



“Education as the Art of Making Oneself at Home in the World with and Through Others”: The Call to *Bildung* in Meister Eckhart and the Film *Of Gods and Men*

Katja Frimberger¹

Accepted: 17 June 2024 / Published online: 26 June 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

This paper explores the mystical structure of education as *Bildung* in medieval theologian and Dominican friar Meister Eckhart’s work and the 2010 French film *Of Gods and Men* (*Des Hommes et Des Dieux*). I start this paper with a short introductory sketch of the *Bildung* tradition, in order to situate my discussion of Eckhart within the more well-known humanist tradition. Here, I claim that *Bildung* (as we understand it today through the classic *Bildung* philosophers) points back to its theological heritage and horizon of meaning, when it is claimed as the general *tekhnhê* (art, craft) of making oneself at home in the world with and through others. In my first step, I then explore the intellectual heritage of this mystical structure of *Bildung*. Drawing on a range of Meister Eckhart’s writings (esp. his German sermons), I elaborate three features pivotal to his concept of *Bildung* (as image-ing) of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in the human soul/action: (1) divine grace, (2) human cultivation and (3) the harmonisation of both in (what I shall call) ‘careful gestures’. In my concluding second step, I illustrate this mystical structure of Eckhartian *Bildung*—with a particular focus on the emergence of careful gestures—through the motion picture *Des Hommes et Des Dieux*.

Keywords Meister Eckhart · *Bildung* · *Of Gods and Men* · Education

What is *Bildung*?

Bildung is a notoriously stubborn term to translate from German into English. Its many linguistic varieties, including the various possible compound verb forms of *bilden* in the German language (e.g. *aus-*, *um-*, *über-*, *an-*, and *ein-bilden*), are a vivid reminder of the conceptual nuances and, with that, complexity of meaning that the German *Bildung* tradition and its terminology have accrued. Its long and fascinatingly diverse intellectual history (see Herdt 2020), of which I can only give a very rough impression, reaches all the way back to the ancient Greek concept of *paideia*: the (ideal) *coming-into-form* of the aristocratic,

✉ Katja Frimberger
katja.frimberger@strath.ac.uk

¹ Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Strathclyde Institute of Education, University of Strathclyde Glasgow, Room 636, Curran Building, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

polis citizen's mind and body for the public good (and his rising above practical concerns in leisure); the Roman aristocratic virtue of *humanitas* (ensuring Roman imperialism), and moving from thirteenth and fourteenth century medieval humanism/theology (we get to Eckhart in a moment), through the pietists and, glossing over some finer developments, to the eighteenth century, where the classic humanist philosophers (e.g. Humboldt, Herder, Hegel) came to secularise *Bildung* as the cultural-political ideal of moral-intellectual *Selbst-Bildung* (self-cultivation); made (perhaps) most famous and societally influential in Humboldt's (1964) (writings on) higher education reforms: 'Denn nur die Wissenschaft, die aus dem Innern stammt und ins Innere gepflanzt werden kann, bildet auch den Charakter um, und dem Staat ist es ebenso wenig als der Menschheit um Wissen und Reden, sondern um Charakter und Handeln zu tun' (p. 256). [For only the science which arises inwardly and can be sown inwardly re-forms the character, and neither the state nor humanity are concerned with knowledge and speeches (as such), but with character and self-guided action (my translation)].

The most common, contemporary translation of the term into English as (liberal, holistic, humanist) *education*, or, in a similar spirit, as (*self-*)*cultivation* and (*self-*)*formation* of course betray this modern, enlightenment and idealist heritage. Classic eighteenth century *Bildung's* normative subtext is inseparable from the modern invention of the individual and her/his active (self-)cultivation of an inner human essence and potentiality, vis-à-vis the more instrumental aspirations of fostering a narrow subject/skills specialisation or mere mindless adherence to external moral principles and doctrines (what Humboldt above hinted at as mere 'knowledge and speeches'). Current twenty-first century resistance to the reification and marketisation of education as institutionalised 'learnification' (Biesta 2015), and suspicion of its measures of surveillance and control (the yardsticks of fixed benchmarks, standardised testing, and canonised curricular content etc.), have, again and again, breathed new interest and life into the idea(l) of *Bildung*, prompting critical re-examination of its role in formulating a broader, holistic horizon of education beyond a merely transactional, instrumental market logic; one in which education may be conceived as the relational formation of our being-in-the-world with and through others (e.g. Taylor 2017; Miyamoto 2022; Biesta 2002).

Bildung's Secular Theology

As Stojanov (2012) reminds us in this respect, classic *Bildung's* individualism was of course not devoid of universal aspirations or exhausted in the idea of cultivating mere cultural talents, skills or personality. As a secular theology, *Bildung* transformed 'theological concepts into the modern realm of meaning' (Hotam 2019, p. 624). Here, the envisioned cultivation of the full potentiality of the inner self in the humanist liberal tradition points back to its mystical heritage. This is because humanist *self-formation* is still premised on the existence of a spiritual human essence (hidden in the depth of the human soul); one which *can* be transformed towards a future, desired state of being. Classic *Bildung's* concern with the anthropological necessity for moral-intellectual *self-formation* is then inextricably (normatively) linked to both the individual self's being formed through an active encountering and reflective, discursive engagement with a contradictory social-cultural world (beyond institutional boundaries), as well as their subsequent (moral-intellectual) *in-forming* into a more universal and future-oriented transcendent realm: humanity.

Curiously then, *Bildung*—as the process of becoming, or transforming into, a material-spiritual future Bild/image—acts as both a descriptive *and* normative account of our relational being and becoming in the world. As such, it cannot of course be reduced to a singular anthropological, humanistic or theological meaning. Given its intellectual history and, with that, mystical-pietist, philosophical, aesthetic and pedagogical inflections and intellectual amalgamations, the term can describe a process as well as an outcome (Bollenbeck 1996). It can stand for a cultural/educational aim as well as a condition (of being). *Bildung* may sketch our active, as well as a passive-receptive, contemplative and discursive and practical engagement with what appears as other to our subjectivity (people, things, ideas—even God). It describes a continuous, relational undertaking; one which may be conceived as agentic and guided by the individual of course; yet is also (necessarily) conditioned and embedded in a collectively shared world (however this otherness of world may be conceived). Here, our relational formation as *Bildung* takes intellectual-moral, but also material form through a general cultural tekhnê—that is the art of making oneself at home in the world with others. As such craft, *Bildung* may of course be (culturally) aided, misguided, yet can also be read with the classic theoreticians as universally given and gifted in and through the human spirit, or consciousness, and its inner movements (aka the inclinations of our will, intellect and senses).

The Craft of Home-Making

Here, Gadamer (2001) suggests that Hegel perhaps best summarised *Bildung*: as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end—in his image metaphor of the reflexive action verb *sich-einhausen*. *Bildung* as the tekhnê of making oneself at home in a commonly shared world with others, is here pictured as the simultaneous process of *transcending* what is our immediate and particular (Hegel would also insist 'alienated') natural life. In sum, the movement of *Bildung* is imaged as the cultivation of the art of living (in and beyond the material realm), or, as Stojanov (2012) aptly phrases it, as an entering into the 'opening of a [universal] world-horizon of meaning by and for the [culturalised] self' (p. 79). Subsequently, the key dialectical movement of *Bildung*, may be described as the (never-ending) interplay between the culturalised self's active and open practical and discursive engagement with the world (e.g. as the potentially always more universal viewpoints of diverse, culturally specific others); a movement, which constitutes the cultural self's concomitant coming into its true being—as crystallised in Hegel's idea of the universal world spirit (Stojanov 2012; Bykova 2020).

Following from this, *Bildung* is no mere theoretical enterprise of course. As Gadamer (2020) summarises: the task of *Bildung* (as formulated by Hegel) is a rising to the universal through the self-less activity of full engagement with the material world, as exemplified in the act of craftsmanship. 'In forming the object—that is, in being selflessly active and concerned with a universal—working consciousness raises itself above the immediacy of its existence to universality; or, as Hegel puts it, by forming the thing it forms itself [and becomes itself]' (p. 12). Here, we are encouraged by Gadamer to embrace the idea that *Bildung* is an element of spirit even if we cannot (or as he implies, should not) subscribe to Hegel's idea of an *absolute* spirit moving towards a completion of *Bildung* in the dissolution of concrete being, and our final de-alienation in absolute philosophical knowledge (p. 14).

