





**Luigi Russo (ed.)**

**Evolutions of Form**

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## Introduction

LUIGI RUSSO

A research project entitled *Beyond Art (Al di là dell'arte)* and funded by the Italian University (Prin 2009, scientific coordinator Luigi Russo) is currently being developed by the study group *Morfologia*, working on the history of concepts and the present-day theoretical importance of the issue of form, analysing its broad-spectrum evolution, between aesthetics, biology, theory of perception, science of art and literary theory.

This volume collects the first results presented in two international seminars held in Palermo and Milan in 2012 and it offers a conceptual map of the main debated axis of the research.

First of all, the turning point between the Eighteenth Century debate and the modern science of life is discussed in order to show how, through Kant and the *Goethezeit* – see the contributions by Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis, *The Classification of Monsters. Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and His Teratological Taxonomy*, Claudio Rozzoni, *Him, the Monster? The Ego Deformation in Rameau's Nephew*, Michele Bertolini, *Monsters and Social Deformations in Balzac's Work: Sarrasine's Case Study*, Pietro Conte, *Skin-deep. Wax Moulages between Science and Aesthetics*, Elena Canadelli, *Evolutionary Monsters: Regression and Hybridisation between Science and Imagination*, Serena Feloj, *Ethics of the Formlessness: Imagination, Sublime and Morality in Kantian Aesthetics* and Davide Di Maio, *Form, Gestalt and "Dominion": Echoes from the George-Kreis. Friedrich Wolters' Case. (Herrschaft und Dienst, Richtlinien, Gestalt)* –, the enquiries into aesthetics have been provided with a modern basis for the theoretical elaboration of the relationship between form and deformation, beauty and ethics, metamorphosis, evolution and development.

Moreover, within such an intricate intertwining of topics some important figures of the Twentieth century morphological debate have been reconsidered, from Warburg, to the science of art, and to the biological evaluation of the Gestalt, up to Adorno, as it is shown by Clio Nicastro, *The Form of the Denkraum: Technique and Representation in the Kreuzlingen Lecture*, Luca Vargiu, *Frederik Adama van Scheltema and the West between Systole and Diastole*, Valeria Costanza D'Agata and Salvatore Tedesco, *Between Uexküll and Weizsäcker: the Criticism of Functionalism and the Configuration of the Biological Act*, Andrea Pinotti, *The Pontifical Gaze. Morphology and the History of the Images*, Miriam Franchella, *Deductive Reasoning and Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt's Provocation of Logic* and MariaLuisa Bonometti, *Form and Fragment: the Unfeasibility of Sense in T.W. Adorno*.

The journey ends looking out onto some noteworthy contemporary perspectives, between the artistic debate and the rethinking of the methodological foundations of the morphological debate, as it is suggested by Emanuele Crescimanno, *Shared Responsibility: Author and Public in JR's experience*, Elisabetta Di Stefano, *Living Forms (of Art)*. Edoardo Kac's *Transgenic Art between Ethics and Aesthetics*, and finally Salvatore Tedesco, *Constraints, Boundaries, Responsibility: some Remarks on Contemporary Morphological Lexicon, between Aesthetics and Theoretical Biology*.





# The Classification of Monsters. Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and His Teratological Taxonomy

MADDALENA MAZZOCUT-MIS

**Abstract:** In the early Nineteenth Century, what does it mean to escape the form of our own species? Is it an eccentricity? Certainly not, given that monsters and the anomalies of form are not simply taken any more as freaks. Is it a sign of the metamorphic power of the animal realm? It is indeed. And yet, the monster turns into the concrete expression of the natural laws and their regularity. What reason is at the basis of a classification of anomalies and monstrosities? How can a classification be provided if it is taken for granted that the monster has its own peculiar organization? The answer to these questions is not straightforward. This was well known to Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire – famous for his study in comparative anatomy, embryology, palontology, as well as for granting an autonomous status to the science of monstrosity – and to his son Isidore, who attempted to provide a full nomenclature, combining theories from Linnaeus, Cuvier and his father. We are thus dealing with an hypothesis where several solutions are summed up, in order to combine the notion of an ascendant scale, according to the level of seriousness and complexity of the monstrosities, with the idea that the world of anomalies is made of parallel *embranchements*, as to obtain truly “natural” groups.

## 1. The unity of the plan of composition and the science of monsters

At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, what was the meaning of infringing the common shape of one's own species? Was it an odd thing? Not at all, since monsters and their abnormal shapes are not deemed as tricks of nature, but as fully compliant to its laws. Then, are monsters a signal that the animal kingdom has an inherent metamorphic potential? Yes, of course. But then again, how can we explain these abnormal alterations without a teleological framework? The monster would then become an expression of the laws of nature and their regular application. Released from superstition and prejudice, the monster would become the recipient of the naturalist's gaze. As the naturalist observes the monster, he would detect the same laws of nature that come into play in the shaping of any individual. And then, what is the meaning of providing a classification of monsters and anomalies? Is it an ingenious and cunning device, a self-aimed, sterile exercise in systematic inventory? Does it have a gnoseological value? And how can we draw a classification if it is attributed to the monster a peculiar composition that is just its own?

We cannot give a direct, immediate answer to these questions. Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire<sup>1</sup>, the French scientist who gave the science of monsters an autonomous status and

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<sup>1</sup> The French scientist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844) was renowned for his studies on embryology, palontology, and comparative anatomy. He gave an autonomous status to the discipline of teratology, i.e. the science of monstrosities, whose name was minted by his son Isidore. In 1793 he was appointed professor of zoology at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (see in particular I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Vie, travaux et doctrine scientifique d'Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, Paris, P. Bertrand, 1847 and Th. Cahn, *Vie et œuvres d'Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, Paris, PUF, 1962). On these subjects and on the birth of teratology, see M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Maxio. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte*, Milano, Guerini, 1992 (new edition: 2013); M. Mazzocut-Mis, *The 'Unity*

whose ground-breaking studies on embryology, comparative anatomy and paleontology still enjoy wide popularity, and his son Isidore<sup>2</sup>, to whom the study of anatomical abnormalities owns its name ("teratology"), knew this very well.

His father's studies allowed Isidore to notice the existence of a shared background for all living beings. This background was, as Étienne might call it, a "transcendent" idea, a background, source, and form with a pivotal role in the formation of monsters as well as of any other creature. This ideal plan is not an archetype nor a Platonic idea, but rather a framework having a normative and constitutive function.

Geoffroy's objective was to study the "organisation" of animals by referring to the most complete of its expressions: *the unity of the plan of composition*. His research was grounded in the analysis of how the position of organs and their parts are reciprocally related; it used the method of analogical comparison as the key gnoseological tool to discover the constant elements underlying the composition of every zoological species and its abnormal or monstrous variability. The limitless variety of animal forms was then comprised within an ideal framework, where any morphological mishap was taken into account.

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*of Organic Composition' and the Birth of Teratology*, "Rivista di Storia della Scienza" S. II, 1/2 (1993), p. 27-45; M. Mazzocut-Mis, *La contingenza della forma*, Milano, Cuem, 1994; M. Mazzocut-Mis (ed.), *Anatomia del mostro. Antologia di scritti di Étienne e Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1995 (a collection of the most significant passages of the works by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in their Italian translation); M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Esthétique, épistémologie et la vision de la forme*, in *Mathématique et art*, Paris, Hermann, 1995; M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Gli enigmi della forma*, Milano, Edizioni dell'Arco, 1995 (new edition: Milano, Mimesis, 2012); P. Ancet, *Teratologia ovvero scienza dei mostri. Il lavoro di Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, in U. Fadini, A. Negri, Ch.T. Wolfe (eds.), *Desiderio del mostro. Dal circo al laboratorio alla politica*, Roma, Manifestolibri, 2001, p. 83-108; A. Morin, *La Tératologie de Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire à nos jours*, "Bulletin de l'association des anatomistes" 80/238 (1996), p. 17-31. Finally, see also H. Le Guyader, *Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1772-1844: Un naturaliste visionnaire*, Paris, Belin, 1998; tr. by M. Grenc, *Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire 1772-1844: A Visionary Naturalist*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2004; all quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1805 -1861) took up his father's legacy with an independent originality and accomplished the difficult task of giving teratology the status of a scientific discipline. These are some of his works: 1. *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation chez l'homme et les animaux des monstruosités des variétés et vices de conformation, ou traité de tératologie*, 3 vols. and 2 Atlas, Paris, J.B. Baillière, 1832-37; 2. *Essais de Zoologie générale, ou mémoires et notices sur la zoologie générale, l'anthropologie et l'histoire de la science*, Paris, Roret, 1841; 3. *Vie, travaux et doctrine scientifique d'Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, Paris, Strasbourg, P. Bertrand, 1847; 4. *Résumé des vues sur l'espèce organique émises par les principaux naturalistes français du XVIIIe siècle et du commencement du XIXe, et de la théorie de la variabilité limitée de l'espèce*, Paris 1859; 5. *Acclimatation et domestication des animaux utiles*, Paris, Librairie Agricole de la Maison Rustique (1854), 1861<sup>4</sup> (republished in facsimile, 1986), read and studied by Darwin; 6. *Histoire naturelle générale des règnes organiques*, 3 vols. (1854-62), incomplete. As far as the issue of teratological classification is concerned, see P. Ancet, *Le statut du monstre dans la tératologie d'Étienne et Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, in A. Caiozzo, A.-E. Demartini (eds.), *Monstre et imaginaire social. Approches historiques*, Paris, Crcaphis, 2008 and in particular P. Tort, *L'ordre et les monstres*, Paris, Le Sycomore, 1980 and P. Tort, *Sixième étude. La logique du déviant*, in *La raison classificatoire*, Paris, Aubier, 1989, p. 143-171. About Isidore see also C. Blanckaert, *Les animaux "Utiles" chez Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. La mission sociale de la zootechne*, in *Revue de Synthèse*, 3-4, 113, 1992, p. 347-382; J.-L. Fischer, *Monstres. Histoire du corps et de ses défauts*, Paris, Syros-Alternatives, 1991 (in particular, p. 92 and following pages); and J.-L. Fischer, *L'acclimatation: pratique, théorie, expérimentation ou l'esprit des Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, in volume collectif du 150<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de *Jardin d'Acclimatation*, on-line paper.

Infringing the form of one's own species, as in the case of monsters, does not mean that the unity of organic composition is also infringed. This is because the unity of composition enables and at the same time limits the existence of potential alterations, providing them with an inherent legitimation.

His objective was then to establish a new discipline by developing a new method for the study of monsters, fighting against the prejudice that the monster is a freak of nature and against all theories imbued with metaphysics or teleology. The observation of monsters should then be supported by a strongly framed theoretical background, a speculative framework that would also influence the perception of monster and the ethical setting surrounding them.

The empirical observation of monsters could hope to acquire the status of a theoretical "discipline", such as anatomy, only if a method of enquiry providing the necessary heuristic tools was devised. This method, called *la nouvelle méthode*, was set up by Étienne and included four tenets: the theory of *analogues*, the principle of *connections*, the *balancement of organs* and the law of *attraction* (i.e. the "*soi pour soi*"). The "analogy" was the cornerstone of this method, but the theory of *analogues* took only into account the mutual dependence and the relative position of organs; in brief, their reciprocal *connection*. The principle of *connection* rested on the assumption that those organs whose parts had a similar structure could be considered as analogous. The principle of the *balancement of organs* accounted for the changes in volume of nearby organs as they suffer from a hypertrophic or hypotrophic condition. It also claimed that the volume of normal and affected organs could never grow to an excessive degree without causing another organ, taking part in the same set of relations, to suffer from a decrease in volume equal to the growth of the other organ. The principle of *elective affinities*, also known as law of *attraction* or law of the "*soi pour soi*", pointed out the attractive and repulsive force of the organic matter: like attracts like<sup>3</sup>.

For Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy, the universal validity of this method was empirically confirmed by the strict application of the *nouvelle méthode* tenets. The monster would then represent the privileged occasion for research, the essential heuristic tools to validate those general principles. "Il y a monstruosité, mais non pas pour cela dérogation aux lois ordinaires"<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. A partial adoption of the Linnaean system

The theory of *analogues* allows Étienne Geoffroy to follow the subsequent metamorphoses of an organ as it acquires a new function by changing its form. The forelegs provides a driving propulsion "au vol, à la natation, au saut, à la course, etc.; être ici un outil à fouiller, là des

<sup>3</sup> See É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Notions synthétiques, historiques et physiologiques de philosophie naturelle*, Paris, Dénaire, 1838 and F. Gil, *É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's Doctrine of Attraction*, in S. Rossi (ed.), *Science and Imagination in XVIII<sup>th</sup>-Century British Culture*, Milano, Unicopli, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique des monstruosités humaines*, Paris, De Rignoux, 1822, p. 105-106.

crochets pour grimper, ailleurs des armes offensives ou défensives"; then they become, "comme dans notre espèce, le principal organe du toucher, et, par suite, un des moyens les plus efficaces de nos facultés intellectuelles"<sup>5</sup>. The correlations between organs never vary, and the ever-changing exterior forms can provide no standard for comparison. Form and function are not relevant conditions. For Étienne Geoffroy,

Était-il bien certain que les naturalistes eussent réussi à attacher une idée générale à un organe, sans y rien faire entrer des notions de sa forme et de ses usages. Demandez-leur de vous définir le pied, sans recourir à ces mêmes notions. Étonnés de la demande, ils vous répondront: *ce pied, nous le concevons ; c'est assez dire*. Ils vous répondront en invoquant des autorités, en s'appuyant sur des exemples. Les anciens avaient déjà dit: *pedes solidi, pedes fissi, pedes bisulci*, quand ils imaginèrent les dénominations de solipèdes, de fissipèdes et de pieds-fourchus; ce qui fut depuis imité par Linnéus et appliqué par lui comme caractères à d'autres familles : *pedes ambulatorii, pedes gressorii, – scansorii, – cursorii, etc.*<sup>6</sup>

His polemic against Linnaeus seems quite clearly stated.

But how could he devise a classification if Linnaeus is set aside? We will try to proceed step by step. Firstly it is worth remembering that Linnaeus and Buffon had a controversy about what a *natural taxonomic method* should be. For some time Buffon had been an advocate of nominalism, which only admitted the actual existence of individuals in nature and denied that of genres and species. However, he rapidly embraced a more realistic stance, and he acknowledged the existence and, more importantly, the persistence of the species; the species then had to be taken into account as the building blocks of taxonomy. In agreement with Leibniz and against Linnaeus, Buffon claimed that a species could not be determined by the number or group of its individuals, or by a dominant feature that allowed for its identification, but rather by the constant succession of similar individuals: the criterion for determining a species was the reproductive system. On the contrary, Linnaeus thought that the key element for identifying a species was to detect the general features delimiting different macro-groups. According to Linnaeus, who applied the principle of the *subordination of characteristics*, a supposedly natural classification had to point out a secure and reliable feature that could be clearly detected in a species. This means to find out the primary characteristic underpinning a systematic taxonomy that would guide the naturalist in his classification effort. It is well known that for the Swedish scientist, the most constant organs are those of reproduction. Reproduction is indeed the main function of an organism, its key vital activity. According to Linnaeus, the species are fixed and unchanging entities,

<sup>5</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Discourse préliminaire*, in *Philosophie anatomique des organes respiratoires sous le rapport de la détermination et de l'identité de leurs pièces osseuses*, Paris, J.B. Baillier, vol. 1, 1818, p. XXII and XXIII.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXIV-XXV.

expressing the uniqueness and unchangeability of God's creation. On the contrary, Buffon aimed to develop a taxonomic method that would allow him to tell at a glance the main subdivision of the animal kingdom, where he would subsequently identify the specific features of all individuals. An animal can be accurately described only if we take into account the full set of its features, including its anatomical and physiological characteristics and elements such as mating, the duration of pregnancy and delivery, the number of litters, its natural habitat, its habits and not in the least its usefulness for men. In his opinion, it would be insufficient to detect a single, distinguishing feature, because there was no natural criterion for its identification.

Buffon thus rejected the attempt to consider as essential the anatomical and physiological features, and pursued an open and multidimensional type of classification similar to that of Aristotle. However, as far as teratological taxonomy was concerned, with the principle of the equivalence of characteristics prevailing over that of their subordination, there could be one only criterion left, i.e. a detailed description of each anomaly. Any other choice would be considered as mistaken on principle.

Buffon's criticisms against Linnaeus were substantially the same that in later years Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire would direct against Cuvier and those who wanted to change natural history anew by the introduction of artificial methods. Taxonomists were mistaken in trying to submit nature to a set of arbitrary laws: nature should be studied in all its vast and rich complexity.

Therefore, Étienne then already declared that he could not rely upon a "vague sensation", but he required reliable general principles to trace a classification of the species. These principles could only be obtained by examining the locations, relationships, and interdependencies among parts, i.e. using the principle of connections.

It was in this scientific and philosophical milieu that Isidore's classification began to take shape. Above all, his taxonomy challenged the common belief that it was impossible to draw a classification of monsters, "en raison de la multitude des modifications individuelles qu'il faudrait regarder comme autant de types génériques"<sup>7</sup>. On the basis of the key assumptions and observations of teratology, the identification of teratological genres could not proceed endlessly: according to Isidore, it would be well-defined and stable over time. The discovery of a new genre is an "événement beaucoup plus rare en tératologie qu'en zoologie"<sup>8</sup>.

Once the repetitiveness and stability of monstrous anomalies were pointed out, the Linnaean theories, that had been previously overtly excluded from taxonomy, are covertly reintroduced by Isidore. The taxonomic system had by no means gained advance through Buffon's system of the equivalence of characteristics. What was needed was a set of criteria centered upon the *subordination of characteristics*. On the one hand, Isidore acknowledged an unquestionable merit to Buffon, in that he tried to develop a teratological taxonomy on the basis of its analogies and connections with the laws of zoology and anatomy. (However, it

<sup>7</sup> L. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation* cit., vol. 3, p. 432.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 433.

must be said that Buffon's taxonomy looks more like a simple inventory and less like a brand new classification<sup>9</sup>.) On the other, even though he built his system upon his father's tenets, Isidore actually came to terms with Linnaeus and his father's worst enemy: Cuvier.

### 3. The controversy

In the early nineteenth century, two opposite morphological enquiries were developing. These different trends came to a clash in the 1830s controversy between Cuvier and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire<sup>10</sup>. The French naturalists were trying to find out the normative principles governing all living beings, however they paid a lot of attention as well to the laws governing each single organism. This allowed the development of compared anatomy as an independent branch of science, free from its previous subordination to zoology; moreover, it fostered an almost exclusive interest towards the structure and anatomical configuration of living beings, reducing the importance of morphological characteristics. Therefore, it was the anatomical arrangement of each part, rather than its peculiar shape, that would make clear the subordinate relations and intimate link or connection between different organs. The relationship between different parts can be further emphasized by means of a *structure* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire) or either a *coordination of functions* (Cuvier). What matters here is to detect, besides all superficial differences in forms, some similarities in the "connections of parts" or some "functional analogies". For Cuvier, the arrangement of the organs could be explained with the principles of physiology, which set the role and function of those organs in relation to the life of animals. The structure of an organism could only be understood by looking into how the organism itself is working. The organ's function prevails over the organ itself. Understanding the relationship linking a part (the organ) to the whole (the living organism in its entirety) inherently depends upon the physiological requirements of the species, as well as upon the inner hierarchy of the organism. Thus some organs have a greater importance and can affect the "nature" of other organs. (This is precisely the principle of the *subordination of characteristics*, according to which some organs can coexist or be incompatible with a higher frequency, thus affecting the overall organism and its *conditions of existence*). By giving primary importance to a few and more stable organs, the principle of the *subordination of characteristics* allowed to establish a taxonomy that was based on the hierarchy of functions.

<sup>9</sup> "Buffon, que sa célèbre classification des anomalies a souvent fait citer comme le législateur de la tératologie, a écrit en tout sur cette science cinq ou six pages, où même il se montre bien plutôt compilateur qu'auteur original ; et les autres zoologistes ne nous ont guère transmis comme lui que quelques vues ou quelques faits isolés, ou même ont laissé les anomalies complètement en dehors du cercle de leurs études. La raison en est simple: elle est dans ce classement vicieux qui a si long-temps fait de la tératologie une partie, indistincte même, de l'anatomie pathologique. En décrivant une anomalie, à moins que ce ne fût un cas de nanisme, d'albinisme, ou quelque variété très-simple, un zoologiste devait croire alors qu'il s'aventurait dans le domaine de la médecine". *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 336.

