MThZ 75 (2024) 68–82

Attention to Dramatic Revelation

Theatrical Sacraments and a Phenomenology of Spectacle

by Charles A. Gillespie

Der Essay schlägt vor, die einem „Spektakel“ gewidmete Aufmerksamkeit als „offenbarend“ zu qualifizieren. Gefragt wird danach, ob innerhalb eines katholisch-christlichen Paradigmas theatralische Phänomene ein Ort der Offenbarung sein können. Für die theologische Tradition sind Spektakel eher Mittel der Täuschung und der Ablenkung, weil sie durchaus machtvoll Wahrnehmung zu formen. Wenn Offenbarung phänomenalen Charakter hat, kann sie nach einer sakramentalen Logik verstanden werden. Zugleich ist bekannt, dass Sakramente (vor allem von Menschen außerhalb der Glaubensgemeinschaft) als Spektakel wahrgenommen werden können. Im Rahmen einer religiösen Phänomenologie des Spektakels sollen sogenannte „theatrale Sakramente" betrachtet werden: Momente auf der Bühne, die zu einer Gotteserfahrung führen. Der Beitrag wiederum greift auf den Begriff des theatralen Sakraments zurück, um die Aufmerksamkeit, die einer Aufführung gewidmet wird, als eine Form des Gebets und so als Reaktion auf inszenierte Fiktionen zu behandeln, die (potenziell) eine Offenbarung Gottes darstellen.

1. Attending Tales

Theatre[1] grabs attention rather intentionally. Even musicals currently on Broadway can echo the medieval imagination of St. Hildegard von Bingen’s *Ordo Virtutum* and begin with a sort of prologue in heaven to set the stage and ritually prepare the audience for the spectacle. But few shows make this point more clearly than Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*. The first line, reprised over and over as a leitmotif, commands the audience to “Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd.” The irony of such instruction to those who have already entered the theater and found their seats elevates the titillation of the penny dreadful thriller. Attending the tale transfigures into a ritualistic summoning for the demon barber and his anti-theology in service to a “dark and vengeful god.”[2] Actors will “attend” to telling the

[1] I follow spelling conventions from theatre and performance studies and so use “theatre” for the art and practice of dramatic performance and the spelling “theater” for the space or place wherein such performances happen.

[2] The opening sequence has always carried something like a ritual invocation. The original staging by Hal Prince evoked social commentary by setting the story within the misery of a Victorian factory, complete with a shift change whistle to mark the scenes. Some productions, like the Live at Lincoln Center concert version, embrace this opening number as a conjuring. What begins in concert formal wear erupts into a frenzy of desecrations. Later in the play, Sweeney’s “Epiphany” will equate “salvation” with “vengeance.” Some of the delight in the show’s sacrilegious play with Christianity derives from its subversions, literalized in Mrs. Lovett’s human-meat pies. Eating “A Little Priest” functions akin to Eucharistic cannibalism, all become one in the mutual feeding of the body. The set up obliquely recalls Jesus’ great reversal at table where last shall be first as well as the class logic

story, but audience attending also means more than passive presence. "Attend" here refers to attention to the *story* of Sweeney Todd, to learn how, alongside Sweeney, to hear "music that nobody heard." Attention notices allegorical nuance and theatrical conventions, dark thrills and feats of mechanical and performance prowess that make the spectacle. This opening sequence, "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," breaks the fourth wall to prepare audiences with necessary backstory for understanding what will eventually happen to those who sit in the chair of the titular demon barber of Fleet Street. The show begins with the basic outline of its plot. There will be no surprise that Sweeney becomes murderous, returning aristocrats and villains to their maker "impeccably shaved." Benjamin Barker *becomes* Sweeney Todd, so too the actor who inhabits this role. And it is the actor playing (perhaps himself possessed by or being played by) Sweeney Todd who explains how the company should not reveal too much of the story at the start: "What happened then – well, that's the play, / and he wouldn't want us to give it away." The turn to the third person – the actor playing Sweeney *referring* to Sweeney's wishes – is telling. Attending the tale is the same as attending the play in its playing. Attention to the play is different from rehearsing the mythological summary offered by the company; attending distinguishes itself from hearing, knowing, watching. Time spent in the theater will be to "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd" as performed, an act of service and participation. The tale gives itself to be attended in the playing of the play.

This essay meanders toward conceiving attention to spectacle as revelatory, but walking a route to revelation via spectacle is strange for a Christian theology. Spectacles are more often vehicles of deception, distraction, and defilement. Sweeney and company conveniently identify the demon on Fleet Street. *Sweeney Todd* presents itself for the patristic rejection of theatricality due to the dangers of demonic possession. Both Tertullian and St. Augustine distance Christians from Roman spectacles (whether lascivious romances or gladiatorial games) precisely due to theatrical collusions with evil.[3] Early Christian assessment of spectacles presupposed demons masquerading as the pagan pantheon. In Book VII of *City of God*, Augustine make the point plain: "Hence it is clear, without any ambiguity, that this 'civil' theology has invited wicked demons and unclean spirits to take up residence in those senseless images and by this means to gain possession of the hearts of the stupid."[4] A question arises as to whether it might be possible to attend to spectacles of dramatic revelation that disclose the God revealed by Jesus the Christ to be infinite, self-giving love rather than the Sweeney's fictional "dark and vengeful god" or the demons of antiquity. The early Christian assessment of spectacle inherits and furthers Platonic aversions to mimesis. For Tertullian, wearing masks or "putting on of voice, or sex, or age" offends God because "The Author of truth hates all the false; He regards as adultery all that is unreal."[5] The stage reveals unseen spirits *but not God* because the stage is a place for illusions and

---

of "upstairs, downstairs" and the scenographic architecture of the demon barber's chair above the pie shop: "Those above serve those below."

