions traditional ideals of family, father-daughter relationships and motherhood: while Sexi's father is not interested in her at all until he finally gives in to his (suppressed) sexual desire for her (but with her *doppelgänger*, Queti), Queti's own father abuses her sexually, in his drug-induced delusion believing her to be her mother. One of the women who became pregnant following Sexi's father's fertility treatment admits to hating her daughter and wanting to kill her, subverting the ideas of good, "natural" motherhood expressed by other characters in the film. Social norms are also challenged in *Labyrinth* by instances of scatological humour and crude jokes that obviously question ideas of good taste and politeness. In *The Skin I Live In*, the theme of gender roles and relationships is taken up when Vera is "educated" to be a woman by giving her books about make-up, laying out dresses for her to wear and high heels to practise walking in. Here, the director points out the elements that make social femininity (and by extension, masculinity): clothes, make-up, shoes, certain ways of behaviour, gestures, mimics. And knowing these artificial elements is, of course, the first step to undoing their pervasive power in the making of gender and other norms.

Camp's criticism of conventions and social norms also expands to the realm of religion. Religious motifs or objects are one of the key ingredients of camp, for two reasons. First, religions have contributed to the development of social norms, categories and boundaries, as well as to regulations that reinforce these boundaries, in particular with regard to gender, class and sexuality. Religion – in the western context⁶ in which camp has originated, the Christian tradition in particular – is thus a prime target for camp's criticism. But second, Christianity, especially Catholicism, is also a camp favourite because in many of its elements it is so camp itself: candles, incense, the splendour of priestly vestments, golden crosses, chalices or monstrances crusted in jewels, mystics swooning in front of the cross, dissolving in tears, tearing their bodies apart in their fervour to imitate Christ, elaborate ritual and the theatricality of the celebration of the sacraments, where issues of authenticity and performativity come to the fore. Mark Jordan (2010, p.188) writes: "Vivid Christian artefacts or rituals pass so easily into 'secular' camp because they are already camp – because they permit themselves excess in the extremity of devotion; because they outrageously combine the divine and the human; because they announce their failure ever to represent what they ceaselessly copy."⁷ Almodóvar (quoted in Rennett, 2012, p.84) explicitly admits his interest in religion: "What interests me, fascinates me and

moves me most in religion is both its ability to create communication between people, even between two lovers and its theatricality.” Many of his scenes and protagonists thus reference religious motifs and themes, but with a parodic twist, something which can be traced back to his critical engagement with the Spanish culture of the Franco regime when the Catholic Church was closely involved with the dictatorship and maintained strict social control (Vernon, 1995, p.60), and further contributes the campness of his cinema. Thus in *Labyrinth*, Queti is tied to the bed and raped by her father underneath a cross on the wall, while in *The Skin I Live In*, Marilia wears a cross and asks Robert to pray for his (unknown) half-brother whom he killed for raping Vera, when he gets rid of the body. As these references imply, and as is made even more explicit in *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004), Christianity is associated with those who do evil, rather with those who do good. And yet, it is not so simple: Christian values, such as neighbourly love or forgiveness, humility or care for the excluded and marginalized, are quite prominent in Almodóvar’s films, although anonymously and usually not associated with Christianity, with the exception of *Dark Habits* (*Entre tinieblas*, 1983). In this film, these Christian virtues are impersonated by the nuns of a convent in Madrid, and yet, here again, the religious reference comes with a twist (D’Lugo, 2006, pp.32-37). Although the nuns are truer to the core values of Christianity than other religious characters in Almodóvar’s films, they are by no means exemplary: they take drugs, have eating disorders, masochistic tendencies, they are torn by jealousy, (sexual) desires and worldly ambitions. When one of the nuns removes the make-up from the face of her lover, an imprint remains on the cloth like a camp version of the veil of Veronica casting a nightclub singer in the role of Christ. It seems as if in his treatment of religious themes Almodóvar does not criticize religion per se, but its institutionalized forms with their perversions of central values of love, care and forgiveness.

