

Donald Preziosi

**MEMORY AND AMNESIA:  
THE ESSENTIAL INTERRELATION OF ART AND RELIGION**

To even raise the question of the “relationship between” what are customarily distinguished in modernity as *art* and *religion* is to have already answered the question, because the answer is in the words themselves: a presumption of their distinctiveness and autonomy, that each is a *kind* of thing requiring an account both of the way each exists *in itself* and the way each is linked to the other.

However, because two or more notions are verbally juxtaposed does not necessarily create a genuine relationship, despite the efforts of politicians, propagandists, or advertisers of cars, vodka or shoes. The art historian and theorist Hubert Damisch once commented upon what he termed the “false simplicity” of such conjunctions; what he called “two uncertainly defined terms...coordinated in service of a demonstration, usually of an ideological nature”, because such linkages, depending upon the circumstances, might signify union as much as opposition, connection as much as exclusion.

But what about the juxtaposition of art and religion? I will argue that this relationship may be more than circumstantial or accidental, but is a genuine one and *essential*. This is because each term in the equation – art, artistry, artifice, or materiality, (on the one hand); and religion, religiosity, spirituality, or immateriality (on the other) – has been historically so much a part of what constitutes the *other* as to deeply challenge the very idea of each as *autonomous* or ontologically distinct.

My point is that the relationship between what we call religion and art is so fundamental as to trouble the autonomous existence of each *except in relationship to its other*. Each as the other’s shadow or ghost; the ghost in the machinery or constitution of the other. In other words, each term in the equation is the mark of a *differential relationship*. What is termed art, then,

is not a “thing” but a distinct *type of relationship between* things, ideas, or phenomena. Distinct, that is, from the kind of relationships marked by religion.

But how then should we characterize such relationships? If each is a different process or method of relating or using things (potentially, any thing), they may better be termed *artistry* and *religiosity*, to foreground the *performative* aspect of each and *de-emphasize* their reification or thingness.

There is a linguistic analogy to such processes. For example, the concept of the *phoneme*, where the ‘meaning’ of a single sound is to *mark differences* from other phonemes, other markers of difference. The meaning of the sound of the Russian “ts” is to mark its difference from others such as “sh” so as to differentiate larger units such as words, that are directly significant. In other words, indirectly meaningful sounds that *in combination* build or ‘ground’ more *directly-significant* phenomena (morphemes, words, syntactic structures, sentences, texts...).

Are the connections between what we designate as art and religion uniquely different than any others that we might juxtapose, for example art and science, or religion and politics? Is any such marking of an ontology *deponent*; that is, incomplete, and significant mainly insofar as it reflects upon the entire set of phenomena which may be claimed to be more than circumstantially or randomly connected? What exactly would justify a claim – such as the one made by this paper – that art and religion have a uniquely special relationship? Or is it that this juxtaposition is systemically similar to others, but at a deeper level?

My title also juxtaposed *memory* and its presumed antithesis, *amnesia*. What exactly does art have to do with amnesia? Isn’t art a cure for amnesia; a remedy for forgetting, and not its cause? It might seem obvious that artworks – or more generally, humanly-made artifacts – preserve the memory of things occurring in the recent or distant past. Artifacts would seem to be constant reminders of events, phenomena, and experiences. Constant and persistent, to be sure, but also mutable and context-specific.

The general concern here is with the latter: the mutable and contingent nature of *both* art and religion. All such problems come into clearer focus when we look at them from the perspective of one particular modality of signification; one modality of meaning-making that I will refer to in shorthand as *theism*, which I use to signal an *equivalence* between phenomena. Where X = Y in any situation, *independent* of context. However, as I will argue here, any equivalence is defined in relation to other non-equivalent connections. So: What does all this mean when applied to the question of art’s relationship to religion, or memory’s relation to amnesia? Consider the following.

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the philosopher and social critic Hannah Arendt (b.1906) famously observed in 1951 that the aggressiveness of totalitarianism lay less in its lust for power and more in an ideologically-driven *desire to make the world consistent*. That is: to make the world orderly, homogeneous, and *pure*. More orderly than it currently appears.

