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A Parallax View on Eastern Orthodox Aesthetics: From the Ethos of Liturgical Art to Dionysis Savvopoulos' Aesthetic Eschatology

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Abstract

This study explores Eastern Orthodox aesthetics through a parallax lens, situating it at the intersection of theology, anthropology, and cultural practice to move beyond the icon-centric discourse. It examines how Orthodox aesthetics, rooted in the theological vision of beauty as divine disclosure, manifests in liturgical ethos, material culture, and secular artistic expression. The analysis draws on Christos Yannaras' ethos of liturgical art, Chrysostomos Stamoulis' exercise in philokalic aesthetics, and Timothy Carroll's ethnographic material ecology of Orthodox Christianity, revealing beauty as an ontological event of communion and transformation. A parallax shift to Dionysis Savvopoulos' lyrics uncovers an aesthetic eschatology, or an aesthetics of eschatology, where Orthodox themes of resurrection and festivity permeate non-ecclesial Greek culture. Employing a comparative, interdisciplinary methodology, the study integrates theological reflection, ethnographic insights, and cultural analysis. It concludes that Orthodox aesthetics is a dynamic field where beauty, truth, and eschatological hope converge, extending beyond the sanctuary into everyday practices and popular art—"incarnated" in material reality. This transdisciplinary approach reconfigures Orthodox aesthetics as a theological anthropology, offering fresh perspectives on its role in contemporary discourse and its diffusion into the public sphere, while advocating for material culture as a critical lens for future exploration.

Keywords: Orthodox aesthetics; material culture; eschatology; Dionysis Savvopoulos; Christos Yannaras; Timothy Carroll; liturgical art; philokalia; Greek culture; theological anthropology

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1. Introduction

The discourse on Eastern Orthodox aesthetics occupies an intriguing position at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and cultural practice. It is at once ancient and contemporary, grounded in the patristic vision of the Church Fathers and yet perpetually renewed in the lived experience of Orthodox liturgy, art, and music. At least in theory, Orthodox aesthetics resists the reduction in beauty to mere subjective sentiment or autonomous artistic achievement. Rather, it proceeds from a profoundly theological premise: that beauty discloses and participates in divine glory, drawing the beholder into the eschatological horizon of communion with God. To speak of Orthodox aesthetics is, therefore, never to speak of art alone, but of a theological anthropology in which humanity, through the senses, is transfigured in the presence of the divine.

The scholarly literature has approached this field along two principal trajectories. On the one hand, one may move from theology towards aesthetics, articulating how theological commitments (whether apophatic, eucharistic, or eschatological) generate a particular aesthetic ethos. This is the path trodden by figures such as Vladimir Lossky (1997), Pavel Florensky (indicatively, Florensky 2000), and Leonid Ouspensky (Ouspensky 1992; Ouspensky and Lossky 1983), for whom the icon is "theology in colour" and liturgy the embodiment of divine beauty. To these, one may add Sergei Bulgakov, for whom aesthetics is tied to Sophiology, with Divine Wisdom as beauty, and art revealing the transfigured cosmos; Georges Florovsky who, albeit less focused on aesthetics per se, situates patristic theology as a liturgical–aesthetic experience; Alexander Schmemann, for whom beauty is understood liturgically: the world is revealed as sacrament and doxology; and John Meyendorff's discussions of aesthetics in relation to Byzantine theology, especially Palamism, where divine light and beauty are central.

On the other hand, one may begin from artistic or cultural practice (e.g., icon painting, liturgical chant, architectural space, or indeed modern artistic production which might not be nominally religious or Orthodox, but *culturally* very much so) and ask how these phenomena invite or even demand theological reflection. This latter approach, increasingly taken up in recent anthropological and cultural studies, places Orthodox material culture at the centre of the enquiry and highlights the performative, sensory, and communal character of Orthodox beauty. It should be noted that there are also particularly noteworthy contributions bridging the two categories: for example, in our era, one may point to the works on Orthodox aesthetics by artist, theologian, and scholar Davor Džalto (2008, 2014, 2019, 2023).

Frequently, though not exclusively, discussion on Orthodox aesthetics tends to revolve primarily around the icon and its theology, the icon being treated as something akin to an "Orthodox trademark" (which, to a considerable extent, it indeed is, hence we see in the relatively recent proliferation of icons in many Catholic and Anglican churches a preference for retaining the style of Byzantine iconography rather than re-imagining the icon in a non-Byzantine, or non-Orthodox, way). Among the patristic sources usually invoked, John Damascene (on the theology of the icon) and Gregory Palamas (on the capacity of bodily eyes to see the divine, uncreated light) emerge as towering figures—yet Maximus the Confessor is also increasingly being examined in this context, not only for his *logoi* doctrine that bridges creation with the uncreated, but also for his ecclesiological vision wherein the Church herself is understood as an icon of the cosmos transfigured. This iconic ontology, where liturgy recapitulates creation and mediates divine glory, has had significant resonance in modern Orthodox studies of aesthetics, particularly in connecting ecclesial beauty with eschatological participation. Beyond icons, other patristic sources include Basil the Great (speaking of beauty as a reflection of divine order, with the *Hexaemeron* highlighting creation's beauty), Gregory of Nyssa (where beauty is an expression of the infinite movement, or *epektasis*, toward God), and the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, which introduces the idea of God as "the Beautiful" (*to kalon*), radiating through creation.

This field, of studying Orthodox aesthetics with the icon and its theology occupying centre stage, is dynamic rather than static; e.g., Maximos Constas' *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Constas 2014) offers a considerably innovative synthesis rooted in patristics and art history, while other recent studies such as Cornelia A. Tsakiridou's (2013, 2024) demonstrate that the field is anything but exhausted. The discussion is enriched by contributions comparing aesthetics in Eastern and Western Christianity, from the icon to architecture and from poetry to phenomenology, such as van den Bercken and Sutton's (2005) edited collection, and Bychkov's (2010) exploration of theological aesthetics from classical philosophy and late antiquity to, or via, Balthasar. Moreover, I

would consider it simply unthinkable not to mention David Bentley Hart's magisterial *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Hart 2005) in a discussion of Orthodox aesthetics, even if this masterful book, authored by an Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher, is neither presented as specifically Orthodox nor does it focus on *Orthodox* aesthetics per se—but on beauty and theology *lato sensu*. The book reasserts beauty as a transcendental attribute of being, intrinsically tied to God's infinite, self-giving love within the Trinity, and revealed through Christ's kenotic beauty on the cross. Engaging postmodern thinkers like Nietzsche and Lyotard, Hart counters their suspicion of beauty with a Christian aesthetic that is non-violent, participatory, and eschatological, portraying creation's beauty as a reflection of divine glory that draws humanity towards communion with God. Through its liturgical and apologetic dimensions, the work reframes beauty as a persuasive, non-coercive revelation of truth, bridging patristic theology with contemporary philosophy, and establishing a landmark contribution to understanding beauty's role in divine and human encounter.

In this paper, I do not intend to focus on icons or architecture per se. I propose to explore Orthodox aesthetics through a *parallax* lens: a double movement that first considers the ethos of ecclesial art and the theological elaborations it has inspired, before turning towards artistic practices that exceed the traditional liturgical canon yet remain inflected by the Orthodox imagination—utilising the study of Orthodox material culture as a bridge. The phrase "parallax view" (which has been further popularised by Žižek 2006) can mean a host of things depending on the context, but at its core it refers to how something looks different when observed from different positions or perspectives. In science and astronomy, for instance, parallax is the apparent shift in the position of an object when you view it from two different places; in philosophy, the social sciences, and literature, "parallax view" is sometimes used metaphorically to mean that the same thing can look completely different depending on your standpoint or frame of reference; in short, a "parallax view" means a perspective where the same object, event, or idea shifts appearance depending on the observer's position. In the case of the present paper, the context of which is primarily yet not exclusively Greek, I propose to begin by examining selected theologians' perspectives on Orthodox aesthetics, proceed to underscore the centrality of material culture in discussing said aesthetics, and end up with a parallax view proper: instead of focusing on theological *discourse* on Orthodox aesthetics or on Orthodox religious *art*, I shall focus on how theological themes pertaining to eschatology emerge in verses by a highly popular and influential Greek songwriter and singer, Dionysis Savvopoulos (b. 1944). Savvopoulos has been deeply influenced by Orthodox theology and tradition, yet his songs and verses are anything but *religious*; in examining their implicit eschatological *theology*, the extent to which Greek contemporary culture is inflected by the Orthodox imagination is hinted at—revealing another Orthodox aesthetics, a *cultural* Orthodox aesthetics (in the sense of "culturally Orthodox"). In this context, the primary research questions of this paper are: beyond a discussion focused predominantly on the icon, what *else* can be said of Orthodoxy's aesthetics *today*? May we consider the social–scientific field of material culture as a prime venue for further exploring Orthodox aesthetics? And, last but not least, what does it mean for an artist—in our case, Savvopoulos—to exhibit an Orthodox theological aesthetics in non-religious, non-ecclesial, and non-ritual settings?

