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Beauty as a Criterion of Spiritual Discernment: an Outline of a Theory and Practice

Summary

The goal of this paper is to indicate some possible ways of enriching the traditional approach to discernment by some new forms taken from fine arts. To achieve it, firstly different definitions of discernment are presented. Then, follows the presentation of some theological reasons for analogy between discernment and art. The next section develops the hypothesis resulting from the above analogy, in reference to some texts approaching discernment from the perspective of arts. The conclusion brings some practical indications.

Keywords: discernment, spirituality, art, analogy, aesthetics

Streszczenie

Piękno jako kryterium rozeznania duchowego: zarys teorii i praktyki

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wskazanie pewnych możliwych dróg wzbogacenia tradycyjnego podejścia do rozeznania, przez niektóre nowe formy zaczerpnięte ze sztuki. Aby to osiągnąć, najpierw zostają podane rozmaite definicje rozeznania, po czym zostaje przedstawione teologiczne uzasadnienie analogii między rozeznaniem i sztuką. Następną sekcją rozwija hipotezę wynikającą z powyższej analogii, w odniesieniu do pewnych tekstów opisujących rozeznanie z perspektywy sztuki. Zakończenie oferuje kilka praktycznych wskazań.

Słowa kluczowe: rozeznanie, duchowość, sztuka, analogia, estetyka

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Although the term “discernment” is widely known and very useful, it is not easy to formulate its clear definition. Naturally, this does not help in developing any further reflection on this topic. Nevertheless, the relevance and necessity of a deeper understanding of discernment is an inspiration for this paper which results from some observations of modern tendencies in understanding and living spirituality, where new possibilities and means must embrace old classical themes. Discernment is a case in point. Its challenge remains but the means we may have at our disposal can change the way and efficiency of making a good discernment. Thus the goal of this paper is to indicate some possible ways of enriching the traditional approach to discernment by some new forms taken from fine arts. To achieve this goal, first some different definitions of discernment will be presented. It will be followed by the presentation of some theological reasons for analogy between discernment and art. The third section will develop the hypothesis resulting from the above analogy, in reference to some texts approaching discernment from the perspective of arts. The conclusion will offer some practical indications.

1. Towards a general definition of discernment

At the beginning some categories which usually appear in the definition of the concept of “discernment” should be outlined. For this purpose the suggestions given by some theologians will be examined.

Giuseppe Sovernigo sees mental health (sanity) as the base of discernment, especially the rapport with “objects” which are significant in a person’s own existence, self-image and self-esteem. Other circumstances which should be taken into consideration are the affects, the mechanisms of defense and control, obstacles, difficulties. As a goal of discernment itself, Sovernigo mentions the choice between good and better, and discovery of one’s proper vocation. What also counts is verification of the efficacy of the decisions which have been made after discernment.²

² G. Sovernigo, *Le dinamiche personali nel discernimento spirituale. Elementi di psicologia della pastorale*, Padova 2010, p. 35–64.

Pietro Schiavone sees this theme more in a theological context. According to him discernment presupposes, first of all, the will of Father and the necessity of prayer.³ It is interesting that he sees discernment as both art and charism,⁴ listing as its means, affects, presence, absence and silence of God,⁵ and, as its conditions, maturity, sensibility, striving towards perfection, fidelity to the real word, reasoning and motivation, experience and trust in God.⁶

The etymology of the word “discernment” lends a dynamic character of this notion. As R.L. Bautista reminds us, “in English, ‘to discern’ basically means ‘to detect something that is obscure or concealed’. It also means ‘to perceive or recognize as being different or distinct; distinguish’. Hence, in ordinary usage, “‘discernment’ has to do with ‘keenness of insight and judgment’”. And he continues saying that “the verb ‘to discern’ comes directly from the Latin term *discernere* which means ‘to sift apart or separate’. *Discernere* has the prefix *dis-* (meaning “apart”) and the root word *cernere* (meaning “to separate”).⁷

Analyzing the vocabulary of the Greek New Testament, Bautista notes the existence of several terms that can serve as equivalents to the verb “to discern” and the noun “discernment”. They are:

1. *anakrino* (verb): to distinguish or separate out so as to investigate (*krino*) by looking throughout (*ana* – intensive) objects or particulars; hence, it signifies to examine, scrutinize, and judge closely;

2. *diakrino* (verb): signifies to examine, separate out, and discriminate;

3. *dokimazo* (verb): signifies to test, to prove, to scrutinize so as to decide;

4. *diakrisis* (noun): discerning, judging.”⁸

³ P. Schiavone, *Il discernimento. Teoria e prassi*, Milano 2009, p. 29–46.

⁴ P. Schiavone, *Il discernimento. Teoria e prassi*, op. cit., p. 144–146.

⁵ P. Schiavone, *Il discernimento. Teoria e prassi*, op. cit., p. 151–278.