Even if deconstructing and transforming the world as it now seems might involve marginalizing, banishing, expelling, or even murdering persons or peoples perceived as *impure*, whoever and wherever they may be, and on whatever grounds they may be staged as undesirably *other*.

The problem with this is that othernesses are not only external but *internal*: constituting what in myself I distinguish or bracket out as other. I'm reminded here of the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "...the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" he said. The uncanniness of this is strikingly manifest when reckoning with or trying to account for the phenomenon of self-sacrifices of one's life – A particular kind of suicidal action that is increasingly common today, especially in societies (and not only in the Middle East) dominated by *monotheistic* variants of theist versions of that form of art we call religion.

Consider especially the *martyrdoms* – literally, acts of "witnessing" – performed in the name of a transcendent divinity, spirit, force, or being. I mean the very *idea* – that is, precisely, the artistry or artifice – of a god. A cosmological *theatricality* concerning what the poet William Butler Yeats, in his remarkable poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, aptly called "the *artifice* of eternity" into which we shall all "be gathered" at death.

The philosopher and cultural critic Simon Critchley, in a recent book called *Infinitely Demanding*, investigating the ethics of political and religious commitment, and drawing on Hannah Arendt and other authors, argued that in modernity the political order of the nation-state came to be staged as social cartography, cultural mapping, and psychological ordering. What is crucial here is the artistry of *staging* or theatricality. He took as a salient example Martin Heidegger's 1933 inaugural address as Rector of the University of Freiburg, in which he divided the university student body into three types of projected community service: work-service, war-service, and knowledge-service (*Arbeitsdienst*, *Wehrdienst*, *Wissendienst*). In fact, this civic-psycho multifunctionality was directly modeled on Plato's three-fold division of the "soul" of the ideal citizen 2500 years ago in his utopian dialogue *Ta Politeia*, or "[Concerning] Civic Matters" (known in English as "*The Republic*"). Heidegger's lecture was delivered 3 days after joining the Nazi party.

The important point however is that this is *not* unique to Nazism. For Critchley, politics and democracy were two names for the same practice. Democracy is not a *kind* of thing; nor is it fixed or immutable, nor is it even the practice of social *consensus*. Democracy is more fundamentally the practice of what he calls *dissensus* – what might more explicitly be termed *critique*. By which I mean specifically the crafting or fabricating of an awareness of the contingency, mutability, and artistry or artifice of the social and political realities promoted and policed by the nation-state or community or ethnic group as "natural" – commonly involving the militarization of civic life. The practice, in other words, of totalitarianism.

But, if democracy is an ongoing process or practice, then in relation to what other practices would it be understood? To what is it staged as antithetical? While one might answer: practices such as aristocracy, plutocracy, kleptocracy, or oligarchy; more fundamentally, democracy is antithetical to *theocracy* or theocratic politics. Which means, technically, in semiotic terms, a *fixity* of signification and the a-historical juxtapositioning and putatively permanent alignment together of signifiers and signifieds. In other words, a *totalitarianism of belief*; the *policing* of signification and its affordances and opportunities.

Historically, in many if not most totalitarian polities this has commonly involved the staging of *shame*: shame associated with and publically manifesting or confessing one's own imperfections and inadequacies. The shame that has played a central role in expressions of martyrdom, both ancient and modern, eastern and western. One classic manifestation of self-shaming in the early Western Christian tradition was St. Augustine's account of his revulsion and abhorrence of his own body, the reaction to an earlier life of excess and promiscuity. Augustine, it may be recalled, articulated and promoted (1500 years before Freud) the notion of "original sin" as an innately negative and permanent quality of human personhood as such.

