


# Paul Tillich and Photography

Bo-Myung Seo 

## ABSTRACT

Paul Tillich did not consider photography to be a form of art and, therefore, rarely talked about it. In this paper, I discuss what he said publicly about photography in relationship to Tillich's own understanding of art and in conversation with some of his contemporaries in Europe. This discussion will include reasons as to why he was reluctant to admit photography to be art and how his thoughts could have been changed. Premised upon the belief that Tillich's theological analysis of art is still relevant for contemporary theological discussions of art, this paper will try to situate Tillich's theology of art in the midst of the visual culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will further make two related claims: (1) there were moments of his intellectual career when Tillich could have reflected on photography in a deeper way; (2) the examination of Tillich's reluctance can be fruitful for future theological reflection on photography.

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Chicago Theological Seminary, USA.

\*Corresponding Author:  
e-mail: bseo@ctschicago.edu

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"I don't know what photography can be or what art is." (Tillich, 1987, p. 184)

Reading a few places in his writings where Tillich mentions photography is enough to come away feeling that he did not have a high regard for photography as a form of art. This explains why he never took it up as an object of theological or philosophical analysis. Nevertheless, thinking about Tillich in relationship to photography can be helpful in shedding more light on the cultural conditions of his theology, believing that they include the visual culture shaped by photography. This would involve invoking the names of his contemporaries—such as Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Lukacs—and art movements of his era, many of which Tillich dealt with in his lectures and writings. The hope here is premised on the belief that his theology of art is still important today in informing us of a basic method and model of how to relate theology to art. It is additionally hoped that any theological reflection on photography can benefit from an analysis of the larger context of its existence, irrespective of how negative it has been. As the above epigraph indicates, Tillich did leave some thoughts on photography and looking at them ought to hold some meaning to those who are interested in Tillich's theology, especially given what photography has meant both for art and the cultural life of the West in general since its invention in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

As for the possibility of a theological reflection on photography, some general observations can be offered. The invention of photography was an attempt to respond to theological questions that go back at least to the Middle Ages, making it possible for us to trace a theological history of photography—before and after the scientific feat that was the invention of photography. The medieval metaphysical speculations on light and the science of optics were always built upon aspirations for the divine. The Renaissance and early modern experiments with the camera obscura did not hide the theological desire to see the created world clearly through the light. The idea of permanently fixing the light image on a flat surface stemmed from a desire that was as much a matter of faith practice as it was of scientific experiment. This faith had its origin in the hope for supernatural events, practiced through many centuries as alchemy and magic. We can say photography was this faith in magic realized through science. Benjamin, in *Small History of Photography*, conveyed an early quasi-theological response to the invention when he quoted from a German newspaper article published soon after the pronouncement of its invention:



“Wanting to fix fleeting reflections,’ it opines, ‘this is not merely an impossible quest, as thorough German investigations have established, but the very wish to do is blasphemous. The human is created in the image of God and God’s image cannot be captured by any man-made machine. At best, the divine artist, rapt with heavenly inspiration, might dare to reproduce theandric features, in a moment of intense devotion, at the higher command of his genius, but without any mechanical aids.” (Benjamin, 2016, p. 62)

Benjamin knew such assessments miss the mark concerning the nature of photography, but theological connotations surrounding debates and discussions over photography in history are unmistakable. In fact, many of the earlier discussions around photography and stereoscope used the language of natural theology to make sense of their appearances. This German response aside, they were seen as devices that aided human senses to witness the creative goodness of God. They included the idea of a photograph confronting or revealing to us the presence of what is absent from us, which requires us to relate to the world in a different way. From this, we can move to how it is practiced by ordinary people as an act of faith in the world, to redeem the world of every day.

## 2. TILlich ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Let us then see what Tillich said publicly about photography. There are two lectures, both of which are collected in *Paul Tillich: On Arts and Architecture*. The first is his 1952 lecture, “Human Nature and Art,” and the other “Religious Dimensions in Contemporary Art” from 1965. I quote the relevant passages below:

“... an art is only art if it is more than an objective record. Photographers are artists only if they discover the artistic realm of reality through their lenses. This sometimes happens. The combination of eye, soul, and camera occasionally can transform the photographer into an artist.” (Tillich, 1987, p. 19)

“One can ask, is a photograph a work of art? It probably can be, but I will leave that an open question.” (Tillich, 1987, p. 173)

[The quote below is a lengthier treatment of photography by Tillich, which came as a response to an audience question during the 1965 lecture: “Dr. Tillich, would you elaborate on your views of photography, can it or can it not be art?”]

