

Theology of Creation and Beauty: Kohelet 3:11

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This paper explores the interrelated concepts of beauty, creation, and kitsch, which collectively form a comprehensive framework for understanding one's relationship to the world and one's place in it. The hermeneutic of the text Kohelet 3:11, which defines beauty as a characteristic feature of all being in the context of creation theology, is utilised to focus on the typical tension between beauty as an immanent feature of the real world and the human desire to fully understand and capture it. In this context, beauty is posited as a spiritual value that, on the one hand, reflects God's essence and serves as a source of inspiration for humanity, and, on the other hand, remains an unattainable reality for humanity's ambitions. This paradox forms the basis for understanding kitsch, which is not merely an aesthetic category, but also encompasses the broader cultural and value dimensions of humanity. Within the context of a narcissistic culture, kitsch is conceptualised as a manifestation of humanity's creative endeavour to articulate beauty, characterised by a simplification of beauty that does not edify humanity and society, but rather leads to superficiality, mediocrity, and the loss of the transcendent dimension of beauty. The exploration of these three concepts in unison underscores their interconnectedness and the potential for serving as a conduit of understanding across diverse cultures, value systems, and individuals. A theology of beauty in relation to kitsch thus offers not only the possibility of reflecting on the state of the modern world, but also an important integrating element in a polarised society that can foster a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships and the spiritual dimension of the human person. | *Keywords: Beauty, Aesthetics, Solipsism, Creation, Artistic Sensibility, Kitsch*

1. Introduction

The narrative of creation, as recounted in religious texts, serves as a wellspring of inspiration not only for theologians and philosophers but also for artists. The book of Genesis offers an account of the origins of the world, thereby establishing a framework for discourse on metaphysics and its relationship to moral philosophy, particularly in contemporary ethical realism and anti-realism scholarship. Moreover, this well-known narrative provides a significant foundation for understanding beauty in theological and artistic contexts.

The present study seeks to demonstrate the inextricable linkage between art and theology by examining the manner in which art serves as a medium for both the articulation of human desires and thoughts, in addition to providing answers to more profound inquiries concerning the meaning of existence and humankind's position within the context of creation. In contrast, the concept of kitsch, as a value phenomenon in contemporary art, has the capacity to revive classical debates surrounding the authenticity and profundity of a work of art. Furthermore, it has recently given rise to reflections on the legitimisation of kitsch, particularly in relation to the authentic self-expression of the postmodern individual. In this context, the creation story emerges as a conceptual framework that facilitates a nuanced understanding of kitsch's role in artistic expression. It serves as a point of reference, offering scholars a valuable space to engage with contemporary debates and explore the complex relationship between art and authenticity in the postmodern era.

Furthermore, the book of Genesis, which is part of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, also provides insight into the contemporary issue of the rise of narcissism in society. The anthropocentric interpretation of the world and self-expression, which is characterised by solipsism, has resulted in the fragmentation and disintegration of society, as well as the blurring of traditional artistic criteria for evaluating authentic self-expression in art. The theological underpinnings of creation, as elucidated within the aesthetic and beauty paradigm, serve as the foundational framework for our examination of the nexus between beauty and kitsch. The hermeneutical analysis of the biblical text, specifically the book of Kohelet chapter three verse 11, forms the crux of our investigation. This text, with its content and reference to the creation story, provides a pertinent basis for reflection on the role of beauty in creation, both in its observable physical aspect and in its transcendent and enigmatic dimension for humans. The dialectic between these two aspects of beauty, as outlined in the text, is therefore central to our understanding of kitsch.

2. Hermeneutics Kohelet 3:11

“He made all things beautiful in His time, even eternity He has put in their hearts, yet man does not comprehend the work that God has done from beginning to end.” (Koh 3:11)

Within the context of wisdom literature, the Book of Kohelet is regarded as a paradigm of scepticism, representing a distinctive manifestation of philosophical realism of its era. The inquiries posed by the author and the way they are addressed offer a comprehensive array of authentic and analytical commentaries on the intricacies of existence, the manifold dynamics of life, and the entanglements inherent to the human condition. The author's intent is not to engage in equivocation regarding the human intellect or to engage in self-aggrandisement through the recounting of a rich life story. Instead, the objective is to ascertain the meaning of life in its universality, to recognise the transience of worldly things, and to elucidate the necessity to discern God's plan for humanity. Within this framework, the text of 3:11 constitutes a seminal theological foundation for the entire book.

Solomon¹, as the declared author, incorporates several essential components into this sentence, upon which he systematically builds his paradigm for comprehending the world in both the external and internal senses. The first component is God² as an eternal being who genuinely revealed himself in the creation of both visible and invisible things. As the creator of time, he is positioned above time itself and simultaneously manifests himself in time. The concept of eternity, therefore, is inextricably linked to temporality, and from the perspective of humankind as a created entity, these two dimensions of reality are inseparable. The notion of *eternity in the heart*³ signifies the hidden layers of the human psyche, where eternity and temporality interweave in a mystical manner. This concept is a remarkable expression of the existential potentiality of humankind, where there is space not only for the urgency of the individual's self-actualisation stemming from eternity, but also for the limitation of its realisation, which is determined by the temporality and transience of the human condition.

