The Eucharist and aesthetics are, depending on the sense of the term aesthetics, a problematic pairing. If we take aesthetics in its most general and original sense, in the sense that Aristotle uses it, for instance, in De anima, namely as aisthesis or “perception,” the problem immediately becomes apparent. What fueled the long history of eucharistic controversies all the way up until the Reformation is the fact that the Eucharist fundamentally frustrates perception and cognition. The body and blood of Christ are precisely what cannot be seen or easily understood. This discrepancy between perception and essence is what the many different theorizations and theologies of the Eucharist during the Reformation were attempting to work through. Taken in this original and epistemological sense, the conjunction of Eucharist and aesthetics explodes the narrow confines of a single companion article, and is, thus, treated by the various contributions in section II of this volume. The same is true if we take “aesthetics” of the Eucharist in the sense of its phenomenal presentation; in other words, the religious technologies and practices that were employed to make it experiential and intelligible in the course of the liturgy and other ritual processes. An integral part of these technologies and practices of bringing the Eucharist to appearance are, of course, the arts arranged around the central event of Christian liturgy. Aesthetics in this sense is explored by sections III and particularly V of this volume and will, thus, not be the subject of my contribution either.

The purview of this essay is much narrower, both historically and systematically, as I take “aesthetics” in yet a third, very specific sense: as denoting the discipline and discourse of the beautiful in art and elsewhere. As a discipline, aesthetics emerged in the German lands in the middle of the eighteenth century. While there were, of course, a number of other aesthetic thinkers in England and France, it was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who coined the designation “Aesthetica” when he published his lectures in 1750 under the same title. Although Baumgarten could not
deny its Aristotelian heritage when he defined aesthetics as the “science of sensate cognition” (scientia cognitionis sensitivae),¹ its domain was no longer the whole perceptual world, but the beautiful in art and literature. Relevant to the present essay, but all too often overlooked by eighteenth-century scholarship, is the fact that aesthetics, like so many other developments in German eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural history, was a largely Evangelical and, more particularly, Pietist affair. It was conceived and elaborated by products of a Pietist upbringing such as Baumgarten, his student Georg Friedrich Meier, or Immanuel Kant and Karl Philipp Moritz, or by sons of Evangelical pastors or students of Evangelical schools such as Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder.

The demarcation of an autonomous aesthetic domain, which gave rise to the emergence of a corresponding discipline, happened first in the Evangelical controversies over the so-called adiaphora.² Their mostly Lutheran defenders claimed that art and literature belonged to a category of things that are neither good nor bad or, more precisely, neither effective for salvation nor for condemnation. In other words, art and literature in themselves are soteriologically indifferent and purposeless. This demarcation was articulated in medial terms. Those things which are neither good nor bad were termed “Mitteldinge” or “media.” It is thus their use or abuse that determines their soteriological and moral status. They are media not only because they are literally things that are located in the middle (in Latin medium) between those things and actions which redeem or condemn, but also, and maybe more importantly, because they are mere media. In the eyes of their Lutheran defenders, art and literature are neutral representational media which are not to be held responsible for the abuses for which they may have been deployed. They communicate and mediate without altering or corrupting the message. Thus in a sense, those claiming that art is a “Mittelding” hold a theory of, what one could call, “weak” mediality. Aesthetic media are completely neutral and transparent and, thus, do not affect what they mediate.

In contrast, the Pietists, who vehemently denied that there existed anything indifferent in this fallen world, advocated the opposite view. In a moral universe governed by Paul’s prescription that anything that