“First of all, we have already undermined any dogmatic definition of what art is and is not. So your question is doubly difficult to answer, because we know neither what photography can be nor what art is. Nevertheless, I will try to give an answer. First, I will start with the meaning of a portrait painted by an artist, or sculpted by an artist. A portrait is free of the specific moment, the here and now. The photographer cannot change the way in which you are sitting before him. He can photograph you from different angles, but he is always photographing the being who at the present moment is in a specific chair. The artist can do something more. He enters into the biography of the man whom he wants to paint, into the elements which are not present in this moment, but which have formed his face. He tries, so to speak, to penetrate to the essence of this individual, to that which he could be and to that which he has made of himself in the history of his life. This is the greatness of art. In a great portrait, there is something of the eternal essence which the photographer cannot capture, although he can provide us with a number of illuminating aspects of the person. In this sense, the photographer is an artist. But in respect to the attempt to condense a full character into one moment, one view, the photographer does not achieve what a great artist is capable of doing.” (Tillich, 1987, p. 184)

The implication of Tillich’s above comments about photography seems to be the following: The act of representing something through photography does not amount to being an artistic act because art is almost by definition an act of going beneath the surface of the given reality and finding the hidden dimension of depth that gives meaning to reality. It is, however, possible for photographers to become artists by achieving art through photographs, but they often remain at the level of recording the surface of reality. Although he says the achievement of art through photography does happen sometimes, Tillich did not mention any particular photographers. Curiosity remains as to which photographers might have fulfilled Tillich’s criteria for art. One is tempted to believe that Tillich might have thought similarly to Benjamin that such photographers as Octavio Hill and Eugene Atget can be named for such achievements. However, the more likely interpretation is to believe there was something inherent to photography that made it difficult to achieve the status of art.

In the second quotation above, Tillich does raise the question of the artistic status of photography. When Tillich says he wants to leave it an open question, an audience member afterwards asks the question again. Tillich’s response was short, but it was, to my knowledge, the lengthiest treatment of photography that he ever gave. That this is an open question can be constructed as Tillich’s own openness toward photography out of his awareness of the changes in the world of art in the mid-1960s, but it also speaks to his continuing doubts about its status as art until the very end of his life. This is to

be witnessed in his statement: “We know neither what photography can be nor what art is.” To make sense of it, we need to see it in the context of the lecture, which was to consider contemporary art from a theological perspective.

His comments on the contemporary arts of the 1960s were brief, but they give us a picture of Tillich’s future thoughts on art. If he believed there was no universally agreed definition of what art is anymore, then that could help him to conceive of a broader definition of art, which would include photography as a legitimate form of art. Instead, he is saying that whatever artistic status photography is granted will be pointless because we do not know what art is anymore. This inability to know what art is anymore is a simple but accurate description of what many were feeling about the world of art at the time. However, we do know what photography can be through the works of the artists discussed by Tillich, as many of them incorporated photography into their works.

From the perspective of photography, it seems more than a mere coincidence that Tillich was asked by an audience member in his last lecture on art to deal directly with the possibility of photography as art. The fact is many of the artists whose work he grouped together as belonging to “the most recent stage in the development of the visual arts” incorporated and appropriated photography in their works. Robert Rauschenberg’s use of photographs in his mixed media works was well known, not to mention the fact that he was known also as a photographer in his own right. Though not mentioned by Tillich, Andy Warhol is another artist who utilized photographs as source images for his art. In fact, it was typical of the artists of that generation to use and experiment with photographs in their work as the source material that lay bare the basic condition of social life. When Rauschenberg praised Walker Evans’ photographs for their “keen reverence for the ordinary,” he was capturing the spirit of the generation (Gefter, 2013). Tillich did not mention the photographic basis of their works, but he did highlight in the lecture how the artists—such as Robert Rauschenberg, Tom Wesselman, Jasper Jones, and Claes Oldenburg—all worked with everyday, ordinary objects in their works. It seems that, after listening to Tillich’s short but insightful analysis, the audience member was moved to ask a simple, logical question: What about photography? Can it be an art? The artistic status of photography back then was still a contested topic, one that, in my mind, was not settled until the 1980s.