The Dialectical Movement of *Bildung*

In sum, despite the receding of an explicitly pronounced divine ideal, rooted in (the Christian) God/doctrine/divine law, humanist *Bildung's* vision of human *self-cultivation*, is still framed by the same structural interaction that marked antecedent theological concepts (as I will show with Meister Eckhart's Bild-based theology in a moment). That is, the hope for *Bildung* as the transformation of the self (the cultural *and* spiritual self)—and any ensuing intentions and practices aiding to bring this transformation into being—are initiated by a transcendent, motivating horizon/ideal; one that is 'worthy of devotion' (e.g. the ideal image of humanity towards which the self is to be transformed) (Hotam 2019, p. 624). The horizon of transcendence in the humanistic concept is hereby not imagined to be outside of the realm of humanity's inner potentiality of course. In other words, the motivating transcendent ideal of humanity is neither framed through a divine image that is fully external and other to human being, nor mediated through doctrinal guidance on salvation by an external moral authority (the Church; moral law). Conversely, the transcendent ideal drawing the secular devotion (e.g. towards the ideal of human freedom and autonomy) is fully integrated into the very realm—the potential but hidden capacity—of the human essence itself. Hotam sums up this secular, yet theologically rooted, dialectical movement of humanistic *Bildung* perfectly: 'It is secular in that it focuses on the human domain alone. It is mystical in its quest to fulfil the divine demands anchored in the depth of the human self' (p. 627). In essence, it is the dialectical structure of *Bildung*, which moves in-between transcendent/ideal and material images and, as such, spiritualises the process of making ourselves at home in the (material) world, which manifests humanist *Bildung's* theological heritage and rootedness.

Here, it is in particular the Bild-based theology of Dominican friar Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), which significantly shaped the conceptual language to conceive of this dialectical movement of *Bildung*, as the relational formation of the imago dei (the image of God/das Bild Gottes) in the human soul and the outwardness of aesthetic-material action (see also Herdt 2020, p. 31). As I will show, Eckhart does not only give conceptual shape to *Bildung* as the craft of making oneself at home in the world with others. His theology also foreshadows humanistic *Bildung's* integration of the divine into the human domain.

The Paper's Aim: Mapping the Craft of *Bildung*

What I sought to highlight then with my rather eclectic introductory sketch of the tradition, is *Bildung's* intellectual breadth of influences. Given its diverse intellectual history, *Bildung's* meaning may be perhaps said to unfold only in our own continuous reflection on its dialectical movement and interplay of this (material and ideal/transcendent) *sich-einhausen* as its broad secular-theological horizon of meaning; a scholarly undertaking, which must of course embrace those pedagogical phenomena that transcend the boundaries of educational institutions. My aim for this paper is then twofold. Firstly, to further clarify the conceptual structure of *Bildung's* dialectical movement (in-between the material and ideal realm), I will look more closely at *Bildung's* mystical heritage, drawing on key writings of medieval theologian Meister Eckhart, esp. his *Talks of Instructions*, his German *Sermons* and his *Book of Divine Consolations* (Eckhart and Davies 1994). In my second step, I will then bring to life this dialectical movement of *Bildung* in a film example. As I will show,

Eckhartian *Bildung* as the (still relevant) general tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world, is aptly illustrated in the French film *Des Hommes et Des Dieux* (*Of Gods and Men*).

The Film: *Des Hommes et Des Dieux* (Of Gods and Men)

Directed by Xavier Beauvois, produced by Étienne Comar and starring a group of renowned French actors, such as Lambert Wilson (Prior Christian) and Michael Lonsdale (Brother Luc), *Des Hommes et Des Dieux* dramatises the life (of nine) and death (of seven) Cistercian Trappist monks at the Tibherine monastery of *Our Lady of Atlas* in Algeria. The film is based on the monks' everyday life and death during the Algerian Civil War—roughly between 1993 and 1996—the year the real monks were abducted and killed. As latest evidence suggests, the Brothers likely died as collateral damage in the power struggle between the Algerian army and Islamist groups. Seven of the monks were (officially) abducted by the Groupe Islamiste Armé (Armed Islamist Group) and held prisoner for two months before being killed. These were Prior Christian de Chergé and Brothers Célestin (Ringard), Michel (Fleury), Bruno (born Christian Lemarchand), Christophe (Lebreton), Luc (born Paul Dochier), and Paul (Favre-Miville). Two of the monks—Brother Amédée (Noto) and Jean-Pierre (Schumacher)—were able to hide from their kidnappers when they entered the monastery. They survived and continued *Our Lady of Atlas* in Morocco at the monastery of Midelt (Salenson 2009).

Of Gods and Men focuses on the Brothers' lived relationships with each other, and their Muslim neighbours in the nearby villages—depicting their daily individual and social activities of prayer, work (e.g. in the monastery's garden and kitchen), interactions in Brother's Luc's doctor's surgery, as well as social gatherings, such as shared meals and festivities (e.g. a Khatna celebration in the nearby village). The film also explores two encounters with the Islamist guerrillas and Algerian army, which culminated in the monks' abduction and eventual assassination. Refusing to take sides in the play of power or leave the country (when their neighbours didn't want them to), the monks opted instead to stay loyal to the everyday relationships they had built with their Muslim neighbours and co-workers in Tibherine (Lebreton 2014). Pointing to the threat to all of Algerian society, including the Algerian Church, at the time of the Civil War, Archbishop Emeritus Henri Teissier, in the preface to Brother Christophe's posthumously published prayer journal (Lebreton 2014, p. xii), explains that the monks' personal struggle, mirrored all the difficult decisions and actions that had to be taken by all the people of Algeria at the time. As such, their situation, as depicted in the film, was not unique, yet also reflects a more universal story. And for the purpose of my paper, I wish to add that the film's story allows a phenomenological glimpse of the universal task and drama of *Bildung* (including its hopeful and tragic dimensions)—as the craft of making oneself at home in the world with and through others.

As I will elaborate further in the second part of the paper, *Des Hommes et Des Dieux's* focuses on the Tibherine monks' cultivation of (what I will call with Eckhart) 'care-ful(l) everyday gestures'. These do not only illustrate *Bildungs'* Eckhartian dialectical, conceptual structure, but poignantly remind us of *Bildung's* still relevant, broad normative horizon. In sum, following Eckhart and *Of Gods and Men's* depiction of *Bildung*, education is conceived as the general tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world with, and through, others (which can of course also include the divine other as a dimension of world). But before I turn to the film's

illustration of Eckhartian *Bildung*, let me start with my first step, in which I will map the medieval Dominican theologian's concept of *Bildung*.

Meister Eckhart's *Bildung*

(Johannes) Eckhart von Hochheim's OP (aka Meister Eckhart's) creative use of the German language's penchant for pre-fixes in his Bild-based theology (Bild: image; *Bildung*: the process of formation of the image; bilden; the act of image-ing) pictures the multi-directional nature of the movement of *Bildung*; one that operates in-between the ideal/transcendent and material realm. As such, it takes form as a (given) gift, which in turn requires human receptivity, yet also the concomitant active *self-cultivation* of the imago Dei—culminating in the acquisition of the tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world (what we may call with Eckhart careful everyday gestures, as I will show later). As already hinted at, the Dominican, medieval theologian's depiction of this dialectical double movement of *Bildung* in-between an innate, given/gifted and, simultaneously, future-oriented (and actively cultivated) image of an ideal relation to God, foreshadows humanist education's integration of *Bildung*'s transcendent horizon of meaning—from the divine into the human realm. With the complexity of Eckhart's oeuvre in mind, I will focus in this first part of the paper on three key features, which frame his conception of this received-and-cultivated dialectical movement of the 'Bild'—the imago Dei—(i.e. its *Bildung*) in the human soul and in human action. In my second step, I will then map this Eckhartian mystical structure of *Bildung* in *Of Gods and Men's* moving images.