Originating from gay and transvestite subcultures, camp has always embraced the excluded, both in social and in aesthetic terms: socially marginalised groups such as gays, transvestites, transsexuals or otherwise queer persons, and aesthetically marginalised artistic forms or genres such as kitsch objects, melodrama, sentimentalism, polished superficiality or – in the case of Almodóvar – outright scatological humor, as in the case of the janitor in *Labyrinth* who has taken a laxative and is kept from going to the toilet until it is too late – a fact that is made abundantly clear to the audience both visually and on the soundtrack. Almodóvar’s films are populated by people from the margins. In *Labyrinth*, the protagonists are homosexuals, a nymphomaniac, terrorists (one of them with a paranormal sense of smell), a mother who wants to kill her child, a doctor who desires his daughter, a Lacanian

psychoanalyst who desires the doctor, a man who confuses his daughter with his wife, a series of would-be singers and artists – certainly not representatives of the social elite. And if they do belong to the elite, like the doctor, Sexi's father, his incestuous desires indeed disqualify from the respect that a successful doctor would demand. In *The Skin I Live In*, the protagonists appear to be more middle to upper class (Robert is a scientist and apparently quite wealthy, Vicente's mother owns a fashionable boutique), but again any relationship between class and ethics is challenged, not only because the good doctor is a criminal, but also in the appearance of Zeca with his working-class accent, his past as a drug-dealer and generally rough manners. The fact that he is Robert's half-brother questions Robert's attempts at culture and underlines how arbitrary the belonging to the elite vs. marginal groups can be.

Almodóvar's films are a good example of the strategy of camp to represent the marginalised – in whichever sense – in an affectionate and generous way that elicits sympathy (Willoquet-Maricondi, 2004, p.xii) and a tender feeling, as Sontag says. Even in its critique and parody, camp is not mean or bitter; it does not aim at rejection or condemnation, but rather at empathy, identification and even sympathy. The abusive father in *Labyrinth* is not excused for raping his daughter, but the film shows his inability to deal with his wife running away with a lover and thus offers a glimpse into his motivations (exacerbated by the mix of medicines which makes him delusional). Similarly, Robert certainly can't be excused for kidnapping Vicente and forcing a new identity upon him, but as viewers, we are made to understand his motivations as grounded in his intense suffering over his wife's disfigurement and suicide and the subsequent loss of his daughter for which he holds Vicente responsible. As Marvin D'Lugo (2006, p.11) writes, Almodóvar makes an "effort to use narrative to provide a logic to actions and lives, to dramatize the identity of characters." The emotional style of Almodóvar's cinema allows the audience to share in their feelings and to empathise with them, to experience that tender feeling that Sontag mentions. Through empathy and emotional engagement Almodóvar's films challenge our presumptions about what or who is good or bad, setting out a queer ethic that is rainbow-coloured rather than black and white (Knauss and Zordan, 2013, p.521).

In *The Skin I Live In*, another topic is addressed that fascinates camp: the corruptibility of objects as well as human beings, their mortality and the strain this puts on people, in particular those who live off their appearances. The skin that Robert develops is supposed to be resistant to fire and mosquito bites, a desperate and far-too-late attempt to undo his wife's burning that drove her to suicide. The same fascination with mortality can be discovered behind the references to bodily processes and fluids that are so prominent in *Labyrinth*. In camp culture, this fascination with decay and mortality is also

expressed in the figure of the aging diva, a character that Almodóvar introduces in *All About My Mother*, and in the recycling of clothes, objects, films or personae for new uses and with new meanings and reasons to be, such as in *The Skin I Live In* when Vera makes sculptures from pieces of clothing, or when a man brings the clothes of his wife who left him to be resold or made into new clothes in Vicente's mother's shop. Through this practice of recycling, camp criticises consumer culture in which what is no longer used is relentlessly discarded (Flim, 1999, p.437). At the same time, however, camp also succumbs to consumer dynamics by turning these objects or personae into objects of consumption again, as does Vicente's mother. Almodóvar himself seems to engage in a similar form of recycling when he uses music from his Movida band or a fictional character, Patty Diphusa, he created for a magazine in *Labyrinth*, or "recycles" scenes from his films in later ones, such as a scene when nurses and doctors practise conversations about organ donation (first in *The Flower of My Secret* [La flor de mi secreto, 1995], then in *All About My Mother*), or more extensively, when he reuses scenes from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988) in *Broken Embraces* (*Los abrazos rotos*, 2009). His multiple intertextual references can also be seen as a form of "recycling" and reviving characters and stories from other texts.