[3] See *Augustine*, City of God, trans. by Henry Bettenson, London 1995, and *Tertullian*, De Spectaculis, tans. by S. Thelwall, in: Alexander Roberts; James Donaldson (eds.), Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, New York 1905.

[4] *Augustine*, *City of God* (see fn. 3), VII. 28.

[5] *Tertullian*, *De Spectaculis* (see fn. 3), chap. XXIII. 5.

lies. It is better for Christians to reserve that artistry of performance – theatricality – for the sake of the liturgy and the celebration of the sacraments.[6] Any and all other spectacles are, in the memorable words of a contemporary baptism rite in the Catholic tradition, part of Satan's "empty show."

2. Dramatic Revelation

But could spectacle operate as a site for revelation? This essay begins with and returns to attention as the hinge between theatrics and revelations. Almost immediately, however, it must address the central problem of spectacles that *do* invite a kind of real "religious experience" in response to fantasy. As Jean-Luc Marion identifies:

> "Revelation, if it can ever be conceived, arises from the question of phenomenality much more than from the question of beings and their being (existence), and certainly infinitely more than from the question of knowledge of objects (demonstration). What do we see, what can one ever see, of the invisible?"[7]

My aim is not to assert that revelation always or exclusively phenomenalizes itself *as* spectacle, but to think through how attention to theatrical phenomena might *disclose* rather than *delude*. I want to take seriously the possibility for God to make Godself known *through* spectacles, everywhere from the sacred biblical theophanies on Mounts Horeb and Sinai to the glitz and glamour of Broadway musicals. A more interesting dilemma in terms of theatre regards dramatic revelations rather than demonic theatrics. Even more so for thinking about revelation after the widespread turn to performativity as a keyword for interpretations of being-in-act. As Hans Urs von Balthasar shows across his five volume *Theo-Drama*, theatrical language provides manifold resources for Christian theology to interpret God's performance on the world stage – paradigmatically in Jesus the Christ.[8] Hermeneutic attention to theatrical phenomena may also help to clarify how to attend to revelation in, through, and as spectacle without mistaking the entertainment of demons or charlatans for experiences of God.

In a general sense, religious experiences might be plausibly considered an encounter with revelation, at least insofar as naming religious experiences describe an event disclosive of the divine. Experience takes the label "religious" when something conceived to be divine or spiritual or ineffable appears to consciousness. The phrase describes sensorial heights – "the concert was a religious experience" – as readily as the phrase denotes more expected encounters with the sacred that point towards transcendence: rituals, spectral manifestations, sublime contacts with beauty, experiences that reflect the life of a religious community. Religious experiences are experiences, but they exceed the boundaries of the ordinary

---

[6] For an approach to Christian litrugy as the apex of artistry, see *Sarah Coakley*'*s* argument in God, Sexuality, and the Self. An Essay 'On the Trinity', Cambridge 2013, and the role of liturgy in her *theologie totale*.
[7] *Jean-Luc Marion*, Revelation and Givenness, trans. by Stephen E. Lewis, Oxford 2016, 5.
[8] *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory, 5 vols., trans. by Graham Harrison, San Francisco 1988–1998.

by way of the ordinary. Applying the adjective "religious" to "experience" signals a depth dimension. "Religious" uplifts the paradoxical capacity for this experience to manifest the invisible (to others or as such). Once further identified as a religious experience of revelation, the experience makes a claim about how one lives. A paradigmatic religious experience, then, would be theophany: a direct manifestation of some god that irrupts into the world and is perceivable in the same manner as other phenomena. The paradigmatic case of theophany cannot be the sum total of religious experiences, otherwise it would be hard to distinguish between angelic visitation and alien abduction. One kind of religious experience seems clearly legible: the interpretation of phenomena *as* revelatory and so disclosive of God.

In the Catholic-Christian paradigm from which I encounter the world, a term for such a phenomenal encounter with God is *sacrament.* A sacrament has long been defined, following Augustine, as a visible sign of an invisible reality.[9] Sacraments reveal divine action in a phenomenal way: one can *see* that which mediates unseeable grace. In every case, sacraments manifest the presence of God by means and mediation of created things. Sacraments can be phenomenologically interpreted like spectacles. The Eucharist *appears* to be ordinary bread; a confession *appears* to be an ordinary, if charged and hushed, conversation; a baptism *appears* to make a wet baby, and so on. Sacraments are a strong locus for thinking about revelation because the material (visible) components of a sacrament can be recognized by nonbelievers in other realms of human life or cited in other ritual actions. One does not require the eyes of faith to recognize the phenomenality of a sacrament.