The eternity embodied within the human heart suggests that the human desire to comprehend this beauty and its origin is rooted in something that transcends time and space itself. The Koheletian paradigm thus encapsulates the paradoxical nature of human existence, wherein individuals, in their quest for understanding, confront their own limitations in attaining a state of harmony between their knowledge of the subject under investigation and the complexity of the subject itself.

3. Beauty in the context of creation theology

Creation theology is a theological doctrine that focuses on the origin of the world and on God's relationship to creation, in which humanity occupies a prominent place. Indeed, humanity is said to be created in the image of God. Everything that God has created he repeatedly evaluates as beautiful (Hebr. טוב *towb*, Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), good, pleasing, fitting, proper, appropriate. The etymology of the Hebrew term opens the possibilities for a wide-ranging use not only in the aesthetic sense but also in terms of the functionality of the system, the synergy of the individual components, and the moral order, as can be seen in many places in the biblical text. Beauty, as one of the main aspects of God's creation, plays a significant role in this theology. The Koheletian paradigm facilitates a more profound comprehension of the interplay between creation theology and

¹ The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem - Ecc 1:1. King Solomon was the third king of Israel, the son of King David. He is renowned for his wisdom, wealth, and the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. In the biblical tradition, Solomon is traditionally associated with the authorship of several books, including Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes (Kohelet). Solomon is a key figure in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Kohelet is the Hebrew title of the book known in English as Ecclesiastes. The term Kohelet can be translated as *Teacher*, *Preacher* or *Assembler*. The book is a philosophical reflection on the meaning of life, the impermanence of worldly pursuits, and the pursuit of wisdom.

² The Hebrew אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is a plural form of Deity that refers to the creation story in Gen 1-3.

³ The Hebrew עוֹלָם (*olam*) concept of eternity contains within it not only the dimension of timelessness, but also the antiquity and futuristic horizons of the passage of time. The concept of the heart לֵב (*leb*) refers to and the mind of man, his ability to make decisions and exercise his choice. It is the inner capacity of man in the sense of the cognitive-behavioral aspect of his existence.

aesthetics. Notwithstanding, the creation narrative also encompasses the fall of man and, consequently, the corruption of nature and all of creation (Gen 4). Consequently, creation theology acknowledges the shadow side of human existence and the existential limitations that hinder man from achieving the excellence for which he was originally intended. Pain, disappointment and frustration are thus integral components of beauty, alongside joy, contentment and enthusiasm, with a shared underlying passion for life.

In the context of biblical theology, the creation of the world is interpreted as an act of God's self-revelation, characterised by love and the pursuit of love. This fundamental reality is expressed through the beauty of creation, which is materialised in the diversity and complexity of the natural world. The concept of beauty, as understood within the framework of biblical theology, is deeply intertwined with the concept of community. The concept of God as a triune entity underscores the notion of community as a fundamental aspect of beauty, calling for the establishment of a community that is characterised by beauty, functionality, welcoming, organisation, significance, and selfless love. According to Moltmann, "creation is an open system in which God expresses his love and freedom" (Moltmann, 1993, p. 198), thereby facilitating an ongoing creative interaction between humans and creation. The concept of beauty in creation provides a foundation for the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between God and creation, as well as between creation (man) and God. The biblical concept of beauty encompasses the inner man⁴, his holiness and godliness⁵, and love⁶, while outer glamour⁷ and physical beauty may prove misleading. Man's sin, within this context, signifies his inherent inability to meet the standards that the goodness and beauty of creation anticipates from him. This corresponds to humanity's inability to comprehend the divine work.

It is evident that beauty functions not only as an aesthetic concept but also as a significant theological and ethical principle that ought to be manifest in the world. In this context, beauty is not merely an abstract concept; rather, it is the radiance of truth and goodness that, in a state of mutual harmony, unveils the glory of God. Consequently, creation becomes a mirror of God's beauty. Consequently, authentic art does not merely mirror the world, but rather serves as a "mirroring of transcendence in immanence" (Marion, 2004, p. 112). In the absence of beauty, truth and goodness risk becoming "dry academic concepts" (Balthasar, 1982, p. 42). Conversely, the world is perceived as a Koheletan scene, accessible to a human being entrusted with a mandate of stewardship⁸, in accordance with creation's immanent beauty. Even though not

⁴ In 1 Peter 3:3-4, the emphasis is on the constitutional primacy of a person's inner character over his outward appearance: 'Let not your adornment be external [...] but a hidden man of the heart, with an unbroken spirit of a quiet and peaceable nature, which is very precious in the sight of God.'

⁵ Psalm 29:2 says: "Give unto the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Spiritual purity based on spiritual anchorage in relationship to God is a prerequisite for being formed in beauty according to creation.

⁶ John 15:13.