As such, this discussion begins with Christos Yannaras' (1935–2024) influential account of the *ethos* of liturgical art, as well as with Chrysostomos A. Stamoulis' (1964–2025) engagement with culturally prevalent elements of Orthodox aesthetics. I then expand the inquiry into the domain of Orthodox material culture more broadly, drawing on the work of Timothy Carroll to illustrate how liturgical and/or everyday objects and ritual artefacts embody an Orthodox aesthetic sensibility. Finally, adopting a parallax shift, I examine the

eschatological dimensions of aesthetic expression in the lyrics of Dionysis Savvopoulos, suggesting that his work exemplifies a contemporary Orthodox aesthetic eschatology in the public square rather than inside the church building: one that testifies, through artistic practice, to the anticipation of the Kingdom—if we are to wax theological.

This parallax view allows us to hold together two complementary yet distinct modes of inquiry: from theology to aesthetics, and from aesthetic practice to theology, with a focus on the quotidian. In so doing, it seeks to demonstrate that Orthodox aesthetics is neither a marginal curiosity of Byzantine studies nor a devotional sideline to "serious" theology, but rather a locus in which questions of truth, beauty, and eschatological hope converge with rare intensity.

Research Questions and Methodological Approach

This paper proceeds from three interrelated research questions. First, how might Orthodox aesthetics be articulated beyond its familiar locus in the theology of the icon, and what resources do contemporary Orthodox theologians provide in this regard? Second, in what ways does the study of Orthodox material culture, understood anthropologically as a material ecology, reconfigure theological accounts of beauty, embodiment, and eschatology, i.e., reconfigure discourses on Orthodox aesthetics? Third, to what extent can Orthodox aesthetics be discerned in non-ecclesial cultural production, and what does this reveal about the diffusion of Orthodox imagination into the public sphere?

Methodologically, this paper adopts what I call a "parallax view." This entails a double (indeed, triple) movement: from theology to aesthetics, from aesthetic practice to theology, and from ecclesial forms to secular cultural production. By juxtaposing patristic and modern theological reflections (Yannaras, Stamoulis), ethnographic accounts of Orthodox material culture (Carroll), and the cultural output of Dionysis Savvopoulos, the paper tests the hypothesis that Orthodox aesthetics cannot be confined to the sanctuary but resonates across theological, anthropological, and artistic registers. The approach is therefore comparative, interdisciplinary, and exploratory: not a systematisation of Orthodox aesthetics, but a mapping of its multiple instantiations in contemporary discourse and practice. Furthermore, an important part of the argument articulated here consists of the necessity of examining Orthodox aesthetics *also through* material culture and social–scientific methodologies such as those provided by anthropological ethnography, rather than Orthodox aesthetics being limited to a discourse on, and of, theory and art, given the limitations that this would entail as juxtaposed to the possibilities opened by the route proposed here.

2. The Ethos of Liturgical Art—And a "Philokalic" Aesthetics

2.1. On Christos Yannaras' Ethos of Aesthetics and Freedom of Aesthetics

In the context of the thematic sequence of this paper as described above, the present section looks at two Greek theologians who have contributed to the question of Orthodox aesthetics, before turning to Orthodox aesthetics as examined via material culture.

The first among them is Christos Yannaras (1935–2024), who stands as one of the most important Orthodox thinkers of the modern era, a figure whose influence extends well beyond the confines of theology into philosophy, cultural critique, and public discourse. Educated in Athens, Bonn, and Paris, he has devoted his career to rearticulating the patristic inheritance in conversation with contemporary European thought, from Heidegger and Kierkegaard to modern political philosophy. For many within and beyond the Orthodox world, he has become a decisive voice in recovering the existential and personalist dimensions of Christian faith, challenging the reduction in theology to abstract doctrine or moralism (Petrá 2015; Mitralexis 2018; Andreopoulos and Harper 2018). At the heart of

his project lies a radical claim: that truth is not an impersonal proposition, but a *mode of existence*; personal, relational, and above all ecclesial.

It is within this framework that Yannaras' reflections on aesthetics, particularly in the chapter entitled "The Ethos of Liturgical Art" from his seminal *The Freedom of Morality* (Yannaras 1984, pp. 231–64), must be read. For Yannaras, aesthetics is never a marginal concern, an ornamental addition to theology or morality. Rather, beauty belongs to the very essence of ecclesial life, manifesting in visible and tangible form the communion that constitutes the Church. Beauty, in his vision, is a mode of truth: a way in which the reality of existence transfigured by love is disclosed to perception and made present to the senses.

Here, aesthetics emerges not as an autonomous sphere of human expression, detached from truth or morality, but as an indispensable dimension of ecclesial life. Beauty, in Yannaras' vision, is not reducible to taste or decoration, but a *mode* of truth, a way in which the communion of persons with God and with one another is both disclosed and enacted. To speak of aesthetics in the Orthodox tradition, therefore, is already to speak of ethos, for the two are inseparably interwoven. Beauty does not embellish ecclesial existence from the outside; it belongs intrinsically to its very mode of being.

What is less immediately apparent in schematic summaries, but emerges forcefully in the chapter itself, is Yannaras' sustained engagement with the ethos of modern technology. For him, the problem of aesthetics cannot be disentangled from the broader question of how human beings relate to the material world. The technological mediation of modern life has severed man from his immediate, artisanal relationship with matter, replacing skill and reverence with mechanised production and consumerist alienation. Bread and wine no longer embody the annual rhythm of sowing and harvest, but appear as hygienically packaged commodities on the supermarket shelf. This alienation, Yannaras insists, deprives the Eucharist of its ontological content, reducing it to a mere outlet for religious emotion. Liturgical art, by contrast, discloses an alternative ethos: the transformation of matter into communion, the rediscovery of the world as a personal event rather than an impersonal mechanism.

Integral to this vision is what Yannaras calls the "asceticism of art" and the "art of ascesis." Worship is not merely symbolic; it is an embodied discipline that trains perception and desire, orienting human creativity towards participation in incorruptible life. The liturgical arts (e.g., architecture, iconography, hymnography) bear witness to the conviction that salvation is not an abstraction of intellect or morality but the transfiguration of material existence. This resonates with Maximus the Confessor's *logoi* doctrine, where created things participate in Christ the *Logos* who recapitulates in Himself all the uncreated *logoi* of beings, rendering the Church an aesthetic icon of cosmic unity and liturgical beauty a pathway to deification. Against the reductionism of heresy, which either moralises Christ as an ethical paradigm or abstracts Him into disincarnate divinity, according to Yannaras the Church insists upon the cosmic scope of the Incarnation: the salvation of the body and of material creation itself. Hence, liturgical art is inseparable from ascetic practice, for both manifest the same logic of transformation: the refusal of arbitrary subjectivity, the respect for the "reasons" (*logoi*), or rather *relationality*, of created things, and their elevation into communion.

The Orthodox icon provides Yannaras with the most compelling paradigm of this understanding. Far removed from naturalistic mimesis, the icon does not seek to replicate the empirical features of the visible world, nor to indulge the viewer's sentimentality. Its stylised physiognomy, inverse perspective, and luminous palette all bear witness to another order of reality: the world transfigured in Christ. The icon discloses not the individual subjectivity of an artist, but the ecclesial vision of the eschaton; creation's consummation in communion with God. In this sense, the icon is a theological event as much

as an aesthetic one, manifesting an ontology grounded in (yet not exhausted to) freedom and relation.

Yannaras sets this vision in sharp relief against the trajectory of Western aesthetics, particularly from the Renaissance onwards; this gesture is repeated in *The Schism in Philosophy* (chapter titled 'Beauty,' Yannaras 2015, pp. 317–37; and also passim in Yannaras 2006). There, in Yannaras' juxtaposition, the turn towards naturalism and subjectivism engendered an art that became increasingly preoccupied with the individual gaze, whether in the guise of empirical imitation or of expressive self-assertion. Such tendencies, for Yannaras, betray a loss of the liturgical dimension of beauty. Art in this register ceases to be the shared witness of the ecclesia to the transfigured cosmos, and risks devolving into aestheticism: an autonomous sphere governed by private taste or technical virtuosity. By contrast, Orthodox liturgical art retains a fundamentally communal and eschatological orientation, resisting both the arbitrariness of innovation and the rigidity of archaism. Its ethos is fidelity to truth: beauty as participation in the divine life.