<sup>10</sup> This controversy caused a great sensation throughout Europe. In some respect, it might be simplified as a quarrel between a supporter and an adversary of Buffon, between an opposer and an advocate of finalism, or even between a supporter of transformism and a scholar of fixism (É. Geoffroy and Cuvier respectively). See H. Le Guyader, *Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire* cit., p. 225 and following pages.

Pour la rendre [la méthode] telle, on emploie une comparaison assidue des êtres, dirigée par le principe de la subordination des caractères, qui dérive lui-même de celui des conditions d'existence. Les parties d'un être devant toutes avoir une convenance mutuelle, il est tels traits de conformation qui en excluent d'autres; il en est qui, au contraire, en nécessitent; quand on connaît donc tels ou tels traits dans un être, on peut calculer ceux qui coexistent avec ceux-là, ou ceux qui leur sont incompatibles; les parties, les propriétés ou les traits de conformation qui ont le plus grand nombre de ces rapports d'incompatibilité ou de coexistence avec d'autres, ou, en d'autres ternies, qui exercent sur l'ensemble de l'être, l'influence la plus marquée, sont ce que l'on appelle les caractères importants, les caractères dominateurs; les autres sont les caractères subordonnés, et il y en a ainsi de différents degrés.<sup>11</sup>

In order to give anatomy a scientific dignity, Cuvier asserted its intelligibility. This intelligibility resulted from the principle of the mutual dependence of functions, on which the laws that determine the relations of their organs could be determined. (This means that Cuvier stated the inherent necessity of living organisms.) Cuvier's teleology thus presents a determinant and heuristic nature<sup>12</sup>.

#### **4. A comparison of three taxonomic criteria**

One of the main difficulties in setting a thorough taxonomic system is to define and identify the criteria for a "natural classification", pinpointing at the same time which anatomical system can be considered as dominant under an "animal economy". (This anatomical system would be not only "all-pervading", but also divisible by different degrees, as to ensure that the classification of the animal kingdom is consistent also in relation to its level of complexity). As mentioned by Dagognet, there were many answers to this problem: Harvey focused on the primacy of the heart and blood, Linnaeus on the genital-reproductive system, Lamarck on the neural and skeletal system. However, the strive towards the essential often resulted in an aporia: "On doit résumer l'animal mais on ne trouve pas à quoi le rattacher. Non seulement on délibère sur le critère mais, pour ainsi dire, sur le critère du critère: quelle qualité doit-il détenir pour jouer son rôle?"<sup>13</sup>.

When the three taxonomic classifications proposed respectively by Geoffroy, Cuvier and Lamarck, are compared, they appear as diverging systems based on distinct principles:

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<sup>11</sup> G. Cuvier, *Introduction*, in *Le règne animal distribué d'après son organisation, pour servir de base à l'histoire naturelle des animaux et d'introduction à l'anatomie comparée*, 10 vols., Paris, Fortin, 1828, vol. 1, p. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. B. Balau, *L'ordre et le temps. L'anatomie comparée et l'histoire des vivants au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Vrin, 1979, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> F. Dagognet, *Le catalogue de la vie*, Paris, PUF, 1970, p. 95.

“l’associatif (Lamarck)<sup>14</sup>, le disjonctif (Cuvier), l’unitaire (Geoffroy)”<sup>15</sup>. In addition, Fernando Gil points out that the analysis of this triad can be further extended by providing a more complex observation:

formally, these potential solutions – i.e. a taxonomy based on all aspects, on a single aspects, or mediating between one and many aspects – will tend to produce three different taxonomic systems, focusing respectively on many characteristics, a single characteristic, or no characteristics in particular.<sup>16</sup>

Geoffroy’s classification precisely falls into the first group where, according to Gil, morphological or structural taxonomies are included.

We shall thus take into account Dagognet’s opinion of Étienne. Dagognet acknowledged him as an “outstanding precursor of modern times”, an innovating thinker who revived the academic debate over classifications on new grounds. In doing so, he employed a notion that could provide a new basis for the discipline of structural morphology: “le renversement, la négation des dispositifs”<sup>17</sup>. This revolution was set forth by a new take on classification, which was seen as consistent with a “unitary” topological framework. As a matter of fact, Étienne wanted to “reconstruct” the animal kingdom by using the same elements, and comprising any alteration within a minimum and maximum threshold within the unity of the plan of composition.

This ground-breaking proposition will only be partly pursued by his son Isidore, who indeed acknowledges the importance of his father’s work. However, by only applying Geoffroy’s tenets, the classification failed even before it was accomplished. A possibility of mediation, a new stance freed from the rigid boundaries of structure and function was therefore required. Things could be added up in a different way – and this is precisely Isidore’s great challenge.

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<sup>14</sup> By rejecting the four different groups, Lamarck aimed to reaffirm the existence of a continuous and regularly arranged series, “focusing”, as underlined by Gil, “on the floating nature of boundaries, on the intermediate variations from one species to another” (F. Gil, *Sistemática e classificazione*, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 8, p. 1036). Lamarck’s answer about the “natural” method of classification was not based on a complete rejection of all groups, but rather on the claim that nature could not be divided in discrete parts. According to Lamarck, all living beings could be classified on the basis of an objective, i.e. non arbitrary, standard without interrupting the continuous order of nature. First of all, it should be determined what is the simplest living organism, the first link of the “chain” to which a more advanced organism can be attached. By proceeding this way, all living organisms would be classified.

<sup>15</sup> F. Dagognet, *Le catalogue de la vie* cit., p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> F. Gil, *Sistemática e classificazione* cit., p. 1037-1038.

<sup>17</sup> F. Dagognet, *Le catalogue de la vie* cit., p. 97.



## 5. A crucial step

The research on embryos carried out by Serres<sup>18</sup> was well known to Étienne Geoffroy and played a key role in the development of Isidore's classification. Serres' studies confirmed that the development of a single individual follows the same laws that are essential for the entire zoological series. This means that the organism of an animal having a higher development status goes through all the permanent stages in the lower levels as it changes and grows<sup>19</sup>. Serres believed that the animal kingdom could be considered as a single animal, whose development might come to a halt now and then. In this standstill, the hallmarks of each class, family, genus, and species are determined and come to light. Moreover, the assumption that worms are embryos of vertebrate animals – just like cold-blooded vertebrates are embryos of warm-blooded animals – seems to perfectly agree with Étienne's thesis on the existence of a single natural paradigm, upon which all species are shaped and traced out. Geoffroy and Serres' findings eventually brought the "old" scale of beings, the most representative product of finalism and the theory about the relentless progress of nature, to boil down to a simple idea: that of a single set, or more exactly a single "animal" whose growth is more or less staggered and whose development follows the same regular step the human foetus goes through as it grows.

Étienne did not only verify the hypothesis that there is a parallelism between the natural scale and the development stages of the foetus in higher vertebrates, but he also proved that this parallelism was applicable to teratology and embryology as well. "Les monstruosités ne s'écartent des formes de leur espèce qu'en revêtissant celles d'une autre: *une anomalie dans un cas retombe dans ce qui est de règle ailleurs*"<sup>20</sup>.

## 6. Isidore's betrayal

L'extension à la tératologie du principe de la subordination des caractères<sup>21</sup>, si heureusement établi dans la zoologie par M. Cuvier, est un des progrès que j'ai eu le plus à cœur de réaliser, et heurcusement aussi l'un de ceux qui se sont trouvés

<sup>18</sup> According to Dagognet, Antoine Étienne Reynaud Augustin Serres (1786-1868) was the naturalist who would bring to full development the insights of Étienne Geoffroy (see *ibid.*, p. 113). Serres also argued that a classification should be reviewed and amended according to a new and ground-breaking way of considering the animal organism, seen as "une somme pure et simple d'organites" ou de "molécules" (*ibid.*, p. 114).

<sup>19</sup> This law is also known as *Meckel-Serres law*. In the early seventeenth century, the law of *récapitulation* or law of *embryological parallelism* – comparing the stages in the development of embryos with the structural condition of adult animals – enjoyed a great popularity (see E.S. Russell, *Form and Function*, London, Murray, 1916, p. 79-101, A.W. Meyer, *Some Historical Aspects of the Recapitulation Idea*, "Quarterly Review of Biology" 10/4 (1935), p. 379-396). One of the first systematic formulation was proposed by Serres. A complete definition was subsequently elaborated by the naturalist Johann Friedrich Meckel (1781-1833). (See J.F. Meckel, *System der vergleichenden Anatomie*, 7 vols., Halle, Renger, 1821-1833, vol. I, p. 345). See also J.-L. Fischer, *Le concept de 'récapitulation' chez Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, in *Histoire du concept de récapitulation*, Paris, Ed. Paul Mengal, Masson, 1993, p. 55-68.

<sup>20</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique des monstruosités humaines* cit., p. 403 (all Italics are the author's).

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 47, 104.

les plus faciles. Il suffisait de s'être familiarisé par des études quelque peu approfondies avec l'emploi que les zoologistes, et aussi les botanistes, font chaque jour de ce principe, pour reconnaître que toutes les conditions de son application se trouvent réunies aussi bien chez les monstres que chez les êtres anormaux.<sup>22</sup>

Someone could say that these lines do not seem to have been written by Étienne's son: as a matter of fact, Isidore conveniently applied the method of the subordination of characteristics, acknowledging the importance of Cuvier's studies.

It would then seem that Isidore has forsaken his father. However, his betrayal is diminished when he confesses that, even though it was obvious and even predictable that he would apply the subordination of characteristics to teratology, he "did not use it" (albeit he actually employed it).

Il se trouve en effet finalement, que toutes les divisions primaires que j'ai déduites de l'observation et de l'analyse des faits à l'égard des monstres unitaires, et par suite, des monstres composés, sont parfaitement identiques avec celles que j'aurais pu déduire immédiatement, et avant toute étendue approfondie, du principe de la prééminence des caractères de la forme générale.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to his father, who despised this classification on many grounds (including his dispute with Cuvier), Isidore elaborated a nomenclature, combining theories by Linnaeus, Cuvier, and Geoffroy, because he knew it would provide many advantages. The following is the foremost advantage:

Soit un sujet chez lequel le canal vertébral est ouvert dans sa partie supérieure, et qui se trouve privé du crâne, du cerveau et de la portion cervicale de la moelle. Un tel monstre, nommé *dérencéphale* dans la méthode de mon père, ne pourrait être indiqué, en adoptant toute autre nomenclature, que par la périphrase suivante : "monstre affecté de *spina-bifida cervical*, d'*acrânie*, d'*anencéphalie* et d'*amyélie partielle*" ou par un mot équivalant à cette phrase : mot tellement long qu'on ne saurait le retenir, et tellement compliqué que l'helléniste le plus exercé pourrait à peine, sans prendre la plume, en distinguer les éléments, en comprendre la signification.<sup>24</sup>

Using a dominant character to find a new name had some advantages.

It must be said that the Linnaean method, where the most constant elements were found in the reproductive system, was not "applicable" by itself; indeed "la possibilité de son emploi

<sup>22</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation* cit., vol. 3, p. 602.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 603. See also *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 197.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 100.

[cesse] précisément, par une singulière et heureuse concordance, là où cesserait aussi son utilité<sup>25</sup>, as, for instance, when the monster's sexual organs are either missing or doubled. However, when combined with Cuvier's anatomy, the principle of the subordination of characteristics proves successful and promising.

Thus Isidore Geoffroy provides an extremely complex and original solution for the classification of monsters. In his hypothesis, where Linnaeus, Cuvier, Serres, and Étienne Geoffroy's theories are combined, summed up, and eventually blended, the idea of a bottom-to-top scale, based on the complexity and severity of monstrous alterations (Serres,) went alongside the assumption that the world of anomalies is divided in *embranchements* that run parallel to each other (Cuvier's legacy). The principles outlined by Isidore Geoffroy represent a trade-off between "groupes vraiment naturels, et le parallélisme des séries". This "est aussi un fait général, également vrai en zoologie et en tératologie, mais nouveau encore pour la première comme pour la seconde de ces sciences"<sup>26</sup>. It was based on the principle of the *predominance of characteristics*<sup>27</sup> (a corollary of the principle of the *subordination of characteristics*), "règle principale d'où se déduisent immédiatement les divisions primaires du règne animal", a significant principle "en importance théorique" and more importantly "par l'immense valeur de ses applications pratiques"<sup>28</sup>.

## 7. The classification of monsters

The essay *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation chez l'homme et les animaux des monstruosités, des variétés et vices de conformation, or Traité de tératologie* by Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire consists of three volumes with an iconographic atlas. By using a precise nomenclature, a wealth of details, and a clear, explanatory style, this essay helped to lay the foundations of teratology as an autonomous science. On the one hand, this new science claimed its own theoretical legitimization, identifying itself with its own peculiar method and subject of study; on the other, it could not lose contact with the other sciences, on pain of becoming a sterile speculation.

Isidore Geoffroy proceeded upon the assumption that the majority of individuals in a species share a set of common features, called the "specific type". His teratological classification does not discard then Étienne Geoffroy's results, but rather it employs them differently. Any deviation from the "specific type" (i.e. the organic differences of an

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 604. See also *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 602, 604.

<sup>27</sup> As Isidore Geoffroy suggests, this concept was introduced in zoology by Blainville, who in 1816 fully formulates the theory of parallel series as well. Blainville's hypothesis aims to maintain final causes reinstating as well the idea of a hierarchical scale. Blainville appreciated also the novelty and importance of Étienne Geoffroy's philosophical anatomy, although he rejected the unity of composition. He could not believe that homologies were the true essence of comparative anatomy. Finally he warned Cuvier not to limit comparative anatomy to a description of parts and not to ignore the results of philosophical anatomy (see T.A. Appel, *The Cuvier-Geoffroy Debate. French Biology in the Decades before Darwin*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 119-120 and p. 213-215).

<sup>28</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation* cit., vol. 3, p. 603.

individual compared to the majority of subjects from the same species with the same age and sex) represented an anomaly and could be classified into four main types<sup>29</sup>: 1. The *hémitéries* or half-monsters, which are divided in *variétés*, slight deviations from the specific type, and *vices de conformation*, anatomical deviations that are very simple and yet hamper or impair one or more functions. Simple anomalies of little complexity are in turn classified according to the changes in size, shape, structure, location, number and so on. 2. The *hétérotaxies*, anatomically complex anomalies and yet do not interfere with any of the functions. 3. The *hermaphroditismes*, deviations from the specific type that are evident in the outer appearance of the subject; they are congenital and consist in the simultaneous presence of both sexes or some of their features, reaching full development in the period of puberty<sup>30</sup>. 4. Abnormalities of a complex kind, or actual *monstrosities*, which hamper or impair the performance of one or more vital functions<sup>31</sup> and are divided in simple or double monstrosities<sup>32</sup>. The classification was therefore substantially based on the level of complexity and severity of anatomic and functional deviations.

In contrast with Étienne Geoffroy, Isidore claimed that the classification of abnormalities could be compared with the zoological classification, since the different degrees of anomaly actually provided a natural criterion for distinction. Therefore, it was also necessary to pinpoint which organs had to be assigned greater relevance, in order to distinguish between actual monstrosities – severe abnormalities affecting vital organs – and simple anomalies – alterations affecting non-vital organs. In a living being, the organs are generally divided in three classes: organs that are necessary for the survival of the individual; organs that are necessary for the survival of the species; organs that do not specifically fall under the above-mentioned categories but that are common to both. The anomalies affecting first-class organs are severe and often fatal; those affecting second-class organs only show their severity in the postpubescent years; and finally, the anomalies affecting third-class organs cause little or no handicaps for the individual. In addition, there is a further class of anomalies, of those affecting the organs whose homologous are in great numbers and arranged in series. Compared to those affecting third-class organs, these abnormalities have an even less relevant influence on the individual's body.

In his classification, Isidore Geoffroy thoroughly studies the level of complexity – from the perspective of the anatomic ratio – and severity – depending upon the degree of disability suffered by the subject – of the abnormal conditions. However, it appeared that these two scales (the one of complexity and the one of seriousness) were not superimposable, since the *hétérotaxies*, in particular, the *situs inversus* of viscera, are not disabling conditions, even though they are anatomically complex. Against this common belief, Isidore declared that the general transposition of viscera was by no means a complex abnormality.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 29 and following pages.

<sup>30</sup> See J.-L. Fischer, *Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire face au déterminisme du sexe*, "History of Philosophy of Life Sciences" 1/2 (1979), p. 261-283.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127 and following pages.

<sup>32</sup> See *infra*.

As far as actual monstrosities were concerned, the outer surface level of the body was seen as displaying the complexity of the inner, in-depth malformation. The inside condition was consistent with the outside look: appearances are not deceptive. This was one of the few cases when a taxonomic assumption matched with a common prejudice. Monstrous anomalies have a global and pervading influence over the body's organization.

In the case of the transposition of viscera, however, the affected subject looks perfectly shaped. As a consequence, it might be assumed that this abnormality is not severe or disabling: "Les rapports de position des organes ont été souvent confondus avec leurs rapports de connexion: il importe cependant beaucoup de distinguer les uns des autres"<sup>33</sup>. While an anomaly in the reciprocal position of the organs is by no means severe, the same is not true for the anomalies in the mutual connections of the organs. Therefore, the general transposition of viscera is only superficially a serious anomaly, for it has no physiological influence on the body and, more importantly, it does not alter its external form. It does not have to do with the "connections of the parts", but with their "positions" only. In other words, "la position absolue est changée, mais la position relative conservée"<sup>34</sup>.

The most severe type of abnormality is the absence of an organ, especially if it is a vital one. "Être et n'être pas sont les deux conditions diamétralement opposées"<sup>35</sup>, writes Isidore. This abnormality can be very serious – e.g. the missing or duplicated organ had a vital function, such as the heart – or unimportant – e.g. in the case of missing or duplicated fingers. Anomalies pertaining to similar organs' decreasing or increasing number are themselves divided in two groups: those where one or more organs are added or deducted, and those where the increase or absence of one or more organs is only apparent. The anomalies included in the second group may result from the disjunction of the two halves of an organ or either from the unnatural union of two usually separate organs. It is a "combinaison insolite de ces éléments".

The law of the arrest of formation or development, well-described by Étienne Geoffroy, defined the fortuitous arrest of a development that has had a regular start, and it played a pivotal role in Isidore's classification. Given that the development of an organ always follows its shaping, the arrest of its shaping mostly involves the absence of such organ<sup>36</sup>. The abnormal parts of a monster's body show evidence of an arrest of development, where the affected organ takes the same shape of its zoological analogous, belonging to an animal placed at the bottom of the scale of beings (retrieval of the *Meckel-Serres* law)<sup>37</sup>.

If, as already Étienne claimed, the anomaly is always produced by a sudden, accidental, and highly traumatic event, the possibility that malformations might be caused by a disease should be dismissed. When an illness strikes an individual in its early development, the whole

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<sup>33</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies* cit., vol. 1, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> It should be added that "conséquence naturelle et nécessaire de ce fait, que l'homme, supérieur aux animaux par le degré de développement de la plupart de ses organes, leur est en même temps inférieur par le degré d'évolution de quelques autres" (*ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 442).

of its body is affected. And yet, the monster looks perfectly formed in many of its parts. Moreover, no pathological condition can make an organ return to a lower stage of development already achieved by that very organ when the illness was taken<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, if the monstrous body had not been considered as completely independent from any pathological alteration, it would not have been possible to outline a teratological classification.

As far as the decrease or increase in volume of an organ is concerned, abnormalities are generally of modest entity. However, "des cas où toutes les parties ont subi une diminution ou une augmentation de volume, si toutes, comme chez les nains et les géants, ont diminué ou augmenté dans les mêmes rapports", the abnormality is rather visible, even though "c'est la proportion des parties, et non leur volume, qui détermine leur valeur anatomique et qui règle leur influence sur les fonctions"<sup>39</sup>. Anomalies should not be merely described, but studied in their natural relations.

### 8. A *sui generis* type of composition

In the world of living beings, every single monster is a distinct species: it has a *sui generis* composition.

First of all, we should remark that a subject actually having monstrous anomalies dies immediately after its birth. Moreover, since it cannot breed, its specificity would not be passed on. The anatomy and physiology of a monster is peculiar and clearly recognizable. The monster is not the defective analogous of a "normal" being: the originality of its constitution becomes fully clear and classifiable.