⁷ Proverbs 31:30.

⁸ God, after creating man, placed him at the centre of the Garden of Eden and commissioned him to steward the world, to care for it, to ensure its sustainable growth, and to see to the cultivation of all creation (Gen. 1:28).

all of life's endeavours may be successful, it is not permissible for man to acquiesce to this purpose. This commitment entails not only the pursuit of personal desires, but also the discernment of God's will, purpose, and objective.

4. Beauty and the three stages of existence

Kierkegaard's three existential stages of life - aesthetic, ethical, and religious - in three distinct perspectives address the paradoxical nature of human existence. In all directions of human thought, reflection, and conscious and unconscious human endeavour, no individual can escape the contradictory nature of their own existence, which is determined by the fusion of the eternal into the temporal and the inability of the temporal to encompass the eternal. The three stages of existence do not represent a cascade of man's knowledge, a kind of inner development through which the individual must lawfully pass during his personal development. Kierkegaard's three views are offered as three perspectives on the existence of man, who is faced with a reality that transcends him in all respects and which he at the same time wants to grasp, to describe, to capture, to express. This metaphysical asymmetry places responsibility before the gates of eternity not only in moral and religious conduct and thought, but also in artistic and scientific self-expression.

Although Kierkegaard did not draw directly on the text of Kohelet 3:11 in his writings, yet his ideas and analyses indirectly correspond to and point towards the Koheletan paradigm of eternity in the heart. As a theologian and philosopher, he was conversant with the wisdom literature, and his entire corpus of writings refers to the Hebrew way of thinking and the source message of the Old and New Testaments. In his work *Either/Or (Enten/eller)*, he elaborates a dualistic tension of human existence that stems from the paradoxical nature of reality: "For the individual is essentially a temporal being, and as such, he lives in time. Yet the consciousness of eternity is also inherent in him, and it is this duality that is the tension in his existence" (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 529). In his work *Fear and Trembling (Frygt og Bæven)*, he expounds on his conception of eternity as immanent in the human heart, positing it as the driving force behind human action, lest life devolve into despair:

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that, twisting in dark passions, produced everything great or inconsequential... what then would life be but despair? (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 15)

Kierkegaard's observations of human existence do not lend themselves to scepticism; rather, they are characterised by an inherent conflict between the eternal and the temporal in human consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Sickness unto Death (Sydommen til Døden)*, he emphasises the pivotal role of existential despair in the progressive direction of human life, stating:

Despair is the sickness unto death in the sense that it is the relationship of the self to itself, the infinite spirit's refusal to be itself or the infinite spirit's inability to be itself. Despair is the impossibility of anything eternal... (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 30)

Such despair is not destructive to human consciousness; on the contrary, it carries the constructivist potential of the knowledge that human understanding of life is limited and the true meaning of life can only be found in union with the infinite, with eternity, that is - with God (Kondrla and Repar, 2017).

5. The paradox of beauty

The human condition is characterised by a perpetual oscillation between two distinct yet interconnected realms of existence: the external, and the internal. This duality is further compounded by the concept of *beauty* as the fundamental creative principle that permeates both these domains. The pursuit of beauty, both in its tangible and intangible forms, serves as a paradoxical mirror to the human condition. It reflects the dichotomy between the unattainable and the attainable, the fleeting and the enduring. Buber refers to this paradox in his exegesis of the Kohelet text: “Man is, in a way, a prisoner of time, but at the same time he feels a longing for something eternal that transcends time. This contradiction is the source of both human anxiety and hope” (Buber, 1970, p. 154). When considering the question of how to understand beauty and the basis for identifying kitsch, the paradoxical nature of human existence serves to further complicate the situation.

According to Hart, “beauty is an objective reality that reflects God’s presence in creation. By being beautiful, the world bears witness to its Creator, whose own beauty transcends all human understanding” (Hart, 2003, p. 89). Hart points to an important aspect of the Kohelet paradigm, which is the expression *in his time*. In this context, Kohelet underscores a dimension of beauty that is not static but dynamic, existing in a state of constant flux and transformation. This beauty, in its metaphysical essence, represents a universal category. However, it simultaneously embodies a contradictory nature, existing as a subject defined by its partialities *in different times* and *in different contexts*. The phenomenon can be illustrated by the example of a person in two different contexts, who may perceive the same object differently.

In his exploration of the interdisciplinary relationship between theology and culture, Tillich (1959) conceptualises beauty as “a symbol of God’s presence and transcendent value which transcend human understanding” (Tillich, 1959, p. 27). Here, beauty represents a reality that transcends aesthetic experience and denotes a manifestation of the Divine. According to Tillich, beauty thus functions as a conceptual bridge connecting the finite realm of human experience and knowledge to the infinite nature of reality, thereby offering a glimpse into the sacred.