It is in his extended reflections on architecture (Yannaras 1984, pp. 237–52) that Yannaras most vividly articulates this ontology of beauty. By contrasting ancient Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, and Byzantine churches, he shows how divergent metaphysical commitments are inscribed in stone. Where Greek architecture enacts cosmic harmony through fixed proportions, and Gothic architecture subjugates matter to rationalistic systematisation, Byzantine building discloses an altogether different ethos. Here, the material is neither coerced nor idealised but encountered with respect, love, and ascetic discipline. Asymmetry, irregularity, and the human scale reveal an architecture that is profoundly personal, embodying the flesh of the Word and the mode of ecclesial communion. Light itself becomes a constitutive element of the building, diffused through domes and windows to form what Yannaras strikingly calls an architecture of light. In this way, Byzantine churches are not inert containers for worship but eucharistic events in themselves: dynamic bodies uniting heaven and earth, personal distinctiveness and communal life, matter and spirit.

It must be underscored, however, that Yannaras himself is cautious not to present these architectural reflections as an exhaustive or definitive interpretation of Byzantine space. His comparative gestures are meant to highlight theological orientations inscribed in material form rather than to provide a systematic analysis of Byzantine architecture. Indeed, he devotes comparatively greater attention to critiquing Western trajectories than to a close architectural exegesis of the Byzantine tradition; to read him otherwise would be to risk attributing to him claims of comprehensiveness that he himself does not make. In this study, therefore, Yannaras' reflections are invoked not as architectural conclusions but as a heuristic perspective on the theological ethos that informs Orthodox aesthetics, and *material* Orthodox aesthetics in particular. Granted, Yannaras' sweeping statements here may raise suspicions of an apologetic and/or confessional discourse; yet faring beyond possible accusations of an apologetic hyperbole characteristic of the author's era, what is truly at stake for Yannaras is the recognition that beauty is an ontological event, not an aesthetic luxury. To encounter beauty in the liturgical life of the Church is to be drawn into communion, to glimpse the transfigured order of being which the Eucharist realises and the icon depicts. The aesthetic thus bears a soteriological function: it shapes perception, forms desire, and opens the human person to the freedom of divine love. If morality, for Yannaras, is not a codified system of rules but the existential freedom of love, so too liturgical aesthetics is not reducible to codified styles or ornamental forms. It is the very expression of ecclesial existence as communion and as freedom, beauty revealing what it means to be.

Yannaras' contribution concludes (Yannaras 1984, pp. 261–64) with a sober recognition that no aesthetic theory, ethical programme, or political scheme can secure the trans-

formation of human life. Against the backdrop of technological alienation, ecological devastation, and the mechanisation of social existence, Yannaras discerns only one horizon of hope: the Eucharistic community. It is there, in the concrete assembly of the Church, that matter is once again received as gift, transfigured through thanksgiving into communion, and human freedom reconciled with creation's inner logos. Liturgical art, architecture, and iconography are not isolated achievements but expressions of this eucharistic mode of being, offering a foretaste of the eschatological Kingdom even in the midst of modernity's crises. The last word of Orthodox aesthetics, then, is neither nostalgia for lost forms nor apologetic defensiveness, but the radical affirmation that in the Eucharist the world itself becomes art, and art itself becomes the mode of salvation.

To phrase Yannaras' contribution to the matter at hand in a nutshell, he offers a vision of Orthodox aesthetics that is both profoundly theological and profoundly liberating. Beauty, he insists, belongs not to the margins of ecclesial life but to its heart, for it is in beauty that truth shines forth, in beauty that communion is made tangible, and in beauty that the eschatological vocation of humanity is intimated. Orthodox aesthetics, as Yannaras articulates it, is nothing less than the luminous manifestation of freedom transfigured in love.

While the above hopefully summarises and encapsulates Yannaras' contribution to Orthodox aesthetics (a contribution that has been acknowledged to a very limited extent today), it would be an omission not to address the fact that, in other contexts, Yannaras often refers to painters and classical music composers in order to illustrate theological and philosophical points, deepening his interaction with art; he frequently refers to Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Bach, and Mozart. For example, in his *Elements of Faith* (Yannaras 1991, pp. 2, 44–45)—an introduction to Orthodox theology, not a treatise on art—the author illustrates the contrast between positive knowledge and metaphysical disclosure by invoking the examples of the artists above. What differentiates their works cannot be grasped in terms of empirical measurement or technical analysis alone; it lies rather in the irreducible uniqueness of the personal ethos that each artist impresses upon matter and form. Marble, colour, and sound thus become bearers of human singularity, testifying to the capacity of art to reveal existence as personal and unrepeatable. Yannaras contends that this insight resonates with the patristic distinction between the divine essence and the activities (*energeies*) of God—both the *uncreated* activities, as in Gregory Palamas, and divine activities that result in the emergence of created beings (on how Yannaras understands the patristic, and Maximian, teaching concerning activities, see Mitralexis 2017a, pp. 31–34). While God in his essence remains utterly inaccessible, he makes himself known through his activities, which pervade creation and render it transparent to his presence. For Yannaras, the beauty of a Van Gogh painting or the luminosity of Mozart's compositions disclose more about their artists' true otherness than what would be readily accessible to the people meeting them during their short earthly life (for example, when they would visit their local bakery to purchase bread). For Yannaras, this is not wholly unrelated to the claim that we can know God, even if divine uncreatedness is abysmally different than the natures of creatures. In this sense, Yannaras' artistic examples are not incidental but integral to his theological claim: just as art resists reduction to objective categories and instead manifests the mystery of personal otherness, so too creation, through the divine activities, resists being exhausted by description and instead becomes a vehicle of revelation; in the case of God, a window into the uncreated.

Yannaras develops this further (indicatively, in brief in Yannaras 1991, pp. 44–45) through an engagement with Maximus the Confessor's distinction between activities that are homogeneous to a nature and those that are heterogeneous. The latter make possible an indirect knowledge of the person: just as speech discloses reason directly, so too

writing, painting, or music disclose it through media heterogeneous to human nature. It is in this context that he turns again to the figure of Van Gogh. No accumulation of biographical detail, however exhaustive, can communicate the irreducible singularity of Van Gogh's existence. His paintings, however, reveal his personal *logos*, the distinctive reason and existential otherness that mark his being, as immediately recognisable, unrepeatable, and wholly his own. Although expressed through canvas and pigment, which are of a different essence than his humanity, these works become a "word" and disclosure, a *logos* of the person, rendering the person's unique presence perceptible. To contemplate them is to participate in knowledge of Van Gogh himself, however indirectly, and this participation remains personal and undivided: each viewer apprehends his *logos* in a singular way, yet without fragmenting the unity of its revelation. For Yannaras, this analogy discloses the deeper theological truth that creation itself, though distinct in essence from God, bears the impress of his uncreated activities, through which his personal otherness is revealed and shared without being diminished. This is not an observation on theological aesthetics; it is, however, an observation prompted by art, and as such it finds its place in the present section.

2.2. Chrysostomos Stamoulis' Project: Articulating a Language of "Philokalic Aesthetics"

The generation of Christos Yannaras and Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas (1931–2023) proved to be supremely pivotal for Orthodox theology in Greece. While the next generation's most distinguished theologian and philosopher is arguably Nikolaos Loudovikos (academic and priest, 1959), it is another representative of that generation that aspired to explicitly contribute to a theory of Orthodox aesthetics in Greece in a book-length study. Hailing from that next generation of Greek theologians, Chrysostomos Stamoulis (1964–2025) was until his untimely death Professor of Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki as well as a musician; his *Holy Beauty: Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics* (Stamoulis 2022) encapsulates this contribution.

Some elucidation is required in order to approach the title's reference to a "philokalic aesthetics". *Prima facie*, the Philokalia is a classic anthology of spiritual writings by Eastern Orthodox Christian mystics, compiled from text ranging from the 4th to the 15th century and focusing on inner prayer, spiritual purification, and union with God, mainly through the practices of what was later called hesychasm. As a word, however, *philokalia* means "love of the beautiful/good" in Greek; *love of beauty*. In a Platonic and Neoplatonic context, aspiring to the love of the good/beautiful has a specific connotation, but as Norman Russell notes in his translator's introduction, "in one major respect, the Christian version of *philokalia* differed profoundly from the Neoplatonic; this was the value accorded by Christianity to the body" (Russell 2022, p. x)—and Stamoulis employs the term to speak of Orthodox *aesthetics* as *philokalic* in texture.

As Russell notes (Russell 2022, p. xi), the Greek milieu Stamoulis comments on—Kostas Zouraris, George Seferis, Georgios Themelis, Zissimos Lorentzatos, Nikos Matsoukas, Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, Manos Hadjidakis, Alexandros Papadiamandis, General Makriyannis, and so on—are arguably rather unfamiliar and obscure to an international reader, some of them "hardly known outside Greece," as pointed out by Andrew Louth in a review of the book (Louth 2023, p. 57), thus significantly undermining the book's international readability. Despite this, the book's endeavour is most germane to this paper, hence an engagement with the argument would have merit.