Let us take into account a specific example: the human acephalous. In the light of the above considerations, can we still consider it as a human being? According to Isidore's analysis, it cannot be recognized as a member of the human species because it lacks all the features characterizing the human individual (i.e. head, brain, etc.). However, it will be a subject worthy of analysis and classification, due to its unique existence that is confined to the intrauterine environment.

The monster is not merely an ill subject, suffering from a more or less lethal disease, but it is an individual having a *different organization*. Such an organization has its recurrent characteristics external to the zoological realm the monstrous individual belongs to.

Just like his father Étienne<sup>40</sup>, here Isidore referred to Leibniz. In his *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Leibniz had argued that the abnormal individual loses his/her identity when the classification criterion lies in the comparison of external forms. This was because the external form of monsters is deeply altered by the disease and is not consistent with the typical form of other specimens in the same species. Therefore a different criterion is required for the identification of this species. This criterion should not only take

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 501.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> In the entry "Monstre", included in the *Dictionnaire classique d'histoire naturelle*, Paris, 1827, vol. 11 (Mons), his father refers to Leibniz precisely in the same way.

into account the monster's external shape, that is by nature ever-changing, but it should also give an answer to the question as to whether the "inner nature [...] that is common to the individuals of a given species [...] is also present [...] in individuals lacking some of the outer signs that ordinarily occurs in that species"<sup>41</sup>. By hinting at the *inner nature*, i.e. an *entelechy*, Leibniz had overcome the problem of the restrictive analysis of *external features*, which is insufficient for the identification of the monster's species. Leibniz' notion of species would then be invalidated by the existence of monsters, unless a metaphysical principle, a *substantial form*, came into play.

Isidore Geoffroy's answer to the above question (whether an acephalic subject is still a human being) is a clear expression of the epistemological shift from Leibniz' thought. The underlying issue is thus solved:

un Acéphale n'est donc point un être humain, anatomiquement parlant : il n'appartient à l'espèce humaine que par la circonstance de son origine ; circonstance dont on doit toujours faire abstraction, et dont la valeur est absolument nulle, lorsqu'il s'agit de déterminer les rapports d'un être sous un point de vue général et philosophique.<sup>42</sup>

An acephalic subject is an individual at its highest level of development, whose life is restricted at the existence in the uterus. The monster is then a fully-formed individual: in the acephalic subject, the development of the organization did not proceed regularly as required by its specific type, but was arrested, producing a different kind of organization. The "new being" would then fall into another type of classification, parallel to the zoological one. The "circumstance of its origin" could not be applied any more as a heuristic criterion for the classification of monsters; it was confined – together with any reference to final causes – to a discipline like teratology, which aimed to acquire a scientific dignity. All features that are shared with normal subjects must be left out of the analysis of a monster, which should only focus on the purposeful study of the typical features of monsters.

The application of the naturalist method to teratology was validated by the finding that the same kind of abnormality or monstrosity recurs in different subjects, as well as by the empirical proof that those abnormalities are actually regulated by general laws; however, on Isidore's opinion, this taxonomic method did not allow for a global and complete classification. "La meilleure des classifications ne saurait être parfaite"<sup>43</sup>; however, this is also true for teratology and, generally speaking, for any method or system. In spite of this specification, it is unquestionable that a "natural" yet imperfect classification is more useful than a supposedly perfect yet "artificial" classification: while the latter results in a sterile

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<sup>41</sup> G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. by P. Remnant, J. Bonnot, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 312.

<sup>42</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies cit.*, vol. 1, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 122.

enumeration, the former allows for comparisons and highlights analogies that would be otherwise unnoticed<sup>44</sup>.

## 9. The limits of monstrosity

“Les anciens anatomistes paraissent n’avoir pas même soupçonné que les anomalies de l’organisation pussent avoir des limites, et à plus forte raison, qu’elles fussent réductibles à des lois certaines et précises”<sup>45</sup>. The fifth chapter of the essay *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies* opens with a brief overview of ancient beliefs about the origins and the appearance of monsters. In particular, the first paragraph entitled *Des faux monstres* deals with imaginary monsters or fictional and mythological creatures, resulting from a combination of different parts of animals. The notion of monsters has significantly changed from Ambroise Paré and Malebranche to Diderot<sup>46</sup>, going from a mythological conceptualization to a structuralist (or functionalist) framework, where it can be quantified, analysed and classified. “[...] La science du rangement, la cartographie des productions végétales ou animales transformera directement l’économie, [...] inquiétera les rois et leurs conseillers”<sup>47</sup>.

Prior to the epistemological revolution, there was no limit to imagination. According to various beliefs, monsters acquired forms that could not exist within the rigid boundaries of nature, where no infringement is allowed. The impulse towards hybridism reached the highest levels of fancy, even though the researches of eighteenth century anatomists were clearly already looking for a regular principle.

These flights of fancy were interrupted by Isidore: as it appears, nature “creates” nothing anew, but ceaselessly keeps modifying its current forms according to the laws of organization, by which it must always abide. This means that any monstrous feature, as well as any arrest or even excess of formation or development, must comply with rigid boundaries, which are eventually set by the general laws governing the world of living beings.

Explaining what caused an *excess* of formation thus required a set of general laws of organization, ensuring the possibility to alter but not to “create” the organic matter. The most relevant of these laws is the principle of eccentric or centripetal development, upon which blood vessels and nerves are always formed before the development of the heart and the cerebrospinal axis. According to this theory, the process of organogenesis is reverted, because the formation of organs follows the flow of venous blood. This means that it proceeds from the “circumference” to the centre. By consequence, the organs are formed and shaped from the “circumference” to the centre; hence each uneven and median organ is originally double and the right half, separated from the left half during the early stages of development, is then combined to the latter only in the following stages. If an accident prevents these halves from joining (*arrest of development*), two separate organs are consequently created (*excess of*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 421.

<sup>46</sup> On these topics, see M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Gli enigmi della forma* cit.

<sup>47</sup> See F. Dagognet, *Le catalogue de la vie* cit., p. 11.



formation), without involving the *formation* of a new and excess matter. The law of *eccentric* or *centripetal development* explained the *outgrowth* of organic matter by the notion of the *arrest* of development.

While looking for proofs that could validate this law, Isidore Geoffroy discovered another law of embryogenesis: the law of the *renewal of organs*, according to which "chaque fonction est successivement exécutée au moins par deux organismes, l'un primitif et provisoire, l'autre définitif et permanent, inverses dans leur développement, et comme antagonistes". This law, as declared by Isidore Geoffroy, "m'a été en effet, sinon démontrée, du moins indiquée d'abord par les résultats de mes recherches tératologiques"<sup>48</sup>. He was able to remark that the volume of many organs, such as the thymus and the suprarenal glands, is much greater in the foetus than in children or adults. At a given moment, these organs begin to decrease until they reach a rudimentary stage. The excessive volume of a developing organ can be due to a persisting condition that is typical of a less advanced stage; that is, by a rudimentary, provisional and transitory organ that abnormally persists and whose volume is greater by nature than its final size. Fully-formed organs are prevented from taking the place of their provisional likes by the *arrest of development*, so that they maintain an unnaturally bigger volume.

Even in this case, no organic matter is formed anew. But what about double or triple monsters? Once again the law of the arrest of development comes to Isidore's aid: the excess of formation is caused by an arrested development in one of two subjects; this subject can be seen as a parasitic form of the twin with a more advanced level of formation.

Again, it is recommended to go through Isidore's classification step by step. According to his taxonomy, the class of simple monsters includes three categories: 1. the *autosita* (whose body appears as fully-formed; after their birth, they can survive for a varying period of time. *Autosita* are in turn divided into four *triba*, according to the abnormal part: limbs, head, torso, or cerebrospinal axis); 2. the *omphalosita* (suffering from a very complex abnormal condition, where one or more organs or body parts are missing but the umbilical cord is still present); 3. the *parasites* (monsters appearing as an amorphous mass of cells, having no venous circulation or umbilical cord). The class of double monsters is divided in two categories: the *autositaria* (double abnormal condition presenting two *autosita*) and *parasitic* individuals (where an *omphalositus* or *parasite* is joined with an *autositus* and so on; one of two individuals is more developed than the other). In these

réunions qui amènent la formation d'êtres composés, ce qui est vrai du corps tout entier, l'est de ses diverses parties, soit chez les monstres doubles ou triples, soit chez les êtres composés normaux. Sauf de rares exceptions, dont il est presque toujours possible de se rendre un compte satisfaisant, l'union des individus composants se fait toujours entre parties similaires.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies* cit., vol. 3, p. 597.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 464.

This happened accordingly to the law of *soi pour soi*. A regular pattern in the shaping of double or triple monsters emerges from the analogies and the “harmonie des matériaux qui les constituent”<sup>50</sup>.

## 10. Conclusion

With such a complex classification, is there still room for an order? According to Isidore, the answer is yes: an order that is not teleological, and yet it can display the regular patterns of living beings by emphasizing their irregularities. The monster is a challenge to nature and to its own laws, by which their compulsory application is reaffirmed.

The scientific teratology “est à l’origine de l’intelligibilité contemporaine du monstre (la classification d’Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire est d’ailleurs toujours en usage dans les thèses de médecine)”<sup>51</sup>. Facing monsters, which are always a challenge to reason, and confronting it with the mystery of life and creation in its limitless complexity, the limits of men are bypassed. The philosopher of science can now understand and classify an accphalous, placing it on the rank of a complex organisation, that not only it is worth studying, but it also represents an empirical evidence of the power of nature and of the regularity of its laws .

The birth of teratology is legitimized under the plan of anatomical research set by Isidore Geoffroy. The French philosopher took on the scientific tenets of the emerging biology (i.e. variability is due to key invariables) and he arranged his studies combining different epistemological theories (namely those of his father and his rival Cuvier’s), demonstrating that a profitable combination could be achieved. Reading Isidore’s words and asking ourselves why the haunting and suggestive enigma of the *monster* loses its aura of terrifying wonder and is placed at the centre of the naturalists speculations finally means to question the role and the limits of modern science.

[Translated by Michela Pistidda and revised by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* In the Atlas tables, Isidore did not include triple monsters, and yet they are subject to the same laws governing double monsters. Their name is created by adding the prefix *tri-*.

<sup>51</sup> P. Ancet, *Phénoménologie des corps monstrueux*, Paris, PUF, 2006, p. 13.

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# *Him, the Monster? The Ego Deformation in Rameau's Nephew*

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**Abstract:** This essay deals with the topic of *social deformation* through the dialogue of MOI (Me) and LUI (Him), the two characters of *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot. This work overturns the Platonic terms of the dialogic form “staging” a comparison between a “philosopher” (MOI) and a “monster” (LUI). Through the proposed path we aimed to show how the *deformation* of the “moral monster” Rameau concerns equally the levels of aesthetics, ethics and physiology. Hence the difficulty for the “philosopher” of the dialogue to find an identity in the deformation, to think the *ego* individuation of such a changing and monstrous HIM, someone who is able both to mock the truth, assuming several forms, as a “cold blooded actor”, and to let truth “ferment” and to give back to anyone a fragment of “his natural individuality”. We attempted to accomplish the described task by clarifying that the “Nephew’s monstrosity” is just *relative monstrosity*, just one possibility of that ever changing “one”, that is man, furthermore pointing to the relationship between memory and freedom in order to find the theoretical fulcrum for a re-thinking of the “necessary” – and creating – role of deformation.

## 1. The philosopher and the “eccentric”

The philosopher has a “habit”<sup>1</sup>. “Rain or shine, [...] about five of an evening”<sup>2</sup>, walks along the Palais Royal, and ends his wandering on a bench of the boulevard d’Argenson. That’s when his thoughts start wandering, or his “trollops [*catins*]”<sup>3</sup>, as he notoriously calls them. But “if the weather’s *too* cold, or *too* wet”<sup>4</sup>, if then something threatens his daily promenade, here we find him in the Café de la Régence, where he can enjoy himself and shift from the licentiousness of his thoughts to the best chess playing place in Paris. Precisely one of those days of different weather from the *usual*, he enters the Café, and he is approached by an equally “different” figure: different from anything that can be said *normal*.

We are in the famous *incipit* of the *Second Satire*, also known as *Rameau's Nephew*, started by Denis Diderot in 1761 and probably modified until its last version in 1774<sup>5</sup> (it is worth remarking that Goethe translated it in 1805, even before the French edition, and from this translation Hegel will draw the passages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* dedicated, as it is well known, to *Rameau's Nephew*). We mentioned, right from the start, that in this work the chess game<sup>6</sup> forms the setting for the encounter between the philosopher, designated in the dialogue by the pronoun *Moi*, and the strange “character”<sup>7</sup>, who is given instead the pronoun *Lui*. A layered game is announced, and it characterizes indeed the dialogue soon taking place:

<sup>1</sup> D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, in D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and First Satire*, transl. by M. Mauldon, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 3 (henceforth RN followed by page number).

<sup>2</sup> RN, 3.

<sup>3</sup> RN, 3, translation modified.

<sup>4</sup> RN, 3, my italics.

<sup>5</sup> See H. Dicckmann, *The Relationship between Diderot's "Satire I" and "Satire II"*, “Romanic Review” 43 (1952), p. 12. See *ibid.* also on the crucial link between *Satire II* and the *Satire I*, *Sur les caractères et les mots de caractère, de profession, etc.*

<sup>6</sup> See J. Starobinski, *L'Incipit du "Neveu de Rameau"*, in “La Nouvelle Revue Française” 347 (1981), p. 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> RN, 3.

a kind of dialogue that formally overturns his illustrious predecessor, i.e. the Platonic dialogue<sup>8</sup> (we shall shortly see how this is not the only support employed by Diderot, with his well positioned levers, in order to stage his personal overturning of the *Platonism*).

Going back to the character, *Lui*, who starts bothering the philosopher, *Moi*, we immediately notice the main features of what could be defined – as many illustrious critics actually did – as a “moral monster”<sup>9</sup>: “he is a composite of nobility and baseness, good sense and irrationality”<sup>10</sup>. Such contradictions permeate this man at every level. The philosopher, with his Platonic attitude, tries to analyse him and make distinctions: he tries to rationally discern order in the person who sometimes looks like a tramp, sometimes like a “gentleman”<sup>11</sup>. And in order to make the task even more complicated, while introducing the complex core of the dialogue, we shall say straight away that the social deformation defining this “bizarre”<sup>12</sup> character is *played* on three different levels. The “changeability” of this “monster” is “moral”, “physiological”<sup>13</sup> and “aesthetic”<sup>14</sup>.

However, the main question I wish to tackle here is the one concerning the critical discussion of the notion of *ego* and its *freedom*. Throughout the dialogue the question is: what is the *ego* of such a changing and monstrous *Him*? Our question seems somehow trivial. The dialogue does not take place between “Diderot” and “Rameau’s Nephew”. About such *Him*, continually changing like the god *Vertumnus* mentioned in Horace’s exergue of *The Nephew*, like the weather opening the dialogue, the philosopher says at the beginning that “nothing could be more unlike him than he himself is”<sup>15</sup>. *Him* is at the mercy of money, thin or fat

<sup>8</sup> On this matter, see H.R. Jauss, *The Dialogical and the Dialectical Neveu de Rameau: How Diderot Adopted Socrates and Hegel Adopted Diderot*, transl. by S. Brewer Berkowitz, Protocol of the Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 27 February 1983, p. 1-29, where several, although often significantly divergent, interpretations of Diderot’s dialogue in relation to Plato’s dialogue are taken into critical account, and where, *d’après* Bakhtin, the Menippean form of the Satire is recognized in Diderot’s work. See also M.A. Bernstein, *When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero*, “Critical Inquiry” 10/2 (1983), p. 283-305 and J. Starobinski, “Diogène”, in Id., *Diderot, un diable de ramage*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, p. 219-222.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance H.R. Jauss, *The Dialogical and the Dialectical Neveu de Rameau* cit., p. 6, where Jauss goes back to J. Fabre, *Introduction à D. Diderot, Le neveu de Rameau*, Genève, Droz, 1977, p. XLV, who, in turn, defines the Nephew a “monster” referring to F. Venturi (cfr. F. Venturi, *Giovinazza di Diderot*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1988, p. 132).

<sup>10</sup> RN, 3. On the coexistence of such opposite factors in the Nephew, see J. Starobinski, *L’Incipit du “Neveu de Rameau”* cit., p. 52. On this matter, see also *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, where Diderot says probably alluding to Rousseau: “Had he been wise, I would not have loved him; I would not have loved him, had he been crazy: I needed him wise or crazy that way” (D. Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, in D. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by H. Dieckmann, J. Varloot, Paris, Hermann, 1975-, t. XXV, p. 232, my translation). And Foucault defined him as “the last character in whom madness and unreason are united” (M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, transl. by J. Murphy, J. Khalfa, London-New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 344), a “derisory figure” (*ibid.*, p. 345) finally revealing an “anti-Cartesian” (*ibid.*, p. 348) “power of derision” (*ibid.*, p. 345).

<sup>11</sup> RN, 4.

<sup>12</sup> RN, 3.

<sup>13</sup> J. Starobinski, *L’Incipit du “Neveu de Rameau”* cit., p. 44, my translation.

<sup>14</sup> J. Starobinski, *Sur l’emploi du chiasme dans “Le Neveu de Rameau”*, “Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale” 89/2 (1984), p. 184-185, my translation.

<sup>15</sup> RN, 3-4. And, as it is well known, Diderot himself, in the *Salons*, evoked the powers of *Vertumnus*, in order to reshape with words Vernot, Chardin, Greuze.



according to the circumstances, depending on whether he has been properly eating or he has snatched a frugal meal. *Him's* biological, animal dimension does not miss the opportunity to reveal itself<sup>16</sup>, right from the start in this work. In such "composite"<sup>17</sup> incarnated by *Him*, biological needs emerge and flourish during the dialogue, producing tensions and implications on the social and aesthetic level. The above mentioned paraded dependence on needs, as Starobinski remarks, implies that *Him's* deformation leads him to inhabit "zones of indistinction", "infra-human"<sup>18</sup>, i.e. the very thresholds by which, not by chance, Diderot's studies in physiology are very much concerned. However, this "eccentric"<sup>19</sup> individual, a member of the "eccentrics" group, sometimes knows how to raise interest in the wise philosopher. After all, when the weather is different from the usual, when the philosopher, contrary to his habits, does not indulge in the licentiousness of his thoughts, he can relax and listen to this "eccentric", although he does not hold him in "esteem"<sup>20</sup>. And that is because, – and this is a crucial point –, it seems that such a "soul of an earth-worm"<sup>21</sup> has something to teach him about the *others*. The game takes place then between *Me*, *Him* and the *others*, according to a "permutability"<sup>22</sup> style that Lyotard already recognized in "Diderot the satyr" and in his great "satire"<sup>23</sup>; more precisely *Rameau's Nephew*<sup>24</sup>. In fact, says *Moi*, this "eccentric" is interesting in so far as his changing deformation "contrasts" with "*other men's*"<sup>25</sup> forms, and "break[s] with that tedious uniformity [of] our education, [of our] social conventions"<sup>26</sup>. Exactly the others. If we take into account Lyotard's formula of permutability: *we*, the readers, are the others.

The image chosen by the philosophers, *Moi*, to describe how we are influenced by such a kind of people is even more revealing: a kind of maieutics, revealed, we could say, right from the start, when the narrator-philosopher has already experienced what happened that strange late afternoon, that is the time lapse of the dialogue, when he can then tell his truth, i.e. that when "one of them appears in a group, he's like a grain of yeast that ferments, and restores to each of us his natural individuality"<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Y. Sumi, *Le Neveu de Rameau: caprices et logiques du jeu*, Tokyo, Librairie-Éditions France Tosho, 1975, p. 134-142.

<sup>17</sup> RN, 3.

<sup>18</sup> J. Starobinski, *L'Incipit du "Neveu de Rameau"* cit., p. 57, my translation.

<sup>19</sup> RN, 4.

<sup>20</sup> RN, 4.

<sup>21</sup> RN, 88.

<sup>22</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity*, transl. by M. Minich Brewer, D. Brewer, in A. Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1989, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> "Being didn't choose Cézanne to express itself, now did it? Nor Merleau-Ponty, nor anyone. Don't try to re-establish these ponderous elections, poetic institution, Heideggerian preaching. 'Being' chose Rameau's Nephew" (*ibid.*, p. 189).

<sup>25</sup> RN, 4, my italics.

<sup>26</sup> RN, 4.