Indeed, unlike the biblical theophanies or a Marian apparition or a mystical ecstasy, sacraments *depend* on their mundane commonality to communicate grace. *A sacrament without phenomenality is no longer a sacrament.* The logic of sacramentality posits that a disclosure of the divine in the form of a communication of grace can occur *simultaneously* with the ordinary givenness of phenomena while nonetheless superseding, without eradicating, ordinary meaning. In this way, sacraments reveal the ultimate end of all things in God. For the Christian, *every* loaf of bread and *every* cup of wine anticipates some possibility to become more than itself as a communication of grace. Indeed, the bread that performs Eucharist perhaps achieves a more flourishing breadliness than the bread that becomes a sandwich.

But even a sandwich can be considered a religious experience without any knowledge or participation in the sacramentality of the created world. So what happens when revelatory "phenomena" appear outside the confines of a sacred context or religious intent? I turn, now, to a consideration of religious spectacles in theatre as one avenue for an answer.

---

[9] As an example of the influence of Augustine's definition, see Aquinas' reliance on it in *Summa Theologiae* III. q. 60. a. 1. s. c.

3. The Theatrical Phenomenon: Toward a Religious Phenomenology of Spectacle

The spectacle of a ritual or a god during a commercial play makes a salient example steeped in a long history. Stages have always been places where gods make themselves known, visible, tangible, and present. The theater of Dionysius was as much a temple as it was a place for entertainment, diversion, and civic bonding. There is a close and inextricable kinship between religion and theatre.[10] Gods might be played by human players or puppets, but they nevertheless perform and *present* spirits and divinities and unseen realities.

Such presences can be experienced in and through theatrical performances. Performance theorist Donalee Dox argues again a speculative "what if" approach to spirituality within critical scholarship. She writes:

> "The body remains the starting place, as it already has a place in critical performance analysis. Because the body is the experiential locus for many contemporary spiritual practices, the necessary move for an interpretive paradigm is to accept the possibility of bodies infused with a sense of an ineffable presence. This may or may not be immediately accessible to critical methods."[11]

A phenomenological theological approach to sacramental spectacles could make sense of what Dox calls this "infusion" of "ineffable presence" into bodies with the language of revelation. In some ways, Dox's work is consciously sympathetic to phenomenology's theological turn as a way to move, with attention to embodied experience, toward the "territory of the numinous, the sacred, the divine, or spirit" that philosophy ordinarily eschews. Dox does not follow that trajectory.[12] Instead, Dox turns to reconsider the materialist presumptions in the "critical methods" of what she calls the "performance paradigm" that dictates the boundaries for taking spirit seriously in performance studies. Her book seeks to make greater space for interpreting reports of felt presence of spirit during vernacular dance-performances and to jostle performance studies from its uncritical rejections of spirituality based on methodological prejudices: "Performance may be the membrane between matter and mystery."[13]

Performances can mediate revelation. Consider the spectacle of theatrical performance. Like the musician, actors *play* their character in acts of interpretive artistry. In playing their given role, actors become transparent to their role. Play suspends ordinary meanings but supplies the very same bodies in action. Theatrical play – like all forms of play – allows the event of play to transform into a structure that displays meaning in excess of itself.[14]

---

[10] For an excellent and globally minded comparative study attentive to developments in performance studies, see *David V. Mason*, The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre, New York 2019.

[11] *Donnalee Dox*, Reckoning with the Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance, Ann Arbor 2016, 45.

[12] Ibid., 11. This paragraph in Dox's introduction approvingly cites Maurice Merlau-Ponty as well as Jean-Luc Marion, but there is no extended meditation on phenomenology's openness to theology

[13] Ibid., 146.

[14] The language, here, is an oblique reference to *Hans-Georg Gadamer's* hermeneutic theory in Truth and Method, rev. ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal, New York 1989. Gadamer builds on *Johan Huizing*, Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture, Boston 1955, to ground hermeneutics

The reality of a play is not recognized through an examination of the biology of the players or the sociology of the theatre industry or an amalgam of anthropological "collective effervescence" with action and poetics and narrative. Rather, in Hamlet's phrase, "the play's the thing." Risking a tautology, it is the *event* of playing that manifests the performative phenomena we call "a play." Like music, a piece of theatre – a play – exists most truly in its being performed. The theatrical phenomenon is, first and foremost, an event that gives itself as event to be watched.

The theatrical phenomenon might be better dubbed a "spectacle." Spectacle (and its adjectival cousin "spectacular") suggests events of entertaining display that can be witnessed: a rock concert, a presidential inauguration, a lightning storm, a parade or protest march, a rocket launch, a lover's quarrel in a public place, fireworks, a liturgy. Any event gives itself as spectacle once framed as an event to be witnessed. There is a sort of theatrical reduction that begins to consider a performance (perfectly ordinary and mundane) as a spectacle to behold, a theatrical phenomenon. One sees a physical, if certainly not phenomenological, form of this reduction all the time. Events are rendered into spectacle by means of the crowds that produce their smartphones and cameras to record pictures and video. By terming the theatrical phenomenon a "spectacle" I aim to open up the category of spectacle beyond the genre conventions of drama, theatre, opera, and performance art. Theatrical language and theory can then be used to clarify spectacles in various contexts. At the same time, "spectacle" nicely distinguishes those performances received as performances-to-be-watched from those performances that are everyday performative phenomena. A performance becomes a spectacle when one stops to watch the show.[15] Some days I am captivated by the ways my coffee maker performs a spectacle of bubbles and drips and olfactory delights; other days I am captive only to my desire for the result and quality of its performance in the event of coffee making. A theatrical phenomenon needs to meet the first criteria, the spectacle. It does not really matter if the coffee maker on the stage in a play brews spectacular coffee, but, as theatrical phenomenon, it always performs its coffee-making in a spectacular way.