Stamoulis begins with the claim that within (Greek?) Orthodox circles, "the East's *philokalia*" is triumphantly and apologetically juxtaposed to "Western aesthetics," a gap he sets to bridge (Stamoulis 2022, p. xiii); to put it otherwise, the book aspires to intervene in contemporary Orthodox theology by reconsidering the category of aesthetics in

light of the tradition's philokalic inheritance. Again, his point of departure is the opposition, articulated by figures such as Kostas Zouraris, between "aesthetics," associated with Western notions of taste and form, and *philokalia*, understood as an Eastern love of beauty (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 4–5). Stamoulis rejects this polarity, arguing that a properly conceived Orthodox aesthetics is already philokalic: beauty is not reducible to subjective refinement but names the ontological radiance of truth, inseparable from communion and deification (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 61–63).

Drawing on the Dionysian tradition, he emphasises that beauty is not an adjunct to being but a divine name, the *supra-substantial Good* which gathers all things into unity (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 95–96). To speak of beauty, therefore, is to speak of salvation, and to live "philokalicly" is to inhabit the ecclesial mode of existence. Aesthetics, in this perspective, extends beyond art and iconography to encompass the whole life of the Church. Alexander Schmemann's insistence that Christian faith discloses itself through beauty (in liturgy, in symbols, and in the sanctification of the ordinary) exemplifies this insight (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 37–38).

Stamoulis is nevertheless cautious of aestheticism. Both aesthetics and philokalia can degenerate when absolutised, becoming ends in themselves and lapsing into sterile formalism or spiritual narcissism (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 16–17). Authentic Orthodox aesthetics, by contrast, is eschatological: it opens outward, towards the other and towards God, refusing closure. Hence, the witness of Elder Sophrony or Elder Porphyrios (both of them now canonised in the Orthodox church), whose ascetical and cosmic love exemplify beauty as participation in divine life, is placed alongside the artistic and liturgical traditions as equally constitutive of Orthodox aesthetics (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 213–14).

The scope of Stamoulis' engagement is notable; he draws into conversation patristic sources, modern Orthodox theologians, poets and cultural figures, and Western interlocutors from Balthasar to Adorno (Stamoulis 2022, pp. 68–69). This breadth allows him to position Orthodox aesthetics not as a closed discourse but as a resource for wider intellectual debates, while preserving its distinctive theological grounding. His aim is not to perpetuate oppositions between East and West but to retrieve the philokalic tradition as a corrective to the fragmentation of modern aesthetic thought. Yet the contribution of *Holy Beauty* lies less in systematic construction than in conceptual reorientation. By situating beauty at the centre of Orthodox theology, Stamoulis insists that aesthetics is not ornamental but essential: it is the mode in which truth becomes manifest, the form of ecclesial existence itself. His work thereby provides the conditions for an Orthodox aesthetics that is simultaneously patristic in foundation and responsive to contemporary cultural and theological concerns—while taking into account the ecclesial texture of aesthetics that ostensibly lie beyond the gates of the church, in the material and the quotidian that do not necessarily and readily appear as "religious."

Yet if theology has insisted that beauty is inseparable from ethos, and if recent Greek voices have retrieved a philokalic disposition as the texture of Orthodox aesthetics, these claims demand further testing in lived practice. Theology may delineate the principles, but anthropology reveals how they are embodied, refracted, and negotiated in material form. Hence, to advance the inquiry, we must now turn to Orthodox material culture as the indispensable locus where aesthetics and ethos converge.

3. Exploring Material Culture, Exploring Aesthetics

3.1. From Aesthetics to Material Culture

If something has been made apparent thus far, this should be the centrality of *materiality* in the Orthodox aesthetics discourse—as well as the extension of said aesthetics to the quotidian, both in explicitly religious and ritual contexts and beyond. It follows logically

that the study of material culture as an academic field, and the study of the material culture of Orthodox Christianity, is eminently germane in an exploration of Orthodox aesthetics; doubling down on this, we would argue that not considering the *field* of material culture in such an exploration would be a grave omission.

A potent case study for this is the work of Timothy Carroll—who has written both on aesthetics per se and on Orthodox material culture, in which he may be recognised as today's preeminent expert. Apart from being an anthropologist, Carroll is also an Orthodox priest—but the latter was not always the case. Before turning to his work on Orthodoxy's material culture per se, a note on his understanding of aesthetics would be appropriate, since it is precisely there that aesthetics is claimed by anthropology.

In an extensive analysis of aesthetics in the *Cambridge Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Carroll (2022) confronts the term's complex and often problematic history within social theory, arguing for its continued analytical value through a critical reconceptualization (Carroll 2022, p. 380). He acknowledges that traditional aesthetics, rooted in the work of Baumgarten and Kant, established a Eurocentric framework linking beauty to morality and objective, disinterested judgement. This legacy has been rightly critiqued for its elitism, as demonstrated by Bourdieu, and its ethnocentric limitations in non-European contexts. To move beyond these constraints, Carroll charts a trajectory away from beauty and towards affect, form, and cognition. He highlights Clive Bell's concept of significant form, i.e., the arrangement of formal elements that evokes an aesthetic emotion, shifting the focus to intentional craft and social relation. This affective response is further developed through the work of scholars like Susan Best, who applies affect theory to explain the variability of aesthetic experience (Carroll 2022, pp. 386–90). The cornerstone of Carroll's reformulated approach is abduction, or intuitive inferential thinking, a concept central to the work of Alfred Gell and, prior to him, Gregory Bateson. Gell, despite rejecting the term "aesthetics," effectively rebuilt it by focusing on how the skilled precision of an object's creation captivates a viewer, functioning as a technical system to guide thought. Carroll employs Bateson's insights to expand on this, positioning abduction as a fundamental cognitive process of recognising the pattern which connects all things in an ecological unity (Carroll 2022, pp. 389–95). This intuitive, pre-discursive thinking allows individuals to grasp abstract reality. Carroll synthesises these ideas to propose "Aesthetics" (with a capital "A") as a comparative *anthropological* science that studies how the internal, intuitive logics of a society are made concrete in external forms. By focusing on what aesthetics *does*, i.e., how it facilitates somatic apprehension and empathetic responsiveness to patterns, he argues it becomes a methodological imperative. The aesthetic object acts as a condensed model of reality, which, through abduction, can be contemplated to generate new insight, thereby providing access to the very geometries of society (Carroll 2022, pp. 393–96).

The point of this exposition of Carroll's understanding of aesthetics it is twofold. Firstly, the chapter argues for "aesthetics as a methodological imperative", calling for "ethnographically grounded research into what aesthetics does" (Carroll 2022, pp. 395–96); i.e., for the examination of aesthetics in general (and *Orthodox* aesthetics in particular, as we shall see) via the field of material culture. Secondly, due to the chapter's *inter alia* implicitly theological gesture, if one were to desire to approach it that way—as the present paper does—and if that wanted to be made explicit. The chapter lays out a definition of aesthetics that would be eminently suitable to the sort of embodied phenomenological work of participation in a Dionysian liturgical sense, i.e., a definition of aesthetics that *works* for any proper endeavour of approaching Orthodox aesthetics. This is also apparent in other works by Carroll that are *not* on religious aesthetics/religious material culture as such, yet return to the material aesthetics of Orthodoxy (see, for instance, his co-authored book on Alfred Gell, art, and social theory; Küchler and Carroll 2021, pp. 31–32, 120–21, 162–67).

3.2. Orthodox Aesthetics as Orthodox Christian Material Culture

It is quite felicitous that the *tendencies* described above have indeed been fleshed out in a book-length study based on ethnographic fieldwork: Timothy Carroll's *Orthodox Christian Material Culture: Of People and Things in the Making of Heaven* (Carroll 2018). This represents a decisive contribution to contemporary debates on aesthetics, both within the anthropology of art and within theological anthropology. Where much of the anthropology of Christianity has historically privileged discourse—"the word"—Carroll insists upon the irreducible significance of the sensorial and the material. In this, his project may be understood as a corrective to those semiotic or phenomenological approaches which treat religious aesthetics primarily as an experience of meaning or transcendence. For Carroll, the beauty and efficacy of Orthodox aesthetics reside precisely in the active agency of materials themselves, their affordances and their capacities to transform people and spaces (Carroll 2018, pp. 7–8, 120–21).