<sup>27</sup> RN, 4.

## 2. *Him's* game

What is *Him's* game? We soon understand that – as we claimed in the opening – the overturning of the Platonic dialogue actually takes place. Starobinski claims that *Him* is the paradigm of the “category of the hors-category, of those who cut and break, who don't play the game”<sup>28</sup>, but I would like to introduce a further distinction. Two passages characterize *Him*. When *Him* plays in society: in our play that's what *Him* describes to *Me*. When *Him* plays the social game, challenging it from within, *choosing* to obey its rules, precisely thus mocking them deeply: answering artfully, *coherently deforming* (as Merleau-Ponty would say<sup>29</sup>) in a *humorous way* (as Deleuze would say<sup>30</sup>): you can overthrow a rule by obeying it up to its finest details. In this scenario, – let's say a regime situation, – the Nephew willingly undergoes social deformations: he is the cold blooded actor who, once more within the tension between biological needs and social rules, chooses to mildly conform to the roles that society asks him to play. He defines himself as an “actor [*comédien*]”<sup>31</sup> who is better than the others.

But when *Him* meets *Me* at the Café de la Régence, for *Him* it's a suspension moment, a crisis of the Paradigm of the daily pantomime: he was in fact expelled from the Bertin-Hus salon, the last mundane shelter where he had found abundant meals. It's a “middle” moment. The philosopher and the jester both “smell” something different, something they do not know yet, and they are both attracted to it, they look for each other and they find each other. In this breaking point the Nephew's pantomime gives form to the deform maieutics of the dialogue. The question *what is it?* is replaced by the pantomime of the social pact in the process of helping someone to give birth to truth. Through his pantomime the Nephew shows the philosopher what he calls “idioms”<sup>32</sup> and thus provokes laughter. He shows, while deforming, “the various pantomimes of humankind”<sup>33</sup>, the idioms of each category, “moral idioms”, “idioms of that calling”<sup>34</sup>, pervaded by more general “idioms” capable of relating different categories.

*Him's* pantomime assumes then the truth value that both Diderot, and later on Bergson give to Molière's characters. We shall recall that according to Bergson laughter is moved precisely by the display of the folds of those habits moving human beings as “wooden dummies”<sup>35</sup>. The model for such a social unmasking, for Bergson, is precisely Molière's work, who is also, not by coincidence, an essential author for Diderot, and a fundamental

<sup>28</sup> J. Starobinski, *L'Incipit du "Neveu de Rameau"* cit., p. 59, my translation.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance M. Merleau-Ponty, *Man and Adversity [Discussion]*, transl. by T. Toadvine, in T. Toadvine, L. Lawlor (eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007, p. 216.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance G. Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, transl. by J. McNeil, Chapter VII, in *Masochism: "Coldness and Cruelty" by Gilles Deleuze and "Venus in Furs" by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch*, York, Zone Books, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> RN, 40.

<sup>32</sup> RN, 29.

<sup>33</sup> RN, 85.

<sup>34</sup> RN, 29.

<sup>35</sup> See H. Bergson, *The Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, transl. by C. Brereton, F. Rothwell, New York, Cosimo, 2005, p. 60.

inspiration for *Him* in *Rameau's Nephew*. The latter inherits this lesson in a "monstrous" fashion, playing it against the very social characters that force him to play the comedy of life. How is Molière's lesson transformed in the modelling hands of the Nephew? "When I read *L'Avare*", *Him* says,

I tell myself: be miserly, if you wish, but take care not to talk like the miser. When I read *Tartuffe*, I tell myself: be a hypocrite, if you wish, but don't talk like a hypocrite. Keep those vices which serve you well, but beware of the tone and the air that go with them, and would make you appear ridiculous. To be sure of avoiding that tone and air, one must *know* what they are; now, those authors have portrayed them superbly. *I am myself, and that is what I shall remain*; but I behave and talk in a socially acceptable manner.<sup>36</sup>

Here is the cold actor speaking. Notwithstanding, "I am myself, and that is what I shall remain" is an expression generating a problematic echo paired with the opening lines by the philosopher, *Me*, who describes *Him* saying that "nothing could be more unlike him than he himself is", and with what we also hear *Him* himself stating: "Devil take me if I have the faintest idea of what I really am"<sup>37</sup>. What seemingly stays the same instead is *Him's* tendency to assume forms, his tendency to deformation, cold indeed, although also supported – as the Nephew passively discovers as a happy surprise – by natural predisposition: he feels he has a kind of nature "which in this domain is surprisingly abundant"<sup>38</sup>. He is left then with a double choice: he can mutate and bend, so as to deceive the others, or he can become the person who reveals the social game.

And still, besides running after the satisfaction of physiological needs, *Him* is also urged to get full recognition as *I*, and therefore needs *Me*. Doesn't he feel the need, towards the end of this work, to receive confirmation from *Me* that he is always the same? Precisely him, Ventummus? He needs to be confirmed in front of the philosopher, to chase him down, as Socrates with the Sophist. The Platonic play roles are here reversed: "Rameau confers to his interlocutor a Socratic role. But we are only dealing with a simulacrum of a birth"<sup>39</sup>. Rameau is sterile in relation to the philosopher's words, who instead is unmasked by Rameau, and "fecundated" by him. Showing society's folds, types, idioms, deforming them just above the limit, this demonic Socrates "brings out the truth"<sup>40</sup>, a *humorous* maieutics in opposition to Socratic *irony*. Here is the confession that the Nephew gets the philosopher to engender: "Upon my word, what you call the beggars' pantomime, is what keeps the world going round"<sup>41</sup>.

Diderot's satire, an expression of his "freedom style"<sup>42</sup>, replaces the Platonic dialogue.

<sup>36</sup> RN, 48, my italics.

<sup>37</sup> RN, 46.

<sup>38</sup> RN, 49.

<sup>39</sup> J. Starobinski, *L'incipit du "Neveu de Rameau"*, cit., p. 64, my translation.

<sup>40</sup> RN, 4.

<sup>41</sup> RN, 86.

<sup>42</sup> One of the two styles recognized by Deleuze in the writing of the *Philosophe* (see G. Deleuze, *Introduction à*

It is its overturning. Can we nevertheless say – as we saw the philosopher stating – that such an overturning brings about the discovery of a “natural individuality” lying underneath “idioms”, that would be the result of the clear vision derived from the unmasking of the Nephew, *Him*, who is able to assume and reveal through pantomime the folds of habit forming the social fabric? Once the half an hour of “crisis” of the dialogue is over, the Nephew will go back to being a cold actor, and he will re-enter the great pantomime of the world, the existence of which, as we just saw, he got his “victim”, the philosopher, to admit. But let’s consider a further step, “backwards” to be precise: if, helped by Diderot’s *Elements of Physiology*, we go indeed a step backwards in relation to the Nephew’s actions, one “notch [cran]”<sup>43</sup> back, we get to the heart of the problem that the Nephew’s deformation let emerge at the limit between social grounds and biological grounds. Can the Nephew act differently from how he acts? The problem is not only who *him* is, but what his *I* is. What is the *Me* of *Him*? It’s not by chance that at some point in the dialogue *Him* advocates the dignity of his own *Me*, through his ability to say *no*. Indeed, it is true that Rameau mocks the others, because he is hungry for fine food and wealth, although hunger is not enough to force him to return to his daily pantomime: he wants the “dignity” to satisfy his needs by *choice*. After all, it would be a choice involving, according to him, ethical consequences: his monstrous pantomimes can, so he claims, express “providen[tial]” justice, as they present themselves as a “homeopathic remedy” for the corresponding illness: “We are the means appointed for all eternity by Providence” *Him* claims “to mete out justice to the Bertins of our day”<sup>44</sup>.

### 3. Is the Nephew a monster?

I recalled earlier how the most authoritative critic has repeatedly defined Rameau’s Nephew as a *monster*. And yet this word never appears in the whole dialogue. I believe rather relevant that, on the other hand, the philosopher writes: “there was, in what he was saying, much that we all think, and by which we guide our behaviour, but do not actually say. In truth, this was the most striking difference between my man and the majority of other people”<sup>45</sup>. Diderot could have defined the Nephew a “monster” with no difficulty, granted however that, in regards to the last quoted remark, the definition and the monstrosity effect were applied to all human beings. Taking into account Diderot’s physiological studies can shed much light, if we hold true, as Diderot claims, that there is no hiatus between what is biological, social or aesthetic, and man is just one, under all mentioned “aspects”. Through the lesson of D’Alembert *Rêve* we learnt that man is a form provided with a “temporary equilibrium”<sup>46</sup>, like all other beings. According to Simondon’s Twentieth century terminology, a “metastable

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D. Diderot, *La religieuse*, Paris, Marcel Daubin, 1947).

<sup>43</sup> D. Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2004, p. 315, my translation.

<sup>44</sup> RN, 57.

<sup>45</sup> RN, 76.

<sup>46</sup> See J. Varloot, *Genèse et signification du “Rêve de d’Alembert”*, in D. Diderot, *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, Paris, Éditions sociales, 1971, p. LXXXIII, my translation.

equilibrium"<sup>47</sup>. Thus, we could say that Diderot's enquiry aims at the process, and not at the principle, of individuation<sup>48</sup>. There is no pre-formation, although Rameau insists on the ominous influence, in itself, of the "paternal molecule"<sup>49</sup>. Social and biological monstrosity are according to Diderot only relative: "Animals, plants etc. are, to my belief, recent events in respect to the origin of the world; once born, in time they will pass away"<sup>50</sup>; human species, monstrous perhaps in relation to something else, could be a fleeting species<sup>51</sup>.

We shall now refer to a strategic writing – from which the latter quotation is taken – in order to disentangle some of the controversial points of the stratified text of *Rameau's Nephew*, i.e. to Diderot's *Comment on the Letter Concerning Man by Hemsterhuis*, where some of the main topics of the *Elements of Physiology* are carried out (when Diderot writes his *Comment*, he has already started writing the *Elements* as well). In this text, Diderot himself carries the topic of the monster from the biological level to the social one<sup>52</sup>. First of all, he claims that monstrosity is relative: "there is nothing that is monstrous in relation to the whole"<sup>53</sup>; then suggests that "the envious man is not a lasting monster" and "the voluptuous is another fleeting monster", "provided that", not an irrelevant clarification, "such vices are at variance with the organization"<sup>54</sup>. Moreover, if we remark that Diderot, in a letter to Sophie Volland, defines himself as a "monster", we can then understand how it seems necessary to apply to the social fabric at least what has been said concerning the biological field and the fundamental becoming of the forms. It happens, as it does to Diderot, that you feel "rather a monster" as to live "with discomfort, although not monster enough to be exterminated"<sup>55</sup> by nature. And yet, in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius* not only the "imbecile", but also the "genius" is considered to be a "monster"<sup>56</sup>.

Not only monstrosities are relative, but perhaps we are monsters ourselves, man is a

<sup>47</sup> G. Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, Paris, Aubier, 2007<sup>2</sup>, p. 28, my translation.

<sup>48</sup> See D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, in D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*, transl. by L. Tancock, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 189: "Anyhow, you can see that where the early stages of the development of an animal are concerned, it is beginning at the wrong end to observe and study the mature animal. You must go back to its rudimentary state, and it is relevant to strip yourself of your present bodily organisation and return for a moment to the time where you were simply a soft, fibrous, shapeless, vermicular substance, more comparable to a bulb or root than to an animal".

<sup>49</sup> RN, 73. On the importance of the term molecule in *Rameau's Nephew*, see R. Eluér, "Note sur fibre et molécule dans *Le Neveu de Rameau*", "L'Information grammaticale" (52) 1992, p. 14-16. However, on the notions of molecule and fibre, with reference to the *Éléments de physiologie*, see P. Quintili, *Introduction à D. Diderot, Éléments de physiologie* cit., p. 55-60; 73-80.

<sup>50</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme et ses rapports de Hemsterhuis*, in D. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes* cit., t. XXIV, p. 315, my translation.

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 403. See also D. Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie* cit., p. 108-109.

<sup>52</sup> See M. Brini Savorelli, *Introduzione a D. Diderot, Commento alla Lettera sull'uomo di Hemsterhuis*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1971, p. 62-64.

<sup>53</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 315, my translation.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323, my translation.

<sup>55</sup> D. Diderot, *Lettres à Sophie Volland*, vol. III, Paris, Gallimard, 1930, p. 276, my translation. Jean-Pierre Vernant paid attention to this very passage in its interesting "Le 'Diderot' d'Henri Lefebvre", "La Pensée" 29 (1950), p. 89-94. On the one hand, Vernant points out the dichotomy between nature and society in Diderot's work, but, on the other hand, in his short *compte rendu*, he makes clear that "we do not have to say that Diderot hesitates and floats in the contradiction between Nature and Society, but that he consciously preserves and sharpens this contradiction" (*ibid.*, p. 93, my translation).

<sup>56</sup> D. Diderot, *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé L'Homme*, in D. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes* cit., t. XXIV, p. 505; 517, my translation.

monster:

Why could the whole human species not be a monstrous species[?]. Nature exterminates the individual within an interval of one hundred years. Why would it not exterminate the species within a greater number of years[?] If all is *in fluxu*; – as one can hardly doubt; – all beings are monstrous, that is to say, more or less incompatible with the subsequent order.<sup>57</sup>

Nothing is still, as the *Elements of Physiology*, a work on which Diderot will work until his very last days, effectively shows: not only do species transform in their history (intra-specific transformation inspired by Buffon), but a species can also, gradually, fold by fold, transform into another one (extra-specific transformation)<sup>58</sup>. Diderot, originally approaching the medicine of his time and the lessons of Montpellier doctors and Haller, offers a personal overturning of Platonism. Such a claim doesn't exclusively follow Nietzsche or Deleuze's comments, as we could expect, it also derives from what Diderot himself clearly states in the *Comment* on the work of Hemsterhuis the "Platonist"<sup>59</sup>. The soul becomes the I, and the I becomes an effect, the effect of a process, – and not of a principle – of individuation. I recalled at the beginning how the three interplay levels of *Rameau's Nephew* develop in several directions and constantly imply one another. Each level is implied in another, with no proper separation. To describe form, and most of all the notion of deformation, without employing final causes, nor causes of generation, is a new task, and a relative one. In Diderot's overturning of Platonism, form is neither a final nor initial cause, and becomes, on the contrary, an *intensive* notion; that which cannot be separated without changing its nature. The infinite division of matter is possible from an intellectual point of view, but reason stops dividing where it perceives forms. Half a finger does not exist. You can divide a circle, but the half of roundness does not exist<sup>60</sup>. The idioms that Rameau made visible can change, but cannot be divided: they are qualitative forms.

#### 4. I want what I am

The *Comment on the Letter Concerning Man by Hemsterhuis*, once taken into account the lesson coming from the *Elements of Physiology*, provides the access to a further level of interpretation of *Rameau's Nephew*. *Me* and *Him*: those are the names, as we know, of the two interlocutors in the above mentioned work by Diderot. And yet, what do *Me* and *Him* stand for within Diderot's overturning of Platonism? According to Diderot, what is – and this is my final question – the principle of the *ego* in such a perpetual flux with no pre-constituted ideas,

<sup>57</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 403, my translation.

<sup>58</sup> See P. Quintili, *Introduction à D. Diderot, Éléments de physiologie* cit., p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> See D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 343. And, moreover: "what an excellent disciple of Socrates you would have been!" (*ibid.*, p. 406, my translation).

<sup>60</sup> On this matter, see D. Diderot, *Conversation between D'Alembert and Diderot*, in D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream* cit., p. 160.

with no pre-formation? The principle of the *ego* is memory: "Diderot's razor" would like to do without the soul, and this is the main point in the *Comment*. *Me* and *Him* can then be interpreted not as two *souls*, but as two different memories, two "series" of continuity: the *ego* is just the awareness of the continuous series. In the *Comment* we read: "The *me* [*moi*] is the result of the memory, which attaches to an individual the sequences of [his/her] sensations. If I am an individual, this is *me* [*moi*]. If it is another individual, this is *him* [*lui*]. The *him* and the *me* spring out of the same principle"<sup>61</sup>. *Me* and *Him*, precisely as Rameau's characters, are not two "metaphysical souls", but rather two different series of memory, two "stories", two different forms of subjectivity: here lies the "difference" between the two poles of the dialogue. Diderot avoids using personal names in *Rameau's Nephew*, the dialogue being between *Me* and *Him*, i.e. between a chain of experiences that calls itself *Me* and another "individual", *Him*. *Me* and *Him*, according to what we read once more in the *Comment*, come from "the very same principle": "they extend through the same medium, and likewise they annihilate themselves. Without memory which attaches to a long sequence of actions the same individual, the being at every sensation, momentary, would pass from waking up to sleeping, it would barely have the time to admit to itself it exists", and he/she would feel as if emerging, so to speak, from "nothing"<sup>62</sup>. The individuation process of such a transcendental memory, a "source of vices and virtues"<sup>63</sup>, is introduced in the *Éléments* through two 'images of memory', closely connected to one another. The first, an image of memory as all retaining "sensitive and living wax": "in order to explain the mechanism of memory", Diderot writes, "we have to consider the soft substance of the brain as a mass of sensitive and living wax, [...] susceptible to all sorts of forms, not losing any of those received and receiving, ceaselessly, new ones it keeps"<sup>64</sup>. Thus, he adds, you write the "book" – a second image of memory – that the *ego* is, a peculiar book, since its reader is the book itself: "This book is sentient, living" and it "reads itself"<sup>65</sup>. Memory then is the transcendental part of the *ego*, transcendental in relation to the formation of identity.

Without memory, there is no *Me*, and, as it is clearly demonstrated in the *Comment* on the Letter by Hemsterhuis, there is no *Him* either.

*We create a story of our own life, we need a continuous link, we acquire habits*<sup>66</sup>, as the one opening *Rameau's Nephew*, of the philosopher strolling everyday at Palais Royal. The images of the sensitive wax and of the book reading itself had been anticipated in *D'Alembert's Dream* by the image of the sound of a cord hearing *itself*<sup>67</sup>. *Me* is memory, "memory of the sensations I felt, making the story of my life; a story starting slightly sooner

<sup>61</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 329, my translation. In D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream* cit., p. 194, we can read: "It is the recollection of all these successive impressions which makes up the story of each animal's life and its consciousness of self".

<sup>62</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 329-330, my translation, my italics.

<sup>63</sup> D. Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie* cit., p. 302, my translation.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297, my translation.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, my translation.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>67</sup> See D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream* cit., p. 157. We cannot further develop here the topic of the image of the 'memory wax' and its relationships with Diderot's preceding images of memory. On this matter we refer here to a J. Chouillet, *Matière et mémoire dans l'œuvre de Diderot*, "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale" 89/2 (1984).

or later according to the individual"<sup>68</sup>.

If we accept the suggestion coming from the *Comment on the Letter* by Hemsterhuis, then *Me* and *Him*, like the characters of *Rameau's Nephew* are series of memory, figures coming from connections among time lapses, books reading themselves and allowing external reading, not without difficulty or oblivion: memory is a stratification of echoes, a creation of depth. So we are allowed to talk about Diderotian temporal genesis of the *ego*, rising from a process of passive genesis. On this very ground is played the relationship between freedom and fatalism in Diderot's late thought, as in the *Éléments*, and on this ground we take a peek at the philosophical stance of the topic of the choice of the *ego*, as emerging from the analysis of *Rameau's Nephew*. I can say *I* for the experience never stops to remind me, although in the form of an endless problem, *who* I am.

Within Diderot's overturned Platonism it is increasingly necessary to define the space for a new possible ethics, not giving in to deformation and the evil "charms". Nietzsche laments the lack of a "more refined ethics, *Rameau's Nephew*"<sup>69</sup>. Even the notion of responsibility is charged with a triple connotation: in biology, ethics and aesthetics. *Him* clearly raises this issue, introducing what we could call Palissot's dilemma: "Brun", a poet, "complains loudly that Palissot, his guest and friend, has written some couplets attacking him. Palissot had to write the couplets, and it's Brun who's in the wrong. [...] If you take a young man from the provinces to the Versailles menagerie, and he stupidly decides to put his hand between the bars of the tiger's [...] cage: if this young man loses his arm in the beast's maw, who is in the wrong? It's all spelled out in the tacit agreement. Hard luck for anyone unaware of that agreement, or who has forgotten it. How often would I not invoke this universal, sacred compact to justify those we accuse of malice [...]!"<sup>70</sup>. But if we say that Palissot "had to", isn't it also true that we could answer the Nephew, that the poet Le Brun also *had to*? Did the young man from the provinces not *have to* put his hand between the bars? Was everything already not written on the great scroll, Jacques the fatalist would say? Once again the *Elements of Physiology* hit the deepest point at stake, hitting the "rock solid" issue:

Voluntary action, involuntary action. The one we call voluntary is not more so than the other, the cause has only moved back a notch [...]. If there is freedom, it is in the ignorant person. If between two things to do we do not have any reason of preference, that is when we do what we want, that we want without cause [...]; [but] this man is the abstract man and not the real one.<sup>71</sup>

From here to the denial of man's freedom the step is short: "The free man is an abstract

<sup>68</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 351, my translation.