A considerable number of contemporary thinkers, in both theology and the arts, adopt a similar mode of thinking. Wright (2008, p. 101) asserts that “Kohelet reminds us that even when we do not see the full picture of God’s handiwork, beauty and meaning are present in every moment of creation”. The despair of feeling one’s own inadequacy before God must not be a reason to overlook the beauty of God and His greatness, as well as one’s own

significance and the importance of the knowledge one has attained. McGrath's perspective on the Koheletian paradigm is decidedly positive, as he asserts that it underscores the notion that the human capacity to create and appreciate beauty is a divine gift that prompts a deeper comprehension of God's creation (McGrath, 2008, p. 134). This perspective thus opens the possibility and space for the apprehension of absolute beauty by the author.

It can be argued that the finitude of humankind cannot be regarded as an absolute impediment to humanity's pursuit of beauty, its recognition, and its articulation. Instead, the significance of these human endeavours is substantiated by the existence of beauty, and by the inherent capacity within human nature for the desire and pursuit of its manifestation. The artistic value of a work of art created with the authentic intention of expressing beauty is determined by the artist's education, skill, aesthetic sensibility, and other factors. It is also important to emphasise that, just as beauty affects all of creation, so too should man, in his self-actualisation, strive for beauty in all that he thinks, does, creates, and lives.

6. Beauty and kitsch

In the domain of philosophy of art, the concept of *kitsch*⁹ emerged in the second half of the 19th century, particularly during the 1860s and 1870s in Munich (Calinescu, 1987, p. 234). The precise moment of its emergence remains contentious, as it is a gradual formation of a concept that began to be used in artistic and literary circles, gradually spreading to several spheres of human activity, including the political (Arendt, 2017). Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, there is a prevailing consensus that kitsch impacts all facets of life, encompassing both the secular and religious domains (McIntyre, 2014, p. 95).

In essence, the issue of kitsch can be distilled into two overarching concepts. Firstly, the objectivist approach, as outlined by Broch (2002, pp. 13–40), asserts that kitsch is inherently deceptive due to its deliberate fabrication of falsehood. This deception is perpetuated not only to its audience but to the artist themselves, as it seeks to eliminate all that is deemed negative, challenging, or unresolved. Instead, it proffers an ostensibly harmonious and aesthetically pleasing facade. The essence of kitsch lies in its substitution of an ethical category for an aesthetic one, with the artist prioritising the pursuit of a *beautiful* work over a *good* one, and the effect on people being of paramount importance. Broch's philosophical approach accentuates the reality of beauty, which appears to exist independently of the human subject.

The subjectivist approach, on the other hand, is associated with an individual's innate abilities and characteristics. A notable contemporary example of this is Broch's Robert Musil (2022), who viewed kitsch as

⁹ The first documented use of the term *kitsch* is attributed to art dealers in Munich, who employed it to denote works of art that were inexpensive, sentimental, or of inferior quality, and intended for the commercial market. The term is believed to have originated from the German verb *verkitschen*, which means to sell cheaply or to undervalue, or alternatively from the English word 'sketch', referring to superficiality and mass production. For further information, see Kulka (2002, p. 18).

a manifestation of superficiality and inauthenticity in cultural expression. In this context, kitsch is perceived as a tendency to reduce the complexity of reality to sentimental, simplistic and often inauthentic images. It is a kind of *cheap emotional effect* that is not based on actual experience, but rather on schemes and clichés. In his thinking, we could define kitsch as an aesthetic category that eschews critical thinking and substitutes prefabricated emotions for genuine experience. Kitsch therefore resonates with mass culture and collective taste, which is at odds with individuality and its authentic being, which by its very nature escapes mediocrity and conventionality. Kitsch thus offers an ostensibly beautiful facade, devoid of the depth and complexity that authentic art demands. This is due to its rejection of reality, as Musil notes, “the world of today loves pretty dreams, since reality is too complex” (Musil, 1996, p. 647).

Even Kulka, in his definition of kitsch using the three criteria¹⁰, does not avoid the problem with which he is continually in controversy (Kulka, 2002, pp. 36–42). The definition proffered by Kulka provides unambiguous criteria by which to differentiate between kitsch and art. The definition is analytical in nature and eschews the use of subjective terms such as *bad taste*. Concurrently, Kulka and other scholars have emphasised the capacity of kitsch to manipulate viewer responses through uncomplicated and direct means. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the perception of kitsch as art is subjective and can vary between individuals, thereby complicating the application of the definition. It is noteworthy that certain artistic creations may align with a single or two criteria yet still be categorised as art, thereby illustrating the ambiguity of the delineation. The assessment of the author’s intention remains a fundamental question. It is not always clear that the intention of artistic creation is commercial success on a mass scale (Zayas et al., 2024).

