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Liturgical Art for a Media Culture and A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship

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Review

Eileen D. Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 102 pp.

Eileen D. Crowley, *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 91 pp.

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Apart from the unceasing ecclesiastical controversies generated by clashing opinions on sexuality only controversies around liturgical matters usually garner such zeal and occasionally even spitefulness. Who has not heard the term “worship wars” at least on some occasion? Eileen Crowley’s two studies of the promises as well as the perils of media arts in Christian worship survey one of the most passionately debated topics in liturgical practice across denominational lines. As such, these two volumes fall into the category of “must read” for both media-philes and media-phobes, among professional theologians as well as local communities of worship and their professional or volunteer liturgical media artists.

Liturgical Art for a Media Culture is a concise yet attentive, well-organized and well-proportioned introduction to liturgical media art in the broader context of liturgical worship. Reading *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship* after *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* is recommended since the latter volume provides a useful theo-liturgical framework, which can elucidate the underlying and most often implicit theological rationales for the more hands-on strategies of integrating media arts in actual worship exemplified in the former.

Liturgical Art for a Media Culture has an overall clear structure; a helpful introduction (Ch. 1) of basic liturgical terms will be welcomed by liturgical novices as well as those with a beginner's mind in the realm of multimedia technologies. It may come as a bit of a surprise for some that it is, in fact, possible and appropriate to talk about the history of media's role in Christian worship (Ch. 2) dating back to the early 20th century in the United States. Even though media art usage in worship might seem like the cutting edge of innovation, and possibly even borders on a kind of hyper-"modernism" heresy in some circles, Crowley puts these matters in perspective since "what qualifies as media art in most churches is on the level of the media art produced by secular artists in the 1970s and 1980s. Most churches lag at least twenty years or more behind the art world" (32).

The perils and positive possibilities of incorporating media in worship are insightfully and open-mindedly analyzed in Ch. 3, which frames the theological force field of the book. The critical assessment of media in worship gravitates around four possible perils—an alleged decrease of worshippers' participation, the danger of worship becoming entertainment, the fear of contamination of worship through uncritical acceptance of mass media, and a temptation to idolatry. All four are explored with great care, while the conclusion is that worship without multimedia arts can be equally susceptible to the same perils if theological and liturgical discernment is missing. After all, what is the qualitative theological difference between idolizing the "electronic golden calf" versus idolizing certain high forms of *bel canto* or Gregorian chant in worship music, or Mannerist paintings, or Neo-Gothic church architecture or whatever else happens to occupy the slot of normativity—all within the arena of normative performative efficacy of liturgy? Alongside perils, Crowley also focuses on three areas of underused possibilities: media arts can

enhance communication with a particular emphasis on the contemporary cultural penchant for visual styles of perception and retention of information; media arts can provide greater liturgical access for people with disabilities; and finally, the case is made in support of liturgical media arts as a tool for developing spiritual sensitivity and sacramental imagination. Examining the positive potential of responsibly used media arts, Crowley argues that despite the perils, the positive possibilities, though not guaranteed, do exist if and when media arts are used “in an integral way within worship” (52) to help worshippers “make meaningful connections between their worship and daily lives” (53). The keyword here remains discernment: to facilitate a multi-pronged theological, liturgical, ethical, pedagogical, and aesthetic discernment, four frameworks for evaluation of media in worship are provided (Ch. 4), focusing on the exploration of the local context of worship, on the functions of media in worship, on aesthetics, and on the issues of ethics and justice. All four frameworks can be applied to a variety of local contexts practically and ecumenically. The final chapter offers an inclusive model of liturgical media ministry—“communal co-creation” (Ch. 5) —with helpful suggestions on how to facilitate a meaningful, cooperative, and spiritually mature liturgical ministry vis-à-vis commercialized models of multimedia performance in liturgy.

The merits of the monograph are manifold: it is concise and accessible yet theologically nuanced, and its ecumenical appeal is considerable as is the spectrum of Crowley’s interlocutors in both Catholic and Protestant liturgical milieus. What remains fascinatingly open for discussion—and likely fertile ground for collisions of theological positions, tastes, and temperaments—is the notion of liturgical integrity itself. Per definition, Crowley describes genuine liturgical media art as “integral to the actions of a

community's liturgy" and therefore being "media art *of* the liturgy, as opposed to media simply being used *in* liturgy" (15). Now the linchpin of Crowley's argument subsists precisely in the marker "integral." Alas, what is "integral" to liturgy is never explicitly explicated. But of course, the whole theological argument in support of what amounts to no less than a truly sacramental potential and function of media arts as a modality of liturgical action rests upon the definition of liturgical integrity—or lack thereof. In other words, Crowley's argument stands or falls in relation to how liturgical integrity is defined—and yet such a description is not systematically advanced in the present volume. Consequently, one can immediately see a wide spectrum of positions emerge. On the one hand, it may be a strategic choice to increase the access, appeal, and practical applicability of this study. On the other hand, such a choice bypasses some of the deepest theological conundrums within contemporary liturgical theology.

Specifically, when discussing the positive possibilities of liturgical media arts, Crowley makes an important distinction about the proper, that is, non-idolatrous, intentionality of media usage in worship. Thus, the proper starting point for a conversation on media ministry is not its utility, attraction, or the mere fact of technology's availability but liturgy itself (89). Yet what is important to notice here is that the text's emphasis falls upon the utilitarian aspects of liturgical media arts—note the keywords enhance, improve, encourage, develop, and others in Ch. 3. While such an approach would not constitute a problem or would be taken for granted by some, others in the present liturgical discourse across denominational lines would challenge the very assumption that liturgy is defined as "the work of the people giving praise and thanks to God" (89) as incomplete. Namely, voices from Godfried Danneels to Michael B. Aune and others like them would insist on the

necessity of considering liturgy as the work of God before it can ever be imagined as the work of the people. The very perception of the integrity of liturgy might vary depending on whether one advances a liturgical theology, as it were, “from above” or “from below.” But the integrity of liturgy is precisely the topic that often creates divisions between the media-philosophers and media-phobes among many other theo-liturgical bones of contention. A thorough analysis of this issue most surely cannot be expected from this volume. Crowley intensifies, however, yet another fascinating feature of the discourse on what constitutes liturgical integrity through her multifaceted investigation of the contemporary multimedia arts. This is an additional merit of the slim yet truly stimulating volume.

The other volume, *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship*, can serve as an excellent primer on how to discern and evaluate theological goals, liturgical strategies, and technological resources in a variety of local contexts and, most importantly, as a “how-to” guide to fruitful media ministry. Embedded in the theological context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America but by no means limited to that context alone, this book offers seven engaging chapters on how to envision and implement meaningful media-intensive worship throughout the church year. The model of “communal co-creation” is fleshed out through engaged and example-laden explorations of the liturgical calendar. Crowley focuses on the underestimated multimedia arts potential of Epiphany and the Baptism of Our Lord (Ch. 2) as well as Ash Wednesday (Ch. 3) and the Vigil of Easter (Ch. 4). Special chapters are dedicated to funerals as well as liturgies of lamentation and healing (Ch. 5) and to worship services geared toward college students during particularly demanding exams (Ch. 6). Finally, the concluding chapter “For All the Saints” is devoted to the discussion of how to reach out to people who are confined because of various life concerns

and how to actualize the memory of those who have passed on (Ch. 7). Each chapter is augmented by a set of practically helpful questions for reflection and discussion as communities of worship seek to re-envision their liturgies with multimedia art in mind. All in all, Eileen Crowley's two volumes provide a thoughtful, accessible, and creative roadmap of liturgical media arts for all the technologically advanced saints as well as beginners.