<sup>69</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments* (KSA 7, 30[18], 739), in F. Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, t. XI. *Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations*, transl. by R. T. Gray, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 299.

<sup>70</sup> RN, 55-56. On this matter, see also the analyses in J. Starobinski, *Sur l'emploi du chiasme dans "Le Neveu de Rameau"* cit., p. 188-192.

<sup>71</sup> D. Didcrot, *Éléments de physiologie* cit., p. 315, my translation.



being<sup>72</sup>, a necessary conjecture for a finite being, a necessary idea for the forced man. At best, as the *Letter to Landois* already claimed in 1759, man has developed the habit of thinking himself free<sup>73</sup>. The first consequence of the theoretical negation of individual freedom is the immediate demand for the foundation of ethics, not exclusively on the grounds of biology, but taking into account that – also biological – “one”, that man is<sup>74</sup>, with no reference to external principle, be this latter a “soul”<sup>75</sup>, or a “moral organ”. Let’s consider how, if “freedom is but a chimera”<sup>76</sup>, the notions of repentance and regret change: repentance is still possible, but there is no room for regret<sup>77</sup>. However, if on the other hand I have no choice, suddenly the space of morality is, so to speak, vertically “safe”: I must act so as to be worthy of what happens to me. During the last period of his life, Diderot, not by chance, devoted great thinking to Seneca, looking for a “wise man ethics”<sup>78</sup>. The moral question rising from *Rameau's Nephew* must respond to the same issue: *Me*, at some point in the dialogue, talking to *Him*, seems to anticipate it: “you can’t believe that one can *rise above* good or ill fortune”<sup>79</sup>.

We shall not claim, however, that in Diderot’s ethics man is exclusively determinate. Simply, what he did, he did necessarily. He cannot regret anything saying: “I could have done otherwise”. If, for the sake of argument, this were possible, he would cease to be the very man uttering the sentence, since in his place we would find a different series, another story, another *Me*, who would ignore everything about the existence of the one expressing recrimination. It would certainly be an “identical” *Him*, from the point of view of the other *Me* watching him, so to speak, from outside, but he would not be the same *Me* who expressed regret<sup>80</sup>. Man, like the animals, is perfectible, “modifiable”<sup>81</sup>. And the very “man of the *Éléments*”, as Paolo Quintili remarked, “is a being that can *perfect itself*, physically as much as morally, these two fields being causally tied together”<sup>82</sup>, in the “single cause” represented by man:

I’m almost sixty years old. Whatever the multitude of causes is which contributed to make me what I am, I am a single cause. When I speak, I always have only one effect to produce. This effect is the necessary result of what I have been since the farthest moment from the present moment to the former.

<sup>72</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l’homme* cit., p. 308, my translation.

<sup>73</sup> See D. Diderot, *Lettre à Landois*, in D. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by H. Dieckmann, J. Varloot, t. IX, Paris, Hermann, 1981, p. 257.

<sup>74</sup> “In my system I would employ a different expression than moral organ; I would have said man; that in my opinion is a being *one*” (D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l’homme* cit., p. 360, my translation).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340, my translation.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402, my translation.

<sup>77</sup> On this matter, see D. Diderot, *Lettre à Landois* cit., p. 258.

<sup>78</sup> See E. Franzini, *Elogio dell’Illuminismo*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2009, p. 23, my translation.

<sup>79</sup> RN, 35, my italics.

<sup>80</sup> RN, 35, my italics. On this matter, see also D. Diderot, *D’Alembert’s Dream* cit., p. 202: “Bear in mind also that although our birth and young manhood were linked by an uninterrupted series of sensory impressions, the first three years of your life have never been part of your conscious life-story. What would the period of your youth have meant to you if it had borne no relationship at all to this moment of your decrepitude? D’Alembert as a decrepit old man wouldn’t have the faintest recollection of the young D’Alembert”.

<sup>81</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l’homme* cit., p. 342, my translation.

<sup>82</sup> P. Quintili, *Introduction à D. Diderot, Éléments* cit., p. 92, my translation.

Leaning [*velléité*] is nothing else but my necessary agreement to do what I necessarily do, in the moment.<sup>83</sup>

Is then consensus to make an action virtuous or not? Can we say that the Nephew is guilty since he gives consensus to his monstrous nature? I don't commit a sin, Abelard claimed, when an evil thought comes knocking to my head, but when I open, so to speak, the door and invite it to come in...

However, in the *Comment* once more Diderot goes backwards a "notch" and, although acknowledging the existence of assent, he denies, after all, the stance of freedom: "the agreement to produce the effect we necessarily produce, as one cause, is nothing else but the awareness of what we are the moment we act. So I want is synonymous with I am such"<sup>84</sup>. This is not then, according to Diderot, the best of all possible worlds<sup>85</sup>, but, as Rameau's Nephew already sensed, this is the only world possible<sup>86</sup>, within which we should give further thinking to the wise man figure, granted that Diogenes appears to be, towards the very end of *Rameau's Nephew*, the example of a much too abstract philosopher<sup>87</sup>. The only world possible, however, is a world still writing itself according to the only possible way it can be written. Like, by the way, Jacques' "great scroll", creating new forms. This is why *Rameau's Nephew* can conclude saying: "He that laughs last, laughs best"<sup>88</sup>. And perhaps the one who will laugh, Diderot would say, will not even be a man<sup>89</sup>.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>83</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 301, my translation, but on this matter see what doctor Bordeu says to D'Alembert in the *Rêve*: "There is only one thing I can say about freedom of action: it is that the most recent of our acts is the necessary effect of one single cause – *ourselves* – a very complicated cause, but a single one" (D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream* cit., p. 217, my italics)

<sup>84</sup> D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 302, my translation. It thus opens up the possibility for a transcendental – and not metaphysical – discussion about freedom: it is no more question of "showing how it is possible that the causal chain which determines us as empirical subjects is interrupted by the breaking in of voluntary act", but rather of "determining the structural rules starting from which one gets allowed to talk about will" (V. Costa, *Distanti da sé. Verso una fenomenologia della volontà*, Jaca Book, Milano, 2011, p. 16, my translation).

<sup>85</sup> See D. Diderot, *Observations sur la Lettre sur l'homme* cit., p. 389.

<sup>86</sup> "Nothing else is possible but what exists; I mean possible in nature, and not in concept. [...] All that is, it is all that can be. Nothing else can exist" (*ibid.*, p. 401, my translation). In what concerns the *Nephew*, the best possible world would be "the one that includes me; to hell with the most perfect of worlds, if I'm not part of it" (RN, 12).

<sup>87</sup> On the figure of Diogenes in *Rameau's Nephew*, see J. Starobinski, "Diogène" cit.

<sup>88</sup> RN, 89.

<sup>89</sup> See D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, cit., p. 180-182.

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# Monsters and Social Deformations in Balzac's Work: *Sarrasine's* Case Study

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**Abstract:** The project of *La Comédie humaine* by Balzac appears like a monstrous monument, a succession of social deformations and pathologic life's forms: this essay focuses on the historical and theoretic relations between Balzac, the science of life and a new science like teratology in French context. The scientific research by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire on monster, particularly on hermaphrodite, linking with a morphological tradition, crosses the obsession for neuter and mixed in *Sarrasine's* short story.

Balzac's interest for the epistemological and methodological implications of the sciences of life is largely documented, starting from his explicit admiration for both Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. Notwithstanding the expression of personal esteem for Cuvier all across the pages of *La peau de chagrin* or *La théorie de la démarche*, in the well known *Avant-propos* to the *Comédie humaine* of 1842, the novelist decides Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's victory over Cuvier in the famous dispute of 1830, the *querelle des analogues*, where the two scientists battle against each other in front of the French and German academic world, including an exceptional spectator, such as Goethe<sup>1</sup>. The choice in favour of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire is motivated mainly by the strong principle of *unity* and by the strong belief in *connection*, as essential principle of reality, presented in the scientist's writings, as well as in the efficacy of *analogy*, as an heuristic tool for the universal understanding of reality<sup>2</sup>. Balzac is looking for an ontological truth, to be presented as the invisible truth of the world of visible phenomena, and he finds in the principle of the unity of composition of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, – already anticipated, according to Balzac by the researches of Leibniz, Buffon, and Charles Bonnet, – both a grounded *hypothesis* and a methodological *model* for the understanding of the world<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. Where is the monument? The monster as monument.

Balzac is certainly attracted by the *monumental* dimension acquired by the science of life with Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. This element cannot be separated from the attention for the dimension of time, pervading natural sciences, and particularly the science of life, in the

<sup>1</sup> See H. de Balzac, *Avant-propos*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, vol. I, p. 8-20. See Balzac, *Author's Introduction*, ed. by G. Saintsbury, produced by J. Bickers, Dagny, and D. Widger, 2010 (iBook #1826). On the relation between Balzac and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, see H. D'Also, *Balzac, Cuvier et Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, "Revue d'histoire de la Philosophie" 1934, p. 339-354; S. De Sacy, *Balzac, Geoffroy et l'unité de composition*, "Mercure de France" 1/6, 1/7 (1948), 1/12 (1950).

<sup>2</sup> See M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte*, Milano, Guerini & Associati, 1992, p. 117-118.

<sup>3</sup> See F. Gaillard, *La science: modèle ou vérité? Réflexions sur l'avant-propos à la Comédie humaine*, in *Balzac: l'invention du roman*, sous la direction de C. Duchet, J. Neefs, Paris, Belfond, 1982, p. 69-73.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century<sup>4</sup>, that is to say, the capacity to go “from the study of the synchronical of life to a diachronical study: biology properly speaking, defined by its historical dimension”<sup>5</sup>, that is certainly a not unfamiliar dimension for the construction of a literary monument, such as the *Comédie humaine*.

However, the two ideas of the systematic articulation of the animal world as a monument, that we can get from Cuvier and from Saint-Hilaire are not identical: Cuvier is admired by Balzac, as the writer says, for his analytical skills to logically deduct the entire whole from one detail, to reconstruct from “the frontal bone, jawbone, or femoral bone of some beast, [...] an entire creature from them, even if it be antediluvian”<sup>6</sup>, without mistakes, but classifying the discovered individual according to the principle of parts and whole correlation and mutual dependency, for which each part separately considered hints to all the others. Cuvier’s method responds to a both economical and aesthetic principle particularly seductive for the French novelist: it allows an economy of means to grasp the necessary links between a detail and its set (*ex ungue leonem*)<sup>7</sup>. Cuvier tends then to restore the monument as a systematic unit starting from its fragments. The scientist himself employs the term “monument” when he compare his activity to that of the antiquarian: “Antiquarian of a new species, it was necessary that I learn both how to restore these monuments of past revolutions and to decipher their meaning; [...] to compare them with the ones living today on the globe’s surface: an art almost unknown and relying before on a simply sketched science”<sup>8</sup>. The tribute paid to Cuvier in the first pages of *La peau de chagrin* by Balzac takes place, not by chance, in an antiquarian shop, where objects, works of art of different and distant periods are randomly piled up.

Here, also the peculiar retrospective and circumstantial look of the scientist-poet finds its place, with its ability to let a full set rise from a stone fragment, a footprint, a bone<sup>9</sup>. Precisely considering each animal of a species as a complete totality, to which every part necessarily refers, Cuvier cannot justify and master the principle of variability, that is the base of variation in living forms. This is why his analytical spirit, his rigorous although restricted genius, is compared by Balzac (through the mouth of Félix Davin) to the efforts of historical

<sup>4</sup> See M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> A. Michel, *Balzac et la logique du vivant*, “L’année balzacienne” 1972, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> H. de Balzac, *Treatise on Elegant Living*, transl. by N. Jeffries, Cambridge MA, Wakefield Press, 2010, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> The principle of the necessary and functional correlation between the detail and the whole is formulated on the aesthetic and epistemological level already in the *Salons* as well as in the first chapter of the *Essais sur la peinture* by Diderot. See D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art. The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting*, ed. and transl. by J. Goodman, Introduction by T. Crow, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1995, vol. 1, p. 191-193.

<sup>8</sup> G. Cuvier, *Discours sur les Révolutions de la surface du globe, et sur les changements qu’elles ont produits dans le règne animal*, Paris, Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et Cie, 1867, p. 1: “Antiquaire d’une espèce nouvelle, il me fallut apprendre à la fois à restaurer ces monuments des révolutions passées et à en déchiffrer le sens; [...] à les comparer enfin à ceux qui vivent aujourd’hui à la surface du globe: art presque inconnu, et qui supposait une science à peine effleurée auparavant”. On the evidential paradigm as a model of knowledge inherited from divination, and putting together history, archaeology, medicine, geology and palaeontology, see C. Ginzburg, *Clues. Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, transl. by J. Tedeschi, A.C. Tedeschi, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 96-125.

<sup>9</sup> See H. de Balzac, *The Magic Skin*, translation by Ellen Marriage, produced by Dagny, B. Sala, D. Widger, 2010 (EBook #1307).



reconstruction by Walter Scott, sculptor of several beautiful novels, or of well crafted chapters of a single work, nevertheless unable to rise from the effects of such a marvellous analysis to the synthesis, i.e. the system<sup>10</sup>. Cuvier consciously precludes himself the possibility to consider intermediate states of animal species, the imaginative effort to consider variations and transition from a form to another in continuity, according to the law of variability, that is the corollary of the principle of the one plan of composition. His monument is just sculptural, as the literary work of Walter Scott, and cannot account for a temporal layering of several levels of biological development, of different species and different layers of time in one unique, fresh form: taking the distinction and the heterogeneity of the species as a starting observational data, Cuvier can grasp the internal formal necessity linking animal parts to the whole, but he cannot deduct the variety of the species from a principle of variability of a single form, capturing in a unitary synthesis the one and many, as Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire could actually do<sup>11</sup>.

Next to this enquiry reconstructing life as a monument, precisely thanks to the study of anomalies and monstrosities started by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, another conception emerges, privileging the possibility of a double or plural vision of the same form. This means capturing the time deep frame of the monstrous form as well. This allows indeed to read diachronicity in the fixed form, to see variations within the unity. The monster can presents itself as a *monument*, jewel box of memory to be interpreted, and thus offer a precious intuition to someone, as Balzac, trying to articulate a project as the *Comédie humaine*, a systematic history of human and social culture.

The monumental project of the *Comédie humaine* gets monstrous looks in his encounter with the spirit of Balzac: a mythical monster incomprehensible at first, appearing to the novelist "at first as a dream", "a chimera that gives us a glimpse of its smiling woman's face"<sup>12</sup>, made intelligible by the principle of the unity of composition (as well as by its corollary, the variability law, justifying nature and the origins of metamorphosis in life, i.e. natural differentiation). The one plan provides to Balzac's project unity, coherence and intelligibility, through the introduction of elements of social classification analogous to the principles of natural classification, in the direction of an extension of the analogical method already applied by Saint-Hilaire in the inspection of several animal species, opening to possibility the analysis of social species as the zoologist studies zoological species.

The unitary plan justifies and allows the understanding of the origins of differences and of social and biological deformations, in relation first of all with the environment (*milieu*). This last term was made familiar in literature by Balzac himself, but it was already dominant in biological science since the early years of the Nineteenth Century (from Lamarck to Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire)<sup>13</sup>. The environment is the agent of social differentiation for human species, whose multiple forms come out of the progressive multiplication and variation of the same matter: "There is but one Animal. The Creator works on a single model for every

<sup>10</sup> See F. Davin, *Introduction aux Études de mœurs*, in Balzac, *Œuvres complètes* cit., vol. 1, p. 1151-1152.

<sup>11</sup> See F. Gaillard, *La science: modèle où vérité? Réflexions sur l'avant-propos à la Comédie humaine* cit., p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> H. de Balzac, *Author's Introduction* cit.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Canguilhem, *Le connaissance de la vie*, Paris, Vrin, 1965.

organized being. "The Animal" is elementary, and takes its external form, or, to be accurate, the differences in its form, from the environment in which it is obliged to develop. Zoological species are the result of these differences"<sup>14</sup>.

Society functions *in analogy* with nature's work, minus the strict respect of species limits, thanks to its greater mobility and dynamism. Accordingly, Balzac presents the French society engendered by the French Revolution and by Napoleon's epopee claiming that "differences have vanished in our society: all that remain are nuances"<sup>15</sup>, to the point that the son of a grocer can become Peer of France thanks to his wealth. Hazard, individual talents and passions, they all play as motives and motors of social transformations. The variability principle, i.e. the base of social life forms variations, is now the fundamental heuristic principle for the understanding of the spectrum of differences among classes and professions. Accordingly, the study of fashions, manners, bearing, furniture, things reflecting our habits, is the main object of interest in the *Pathologie de la vie sociale*.

In order to understand how the (biological and social) monster can provide an image of the time and rise to the value of monument under the clear inspection of someone considering it as the manifestation of one of the laws of nature, it is necessary to briefly recall the heuristic and epistemological value attributed by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire to teratology and, in direct connection, to embryology. The monster reveals in some of its organs traces of formation and development arrest (as theorized by Meckel-Serres's<sup>16</sup>), thus allowing an insight in the embryo's history, the memory of its development, that is its correlation to the scale of beings and the phylogenetic plan of development. In blocked organs anomaly, that fix them almost photographically to the development stage of an inferior animal, lower down in the scale of beings, *memory* otherwise lost in the embryo development is revealed, to the point that deformation is taken as a *spectre/spectrum* of memory of the natural scale of beings. And for Geoffroy, as for Balzac, memory is inseparable from the morphological frame of manifestation, from the possible *vision* of form: "monstrosities – Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire claims – do not depart from the forms of their species, if it is not to endorse another one: an anomaly, in some cases, fall under a rule elsewhere"<sup>17</sup>. Transgression to the form of the species means the inclusion in the form of some other species: anyway the living thing cannot escape from a morphological frame of appearance.

In the screening of the snapshots of foetus biological development, in the layering of several stages of the scale of being revealed through the monster, Balzac grasps several fruitful suggestions for the building plan of the *Comédie humaine*. In the piercing eye of the scientist, the monster brings forward stratified biological memory, including the memory of

<sup>14</sup> H. de Balzac, *Author's Introduction* cit.

<sup>15</sup> H. de Balzac, *Treatise on Elegant Living* cit., p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Law postulating the parallelism between the law of foetus development of superior vertebrates and the natural scale of beings, as between teratology and embryology, beyond any form of progressive finalism. This law postulates the idea of the one plan of composition, and thus is accepted by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

<sup>17</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique. Monstruosités humaines*, Bruxelles, Culture et civilisation, 1968, vol. II, p. 480. See M. Mazzocut-Mis (ed.), *Anatomia del mostro. Antologia di scritti di Étienne e Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1995, p. 35-39.

the general development of living things. Similarly, Balzac's social monsters bring forward all together the several development stages of individual history, social environment reflections, and collective history (for instance French political transformations, from Napoleon's Empire to Restoration), in addition to their innate monstrous features (take the head portrait of Balthasar Claës, main character in *La recherche de l'absolu*).

On the premises of the new teratological science introduced by Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in the *Comédie humaine*, we meet both true *social monsters*, unable to adapt to the transformations of their social environment, as for instance Louis Lambert or Balthasar Claës, who are going to die, and *widespread anomalies* (according to the term introduced by Isidore Geoffroy, indicating pet animals' modifications, produced by the environment and transmitted to each individual of the same species via filiation<sup>18</sup>), that are bodily and habit pervasive deformations, explaining human beings transformations and allowing the adaptation to specific environments. In this case, individuals have adapted to a *milieu* more and more similar to a mirror, a reflection, a second skin, according to the interplay of reciprocal deformation and mutual accommodation (of the individual to the environment, and of the environment to the individual). The grotesque deformation, as it is the case in the description of the antiquarian shop in *La peau de chagrin* or rather of Gobseck's house, comes out to be a form of social existence, as the characters' multiple forms of degeneration make up to a pathological life, nevertheless guaranteeing vital activities<sup>19</sup>. It should be distinguished then from strictly speaking monstrosity (that is not included in the realm of illness). The anomaly is then the agent of transformation and metamorphosis, a vector of social change, as "teratology explains the necessity itself of modification for survival and adaptation to the environment"<sup>20</sup>.