⁶ P. Schiavone, *Il discernimento. Teoria e prassi*, op. cit., p. 279–331.

⁷ R.L. Bautista, *Discernment of Spirits in the Bible*, “Landas” 28 (2014) no. 1, p. 91.

⁸ R.L. Bautista, *Discernment of Spirits in the Bible*, op. cit., p. 91–92, after *The Expanded Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, ed. W.E. Vine, J.R. Kohlenberger, Minneapolis MN 1984, p. 306–307.

From these meanings one can see a general picture of discernment: an almost physical activity of distinction, separation, investigation, looking through, examination, scrutiny or judgment which implies an attentive subject facing and dealing with a complex matter.

Manuel Ruiz Jurado defines discernment from the perspective of Biblical theology. His points of departure are Christ and the Gospel. However, on the other hand, as a condition of discernment he sees human maturity, and, as dangers, illusions and the whole field of the sub-conscious,⁹ all within the context of the Church and community.¹⁰ Spiritual direction and experience of God¹¹; the objects of discernment are thus charismatic phenomena, an ecclesial way, the origin of internal inspirations¹² as well as vocation.¹³

These descriptions, necessarily summary descriptions, show well the complexity of discernment. By no means it is not a static structure. The Fathers were very aware of its dynamic character and its mysterious character. As an essential component of discernment they mentioned charism¹⁴, and they were also aware that discernment always locates itself “between”, as a passage or “a missing link”. In Evagrius discernment is located “between” personal challenges (*logismoi*, *phronesis*) and revelation.¹⁵ In Cassian – between askesis, practical discipline, *logismoi*, self-knowledge, prayer, the goals of monastic life. In other ways, it is “between” teacher and counsellor or guide, “between” scripture and revelation and “between” grace and virtue.¹⁶ In the first, alphabetic, collection of the *Apophthegmata* discernment, the “between” runs analogically across different spaces: of union with God, virtue, *logismoi*,

⁹ M.Ruiz-Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual. Teología, historia, práctica*, Madrid 2010, p. 6–63.

¹⁰ M.Ruiz-Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, op. cit., p. 177–193.

¹¹ M.Ruiz-Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, op. cit., p. 290–308.

¹² M.Ruiz-Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, op. cit., p. 195–219.

¹³ M.Ruiz-Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, op. cit., p. 279–289.

¹⁴ F. Vecoli, *Lo Spirito soffia nel deserto. Carismi, discernimento e autorità nel monachesimo egiziano antico*, Brescia 2006, p. 64–73, 109–119.

¹⁵ A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Milton Keynes 2007, p. 55–74.

¹⁶ A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, op. cit., p. 75–122.

vigilance, self-knowledge, prayer, guide, scripture, revelation.¹⁷ In the second, systematic, collection of the *Apophthegmata*, we have the “between” of relationships – with teacher/disciple, as well as with others – with a requirement of a certain balance.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the golden age of natural and integral discernment finished with the conclusion of the age of the Fathers. Tomáš Špidlík reminds that, with the course of history, the number of experienced Fathers was decreasing. Their lack caused the necessity of elaboration of some rules for more or less autonomous discernment. This is exactly what Evagrius and Ignatius of Loyola did.¹⁹

However, the general structure of discernment remained, and it was located between two poles: community, emphasized by some authors, and individual needs and desires. The communitarian aspect of discernment is described by Marlene Kropf:

We must remember what the Church has understood through the centuries, that we are formed first through our communities. Consequently, the most effective way to equip individuals for personal discernment is to focus first on shaping the Church as a community of discernment. In other words, an individual Christian will know how to exercise spiritual discernment if the community of faith and its leaders model a discerning life.²⁰

The collegial dimension of discernment is a natural context for appreciating its ecclesiastical character. On the other hand, discernment has its individual aspect which, usually, is the one most analyzed and described. The key motif of this aspect is desire, a theme important and decisive to Saint Augustine, Saint Benedict and Saint Ignatius. For Saint Augustine, desire constitutes our prayer.²¹ For Saint Benedict, it is an instrument which can be used both for good and bad purposes.²² Analyzing the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, A. Spadaro shows the crucial role of desire:

¹⁷ A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, op. cit., p. 123–188.

¹⁸ A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, op. cit., p. 189–229.

¹⁹ T. Špidlík, *Ignacjański model kierownictwa duchowego*, w: *Sztuka kierownictwa duchowego*, ed. J. Augustyn, Kraków 2013, p. 195.

²⁰ M. Kropf, *Cultivating a congregational climate of discernment*, Fall 2011, p. 44–45.

²¹ Augustinus, *In ps. 37, 13–14*: CCL 38, 391–392.