Tillich describes what was then the most recent stage of the contemporary visual arts as “an artistic revolt against the disruption of the surface reality.” That the depiction of the surface of everyday life can amount to being art is a departure from his earlier conception of art formulated with Expressionism in mind. Earlier in Tillich’s thinking, Expressionism represented an artistic revolt against the glorification of the surface reality of life under capitalism. But, the new revolt was not a revolt against Expressionism. The turn to the everyday and ordinary in Roy Lichtenstein’s *The Engagement Ring* and George Segal’s *The Dinner Table* should not be understood as “a simple return to naturalism” since it assumes and acknowledges the achievements of Expressionism. Pop art represented, for example, “a radical, intentional return to the surface of things,” but this return was a return through the path of Expressionism (Tillich, 1987, p. 180). If Tillich meant to say that the surface in pop art was already a broken surface, revealing the depth beneath it, then it may go against its self-understanding around the notions of parody and irony. But that does not mean Tillich’s interpretation was misguided, as parody and irony can accommodate alienation, fissure, and even brokenness within what is real. That Tillich continued to see the later arts from the perspective of Expressionism—believing that “all specifically religious art is expressionistic” (Tillich, 1987, p. 190)—can be seen as a limitation and problem in Tillich’s conception of art. But it is no more limiting than his claim that all religious expressions are symbolic in nature. If Tillich’s basic assertion concerning Pop art is that the development of art assumes its own past, that there is no simple return to the past, and that art is to be defined by its reflection of its history, then it is one fine way to conceive of the history of art. His reliance on Expressionism needs to be acknowledged as what it is—as Tillich’s theological judgment about a cultural, artistic style that has existed throughout history, one that is best exemplified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by German Expressionism.

To come back to photography, Tillich’s lack of interest should be seen in connection with German Expressionism’s apathy toward photography—due to reasons that are like the ones we are attributing to Tillich. This may help us understand why the later art movements, in their counter-reaction, turned to photographic images in creating art that is attentive to the surface reality of everyday life. This, I understand, is due to the photograph’s special relationship to the everyday world as we know it, which is testified to, if not confirmed, by the sheer volume of photographs taken by everyday people throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a relationship that German Expressionism, or Abstract Expressionism, was not willing to admit to. In giving a negative answer to the audience question, Tillich might have been suggesting that the use of photographs as source material for, let us say, mixed-media artwork does not make it a photographic art or establish photography itself as a form of art. Nevertheless, it is the case that, several months before his death, Tillich encountered a situation where he had to offer a discussion of photography as he never did before; but ultimately, it was a missed encounter, one that did not

lead to his embracing photography as an art form that was at the forefront of the “revolt against the disruption of the surface reality” or, to use Siegfried Kracauer’s expression, suggested the possibility of the redemption of the physical, surface reality.

Tillich’s statement that contemporary art creates a “kind of metaphysical dizziness” is as good a description as any that I know concerning the mental impact the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern art had on the viewer. This means the dizziness is not due to Tillich’s inability to reconcile the difference between Expressionism and the contemporary art of the 1960s. Arthur Danto’s experience of Andy Warhol’s exhibit in 1964 could be described as such dizziness, which was dizzying enough to make him imagine the end of Western art. Tillich tied our inability to know what photography can be to our inability to know what art is anymore. Perhaps we can say that it was the absence of a metaphysical certainty about art that opened the door for photography to claim its status as art.

### 3. PHOTOGRAPHY IN TILlich’S TIME

Having discussed what little Tillich said about photography, let us examine the context of his time in relation to photography and see why it did not measure up to his criteria for what art is. First, it is not an exaggeration to say that Tillich’s culture of visual art was defined by the influence of photography. This influence stemmed from what photography demanded of us: a re-definition of what is real and a changed understanding of how we relate to the world. Its influence on traditional arts is often disputed, but the fact of its influence is not. If we try to force photography into the scheme of artistic styles Tillich often discussed, it will fall somewhere between naturalism and realism, which happen to be the styles of art in which the impact of photography is felt the most. For Tillich, both fell under the influence of bourgeois capitalism and lost their artistic edges, being unable to reach the depth beneath the surface and ending up accepting the finitude of things as given. In the above lecture, however, Tillich said photography did not measure up to being even a naturalistic art since naturalism involved “something more than photographic duplication” and assumed “a transformation created by the artist” (Tillich, 1987, p 175). With realism, the case is a little different. Tillich was critical of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, but the importance of its idea to anyone with a socialist commitment, such as Tillich himself in Germany, is beyond question. It was for this reason that he made distinctions within realism and even attempted a reconciliation between the Christian faith and realism through the idea of “belief-ful realism.” A thinker whose work can be compared to Tillich here is Georg Lukacs, a thinker well-known for his commitment to defending realism in art.