The definition of kitsch thus becomes problematic and paradoxical. Kitsch is typically associated with superficial aesthetic values, such as exaggerated sentimentality or idealisation (Leskova and Yochanna, 2024). Nevertheless, it has the capacity to appeal to the masses and evoke profound emotional reactions (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023, p. 15). This phenomenon gives rise to the following question: If kitsch is superficial, why do people react so strongly to it? On the one hand, we may anchor our artistic and ethical values as Broch in a metaphysical realm, outside the sphere of aesthetic discourse. On the other hand, Musil frames the distinction between *good* and *bad* art “within an empirical, relativistic, and immanent understanding of aesthetic experience” (McBride, 2005, pp. 285–287), thus creating a wide space in which multiple views on judging what kitsch is and what else is not can be identified. Kitsch is often considered aesthetically inferior, but at the same time it can be a source of nostalgia, joy or humour. While some may be reluctant to

¹⁰ Kulka (2002) proposes a three-criteria analytical framework to distinguish between kitsch and art. The first of these is the depiction of an emotionally highly charged object or scene, such as a sunset, a crying baby, or romantic couples. The second criterion is the immediate and straightforward readability of the work, which does not necessitate any intellectual or interpretive process. The third criterion is the evocation of emotion without the presence of original qualities of value. Kitsch is designed to elicit emotion in a straightforward way, often through cliché or exaggerated aesthetic expression, but without deeper artistic or intellectual value.

acknowledge their affinity for kitsch, it is undeniable that it provides a source of pleasure. This prompts us to delve into a multifaceted domain that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, a territory that is becoming increasingly intricate with the advancement of both technology and culture (Kusnir and Pavlikova, 2024). The proliferation of perspectives that characterise kitsch leads to a more intricate and less straightforward delineation of its defining characteristics.

In the postmodern era, characterised by the relativisation of beauty within the context of the sophisticated fashion industry, there has been a notable shift in the transcendent dimension of art (Detweiler - Taylor, 2003, pp. 277-8). This shift can be attributed to the subordination of aesthetic value to commercial interests, which has resulted in the rationalisation of culture, thereby reducing aesthetic experience to a technical and commercial level (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 36). Consequently, kitsch has come to symbolise beauty in the context of commercialisation and consumption, rather than as an expression of authentic artistry that seeks to comprehend beauty and embody it in a person's work.

Philosophical pluralism and relativism have resulted in a blurring of the distinction between high art and low art. These two categories have traditionally provided a framework for evaluating the quality of art and identifying kitsch. Conventionally, *high culture* (good taste) encompassed domains such as painting, sculpture, literature, classical music, opera, theatre, and philosophy, among others. These disciplines were regarded as *classical* and exemplified the eternal qualities that had earned their place in the *canon* of a given civilisation. The appreciation of high culture has been shown to require a certain level of education and the capacity to discern its finer aspects. Conversely, a narcissistic form of individualism has been demonstrated to lead to a process of deculturation, thereby enabling the proliferation of relativism in all its forms (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 136). Popular forms of *low culture* that are often considered to be in bad taste, such as popular music, reality television, literature, magazines, celebrities, fashion, and blockbuster movies, enjoy widespread popularity due to their ability to appeal to the masses without the need for special initiation. Olivier (2009, pp. 63–77) posits that kitsch emerges when these clear boundaries become blurred and overlap, resulting in hybrids that combine elements of high and low culture, such as *The Matrix*, the Jerry Springer opera, pop art, comedy panel shows, and so forth.

In this sense, kitsch can be regarded as a significant contemporary problem. Objectivist beauty is becoming less prominent, and the subjectivist experience of the individual, his preferences and his right to authentic expression are becoming more dominant. A component of postmodernism is the subversion of the foundations of knowledge and historical truth. In contradistinction to the past, when the critique of reason was accompanied by an alternative foundation, such as imagination, postmodernism tends to abandon any metanarratives that might legitimately establish a foundation for postulating truth (Waugh, 1992, p. 5). Moreover, it claims that such metanarratives are no longer necessary and are of little use.

7. Kitsch and narcissism

Christopher Lash is a prominent figure in the establishment of the concept of a culture of narcissism within the domain of scholarly discourse across the humanities. He has provided an apt characterisation of the society in which the cult of celebrity was born:

In the contemporary era, individuals seek the kind of recognition that applauds not their actions but their personal qualities. They aspire to be admired rather than respected. They crave not fame but the glamour and excitement of the celebrity world. They desire to be the recipients of envy rather than respect. (Lash, 1991, p. 105)

He identifies the hallmarks of narcissism, emphasising that individuals prioritise their *qualities* and *feelings* over their actions, which are performed for the benefit of others. The self-deification of the individual not only contributes to the culture of kitsch but also leads to the atomisation of society, resulting in the loss of coherence of individual subsystems. Kitsch feeds into currents of thought that dissocialise the individual, consequently leading to a sense of emptiness and boredom, despite the presence of a highly developed entertainment industry (Winter, 2002, p. 85). The pursuit of momentary, pleasurable experiences, self-affirmation, the exaggeration of banalities, and the trivialisation of subtle yet important differences by the individuals fosters a culture in which kitsch flourishes (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 76).