In advancing this claim, Carroll enters into a dialogue with Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998) and its afterlife in anthropological theory. Gell's emphasis upon art as action, as the extension of agency through indexes, provides Carroll with an indispensable framework; yet Gell notoriously underplayed the role of material affordances, prompting critiques from Ingold and Küchler, among others. Carroll's intervention is to transpose these debates into an Orthodox context, showing that fabrics, vestments, icons (as an ethnographic term, Carroll prefers the spelling *ikon* to *icon* for reasons he explains in Carroll 2018, p. xviii), incense and relics cannot be reduced either to signs (semiotics) or to mere vessels of human intention (Gell), but must be understood as possessing intrinsic qualities that Orthodox Christians deliberately cultivate and capitalise upon (Carroll 2018, pp. 12–14). Thus, the fragility, pliability, and luminosity of fabrics are not neutral properties but essential to the transformation of the mundane into the sacred, the human into the icon, the church hall into heaven (Carroll 2018, pp. 134–39).

This position also situates Carroll against phenomenological accounts of religious aesthetics, which have often treated material culture as that which discloses transcendence to embodied perception. By contrast, Carroll argues that Orthodox aesthetics is not a matter of disclosure but of *making*. The liturgical act is not an *ekstasis*, an escape from the world into transcendence, but a metastasis, a transposition of the world into heaven (Carroll 2018, pp. 77, 149–50). This has significant implications: beauty is not simply a matter of sensory apprehension but of ontological transformation. When the priest vests, for instance, the vestments do not symbolise Christ but effect a "modal switch" in which the priest becomes an embodied icon of Christ (Carroll 2018, pp. 133–34). Here, Carroll diverges not only from phenomenology but also from representational theories of aesthetics, advancing instead a performative and sacramental account.

His most important theoretical move is to reframe Orthodox aesthetics as a *material ecology*. Orthodox beauty is never isolated in a single icon, chalice, or vestment, but emerges from the interlocking ensemble of fabrics, oils, incense, relics, architectural features, and ritual gestures which together produce heaven on earth (Carroll 2018, pp. 149–50). This holistic model disrupts dichotomies between sign and matter, subject and object, theology and anthropology. It is an aesthetics of participation, in which believers and materials co-constitute one another in a ceaseless art of becoming Orthodox (Carroll 2018, pp. 16–17, 161–62). Here, one would be excused to remark that Carroll's emphasis on material transformation echoes Maximus the Confessor's theology of the Church as an icon, where liturgical matter and human action synthesise into a visible eschatological harmony, thus offering a bridge between ethnography and patristic aesthetic theology.

In this sense, Carroll challenges both secular anthropological theories and certain theological tendencies which risk reducing aesthetics to an epiphenomenon of doctrine. By insisting upon the necessity of fabric in the formation of sacred space and Orthodox personhood (Carroll 2018, pp. 7–8), he offers a vision of aesthetics *in which heaven is materially made*: stitched, woven, perfumed, and sung into being. Carroll thus establishes Orthodox aesthetics not as a marginal curiosity but as a field of central theoretical importance, capable of reconfiguring wider debates in aesthetics, anthropology, and theology alike.

Arguably, there is a tendency among a number of (Greek?) Orthodox theologians to engage in various versions of monologue when encountered with the question of Orthodox aesthetics. As seasoned theorists of Orthodoxy by profession or calling, they often provide their proposition on what Orthodox aesthetics is, which may or may not be contextual, may or may not be in actual dialogue with other theories of aesthetics (philosophical, religious/theological, or otherwise), may or may not be apologetic in nature or an attempted corrective to expositions that are perceived as apologetic in nature, and so on. The crucial contribution of Carroll in this respect—an anthropologist rather than a theologian—lies, firstly, in the nuanced and substantive dialogue with discourses on aesthetics that are not necessarily religious or theological in scope. And secondly, but perhaps more importantly, in the insistence to boldly reframe Orthodox aesthetics as a *material ecology* and establish the engagement with the field of material culture as, indeed, a necessary precondition for work on Orthodox aesthetics. Yet apart from the question of Orthodox aesthetics, it would not be too fanciful to suggest that the study of Orthodox Christianity via ethnographic methods and the framework of material culture (or, alternatively, Carroll's *material ecology*) is gradually forming into a subfield of its own (see, e.g., Lackenby 2022, 2023, 2024; Mitralexis 2025; Carroll et al. 2023, and so on).

3.3. Ethos as Aesthetics Redux: Once Again on Material Culture as Aesthetics, and Vice Versa

Apropos of the reference to theologians and reflections on Orthodox aesthetics, the reader might recall, from a previous section, Christos Yannaras' chapter on "The Ethos of Liturgical Art," on aesthetics *as* ethos and the ethos *of* aesthetics. If Yannaras (1984, pp. 231–64) could speak of the "ethos of liturgical art" and thus of beauty as ecclesial truth transfiguring matter, Carroll's intervention adds a crucial ethnographic dimension to this claim. In his paper with the telling title *The Ethics of Orthodoxy as the Aesthetics of the Local Church*, Carroll (2017) further argues that for Orthodox Christianity, ethics and aesthetics are not parallel but inseparable domains: *aesthetics is localised ethics in practice* (Carroll 2017, p. 353). This formulation dislodges aesthetics from the realm of ornament or doctrine's after-image, and situates it in the lived practices, gestures, and material artefacts of Orthodox communities.

Locality and the quotidian are of essence here. Carroll demonstrates that Orthodoxy's universality does not negate, but rather necessitates, local difference. A single ethical imperative (say, reverence towards blessed matter) may be realised in divergent material practices, each producing its own aesthetic surplus. Basil sprigs blessed at Theophany may be eaten immediately as sacramental food in one parish, stored in wardrobes as apotropaic protection in another, or deployed in everyday cooking after Pascha elsewhere (Carroll 2017, pp. 364–66). What unites these diverse practices is not aesthetic uniformity but fidelity to the same ethical orientation. The aesthetics of Orthodoxy, therefore, emerges precisely in the inventive ways local communities extend ethical commitments into material form.

Here—and our intentions in this paper rhyme with this—Carroll pushes beyond a narrow association of Orthodox aesthetics with icons and architecture, proposing instead that it inheres in the surplus of the ordinary. A splash of basil-scented water, the tactile

choreography of approaching the chalice, or the scattering of bay leaves on Holy Saturday: such gestures cross what Carroll, drawing on de la Fuente, calls the "aesthetic threshold" (Carroll 2017, p. 357), where the practical acquires density, resonance, and beauty (Carroll 2017, pp. 358–60). In this light, Orthodox aesthetics is not primarily an iconological canon but a lived ethos materialised in innumerable local variations.

The implications for the wider discourse are considerable. If Yannaras insists that liturgical beauty discloses the ontology of communion, Carroll shows how this ontology is continually refracted through material culture and everyday practice. His contribution thus forges a methodological bridge between theology and anthropology: to study Orthodox aesthetics is to attend to how ethics becomes visible, tangible, *material*, and sensorially compelling in the life of the local church. What emerges is not a contradiction but a parallax: theology discerns beauty as communion, anthropology as ethics made aesthetic, together illuminating how Orthodoxy fashions its world through matter, gesture, and form.

A more practical conclusion from this is that Orthodox thinkers and theologians wishing to expand on Orthodox aesthetics would have much to gain by engaging with the methodologies and insights of particular corners of the social sciences: anthropological ethnography and material culture form prime examples of this necessary and fecund transdisciplinarity. That said, it must be acknowledged that within Orthodox theology, the question of methodological borrowing remains contested. Some theologians view transdisciplinary engagement with suspicion, regarding it as a dilution of theology's spiritual character. Nikos Matsoukas, for example, while valuing dialogue, insists that theology's proper methodology must be dual in character, at once rational and spiritual, i.e., pneumatic, the latter underscoring the indispensability of the Paraclete in theological inquiry; Matsoukas presents this dual methodological framework as the methodology *par excellence* of the Eastern Fathers of the Church (e.g., in Matsoukas 2004, p. 137). What is proposed in this paper, however, is that not all transdisciplinary endeavours are created equal vis-à-vis their compatibility with properly theological projects. Indeed, the methods and insights of anthropological ethnography and the field of material culture in particular are proposed here as not merely *useful* for studying Orthodox aesthetics *sub specie theologiae* (after all, Carroll's work alone suffices to splendidly illustrate this point) but as *indispensable*, since the parallax perspective they offer on Orthodox aesthetics forms a part of the greater whole that cannot properly emerge solely on the basis of an academic theologian's work. In other words, and not to put too fine a point on it, this is a *particular kind* of transdisciplinarity that we indeed *need* for theological work in Orthodox aesthetics, which is not necessarily the case with *any* inter- and transdisciplinarity on *any* theological field.

Up until now, the present paper surveyed selected Orthodox theologians on aesthetics, and then proceeded to underscore the centrality of the material, and of material culture. To trace Orthodox aesthetics through the artefacts and practices of material culture is already to have recognised that it cannot be confined to an art-historical canon nor reduced to a liturgical ornament. It is, rather, a mode of inhabiting the world in which matter, form, and ethos are drawn into the eschatological horizon of communion. Precisely because of this, Orthodox aesthetics also resists the neat boundary of "inside" and "outside" the Church. If fabrics, icons, and gestures disclose heaven within liturgical life, they also attest to a grammar of beauty that continues to resonate beyond the sanctuary. The same theological logics (of transfiguration, participation, anticipation) can be discerned in cultural forms that are not explicitly ecclesial.