Consider a different set of examples closer to the theme of revelation. Fire quickly becomes a spectacle when watched, but a fire can also give itself in ways that fade into

---

(particularly the interpretation of the arts) in an auto-telic self-presentation of meaning that occurs in the event of play. See: Truth and Method, especially the section called "Play as a Clue to the Ontology of a Work of Art," pp. 101–169. For a more explicit study of Gadamer's writing as it applies to theatre, see *Charles A. Gillespie*, "Sustainable Canons. Gadamer's Hermeneutics and Theatre", in: Labyrinth: An International Journal for Philosophy, Value Theory and Sociocultural Hermeneutics 24/2 (2022) 150–175.

[15] This phenomenological framework helps also to avoid the pitfalls of determining theatre according to the attitude or physical location of its audience. As such, it follows the notion of performativity developed in response to John L. Austin. Performatives are speech-acts that do what the words describe in a given context. Classic examples of a performative utterance include "Class dismissed," "I accept your apology," and "I do" (in the context of a wedding ceremony). See the discussion of performatives throughout *Austin*, How to Do Things with Words, Cambridge 1962. Most recent scholarship on performativity follows how Judith Butler expands performativity to be an ontological category, one that identifies the reality of socially constructed phenomena in bodily doing rather than idealized or essential being. Butler has developed her notion of performativity across multiple projects. See especially *Judith Butler*, Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York 1990; Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex, New York 1993; Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative, New York 1997; Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, Cambridge, Mass. 2015.

background. Fire might be foreground or background depending on phenomenological focus: as an element of a room's coziness, as a means for cooking, as the source of light from a candle, as backdrop to a newsreel on climate disaster. In every case, some aspect of a fire may call for enough attention to become the focal point of consciousness and therefore a theatrical phenomenon. The spectacle of a fire that burns without consuming a bush in Exodus 3:2, at the very same time, seems to have the capacity to reveal God. I am less concerned with the order of manifestational operations: it is clear from the text that burning bush spectacle is angelic in origin – "There the angel of the LORD appeared to him as fire flaming out of a bush" (Ex 3:2). Nonetheless, "God called out to [Moses] from the bush" (Ex 3:4) and the scriptural text attributes the speech directly to God (cf. Ex 3:5–10, 12, 14–22). God seems quite comfortable communicating alongside and through phenomena that give themselves in order to grab attention. Miracles often do, hence God's promise to assist Moses with "wondrous deeds I will do in [the King of Egypt's] midst" (Ex 3:20). Yet the same Book of Exodus further indicates that God might communicate something of Godself via natural phenomena. The story of the great theophany includes the phrase "… Moses was speaking and God was answering him with thunder" (Ex 19:19). God's self-revelation has not been compromised because God mediates God's "voice" via spectacles that, at least on the part of the biblical record in Exodus, do not require supernatural gifts to perceive phenomenally. Fire and thunder reveal *as* spectacles of fire and thunder.

Theophanic revelations might be said to share a kind of public interpretability with sacraments. Both manifest the presence of God through discernable and universal phenomenality. Discernable because theophanies and sacraments both can become subject to description; universal because theophanies and sacraments – unlike private mystical experiences – occur in straightforwardly phenomenal ways. What sharply differentiates sacraments from theophanies, however, will be the lack of any coterminous divine self-confirmation. The burning bush and the speaking storm both include the content of God's revelation in speech in addition to the spectacle.[16] Sacraments, by contrast, do not self-confirm with a clearly objective form of revelation.[17] Only Jesus' baptism in the Jordan concludes with the heavens opening to announce a child with whom God is well-pleased; sacramental baptisms do not feature such clarity. Instead, sacraments offer themselves to private scrutiny and a community of faith as to whether the sacrament has *revealed* something of or from God.

Returning to the theater and the case at hand, then, if a play mediates a religious experience, the performance of an actor might be said to reveal theatrically what the performance of a priest ordinarily reveals sacramentally. But should stage depictions of spiritual realities be considered properly revelatory phenomena? Or are the religious experiences occasioned by stage spectacles a sentimentalized "religious feeling," always automatically suspect? The patristic concern about theatricality returns, however, whenever spectacle calls into question the veracity of ritual actions to be what they present themselves to be. There are differences in *intent* between a Christian ritual in a religious context and spectacles of

[16] Even if Ex 19:19 is read to mean that God answered Moses's speech with thunder there remains some perception of a call-and-response conversation.
[17] *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, The Glory of the Lord, San Francisco ²1992.

religiosity for the sake of theatrical entertainment. Catholic doctrine from the time of the Council of Trent, for example, demands the clear announcement "I do not intend to consecrate" before a priest 'practices' the ritual actions of the mass. So, too, differences in *context.* A couple that joins hands and says special words during a wedding scene do something distinct from a couple doing the same actions during a marriage rite (even if the very same people perform the same performative speech-acts in both cases).[18] One common solution appears according to locational context and expressed intent: theaters present "fake" revelation in their profane citation of religion and churches and other holy events signal "real" revelation in their performances of sacred truth. Context and intent certainly matter for religious practice. But I find this solution for religious spectacles ultimately unsatisfying when it relegates the standard for "real revelation" to the physical and social location of the event. We know that a "real" religious ritual can occur on a theater's stage and a "fake" religious ritual can occur in a church.