The strong prevalence of subjectivism has the potential to act as a trap for both the individual and the wider society. As Detweiler and Taylor (2003, p. 107) argue, there is a cultural demand for “glitz and glamour, our taste for immortality” that is deeply ingrained in all of us. This cultural inclination, characterised by the pursuit of happiness and success, is fuelled by the distorted reflection of the celebrity world, rather than by effort or responsibility towards others. The allure of the celebrity world serves as a metaphor for an existential void and a yearning for spiritual fulfilment, underscoring the search for meaning in life (Boorstin, 1992). Boorstin contends that the entertainment industry and the culture of narcissism can be regarded as a spiritual problem of humanity, given that “we have created celebrities in our own image, now we have an obligation to worship them” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 232). The phenomenon of venerating celebrities, which, though tangible, is inherently distinct from the world of our quotidian experience, is a manifestation of our profound need to transcend the abyss that looms in our lives (Králík et al., 2024).

A further facet of contemporary narcissistic culture is the markedly diminished capacity for critical thinking, thus engendering a mass culture that is devoid of elevated aspirations and exhibits a disavowal of truth and beauty. This phenomenon, which has been noted by Kierkegaard (1987, p. 222) as being indicative of a *crowd* that is *untruth*, is one that has been identified as a significant threat to Europe, and one that has the potential to manipulate the populace through the medium of the media. The events that have come to pass in the twentieth century have served to validate this assertion. The contemporary context, characterised by the pervasive influence of

disinformation and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) within digital technologies, underscores the critical role of critical thinking in fortifying cyber security (Nowduri, 2018, p. 392). Critical thinking is instrumental in curbing the cyber-related destruction of democratic principles in an open society, as it fosters a conducive environment for the cultivation of a democratic society, particularly by facilitating the honest consideration of divergent views and preferences (Burbules, 2023, p. 3–4). A narcissistic culture, however, has been shown to weaken the ability to think critically (Jones, 2019, p. 123). This results in individuals becoming immersed in a world that is warped around their own ego. As beauty confronts one with otherness, narcissism ultimately prevents one from perceiving beauty in all its diversity, instead preferring simplifications that resonate with one's own mirror (Smith, 2021, p. 13). In doing so, it ignores the complexity of life and the complexity of the world in which we live. In contrast, true art has the capacity to confront reality, while kitsch, as Scruton (1997, p. 58) asserts, becomes “an aesthetic experience that avoids painful reality, instead providing simple, predictable, and pleasurable emotions”, and which readily becomes mainstream in a narcissistic society. In the absence of a culture of critical thinking within a society, there is a risk that the pursuit of political correctness may result in the propagation of tastelessness, which, through clever manoeuvring, may produce a similar effect in terms of high art to that of totalitarian regimes in which culture is strictly ideologized and subject to institutionalised control.

In this context, it is important to note that kitsch is frequently regarded within the domain of art and aesthetics as antithetical to authentic beauty and truthfulness. It symbolises superficial and sentimental interpretations of genuine beauty that are deficient in the requisite depth and authenticity. At times, art is susceptible to becoming mired in utopian perspectives on life. As Kundera (1984, p. 211) asserts, “kitsch is the absolute oblivion of death”, art, in its distorted state, becomes a caricature of truth and goodness, losing its ability to reflect life in its complexity and contradictions. This tendency aligns with the narcissistic inclination to avoid pain and suffering, preferring instead the pursuit of happiness, joy and peace. Digital technology and the entertainment industry have emerged as conduits that cater to these cravings, a phenomenon that kitsch, in contrast to authentic art, is capable of appealing to a broad audience through its easily accessible and pleasurable nature. The repercussions of this phenomenon are grave, as it engenders a dissociation from the natural world, leading to the forfeiture of a crucial and intrinsic facet of the human experience. This results in a loss of opportunities to acquire essential communication and social skills that shape both the conscious and unconscious mind (Giannelli, 2016). The pursuit of authentic experiences, driven by a yearning for true life, can lead to a spiral of death.

8. Kitsch and the theology of beauty

The concept of beauty, as an aesthetic phenomenon, is subject to contemporary trends of relativising aesthetic claims regarding the distinction between art and kitsch. Kitsch, understood as an aesthetic phenomenon, also functions as a cultural product, closely associated with social values, emotions,

and norms. In an open society, these norms are subject to change in accordance with the prevailing social and cultural context (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023). Proponents of kitsch as a legitimate part of the new postmodern society argue that kitsch lovers “are simply coping with the increasing abstraction of daily life and are finding new opportunities for creating their own articulation of that life” (McIntyre, 2014, p. 96), and in any case, “kitsch offers an experience that is in many cases valuable” (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023, p. 255), especially from the perspective of authentic feeling on the part of the consumer. However, when considering the impact of kitsch on the individual’s life and, consequently, on society, an implicit call for a metaphysical anchoring of the concept of beauty and, consequently, of kitsch can be identified across the entire spectrum of opinion. This concept is intricately linked to the philosophical inquiry into the meaning of human existence and, by extension, human endeavours. Consequently, the notion of “a correct distance” (McBride, 2005, p. 294) emerges as a unifying concept that connects both conservative and neo-liberal viewpoints. In this context, the theology of beauty serves as a foundational framework for a meaningful dialogue that transcends diverse perspectives on the ascription of a *correct distance* in relation to the transcendent dimension of beauty.