By way of an initial definition, Eckhart's three key characteristics of *Bildung* pertain to the relationship between these gifted and cultivated dimensions:

1. The initiating movement of *Bildung* through self-giving divine grace, which starts to *de-image* the self out of human knowledge and *in-forms* it instead into divine will (he calls this detachment). This given feature of *Bildung* constitutes its gifted (ontological) dimension.
2. The human intentional *cultivation* of spiritual and practical-material skills, which is to follow from the divine initiation. Here, we are to further *motivate* the full *in-forming* (Einbildung) into God's will and detachment from human concepts (including our concepts of God). This feature of *Bildung* pictures the active dimension of *self-formation*, which presupposes free choice, aka moral freedom (this feature can of course be clearly traced in the later humanist tradition).
3. The third key feature refers to the fruition of *Bildung*, as the tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world with others (including the divine *other*). This becomes visible in (what I shall refer to as) Eckhart's careful(l) everyday gestures. Here, the gifted movement of *Bildung*, and the active and free human cultivation of the Bild/imago Dei, have harmonised into human actions in the material world, which also point back to its motivating transcendent horizon. In sum, Eckhart's careful everyday gestures (which I will also trace in *Of Gods and Men* later) act as a double reflection of the incarnated craft/tekhnê of *Bildung* (to stay with Eckhart's theological language).

The Gift of Bildung

In his Sermon 5, Eckhart (Eckhart and Davies 1994) points us to his concept of 'detachment', which is pivotal for understanding the first conceptual feature of *Bildung*'s initiating movement: divine grace, as the gift of transformation.

When I preach, I am accustomed to talk about detachment [Gelassenheit] saying that we should become free of ourselves and of all things. Secondly, I say that we should be in- formed back into the simple goodness, which is God. Thirdly, I say that we should be mindful of the great nobility which God has given the soul in order that we should become wonderfully united with him. Fourthly, I speak of the purity of the divine nature, and of the radiance within it which is ineffable. God is a word: an unspoken word. (p. 127–128)

The movement of *Bildung*—the *becoming* (image-ing) of the imago Dei/image of God—is described by Eckhart as the relational process of the human soul's *in-forming* (ein-bilden) into God's presence (his 'simple goodness') and a concomitant *de-forming/de-imaging* (ent-bilden)¹ out of those concepts that populate—as finite images—our intellect's² epistemological and ontological horizon. *Bildung* as the movement of *de-imaging* and *detachment* conceptually claims human receptivity/passivity as the precondition for a (potentially total) transformation of self whose initiation can however only be gifted (by a radically *other*—here: God). In Eckhart, the process of *Bildung* as the becoming 'free of ourselves and things' is then connected to a ceasing of our soul's intentional activities, i.e. the powers of the will, intellect and sensory appetites. In other words, we are to lose egoic attachment to those *familiar* concepts, objects and desires that normally image sensory, material reality to our minds. Most importantly for Eckhart however, it is God's continuous action of grace—his active 'ennobling' of the human soul—which initiates our moral-intellectual transformation, in which *Bildung* appears (firstly and simply) as the gift of being (human).

Poverty of Spirit and Fullness of Being

Importantly, Eckhart argues that the light of the intellect must witness to its own poverty, so that the mind may be transformed towards 'an unknowing knowing that cannot ever exist' (Sermon 25, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 224). The nakedness of human knowing lauded by Jesus in the first Beatitude³—that is the 'blessedness of those who are poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3, KJV)—becomes for Eckhart the very precondition for *Bildung*. As the cultivation of the mind's stillness and receptivity for the otherness of God, the knowledge of not knowing (God) de-images us out of our exiting concepts of the world. Accordingly, it is also described as the pivotal spiritual gesture to bring forth the further *in-formation* (Einbildung) into the imago Dei. Here, in the birthing of the Son (aka God, the Holy Spirit) in the still soul, the human self, despite losing its ego and attachment to sensory objects and subsequent concepts, does not however *lack* being. Instead, it is only in and through

¹ Eckhart does not use the term *ent-bilden* in this particular excerpt from Sermon 5.

² For Eckhart, the intellect is part of the power's of the soul. *Intellectus* has the capacity to take on the form of the objects it cognises and (kind of) becomes them, but in and of itself the intellect is not a being with form. (Flasch et al. 2015).

³ 'Beatitudes' are the blessings mentioned by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3–11).

this poverty of spirit that the human self is seen by Eckhart to come into its *full* potential and true being. Here, in the event of the loss of (cultural) self, the soul is to become *fully itself* again. It reaches its full potential when being taken into the divine otherness beyond being from where it emerged and to whom it is called back (also betraying Eckhart's Platonist influence).

The movement of *in-formation* (Einbildung) into the form of God (which ultimately stays mysterious) is concomitantly fostered by an intentional honing of a disposition of quieting the mind. It is in the disciplined cultivation of an active (spiritual) habit of inner listening and self-knowledge that we learn to 'break through things and learn to grasp God in them' (p. 9). Here, we are to practice the discernment between the motion of the spirit (i.e. the divine 'other' image) in the soul and the finite worldly images (of familiar objects, people and concepts, even ourselves) that populate and divert the mind. Hence, knowledge of a God who exceeds material being can always only be symbolic as it concerns human culture (knowledge, art etc.). Eckhart further details this epistemological/ontological conundrum in his Sermon 25: 'Neither the skills of all creatures, nor your own wisdom, not the whole extent of your knowledge can bring you to the point that you have a divine knowledge of God' (Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 224). The dialectical movement of *Bildung*, although seen to draw us towards God, neither enables us to ever fully speak or figure God's (ontological) otherness; nor does the call to *Bildung* allow us to simply bypass or dismiss the material dimension of world. As with the later humanist tradition (as we have seen in Hegel—Gadamer gave the example of craftsmanship), Eckhart insists (as we will see in a moment) that it is only through the self-less activity of full engagement with the material world that we *in-form* (einbilden) into a more universal ontological horizon (for Eckhart: participation in the divine life/Oneness).

Picturing God in the Everyday

In this regard, McCabe (1992), drawing on Aquinas and McInerney (1998), further reminds us that the craftsmanship of religious art is not only to connect us to God's mystery as an ontological horizon. Religious imagery points both to the richness *and* the limits of any cultural (human-bound) art forms to make this mystery of being tangible in mimesis. McCabe explains the distinction between religious metaphors and analogies. The image-based metaphors at the heart of, for example, scriptural language indeed richly refer to the materiality of bodies, space and time. They picture God (e.g. in the Old Testament) as a shepherd looking after his flock (Psalm 23); a potter who fashions people as clay (Sirach 33); a mother who cannot forget the child she bore (Isaiah 49); a lover in search for his beloved (Song of Songs 2); both protector from harm (Sirach 51) and avenger of harm (Psalm 99). Religious language is in fact overabundant with oftentimes contradictory and competing images taken from everyday life, embedded in shared human experience of a material world. These materially-bound images remind us thereby that God cannot be captured in any *one*, static image bound to our sensory apparatus. It follows that the otherness of God may only be glimpsed in—between the *moving* images. That is, the dialectical (Eckhartian) *movement* of *Bildung* is constituted in the movement of the imago Dei in-between cultural expression and its always other-to-being ontological horizon.

McCabe further explains that analogies, like those that God is Love, Goodness, Justice—allow us to speak about God *literally*, rather than just metaphorically. This means that analogies do not take recourse to the material world as such, but point silently beyond

the specific cultural expression and everyday image. Here, McCabe suggests that analogies are our human 'way of asserting that the riches of religious imagery are more than the art form of a particular culture (though, of course, there are also that) but are part of our access to a mystery beyond our understanding, which we do not create, but which rather creates us and our understanding and our whole world' (p. 59). In sum, even our literal analogies of God (e.g. God is Love) are our human way of signalling that the movement of *Bildung* as the general tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world (e.g. through intellectual understanding and practical doing/making), is (continuously) catalysed by acknowledging the continuous mystery of being.