This connects to a last point that bears mentioning, and that is the disparity of influences that shape camp. Camp draws equally – one might say, "democratically" – on the everyday, the "banal," the "lowly," genres such as exploitation movies, romance novels or cheap plastic objects sold at souvenir kiosks, and on elements or works of high culture, developing thus an "egalitarian ethics," as Halperin (2012, p.209) said, not only with regard to persons, sexual desires or identities, but also with regard to aesthetic value and form. In *Labyrinth*, Almodóvar focuses on underground culture, such as the punk-rock music of the Movida in whose production he was involved with Fabio McNamara, the popular genres of photonovella and exploitation movie (with Almodóvar as director of the photonovella-within-the-film urging his model, McNamara, to "use your acting talent!"), references to Picasso in the wall paintings in Sexi's room, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In *The Skin I Live In*, "high" art is referenced through Vera's textile sculptures that are inspired by Louise Bourgeois' work and in the paintings that decorate Robert's house. But the film also refers to the more "trashy" genre of horror films and melodrama with the character of the mad scientist and his underground laboratory, the use of suspense or the dramatic shadows of Marilia, creeping around the house dressed in an innocent white nightgown but holding a gun when she hears a shot from Robert's room. This diversity of influences and intertextual references is increased further in Almodóvar's other films, all of which contain references

to various genres and works of both popular and high culture. These dense intertextual references make his films look like the patchwork sculptures Vera makes of the scraps of the dresses she's supposed to wear as a woman. By making explicit his multiple influences, Almodóvar also provides a critique of the idea of the "original masterwork" and the genius that autonomously created it. His intertextual juxtapositions of different works and genres provoke new readings and contribute to the characteristic blurring – or queering – of genres and categories, which is not only part of the aesthetic strategy of camp, but also contributes to its critical effect.

Camp and Theological Aesthetics

In the introduction I have already mentioned some *desiderati* in theological aesthetics that camp might help to develop further. Based on my discussion of the camp aesthetics of Almodóvar's films, I will now develop these ideas in this final section, thinking about the constructive potential of camp for theological aesthetics. What follows should be seen as hypotheses put forward for further discussions, and not as the last word on the issue. Indeed, the subject of this paper, camp, itself prohibits the idea of any last words that could end a discussion.

First, camp uncovers and challenges the persisting elitism of much of theological aesthetics. As I pointed out in the introduction, theological aesthetics limits its study of aesthetica to a canon of great (male) masters considered capable of creating works that reveal the truth of reality, without critically reflecting on how this canon has been established, by whom and using which criteria.⁸ This approach overlooks what is happening in other aesthetic realms, which could have much to offer, especially when attention to reception is integrated into the analysis of the work in its context. Through its destabilising effects, camp also sabotages attempts at finding universal criteria for distinguishing good from bad or high from low art. This opens up the realm of subjects potentially of interest to theological aesthetics to all genres and media, including film, as well as other forms that address the senses, such as cooking or design, that are not usually included in reflections on the aesthetic.

This critique of elitist tendencies in theological aesthetics also requires a reflection of the economic dimensions of culture. High art is often defined as autonomous precisely because it is considered to be free from the demands and finalities of the market, but of course it may also be co-opted by the capitalist system and become commodified; the thriving business of museum shops selling umbrellas and coffee mugs with Van Gogh or Monet motifs is certainly a case in point. In its

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reflections on the aesthetic, theological aesthetics has to take into account questions regarding how the art market drives the creation and evaluation of artworks, and who the authoritative institutions are, issues of public sponsoring of the arts and whether a museum should charge an entrance fee. These are issues that influence how people make sense of a work, and whether they are able to interact with it in the first place. The ethical dimension of the aesthetic is often discussed in theological aesthetics with regard to how a work challenges an individual's ethical principles – what Bychkov (2008, p.xv and xvii) calls the transformative dimension in aesthetic experience – but this discussion would have to be expanded to include economic ethics.