Lukacs was also critical of what he perceived to be the decline of realism since the 1840s, which happened to be roughly the decade of photography’s birth. Both Tillich and Lukacs reasoned similarly about how realism in art had fallen from its true mission, which is to say that it lost the ability to objectively reflect the socio-cultural reality of the time and to suggest a meaningful world beyond the finitude of the surface. Realism has both degenerated into naturalism and bourgeois realism, which merely copies and imitates reality in a way that could not reflect the reality of capitalism. Redeeming realism toward its proper duty was a matter of significance to Lukacs in a way comparable to the kind of hope Tillich had in “belief-ful realism.” For Lukacs, it meant recovering the social function of realism for mediation—in this case, to mediate the individual and the social for the sake of creating and maintaining an organic community; for Tillich, it meant opening up the individual human existence toward the infinite and transcendence. The decline of realism for Lukacs meant that the art of the novel in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century took a descriptive, pictorial, or even photographic turn in reproducing “petty details of everyday life” (Lukacs, 1964, p. 109). For Lukacs, this was what photography was good at—producing “superficial” appearances of reality; Tillich similarly thought that photographic pictures were merely copies of what is given.

Their perspectives diverged sharply when it came to Expressionism. Lukacs’ criticism of it is as famous as Tillich’s reliance upon it. Tillich saw Expressionism as a transformative art pointing toward the future beyond naturalism and as a style of art that expressed the contradictions and alienations generated within capitalism and attempted to get at the depth of reality by revealing its disrupted and distorted state. Lukacs criticized it for its subjectivism, “childish nonsense, generating unrealistic and irrational mythology that was susceptible to Fascist distortions (Lukacs, 1980, p. 106). For Tillich, it provided a critique of the romantic naturalism of the bourgeois class, but for Lukacs, its abstraction, its anti-realism merely diverted the attention from the “real battlefield of the class conflict” and eventually became an art form of imperialism (Lukacs, 1980, p. 96). Lukacs pronounced the demise of Expressionism in the 1930s, but Tillich defended its legacy to be valid even in the conceptual arts of the 1960s. Their differing positions on Expressionism can partly be explained through Tillich’s theological orientation and its absence in Lukacs. What Lukacs understood as Expressionism’s “irrational and mythological foundation” was, for Tillich, an attempt to re-orient reality toward its symbolic, deeper meanings.



Tillich's concern with realism had to do with its 19<sup>th</sup> century manifestations, adopting naturalism and idealism into its ethos, thereby depriving "reality of its symbolic power." What Expressionism did was to occasion a new realism, called the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), which he referred to as "belief-ful realism." It was a post-expressionistic realism that did not negate the spiritual meaning of the real while attending to the natural form of things. Welcoming this development, Tillich also referred to it as "a self-transcending realism." What Tillich wanted to pursue was a realism that does not cater to the capitalist vision of the world, which was what he charged the naturalistic and idealistic realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with. Both Tillich and Lukacs had a similar vision for realism, one that understands the world through the social bond that is achievable with a deeper sense of human reality. That, for Tillich, was not possible without considering the dimension of the belief in human knowledge and experience. This belief can also be construed as a form of trust in the possibility of self-transcendence and shared meaning in the world.

To further get a sense of photography's impact on the visual culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century West, we can briefly turn to Cezanne. Tillich famously declared that Cezanne's paintings of apples had more of a sacred quality than the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalistic paintings of Jesus. He understood Cezanne to have been a progenitor to the Expressionist artists he so admired. However, the creative innovation of Cezanne's paintings needs to be understood within the context of the visual culture that photography helped to create. Cezanne sought to resist the limits of what was hailed as photography's singular achievement, that of creating two-dimensional pictures with mechanical precision and a single-point perspective. However, overcoming this limitation was not an issue just for artists like Cezanne, as it was also a problem for photographers. We can debate about the nature of reality presented by a photograph, but the simple fact is that human eyes are not like the camera. Human perception depends on the combination of data brought separately by two eyes. The Stereoscope was one such optical device invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was meant to replicate this reality of human vision and became popular through the photographers who produced pictures for this device. To use Tillich's terms, the attempt to break the surface and reveal the depth by being truthful to how humans perceive things was Cezanne's concern, but this concern was also shared by the photographers of the time, who created stereoscopic photographs to offer images that supposedly matched human perception.