Of course the feeling of shame is neither uniquely Augustinian, or Western, or even Christian, nor is it limited to the other Middle Eastern monotheisms such as Islam or Judaism. Indeed, it is not uncommon in many religious communities around the world. It is exemplified in East Asia in the Aum Shinrikyo of Japan, or in South Asia in Mahayana Buddhism. Nevertheless, shame is most powerfully embodied and realized in societies in thrall to the phantasmagoric artistry of monotheist institutions. This is powerfully seen in the actions of the jihadist terrorists behind the suicidal destruction of 11 September, 2001 in New York, whose explicit aim, as stated by one of its organizers, the 32-year old Egyptian architect Mohammed Atta, himself on board one of the flights, was *to initiate a new series of religious wars*. Wars that have multiplied and whose devastations, displacements, and genocidal atrocities have strikingly accelerated over the past decade and a half, especially with the recent growth of what has been proclaimed as an Islamic State (IS, ISIS, or ISIL) and the projected revival of a Muslim "caliphate." The staging of which is being done in direct relationship to what it creates *as its antithesis*, the 'Dar al Harb,' the house or zone of the rest of the (non-Muslim) world. The house of war; that world staged as that which must be destroyed in order to *purify* the world. An act of artistry similar to what some in Muslim Africa refer to as "Boko Haram," or western ideas subject to censure and erasure.

Jihadist acts are self-proclaimed *acts of destruction and simultaneous self-immolation*, done in the name – that is, the artistry – of the transcendental purity and supreme perfection of a *divinity*. An artistry staged as if it were *not* artifice, *not* theater. As the theologian and psychologist James Jones observed recently, this commonly entails crafting an *image*

of a vengeful, demeaning, patriarchal, absolutist divinity: one eliciting individual and collective obedience, submission, and purification.

In terms of art, what is going on here? What exactly is a *religious* artifice or artwork? I'm going to give a name to such an entity using the ancient Greek technical term used exclusively for *statues of gods having innate power*: an *agalma*. It is what psychoanalytic theorist and master semiotician Jacques Lacan once referred to as the "*objet petit a*": the *aporia* at the heart of semiosis, the still center around which revolves the world of signs. A sign that is *not* a sign. The "little a" stands for *agalma*.

This uncannily recalls the notion of that Christian ceremonial object, the *eucharist*, the piece of bread that at a singular ceremonial moment comes to be equal or identical to what at all other times it would symbolize or merely "re-present:" the body of the divinity. An act which in its *determinacy* ironically simultaneously calls attention to the relationality and contingency of *representation*. These very issues were explicitly elaborated upon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the French linguist-theologians of Port-Royal, whose semiotic theory postulated a universe of contingent signs incorporating, as its enabling center-point, a sign that was *not* a sign and *non*-contingent: the *eucharist*. In scientific terms, this resembles the kind of massive black hole of *antimatter* said to be at the center of galaxies, and around which all galactic *matter* revolves.

I referred a moment ago to the formal or institutional solicitation of self-sacrifice. Making a sacrifice literally means making (something or someone) sacred. Self-sacrifice, furthermore, entails a *proactive nihilism* explicitly articulated *not* as "suicide" – which most monotheisms see as cowardly – but as a dramatic *witnessing of the inadequacies of the self* – in the face of what that imperfection is the *negative index of*. Which is, specifically, the perfection of an absolutely transcendent and unattainable Real; the artistry of the absolute and completely transcendent purity of the idea of divinity. What the Greek Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras once called "the absence and complete unknowability of God." Entailing what in Eastern (Greek) Orthodox theology is termed *apophaticism*: positive knowledge of god obtained *by negation*; by declaring all that the god is *not*.

Lacan argued that art is the most explicit staging of the impossibility of desire gaining access to its final object. Manifested as the artifice of determination within indeterminacy. Indeterminacy's *interior other*: Its *theatricality*. Those incorrectly called in the contemporary media "suicide bombers" are in fact performing the monotheist ritual of *sacrificing the imperfections of their own selves* so as to manifest, reveal, or witness precisely *what that inadequacy is the antithesis of*: the purity and absolute perfection of god. A supremely semiological act of self-knowledge as self-re-creation or re-birthing through the staging or theatricality of self-erasure.