Second, camp's embrace of the material and its surface can be seen, in theological terms, as an incarnational aesthetics that offers redemption through the affirmation of the material, not its disruption or even negation. Christianity affirms the material, concrete dimension of human existence as a potentially sacramental space of the encounter with God. Emphasis on the sublime, the transcendent, the other-worldly in aesthetic theories has often rendered obscure this fundamental appreciation of the material which camp can help to rediscover.

This is connected to another issue important to reconsider in theological aesthetics: the question of artificiality and authenticity, truth and reality. As mentioned in the introduction, some approaches in theological aesthetics see the value of the aesthetic in its ability to reveal the truth of reality and its eternal principles. Consequently, authenticity is associated with reality (without confusing authenticity with a simple realistic aesthetics) and highly valued in theological aesthetics. Camp questions these assumptions of truth in reality and challenges theological aesthetics to think about what authenticity is and where and how it can be expressed. Is it the authenticity of feeling that can be expressed more deeply on the stage in the fiction of a play, as in *All About My Mother*, the authenticity of identity that comes to the fore only after having undergone plastic surgery as in *Labyrinth*, or an apparent authenticity of the natural that is denied by Robert in *The Skin I Live In* when he prunes and twists his bonsai plants? What is authentic, what is real, what is truth, and how is it revealed? Camp challenges theological aesthetics to think further about these concepts and their meaning in the context of aesthetics and theology.

Fourth, the emphasis on the beautiful, pleasure and sentiment in camp rather than on the disturbing, ugly or painful should not be dismissed as worthless, easy or immature. There is a worth in beauty, and theological aesthetics is well aware of this when it underlines the unity of the traditional transcendentals, the beautiful, the good and the true. And yet, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, p.144)

write about pleasure: “Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even when it is shown.” For them, laughter holds no subversive potential, but is “the instrument of the fraught practised on happiness” (140). But is it true that pleasure makes us blind and complacent, whereas pain evokes criticism and resistance? Doesn’t this approach exclude any meaningfulness in pleasure, and thus restrict human existence to just the capacity for suffering? Couldn’t one posit that there is the possibility of escapism in violence, as well, when violence or pain become like a vortex that pull one down, away from reality and its complexities, and disable critical thought? And how about “the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic” (Halperin, 2012, p.202), how about the subversive potential of laughter and humour? These are questions that are raised by camp and by the pleasure and laughter it can evoke, when one is immersed in the splendour of the colours of a film by Almodóvar, the sophistication of its style, the intricacies of its plots, the flourish with which its actors gesture. These pleasures do not deny the harshness, suffering or injustices that are also a part of life, but rather embrace them in an overall affirmation of life: Vera goes through suffering and imprisonment in *The Skin I Live In*, she is raped, she kills, but she continues until she arrives at her family again, asking for help to live. Also, Sexi and Riza emerge from their traumata in order to embrace a future together. In Almodóvar’s camp, there is an orientation towards the future and the hopes it holds that embraces past suffering, but is not limited by it.

Fifth, camp challenges theological aesthetics to take into account the affective dimension of the aesthetic experience more than it has done so far. This is not easy, because the contribution of emotions is difficult to capture and describe without falling into reductionist traps. Camp’s over-the-top sentimentality, the tears, laughter, screaming or ranting of the heroes and heroines of Almodóvar’s films and our own tears and laughter in the audience, remind us that there is a cognitive dimension to emotions and sensations. Frank Burch Brown (1989, p.28) has pointed out that aesthetic experience addresses the human being in the unity of body and mind, so that both sensation and intellection are included in the meaning-making process. Knowledge and wisdom are not only derived from critical, rational distance, but might also be found in the immediacy of sensory and emotional experiences, as is expressed in the title of Vivian Sobchack’s article “What My Fingers Knew” (2004), which discusses precisely the sensory-bodily-affective contribution to meaning making. In the embrace of the sentimental(ist), camp provides a space to acknowledge this dimension and its role in human life, and offers us absolution for its denial in the aesthetic realm as well as in the rest of our lives (Pally, 2004, p.85). Thus, the emotional, affective experiences during a film by Almodóvar enable empathy and