Here, *Bildung* as the potential 'grasping' of the imago Dei Bild (either intellectually or in mimesis), then simultaneously comprises fullness as well as nothingness. In essence, the imago Dei is all the (material, everyday) images presented in religious art and imagery—yet concurrently, it also exceeds all those mimetic presentations. This means that the mystery of God can never be fully rendered present and understood through a (finite) cultural image—that is any human cultural expression. As such, the imago Dei is then also nothingness. It *exceeds* all possible forms—and may only be described as the dialectical movement of *Bildung*, drawing our minds (hands, heart) towards this unceasing ontological otherness, as the mystery of being. In sum, *Bildung* as the craft of making oneself at home in the world with and through others is a never-ending task. And as Hegel, Gadamer and Eckhart would agree and rightly correct: *Bildung* is to be understood as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, or a task—not even that of finally understanding/picturing God.

Bildung's Aesthetics of Embodiment

Consequently, we are to recognise and appreciate our materially-bound images (i.e. all images of reality we can picture to our intellect and senses, including the metaphors and analogies of religious language) for what they really are. They are not a finite grasp of divine being, or the Word itself, but well-crafted, beautiful⁴ gestures that 'all point to God and to his birth' (Sermon 25, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 228). In other words, they are gestures that image the continuous movement of *Bildung* as an end in itself. In this moment of comprehending this movement of *Bildung* as the (never-ceasing) birthing of the fullness of (divine) being in all creation, Eckhart proposes, God indeed satisfies our mind and our senses. In the act of recognising these silent, yet beautiful human-made cultural gestures (e.g. in the case of art-making), God infuses our will, our senses and intellect with joy and delight—gifting us 'consolation, bliss and contentment' (Sermon 21, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 193). Here, freed from an instrumental means-end thinking—*Bildung* is then understood as a continuous informing into the mystery being—an unknowing knowing, rather than a finite grasping of the otherness of God. As a result, our rational and sensory faculties may indeed rightly delight in producing and reading cultural expressions that silently point to this mystery (of the unspeakable Word). This can include of course any artwork, like films (not just religious ones), or even embodied, everyday cultural activities (as I will now show), which render present this mystery of the full-ness and no-thing-ness of being.

⁴ Beauty, according to Aquinas and McInerney (1998), is what draws our will, intellect and desire towards the Good—not only the good action but also its motivating ontological horizon (i.e. God).

Aside from the question of craftsmanship in art, the issue is then of course raised as to what everyday aesthetic (as the art of *Bildung* in day-to-day living) may render present this movement of *Bildung* in the ‘right’ way. In short, what is the adequate response to the gifted givenness of being (as self-giving Love; God’s never-ceasing birth—to stay with Eckhart’s terminology)? This is then not (only) a question of identifying the prudent adherence to a human, moral principles, e.g. the Aristotelian virtues. In his Sermon 5, Eckhart provides us with the metaphor of the kiss, helping us to further image the possible nature of the human response to the divine address (what we might term the call to *Bildung*). He quotes from the prophet Jeremiah: ‘The Lord stretched out his hand and touched my mouth and spoke to me’ (Jeremiah 1: 9–10). The stretching out of God’s hand, for Eckhart, symbolises the movement of the Holy Spirit touching the mouth of the human soul—as in a kiss between lovers. In this ‘kiss of the soul, (...) the mouth is joined to mouth, (...) the father gives birth to the son in the soul and the soul is “spoken to” ‘ – i.e. called to *Bildung* (p. 130). Being kissed and spoken to by God—the (mouth of) the human soul desires to return the affection and merge into the utopian no-place of ‘divine radiance’ from which it emerged (p. 128). Accordingly, Eckhart is careful to note that the peaceful (aka detached) mind is to pay attention to what spiritual or material gesture may embody the more *beautiful* (aka right everyday aesthetic) response to this kiss as the (everyday) call to *Bildung*.

Hence, the rendering present of (divine) Beauty in art-making or everyday living cannot be fully pre-planned or calculated, e.g. by adherence to preset principles. Here, the act of good will, when ‘suffering the loss of all things for God’s sake and depriving ourselves of consolation in love for the sake of love’ (Talks of Instruction 11, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 18), might result in an unplanned aesthetic form of embodiment. In other words, the loss of self, when drawn to respond to the call of the imago Dei (in everyday life), may involve the abandonment of a positive, and perhaps much desired, contemplative moment for a practical act of charity (or vice versa). Yet, in order to inhabit this responsive mode of being, one must of course have cultivated a set of practical, material skills (even human virtues) that allow for such potentially unplannable, creative and ‘spontaneous’ embodiment of a (theological) virtue like Love (read as analogous with God), especially when it may take multiple beautiful forms. Eckhart writes: ‘(...) even if you are in such ecstasy as St Paul was, and knew of a sick person who asked for a bowl of soup from you, then I would consider it far better for you to leave your ecstasy for the sake of love and to administer to the needy person in a love that is greater’ (*Talks of Instruction 10*, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 17).

Martha’s Bildung: Rational Actions

By way of example for such creatively beautiful rendering of Love (as analogous with God), Eckhart provides a fascinating re-reading of the well-known parable of Jesus’ visit to the sisters Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 38–42, KJV) in his *Sermon 21*. Here, he notes the ‘blessedness’ of Martha’s skilful practical gestures of hospitality over Mary’s spiritual contemplation (Eckhart and Davies 1994, from p. 193). Martha’s busy acts of hospitality are read by Eckhart not as a merely causal effect of her obedience to abstract, human virtues.⁵ He lauds her care as reflecting her re-organised (umgebildet) will and her intentional

⁵ Wivestadt (2008) makes the fascinating point that in the Aristotelian virtue tradition, ‘happiness is to realise manly moral and intellectual virtues – *virtues* in Latin is related to *vir*—a male person, and this corresponds to Greek *arete* and *aner*’ (pp. 312–313). Martha and Mary are here the unlikely heroes of the

cultivation of spiritual and practical skills. In other words, her material actions of welcome are seen to render present the beauty of the gift of *Bildung*. And as such, they are also an expression of Martha's moral freedom: she autonomously responded to the gift of being (or what Eckhart calls the kiss of the soul; or what I termed the call to *Bildung*). As such, although Martha's actions are informed by her knowledge and practical cultivation of the virtues, they are however not read as merely performing good works as a mechanism of salvation. Instead, Eckhart qualifies Martha's gestures of kindness as rational actions.

Although they might look the same from the outside, rational actions vis-à-vis good works, for Eckhart, ultimately point *beyond the works* as a mechanism of salvation, or outward sign of cultivated, human virtue (e.g. Aristotelian *phronesis*, adherence to moral law). Thence, rational actions are claimed as beautiful embodiments of Eckhartian *Bildung*. In essence, they manifest a (culturally) recognisable human virtue of course. Yet, at the same time, they also point to a greater horizon of meaning (beyond being), best described as Martha's personalised response to (and rendering present of) unconditional *agape*.⁶ Correspondingly, Martha's actions are, for Eckhart, the embodied aesthetic outflow of a reorganised good will and intellect; one that has grown out of a call and response dynamic to the gift of *agape*. Here, Martha actively (and morally autonomously) participates in the dialectical movement of self-giving, unconditional Love (also symbolised in Jesus' spontaneous visit) as its transcendent, motivating horizon. The gifted movement of *Bildung* (imaged in the self-giving gesture of divine grace) and the responding spiritual and material gestures cultivated by (morally free) humans, have harmonised into care-ful(l) gestures. They constitute the fruition of the incarnated imago Dei *Bild*. In sum, Martha's care images the art of *Bildung* as the responsive, everyday craft(ing) of making oneself at home in the world with others (including the divine other).