²² Cf. M.L. Natali, *Desiderio e/o volontà: un cammino dialettico aperto?: 'Desiderare'/'Desiderium' - 'Velle'/'Voluntas': una rilettura semantica e simbolica della Regula Benedicti*, Roma 2003.

the discernment serves not only to identify the “good” and “bad” desires but to help growth in desire, as well as in its education and purification.²³ The exercise of desire is an appeal to a subject “capable of ‘ordering himself’, to bring order to the fragmentary nature of his own experiences through a discernment of the way and the object of his desire.”²⁴

So, the whole richness, refinement and complexity of discernment is contained between these two poles: the individual person and community. This fact is important for our reflection. The community provides the social context of discernment. It requires and concerns relationships and different persons involved. In this case the analogy with art is obvious. At the same time, desire, which also is very closely related to affect and passion, is a natural drive for artistic activity and expression. These two poles lead us, through analogy and affinity, to significant metaphors taken from art in order to explain the very concept of discernment.

The idea of discernment as art, just mentioned above in presentation of Schiavone’s thoughts, finds its development in different authors. The reason for this approach may be found in the idea of Gregory the Great, recalled by Jean Leclercq, that in the knowledge of love the beauty of the Creator is contemplated.²⁵ On the pages of his book, significantly titled *The Love of Learning and The Desire of God*, Leclercq notes the relationship between love and desire. To desire heaven means to love God, sometimes impatiently.²⁶ At the same time, the love of God is the source of all knowledge.²⁷ It is based on wonder and admiration.²⁸ This encounter between desire, beauty, love and knowledge has a real bearing of our theme of the connection between discernment and art.

If we consider discernment as insightful knowledge, and love as a form of knowledge, the relationship between these two concepts is less than analogical. Interestingly, such approach is also present in the oldest, classical definitions of beauty, which describe aesthetics and beauty in a way

²³ A. Spadaro, *Desiderio di Dio e discernimento*, “La Civiltà Cattolica” 2001 no. 3, p. 388.

²⁴ A. Spadaro, *Desiderio di Dio e discernimento*, op. cit., p. 389.

²⁵ J. Leclercq, *L’amour des lettres ed désir de Dieu*, Paris 1990, p. 38.

²⁶ J. Leclercq, *L’amour des lettres ed désir de Dieu*, op. cit., p. 68.

²⁷ J. Leclercq, *L’amour des lettres ed désir de Dieu*, op. cit., p. 211.

²⁸ J. Leclercq, *L’amour des lettres ed désir de Dieu*, op. cit., p. 215–216.

which is very useful for discernment. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the founder of aesthetics as such, wrote that “the goal of aesthetics is the perfection of sensory cognition as such. And this is beauty.”²⁹ According to this definition, beauty is an important tool for cognition, especially when it is seen, as increasingly happens in our times, in an integral way. At the same time, beauty outlines the perspective of our seeing and cognition, because discernment is not only a matter of observation, but of the vision of goals which are to be achieved; beauty is the perfection of a phenomenon.³⁰ Referring this to discernment, one can say that, in the end, its goal is to see a perfect solution and to implement it (or make it possible). Here, again, aesthetic sensibility turns out to be a very useful instrument. As Gernot Böhme reminds us, for Aristotle the arts are types of knowing which guide the production of something.³¹ It is another proof that aesthetics makes us more sensitive and capable of noticing and grasping things, and this capacity is not only intellectual, but also sensorial, corporeal and active.

In this line of thinking, one can also situate Bautista’s explanation of understanding of discernment as “an art”:

“Art” has to do with a “specific skill in adept performance, conceived as requiring the exercise of intuitive faculties that cannot be learned solely by study”. Applying this to discernment, this means that discernment, though first of all a gift from the Spirit, can be developed and facilitated not so much by reading or studying about it but by actually doing it. It is in this sense that discernment is an art. Presenting a simple analogy here may help us.³²

Soon, this rather technical description is supplemented by a metaphorical presentation of the issue:

The art of discernment of spirits may be compared to the deftness and virtuosity of a concert pianist. The skill that the pianist has acquired through the years has been perfected only through sheer constant practice and actual playing. In this

²⁹ A.G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetices finis est perfectio*, § 350, p. 219.

³⁰ Perfectio phaenomenon sive gustui latius dicto observabilis est pulchritudo (A.G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 6, 62).

³¹ G. Böhme, *Atmosfera, estasi, messe in scena. L'estetica come teoria generale della percezione*, a cura T.Griffero, Milano 2010.

³² R.L. Bautista, *Discernment od Spirits in the Bible...*, op. cit., p. 113-114.

regard, learning to discern the spirits is like learning to play the piano. One learns to play the piano not by attending concerts and lectures on piano playing, and not so much even by reading books on how to play the piano. One learns to play the piano by actually getting behind the keyboard and playing the piano.”³³

This musical metaphor well reflects the specificity of discernment and its non-structural and mediating character. A. Trupiano, writing about discernment in Bonhoeffer and Pieper, uses the artistic expression the “polyphony of life”.³⁴ Through such a metaphor, the affinity between artist and a person who discerns is vividly suggested, and extends the matter of discernment even beyond charism – even to the mystical dimension.