In the *Introduction aux Études philosophiques*, Félix Davin, goes through the plan of composition of the *Comédie humaine*, and in particular he studies the articulation of Balzac's work from the *Études de mœurs* to the *Études philosophiques*. He finally interprets the French writer's efforts as a monument of whose physiognomy you can catch just a glimpse, an architectural building whose overall structure is only visible through the details, the small elements, "the squared stones, the scattered capitals, the metopes half covered in flowers and dragons", only apparently "insignificant and small"<sup>21</sup>. A partially monstrous monument, if we consider the displacements, the inverted positions of some works and stories, similarly to the internal organs inversions in biological monsters<sup>22</sup>. This monument is developed around a juvenile germ, coming from a physiological base articulated as a history of social culture, a historical anatomy of humanity, taken in its different phases of temporal development (from

<sup>18</sup> Isidore Geoffroy's focus on the modifications produced by the environment on the adult animal will attract not only Balzac's attention, but also Darwin's: see I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation chez l'homme et les animaux des monstruosités des variétés et vices de conformation, ou traité de tératologie*, Paris, J.B. Baillière, 1832-37, vol. 1, p. 242.

<sup>19</sup> See L. Frappier-Mazur, *Sémiotique du corps malade dans La Comédie humaine*, in *Balzac: l'invention du roman* cit., p. 15-39.

<sup>20</sup> M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* cit., p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> F. Davin, *Introduction aux Études philosophiques*, in H. de Balzac, *Œuvres complètes* cit., vol. 1, p. 1206.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 1202.

youth to old age, from the *Scènes de la vie privée* to the *Scènes de la vie parisienne*). Here, individual life is always in relation to a "frame" (*cadre*), whose borders are sometimes narrow (country life), sometimes broad and large (the capital), i.e. an environment asking man to adapt, setting the premises for the presentation of a character according to a principle of deep affinity, profound correspondence and co-belonging<sup>23</sup>.

Balzac's works, compared to Lawrence's portraits, of which the "unprecedented portraits are alone as many physiognomy treatises"<sup>24</sup>, appears as the multiplication of the different social classes' physiognomy, taken in their most fleeting, imperceptible, momentary nuances, in their most anonymous gestures and glances, rather unknown to the vulgar eye, since next to the "major types and strongest passions, also secondary types and intermediate passions exist, not less dramatic and most of all rather new". Balzac's eye is both microscopic, attentive to detail, and macroscopic, briefly resting on the expression of a particular physiognomy (simply sketched), in order to harmonize it with the overall general plan, applying the "amazing patience of the mosaic builder, putting together a set full of unity, originality and freshness"<sup>25</sup>, in full respect of the principle of the unity of the whole.

Within this time-mirroring monument it is possible to point out two problematic issues: the presence difficult to classify of an heterodox *monster* (the hermaphrodite Sarrasine), raising the question of the relation between type and variation, between model and phenomenon, and the biunique relation between individual and environment, specified as reciprocal correlation, in which *deformation* plays a structural role, constitutive of social life.

## 2. The obsession for neuter and mixed: *Sarrasine* between hermaphrodite and androgyne.

*Sarrasine*, short story published for the first time in 1830, presents a double monster, an hermaphrodite text, developed between two centuries (the Parisian party of 1830, and the scene in Rome in 1758 where the story of Sarrasine's great passion for the castrated Zambinella), on the verge between night and day, between a gelid exterior and a warm and light interior, between two stories, one within the other<sup>26</sup>, -- as an aborted foetus inside the adult body of the present time -- between two forms of art (sculpture and music), between two possible positions in the *Comédie humaine*. It was indeed conceived as *Étude philosophique*, but *Sarrasine* was then placed by Balzac in the *Scènes de la vie parisienne*, raising several issues on positioning in Balzac's corpus. His exceptional position in Balzac's structure does not seem to depend on its later addition, since it is a sort of interior portrait of the author himself, as it was largely made clear by the biographical and psychoanalytical readings of the

<sup>23</sup> See M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* cit., p. 129-131.

<sup>24</sup> F. Davin, *Introduction aux Études philosophiques*, cit, p. 1209.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1208.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Citron, *Introduction à Sarrasine*, in H. de Balzac, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, vol. 6, p. 1038.

story<sup>27</sup>, but it is nevertheless interesting how its position remains problematic in relation to the overall structure of the *Comédie*. Hybrid monument, the present time and first person narration reveals a secret memory glowing on the figure both of the old centenarian and the young narrator.

The monster is here characterized by a sexual ambiguity not immediately visible from outside: Zambinella, the beloved castrated, who is the object of the young sculptor Sarrasine's passion, appears as a young singer with a radiant beauty. In the sculptor's mind, he is the renewal of the myth of "Pygmalion's statue descended from its pedestal"<sup>28</sup>, being the denial of the perfect correspondence between internal deformation and external appearance of the deformity, that should characterize, as Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire says, the most severe forms of monstrosity. The monster cannot lie, but the hermaphrodite can hide and dissimulate his double identity. Zambinella, who etymologically has "two beings inside herself"<sup>29</sup>, having no sexual determination (a man without virility, a woman in her voice and looks, but not in gender), reveals, although through negation, the simultaneous presence of both sexes, storing in her memory the mythical image of the hermaphrodite, gradually unscaled by the story.

There is no need to assume a direct influence, possibly supported by the personal correspondence between Isidore Geoffroy and Balzac, in order to recognize a theoretical affinity between Zambinella's evanescent ambiguity and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's attempt to classify hermaphroditism as *neuter* and *mixed*, in his *Histoire des anomalies*, published in the same years of the production of Balzac's great novels, between 1832 and 1837, since both *Sarrasine* and Isidore Geoffroy's teratology explicitly tackle the philosophical problem of the *mixed* and *neuter*. Here we deal with a form deprived of clear sexual dominant, that is an organism marked by a contrast between exterior and interior (modifications to external sexual organs, in order to copulate, can be added or not to the similar modifications of the internal reproductive organs). The mixed hermaphrodite and the neuter hermaphrodite do not belong, according to Isidore Geoffroy, to two properly separated categories<sup>30</sup>. They present the characters of the species they belong to, without the characters of sexual gender differentiation, while the bi-sexual hermaphrodite presents at the same time two more or less developed complete sexual apparatus. The absence of a precise sexual dominant, besides raising serious issues for taxonomy, since the "*refusal of mixed factors, as principle of individuation, is an indispensable request for any taxonomy*"<sup>31</sup>, it is scientifically

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<sup>27</sup> See R. Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. by R. Miller, Oxford, Blackwell, 1974. Barthes is himself inspired by J. Reboul, "*Sarrasine*" ou la castration personifiée, "Cahiers pour l'analyse" 7 (1967), p. 91-96, who was fascinated by a quote from Sarrasine in one of Bataille's texts. Pierre Citron offers a biographical reading, interpreting the relationship between the narrator and Sarrasine as the conflict between two forms of sexuality lived by Balzac in his life, one adolescent sexuality, uncertain and undecided, with homosexual touches, and one adult sexuality, refusing and punishing the youth sexual deviance: see P. Citron, *Interprétation de "Sarrasine"*, "L'Année balzacienne" 1972, p. 81-97.

<sup>28</sup> H. de Balzac, *Sarrasine*, transl. by C. Bell, produced by J. Bickers, Dagny, D. Widger, 2010 (EBook#1826).

<sup>29</sup> See M. Scrocs, *L'hermaphrodite. Sarrasine sculpteur*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> See M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* cit., p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149. The sexual apparatus appears in the first case, as intermediate, and in the second case, partly male and partly female.

justified as an anomaly following the arrest of sexual organs development, an individuation pathology, revealing itself in puberty.

Hermaphroditism then generally occurs to men and mammals only in the form of the double negation of sexual power<sup>32</sup>, and the perfect bisexual hermaphroditism, developing two complete sexual apparatus, is a non-fulfilled teratological case, a purely ideal term for Isidore Geoffroy. It then marks the boundaries of monstrosity on the opposite side of which we find hermaphroditism with a dominant male or female sexual character<sup>33</sup>. Precisely such an indeterminate sexual identity constitutes an emerging and unavoidable problem for those, as Isidore Geoffroy, who intend to articulate a specific classification of monsters, i.e. a teratological taxonomy.

Before Isidore, his father Étienne Geoffroy had left a few precious remarks for the analysis of hermaphrodites, claiming their similitude with *hypognats*, i.e. double monsters, since "a complete hermaphrodite is, after all, a complete subject, to which organs from the lower part of an other individual are added"<sup>34</sup>. In the pages of the *Philosophie anatomique* we can find several remarks on the structural similarity between male and female sexual organs, set aside any idea of derivation of one sex from the other, as well as any evolutionary or finalistic project, but rather claiming a process of variation from one ideal neutral type, the unique animal, the unique whole. Criticizing De Blainville's hypothesis that considers the male sex as a simple modification of the generating female organ, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire is faithful to the unity of the plan of composition and to the necessary straightforward looking for structural analogies between sexual organs of the same species and of different species:

We cannot consider, I believe, one sex as the degeneration of the other: they can be traced back to the unity of composition, this is the only indisputable point. So that, on this matter, nothing is true in philosophy but the fact that the organs of the two sexes, and these organs considered in all animals, must be traced back to an uniform type, a sort of ideal type, all particular conformation of which comes out to be a more or less big modification.<sup>35</sup>

However, Isidore Geoffroy, more than others, thoroughly examined the study of *hermaphroditismus*, classifying them as complex anomalies of the sexual apparatus, in an intermediate position between *heterotaxies* and proper *monstrosities*, and replicating within their classification the same gradation, according to the scale of increasing complexity, on which base the whole classifications of the anomalies is organized.

<sup>32</sup> Already in the Ovid's tale, the one and the other appear neither as the one nor as the other: see Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoseon*, Book 6, vv. 378-379: "*Nec duo sunt sed forma duplex, nec femina dici nec puer possit; neutrumque et utrumque videtur*".

<sup>33</sup> See P. Tort, *Le mixte et l'Occident*, in P. Tort, *La raison classificatoire*, Paris, Aubier, 1989, p. 194-195.

<sup>34</sup> M. Mazzocut-Mis (ed.), *Anatomia del mostro* cit., p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique. Monstrosités humaines* cit., p. 348.

Sexual indifferentiation is an ambiguity encountered as well in the developmental phase of many embryos, replicating on the ontogenetical and embryological margin of indecidability facing the sexual identification criteria concerning the mixed and neuter hermaphrodites. There is "a time when all embryos seem female, and another when, in the contrary, they all seem male, so perfect is the similarity between the two sexes in that very moment"<sup>36</sup>. Isidore Geoffroy takes on the main claim of his father Étienne on the identity of the plan of organic composition, and he applies it to the similarities between male and female sexual organs of the same species, whose differences in the embryo's formation phases "represent nothing but a developmental difference: hence the indefinite possibility to conceive a series of intermediate states between the two extreme states taken as normal"<sup>37</sup>, through the asymptotic approaching of the two poles of sexual dominance across a series of progressively shaded intermediate degrees.

In Étienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's thinking a principle of morphological variation, in which each element can be placed between two extremes, is then always at work; the hermaphrodite as well, where the ill mixing of opposed character takes place, can be conceived at the same time as an intermediate type between two poles and as an infinite approximation of opposites.

As monster, discarded product of a stopped development, point of regression towards more primitive forms of life, the hermaphrodite is included by teratology on the background of the *sense* of the organic hierarchy and ordered classification, that can recognize it as a perfect form of life only for the lower steps of living things (plants, worms, snails)<sup>38</sup>, thus confirming Étienne Geoffroy's claim according to which "monstrosities depart from the forms of their species, only to take on those of another"<sup>39</sup>. The ambiguity of mixed or neutral hermaphroditism is then twofold: it is internal to the hermaphrodite, being a place of imperfect mixing and sexual indeterminateness; and it is external to it, according to the adopted perspective. On the classification ground of Isidore Geoffroy's teratology, the *mixed* and most of all the *neuter* define a *limit* of investigation for comparative anatomy, i.e. a space for negative ontology, where the living thing is difficult to classify (to the point that also the hermaphroditism must be put under the sign of sexual dominance, nearer to one sex than the other, saving the universality of individuation). Vice versa, on a structural and typological level, close to Étienne Geoffroy's thinking, the hermaphrodite can be interpreted in the light of the human attempt to get closer to an ideal model, through progressive stages and variations. The ideal model is an androgynous type, by definition, neither exclusively male, nor exclusively female, as the painted *Adon* mentioned at the end of Balzac's story and all over present in *Sarrasine*'s crucial reference text: the *Salon* of 1767 by Diderot.

*Sarrasine* is furthermore marked by the repeated presence of references to Diderot and the *Salon* of 1767. In it we can find the famous introduction on the theory of the ideal model

<sup>36</sup> I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies* cit., vol. 2, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> P. Tort, *Le mixte et l'Occident* cit., p. 199.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>39</sup> É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique des monstruosités humaines*, Paris, De Rignoux, 1822, vol. 2, p. 403.

and its morphological variations<sup>40</sup>; in more general terms, all the narration of the unfortunate sculptor's story is imbued in a Eighteenth Century's tone and colour, hinting to very well known artists (Bouchardon, Vien, Allegrain, Louthembourg) in Diderot's *Salons*. Diderot himself, in a passage of 1765 *Salon*, provides a description of the principle of morphological variation, accounting for the moving dynamism of nature<sup>41</sup>. Such a description implies running through a series of increasingly tinged intermediate stages between two typological extremes of a series, in order to reach the ideal type, deprived of dominant characters and specific or peculiar determinations. Between the robust exaggeration of the Hercules type's muscles and the light elegance of Mercury, it is possible to follow the ideal metamorphosis until we have two perfectly seemingly reduced figures: "You'll have the proportions of the *Antinous*, [...] a man without a social function, a sluggard who's never accomplished anything, whose circumstances haven't altered his proportions at all"<sup>42</sup>. This would be a basic, common model, unfit for the real environment, that necessarily ends up deforming it, according to the conditions of life and the assumed habits. The ideal model, *Antinous*, comes out of a gradual morphological variation process, through intermediate stages, till the neutralization and subtraction of all the dominant characters of the two starting morphological types (Hercules and Mercury), thanks to a double subtraction process. The ideal type, as suggested by Diderot in anticipation of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's thinking, is only given through the comparison and the analogy of different organism, as the *place* for the morphological variation or the infinite approximation throughout all its variables.

Balzac's *Sarrasine* harmonizes and synthesizes both the hermaphrodite's polarities, his mythical, romantic and modern dimension of ideal perfection and the monstrous imperfection and incompleteness, derived by classical mythology and science thinking as well. This makes Balzac's romantic image of androgyny as ultimate condition of perfection of the dominant human kind, as in *Séraphita*<sup>43</sup>, even more complex and problematic. The story of the young sculptor is a tale of loss, disillusion and fall: sculpture, love and passion, life itself, are lost paying the price of the journey back to the original fusion of the arts, descending towards the hidden space of original neutrality, concerning first of all the identity of art. This latter finds its original space of origin in death and in the graveyard. The phantom of the regression of sculpture to its architectural base opens new issues of classification: from the taxonomy of natural and social species to the problem of the classification of arts and their possible synthesis in a hybrid monster harmonizing all in one the song movement of *Zambinella* and *Mariannina*, the fixity of the carved statue, the cadaver stillness of the old centenarian in the

<sup>40</sup> See J. Seznec, *Diderot et "Sarrasine"*, "Diderot Studies" 4 (1963), p. 237-245.

<sup>41</sup> Precisely in Diderot's theory of nature it is possible to find useful remarks on the hybrid form as category representing natural forms' life, further developed by Goethe's morphology and by the teratological enquiries on the monster and the deformation: see E. Franzini, *Fenomenologia dell'invisibile. Al di là dell'immagine*, Milano, Cortina, 2001, p. 109-112.

<sup>42</sup> D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art. The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting* cit., p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> See L. Frappier-Mazar, *Balzac et l'androgynie*, "L'Année balzacienne" 1973, p. 253-277; M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* cit., p. 144-150; J. Borel, *Séraphita et le mysticism balzacien*, Paris, José Corti, 1967.



Lanty's palace and the literary narration of Balzac<sup>44</sup>. While on a biological level the monster is sterile and cannot, for functional reasons, give birth to other beings, the castrated Zambinella, sterile monster as Sarrasine, can on the contrary have a revival both in Mariannina's singing – image of his past youth – and in his petrified life as spectral old man, mummy and cadaver together, haunting as a vampire the luxurious rooms at the Lanty palace party.

The theory of the one plan of composition and the correlated variability of forms, allows Balzac to think, out of any form of finalism or evolutionism, the biological and social temporality “as if it carried within itself the possible reversibility of phenomena, a sort of reversibility of the effects”<sup>45</sup>, as if the axis of time was practicable in any direction, overturning the revolution and fractures theory of Cuvier. Indeed, according to Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, the anomalies and monstrosities reveal regressive phenomena, since they cannot be referred to a pathological condition of illness. The display of organs stopped to a primitive stage of developmental evolution, thus presenting excessive organic material or the features of a still double rudimentary stage, is in the end the sign of time, the sarcophagus of memory, where the past is visible next to the present: “the atavism of the effects, i.e. the return to previous conditions of organization, is almost a constant factor in the anatomical world”<sup>46</sup>.

Sarrasine, as the artist portrayed in Diderot's *Préambule* in the *Salon* of 1767<sup>47</sup>, is looking for an ideal model of beauty, searched in vain in the single beautiful details of nature. He believes he found it in Zambinella's beauty and he hurries up to stop such a perfection on his canvas and in marble, tracing by heart the image he believes he discovered. Once he finds out the trickery, that ideal beauty is just a mask of a degenerate creature, Zambinella becomes a “monster” to Sarrasine's eyes, and he says to her: “Monster! you, who can give life to nothing, have swept all women off the face of the earth”. The monster empties the earth of its normality: at the end of the story, Sarrasine, after discovering Zambinella's true nature, once deprived of all pleasure and human emotion, is brought back to the neutral condition of the castrated, to an unutterable emptiness of language and body: “*To love, to be loved!* are henceforth meaningless words to me, as to you”<sup>48</sup>.

The final result is the assimilation by contact of Sarrasine and Zambinella<sup>49</sup>, prelude to the sculptor's sacrificial death in place of the person who should have been killed, as in the sacrifice of *Coresus et Callirhoé* by Fragonard, a painting analyzed by Diderot in the *Salon* of

<sup>44</sup> According to the suggestive interpretation given by Michel Serres (See M. Serres, *L'hermaphrodite. Sarrasine sculpteur* cit., p. 117-133), the hermaphrodite, the phantom of which obsess Sarrasine before he can start his artistic career, embodies the unattainable ideal of synthesis and original unity of the arts (sculpture, music, poetry), preceding their progressive distinction and differentiation.

<sup>45</sup> F. Gaillard, *La science: modèle ou vérité?* cit., p. 76-77.

<sup>46</sup> M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* cit., p. 122.

<sup>47</sup> See D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art. The Salons of 1767*, ed. and transl. by J. Goodman, Introduction by T. Crow, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1995, vol. 2, p. 3-17.

<sup>48</sup> H. de Balzac, *Sarrasine* cit.

<sup>49</sup> Sarrasine's death, executed by the bravoos of Cardinal Cicognara, Zambinella's protector, can be interpreted as a symbolic suicide, preceded by a gesture of self-mutilation (eviration), transferred to the statue, that the sculptor tries to destroy: see R. Barthes, *S/Z* cit.

1765, evoking the image of the hermaphrodite<sup>50</sup>. At the same time, the ideal model incarnated by the statue is overturned into the hybrid and inform image of the *monster*, "a divine harpy who will stamp allover women with a seal of imperfection, [...] that monument of his madness"<sup>51</sup>.

The obsession for the ideal model becomes the nightmare that deprives of sense any real variation, any real woman. Sarrasine shouts to Zambinella his desperation: "I shall never cease to think of that imaginary woman when I see a real woman", while pointing to the statue; also the language and Balzac's chosen lexicon emphasize the sculptor's biological regression process. As an image of sterility and inversion, the hermaphrodite makes the sculptor assimilated to itself: "You have brought me down to your level"<sup>52</sup>.