Martha's Care-ful(l) Gestures

Martha's gestures of caring for Jesus' and her sister Mary's physical and psychological well-being (Luke 10: 38–42), are hereby not read by Eckhart as concern (in German: *Sorge*)—a state of worrying about the things of the world. They are not interpreted as an attachment to concepts and actions that mirror (only) human virtues, so that Martha's busyness could be labelled as an obstacle to her spiritual formation—i.e. her ability to attend to the Word/Jesus fully (the way the story is often interpreted).

Therefore he said "you are careful" [in German: *sorgsam*, not *sorgenvoll* – which would mean *full of worry*], meaning: "you are in the midst of things, but things are not in you". They who are careful are unhindered in their actions. They are unhindered whose works conform to the eternal light. Such people are among things but not in them (*Sermon 21*, Eckhart and Davies 1994, p. 196).

To the contrary, Eckhart re-reads Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha as a relational address of Martha's perfected *Bildung*. The biblical story pictures Martha as the older and more

Footnote 5 (continued)

Christian notion of *agape*, expressed in their moral freedom to respond (with care) to Jesus' presence (as the ultimate equal yet also always other).

⁶ Wivestadt (2008) explains the difference between Aristotelian friendship and Aquinas's *agape*, *amicitia honesti* and *amicitia caritatis*, as the difference between love as finite, conditional human virtue and unconditional love that emerges from divine goodness.

mature of the two, who has grown *past* her attachment to her sensory/intellectual desires. In turn, Mary is pictured sitting at Jesus' feet lost in reverie and rather attached to her pleasure in listening, and being close to, the Word. In turn, Martha is described to perform her actions out of her peaceful resting in the knowledge of being loved by God. As a pedagogical model of a (detached) mind, Martha is shown to be at peace even amidst her busy but freely chosen gestures of caring for the material needs of her friends and family. In fact, her material gestures have become a powerful expression of Martha's embodiment of the *double movement* of the imago Dei's *Bildung*—in the inwardness of the human soul and the outwardness of aesthetic-material action. Her care-ful(l) care—amidst things but not attached to them—renders present the double movement of *Bildung* as the 'perfection in [and interfolding of] eternal as well as temporal being' (p. 195).

Concomitantly, Eckhart reads Martha's concern for her sister Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet so that she can listen to the Word, not as worldly ignorance about the importance of attending to the spiritual contemplation of God's mystery—*above all* material matters. He does not interpret Martha's plea to Jesus, to tell Mary to help her to welcome him, as a telling—off of her sister. Eckhart instead frames Martha's seeming complaint about her sister's laziness as a form of 'affectionate, loving teasing'; one that comes from a loving good will for her younger sister (p. 194). Martha is here seen as concerned with her sister's *Bildung*—expressed (counter-intuitively) in Mary's *lack* of engagement in the craft of making herself at home in the material world with and through others. Seemingly worried that Mary might not ever learn to move *past* her egoic desires to refine the art of *Bildung*, Martha turns to Jesus for advice. 'Martha feared that her sister would remain trapped in her pleasant feelings and in the sweetness, and she wishes that her sister might become as herself was' (p. 199). Jesus, in turn, points Martha back to her own careful(l) gestures. He tells her to 'be at peace', that is to continue to rest in her knowledge of the gift of self-giving divine Love (as *Bildung's* ontological dimension). And Jesus affirms in Luke's parable that 'Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:42, KJV).

Mary's Bildung: Ecstatic Gestures

Curiously then, Eckhart maintains that Jesus signals to Martha that her younger sister is not at the end of her *Bildungs-journey*. Hence, he assures Martha that Mary, in her own time and way, will indeed also respond to the divine kiss and call to *Bildung*—to cultivate her mind and hands (and heart). In time, he assures Martha, Mary will also render present that double (gifted-cultivated) dimension of *Bildung*—from an inner stillness and moral freedom, that will allow her to refine this art and bring forth her own unique care-ful(l) gestures. Correspondingly, Mary's own aesthetic embodiment of *Bildung* may be observed in her ecstatic response to Jesus' resurrection of her beloved brother Lazarus depicted in the Gospel of John (John 11:1–44, KJV).⁷ Here, Jesus is shown to grieve with the family of

⁷ Please note that I am glossing over the discussion of Mary of Bethany's (Martha's sister's) inter-figurality with the figure of Mary Magdalene here. The Gospel of John, unlike the other gospels, blurs both Marys' characteristics into the Gnostic figure of Mary (Magdalene). This seems in contradiction to latest scholarly insight that the two Marys are indeed clearly distinct figures. Please refer to Beavis' article (2012) for a detailed discussion of some of the hermeneutic merits of John's 'gnostic' merge', which foregrounds Mary of Bethany. I chose to connect the three parables in Luke and John to illustrate Eckhart's point around the *Bildung* of careful gestures; the formation of which the story around Mary's anointing seems to nicely illustrate (even if she might not actually have been the same Mary that sat at Jesus' feet).

Bethany (Martha, Mary, Lazarus) who he is pronounced in the Bible to 'love' (John 11:5; 11:36). His spiritual gesture is accompanied by a practical one: he resurrects Lazarus from the dead. Although John's Gospel does not directly indicate Mary's joy at the moment of her beloved brother's home-coming; she is depicted as returning Jesus' gesture of unconditional love (even transcending death) at yet another scene of hospitality at Martha's house (a chapter later, in John 12:3). Often interpreted as Mary's prophetic foreshadowing of Christ's death and resurrection (John 12:7), Mary's gesture of anointing Jesus' feet with expensive, fragrant oil—and wiping them with her hair—also echoes the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs, including the searching lover's beautifully fragrant perfumes and ointments (Song of Songs 3:6; 4:10; Beavis 2012).

When read in relation to Eckhart's emphasis on careful gestures, Mary's practical act of love might then also be read as a visible reflection of her *Bildung*, which Martha seemed so concerned about in Eckhart's Sermon 21. Here, Mary still sits listening at Jesus' feet, but is now shown as attending to the Word spiritually *and* practically (and notably, Martha does not complain about her to Jesus either). Mary enacts her own, distinct care-ful(l) gesture as an Eckhartian rational action—as a response to Jesus' own spiritual-material act of love as agape (resurrecting her brother). Pointing to the double movement in-between divine grace and the cultivated virtue from which her ecstatic (aka self-transcending) gesture emerges, Mary's act of care 'fills the house with the oil's beautiful fragrance' (John 12:3). Her gesture (symbolised as a beautiful fragrance) renders present the unspeakable, yet beautiful response to God's gift of being—made tangible in the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection.

In stark contrast, Judas draws Jesus' attention only to the sphere of human virtues, that is the calculable, transactional value of Mary's labour of love. He complains that she could have fed the poor with the sale of her ointment. Instead of lauding her rational, and ultimately incalculable labour of love, as an ecstatic embodiment of the mystery of an even greater Love (and thus as a sign of Mary's *Bildung*), Judas points to her lack of good works as a mechanism of salvation. And perhaps she is also judged to feel and act rather too creatively and excessively (and out of the box) for her actions to be considered 'morally excellent'—i.e. a 'well-balanced cooperation between desire and thinking' as phronesis (Wivestad 2008, p. 314). Although John is of course also quick to remind us that Judas was so attached to the world of things (particularly money) that he did not really care about virtues or the poor anyway, as he stole from the commonly owned public purse (John 12:6; Beavis 2012). Concomitantly, the beauty of Mary's craft (gesture) of *Bildung*—as a reflection of her ever more refined making herself at home in agape—was evidently also lost on him.

In-Formations into a Greater Love in *Of Gods and Men*

In step 1, I established Eckhart's mystical structure of *Bildung* as the tekhnê of making oneself at home in the world—a claim that reaches through to the humanist tradition (e.g. Hegel). Acknowledging the complexity of Eckhart's writings, I focused on what I called his triple process of formation. Here, the *Bildung* of the imago Dei/Bild Gottes emerges *in-between* the double movement of gifted, divine grace and the human, morally free cultivation of spiritual and material skills, towards the harmonising of both movements into careful(l) gestures (as in Eckhart's example of Martha's hospitality). In my concluding step, I will now illustrate this mystical structure of *Bildung* in the motion picture *Of Gods and Men* (Beauvois 2010). Here, particular attention will be paid to Eckhart's third key feature

of *Bildung*: the emergence of everyday care-ful(l) gestures as an embodied pointer to the (divine, formless) movement *in-between* images and rendering present of agape.