The affinity between artists and mystics is very striking. Even if mysticism is ambiguous, it remains important.³⁵ Its openness and a certain natural incompleteness correspond well with the deepest nature of discernment, which usually must remain imperfect. Mystical experience searches for new forms of expression and transforms the language, mostly through extended use of metaphors and symbols. For this reason, for many centuries, mysticism was an inspiration for poetry, the last eminent example of which is John of the Cross. Mystical experience transforms our sight and capacity of seeing the world what can be easily confirmed by the writings of Meister Eckhart, Nicolas of Cusa and Ignatius of Loyola.³⁶ The priority of deep, personal experience as well as the sense of wonder are the features shared by both mystics and saints.

Given all these data one can risk the thesis that discernment is a matter of culture as well as, on the other hand, that culture involves discernment. M.P.Gallagher notes that discernment, in its search to recognize the presence of Spirit in human activities, tries to “read” different situations; this means a dialogue with culture. In this dialogue, he distinguishes two possible “tonalities”: consolation and desolation. They both

³³ R.L. Bautista, *Discernment od Spirits in the Bible...*, op. cit., p. 113–114.

³⁴ A. Trupiano, *La via della sapienza in Josef Pieper e Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Assisi 2010, p. 397–434.

³⁵ P. Miquel, *Mystique et discernement*, Paris 1997, p. 159–188

³⁶ See A.De Santis, *Metamorphosi dello sguardo. Il vedere fra mistica, filosofia ed arte (Studia Anselmiana)*, Roma 1996.

correspond to a way of perceiving reality – either positively, or critically.³⁷ Art and culture may help to integrate the experience of reality, bringing together its various factors and aspects in a single, clear experience. Of course, it does not necessarily mean finding easy solutions to complex situations but, certainly, it gives a wider and more honest vision of problems situated in contexts that can give new dimensions to discernment. In passing, an interesting theme in aesthetics, which might be developed further, is the new concept of “atmosphere”, which is deployed to integrate various aspects of perceptual experience. Thanks to this concept, the whole process of discernment could not only be integrated, but also seen in its complexity and depth, whereas the aesthetic drive to organize well the perceived elements, apparently enriched by spiritual and theological experience, might be helpful in finding solution of discerned situation.³⁸

2. Towards analogy in a Christological key

Continuing the reflection of the previous section, one can distinguish three major spaces in which the analogy between discernment and art can be drawn: a) the personal; b) the contextual; c) the challenges a person faces. These sections cover both the artistic activity and the process of discernment. Their composition provides a base for constructing our analogy.

The first (a) is related essentially to the discerning person. It may be somebody who helps, but also the person who wants to discern something. Usually the person who helps to make a discernment is expected to show empathy but also to share experience. The key qualification which seems to justify the analogy with art is the “giftedness” of such person. Even somebody who is to discern, to do it well should have a giftedness. Moreover, from the person making discernment a capacity

³⁷ M.P.Gallagher, *Il discernimento nell'ambito della cultura*, “La Civiltà Cattolica” 1997 no. 3, p. 126, 129.

³⁸ The idea of „atmosphere” is proposed by G. Böhme. See, e.g., his *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2013 or *Aisthethik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, Wien 2001.

of having clear ideas is required. To arrive to a certain style of making, communicating and carrying out decisions, this person should be able to know the possibly wide context in which the decision is to be made. It should mean a capacity to see and perceive the consequences of her/his decision, which means picking up the feedback of decision well and, as a result, updating one's own behavior if it is necessary.

The contextual space of discernment and art (b) is constituted by relationships which are necessary to perform the process of discernment. Here, first of all, there are relationships with God, with the community and with other individual people who are involved. They imply not only interpersonal contact, but also its intensity, mutual involvement (and the capacity to involve) and impact one can have on or perceive from the other person.

The final space is related to various challenges implied by discernment (c). Actually it is a matter of the goals of discernment, which can be expected on various levels. So, discernment may serve to bring together various, dispersed elements, in order to introduce harmony, or to improve it, to reconstruct something, to involve somebody, to appeal to somebody, to transform or provoke him (her).

In these three spheres, the encounter between art and discernment occurs in the category of performance. The person who discerns “performs” an act of arriving at the right solution of a dilemma, just as the artist “performs” his art to arrive at the final effect of beauty. In both cases the acting subject is a person gifted by a charism (a). Her/his performance happens in and explores the space of relationships (b), being oriented towards concrete goal of resolving a problem or arriving to a form of beauty (c).