The model, Diderot's ideal type, that is the place for sexual ambiguity, since it is deprived of any specific determination that life functions, work, age and sex can provide, is transformed by Balzac into a monster, given that it is acquired only negatively, through a progressive subtraction of the visible empirical qualities. Sarrasine's "guilt" lies in his attempt to hypostatize the ideal type, making a fetish out of it, blocking or fixing the process of morphological variation, thus replicating Pygmalion's error. His destiny, although tragic, is nevertheless an heuristic moment of knowledge and revelation of the double power of *neuter* and *mixed*: on the one hand he is the ideal type that can be grasped via approximation through a continuous nuancing of forms, a condition of perfection (the androgyny intermediate between human and divine world), on the other hand he is a regressive form, mixed, imperfect, derived by the simultaneous presence of opposite characters or by their absence (the neuter and mixed hermaphrodite). In Balzac the encounter with deformity and monstrosity is a necessary moment of knowledge and thorough analysis of the form's enigmas, an experience of the general limit and of the specific limits in which transformation must be inscribed.

### 3. Social physiognomy as necessary deformation.

A morphological principle is at work also in the study of human behaviour and gestures and in the reciprocal adaptation or deep correspondence between man and his/her environment. In this context deformation has the appearance of a general *pathology of social life*.

The inquiry about the things, objects and products of the social human environment, on which the fingerprints of human thinking and passions are visible, distinguishes the analysis of society from the study of nature: "Man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his use"<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> See D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art. The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting* cit.

<sup>51</sup> H. de Balzac, *Sarrasine* cit.

<sup>52</sup> *Tu m'as ravalé jusqu'à toi (plus bas que toi*, according to the textual variant of 1835). The use of the verb *ravaler* is remarkable as it refers to a gesture of diminishing in value and size, then to a humiliating cut hinting to the eviration act, as well as to an act of regression and backwards return.

<sup>53</sup> H. de Balzac, *Author's Introduction* cit.

Things worked or shaped by man have a face, a physiognomy, revealing their character, a passion, an internal implication. The great fresco of the *Comédie* aims to enrich the description of the visible display of social phenomena and human environments with a clear explanation of the invisible causes of the several manifestations of social reality. Balzac employs the term cause (*raison*) taken from scientific language, although interpreted in the light of the dialectics of forms and forces. Such dialectics should have structured the unfinished *Essai sur les forces humaines*, ideal take over on the work of Lavater, Gall and Mesmer. In the attempt of defining the form of the comparative moral anatomy of society, in parallel to the science of Cuvier, Balzac describes it as an archaeological science, logically deducting totality from each detail. The research for an internal implication of the external face of things and humans is perfectly inscribed within the methodological evidential path traced by Cuvier, but it is also open to Lavater's physiognomy contribution, of which Balzac's theory of the gesture, the bearing, and the objects intends to be a proper prosecution. The very fundamental text by Lavater had been republished in France around 1820 with the title *L'art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie*<sup>54</sup>, awakening great interest in the French writer who could read in it an entire research project:

It is true that anything surrounding man acts on him, but it is also true that he acts on the external objects and, if he receives their influence, he can modify his own environment. Hence the possibility to judge a man from his clothes, his house, his furniture [...] Placed in such a vast universe, man cuts himself a little world apart, that he reinforces, entrenches and arranges as he wish, and in which he can find his image again.<sup>55</sup>

The *Théorie de la démarche* appears to be a phenomenology of deviations, disparities, mimicking of gestures, deformations of human moves, grotesque and comical pantomimes, incongruous silhouettes, compared to the unattainable perfection of animal movement. Human society, according to Balzac, as to Diderot<sup>56</sup>, is a productive agent of *démarche* deformations, to the point that the physiognomy of movement can be detected in its purity and authenticity only "in nature's sincerity" and not "in man's grimaces"<sup>57</sup>. Vice versa in human society the loss of grace and natural bearing is directly connected to the unilateral predominance of one function over the others, to the determination of a "locomotive principle highly determined, located in the thorax, in the hips or in the shoulders"<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Balzac owned a copy of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* by Lavater, that he used as a deposit of possible narrative inspiration, as a register of types to translate in a dramatic context: see F. De Cristofaro, *Zoo di romanzi. Balzac, Manzoni, Dickens*, Napoli, Liguori, 2002, p. 57-70.

<sup>55</sup> J.K. Lavater, *L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie*, Paris, L. Prudhomme, Schoell and Co., Levrault, 1806, vol. 1, p. 127.

<sup>56</sup> See D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art. The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting* cit.

<sup>57</sup> See H. de Balzac, *Théorie de la démarche*, Paris, Eugène Didier, 1853, p. 84.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71: "Les hommes condamnés à répéter le même mouvement par le travail auquel ils sont assujettis ont tous dans la démarche le principe locomotif fortement déterminé; et il se trouve soit dans le thorax, soit dans les hanches, soit dans les épaules".

The perception of deformation allows to measure "and discover in what particulars societies approach or deviate from the eternal law of truth and beauty"<sup>59</sup>, and is revealed to the piercing eye of a genius observer. It opens up to the attempt, following the line of Cuvier and Lavater, of a codification and classification, although imperfect, of the physiognomy of human gestures, clothes, bearings and behaviours<sup>60</sup>. A codification presented as a social taxonomy of gestures, articulated according to the different professions.

The classical physiognomy model however was overcome by Balzac. The novelist does not only try to go from the surface to the deep levels, from the effects to the causes, but he also tries to grasp the centrifugal movement of thought expression in material representations, the emanations of forces in forms, the vital energy turning into and consumed by thinking and feeling products, according to a photographic and electric conception of thought. This sets the ground for detecting in Balzac a "theory of specters"<sup>61</sup>.

In the realm of forms and forces, thinking is a constructive principle as well as a destructive one: passion favours deformation, it bends and disposes virtue according to a principle of multiplicity and variation that opens up to the complex and rich world of ugliness, deformation, vice, in the direction of the monster. It is passion that makes Sarrasine interesting. He will be horrified by discovering a body probably impossible to represent for the simple sculptor's tools. Passions, and most of all desire, as the vital principle of passions, are deformation agents made visible by man's behaviour and objects. Passion acts on the capital of human forces, decreasing life in direct proportion with the power of desires or the dissipation of the produced ideas.

The project of the *Pathologie de la vie sociale* is ambitiously sketched by Balzac's pen as the framework for a general aesthetic anthropology, a science of sensible things, that provides the key to go from the manifestations of the man body to the elements of the person itself, from the figure to its first images or emanations of personality. In the harmonious unity or in the displeasing dissonance of the exterior life, detected by taste and observation, the ego appears as generating images, i.e. a sequence of luminous spectra. There is no correspondence between interior and exterior, between the character and the face features, but rather a projection scheme matching skin to skin, body clothes to house clothes, layer to layer. The idea of homogeneous and unite living matter, taken by Balzac from Saint-Hilaire, is translated into the recurrent image of the unity of social life dress and cloth, according to a pellicular and epidermic vision of the material products of thoughts, of the human spirit objectifications: everything is dress and epidermis, with no room for discard or unexpressed left overs, "a house is the great article of clothing that covers man and the things he uses"<sup>62</sup>, the skin detached from man in order to fill the world, the things and life, with his aesthetic mood.

Thought is made visible in the movement of body, voice, writing, gesture, and words, since in the invisible bottom where thought hides, there is movement, *kinesis* of the soul,

<sup>59</sup> H. de Balzac, *Author's Introduction* cit.

<sup>60</sup> See H. de Balzac, *Théorie de la démarche* cit., p. 45-46.

<sup>61</sup> See R. Krauss, *Le photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts*, Fr. transl. by M. Bloch, J. Kempf, Paris, Macula, 1990.

<sup>62</sup> H. de Balzac, *Treatise on elegant Living* cit., p. 55.

pressing and soaking the space around: "Thought is like steam. Whatever you do, as imperceptible as it may be, it needs a certain amount of space, it wants it, it takes it and it is still impressed on a dead man face"<sup>63</sup>. The bearing of the soul can survive to the stop of its movement in the form of a photographic trace, of a still physiognomy in which it is still possible to see life. As a seismographer, Balzac tries to capture the invisible vital fluid the effects and manifestations of which are the only visible element, and that is particularly sensitive *conservatively* (after the movement stopped), or *exceedingly* (in the vital over abundance of an effort exceeding the required action).

Deformation then appears as the inevitable outcome, the unavoidable *aesthetic* horizon of the visible phenomena of the human and social world: the monster is revealed as an aesthetic figure. The pathology of social life is pervasive and widespread, in a twofold sense: as anomaly, deviation from the ideal model, and as the result of a "suffering", of a "feeling", produced by a *passion*, externalized form of the universal motor of human action, i.e. the ideas, feelings, desire, the great agent, both constructor and destroyer of human societies.

[Transl. by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>63</sup> H. de Balzac, *Théorie de la démarche* cit., p. 53: "La pensée est comme la vapeur. Quoi que vous fassiez, et quelque subtile qu'elle puisse être, il lui faut sa place, elle la veut, elle la prend, elle reste même sur le visage d'un homme mort".

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## Skin-deep. Wax Moulages between Science and Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** starting from a well-known letter from Goethe to Beuth, this essay focuses on the problem of visual representation in plastic anatomy from 18<sup>th</sup> century wax Venuses to 19<sup>th</sup> century moulages. I will argue that the very same problem – i.e. the replacement of the real body by means of artificial substitutes – led to very different solutions, with regard to both the depiction and the observer's gaze.

On February 4<sup>th</sup> 1832, just a few weeks before his death, Goethe sends Peter Christian Wilhelm Beuth a curious letter entitled *Plastic anatomy*, hoping to persuade the Prussian state counsellor to support his project for the creation of a collection of wax models of the human body. The elderly poet suggests sending an anatomist, a sculptor and a plaster-modeller to Florence, where they could learn and import to Berlin – “where sciences, arts, taste and technique are perfectly at home and proceed hand in hand”<sup>1</sup> – the secrets of building wax mannequins which will be then very useful for scientific and didactic purposes.

The reasons behind such a request are easy to understand: at the bottom of the letter, Goethe quotes a deeply troubling article written by Friedrich Alexander Bran, reporter and chief editor of the “*Miszellen aus der neuesten ausländischen Literatur*”. The title, “London asphyxiators”, sounds quite uncanny, and the contents are no less so: we read there the macabre story of the “resurrectionists (*Resurrectionisten, Auferstehungsmänner*)”, body-snatchers who, for lack of fresh bodies to exhume and then to give to the hospitals for anatomical dissections, had the brilliant idea of shortening the process by becoming killers themselves: “Kids abandoned by their parents, left to live on charity or mischief, never came back where you could normally see them. Nobody doubted that they too had been victims of the avidity of those monsters, who would have paid any price to become suppliers for the hospitals' dissection rooms”<sup>2</sup>. The homicides were always committed in the same way: the victims were first followed, then narcotized and suffocated so as not to leave too visible signs of violence.

Besides deploring the effects of such actions on the capital and other big British cities, Goethe was also rightly worried that the highest price would have been paid, not by the criminals, but paradoxically by scientists: the reaction against these body thieves might gradually lead to an increasing lack of legally acquired corpses, resulting in the impossibility of meeting the demands of the medical market and in a drastic reduction of anatomical dissections. This was the direction, moreover, taken by common morality as well, increasingly inclined to abolish death penalty:

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<sup>1</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Plastische Anatomie* (1832), in *Goethes Werke*, 143 vols., Weimar, Böhlau, 1887-1919, vol. 49, second section (1900), p. 64-75, here p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

We care for the re-education of criminals set free, we exhort abandoned children to good deeds, and yet we consider it rather inhumane to punish mistakes and errors in the cruelest way, with death. Traitors to one's country can be dismembered, but it is not right anymore to tear to a thousand anatomical pieces misled young girls. By consequence the old, hard laws have already been partially abolished, and everybody offers support to criticize the milder new ones as well.<sup>3</sup>

Goethe is not arguing – no need to say – in favour of the death penalty; rather, he is expressing his worries concerning scientific progress, which have greatly benefited, for centuries, from observations enabled by anatomical dissections. Goethe feels the need to batten down the hatches in order to guarantee to doctors, researchers and students the necessary support to analysis and lectures. And certainly he is not the first one. The story, on the contrary, is rather old and relates to a much more general problem, human repulsion in front of dead bodies. In the proem of his *Anatomy*, concerning the importance of anatomical studies, Leonardo had already claimed that “though you may have a love for such things, you will perhaps be impeded by your stomach; and if it does not impede you, you will perhaps be impeded by the fear of living through night hours in the company of those corpses, quartered and flayed and frightening to see”<sup>4</sup>. These words were endorsed, three centuries later, by Felice Fontana, director of the renowned Museum of La Specola in Florence: aware of the fact that “the horror elicited by dead bodies drives away the most curious and resolute people”, the Italian scientist stresses how his collection of anatomical waxes, financed by the Grand Duke Peter Leopoldo and opened to the public in 1775, provides the possibility of studying anatomy “whenever one wishes, without the risk of morbid infections, without the inconvenience of noxious odours, in short without distastefulness of any kind”<sup>5</sup>.

During the seventeenth century, body conservation techniques, as well as those of individual body parts, reached extraordinary refinement, and intra-vessel injections shed more light on blood circulation mechanisms and on the topography of vascular beds<sup>6</sup>. Among the main authors of this progress, three Dutch names stand out, Jan Swammerdam, Regnier de Graaf and Frederick Ruysch<sup>7</sup>; the latter, immortalized in one of Giacomo Leopardi's *Operette*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67-68. Another testimony in this direction is offered by J.G. Krünitz: writing the entry “Leichenöffnung” of his *Ökonomisch-technologische Encyclopädie oder allgemeines System der Staats-Stadt-Haus- und Land-Wirtschaft, und der Kunstgeschichte* (vol. 74, Berlin, Pauli, 1798, p. 1-37), he claims that “dissection is considered a sort of offence, and almost everybody is against it” (p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *Proemio della Anatomia*, in *Id., Scritti letterari*, ed. by A. Marinoni, Milano, Rizzoli, 2005, p. 150-151, here p. 151 (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> F. Fontana, *Carteggio con Leopoldo Marc'Antonio Caldani, 1758-1794*, ed. by R.G. Mazzolini and G. Ongaro, Trento, Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche, 1980, p. 366 (my translation). On the work organisation at La Specola and on the role of Fontana, see R.G. Mazzolini, *Plastic Anatomies and Artificial Dissections*, in S. De Chadarevian, N. Hopwood (eds.), *Models. The Third Dimension of Science*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 43-70.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough analysis of this point, see L. Musajo Somma, *In cera. Anatomia e medicina nel XVIII secolo*, presentation by D. Lippi, Bari, Progedit, 2007, p. 9-13, and L. Belloni, *Anatomia plastica. Ein Kapitel aus der Medizingeschichte*, “Ciba Symposium” 7/5 (December 1959), p. 229-233; 8/2 (June 1960), p. 84-87; 8/3 (August 1960), p. 129-131.

<sup>7</sup> On the history of the Dutch anatomical preparations, see the interesting remarks of D. Margóksy, *A Museum of Wonders or a Cemetery of Corpses? The Commercial Exchange of Anatomical Collections in Early Modern*

*morali*, returning home, is terrified to discover his mummies suddenly singing, and exclaims: "When I stopped them rotting away, I never thought they'd come to life on me"<sup>8</sup>. A true animation of the inanimate, then, suggested to Leopardi by the extraordinary vividness of anatomical specimens.

Although Ruysch and his colleagues' considerable efforts brought undoubtedly some successes, the solution they found was nevertheless just a stopgap: after some time, tissues began to deteriorate and lose firmness, cellular turgidity, colour; moreover, the sense of repugnance was not fading at all. Guillaume Desnoues, for instance, knew something about that. This French surgeon was deeply dissatisfied with the results he could obtain: "I was very disappointed to see this pregnant woman's embalmed body, which had cost me much trouble and effort, losing something of her proverbial beauty everyday. Then I got the idea to build an artificial anatomized body like the real one"<sup>9</sup>. A body image to replace the one in blood and flesh then. The project is carried out and its results are to say the least astonishing: Desnoues shows his work to another French anatomist, a certain Sylvestre, who after meticulous examination enthusiastically bursts out: "Ruysch must give you the crown!", without noticing that he is looking not at a real body, but an artificial substitute.

Precisely such a logic of substitution<sup>10</sup> will inspire Goethe's previously mentioned request; in 1829, three years before the letter to Beuth, he had underlined the usefulness of anatomical mannequins in an episode of the *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*. After deciding to study anatomy and throw himself whole into the apprenticeship of its secrets, Wilhelm is suddenly forced to deal with cruel reality and to clash with the less pleasant and edifying aspects of his profession. He is required to put into practice the knowledge he has acquired during lectures and to section his first dead body. What he finds, covered by a white sheet, is the body of a young girl who committed suicide because of an unfortunate love affair: "When he removed the cloth, there lay before his eyes the loveliest female arm that had ever been wound around the neck of a young man. He held his instrument case in his hand and dared not open it; he stood, and dared not sit down"<sup>11</sup>. Unable to fully commit himself to the aseptic world of surgery, the young man cannot consider that body only as a *Körper*, that is a mere conglomerate of matter now reduced to a simple thing. He stays still, paralyzed and unable to make any decision whatsoever until a man approaches him: "It was generally agreed that he was a sculptor, but he was also held to be an alchemist"<sup>12</sup>. Indeed a strange person, leading Wilhelm into the room of an old house, gloomy and scarcely lit, the walls covered by

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Netherlands, in S. Dupré, C. Lüthy (eds.), *Silent Messengers. The Circulation of Material Objects of Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Berlin, LIT, 2011, p. 185-215.

<sup>8</sup> G. Leopardi, *The Dialogue of Frederick Ruysch and His Mummies* (1824), transl. by P. Cragh, in G. Leopardi, *The Moral Essays*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 131-137, here p. 133. It is interesting to remark how both Leopardi and Goethe pay attention to similar topics in the very same years: the *Dialogue*, in fact, is dated 1824, while the first edition of the *Journeyman Years* goes back to 1821.

<sup>9</sup> G. Desnoues, *Lettres*, Roma, Rossi, 1706, p. 82 (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> See for example A. Reinle, *Das stellvertretende Bildnis. Plastiken und Gemälde von der Antike bis ins 19. Jahrhundert*, Zürich, Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years or The renunciants* (1829), transl. by K. Winston, ed. by J.K. Brown, in *Goethe's Collected Works*, 12 voll., New York, Suhrkamp, 1989, vol. 10, p. 93-435, here p. 323.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

anatomical waxes having "the fresh, colourful appearance of newly prepared specimens"<sup>13</sup>. Faced with the evident perplexity on the young man's face, the mysterious individual elucidates the nature of his activities, consisting in making artificial surrogates of every body part in order not to have to use real bodies anymore.

When Goethe writes his novel, clearly, the question is a burning hot issue not only for biological studies, but also for artistic ones. Denis Diderot, for instance, expressed a very negative opinion on this matter in his *Notes on painting* in the appendix to *Salon* in 1765 – a work read and commented upon, as is well known, by Goethe himself:

Study of the *écorché* doubtless has its advantages; but is it not to be feared that this *écorché* might remain in the imagination forever; that this might encourage the artist to become enamoured of his knowledge and show it off; that his vision might be corrupted, precluding attentive scrutiny of surfaces; that despite the presence of skin and fat, he might come to perceive nothing but muscles, their beginnings, attachments, and insertions; that he might overemphasize them; that he might become hard and dry, and that I might encounter this accursed *écorché* even in his figures of women? Since only the exterior is exposed to view, I prefer to be trained to see it fully, and spared treacherous knowledge I'd only have to forget.<sup>14</sup>

It is a matter of surface, then. A matter of skin. According to Diderot, the artist can undoubtedly benefit from the study of human anatomy, but should not change into a doctor, should not lose sight of his aim: the exterior, the outward appearance, the surface. And by "surface" we should here not understand the opposite of "deepness", on the contrary: "Nothing is deeper in man than his skin"<sup>15</sup>, quoting Paul Valéry's very famous sentence, taken up afterwards – and slightly modified – by Gilles Deleuze ("The deepest is the skin")<sup>16</sup>. It exists then – paradoxically only in appearance – a superficial deepness, a kind of deepness *in* and *of* surfaces, precisely that kind of deepness lacking to the *écorché* highly criticized by Diderot. The *écorché* is the skinned individual, a new Marsyas deprived of skin; and skin, with its superficiality, is what characterizes us the most as individuals. Skin is the only organ of sense we cannot live without: we can survive without eyes, ears, nose – but not without skin. There is no need to call upon the "Skin-Ego (*Moi-peau*)" by Didier Anzieu<sup>17</sup> in order to acknowledge that skin defines our body, marking its very boundaries and allowing us at the

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>14</sup> D. Diderot, *Diderot on Art I. The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting*, transl. by J. Goodman, introduction by T. Crow, London-New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> "Ce qu'il y a de plus profond en l'homme, c'est la peau"; P. Valéry, *Idée fixe* (1932), transl. by D. Paul, with a preface by J. Mathews and an introduction by P. Wheelwright, in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, 13 vols., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, vol. 5, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> "Le plus profond, c'est la peau"; G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, transl. by M. Lester and C. Stivalc, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 7 (translation modified).