It is in Tillich's notion of picture that we find the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century visual culture on his theology. Although it does not directly refer to photographic pictures, Tillich's use of the language of pictures shows an internalization of this culture unlikely to be found in any other theologians of his time. If there ever was a pictorial turn in theology, then Tillich's work should be counted as its significant example—although he himself would be reticent to admit the possibility of such a turn. But again, he would have accomplished it without acknowledging the role of photography. As to how it worked for Tillich, one can only point to the frequent reference to the idea of "the picture of Jesus as the Christ" in *Systematic Theology*. The theological motivation behind this idea is to find a way out of the impasse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century quest for the historical Jesus and the positivism of historical criticism. To understand Jesus Christ as the picture is to say that Jesus of the gospels is not an object of historical investigation but a work of imagination requiring a symbolic interpretation. It is to say that what the Bible gives us is a visual, imaginative description of Jesus as Christ. For this to make sense, there must be an analogical relation between the picture and the reality shown in it. To elaborate a bit further, Tillich's picture is mediated by the symbol. We cannot get beyond symbolic mediation to access the truth of the picture of Jesus as Christ. In relationship to photography, he would say that those who try to discover the 'historical Jesus' in the Bible are looking for a photograph of Jesus, one that naturalistically imitates his surface traits. This understanding of the picture, in the end, contributes to Tillich's search for a new realism that is belief-ful and self-transcending. It can be called pictorial realism, one that defies the limits of naturalism and supernaturalism and understands the language of religion itself as symbolic. It is one that enabled Tillich to understand Jesus as the Christ, the central symbol of Christianity, as a picture, without taking away from the sense of reality this symbol is associated with.

We can trace Tillich's sense of ambiguity over photography back to his analysis of the tension between time and space. This tension was fundamentally important for his understanding of human history.<sup>1</sup> Tillich believed the triumph of time over space is exemplified in the rise of monotheism against paganism, but in the modern West, the spatial or the horizontal perspective has gained influence. The related terms such as soil, nation, conquest, colonization, and even totalitarianism in the modern West give witness to Tillich's concerns. Regarding photography, Tillich might have been concerned with the ways in which a photograph, in representing a particular space in time, gives us a spatial representation of a time broken down into an instant, and the time represented is only that of the past. He could have perceived that a photograph, having occupied the form of space, elevates the space over time and turns, à la paganism, the earth and things depicted as objects of adoration. In reproducing

<sup>1</sup> Here we can go back to his early idea of the myth of origin, contrasted with the quest for the unconditional, contained in *The Socialist Decision*. But this paragraph relies on his essay, "The Struggle Between Time and Space" in *Theology of Culture*.

the original, to use his expression in *The Socialist Decision*, it reduces time into a matter of space or puts time “under the domination of space” (Tillich, 1977, p. 17) and recycles the original without ever contributing something new. It asks us to romanticize the origin, the “whence of existence,” thus perpetuating the myth of the origin. If this is a possible account of what Tillich might have been thinking about photography, then Tillich’s triumph of space over time had to do with the rise of science and the mechanical view of the world. It was the belief that photography was an invention that reflected this view of the world that became a major source of objection to its availability as an art form. If we add this to Tillich’s understanding of art as breaking through the surface (space) of reality toward its depth (temporality), we get a consistent view of photography. Furthermore, I note that scenic or landscape photography was a dominant factor in the development of photographic practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that this came with the perception that photography deals with the spatial and factual rather than the depth and temporal dimension of reality.<sup>2</sup> So, with the invention of modern technology, photography could have represented the triumph of space over time. For Tillich, it was mysticism that represented such dominance of space: “Mysticism is the most subtle form of the predominance of space. It is the most subtle form of denying history, but in denying the meaning of history, it denies the meaning of time.” (Tillich, 1959, p. 34). One can argue that the photograph represents such a mystification, as the absent world of the past is made present in the two-dimensional space. It is not just looking at oneself in a photograph that has a hallucinatory effect, as suggested by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1981); Tillich’s myth of origin or the mystery of origin, which in this case refers to the origin of what appears in a photograph, is never separate from one’s experience of photography. That is, we do not have a good idea of what a photograph is.

Yet another way to read Tillich in this regard is through Heidegger’s understanding of the picture. In “The Age of the World-Picture,” Heidegger talked about human beings becoming subjects by turning the world into a picture (Heidegger, 2002). To picture something for Heidegger means to represent it through objectification, and to represent something in a picture means to engage in an active production. It is an act of seeing oneself in the picture—as a subject—and understanding the world as being there as an object for our use. This act for Heidegger ends up being an act of conquest—of the world. I am not suggesting that Heidegger’s criticism of the modern world applies to Tillich, except perhaps as a reminder that the pictorial turn—through which ideas and concepts are conceived of as pictures—is already a fact. This criticism manifests its severity when applied to photography. It is widely acknowledged that photography was a technological tool for colonialism; it objectified the world as being ready for the taking; it enabled the West to see itself in the picture as the subject. For Heidegger, the narrative of the photographic conquest reached its peak with pictures of the earth taken from the moon. The camera there became a witness not just to the conquest of one group of people by another but to the uprooting of humanity from the earth and technological domination on a planetary proportion. Just three years before Heidegger made that observation in the 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Tillich was asked to give his thoughts on space exploration and the human conquest of space (Heidegger, 1981; Tillich, 1963). This, for him, represented the latest iteration of the modern triumph of spatial and horizontal thinking over the vertical and transcendental dimensions of life. While recognizing the potential, even military, consequences of continuing space exploration, Tillich nevertheless believed that it should continue because it was a matter of discovering and expressing truth and knowledge. Heidegger and Tillich agree on the dangers of modern technology in space and the predominance of the horizontal, colonizing mindset. In my reading, photography for both thinkers functioned as a tool that makes the objectification of the world possible, as it uniquely elevates the taker of the photograph to the status of the subject. However, as to the status of a picture, Tillich sought the time and depth dimension in a picture and saw in its essence the creative power of human imagination, whereas Heidegger understood the essence of a picture as the human power of domination.

