Abstract

Dimitri Goossens: ‘In the eyes of Medusa...’: dances on burial ground. Transgression, shock and the sacred as a masquerade of death in contemporary art and popular images

The motivation for this research originated in the attack of Roger Scruton in his book ‘Beauty’ on contemporary art that is considered to be ‘transgressive, shocking and nothing more than savage fantasies and sensation’. This attack is a heavy defense of classical aesthetic ideas about the connection between beauty, religion or the sacred and redemption. It states that ‘abject art’ or ‘shock art’ is utterly empty and meaningless compared with classical aesthetics. This is why the research in this Phd focusses on the following central question: Is there still a place for the sacred in contemporary art and popular images about death that are considered to be transgressive and shocking?

To answer this question the concepts of transgression and the sublime needed to be closely investigated in combination with ‘shocking’ art practices (Young British Artists, Teresa Margolles, Andres Serrano...) and popular images considered to be ‘shocking’ (horror). Central to the study of transgression and the sublime in this Phd were texts from Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Jean-François Lyotard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. For the study of the sacred this study turned to Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Jean-Luc Nancy...

From various perspectives this study shows that there is still a place for the sacred in contemporary art works and popular images that shock. The reason why a lot of critics fail to see that is because they stick to classical aesthetics exactly when contemporary art practices try to attack these classical aesthetic ideals in search for a new sense of sacredness. Another reason is that critics often stick to a christian interpretation of the sacred in a post-christian era. This study, after explaining how different artists and the horror-genre explore the sacred and even remain indebted to classical aesthetics in their transgressions, shows that the exploration of a ‘post-christian sacred’ is in full swing in the world of art.