identification with his characters, which is the presupposition for the engaged, empathetic ethics he encourages and for his critique of social exclusion and discrimination.

Furthermore, camp is not only affirmative, but also critical. It fosters solidarity rather than antagonism, it acknowledges pain without excluding pleasure, it uncovers the constructedness and artificiality of hierarchising categories not by dissolving them but by exaggerating them. Gary McMahon (2006, pp.77-93) has described this unique way of camp to both empathize in identification and reflect on what one empathises with as the “Ahhh-effect,” a camp version of the alienation effect (A-effect) of Brechtian theatre. In Brecht, there is little or no possibility for emotional engagement and empathy because of the distancing effect of his theatre. All focus is on the rational reflection of what is seen. In camp, emotions and the empathy they evoke are equally encouraged as reflection about what we feel and what this means. The camp exaggeration of Almodóvar’s comic melodramas both involves and alienates, because it evokes our sentiments and, without denying them, at the same time distances us from them.

Camp’s flamboyant, sentimental, tender criticism of categories and norms, of elitism and exclusion brings together the aesthetic and social, the emotional and reflective in a unique way. As a tender feeling, it does not stop at such criticism but evokes solidarity and promotes generosity. As such, it represents a challenge for theological aesthetics to rethink its own categories and hierarchies, the exclusion of genres or media from what is considered meaningful and worthwhile, a judgement that often also implies a judgement about the groups in society interacting with them. Camp is thus a challenge to self-critically reflect on these processes of exclusion, both on an aesthetic and a social level, but it does this by pointing further, beyond the failures, and motivates the utopian imagination of a different world, a world of beauty, love and passion.

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¹ Richard Viladesau (1999, p.11) proposes a very similar, and similarly broad definition: “theological aesthetics will consider God, religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, and feeling), the beautiful, and the arts.”

² For a brief summary of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics see Bychkov (2008, p. xiv-xv), and the essays by Francesca Aran Murphy (2008) and Ben Quash (2008).

³ While there are numerous works on film and religion or popular culture and religion by now, it is important to note that these works are not described, or describe themselves, as “theological aesthetics,” nor do they draw on the literature of theological aesthetics, but rather situate themselves through approaches and literature used in the field of religious studies or cultural studies.

⁴ Gavin Hopps (2012, p.167) briefly refers to camp in his theological aesthetics of pop culture and sees camp as an analogy of “the Christian parable, translated into an aesthetic sphere, which urges us to see value in failure and elicits sympathy for the lowly and banal.” For Hopps, camp and kitsch are indicators of the revelatory potential of art, its *surplus*, when it offers more than it has or than is obvious. In theology in general, Marcella Althaus-Reid’s work has been interpreted as camp by Mark Jordan (2010), both with regard to form and content. Almodóvar’s films have been discussed in the realm of theology, but usually with attention to its ethics or his use of religious motifs, and not with particular attention for how his camp style influences both his ethics and his references to religion (Knauss and Zordan, 2013; McMahon, 2006; Donapetry, 1999).

⁵ McMahon (2006, p.46) also refers to the bitchyness or waspishness of camp, and again, the choice of terminology is, I think, revealing about camp theorists’ view of the feminine in camp.

⁶ It could be interesting, and in itself camp, to apply the category of camp to the analysis of Bollywood melodrama or Japanese theater which both exhibit many of the characteristics of camp, although the category itself is, of course, foreign to these contexts.

⁷ See also Stringer 2000.

⁸ The issue of canon formation has been extensively discussed in literary studies, see for example Gorak 2001.