It is here that the parallax structure of the present inquiry comes into sharper focus. For to turn, as we now do, from Orthodox material culture to the songs of Dionysis Savvopoulos is not to abandon the question of Orthodox aesthetics, but to shift vantage-point. From material culture to the seeming immateriality of verses, the dissonance is

deliberate: Savvopoulos is neither a hymnographer nor a religious songwriter, and his oeuvre resists assimilation to confessional art, to put it mildly. Yet, viewed from another angle, his verses bear the impress of an eschatological imagination shaped by Orthodoxy's theological inheritance—and here is where Orthodox aesthetics indeed enter the picture, this time as theology *informing* extra-ecclesial aesthetics. What appears, from one standpoint, as secular cultural production reveals itself, from another, as saturated with motifs of transfiguration, judgement, and ultimate fulfilment. The "parallax" here is not a facile analogy but a methodological wager: that Orthodox aesthetics is not exhausted by its liturgical and material expressions, but may be discerned wherever the Orthodox imagination supplies the horizon against which beauty, truth, and hope are articulated.

4. A Parallax View: On Dionysis Savvopoulos' Aesthetic Eschatology

4.1. Secular, but Also Neo-Orthodox: The Itineraries of Dionysis Savvopoulos

Up until now, this paper traced Greek theologians' discourses on aesthetics, and then proceeded to underscore the importance of material culture for approaching Orthodox aesthetics. Now a change in perspective (a "parallax view") ensues, and the mode for approaching Orthodox aesthetics shall be reversed—for what is surveyed below, as a case study, is the implicit eschatological theology in the verses of a popular songwriter (or "singing poet," to quote Papanikolaou 2007), Dionysis Savvopoulos, who did not operate within religious and ecclesial frameworks, but was deeply informed by Orthodoxy. Indeed, what is surveyed here is how theological impulses "survive" in aesthetics that are ostensibly secular, and surely for mass consumption in Greece.

Dionysis Savvopoulos (b. 1944) occupies a singular place in the cultural and intellectual landscape of modern Greece. Emerging in the 1960s as a singer–songwriter and composer, he distinguished himself by weaving together disparate musical idioms, ranging from Greek folk traditions and Byzantine chant to Western rock and chanson, into a style that was at once idiosyncratic and profoundly resonant with the national psyche. Influenced by French *auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes* like Georges Brassens and Anglo-American counterculture figures like Bob Dylan, Savvopoulos created a unique, hybrid style that blended modern and traditional Greek rhythms with surreal, poetic, and socially critical lyrics; this style defied existing Greek music genres, such as *entehno laiko* (art-popular music), shaped by composers like Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis (Papanikolaou 2007, pp. 101–54). His work is not merely of aesthetic value; it is inextricably bound up with the social and political ferment of post-war Greece, particularly during the *metapolitefsi* ("change of polity") after the years of the military dictatorship (1967–1974). Widely regarded as a key figure in the renewal of Greek popular music, Savvopoulos has continually interrogated notions of identity, modernity, and tradition, thereby shaping debates about Greekness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His importance, therefore, lies not only in his musical innovations but also in his enduring role as a public intellectual and cultural interlocutor.

At the same time, Savvopoulos is considered one of the foremost representatives of Greek "Neo-Orthodoxy." The term "Neo-Orthodoxy" denotes a diffuse and uncoordinated intellectual current that emerged in Greece during the 1980s and, to a lesser extent, the 1990s, characterised by a synthesis of Orthodox theology, traditionalism, and left-wing politics, often manifesting as a dialogue between Communists and Orthodox Christians (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 295–96). It presupposed an earlier theological renaissance in the 1960s and 1970s (largely but not exclusively revolving around Christos Yannaras' presence, work, and wider milieu), which reevaluated patristic heritage and Orthodox tradition as a counterpoint to Western modernity, yet it lacked formal organisation, programmatic texts, or institutional structure, rendering it less a cohesive "movement" than a network of friend-

ships and intellectual affinities (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 296–97, 320). Coined pejoratively within left-wing circles to marginalise this tendency (evident in early usages in journals like *Theseis* and *Scholiastis*) the label encompasses figures from disparate backgrounds, including theologians, communists, and public intellectuals, but eludes a singular viable definition, as it awkwardly bridges non-leftists like Christos Yannaras with avowed Marxists (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 297–99, 320). At its core, Neo-Orthodoxy proposed a hermeneutic reinterpretation of Greek identity through Orthodox communitarianism, critiquing Western capitalism and individualism while seeking convergences with leftist values such as anti-imperialism and social justice (Mitralexis 2019, p. 320). It is not, however, synonymous with nationalism or a unified ideology; nor does it extend seamlessly into the 1990s, where related developments veered towards explicit Hellenocentrism amid the Yugoslav Wars, diverging from the original dialogue (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 307–8, 320).

Songwriter Dionysis Savvopoulos played a pivotal role in popularising Neo-Orthodoxy beyond elite intellectual spheres, serving as its chief cultural ambassador through his music and public persona (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 301, 305). Neither a theologian nor a formal leftist functionary, Savvopoulos infused his 1983 album *Τραπεζάκια Έξω* ("Outdoor Tables")—often hailed as the movement's "soundtrack" *and* as an informal national anthem for Greece—with explicit references to Orthodox eschatology, Byzantine communitarianism, and Athonite monasticism. This artistic intervention, alongside subsequent works like his 1994 album *Μὴ πετάξεις τίποτα!* ("Don't Throw Anything Away!"), amplified the current's appeal, extending its main ideas to a broader audience and contributing significantly to its visibility during the 1980s (Mitralexis 2019, pp. 301–2).

Interestingly, Savvopoulos' recently published autobiography (Savvopoulos 2025) mentions hardly anything about this aspect of the songwriter's personal history and public persona—and portrays the author as a stern Westerniser, in actuality having long crossed the Rubicon to the other side of Greece's Neo-Orientalist "cultural dualism" divide (Mitralexis 2017b). Yet back in the 1980s, Savvopoulos was significantly more explicit concerning Orthodoxy's influence on him; for example, commenting on the 1000-year-old monastic polity of Mount Athos in Northern Greece, Savvopoulos would state in an interview, and quite lyrically so: "these monks are really something else. They are the most extreme people I have ever met. I like to talk to them, I like to hear their stories. There is a luscious anarchism in all of this. Yes, they are anarchists who have come so far that they no longer need to be aggressive … I like their eyes, their bread, their wine" (Makris 1983, p. 97).

4.2. From Material (Culture) to the Immaterial (Lyrics): Savvopoulos' Aesthetics of Eschatology

A full treatment of religious, Orthodox, and theological impulses in Savvopoulos' lyrics (with all his lyrics available in Savvopoulos 2004) would be a book-length study; for example, with the song *Ζείμπέκικο* (popularised as *Μ' Ἀεροπλάνα καὶ Βαπόρια*) from the 1972 album *Βρώμικο Ψωμί* ("Dirty Bread") featuring a counterpoint, antiphonal dialogue between one "voice" mainly speaking about the life of Greek refugees from Anatolia/Asia Minor, and another, second voice pronouncing what is essentially an idiosyncratic prayer to the Mother of God (Savvopoulos 2004, p. 121). For the purposes of this short case study, our focus will be on the *eschatological* vector of Savvopoulos' songwriting, by presenting a mere selection of verses. "Aesthetic eschatology," as per this paper's title, does not point to other possible uses of the term—as, for instance, broader theological discourse could use this very term to describe aspects of Pickstock's work (e.g., Pickstock 2009), i.e., a theological approach that intertwines aesthetics, liturgy, and eschatology to address the nature of history, time, and divine presence as a way of reimagining history and time through a theological lens that emphasises the beauty and immediacy of liturgical practices. Rather

than that, the term refers here to Savvopoulos' gesture of incorporating eschatological concerns, hopes, or impulses in a work of art; taking theological eschatology and putting it into aesthetics, rather than vice versa, essentially an aesthetics *of* eschatology.