The real monks of Tibherine indeed framed their own discipleship within the context of this mystical structure of *Bildung* (even if they did not use the word). Christian Chergé (1990), prior of the Tibherine monastery, articulates the Brothers' keen attention to the relational formation of careful everyday gestures in his address at the Journées Romaines⁸:

People praying amidst other people praying ... nothing could be explained outside a constant communal presence and the faithfulness of each member to humble reality, from the gate of the gardens, from the kitchen to the lectio divina and in to the liturgy of hours. The dialogue that thus came to be constructed has its forms, which are essentially characterised by the fact that we never take the initiative. I would like to define it as being existential. It is the outcome of a long 'living together' and of shared concerns; ones that are at times very concrete. This means that it is rarely of a strictly theological character (...).

In this existential dimension of embodied, lived-in dialogue, the *Bildung* (of the imago Dei) is not thought to be rendered present by speaking *the Word* only abstractly and systematically, i.e. through theology (although this of course has its place). Chergé suggests instead that an embodied dialogue—as a gestural pointer to unspeakable divine agape (as the ever-present birthing of being)—is hoped to, first and foremost, form *in-between* the various moving images that constitute the manifold human gestures of a shared neighbourly and contemplative, monastic life. Here, the continuous birth of the formless form of divine being (manifested in the movement of *Bildung*) is not expressed in one static image of Love (neither as good practical work, devotional practice nor of doing theology)—or a series of separate images, which are not in dialogue. The mystery of the presence of a greater Love beyond being (and any theologising about it) is here hoped to be witnessed, first and foremost, from within this existential, everyday aesthetic of an embodied dialogue. That is, a picturing of God (as Love) is to arise *in-between* the *moving* images of a shared communal life and the many cultural/material forms that Love (as agape) may take within these contexts. These lived-in metaphors imaging the otherness of God's presence here emerge from (and blur) mundane and sacred gestures: the pruning of apple trees, washing the dishes, celebrating and grieving with neighbours, observing the daily office, performing the lectio divina, and 'doing' theology (Lebreton 2014). With Eckhart, we shall also add that these *moving*, dialogic everyday gestures are to orient us towards the beauty of *Bildung*. In the film, this Eckhartian dimension of *Bildung*, is perhaps best exemplified in prior Christian's last speech (during their 'last supper', shortly before their abduction), where he reflects on the Brothers' faithful maintenance of the everyday in the face of the ever increasing threat of violence.⁹

The incarnation, for us, is to allow the filial reality of Jesus to embody itself in our humanity, in what we are going to live. The mystery of incarnation remains in what

⁸ This address seems to have been part of activities of the *The Pontifical Council for Non-Christians*, which was established by Pope Paul VI in the midst of the Second Vatican Council, which "initiated the Church into a new awareness of the importance of dialogue both inside and outside the Church". The Council was later renamed *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (Dicastery of Interreligious Dialogue 2023).

⁹ My thanks goes to Stein Wivestad for pointing me to this scene as a great example for the Eckhartian movement of *Bildung*.

we are going to live. In this way, what we have already lived here takes root as well in what we are going to live in the future (Scene excerpt from 1:38.50–1:41.10).¹⁰

We are to be drawn from the existential praxis of lived relations and 'faithfulness to humble reality' towards doctrine. That is, the mystery of the incarnation, culturally captured in the teaching/doctrine of the true humanity and true divinity of Jesus (McCabe 1985, p. 7), is to be sensed and understood through the faithful, embodied maintenance of the here and now. In sum, the monks' everyday aesthetic of living is to gesture to—and render present—a future and motivating horizon (understanding the mystery of the incarnation), which, at the same time, has also already arrived in faith, where temporal relations of present and future interfold in the monks' everyday gestures.

Faithfulness to Everyday Reality

The film *Des Hommes et Des Dieux* indeed directs the viewers' attention to the monks' fidelity to everyday reality. This is reflected not only in the composition of frames, but also in the length of time shots 'linger' on the monks' individual and shared gestures. The camera, like the Brothers, performs a mimetic faithfulness to capturing the existential dimension of humble reality. This mimetic faithfulness is here not a mere fidelity and ontological obviousness, like the evident morality of a good or bad character, or the nature of a finite reality that we can fully image to our intellect/senses or, in turn, through the camera lens and onto a cinema screen. At the start of the film, the camera indeed patiently lingers to capture what is given: an image of a well-rehearsed, ritualised and lived-in contemplative life. To give the reader a sense of this everyday aesthetic pictured in the film, I will describe the first three scenes:

A wide shot of the Algerian Atlas: an open, wild landscape. The sun breaks through the clouds over a silhouetted mountainscape that sprawls into the distance. River veins wind through a broad, green valley down below. There is no obvious sign of human activity. Only at a closer look do we make out houses, perhaps even small settlements, dots built into the side of the mountains. Next we are taken into the confines of a rather narrow and dimly lit stone corridor, lined with equally spaced, plain ceiling lights and rooms with open doors lining both sides of this long hallway. Three monks in white tunics and black hooded cowls walk in a straight line – perfectly centre frame - in slow but steady gait down the corridor, keeping even distance between each other.

A fourth monk moves into shot, falling into the same rhythmic step. Only one of the four has his black hood up. Then a fifth monk appears slightly behind the others. He does not join into the same rhythmic step. Focused as he is on adjusting his belt, he veers slightly off-centre to the left; his shoulder rubbing against the wall, then – catching up with the others - disappears out of sight. It must be early. He seemed tired. As the four fade into the background of the shot, an older monk, smaller and thinner than the others, leaves his room. He closes the door behind him. He is not as fast as the others. His small, yet determined, footsteps echo irregularly on the stone floor. He takes more time to make his way along the corridor. The camera lingers on

¹⁰ For an exploration of Christian de Chergé's 'Theology of Hope', please refer to Salenson's (2010) book.

him – and the opening credits roll – until he turns off the light and turns left out of shot.

We are now taken into a simple church room. Algerian tiling along the back of a room with blue painted stone walls all around. Our eyes are drawn to three candles that light a cross, the crucified Jesus standing out from the crucifix' golden background. It is the brightest object in the room, as it is still dark outside the windows. A simple wooden altar is placed on a well-worn red carpet, a monk in its shadow rings the church bell in a steady regular rhythm. The monks sit all centre frame, facing each other. They seem lost in contemplation, or perhaps just tired, falling asleep. One monk is rubbing his eyes, another is adjusting his tunic, two monks kneel on the floor with their heads bowed at different angles. Then they slowly rise – all at different speeds. Their movements are slow, heavy, tired, yet present in their own individual ways. Tiredness and personal devotion shape the embodied form of their shared religious gesture. They are holding the morning vigil - greeting the sunrise and consecrating the course of the day together. It is no later than 4am. We hear the steady ringing of the bell, the rustling of the habits. The monk who rang the bell so rhythmically now carefully folds away the rope. He leaves his position (covering a yawn), and, bible in hand, carefully bows in front of the altar, then joins his Brothers, who now stand in two rows turned to face the altar and the cross. The first perfect choreography in the film follows. The monk at the back of the right row knocks on the wooden bench twice. The sign to step one step inwards. All monks move and make the sign of the cross in perfect unison and perfect silence. They bow their heads, then take a step outwards towards the bench again. After 2:44 min. of silence, we hear the first sound of human voices in the film. The Brothers chant Psalm 51:15: 'Signeur – ouvre me lèvres, et ma bouche publiera ta louange' (O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth your praise, KJV). The day can begin.