To return to Tillich’s understanding of a picture, if he thought that the world of the New Testament, and Jesus Christ in particular, existed as a picture, would it be an act of including himself in the picture, having a stake in it, seeing himself as having power over it, to interpret and to imagine? Would it also be an act of objectification through which one becomes a subject? What Heidegger is saying about the act of representation being an act of production seems clear; the fact that Tillich does not give a formal account of what a picture is might be an indication that he assumes a pictorial account of the world to be part of the cultural ethos in which he worked.

Tillich often spoke about how he discovered art in a new way in the trenches of the war, looking through the magazines containing images of art and visiting museums while on furloughs. I wish to make two observations about this biographical detail. First, what he saw in the magazines were black-and-white photographic reproductions of famous artworks. In other words, Tillich’s experience of art during the war years was mechanically mediated through the photographic process. Second, the

<sup>2</sup> There were two kinds of landscape photography that were particularly popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, which helped to cement the reputation of photography as a spatial practice: the pictures of the holy land and wars, particularly the American Civil War.

revelatory and ecstatic encounter with the painting of Sandro Botticelli, which was so impactful to Tillich's sense of art, took place in a Berlin Museum. The point of noting the first is to simply indicate that the public dissemination of paintings in black and white photographs was already widely practiced at the time, enough to reach a soldier serving on the frontlines of war. Tillich acknowledged that they were "cheap reproductions," but nevertheless, he collected "as many as possible" and looked at them with a candle and lantern light (Tillich, 1987, p. 12). Then, what produced the desire for the original in Tillich was the reproduction of art. It did not seem to have entered his mind to reflect on the implication of this fact. Instead, his experience of art during the war, which we can even suggest as having been photographic, led him to the museums to see the original paintings. That he described the encounter with Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels* as a revelatory ecstasy, disclosing a new "level of reality" that had been previously closed, deserves to be mentioned in relationship to the first observation. While there is no doubt that his account of the experience was genuine, it is also the case that he was looking at a religious painting, to use Walter Benjamin's expressions, that was displaced from its intended space or its "fabric of tradition," losing its uniqueness as well as its ritual and cult values and retaining only its exhibition value.

Both observations suggest a conversation between Tillich and Benjamin. Tillich was not concerned about the disappearance of the aura either in the photographic reproduction or in the displaced religious art in the museum. This is possibly related to his notion of the Protestant principle, through which we can say the revelatory power of art does not come from its presence within a religious tradition but from its being able to undergo and withstand the criticism or judgment of its self-sufficiency and its claim to be more than the limit of its finitude. In this reading, the setting of the wall of a secular museum can be a suitable location for such a critical viewing. He variously described his experience of Botticelli's painting with expressions such as: "moment of ecstasy," "approaching ecstasy," "revelatory ecstasy," [being] "shaken," and "Beauty itself." If we can claim such expressions seem to be comparable to how we might describe the experience of aura, Tillich would qualify it by saying that such encounters are possible even with objects that are not religious in content. Again, staking his claim on the Protestant principle, Tillich would deny that the cult value of religious artworks has primacy over the exhibition value and that the exhibition value is not just a form of exchange value nurtured in capitalism. That is, he would not have believed that religious artworks depended on their ritualistic function for their meaning since the revelatory power of art stems from its refusal to be limited by its surface role. For this reason, he would not have been bothered by an artwork sustaining its meaning primarily through the exhibition value. However, in Benjamin's account, it was the photographic image that showed the transition from the cult value to the exhibition value as the primary vehicle of meaning can be successfully completed. What makes this transition possible, for Tillich, would be the expressive power of art, which he denied is present in photographic reproduction. Here is a relevant statement from Benjamin: "The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 224). Tillich's response would be to say that the 'criterion of authenticity' does not change and then to suggest the distinctions between the form and the content and among the styles of art as the way to establish or ascertain that criterion. If there is indeed such a thing as the aura, Tillich would object to the idea that it can wither away, as the fact of aura depends not on the tradition but on the artist. It is partly the role of a theologian to read the substantive and symbolic meanings of art existentially in his own times. For Tillich, the cult value of art is not replaced by a political one; the truth value of art is to be found in its deeper, existential meaning that is represented symbolically in art. His judgment is that, in his time, this function was best fulfilled by Expressionism. In addition, reproducibility, rather than contributing to the decline of the aura, would add value and desirability to the original. Tillich's theory of religious socialism outlined in *The Socialist Decision* presented the issues theologically, and he does not seem to be concerned about socialism's implication for the future of art as a mass cultural movement. Coming to the US in 1933, Tillich's concern was with the state of the art under capitalism and not its status under fascism. In my reading, Tillich offered a way to cope with capitalism through an existentialist interpretation of art.