Better, I contend, to examine the situation according to experience. What of the spectator in the audience/congregation? If we bracket the intent of the actors and knowledge of the context, there seems to be little left to distinguish theatrical spectacles from religious ones in the *experience* of an observer. The truth of the play appears in its performance *for* the audience as manifestation, not in the interior life of the artist. So too, I argue, insofar as revelation (in Christian understanding) always functions as revelation *for* a recipient. Spectacles exist in their performance. Is there any phenomenological distinction between the experience of what might be *revealed* by stage spectacles and the revelation accessed via a more straightforwardly religious performance of a sacrament?

4. Theatrical Sacraments

On one level, a "theatrical sacrament" could describe any moment in a play that so successfully cites the phenomenological experience of a religious ritual as to be momentarily indistinguishable from it. On another level, a "theatrical sacrament" functions as a term for when spectacle becomes revelatory. As such, a theatrical sacrament calls into question easy reliance on the sacred/profane dialectic for dramatic revelation. If revelation is *God's* prerogative rather than a human achievement, even a sacrilegious performance should be reasonably able to prompt a religious experience. Phenomenological attention restores the more ancient understanding of spectacle as always and already potentially theatrical *and* religious. The category of revelation secures the theological meanings a theatrical sacrament gives phenomenally.

I will focus on the problem of a theatrical sacrament according to a Catholic-Christian framework (sometimes invoked as a "sacramental imagination"), but a phenomenological approach to stage revelations remains fundamentally open to other religious ways of knowing. Considering revelation on stage (by definition a space that is public and religiously pluralistic) presents a better avenue than scrying for religious intent and context to analyze revelation in performance. Dramatic revelation can help make sense of the way a vast array

[18] See *Austin*, How to Do Things With Words (see fn. 15).

of spectacles – from the pious to the sacrilegious – can become sites for religious experiences.

Theatrical objects always give themselves in multiple ways: in the phenomenological language of the theatre theorist Bert O. States, a chair on stage is a chair pretending to be another chair.[19] The chair on stage does not cease to give itself phenomenally as a chair. On stage, the chair gives itself as itself (as wooden or metal or painted or plush) and gives itself as whatever role it plays in the play, even if that is simply to be a nondescript place for some character to sit. Actors can and do often sit on chairs as chairs. "What the chair made possible, in a word, was conversation: casual or exploratory talk leading to tension and crisis; the carving of the true subject out of the seemingly phatic encounter."[20] But a chair can also play the role of a throne or be made into the driver's seat of a pretend car. As theatrical phenomenon, the chair's ordinary way of appearing falls away *without* fully disappearing or disintegrating. Instead, the chair becomes transparent to its role as a chair within the world of the play and the world of the stage. The chair never ceases really being and giving itself as a chair even while it plays its role. Theatrical objects (including actors!) thus give themselves in a twofold way – as themselves and as a role in the production.

Theatrical sacraments, then, operate a bit like the theatrical chair. Theatrical sacraments include depictions of religious rites and ideas on stage or the use of "real" hymns and prayers. Theatrical sacraments give themselves in a three-fold way: as their ordinary phenomenality, as their role in the play, and as (potentially) revelatory. Here, I understand "revelatory potential" to be the capacity for a phenomenon to serve as a site for an experience of God's self-revelation in excess of that phenomenon's own manifestation. There remains, however, an important distinction between theatrical sacraments and their religious namesake. From a Christian perspective, theatrical sacraments do not confer grace in the exact same manner as a religious sacrament does. The latter require religious intentionality and religious contexts, but theatrical sacraments are often reported as occasions for religious experiences. Could that which is revealed to experience via theatrical sacraments be credible *as* revelation? Or are theatrical sacraments simply a citation or simulation of the revealed? Theatrical sacraments could also identify when any spectacle becomes a religious experience regardless as to whether the play cites a "real" religious phenomenon.

On the one hand, theatrical sacraments appear to be sacrilegious citations at best or opportunities for cheap religious feelings at worst. For many Christian thinkers across the tradition, theatre must be avoided because it is a site for untrustworthy revelations. Tertullian and Augustine both rejected theatre *because* of its power to reveal the wrong sorts of things about God and the world and ourselves in the wrong sorts of ways. Spectacles warp the perceptive and display power of Christians. As such, even patristic anti-theatrical writing depends on an underlying phenomenology of spectacle. Spectacles have a power to shape perception. On the other hand, Christian confidence that certain spectacles *can* reveal something operates quite differently from the outright rejection of mimetic performance in some versions of the Platonic tradition or the ethical anxieties about illusion discussed by

[19] *Bert O. States*, Great Reckonings in Little Rooms. On the Phenomenology of Theater, Berkeley 1987.
[20] Ibid., 45.

Levinas in his essay on aesthetics, "Reality and Its Shadow."[21] The mimetic arts are distractions from conceptual reflection in a flight from reality to contemplate its shadow. Levinas writes: "Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow."[22] Christian thought appears more comfortable with the shadows cast by its spectacular lights. Christian anti-theatricality concerns the proper use of spectacles to worship God and form disciples. Problems emerge precisely on those stages where truth and playacting overlap.