As viewers, we likely recognise this portrayal of the monastic life, even if we have no personal investment in it—furnished as it is with recognisable objects, spaces, and roles. And at first glance, there is indeed uniformity to these images of monasticism: the plain corridor, the simple church room, the uniform lamps, doors, candles, all evenly spaced, monks all dressed in the same habits, walking at even pace, praying, singing together in unison, all in centre frame. The camera captures a universal, static image of monks doing what monks do, we presume, anywhere in the world. But the longer the camera faithfully lingers to capture these everyday scenes of (supposed) uniformity and mundanity—the static image *moves* us beyond the material references. In other words, as viewers, we observe, perhaps sense (intuit), the relational structure of *Bildung* that moves the monks' everyday gestures as framed by the camera. Lingering, spending time with the monks doing what monks do, we (as viewers) begin to not only see their differences in age, in body shape, in personality perhaps. More importantly for my paper, the longer we look, the longer we linger with these ordinary scenes and gestures (especially in the face of the extra-ordinary threat of violence that could undermine the everyday at any moment), we also—to say it with Eckhart—break through (aka attend differently to) the images' (purely) material references and start to become curious about the ontological horizon motivating these aesthetic embodiments of the art of home-making.

Throughout the film, the camera takes us back, again and again, to the spaces, actions and faces that we have already encountered. We observe the liturgical gestures in the church, including the ringing of the bell and the taking on and off of the black work cowl. We return to the gestures of planting and building in the garden, cleaning the dishes in the

kitchen and mopping the hallways. We watch the joyful celebratory gestures, as well as the gestures of shared concern and grief with the village elders and their co-workers (as the daily violence in Algeria increases). We study each individual monk's and their neighbours' lived-in human face in these encounters: glancing, thinking, contemplating, tired, amused, angry, annoyed, content, fearful. As we contemplate these recurring images of lived relations and the practical gestures and bodily expressions that maintain and accompany this shared life with people (objects and nature), we are also estranged from our initial way of reading these images. That is, over the duration of the film, the images become more than just a general mimetic representation of a familiar, recognisable religious situation and environment. There is nothing showy about these revelatory moments, where the film estranges us from the familiar. We are not jolted out of a set perspective, but rather more deeply *taken into* a new way of attending to the movement of *Bildung* rendered present in this well-rehearsed life of existential daily routines and relationships.

The craft of an acting that prioritises the attending to, and immersion into, the activities themselves—rather than a (perhaps self-conscious) performance towards an image of the monks' religiosity/devotion, is of course also a tribute to the fabulous actors in *Of Gods and Men*, who won many accolades for their performances. Their acting does not draw attention to an image of the monks' special holiness or devotional state, with the aim to communicate a closed and exact idea of what the contemplative life or love, or faith, or hope or even martyrdom look like and is all about. The mundane and sacred gestures are instead performed as (as Eckhart might say) *silent*, existential waymarkers. They are aesthetic embodiments, which are to stimulate our thinking about the meaning and the mystery of *Bildung* (e.g. its continuous, gifted-cultivated dimensions). That is, the monks' existential mode of being is to immerse us into our own shared experience of a lived-in world. And simultaneously, there are to provoke our own intellectual-moral-sensory response to the call to *Bildung*—as to the givenness of being (pictured in the film as the ontological horizon framed by the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, Love),¹¹ which is shown to motivate the Brother's everyday living. Correspondingly, the film does not present us with a final answer as to the right, that is (morally) correct embodiment of the *Bildung* of the imago Dei (in the human soul and action).

Instead, not unlike Martha and Mary's examples, the film locates the act of contemplating the 'truth' of big words like Faith, Hope and Love firmly within an existential dimension, that is the down-to earth and often silent gestures of care that patiently maintain everyday life and living. As such productive (background) actions of maintenance, as the hidden craft of making ourselves at home in the world with others, these careful(I) gestures are, in real life, of course often barely noticeable (perhaps that is why Eckhart told us the story of Martha in a new, unexpected way, so we could 'break through' the familiar image).

Gifted Time

In the same way as the real monks and the actors take their time to practice their fidelity to reality and are shown to refine the craft of *Bildung*, we, as viewers, are given time to contemplate the mystery of these simple everyday images. We are given space, to say it with Eckhart, to practice a mode of silent, watching, intuiting as to the correctness of the

¹¹ The three theological virtues of faith, hope and love are first mentioned by St. Paul's letters (1. Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; 1. Corinthians 13—where he emphasises love/charity above the others).

images' aesthetic. That is, we are invited to ponder the dialectical movement of *Bildung* as the relationship between analogies such as Love (as unconditional agape) and the gestural, embodied imagery we are presented with in the film. In other words, as audiences, we are not merely moved along the lines of a set idea of self-giving love through a linear dramatic development; one which locates (e.g. the cultivated/gifted virtue of) Love only within, for example, the tragic moment of the monks' death—as a one-off, spectacular sacrifice or martyrdom. Rather than focusing on the dramatic development of a finite *idea* of Love, we are instead, taken back, again and again, to those spaces where embodied gestures, practices and ideas are in dialogue with transcendent dimensions (e.g. the virtues of Love, Faith, Hope). In essence, we are invited back into those spaces where the tekhnê of home-making is formed, is becoming, often unnoticed, and on an everyday basis, and as an end in itself. In sum, we are immersed in moments where temporal-spatial dimensions have, often unnoticeably, interfolded.

There is Brothers Jean-Pierre's and Celestin's perfectly choreographed filling of home-made honey jars, in a scene that opens with a hand carefully cleaning and tapping a freshly labelled glass jar, which is put on a well-ordered shelf. There is Brother Jean-Pierre and prior Christian's selling the honey in a busy Algerian market, in which they do not seem out of place, but blend into the vivid scene as just another market stall selling home-made products. And there is the subsequent quiet and personal scene between the elderly doctor Brother Luc and Rabbia; one of the young female co-workers at the monastery. Here, she entrusts the down-to-earth ('no-bullshit') Luc with the important and delicate question as to how one is to know the moment of being in love with somebody. And we suddenly get a glimpse of Luc's warmth and wisdom and his being more than just our image of a religious man. Brother Michel is collecting wood (much more slowly the more worried he gets about things); Paul's quiet cleaning of floors appears as a silent, beautiful meditation with cloth and mop. There are Brother Christophe and village co-worker Nouredin's well-rehearsed collaborations in the garden, in which Nouredin is comfortable instructing the less-experienced Brother in the manual labour. And at the end of the film, just before we see the kidnapped monks being forced to walk all in line (in enforced unison) through the snow and up a hill to disappear into the snowy mist (gesturing towards the remaining mystery around the exact circumstances of their murder), we return—one more time—to the now empty monastery.

It snows. The camera takes us to the place of the surgery, where Rabbia and Luc conversed about Love (with its blue, handwritten and well-worn surgery signage in Arabic and French). The small bell tower is collecting snow. The table around which the Brothers sat to pray, eat and deliberate their decisions stands silently with the table cloth still carefully draped, eight chairs sitting empty. The garden is covered in snow. There are no footsteps resounding on the empty stone corridor that leads to the church. The Brothers' absence in these formerly lived-in spaces invites us to contemplate the beauty of their careful(l) everyday gestures. Maintaining the every-day, the 'existential dialogue' (Chergé 1990) of their day-to-day home-making craft normally goes unnoticed. Yet their absence at the end of the film helps us to break through the familiar image. The echo of their presence provokes us into contemplation of the mystery of *Bildung*, catalysed by the monks' everyday and unshowy aesthetic embodiment of an unconditional Love, which is firmly rooted in the cultural (that is human) world, yet also shown to transcend any human conditionality for mutuality and friendship (in agape).

