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Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty

Rebecca Berrú Davis

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As the book’s title, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* intimates, Loyola Marymount assistant professor Cecilia González-Andrieu’s premise is that art as a gospel of beauty is “an announcement of the good news of our beloved status as children of God.” She asserts that, “In the beauty that delights us or breaks our heart, something is offered and understood, briefly, as wholeness and healing, and that “something” changes everything.” (37) This experience of beauty, or its absence, expedited by art, not only links us to God, but enables insight into our own or the world’s brokenness, engenders our community’s capacity for love and compassion, and has the potential to inspire, deepen and activate faith. With that said, theology does well when it pays attention to art’s transforming power. But how do theologians persuasively demonstrate that art is a viable source of theology?

González-Andrieu shows us a way by naming art, in its broadest sense, the creative activity that unites spirit and matter. Whether it is drama, music, poetry or visual art, symbolic or narrative, these works are significant because of their power to mediate revelatory experience. This is what the arts do well. Thus, the arts (and the aesthetic experiences they evoke) are not only relevant to the theological discussion, they are necessary because “they are markers, pointers and reflections of the shimmering glow left in our world by the presence of God.” (23) They not only express and mediate God’s self-communication, but challenge us to see, respond, imagine and act.

Making full use of a theological method, she proposes engaging art and religion in meaningful conversation with one another. González-Andrieu eloquently interlaces strands of theology, philosophy, art history and criticism. She draws from familiar sources in theological aesthetics: Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, Abbot Suger, Jonathan Edwards, John Dewey, Hans von Balthasar, Paul Tillich, Frank Burch Brown and Roberto Goizueta. However, she also introduces the reader to new partners in the discussion, such as Von Ogden Vogt, *Art and Religion* (1947), and particularly the insights of Pope John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* (1999). Nonetheless, the work of her mentor, colleague and dear friend, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, is a recognizable undercurrent throughout her book. She pushes further Garcia-Rivera’s appeal for those engaged in the work of theological aesthetics to attend to the experiences of diverse communities, as well as his challenge to artists to be responsive to the communities that call them forth.

González-Andrieu does her best work in the chapters that describe, examine and address particular encounters with art. In Chapter Three, “In Search of Wonder,” she recounts her experience attending *La Pastorela*, a medieval shepherd’s play reenacted during the Christmas season at the California Mission of San Juan Baptista by Teatro Campesino’s cast of seasoned actors and local farmworkers. The classic narrative “of the triumph of the human capacity for goodness in the face of temptation” (118) is described in its local particularity as an experience that, for her and those in attendance, evokes wonder. Her point is that it is the experience of the beautiful that awakens love in us. This power of being awakened, *asombrado* in Spanish, then becomes a place where God is experienced. Wonder becomes revelatory. As wonder-filled beings, we are moved first to silence, to insight, and then to speech—a necessary process for imagining and then creating a better world.

In Chapters Four and Five, González-Andrieu introduces us to *Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ* an exhibit where art and religion was brought together at the United Kingdom’s National Gallery, February 26–May 7, 2000. She argues that its unexpected popular reception in light of culture’s “aggressive secularism,” demonstrates that “it is still possible to pick up signals of the transcendent to gain a glimpse of the grace that is to be found in, with, and beneath the empirical realities of our lives.” (50) She examines the exhibit for what it reveals about the communities, the history and the tradition behind the work, as well as the resonance the work holds for contemporary viewers. She complicates the analysis by paying attention to the disparities and
the controversies as “productive sites for generating new knowledge.” (63) González-Andrieu deals with these divides by fluidly demonstrating that theological aesthetics benefit from the thoughtful assessment and critical engagement of varied sites and encounters with art and religion.

In Chapter Nine, “The Bridge to Wonder is Ours to Build,” González-Andrieu examines a mid-twentieth century controversy that took place in Assy, France surrounding an event when sacred art encountered modern art. The “convulsions” that occurred over the placement of Germaine Richier’s cross in the Church of Assy is a fascinating case study which González-Andrieu probes from various perspectives. She describes the incident as cables that had snapped on a bridge with both ends flailing madly about without any connection. “The extremists in the art world were busy defending its right to freedom of expression and artistic innovation, and reactionary partisans were using art as a way to oppose the Church’s growing relationship with the modern world.” (141) On one level, the Church and the tenuous relationship it had with the modern world was reflected in this contentious dispute between art and religion. However, González-Andrieu illuminates this historical moment further by attending to the theological questions raised by the debate. She demonstrates that theological aesthetics are enriched by paying attention to these disjunctures, and that sustained engagement with encounters with art, or acercamiento, bringing it nearer to oneself, yields insights. There is much to be learned from art and the artists, but also from the communities behind both.

Cecilia González-Andrieu’s insights throughout her book are destellos, a Spanish word she uses to describe gusts of light, glimmers of the fullness of a heart, as it fills up with God. As a theologian committed to the task of theological aesthetics, she demonstrates fruitful ways to examine works of art for theological content and creatively wrestles with difficult questions in a field that continues to evolve. Bridge to Wonder is a resource for theologians, for artists who inspire us to see and imagine new worlds, and for all communities of faith who seek revelatory encounters with God.

**Rebecca Berrú Davis**

**Billings, Montana**