#### 4. CONVERSATIONS WITH KRACAUER AND ADORNO

Among Tillich's contemporaries in Germany, it was Siegfried Kracauer who maintained a life-long intellectual interest in photography.<sup>3</sup> Tillich and Kracauer shared much in common in their understandings of art and the need for cultural intervention in philosophy and, in the case of Tillich, in theology. In the case of photography, I believe Kracauer would have been sympathetic to Tillich's

<sup>3</sup> Kracauer was a fellow citizen of Frankfurt, Germany in the 1930s and a close friend of Adorno. His essays on photography and cultural issues published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* were widely read. Tillich and Kracauer were separated by one year in birth; they both left Frankfurt in 1933 and settled in New York; both died in the same year, 1966.

reservation about it, but he also went beyond it and affirmed photography's role in re-directing the path of art. If Tillich's reservation about photography, as I suggested, is related to the spatial dimension of the photographic picture, Kracauer could lend his support with his view that the photograph flattens history into space and "the spatial appearance of [its] object [becomes] its meaning" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 52). Like Tillich, Kracauer believed that for an artwork to be art, it had to "negate the likeness achieved by photography" and destroy the surface coherence of photography. As opposed to a painting, a photograph is unable to contain history, which is flattened into space. This is what Tillich meant when he said the photographer cannot enter the subject's biography. Tillich then would agree with Kracauer's statement: "In order for history to present itself, the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed." If this is to be achieved in art, then it becomes another way of saying that photography cannot be art.

Their views on art in the 1920s centered around the preference for German Expressionism and its attempt, for example, with lines and shapes, to shatter the surface reality of ordinary experience and to reveal the depth hidden beneath it. While both knew that its influence was ending in the 1920s, Tillich maintained his faith in Expressionism until the end by understanding it in terms of "expressionism," a style of art whose essence can be found throughout history. Kracauer's openness to photography is connected to his assessment of the status of surface reality. Just because it is a mere surface, it does not mean that it is easily visible to us or comes into our consciousness. He wrote in 1927 that it is this surface that can "provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things," and photography is privileged to redeem the physical dimension of reality and makes it visible to us (Kracauer, 1995, p. 75). This was a transition Tillich was not willing to undergo. Kracauer's intuition later developed into the idea that a photograph can redeem the physical dimension of reality, make it visible to us, and let us discover it. It means photography is now given a revelatory power of making visible what was not visible or hidden to us. For the sake of this paper, what interests us is why the surface reality or, let us say, the everyday reality of the world became invisible to us in modernity. Kracauer accused ideology and science of being the culprits. By ideology, he had in mind the Marxist understanding of that which manufactures false consciousness in capitalism; the accusation against the dominance of science was that it created a habit of abstract thinking that makes the physical reality of the everyday world elusive and invisible. What photography did was lower the barrier that separated us from our everyday material reality and reveal the world for us to see? Whereas the function of art is "not to reflect reality but to bear out a vision of it," it is precisely the function of photography to reflect it without overwhelming it and make it visible to the viewer (Kracauer, 1960, p. 301). Photography is now given a redemptive role, redeeming the world of surface reality from the state of dormancy and non-existence to becoming an object of meaning and experience. The redemptive role of photography suggests that its nature is now historical, and its time is no longer spatialized but gains depth. Photography then rejects the "idealistic conception of the world" and offers a realism that is faithful to the material conditions of human life. Though it is unlike the kinds of Tillich rejected, it is doubtful if he would have welcomed a realism that relies on the recording of reality. Kracauer understood what Tillich phrased as the "artistic revolt against the disruption of the surface reality" as the primary function of photography.