Where impending *invisibility* (death) is made *visibly legible* as an affirmation of life. Such an act is structurally akin in some societies to making a woman's body invisible by veiling or concealment; precisely in order to *make visible* her "purity." An *allomorph* or analogue of female genital

*ex-cision* (clitorectomy) as a negative index of sexual purity. Itself resonating with male genital alteration or *circum-cision*, the removal of a foreskin and, in Jewish monotheism, its *transference* by replacement on the head and left arm as a *phylactery* – a square leather box containing a piece of skin (or paper) inscribed by a fragment of sacred text. The artistry of absence as a witness of future power. There are many examples of the staging of an absence in a place to negatively make visible what is gone, missing, or removed, such as a particular ethnicity: recall the deliberately empty section of Daniel Liebeskind's Holocaust Museum in Berlin, signifying the city's absent and removed Jewish population. Many comparable examples of this mode of artistry can be cited.

The subtitle of my talk – *Plato's Dilemma* – referred to Plato's patent ambivalence in reaction to what he saw as the inconsistencies, incoherencies, and the very palpable messiness of his own social world: the *direct democracy* of the classical Athenian city. He proposed *banishing* (despite their obvious attractions and pleasures) the representational or mimetic arts of theater, sculpture, and painting, because they had the power to seriously trouble or disturb the allegedly pure and ordered selves or 'souls' of citizens. Art is *dangerous*. But exactly how and why?

Plato's solution to the danger – what he called the holy fear or divine terror (*theios phobos*) of art – seems (from a modern perspective) strikingly disingenuous. His cure lay not in something entirely different, something beyond or external to artistry, for he was supremely aware that all that we call reality is social fiction and illusion – that is, artistry. His cure was in *better* art: meaning that which *coherently and consistently* echoed, reflected, and re-presented the greater order of the universe; the cosmos. To some extent this resembles what we would consider today a cure by *inoculation* – using a serum derived from what poisoned you to build up a resistance to that illness. Plato's therapeutic semiology. Reforming and reconfiguring Athens was the *more coherent artistry* of a theocratic utopia, ruled by a philosopher-king purportedly in synch with divinity. There are not a few contemporary similarities. For example, the actions of the psychopathic genocidal thugs and gangsters of ISIS or the 'Islamic State' (IS / ISIL) whose ultimate aim is to transform the whole world to be consistent with a literal reading of the Qu'ran. The aggressiveness of Islam (literally meaning "submission") is precisely that echoed in Hannah Arendt's words quoted earlier – to make the world *consistently and homogeneously ordered or pure*. Requiring the sacrificing of all that is deemed impure or disorderly, by whatever means – banishment, conversion, or death.

Such a projected action is echoed in many societies at many different times and places. To take but one example, ISIS's mirror-image ethnic-cleansing cousins in the Israeli colony in Palestine, whose ongoing territorial appropriations and displacements of indigenous populations were "authorized" by the convenient fiction: the artistry of a *gift* or endowment of a tribal god, Yahweh. A material world *secured* by its link with immateriality; a theological "get-out-of-reality-free" card.

Plato's text *Ta Politeia* voiced a deep ambivalence about the *uncanniness* of art – its paradoxical ability to simultaneously create *and* potentially problematize the hegemonic political and religious powers imagined to be materialized, embodied, or merely “re-presented” in and as a people's forms and practices. Plato's dilemma was essentially this: art itself deeply destabilizes and renders indeterminate and mutable seemingly secure oppositions between fact and fiction, history and poetry, reason and emotion, the sacred and the secular, materiality and immateriality. Contrasts that are revealed or made apparent as the circumstantial, contingent, and mutable products and effects of artistry.

What artistry creates, then, is *both* a “second world” (a heterotopia) alongside the world in which we live, *and* the very world (*topos*) in which we *do* live. It is *both illocutionary and perlocutionary*: creating *and* declaring or presenting that of which it speaks. An illocutionary act is akin to what Derrida once called *mythomorphism*. The holy fear or terror Plato claimed art induced in the souls of citizens was the terrifying awareness of precisely this paradox: that works of artistry don't simply imitate or reflect but rather create and open up the world. Art *realizes* worlds.