As a result of the above considerations, we may consider discernment as an aesthetic event and as a form of expression. Although partially in agreement with some intuitions present in classical spirituality (for example, the thesis that discernment is an art), if such an approach is taken seriously it may turn out to be answer to some (post-) modern urgencies. One of them is the growing importance of direct experience in culture, which slowly displaces a reflection based on written discourse. Brilliantly, but also somehow catastrophically, it was presented

by Jacek Dukaj in his book *Po piśmie* (*After Writing*). According to him, the modern, post-writing reflection in an exercise of humanism, understood as independent flows of experiences³⁹ and as their configurations, more and more freed from our “self”.⁴⁰ It is connected with a new experience of freedom which is no longer considered as a liberation, and so an elementary dimension of salvation, but as more and more extended possibilities of satisfying one’s own desires.⁴¹ In this case, discernment appears as an urgent capacity to save our identity from experiences which continuously deplete us. Of course, everything depends on our readiness to be aware and to maintain our identity. If we wish to do so, a discernment adapted to this new, post-reflective reality of events is required. In this context it may find a powerful ally in performance arts. It is nothing more than a new approach to classic spirituality where modern values and experiences must be taken in consideration to express comprehensively older values. In this way, beauty, delight, pleasure regain their place in spiritual discourse. Aesthetic categories, paradoxically, can bring ideas of asceticism closer and make them more accessible. Earle J. Coleman says: “Wherever there is a harmonious consciousness and wherever there is the delight of uniting with the other, the ascetic is present.”⁴² In this way poetic expressions may become important indications of ethical character. On this basis Zbigniew Herbert identifies right ethical choices with “the power of taste”⁴³ and Jerzy Liebert writes about a continuous necessity of choosing as a consequence of one definitive choice.⁴⁴ The examples might be multiplied.

The validity and accuracy of aesthetics in theological discourse were noted by H. Urs von Balthasar in his work *Herrlichkeit* (*Glory of the Lord*). His key thesis is important for our reflection: it is based on the concept

³⁹ J. Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, Kraków 2019.

⁴⁰ J. Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, pos. 4434.

⁴¹ Cf. Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, transl. T. Kunz, Kraków, 2000, p. 27.

⁴² E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality. Bonds between Art and Religion*, New York Press 1998, p. 197.

⁴³ In his poem *Potęga smaku* (*The Power of Taste*).

⁴⁴ „Uczyniwszy na wieki wybór, w każdej chwili wybierać muszę” (*Jeździec*, w: *Gusła*, Warszawa 1930, s. 50).

of Figure (Shape, in German “Gestalt”), theologically associated with the person of Christ. This word is a part of the title of the first part of Balthasar’s trilogy *Herrlichkeit*⁴⁵ and in English translation is rendered as “Form”. According to Balthasar, it is the form that gives to Christianity an over-individualistic dimension.⁴⁶ God’s existence is revealed in form,⁴⁷ particularly in Christ who is the archetype of form, being, the only real form and something more than just beauty.⁴⁸ Christ is the form of the sacraments,⁴⁹ in his form the life of Church takes place.⁵⁰ As Balthasar reminds us, form is, apart from light, the essence of beauty.⁵¹ Each form co-exists with God’s form.⁵² Beauty is the real form of reality⁵³ while it gives form to what is ineffable.⁵⁴ On this basis, Christ is a concrete form of God and of his Revelation, and in his form the encounter of human being with God takes place as well.⁵⁵ In this context, the analogy between discernment and art receives its Christological dimension. Going further, the figure of Christ conducts the reader of Balthasar towards expression.

Balthasar’s theological aesthetic emphasizes the importance of expression. In a certain way it is a space of encounter between art and theology, performed both diachronically, as following Christ, and synchronically, as personal relationship with God. Being a deep and essential archetype of interaction between anthropology and Christology, expression is something more than just analogy or metaphor: it is a real event, and base of every human activity in both spiritual and moral dimensions.⁵⁶

⁴⁵ In German this title is *Schau des Gestalt* what is quite different to translate.

⁴⁶ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, Bd. I: *Schau der Gestalt*, Einsiedeln 1961, p. 25.

⁴⁷ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p.112.

⁴⁸ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 164–165, 167.

⁴⁹ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 196.

⁵⁰ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 206.

⁵¹ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 144.

⁵² H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 208.

⁵³ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 230.

⁵⁴ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 242.

⁵⁵ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 310.

⁵⁶ B. Sawicki, *Ekspresja jako spotkanie chrystologii i antropologii*, Kraków 2019, p. 152.

In this perspective the two parts of our analogy come together: just as art ultimately expresses Christ, so, in discernment, the same Christ is sought for in a concrete situation of someone's life. The similar structure of both processes that we showed above are activated by the same, deeply existential, and actually Christological, dynamism.

3. In view of other authors

The Christological character of analogy between discernment and art is, more or less explicitly, present in texts of different authors open for cultural inspirations for theology. Observation of their approaches may help us to put our reflection in a more practical perspective. Interestingly, in all these texts we can find the three spaces outlined in the previous paragraph.