Examples from Savvopoulos' *oeuvre* abound. Among the earliest would be the jubilant song *Ὀλαρία Ὀλαρά*, first released in his 1972 album *Βρώμικο Ψωμὶ* (Savvopoulos 2004, pp. 122–23), which may be interpreted as an eschatological vision of reconciliation through its surreal imagery and thematic progression, evoking a near-apokatastatic resolution, a festive communion where polar opposites are harmonised in a transcendent gathering: from Oliver Twist to Adolf Hitler, from the murderer to the murder's victim, from a virgin to Satan, and so on. Quite early on in the song, the vision shifts to a reconciliatory panorama, wherein historical and archetypal antagonists are united in ecstatic fellowship. In and of itself, this is not Orthodox per se (and the curmudgeonly theological reader might remark that it *cannot* be Orthodox by definition, precisely due to its quasi-apokatastatic vector, but this is a discussion decisively beyond the scope of this paper). However, it is the notion of *the feast* (usually γιορτή in Savvopoulos' lyrics, here πανηγύρι), a staple in the singing poet's vision, that evokes what he traces in this tradition *par excellence*: the described reconciliation culminates in a communal *πανηγύρι* (fair or festival), a motif deeply rooted in Greek Orthodox culture, where saint's day celebrations prefigure the heavenly banquet. Here, according to *Ὀλαρία Ὀλαρά*'s lyrics, "we shall all meet together" with "all our old companions", partaking from "the same cup", including its "most bitter sip"; an image evoking both the Eucharistic chalice in Orthodox liturgy, but also the *memory* of sin and sorrow, which has been superseded by transcendent joy (the antithetical couples swirling in dance and "shining with joy") in this heavenly banquet, where "everything is far away and joyous", purged by the ongoing snow as a potential metaphor for grace. Subtly influenced by Orthodox theology and tradition, the song's apophatic undertones—i.e., its refusal to resolve rationally, instead veiling profundity in folkloric absurdity—mirror the Eastern mystical tradition while depicting a true *πανηγύρι*.

While *Ὀλαρία Ὀλαρὰ* is unmistakeably eschatological, portraying an eschatological vision in its lyrics and this constituting a peculiar aesthetic eschatology, other songs such as *Πρωτομαγιά* ("First of May") from 1983's *Τραπεζάκια Ἔξω* may be read both ways, a more mundane one and an implicitly eschatological one; I have anecdotally noticed that many Greeks familiar with the song have not understood it that way. Focusing here on the second option, the opening lines, "all our lines were bent and failed," set a tone of existential failure and disarray, reflecting a world marked by brokenness, and proceed to evoke a landscape of desolation before switching to the refrain. There, "from the heat of the slaughterhouse"—i.e., after our death?—"and with fresh wreaths, we shall meet on a mad May Day," with imagery of dances, flowers, and wine completing the refrain. The reader might find the connection of such lyrics with post-mortem motifs purely speculative—but the refrain has still more to offer. Our "washed/cleansed body, behind the flowers," so Savvopoulos' lyrics, "shall be reunited"—with *what?*, if not the spirit or soul, reconstituting Palamas' "both-together-ness" (συναμφότερον, PG 150, 1361C) of body and soul?—as "we grow dizzy from the wine of our dances". What is quite transparently referred to here is the poignant and often emotional Greek Orthodox custom of exhumation, known as διάνοιξη τάφου (opening of the grave) or secondary burial; this practice is deeply rooted in Greek Orthodox tradition and practical necessity, blending ancient influences and contemporary needs, given modern urban cemeteries' overcrowding. The rite involves exhuming the body after an initial burial period, cleaning the remains, and reinterring them in a more permanent, compact form (usually an ossuary). The "washed/cleansed body," "behind the flowers," with "fresh wreaths," all this describes here the ritual washing of the bones with wine or water and their placement in the ossuary adorned with flowers; in

the Greek Orthodox custom, a priest then performs prayers, such as the *Trisagion* service, sprinkling holy water and incense, while flowers are often placed nearby, and the family may scatter petals.

Understanding this transparent reference, the "dizziness from the wine of our dances" alludes to *both* the use of white wine in the cleansing process inebriating, as it were, the deceased's remains, *and* to the heavenly feast where our "reunited" bodies dance in joy—contrasted to the initial "heat of the slaughterhouse," a metaphor for death's brutality), with renewal on May Day, a time of spring and rebirth (and, as is usually the case in Greece on that date, splendid weather). The references, particularly to the exhumation rite, are quite transparent, yet still covert. The singing poet is aware of his difficulty in articulating his vision of death and joyous eschatology amidst a world of decay—a world, however, destined to be transfigured, and being God's good and beautiful creation. Indirectly, he concludes the song with precisely this confession, together with the apophatic difficulty in "finding the words," which will be granted only at the very end: "Everything is so fearful, yet I, the poor one, love them. Grant me the words at last, that I may not be alone."

Other *partial* references to eschatology include the song *Μὴ πετάξεις τίποτα!* ("Don't Throw Anything Away!") from the 1994 album of the same name, a song on death mourning Savvopoulos' departed mentors and memorably ending with "We have arrived at that which cannot be uttered: Do not throw anything away! A mere breath transforms us," the eschatological context and content of which has already been pointed out (Stamoulis 2022, p. 146). Or the song *Μικρὸς Μονομάχος* ("Young Gladiator") from the same album, addressing a young schoolboy hailing, according to Savvopoulos, from an emerging generation well-prepared for a transformational, quasi-mystical introspection—and thus heralded as "champion of the innermost realm." The singing poet describes death to the boy with phrases such as "in an instant, the fairy lights flicker on, searchlights from the depths comb through us, and they pluck, one by one, the persons, beaming, journeying towards us here" and "ascending." And Savvopoulos counsels the boy as follows: "if you dive into yourself, you won't find yourself, but all the others … for time is one and singular, and no one has died," following which "you'll see us in the roar of a tempest, like links in a long chain," the last link of which shall be the boy in the future: "you will move losing yourself, yet being the last link in the chain towards the light." And if any doubts concerning the nature of this light remain, Savvopoulos is quick to dispel them in the lyrics by crying, just after an explicit reference to God, "they unseal it, the rock rolls"—i.e., Christ's resurrection leaving behind an empty tomb (indeed, a new tomb used by none other before, a virgin tomb, corresponding to a virgin womb, with Christ's virgin tomb becoming the Church, the virgin mother, the womb giving birth to us as living persons; compare Behr 2025, pp. 38–81). In Savvopoulos' song, the rock sealing the tomb falls "in the first flowering of the century"—or, more accurately, *of the aeon* (τοῦ αἰῶνος), of this *saeculum*, i.e., the interval between fall and *eschaton*. In the lyrics, the boy shall be then "clad in the city's mantle"—yet I would stop short of speculating that this city is indeed the eschatological New Jerusalem where God dwells with humanity, and where salvation is *communal*. We need not speculate, however. Another song stands out even more prominently in its aesthetics of eschatology, which Savvopoulos is weaving into lyrics. One talking about the memory of friends while feasting on lamb during Easter. Or, one speaking about standing next to the eschatological Lamb in the fulness of time, in the *completion* of time.

4.3. Next to the Eschatological Lamb

The most explicit example of Savvopoulos' poetic and aesthetic eschatology is the song *Πλάϊ στὸ Ἀρνάκι* ("Next to the lamb," i.e., in this context, sitting at the traditional banquet on Easter Sunday featuring spit-roasted lamb; for the full lyrics, see

Savvopoulos 2004, pp. 505–506) from the 1999 album *Chronopoios* ("Time-Maker") right at our very own *fin de siècle*. I shall attempt a translation of the lyrics:

[First stanza]
Perfect days, a perfect dusk,
the slopes descend, smiling,
at the little coastal bar, the friends
assemble, as the feasts draw near.
[2]
But where is Greta? And Katerina?
How the roll of absentees lengthens.
Where is Ilias? And Panagos?
And my Kostis Moskov?
[3]
Where is Christos? And where is Krokos?
I never had the chance to tell him.
I gaze and give thanks to you, in the golden dusk,
for your Byzantine museum.
[4]
I think that nothing dies:
with the same names,
the bodies made whole,
we shall ascend, bathed in light,
through the snow-white beeches.
[5]
Yet the sweet sacrifice will not ascend
beyond the earth of mortals.
How shall it be offered to the other? There is no way.
Your only chance is here.
[6]
Where is Greta? And Katerina?
The accordion scatters melodies,
the sea breaks against the deck,
and one by one they grow distant and depart.
[7]
Since my last album,
the losses have multiplied,
and yet we all gather, it seems,
around the spit of the lamb,
beside the young rosebushes.
[8]
With the dormition of Hadjidakis,
life was suddenly reduced to its half.