Art in the light of beauty theology thus transcends purely intellectual and theoretical horizons, becoming instead “a response to God’s creation and a reflection of the human desire for beauty and harmony” (Wolterstorff, 1980, p. 122) or, in the words of Haught (2000, p. 224), “man’s response to God’s creative activity”. Thus, it becomes a spiritual activity alongside the aesthetic, manifesting in all aspects of human life. Metaphysical beauty, in this sense, becomes a challenge for humanity to understand its own knowledge of the world and to apply this understanding to its practice in a way that reflects its progressive development, both as an individual and as a part of the ecosystem. The question that naturally arises is which outcomes of critical analysis on the part of man will be positive, which will be ambivalent, and which will be negative. The theological concept of human freedom¹¹ locates the possibilities of choice in the dialectical relationship of man’s responsibility for the world around him. The resulting vector of reasoning may offer some starting points in understanding what kitsch is and how kitsch relates to a theology of creation and beauty.

The concept of understanding kitsch in such a case will be tied to ‘usefulness’ in the sense of ‘building up’, ‘developing’ and ‘educating’ the individual and the community. The concept of beauty in the sense of a theology of creation

¹¹ The biblical concept of freedom and responsibility is predicated on the rabbinic wisdom, “I may do all things, but not all things prosper; I may do all things, but I will be controlled by nothing” (1 Cor 6:12). This concept is robust in its relationship to ethics, self-denial, and the perspective of the community. This concept of freedom, as outlined in the Bible, is one that is directed towards the protection of the self, but not for the sake of narcissism, but rather to be responsible for one’s surroundings. This responsibility becomes the primary mission to which one must subordinate one’s narcissistic tendencies. According to the principle outlined above, an individual who becomes subservient to their own preferences and egoistic desires will not make decisions that will be beneficial. This is because such individuals are incapable of considering the needs of themselves or their environment. Compare Guttesen (2024).

thus offers a powerful teleological impetus for diverse human activism. In such a case, the benefits of the individual need to be critically evaluated in relation to the benefits of the larger social entity. This is not a simplistic utilitarian approach, but rather an acknowledgement of the transcendent dimension of feelings, thoughts, and actions. An important factor in this dialectic is humility, based on the recognition that humans are not the owners or creators of the universe, but its stewards. From a metaphysical perspective, humans will not be the final arbiters of what is and what is not *kitsch*. From a human perspective, this question remains unanswered. The concept of *a correct distance* in the context of the theology of beauty signifies a position of dynamic equilibrium between the respect for the authentic artistic expression of each individual and the recognition that no human being can fully express beauty in its totality. Human judgement of the quality of art cannot, by definition, be accorded absolute weight; rather, it is to be exercised with all love, respect and tact.

It is vital to acknowledge the notion that beauty, when expressed authentically through art, possesses the capacity to “shape us, transform us, and lead us to God, insofar as it is grounded in truth” (Hauerwas, 2001, p. 93). Consequently, the inquiry into truth within the domain of art remains pertinent. In the pursuit of beauty in life, truth must not become a commodity in the hands of individuals seeking personal gain at the expense of society. From the perspective of the theology of beauty, truth remains an attribute of art that transcends its concrete forms and contents. Rynänen and Barragán (2023, p. 235) asserts that “values such as truth and goodness are not among the categories, we follow in life but represent values that define what it means to be human in truth”. The concept of truth, in this context, is not merely a matter of objective reality, but rather, a moral and spiritual imperative that shapes human responsibility (Pavlikova and Tavilla, 2023). Consequently, any artistic endeavour that aspires to authentically reflect the beauty of God must be grounded in truth, thereby resonating with the integrity of the individual who engages with it (Begbie, 2007, p. 305). The deliberate evasion of accountability to the revealed truth engenders a realm where the meaning and purpose of art are distorted. Kitsch, in this sense, is a tangible manifestation of this distortion. The concept of kitsch, as it pertains to the realm of art, is understood to be more closely associated with the moral and spiritual rhetoric that characterises the artist’s personality profile than with the conventional aesthetic criteria for art, which are often culturally contingent. Within the context of a culture dominated by solipsism, the presence of kitsch serves to exacerbate the perceived distance between humanity and the aesthetic beauty that is believed to be divinely bestowed upon creation. This phenomenon functions as an impediment to the formation of a genuine and profound connection between the individual and the beauty that lies within the created world, thereby hindering a deep engagement with the divine creation. This results in a state of self-alienation, both from oneself and from one’s designated mission.