Phenomenology can say more about theatrical sacraments than other modes of analysis because it avoids the pitfalls of filtering the meaning of religious phenomena through intent, context, or the faithful (or methodologically atheist) interpretations of the observer. As in other types of fiction, a phenomenological approach might make sense as to how spectacle reveals truth *through* fantasy. Actors may not really be praying and the objects on stage not really sacred things, but a religious experience of the play can be rightfully considered a religious experience. A phenomenological approach to the theatrical sacrament underscores that it does not really matter, for the sake of phenomenological analysis, if the performers or the playwright hold any particular belief about God.[23]

If spectacle can be shown to be revelatory, then it is the spectacle that reveals. So even flashy, commercial, and patently illusory theatrical sacraments may nevertheless disclose revelation (that is, become revelatory) akin to intentionally religious spectacles (that is, ritual or liturgy). Phenomenological attention to theatrical sacraments shows how theological questions can and must operate outside the contextual boundaries erected by measurable criteria like intent, material, location, or preexisting faith. This is not to say that such boundaries are immaterial. Religious intentionality and religious contexts are precisely the grounds of differentiation between *religious* spectacles and other theatrical phenomena. Instead, theatrical sacraments indicate how revelation may appear even in non-religious or so-called secular contexts. Theatrical sacraments give themselves for religious attention *because* they become transparent to a truth that reveals itself. Given the ubiquity of "performance" as a category for making sense of the event character of human social life and God's dramatic intervention in salvation history, theatrical sacraments provide a salient locus to investigate what criteria might make other phenomena credible as revelatory.

5. Theatrical Sacraments by Another Route: Attention as Prayer

So what would it mean to "attend the tale" as theatrical sacrament? To *attend* to something or someone means to place them as the focal point of consciousness. In phenomenological terms, attention organizes intentionality and awareness; attention characterizes intentionality toward that which gives itself by considering it apart from what operates as

[21] *Emmanuel Levinas*, "Reality and Its Shadow", in: Collected Philosophical Papers, Dordrecht 1987, 1–13, here 12: "Art then lets go of the prey for the shadow."
[22] Ibid., 3.
[23] An analogous approach to the "revelatory potential" of poetry might be found in *Kevin Hart*, Poetry and Revelation. For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry, London 2017, here xii: "Whether God exists, or exists as the poet thinks, is beside the point when it comes to reading a poem."

background. *Apropos* of theatre, this notion of attention sometimes gets styled "spotlighting." The light draws attention to a particular part of the *mise en scène*, but a spotlight does not diminish the contribution of the background. Rather, a spotlight places a particular part of the scene into focus. Literalizing the spotlighting metaphor on stage helps to clarify something about how I am thinking about attention. Sometimes the light of the spotlight is that which is attended to rather than the objects on stage the spotlight touches and illuminates. A spotlight can play a character, as when Tinkerbell flits around the stage in the first scene of *Peter Pan*. The audience's attention recognizes the light as a character by focusing attention on the movement of the light *rather* than the beds, walls, tables, windows, toys, and lamps that make up the set pieces of the Darling nursery. Attention is therefore *creative* in some sense (and some phenomenologists would agree that analysis and description of intentionality do generate something in experience that is the object of phenomenological study rather than phenomena themselves). Attention studies further distinguish between the kind of attention that requires work (such as that which I am devoting to composing this sentence that needs to be grounded in an accurate scholarly reference) and the sort of enjoyable, effortless attention that describes what it means to be caught up in a state of flow (such as when I become so engrossed rereading a scene from a play that I lose track of time and continue reading).[24] Theatre manifests a core yearning of the human condition, one echoed in the child's or lover's cry "pay attention to me!" Theatrical space organizes attention; stages, wherever they appear, align collective attentions onto the single event.[25]

Attention is also a route to prayer. Simone Weil understands this: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. […] Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."[26] Attention shifts the consciousness of the attendant to become responsive to the object of attention by placing it as focus. It is attention that focuses and so brings phenomena into the foreground. Through attention, an object becomes present to consciousness and so can give of itself in new and surprising ways. We make discoveries by paying attention. So, too, in prayer. An expansive account of prayer describes humans releasing themselves from ordinary self-possessiveness to become responsive to a divine prompt. Prayer becomes attention to experiences of God that, in the natural attitude, recede into the background. Prayer, in this most capacious sense, attends to God's presence (even in apparent absence). Prayer readies consciousness to notice the phenomenality of the divine within the created world: a readiness to attend to the world as created, as a stage for divine action. Here, I distinguish prayer from one of its species in speech-acts directed to God. Certainly, words directed to God are prayers. Words directed to God are often the normative example for praying. My expansive account of prayer only comes in analogy to prayer as directed

---

[24] See *Mihaly Csikzentmihaly*; *Jeanne Nakamura*, "Effortless Attention in Everyday Life. A Systematic Phenomenology", in: Brian Bruya (ed.), Effortless Attention. A New Perspective in the Cognitive Science of Attention and Action, Cambridge 2010, 182.