It rushes, within spring's abandon,
the century's/aeon's final cry.
[9]
And the wind bears it:
"Grant that we may more perfectly
partake of Thy Kingdom
O King of the day without evening"
[10]
A little apple in the wine,
distant voices of war.
Tonight the sky is an ocean
of roses and festive wishes.
(Savvopoulos 2004, pp. 505–6)

Here, in the first stanza, Savvopoulos sets a scene of idyllic festivity. The idyllic mood is immediately broken in the second stanza by the roll-call of absence; each reposed friend (I shall omit here the song's who-is-who in order to focus on the matter at hand) named intensifies the sense of loss, functioning almost as a secular litany of the departed. Given the setting of the song is the Easter festivities, one might wax theological here on the juxtaposition of festivity with mourning that is theologically significant: it echoes the Paschal paradox—joy and death interwoven. Already in the fourth stanza, Savvopoulos embarks in what is essentially a confession of faith in the *bodily* resurrection of all, with their (baptismal) names restored and their bodies bathed in a light that cannot but be the Taboric, uncreated light. Immediately thereafter, in the fifth stanza, the songwriter offers a theological admonition; since "there is no repentance after death," to cite a classical *locus* of theology, every sacrifice of giving yourself to the other must come to pass *here*, in the mortals' immanence. Savvopoulos had already, in the third stanza, lamented the fact that he did not take the chance to express his gratitude to Kyriakos Krokos, the architect of Thessaloniki's Museum of Byzantine Culture, while he was alive. One by one the friends repose and depart—however, it is as if "we all gather around the spit of the [Easter] lamb" (seventh stanza), both the *seemingly*, but incompletely, alive and the *seemingly* departed.

The singing poet's Paschal proclamation finds its climax in the ninth stanza: here, what the previous stanza's "century's [or *aeon*'s, or *saeculum's*] final cry" exclaims, borne by the wind, is an almost verbatim repetition of a fragment from the Orthodox Paschal service. The lyrics of the Greek original are as follows:

Καὶ τὴ φέρνει ὁ ἀέρας
«δίδου ἡμῖν ἐκτυπώτερόν σου
Βασιλιά τῆς ἀνέσπερης μέρας
μετασχεῖν της βασιλείας σου»
(Savvopoulos 2004, p. 506)

This ninth stanza corresponds to the Paschal canon's ninth ode and the troparion:

«Ὢ πάσχα τὸ μέγα, καὶ ἱερώτατον Χριστέ·
ὦ Σοφία καὶ Λόγε, τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ δύναμις·
δίδου ἡμῖν ἐκτυπώτερον, σοῦ μετασχεῖν,
ἐν τῇ ἀνεσπέρῳ, ἡμέρᾳ τῆς βασιλείας σου.»[1]

Usually translated into English as follows:

"O great and holiest Pascha, Christ;
O Wisdom, Word and Power of God;
Grant that we may more perfectly partake of Thee
in the unending Day of Thy Kingdom."[2]

Incidentally, "borne in the wind" need not necessarily be a poetic image here, an allegory or a metaphor, but something quite more mundane. If the scene described was taking place just after the proclamation of Christ's resurrection in the Paschal service, just after Holy Saturday midnight, and if Savvopoulos and his friends assembled in a nearby place before the service's conclusion, then that troparion could as well have been literally "borne in the wind," audible to them from the local church's outdoors speakers—always on full volume during Easter services, in order to accommodate the multitudes reaching the church building only during those days for a few brief minutes in a collective, fast-track, touristic mass performance of seasonal piety. After the climax of this proclamation, i.e., Savvopoulos' inclusion of the troparion as, here, a personal prayer to the Resurrected Christ and an expectation to meet again the departed friends, the singing poet returns to the song's present moment: the meeting with the friends that remain, some *sangria* (hence the apple, presumably), an echo of that moment's bellicose global affairs, but a glorious night nonetheless, with a sky that is "an ocean of roses and festive wishes."

This song is indeed the most lucid depiction of Savvopoulos' Orthodox aesthetic eschatology, or aesthetics *of* eschatology, that manages to be simultaneously overt while not becoming *prima facie* religious or apologetic—a delicate balance worthy of a proper singing poet. However, one last detail is missing in this presentation of our case study. This section commenced with the song's title, "next to the lamb," being interpreted as sitting at the traditional banquet on Easter Sunday featuring spit-roasted lamb, something that follows from the song's Easter setting. Yet in this initial description I have been intentionally misleading—since the first and last stanza quite clearly set the stage not as a daytime Paschal afternoon banquet, during or just after the roasting of the festal lamb, but during the night, at a little coastal bar, sipping *sangria* wine. The song is situated right "next to the lamb," but not *that* lamb. The only lamb that remains as a possibility is the one addressed in the ninth stanza, or ode: the eschatological Lamb—the *Parousia* of the Resurrected Christ. And thus concludes our parallax view on Orthodox aesthetics.

5. Conclusions

This paper has undertaken a parallax exploration of Orthodox aesthetics, beginning with theological articulations, moving through the material cultures of lived Orthodoxy, and culminating in an examination of cultural production outside the liturgical sphere. From the reflections of Christos Yannaras on the ethos of liturgical art and the philokalic vision articulated by Chrysostomos Stamoulis, through Timothy Carroll's ethnographic insistence that Orthodox aesthetics is always already a material ecology, to the eschatological poetics of Dionysis Savvopoulos, whose ostensibly secular verses subtly weave motifs of resurrection, communal festivity, and eschatological hope, thereby disclosing how Orthodox Christian theological impulses permeate non-ecclesial artistic production and the broader Greek cultural imagination, a picture has emerged of Orthodox aesthetics as irreducible to any single locus, medium, or discourse. Rather, it appears as a mode of being-in-the-world in which ethos, matter, and anticipation are woven together into forms that disclose beauty as truth, communion, and hope.

These explorations directly engage the paper's threefold research questions. First, in articulating Orthodox aesthetics beyond the theology of the icon, contemporary theologians such as Yannaras and Stamoulis furnish indispensable resources: Yannaras by

intertwining aesthetics with an ethos of liturgical transformation and relational ontology, and Stamoulis by advocating a philokalic framework that integrates beauty and extends aesthetics into the realms of everyday sanctity and cultural critique. Second, the anthropological study of Orthodox material culture, as exemplified in Carroll's work, profoundly reconfigures theological accounts of beauty, embodiment, and eschatology; it reveals aesthetics as an ethics materialised in local practices, where matter is not passive but agential, fostering a participatory ontology that anticipates the eschaton through sensory and performative engagements, thereby challenging reductive semiotic or phenomenological interpretations. Third, Orthodox aesthetics manifests palpably in non-ecclesial cultural production, as evidenced by Savvopoulos' lyrics, which subtly encode eschatological themes (such as bodily resurrection, the Paschal banquet, and communal transfiguration) within popular song, thereby unveiling the diffusion of the Orthodox imagination into the public sphere and demonstrating its capacity to inform secular narratives of hope and identity.

The contribution of this paper to the field of Orthodox aesthetics lies in its parallax methodology, which eschews monolithic perspectives in favour of a dialogical interplay between theology, anthropology, and cultural studies. By juxtaposing ecclesial ethos with material ecology and extra-ecclesial artistry, it underscores that Orthodox aesthetics is neither a static doctrinal appendage nor a devotional nicety, but a vibrant locus where beauty, truth, and eschatological anticipation converge to interrogate human existence. This approach not only broadens the discursive terrain beyond icons and liturgy but also advocates for transdisciplinary engagement, positing material culture as an essential bridge between abstract theological reflection and lived practice, and revealing how Orthodox sensibilities subtly infuse ostensibly profane cultural forms. In so doing, it counters apologetic insularity and invites a more expansive understanding of aesthetics as a theological anthropology of transfiguration, resonant with contemporary debates in religious studies and beyond.

Looking ahead, future research might fruitfully extend this parallax lens to comparative horizons, examining how Orthodox aesthetics intersects with other Christian traditions or non-Christian aesthetic paradigms, to elucidate shared or divergent conceptions of beauty as participatory revelation. Likewise, comparative studies of Orthodox aesthetics across different national traditions, as well as analyses of contemporary Orthodox visual and musical culture and explorations of how Orthodox sensibilities are negotiated in digital and virtual media, would be more than welcome. Ethnographic inquiries into diverse Orthodox diasporas could further illuminate how material ecologies adapt across cultural boundaries, potentially revealing novel expressions of eschatological hope in globalised settings. Moreover, a deeper analysis of contemporary artistic media—ranging from film and digital art to popular music beyond the Greek milieu—might uncover additional instances of Orthodox-inflected aesthetics in secular domains, thereby mapping the tradition's evolving diffusion in our very own moment in late modernity.

Likewise, closer collaboration between theologians, anthropologists, and scholars of literature and the arts promises to deepen our understanding of how the Orthodox imagination both inhabits and exceeds its traditional forms. If beauty in the Orthodox tradition is indeed a disclosure of truth and a foretaste of the eschaton, then the study of Orthodox aesthetics is not ancillary but central to comprehending how Orthodoxy fashions its world—and how, through aesthetics, it gestures towards the world to come, ever attuned to the perennial quest for communion amidst the fragments of the finite.

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Notes

[1] https://www.enaip.gr/m/bym/ppsa/Ypen/YPen.pdf, accessed on 7 June 2025.
[2] https://orthochristian.com/7406.html, accessed on 7 June 2025.

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