Hebbeler focuses on relationships, noting that the world of art "is fundamentally relational". In this way he can promote the utility of art classes for the formation of capacity of discernment. He writes: "If the fruit of discernment is a deepening awareness of our oneness with all and a growing participation in God's caring love for all, then art classes can provide discerning students with the pruning tools of mindfulness, vulnerability, and perception. In giving form to the substance in front of them, art students are in turn shaping themselves".⁵⁷ This suggestion emphasizes the importance of sensibility both for art and for discernment, and does so in such a way that the elements of beauty interweave with theological expressions. Valters Paintner, who develops her activity of spiritual direction and counseling in monastic and artistic key,⁵⁸ associates directly discernment with sensitivity, however, also in relational context of encounter with God: "Discernment is a growing sensitivity to and awareness of the action of God in one's daily life. Discernment is a practice that helps us to encounter God in the center of our being

⁵⁷ M. Hebbeler, *Art as Discernment*, "ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies" 28 (2017) no. 2, p. 23.

⁵⁸ It is clear especially in her books *The Artist's Rule: Nurturing Your Creative Soul with Monastic Wisdom*, Notre Dame IN 2011 and *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, Harrisburg PA 2010.

and listens for God's desires for our own growing wholeness."⁵⁹ Later she defines her understanding of sensitivity: listening and attention. She writes: "In discernment we listen to the truth of our authentic voices as distinct from all of the other voices both within and without that demand our attention and energy."⁶⁰ In this way we can arrive to a deeper, more intimate knowledge of God which, from its part, enlarges our capacity of listening:

The arts help expand our ways of knowing God beyond the cognitive level. They open up paths for listening to new possibilities. They especially help us tend to times of discernment, when images are being birthed within us before we have the language for them.⁶¹

Apart from sensitivity one can find "the inner wisdom". As Valters Paintner writes, certainly from her own experience: "Engaging the arts in times of transition can help directees to cultivate inner wisdom and trust needed to support their discernment process."⁶² Art can also foster special spiritual qualities which, for Valters Paintner, are attributed to monasticism. In this context monasticism appears as an ally of art. So, indirectly, we can discover that monasticism offers a special space for discernment. Again, it is a vast field of reflection, which is already described in some studies,⁶³ and which, perhaps, should be further developed. Valters Paintner sees in monasticism and in its affinity with art a vast and favorable context for discernment: "Monasticism, in fact, cultivates the artistic spirit. Basic to monasticism are the very qualities art demands of the artist: silence, contemplation, discernment of spirits, community, and humility. Basic to art are the very qualities demanded of the monastic: single-mindedness, beauty, immersion, praise, and

⁵⁹ C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, Harrisburg PA 2010, p. 144.

⁶⁰ C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, op. cit., p. 144.

⁶¹ C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, op. cit., p. 143.

⁶² C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, op. cit., p. 154.

⁶³ One can mention in this place, apart from the already quoted book by A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the desert fathers*, op. cit.; F. Vecoli, *Lo spirito soffia nel deserto: carismi, discernimento e autorità nel monachesimo egiziano antico*, Brescia 2006.

creativity.”⁶⁴ And, to explain more precisely, how art may be helpful to discernment, she continues:

The arts also honor possibility, imagination, questions, and mystery that are integral to discernment. Because the arts are rooted in the existential capacity of the imagination to transcend literal reality, they can serve as present alternative possibilities of being and afford us insight not available through cognitive means.⁶⁵

In this quotation appear other qualities of art which make it close to spirituality: possibility, imagination, questions, mystery. These are natural categories of existential dynamism which, actually, drives both the art and spirituality. This dynamism is more a power of will and affect than an intellectual and cognitive force. Discernment is nothing more than a continuous attempt to manage this dynamism consciously, which, in other words, means living more and more consciously. Art helps us to dwell better in our lives, with all the questions and uncertainties, integrating them in a path of love. Valters Paintner concludes:

Discernment is about living and loving the questions of our lives, the unresolved places. The arts help us to dwell in the space of the question, by allowing us to honor images and feelings, without having to move to linear and logical thinking, the thinking that wants to find answers.⁶⁶

Hall, who has developed an original, independent, spirituality of the artist, sees discernment as one of the important aspects of sensitivity:

One is being sensitive to the Transcendent God, to the movement of the Spirit, the other is towards the Immanent, the things of everyday life and discerning what is being shaped, sculptured before our eyes.⁶⁷

Discernment also plays an important role in artistic activity. It is one of tasks of the artist in his mediation between the beauty of the world and human perception:

⁶⁴ C. Valters Paintner, *The Artist's Rule*, op. cit., p. 161.

⁶⁵ C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening*, op. cit., p. 145.

⁶⁶ C. Valters Paintner, *Awakening*, op. cit., p. 146.