Contemporary media and culture are increasingly influenced by economic and power parameters, resulting in a noticeable absence of love as an attribute of God's self-expression in creation. Given the assertion that "love remains the great norm even in art" (Rookmaker, 1994, p. 222), the distinguishing mark between true art and kitsch becomes, in the light of a theology of beauty, the degree to which the artist reduces and distorts the image of God's love. Instead of acting in accordance with what is right, beneficial to others, and brings goodness, justice, and righteousness to the weak and oppressed, the artist chooses to compromise, thereby undermining society on its path to excellence. Kitsch can be said to diminish the capacity for critical thinking in people and create a crowd thinking that distances people from the *image of God in us*, i.e., it falls short of its maxims. From a theological perspective, "true artists are called to capture transcendent beauty and to refuse to distort truth through superficial aesthetic forms" (Evdokimov, 1990, p. 201) in order to reflect the Koheletian horizon of eternity with their work and not to shy away from the contradictions of temporality.

Within a theological framework, kitsch can be conceptualised as a form of self-expression or reflection of the prevailing reality, characterised as "an aesthetic failure that purports beauty without genuine depth or truth" (Viladesau, 1999, p. 82). In certain circumstances, kitsch may not invariably exert a detrimental formative influence on individuals; indeed, in some cases, it may even result in "a deeper aesthetic and spiritual appreciation" (Brown, 2000, p. 120). This is predicated on the condition that people have unobstructed and adequate access to art. This positions the discourse on the relationship between art and kitsch within a perspectivist framework, thereby creating space for the acknowledgement of kitsch's legitimate role in contemporary art.

Verdon's perspective asserts that authentic artistic creations, crafted with reverence for creation and its divine origin, "transcend temporal limitations and enable us to experience the eternal dimension of beauty" (Verdon, 2010, p. 130). In this sense, art functions as a conduit, facilitating access to the eternal dimension of beauty and thus transcending the confines of temporal existence. This teleological dimension of art and beauty is predicated on the anticipation of the practical forms of human self-expression, manifesting as vitality and life itself. In this sense, the practical outputs of beauty and art are not limited to the realms of visual art, design and architecture, but extend to the domain of social relations, economics, and the collective well-being of a community. Interpretations of beauty within the Kohelet paradigm embody the universal concept of blessing, which, as outlined in the creation narrative, is intrinsically linked to the fulfilment of humanity's mandate in paradise. In this paradigm, beauty corresponds to the harmony of the entire ecosystem, in which the various subsystems function both independently and in mutuality.

9. Conclusions

The Koheletian paradigm of *eternity in the heart* presents a compelling concept that facilitates a thoughtful exploration of the themes of beauty, art and

kitsch. It acknowledges the inherent challenge of capturing beauty and the fundamental human desire to perceive, possess and enjoy it. Contemporary consumerist and narcissistic culture has narrowed the definition of beauty to the aesthetic domain, and art is increasingly becoming a commodity with economic value. This study offers a theological reflection on beauty in light of the creation story (Gen 1-4) as a contribution to the discourse regarding the meaning of art and its place in contemporary society. The Koheletian paradigm of *eternity in the heart of man* presents beauty as an interdisciplinary concept whose value and moral applications have practical implications and transcendent overlap.

The following findings are arrived at:

- Beauty is not an artistic construct but has its metaphysical grounding in the creation story.
- Beauty is not merely an artistic preference for human beings, but brings a challenge to understanding the world and one's place in it.
- Beauty is a timeless category that confronts man in his finitude and in a specific cultural context. The human condition is defined by the need to comprehend and embody beauty, not in the context of self-aggrandisement, but as a responsibility to one's own life and the ecosystem to which they are integral.
- The concept of beauty encompasses the dimensions of truth, goodness, justice, responsibility, and, most notably, love.
- It is through the aesthetic experience that humans are inspired to take responsibility for themselves and their fellow beings. The communal dimension of responsibility is an intrinsic quality of beauty and art, as outlined in the creation story.
- True art, in contrast to narcissistic culture, is believed to recognise the value of human imperfection, pain, disappointment, and various forms of failure and setback. Consequently, it is seen as liberating itself from the economic pressures of profit and success at any cost. It functions as a prophylactic factor in a society that is atomising and there are attempts to undermine the foundations of democracy.
- In the light of creation theology, the category of kitsch is not absolute but relative, and the criteria for judging it may change in society.
- Kitsch as an artistic category has its formative place in the consciousness of society, and its proper functioning helps to educate and develop a person's aesthetic and artistic sense.
- Kitsch should not become an instrument of stigmatization and ostracization of any person who, in his desire to seek forms of authentic expression of his perception of life and the world, has creatively arrived at its concretization.

The present study posits that the Koheletian paradigm provides a valid framework for interdisciplinary dialogue on the question of understanding kitsch and its place in contemporary society. This complex discourse

encompasses an analysis of kitsch from the particular to the universal and from the internal to the external, while resonating with moral realism in questions of ethics. Furthermore, it is posited that this paradigm has the capacity to serve as a counterbalance to the prevailing trend of absolute relativisation of values, while concomitantly delineating novel avenues for research in this domain.

Acknowledgment: This paper was supported by the EU NextGenerationEU through the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under the project: Contemporary worship theology in relation to narcissistic culture, No. 09IXX-03-V04-00654.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14769514