The Desire for Bildung

Throughout the film, we revisit familiar spaces and actions. As viewers, we are given room to detach ourselves from the familiar image (e.g. of a monastic, contemplative life) that we held at the start of the film, when the monks appeared as a 'uniform' group. Through the circular returning to those specific spaces, actions and people that *embody* diverse images of Love, we are invited to read in-between the embodied and the transcendent image (perhaps like Eckhart re-read Martha's action). Here, we are not to merely read static moral acts; good works performed by holy, virtuous people. We are perhaps hoped to discern and desire (aka being moved towards) an Eckhartian rational action; one that manifests the beauty of *Bildung* as the craft of making ourselves at home in the world with and through others. Like the beautiful fragrance of the anointment that symbolises Mary's beautifully ecstatic labour of love in John's Gospel, and the beautiful smell (I imagine at least) of Martha's home-baking/cooking that speaks of the warmth of her hospitality and welcome in Luke's parable, film conjures up our human, sensory/material experience of the world. We 'know' Love (as a self-giving gesture) by having participated in it: we have lost ourselves in love, enjoyed a friend's or stranger's solidarity, shared concern/joy and/or help (or gave it); delighted in the healing power of a home-cooked meal (or in preparing one). Film frames the material dimension of life and summons us into paying attention to what we see and sense, so that our consciousness may be present in new ways to the world (Sobchack 2016, p. 80). As such, the monks' aesthetic embodiments of Eckhartian *Bildung* in *Of Gods and Men* may orient us beyond our familiar sensory-bound knowledge, to deny a full ontological and epistemological capture (through our intellect/senses; the camera)—opening us to a new reading of the mystery of being (and its temporal-spatial dimensions).

Here, the mystery of being expressed in religious analogies (like God is Love) may be glimpsed in-between the manifold material images. That is, we are immersed into a diversity of existential moments: conversations about love, filling honey jars, mopping a floor, praying and singing together, grieving and celebrating with strangers and friends. The viewer is inducted into attending to care-ful(l) gestures that reflect the spiritual-cultural craft of *Bildung* in the monks' shared communal life and fidelity to the everyday. There is no film soundtrack and often no dialogue, only the beats of the footsteps on the stone floor, the rustling of the coarse monks' habits or the sound of the Brothers singing voices breaking into the silence. The viewers' attending to these everyday images is not achieved (only) through the building up of a dramatic narrative, which moves the viewer towards a specific idea, emotion and psychological viewing experience. The film does not enhance, through music or fast editing, the dramatic nature of these, often silent, moments. *Of Gods and Men*'s relational movement of images denies a solely linear dramatic, 'progressive' movement towards a resolution (e.g. of competing ideas as to how virtue is to be embodied).

Conclusion: How to Make Oneself at Home in the World with Others?

To conclude, *Of Gods and Men* takes the viewer deeper into the dialectical movement of *Bildung* as the *tekhne* of making ourselves at home in the world with others—thereby showing us 'the manifest bond between subject and world, between subject and others [here including the divine other]' (Sobchack 2016, p. 77). Thence, the film does not lead us towards an ultimate understanding of God, the virtues (or *Bildung* even); nor does it

uncover the ultimate truth of the shown events, or the meaning of the monks' death. Conversely, we, as audiences, are guided to attend differently to the double movement and the perhaps ever-deepening mystery of the beauty and strangeness of the monks' (recurring, mundane) everyday gestures' emergence—as a rendering present of Eckhartian *Bildung's* interfolded, incarnated temporal-eternal dimension. We are inducted into a viewing mode that invites us to slow down, linger with recurring spaces, people, and actions of maintenance of the everyday, and intuit the presence of the aesthetic of *Bildung*, that orients us to a more universal ontological horizon (here: the divine life as agape).

Of Gods and Men's beautiful image-ing of this moving (incarnated) structure of *Bildung* and, with that, the film's power to teach us about humanist education's mystical-theological heritage and rootedness, is, I hope, well exemplified in the mimetic art of moving (between) images in *Of Gods and Men*. Moved into a different mode of attending to the art of *Bildung*, we may even reclaim its broad ontological-normative horizon for our twenty-first century resistance to the market logic of education. Here, Meister Eckhart's Bild-based theology can invite us to reimagine education beyond transactional, means-end relations rooted in the production-logic of society's economic structures. Invited by Eckhart (Mary, Martha) and the film to revisit the theological language of Love, Beauty, Hope, Faith, we may even (re)discover the mystery at the heart of education and its dynamic movement between of (present, future) being, prompting us into the eternal educational question: How do we make ourselves at home in the world with others?

Acknowledgements The first draft of this paper was first presented at the North American Association for Philosophy and Education (NAAPE) Conference in Mundelein, Illinois, US: Frimberger, Katja (2023, Oct 25–27). *Cultivating Care-ful(f) Everyday Gestures: In-Formations into a Greater Love in Meister Eckhart and the Film Of Gods and Men* [Paper Presentation]. North American Association for Philosophy and Education (NAAPE) Conference, Mundelein, Illinois, US. The author wishes to thank the SPES reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest arising from this paper.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Aquinas, T., and R. McInerney, eds. 1998. *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*. London: Penguin Books.
- Beavis, M.A. 2012. Reconsidering Mary of Bethany. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2): 281–297.
- Biesta, G. 2002. Bildung and Modernity: The Future of Bildung in a world of difference. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21: 343–351.
- Biesta, G. 2015. Freeing Teaching from Learning: Opening Up Existential Possibilities in Educational Relationships. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34 (3): 229–243.
- Bollenbeck, G. 1996. *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

- Bykova, M.F. 2020. Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung. In *The Palgrave Hegel Handbook*. Palgrave Handbooks in German Idealism, eds. M.F. Bykova, K.R. Westphal, 425–449. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chergé, C. 1990. Address at the Journées Romaines. *Pontifical Council for Non-Christians Bulletin* 73 (1): 66.
- Davies, O. 1991. *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*. London: SPCK Publishing.
- Des Hommes et Des Dieux (Of Gods and Men)*. 2010. France, directed by Xavier Beauvois. Dicastery of Interreligious Dialogue. 2023. *The History of the Dicastery of Interreligious Dialogue*. <https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/our-history/>. Accessed June 14 2023.
- Eckhart, M. and O. Davies. (transl./ed.) 1994. *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Eckhart, M., and G. Landauer, eds. 1991. *Meister Eckhart: Mystische Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag.
- Flasch, K., Schindel, A., Vanides, A. (trans.). 2015. *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G., J. Clearly, and P. Hogan. (transl.) 2001. Education is Self-Education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35(4), 529–538.
- Herdt, J. 2020. *Forming humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hotam, Y. 2019. Bildung: Liberal Education and its Devout Origins. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 53 (4): 619–632.
- Lebreton, C. 2014. *Born From the Gaze of God: The Tiberine Journal of a Martyr Monk (1993–1996)*. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publication Liturgical Press.
- Matarasso, P. 1993. *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century*. London: Penguin Books.
- McCabe, H. 1985. *The Teachings of the Catholic Church: A New Catechism of Christian Doctrine*. London: Darton-Longman and Todd.
- McCabe, H. 1992. The Logic of Mysticism. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 31: 45–59.
- Miyamoto, Y. 2022. Wilhelm von Humboldt's Bildung Theory and Educational Reform: Reconstructing Bildung as a Pedagogical Concept. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54 (1): 1–17.
- Salenson, C. 2009. *Christian Chergé: A Theology of Hope*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Sobchack, V. 2016. The Active Eye (Revisited): Towards a Phenomenology of Cinematic Movement. *Studia Phaenomenologica* XVI: 63–90.
- Stojanov, K. 2012. The Concept of Bildung and Its Moral Implications. In: Schneider, K. *Becoming One-self: Dimensions of Bildung and the Facilitation of Personality Development*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Taylor, Carol A. 2017. Is a Posthumanist Bildung Possible?: Reclaiming the Promise of Bildung for Contemporary Higher Education. *Higher Education* 74 (3): 419–435.
- The Bible. 1819. *Authorised King James Version*, London, Dublin: Harper Collins.
- Von Humboldt, Wilhelm. 1964. Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten. In *Schriften zu Politik und zum Bildungswesen*. (Werke in fünf Bdn. 4.), eds. Wilhelm von Humboldt, Flitner and Giel. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Wivestadt, S. 2008. The Educational Challenges of Agape and Phronesis. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42 (2): 307–324.
- Zengarini, L. 2021. *Last survivor of Tiberine massacre passes away*. Vatican News. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2021-11/last-survivor-tiberine-massacre-passes-away.html>. Accessed June 27 2023.