That photography can be a tool for the 'redemption of physical reality,' as envisioned by Siegfried Kracauer, is somehow not outside the realm of possibility for Tillich's theology. The theological motif behind Kracauer's description of photography and Tillich's putative reasons for believing that photography cannot offer a revelatory, redemptive encounter may seem contradictory, but they are products of the same cultural dilemma they inherited. What Tillich meant by the 'surface' can be attributed to the 'physical' or visible in Kracauer. Whether it was the surface or the physical, it showed the damaged conditions of the world under capitalism. Tillich's way of dealing with it was to get to the deeper dimension of meaning beneath the surface, while Kracauer's way was to redeem it through an act of making it visible. It may be possible to impute to Kracauer, against Tillich, the view that the damaged surface contains the trace of the spirit and that the redemption of the spiritual meaning is only possible by rendering visible the damaged, physical world. This redemptive work is done in photography by making the viewers discover their everyday world in its damaged state. Tillich, on the other hand, would prefer to read the damaged surface symbolically as suggesting a deeper, hidden meaning through which the truth of the damaged world can be revealed. For Kracauer, photography captures the fragmentation of the world, and it enables the masses to participate in this experience. It lets us "explore [the] texture of everyday life . . . They virtually make the world our home" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 304). Also, the recognition that photographs make us relate differently to the world than the more traditional forms of art.

Any consideration of the cultural and intellectual contexts of Tillich's thought is incomplete in my view without taking account of how Adorno can be brought into the conversation or how he, at times, seems to finish Tillich's thoughts. Without the burden of having to construct a theological system,



Adorno's cultural criticism was free to explore the implications of capitalism for cultural life in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century West. The focus of his criticism was the suspicion that its practice becomes an operation of the culture industry for mass deception. Adorno could have been echoing Tillich's thoughts concerning the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalism and realism under the influence of the bourgeois class when he criticized Benjamin for lacking a distinction between "a conception of art that is free of ideology to its core and the misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination." I can furthermore imagine Tillich siding with Adorno in criticizing Benjamin's theory of photography for tending toward a "copyrealism" and eventually to "camera rationalism." What is meant by these terms is that the photograph can be a copy of reality, but it cannot be a thought of this reality. The photographic claim to reality is, for Adorno, a form of pseudo-realism or at least a naïve realism, one that caters to the culture industry's ideological sleight of hand. Adorno says this and more in the following sentences:

"Ideology becomes the emphatic and systematic proclamation of what is. Through its inherent tendency to adopt the tone of the factual report, the culture industry makes itself the irrefutable prophet of the existing order. With consummate skill, it maneuvers between the crags of demonstrable misinformation and obvious truth by faithfully duplicating appearances, the density of which blocks insight. Thus, the omnipresent and impenetrable world of appearances is set up as the ideal. Ideology is split between the photographing of brute existence and the blatant lie about its meaning, a lie which is not articulated directly but drummed in by suggestion. The mere cynical reiteration of the real is enough to demonstrate its divinity. Such photological proof may not be stringent, but it is overwhelming. Anyone who continues to doubt in the face of the power of monotony is a fool." (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 118)

The world of appearances or surfaces being omnipresent and impenetrable is a thought that takes Tillich's idea of the shattering of the surface into the context of America's media capitalism. Tillich would have agreed that the omnipresent photographic duplication of the appearance of the physical reality is an instance of idealized naturalism. This idealization or "idolization of the existing order" would be an instance of ideology at work for Adorno and an instance of what Tillich used to call the self-sufficient finitude of the bourgeois class. The mechanical, perspectival rationalism of photography means that the world is depicted as being self-sufficient, a world unto itself. For both, photography does nothing but duplicate appearances. But in the world of the capitalist culture industry, the claim to do so neutrally is already to disseminate misinformation and distortion, as photography elevates the appearances as facts, as the existence itself and as "the irrefutable prophet of the existing order" (Horkheimer & Adorno, p. 118). As an example of self-sufficiency and idolization of the existing order, photography demands no reflection, imagination, or discernment. Leaving aside any speculation about further fruitful dialogue between the two, Tillich and Adorno would not have extended the redemptive and revelatory function of art to photography.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Taking a photograph has always involved a certain degree of faith and even hope—that one's sense and imagination measure up to what the camera sees. This is not necessarily religious, but what inspires one's imagination to take a photograph of something can often be described in terms that are religious. It could be a sense of beauty, grace, wonder, gratitude, lament, or grief. People have always expressed their faith through photography, but there have not been enough attempts to make sense of the entire process theologically. Christianity has had a conflictual relationship with art from the beginning. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even after modern art was given competent theological interpretations by theologians—Tillich and those who followed in his footsteps—the theological dimension of photography is either simply assumed to be true and obvious or glossed over. In discussing Tillich's reservations about photography, I tried to bring his thoughts into conversation with his contemporaries and the context of his time, all in anticipation of future works in theological reflection on photography. This seemed appropriate for someone like me, whose theological perspective on arts is influenced by Tillich's work.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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