Art consequently *really is dangerous*, because it makes available to common understanding that *what we take to be reality is a work of art*: “the fictions of factual representation,” as the historian Hayden White once phrased it. Art is terrifying not only theologically but politically, precisely because *it makes it possible for ordinary citizens to imagine the world differently*. Other than what their rulers would wish (or command) them to believe as real, natural, fixed, and true. Nothing could be more deeply threatening to those holding or desiring power than these two things: (1) that reality really is a fiction, and (2) that it can consequently really be changed.

There is what I'll call a *Praxitelean* impulse shared by politics and theology: the drive to *erase* the marks or traces of their construction; their artistry. The *fine art of artlessness*, in other words – an essential feature or quality of any political hegemony, and especially, to recall Hannah Arendt again, any totalitarian or theocratic power. The motivation of which, of course, being to forestall the need to even think about discussing what is already claimed to be fixed and sacred and eternal. Any political system concerned with the organization and management of daily life would thereby *seem* to be securely grounded and legitimized not merely (if at all) in discourse, discussion, or parliamentary negotiation, but in effectively juxtaposing or *tethering* materiality to immateriality; the physical to the metaphysical; the palpable to the virtual; the world you see to an allegedly “more enduring” (albeit invisible) world of transcendence. That cosmological realm that is *apophatically* the antithesis of whatever is palpable.

Plato's solution to his own dilemma, voiced two and a half millennia ago, has been replicated in theocratic and totalitarian polities ever since. And of course Plato's dilemma is absolutely contemporary: Consider the rhetorical logic of the antithetically-grounded theatricality explicitly articulated a decade ago by Joseph Ratzinger, the (currently emeritus) western

Christian pope Benedict XVI. Benedict was a champion of the arts, and he strongly argued for their importance and indeed their *utter necessity*. But they were essential precisely because *their very imperfections and impurities were legible* apophatically; as *negative indexes*, powerfully eliciting an unquenchable desire for the antithetically perfect, the pure, the fixed, the eternally immutable and immortal; the god.

Jacques Derrida once observed that it was “a divine teleology that secure[d] the political economy of the fine arts.” But Derrida’s assertion was incomplete, for it conjured up its ghostly obverse; its antithesis, as equally cogent: that it has been aesthetics, or artistry broadly construed, that has always secured or grounded the political economy of religiosities, or ‘divine teleologies.’ In the most general sense, art and religion are *inextricable* epistemological processes; that is, variant positions taken on putative relations between objects, entities, and individual or collective subjects.

In conclusion, I trust it will have been clear that these brief remarks were intended as much interrogatively and hypothetically as they have been presented as assertions and theses. One stands in astonishment in the face of what such theatricalities; such art, has wrought in very real suffering, death, and destruction in so many societies around the world. Any hope for redemption in all this is what I’ve tried to weave into these remarks from the outset in the references made to the diverse writers I’ve cited. The texts and authors I’ve touched upon create an epistemological, philosophical, semiological and indeed an *ethical* trajectory or teleology, which I might call a theological semiography. Which I’ll voice here again, finally and simply, as the courage to confront the truth of fiction *as* fiction; the real as artistry and artifice: the uncanny home we as social beings have been fabricating forever as reality’s very real fiction.

Art permits us to see fiction *as* fiction; to see with eyes wide open the fictiveness or contingency, the stagecraft; in short, the artistry of the world. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it in a text he called “Opus Posthumous,” *The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is fiction and that you believe it willingly.* I’ve been suggesting that art and religion are semiotically *imbricated* – manifestations of *alternative signifying processes* in the distinction between a sign and a sign that is not a sign. Between – in terms explicitly used in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* – adequation and equation.

What I’ve dealt with here was the paradox of *representation* itself, of which *theism* was its simultaneously most alluring and most terrifying mode of artistry. Which is why, as I said at the beginning, art and religion exist *primarily* in their interrelationship, and why memory is truly *both* “the subject and instrument of art.”