[25] A stage need not be the proscenium arch of a neoclassical opera house or Dionysius' amphitheater carved into the side of a hill. *Peter Brook*, The Empty Space, reprint edition, New York 1995, defines a stage as any "empty space" across which an actor might walk. This might be framed even more loosely, following Huizinga's philosophy of play, to understand a stage as any demarcated place of play where the rules of ordinary life are suspended for a given time.

[26] *Simone Weil*, Gravity and Grace, trans. by Arthur Wills, Lincoln 1997, 170.

attention of consciousness to communication with God. My point about prayer and attention simply means to underscore how prayer need not be *only* linguistic or cognitive.

A wide swath of religious literature contends all doing can be done as prayer. Practices such as mindfulness, meditation, or contemplation all derive from a fundamental precondition in cultivated attention *away* from the distraction of the world. Paradoxically, spectacles train attention and by orienting attention, theatre thus teaches a mode of praying. Put another way, theatre's organization of attention trains a responsiveness to phenomena that is ready to become prayerful. Such training derives from the way in which the stage leads objects to "double" themselves.[27] On the one hand, this is Antonin Artaud's idea that theatre presents itself *and* that which it makes present. The theatre becomes the space for the immediacy of "*matter as revelation.*"[28] So the actor dancing the part of the Javanese god both presents dancing flesh *and* the god. Doubling applies to all elements on stage. The actor both is and is not the character, at least we hope so in the case of a homicidal barber or a suicidal salesman. The stage makes being ambiguous because stage phenomena never exit their ordinary ways of being. Stages' chair remains a chair *even* as it plays the role of a chair within a scene. The chair could be conscripted to play many other sorts of roles, but the audience sees the chair as itself and as part of the scene. A more uncanny experience goes to the presence of a real dog, a ticking clock, or running water on stage because they maintain a level of freedom that risks dispelling the illusion of the stage world.[29] Their ordinary phenomenality persists more strongly.

The same *might* be true about any spectacle of the human condition. Linda Lowman reminds theatergoers that framing attention as prayer comes at a cost: "So attention must be paid."[30] Her memorable aphorism occurs in the context of theatre's capacity to illuminate human dignity. Attention must be paid to Willy because "he's a human being." The object of Linda's line can mean multiple ways: it can indicate the human actor playing Willy or a reference to a fictional character within the imagined world of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or some ambiguous combination of the two that reflects the shared human experience on stage. Linda theorizes how theatre's mirroring of human life also issues a demand on praxis. Awareness of human performances requires that we pay attention to them. All the more so for performances of suffering. The scene reveals Linda's suspicion that Willy is suicidal thanks to a sales career that fizzles and fades. The whole of Miller's celebrated *Death of a Salesman* explores how such a "terrible thing is happening to him." And, as in ancient tragedy, the audience knows more than the characters.

---

[27] Everything visible on the stage presents both itself *and* its role in the *mise en scène.* I refer to this dual signification as "dramatic doubling" following the title of the collection of essays by *Antonin Artaud*, The Theater and Its Double, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards, New York 1958. For Artaud, "the theater is identical with its possibilities for realization when the most extreme poetic results are derived from them; the possibilities for realization in the theater relate entirely to the *mise en scène* considered as a language in space and in movement" (45).

[28] Ibid., 59, emphasis original.

[29] Cf. *States*, Great Reckonings in Little Rooms (see fn. 19), 30–37, 195.

[30] The line in context: "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fold into his grave like an old dog" (*Arthur Miller*, Death of a Salesman, Act I, in: Christopher Bigsby [ed.], The Portable Arthur Miller, New York 2003, 60).

Linda's prayer to her children that they pay attention to their suffering father inverts the performance anxiety about suffering articulated by Augustine. Augustine finds attention paid to the wailing actress to be a distracting fascination. Finding pleasure in the actress's performance of pain dulls the sensation prompted when one witnesses performances of suffering in everyday life. In *Confessions* Book 3, Augustine worries about how the delight of theatrical mimicry numbs compassion. Performances of suffering pump the heart with anesthetics against everyday empathy.[31] But I think that Linda Lowman might be a better theatrical and phenomenological theologian. For Linda, attention to a human being's suffering – even if that suffering is *performed* as part of a theatrical illusion – uplifts the call of all suffering. It might become formation towards the sorts of attentions worth cultivating after the curtain has fallen. Fiction reveals the value of human dignity displayed simply in being human. If we can learn to pay attention to Willy, we can learn to pay attention to all the miseries that go unnoticed. Attention must be paid.

Such a reading of Linda's aphorism emerges from Miller's *poetics* and yet turns backward onto the *material* bodies at play. This reading proposes that the ambiguous doubling of the stage might be phenomenologically productive. The fictional world crafted by Miller's text comments upon ordinary human life. My point, then, is not about the attention that must be paid within the "world of the play" to Willy Lowman, but rather than Linda's speech *materially* addresses an audience attending the play. Linda's point becomes about the audience's attention to a human being, not Biff's or Happy's. Willy is, of course, played by a human actor. So too Linda, so too Biff, so too Happy. The human being that presents Willy's humanity also presents humanity as such. Human dignity gets doubled. Linda's comment to her children expands to be a comment to the audience about attention, at least for those paying attention.