⁶⁷ G. Hall, *Translating the invisible Wind*, Bristol 2011, mobi, p. 769.

The Invisible becomes visible like the water which is sculpted into all sorts of shapes by the passing wind. The artist has to discern this and create something in the language of their medium, be it music, dance, paint, rock, metal, light, shade and movement, or words filling a once blank page.⁶⁸

According to Hall, discernment is crucial in the artist's mission in the world. Being very subtle, always on the border line between imagination and reality, in the best way discernment may be expressed metaphorically, in a universal existential context:

The artist will discern the prevailing cultural wind, like an explorer in the countryside who knows the direction of the prevailing wind by perceiving the bend on the trees – they will understand the cultural direction of the wind by the bend, the lean in institutions: art, church, film, music, education, business, etc.⁶⁹

Discernment, however, is not only a matter of the constructive perception of positive incentives. It has also to touch less obvious, darker, areas of creativity. Earle J. Coleman recalls the whole tradition of chaotic origins of creativity, interpreted even by Plato “as a product of divine madness; artists themselves see it as a kind of blindness, an experience of a dark night.”⁷⁰ These mysterious resources for artistic creativity become very attractive for Mark Patrick Hederman, philosopher and former abbot of Glenstal, in Ireland. In his vision of artistic activity, discernment is necessary to make art comprehensible. In his book, *The Haunted Inkwell. Art and Our Future*, he admits that “the poet may not even be aware of all that is happening. In a certain sense, he or she is being used as a mouthpiece”. And that is why “it usually requires another person and another kind of criticism to assess and to interpret what poetry is saying.”⁷¹ Discernment is therefore a tool of interpretation. Artists provide a space and material for this. The artist's role is to be attentive and faithful to inspiration. Hederman compares this situation to the work of yeast in dough which, besides, needs a form and a special procedure

⁶⁸ G. Hall, *Translating the invisible Wind*, op. cit., p. 773.

⁶⁹ G. Hall, *Translating the invisible Wind*, op. cit., p. 860.

⁷⁰ E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 162.

⁷¹ P. Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell. Art and Our Future*, Dublin 2001, p. 12–13.

to reach a good, final result.⁷² This mysterious but essential process, which happens “in the space between the paintbrush and the canvas, the nib of the pen and the paper, between the fingers and the computer screen”, Hederman identifies with the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ It is another version of our three spaces. For Hederman, they converge in the space of relationship; personal charisms and sensibilities meet to delineate and rise to the challenge. In this sense, inspiration is both active and passive,⁷⁴ conscious and not. Discernment is required at the final stage of inspiration, when it assumes a perceivable form, which has a character of a message, since, “in some works of art, Being can register its presence in our world.”⁷⁵ Interpretative discernment is necessary to make the work of art fully alive. Also the artist has to face some delicate moments of discernment which appear in the process of artistic creation.

To conclude this section of our reflection, let us again give voice to Coleman who shares and even develops Hederman’s intuition, writing that “at the outset of creation, the artist becomes aware of a somewhat inchoate idea, emotion, image, or problem”. It is a vague matter which requires organization and form. To achieve them, the whole process is needed, in which Coleman distinguishes several phases. In a certain way, it would be very instructive to compare this process to spiritual discernment. The description proposed by Coleman seems to suggest this juxtaposition.

In the first phase, called inception, some spiritual or aesthetic moments may arrive as a result of previous meditation, and of moral or even ascetic discipline:⁷⁶

Creativity requires not only sudden realizations, but the slow, thoughtful, cumulative acquisition and refinement of skills and techniques that render one capable of translating inspiration into art. Likewise, spirituality depends upon prayer, meditation, moral reform, breathing exercises or ascetic practices as well as sudden illuminations.⁷⁷

⁷² P. Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell*, op. cit., p. 19–20.

⁷³ P. Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁷⁴ P. Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell*, op. cit., p. 32.

⁷⁵ P. Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell*, op. cit., p. 33.

⁷⁶ E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 162–163.

⁷⁷ E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 162–163.

The moments of passivity are also present in another phase of creativity, which Coleman calls incubation; he sees its affinity with mystical experience, where there is also a place for a refreshing contemplation,⁷⁸ from whence art and religion are fed and draw form. Here the spiritual, mystical ecstasy and the passionate inspiration of an artist meet. In both cases a submission (if not an obedience) is required, and the whole, deep experience may be prepared by meditation, chanting, or prayer more than by using drugs or other only “human means”. This state of ecstasy, which usually accompanies the act of creativity, essentially comes from outside, or from above, what, in theological terms, would mean grace. Another side of this reality would be the capacity of being childlike, i.e. flexible and receptive. It is another common characteristic of artists and saints and, at the same time, the most important condition for being able to accept grace, even if it is always free.⁷⁹

The next phase of creativity distinguished by Coleman is inspiration. It is the moment for accepting new ideas, as mentioned above, in a free act, without “strain of exertion”, a surprise, prepared, however, by great labor, discipline and attention. It is a free gift, a moment not necessarily expected, “uncontaminated by calculation”,⁸⁰ where man searches, waits for something unknown, sometimes intuitively sensed, and, finally, receives something far better than (s)he could expect.