The cost of attention arrives in time and talent as well as treasure. Attention functions as precursor and training for prayer precisely because it devotes the energy of personality toward the object of attention. Attention borrows time from other activities. The ritual structures of theatrical performance make the temporal cost of attention glaringly obvious: the show has a runtime during which the audience attends. The same can be said of the players and producers who make the show happen during that same runtime. When attention commands both time and talent, it becomes *active* even if the heightened experience of attention for a theatre-goer or theatre-maker appears in a mode of grammatical passivity to the object of attention. Attention fuses with and becomes prayer when reception spills over into acts of devotion (of energy, of time, of talent, of treasure).

Attention does not slip into any sense of pure passivity, as if the object of attention acted upon the attendant as object. Theatre makes this point quite plain. When we hear the person next to us begin to snore, we know that they have slipped into the *passive* attention of sleep. It would be wrong to say that the somnolent no longer receives any of the givenness of the show as phenomenon. One remains oblivious, perhaps even lulled, by the sounds on stage and the darkness of an auditorium. Instead, a sleeping audience lacks the necessary

---

[31] See *Augustine*, Confessions, III.ii.2, trans. by Henry Chadwick, Oxford 1991, 36: "A member of the audience is not excited to offer help, but invited only to grieve. The greater [the spectator's] pain, the greater [the spectator's] approval of the actor in these representations."

attention to receive the show actively. Those asleep receive all the same visual and aural and sensory data but in nonconscious passivity. The image of a sleeping audience can be stretched to those distracted or preoccupied with a cell phone or a side conversation. Distractions block the awakening to that which is happening right before one's very eyes. Metaphorical "waking up" means paying attention to what is *actually* happening all around. Coming to awareness does not change the facticity of the event. The show goes on even for those who sleep through it.

Instead, attention means directed action towards the reception of that which is given to me. That is, attention refers to *active* reception, perhaps even "full and active participation" in the mode of reception. I make an oblique reference to the language of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14 – most memorably its English construction as "fully conscious and active participation" – in order to underscore that such a view of attention need not mean performing roles identical to the actors in order for an audience to act. A phenomenology of the theatrical experience clarifies that even the audience has been doubled. Our attention to the event of the play deepens in the communal experience of attention as in the collective effervescence that makes laughing at a joke on stage *distinct* as an experience from laughing at the same joke while reading a printed version of the script. This goes further than the literal additive of stage business, sight gags, the amusement at how many different ways an actor can interpret and deliver a line. Laughing as a group occurs differently than laughing alone. A group laughs with and for each other as often as an expression of one's own amusement. Our attention to the event of play diminishes when other members of the audience divert their attention, whether slipping into the passive annoyance of a snore or the active rudeness of a glowing cellphone for a text message. What allows attention to concretize in a fused orientation to the stage is *collective* attention. Otherwise, the doubling of the audience as actor in background shifts to the foreground and becomes an obstacle, rather than an augmentation, to attending to the event of the play as theatrical sacrament. Critically, this collective attention does not pretend that awareness of the audience or theater space fades away. Attention must be paid to the stage, but this attention binds with the attentions of other people in the audience. One never pays attention alone. A spectacle becomes or carries a theatrical sacrament in a *communal* religious experience.

6. Conclusions

After my extended second detour through revelation and prayer, I conclude by asserting that revelation, as divine act rather than human achievement, can make use of the theatrical sacrament that gathers collective attention. Spectacle can occasion a response similar to religious experiences. In other words, spectacles might be revelatory. Attention paid to a theatrical sacrament manifests a corollary prayerful attitude to the attention paid to a religious sacrament. Such attention does not turn the theatrical sacrament *into* a religious one, but it does nevertheless occasion a *real* religious experience prompted by the three-fold givenness of the theatrical sacrament as itself, part of the play, and as (potentially) revelatory. Paradoxically, it is a dimension of the play's *illusion* that foregrounds the possibility for it to become revelatory. And it is the presence and resistance of this paradox (*pace*

Marion) that supports the claim to an experience of revelation via spectacle.[32] By virtue of their status as theatrical phenomena, spectacles give themselves *as* performance to be witnessed. Spectacles happen in excess of the objects performing, but so too revelation. Theatrical sacraments, then, reveal in a spectacular mode rather than a natural one. The "problem" of their illusion dissolves; the play's the thing. As such, questions of revelation's meaning, the work of theological interpretation, returns to the consciousness of the witness rather than as a dogmatic translation of the intention of performers.

The essay proposes that attention to spectacle can be revelatory. It asks if theatrical phenomena – that is, spectacle – can be a site for revelation within a Catholic-Christian paradigm. According to the theological tradition, spectacles are more often vehicles of deception, distraction, and defilement because spectacles have such power to shape perception. If revelation has a kind of phenomenality, it may operate according to the logic of a sacrament. But we know that sacraments *can* be experienced (especially by those outside the faith community) as spectacles. I develop the beginnings of a religious phenomenology of spectacle in order to consider "theatrical sacraments": moments on stage that lead to an experience of God. The essay, in turn, uses my notion of the theatrical sacrament to treat the attention paid to a performance as a mode of prayer in response to staged fictions that are (potentially) revelatory of God.

[32] *Marion*, Revelation and Givenness (see fn. 7), 2: "Admittedly, this resistance is not enough to authenticate it [as revelation], but at the very least a reception without resistance would be sufficient to disqualify it as revelation. This resistance, which is an intrinsic feature of every revelation, implies (and explains) that it may, and in a certain sense must, provoke conflict."