Finally, Coleman identifies the last phase as “work”, which is as much the effect as the verification of the previous phases. Summing up the whole description, Coleman makes a very interesting analogy between three basic aspects of human nature (the volitional, cognitive and affective), three traditional stages “of the mystic’s odyssey”, as he puts it, (purification, illumination, union) and three “pulses in artist” (training/technique/discipline, inspiration, fusion /identification with the subject).⁸¹ In this way the artist’s path towards the achievement of beauty is of essentially the same nature as the classic path of spiritual growth.

⁷⁸ E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 165.

⁷⁹ Cf. E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 167.

⁸⁰ Cf. E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 169.

⁸¹ Cf. E.J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 172.

They both reflect the deepest human needs and aspirations. In this thesis our three spheres of discernment, outlined at the beginning of this reflection, find a new and promising configuration. Individual charism expressed and transmitted in intense relationships oriented toward a concrete objective leads towards composition of universal and integral anthropological model of each aware human activity in which spiritual is both necessarily creative and directed towards discernment.

4. Conclusion and some practical implications

As a conclusion of this rather sketchy panorama of diverse possibilities for integrating spirituality and art in the space of discernment, some points can be made:

a) Speaking of beauty as criterion of discernment is justified by seeing spirituality and art more as integrated than as result of analogy;

b) Integration is also important in distinction of three spaces of discernment itself. The personal charism, relational context and the final challenge interweave one with another, creating two tracks: of sensitivity (aroused by meditation and contemplation) and wisdom (which, appearing as the final objective of each discernment therefore life, refers to the monastic tradition);

c) Art is close to spirituality in fostering a particular respect towards the mystery both of human heart and of human intimacy with God. The power of this mystery is visible and tangible in the necessity of expression which characterizes both artists and mystics;

d) Putting mystery in the very center of discernment opens a way to explore the most hidden and intriguing, sometimes incomprehensible, places of human activity, thought and imagination which reveal the movements of the Holy Spirit acting in our intimacy;

e) This integral and sapiential perspective of discernment focuses spirituality, as well as art, on life and love, liberating them from abstract schemes and stereotypes, and thus making them available to everybody.

The practical implications of such approach to discernment can be shown from both spiritual and artistic perspectives. The persons exercising classical discernment can handle it more courageously, seeing it in

a more integrated way, in a vaster context, closely related to human life and to the most profound human desires, perhaps respecting better its mysterious character, which is more motivating than indicating, opening than deciding. Artists can see their artistic activity in a deeper perspective, as something of real existential and human value, important for many persons. Perhaps, precisely around this theme of discernment, a deeper dialogue and exchange between artists and theologians could begin, with a possibility of mutual inspiration. On a very practical level, for art and for aesthetics more generally, it would mean a new openness to spiritual formation: not as a science about artwork and beauty as such, but about aesthetic perception of the world, in the sense of Böhme, as an “aestheticisation of reality, i.e. of everyday life, politics, economy”, to say nothing of nature and ecology.⁸² On the other hand, artists could (and should) be introduced more consciously and regularly to spiritual theology, with a particular emphasis on discernment and on all its moral and pastoral implications, but also in reference to mystical texts as well as to experience.

What would it mean in practice? For spiritual theology, a new model of facing the process of discernment. It could be seen as an artistic action, with a possibly well-defined goal, which should integrate all dimensions of a situation, including its personal and relational components. To see all this configured in a strong relationship requires long meditation, great sensitivity and a long period of exercise in dealing with similar matters. Such conditions assure that the solution will not be banal, but rather open, motivating and involving. Moreover, everything can be seen as a situation which itself is to express something of greatness, beauty and mercy of God. It means responsibility and respect, but also humility and hope. Above all, however, love.

For an artist, such a perspective may mean the possibility of placing the creative process in the wider context of her/his existence, relating it perhaps to some crucial dilemmas and questions which, possibly even unconsciously, have inspired concrete aesthetic choices. It may include

⁸² According to his vision of „new aesthetics”. Cf. *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, op. cit., p. 7.

dedication to the preliminary phases of artistic activity: to meditation, contemplation and also to a thorough knowledge of the human and relational context of this activity. Beyond that, it may mean greater humility and responsibility both in processing the creativity and in planning and verifying its final result, above all as regards its effect and impact. Finally it may mean more freedom and trust in leaving space for intervention from God.

In this point only one thing remains: an attempt to implement the above suggestion in a concrete situation requiring discernment. It might be an interesting theme for more detailed studies in both pastoral theology and artistic training.

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