<sup>17</sup> D. Anzieu, *The Skin Ego* (1985), transl. by C. Turne, London-New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

same time to *open* to the external world, to clearly appear as single individuals: skin exposes us, as Jean-Luc Nancy said playing with the homophony of *exposition* and *ex-peau-sition*<sup>18</sup>.

Although it might seem absurd at first sight, the eighteenth century *écorché* is finally an absolutely idealized figure. Deprived of skin – as anyone who visited Gunther von Hagens' exhibition, *Body Worlds*, knows well – the individual is not such anymore, it becomes anonymous, unrecognizable (and this is why, for instance, skin transplants and plastic surgery in general are so problematic: they involve the risk of no longer recognizing ourselves, of changing literally – as Orlan does – into another person). This de-individualizing feature is precisely what Goethe is thinking about, when he speaks of *Idealnachhülfe*, of a “thrust towards the ideal” characterizing the best results of plastic anatomy: sculpture must “start from the surface of human bodies in order to penetrate always deeper”, applying “the superior style of his art to objects that are otherwise repugnant and unpleasant”<sup>19</sup>.

Once again a matter of surface, then, but now expressed in terms that are very different from Diderot's: according to Goethe, in fact, the best products of ceroplastics put up an *interpenetration* of art and science that is not an obstacle for neither of them. It is not by chance, by the way, that many anatomical waxes are inspired by renowned iconographic models or single works of art.

Some examples. The *écorché* of the Josephinum in Vienna, showing the functioning of the lymphatic system, is clearly inspired to the Sistine Chapel's Adam, while the famous Venus de' Medici of the Specola Museum – basically the work of the most famous artist of the second generation of the Florentine school, Clemente Susini – is nothing but a revisiting of the homonymous Hellenistic copy of the Greek original from the third century B.C., although it is impossible not to notice the prodigious prospective and semantic re-reading of the wax figure in relation to its model: the marble Venus is standing, while its “cover”, though replicating some features of the predecessor's body posture, departs from it in many respects, waiting for the spectator (but it would be better to say, more ambiguously, the “visitor”) in supine position, arms open and eyes slightly closed. Being a dismountable statue that can be opened, it is possible to penetrate – literally – inside the woman's body, skinning it, dismembering it layer by layer, observing its most hidden corners. Not even for a moment, though, do we get the impression of facing the replica of a dead body: agony is confused with ecstasy and the woman, instead of inspiring emotion or repulsion, is found to be charming, enigmatic and attractive<sup>20</sup>. What is perturbing becomes fascinating. Even more so when she wears a magnificent pearl necklace, little charm and great artifice of seduction<sup>21</sup> that not only

<sup>18</sup> J.-L. Nancy, *Corpus* (1992), transl. by R.A. Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 32. See also, more recently, C. Cappelletto, *Skin. Towards an Aesthetic Identity*, in P. Bellasi, M. Mazzotta (eds.), *Pelle di donna. Identità e bellezza tra arte e scienza*, Milano, Mazzotta, 2012, p. 50-60: “The skin also delimits our body like a glove and protect our identity, at the same time clothing us and introducing us into the company of other people. It is an agent of display and membership; it is the palimpsest of our biography” (p. 59).

<sup>19</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Plastische Anatomie* cit., p. 65-66. Only art, then, can make the sight of a dead body bearable – or even pleasurable, as already Diderot claimed in his comments to *The Ray* by Chardin.

<sup>20</sup> In his essay *I putridi, la sventrata, lo scuoiato. Immagini del corpo nella ceroplastica fiorentina del XVIII secolo* (“Journal of Science Communication” 4/3, September 2005, p. 1-7), Francesco Paolo de Ceglia has raised attention on the analogy between the Venus de' Medici and the funeral effigy of Blessed Ludovica Albertoni by Bernini.

<sup>21</sup> See G. Didi-Huberman, *Ouvrir Venus. Nudité, rêve, cruauté*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

hides the neck-body suture, but also – and probably most of all – adds a touch of elegant feminine vanity. In wax models like those created by Felice Fontana in Florence or Ercole Lelli in Bologna, we observe a maximum in both anatomical aestheticism and gaze ambiguity, where a male eye not only contemplates, but also scrutinizes and looks into the body of an apparently sleeping (and dreaming) woman<sup>22</sup>.

Two main aspects of eighteenth century anatomical ceroplastics are thus clearly identified: on the one hand *depiction*, and on the other the specific *gaze* engendered by it. Concerning depiction: whether it keeps the skin or not, what we see is never an individual body, but an idealized one, a normal one – meaning by “normal” both the display of a healthy body functioning, with all parameters “within the norm”, and the “normative”, canonical, ideal value it can endorse<sup>23</sup>. Eighteenth century plastic anatomy depicts, to say it in a word, form. No sign of deterioration, decomposition or blood: what is represented is the structure of a living body (that is why we often find a fully developed foetus which has not affected the flatness of the stomach), a “combination of anonymous structural elements (*Bausatz anonymen Bauelemente*)”<sup>24</sup>. Eighteenth century wax Venuses are often “imbued with a real sense of beauty”<sup>25</sup>, and they can also be seen as “magnificent works of art”<sup>26</sup>.

On the other hand, we can fairly say that our gaze always ventures under the skin, even in the presence of an entire body: “Pale and too uniform skin, similar to a doll, it deceives the observer with a clinical eye, and it does so fully intentionally. Also, the face is turned so as not to engage in dialogue. The observer’s gaze is then inevitably forced into the deep anatomical structure”<sup>27</sup>.

During the nineteenth century, however, another kind of ceroplastics gained ground, that, although still dealing with human body depiction, stands apart from what we have already discussed. Once more, it is Goethe who mentions it in his last lines to Beuth:

Twenty or more years ago, there lived in Jena a young industrious scholar, through whom we hoped to fulfill our wish, in that he was working on his own initiative and without clear encouragement towards highly precise representation in coloured wax of peculiarly pathological curiosities, especially syphilis cases. When he died prematurely, these artefacts ended up in the Anatomy Museum of Jena, where they are still kept, hidden, since they cannot be presented to the public, in honour of his memory and as models for future emulation.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> On wax figures in XVIII<sup>th</sup> Bolognese School from a point of view of gender studies, see C. Pancino, *Questioni di genere nell’anatomia plastica del Settecento bolognese*, “Studi tanatologici” 2 (2007), p. 317-332.

<sup>23</sup> See T. Schnalke, *Vom Modell zur Moulage. Der neue Blick auf den menschlichen Körper am Beispiel des medizinischen Wachsbildes*, in G. Dürbeck et al. (eds.), *Wahrnehmung der Natur, Natur der Wahrnehmung. Studien zur Geschichte visueller Kultur um 1800*, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 2001, p. 55-69, here p. 59 (my translation).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 (my translation).

<sup>25</sup> R. Ballestrero, *Anatomical Models and Wax Venuses: Art Masterpieces or Scientific Craft Works?*, “Journal of Anatomy” 216 (2010), p. 223-234, here p. 227.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> T. Schnalke, *Vom Modell zur Moulage* cit., p. 58-59 (my translation).

<sup>28</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Plastische Anatomie* cit., p. 74 (my translation).

"Peculiarly pathological curiosities", or, in other words, moulages. The word comes from *mouler*, meaning "imprint moulding": the moulages are then first of all moulds, in this respect different from the eighteenth century mainly hand modeled anatomical waxes. Mechanicalness of the procedure is brought to the fore. The moulages, however, show two other fundamental and distinguishing features: they reproduce body parts and never entire bodies; and these parts are affected by pathologies.

Not only "what is depicted" is different, but also "how you watch it": before, the spectator's gaze was irresistibly attracted under the skin, now it lingers *skin-deep*, stopping and resting on the surface of the skin. What is displayed and observed is no longer the normal functioning of an ideal body, but rather its degeneration, no longer the form, but rather the decay – the *de-formation*, the deformity, the dissimilarity. Since they do not deal with ideal bodies, moulages do not make reference to anonymous bodies: they have been rightly defined as "plastic memorial images (*plastische Erinnerungsbilder*)"<sup>29</sup>, three-dimensional images telling the life of single individuals, specific cases, not only of "the" disease, but of the particular disease and suffering of *this person here*, of *this man here*.

We still have to take into account the last, although not the least, point: the correlation, widely accepted in the nineteenth century, between some kind of organic disease on the one side and immorality on the other. Ravages of venereal diseases linked immoral behavior to pathological symptoms, so that deformity was not only a physical, but also – and perhaps above all – a moral question. What was observed at skin level was considered the manifestation of an internal moral illness: venereal diseases such as syphilis were considered as *selbst verschuldet*, resulting from a personal failing. The patient sees his behavior stigmatized: the Greek word *stigma* stands indeed for "stain", "mark", "sign" and "tattoo"<sup>30</sup>. The external stain refers to the internal one, and the ambivalence of the term "stain" comes out in common language usages: "stainless reputation", in English, "uomo senza macchia", "macchiarsi di un delitto", "una vita senza macchie" and "immacolato", in Italian, these are all expressions relying on metaphors, i.e. translations from the physical realm to the moral one. And this holds true not only for English and Italian, but also for the German term *Flecke* ("einen Flecken auf der Weste haben", to have a stain on your honour) or the French *tache*: if it comes from the Gothic *taikns* ("sign"), the original meaning was the small area of a different colour in an uniformly coloured surface. From here to the meaning of "stain" is a short distance. From *tache* comes (XIII<sup>th</sup> century) the Italian word *taccia*, by extension of the idea of stain: "accusation", "charge from public opinion", "bad reputation" (the expression "mala taccia" meant "bad reputation"). These meanings are not far from the new one (XVI<sup>th</sup> century) of *tache* as moral *souillure* ("wretchedness", "filth"), immediately adopted in the religious field to refer to the *impureté*, then also the (original) sin, towards the equivalence of *tache originelle* and *péché originel*. According to the moralists, *innocence* was the condition

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<sup>29</sup> S. Ude-Koeller, *Vorwort* to S. Ude-Koeller, T. Fuchs, E. Böhm, *Wachs-Bild-Körper. Moulagen in der Medizin*, Göttingen, Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2007, p. 1-2, here p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> See T. Schnalke, *Vom Modell zur Moulage* cit., p. 56: the art of moulages was born to document "the stigmata of the pathological (*die Stigmata des Krankhaften*)".

*sans tache*; as in English we say, “there is no stain on his character”. Skin is also “a kind of social manifesto for ourselves”<sup>31</sup>.

What is visible and tangible is then strongly linked “to what is more and more deeply hidden”, as the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann puts it<sup>32</sup>. Outside and inside interact with one another, so that skin can represent the integrity of the self, informing us about our humanity and individuality. It makes visible what would otherwise be invisible. To speak of the skin is to speak not only of the body, but also of the whole person and personality, of interiority and life itself: phrases like “to save one’s skin”, “to feel good in your own skin” or “to sell the skin dearly”, provide evidence for the indissoluble link between skin and life.

And here we come back to Goethe and to Wilhelm’s troubles in front of the corpse of that young girl ready for dissection: skin is inextricably associated with our existence and firmly characterizes our uniqueness, and this is most likely why many medical students, when given the task of dissecting corpses, admit their almost insurmountable hesitation when it comes to cutting the skin, while once it has been removed, the scientist’s eye can easily regain control over the organism, “liberating itself from a strict respect for the *principium individuationis*”<sup>33</sup>. As Hannah Arendt points out in a paragraph of *The life of the mind* significantly entitled *The reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy: the value of the surface*, there is very little reason to perpetuate philosophy’s sempiternal hierarchy of true inner Being over deceitful surface. On the contrary, appearance is never *mere* appearance, and the outer surface plays an irreplaceable role in the existence of living beings: “Since we live in an *appearing* world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?”<sup>34</sup>.

[Transl. by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>31</sup> M. Mazzotta, *Women and Their Skin. Identity and Beauty in Art and Science*, in P. Bellasi, M. Mazzotta (eds.), *Pelle di donna* cit., p. 11-24, here p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> A. Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns. A Study of the Appearance of Animals* (1948), transl. by H. Czecch, illustrated by S. Baur, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1952, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> M. Mazzotta, *Women and Their Skin* cit., p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (1971), San Diego, Harvest Books, 1981, p. 27.



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# Evolutionary Monsters: Regression and Hybridisation between Science and Imagination

ELENA CANADELLI

**Abstract:** the ideas of regression, degeneration and hybridisation were dominating the scientific and cultural landscape between the second half of the Nineteenth Century and the early years of the Twentieth Century, when much of the artistic and literary production turned the dreams of the Darwinian science and of the positivist anthropology into obscure and grotesque nightmares. This essay intends to illustrate how dozens of different novels and short stories, mainly pertaining to science-fiction, fantasy and Gothic genres, developed the topics of biology, anthropology and psychology of the period.

## 1. The regression generating monsters

"Nobody can turn back!"<sup>1</sup>, complained Qfwfq, the polymorphic character of the *Cosmicomiche* (1965) by Italo Calvino, in the story *Lo zio acquatico* facing his fiancée's choice to revert from the mammals stage to the one of fish. Precisely the ideas of regression and degeneration were dominating the scientific and cultural landscape between the second half of the Nineteenth Century and the early years of the Twentieth Century, when much of the artistic and literary production turned the dreams of the Darwinian science into obscure nightmares and the myths of imagination became realities full of anguish with disturbing or grotesque implications<sup>2</sup>.

At the time when biologists, such as the British Edwin Ray Lankester, author of the study *Degeneration. A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), thoroughly analysed the phenomenon of degeneration in marine invertebrates<sup>3</sup>, and criminologists, such as Cesare Lombroso, developed the theory of atavism, fully determined to dig deeply into these topics from a scientific point of view, although according to different styles and motivations, a crowd of real or imaginary "evolutionary freaks"<sup>4</sup> appeared. They were often the product of regressive

<sup>1</sup> I. Calvino, *Cosmicomics*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1968, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> See, among many, E. Chamberlin, L.G. Sauder (eds.), *Degeneration. The Darker Side of Progress*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985; D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder; c.1848-c.1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; W.P. Groenladd, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; K. Hurley, *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> On the relation between the marine biologist Lankester and the writer H.G. Wells, see R. Barnett, *Education or Degeneration: E. Ray Lankester, H.G. Wells and The Outline of History*, "Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences" 37/2 (2006), p. 203-229. See also H.G. Wells, *Zoological Retrogression*, "Gentleman's Magazine" 271 (September 1891), p. 246-253.

<sup>4</sup> J. Browne, *Constructing Darwinism in Literary Culture*, in A.-J. Zwierlein (ed.), *Unmapped Countries. Biological Visions in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture*, London, Anthem Press, 2005, p. 57. The present contribution draws on previous works, in particular: E. Canadelli, S. Locati, *Evolution. Darwin e il cinema*, Recco, Le Mani, 2009, p. 31-72; E. Canadelli, *Pop-Darwin. Evoluzionismo e cultura popolare*, in C. Pagetti (ed.), *Darwin nel tempo. Modernità letteraria e immaginario scientifico*, Milano, Cisalpino, 2011, p.

processes, more or less directly inspired to the words of Darwin, and they literally invaded periodicals cartoons, newspaper satire, illustrated pages of popular scientific books, public conferences, artistic and decorative production, and also “a small and relatively obscure genre of post-Darwinian fiction”<sup>5</sup> and a series of novels, called to have a long lasting success, as *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) by Herbert George Wells, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) by Edgar Rice Burroughs or *The Lost World* (1912) by Arthur Conan Doyle. Darwinism fomented the morbid and ancient interest for what is different, deformed, and hybrid displayed for instance in the circus or in freak shows travelling from fair to fair, accompanied by a series of living missing link, as the monkey-woman Julia Pastrana, touring in Europe in the early '60s of the Nineteenth Century.

Between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century, then, the theory of evolution, positivist anthropology, experimental psychology, physiology, palaeontology and ethnography contributed to change the perspective on nature and on human history. They provided new elements to art and literature, that appropriated many “Darwinian myths”<sup>6</sup>, developing them often in unexpected directions.

In the light of the theory of evolution, man was already an integral part of the natural world: he fell under the same laws, with the result that also he was the product of the evolution from a previous species, recognized in a common ancestor with the anthropomorphic apes. Gorilla and chimpanzee became somehow relatives. Due to this new perspective on the past (animal origins and instincts), the present (mutations and interaction with the environment) and the future (post-human) of man, at the core of much of the late Nineteenth Century production we find then “strong” topics, such as the always incumbent menace of regressing to the atavistic stage of the ancestors, that man share with the great anthropomorphic apes, or the unpredictable and monstrous hybridisations, supported by the fact that man was not a fixed, unchangeable and pre-established identity any more, but rather an identity *in fieri*, open to change and to the blind evolutionary mechanisms.

In those years' production we can thus find condensed, transfigured, strengthened or simply represented the fears and worries, but also the comical and grotesque aspects of Darwin's theory, generating such a rich imagery, such an intricate shadow world of images, a vast iconographic and thematic repertory<sup>7</sup>. Dozens of different novels and short stories,

265-278; E. Canadelli, *L'ibrido uomo/animale. Suggestioni nella cultura di fine Ottocento*, in M. Bellini (ed.), *L'orrore nelle arti. Prospettive estetiche sull'immaginazione del limite*, Milano, Lucisano, 2008, p. 267-283.

<sup>5</sup> J. Browne, *Constructing Darwinism in Literary Culture* cit., p. 56. On Darwin's relationship with literature, see, among many, G. Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists. Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992; G. Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; J. Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007; among Italian literature, V. Roda, “The other in me”: *Aspects of Darwinism in Italian Literature*, in P. Antonello, S.A. Gilson (eds.), *Science and Literature in Italian Culture from Dante to Calvino*, Oxford, European Humanities Research Centre, 2004, p. 204-224.

<sup>6</sup> See the title of the fourth chapter of the volume edited by G. Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Browne, *Darwin in Caricature*, in B. Larson, F. Brauer (eds.), *The Art of Evolution. Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, Lebanon, Dartmouth College Press, 2009, p. 18-39; J. Clair (ed.), *L'âme au corps*, Paris, Gallimard/Fleeta, 1993; L. Vergine, G. Verzotti (eds.), *Il Bello e le bestie. Metamorfosi, artifici e*

mainly pertaining to science-fiction and Gothic genres imagined what would have happened if man regressed to the preceding forms of life, from which he had come. At any moment, in fact, this link with animality was ready to emerge again, to be present, and regression was not only treated as a developmental arrest, but truly a journey backwards on the path of evolution.

Writers and artists dealt in those years with the topics of the hybrid, the monster, the deformed, taken not as exceptions, anomalies, but rather as the product of “normal” possibilities, implicit in the very evolutionary process, hence pertaining to every man indistinctly: rich people, poor people, so-called “civilized” people and so called “savage” or “primitive” people.

Next to the apes, men-monkeys and the most different missing links, the topics of regression and hybrid deeply affected the *fin de siècle* imagination. The idea was to reveal the obscure side of progress: the possibility of degeneration and regression to an animal stage, to a primordial past, inherited but unwanted, determining the present and the future of man. The possibility to go ahead in the evolutionary scale meant that it was also possible to go backwards, along an infernal descent to the origins. As Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid said, a character of the evolutionary fairy tale *The Water-Babies* (1863) by Charles Kingsley: “That there are two sides to every question, and a downhill as well as an uphill road; and, if I can turn beasts into men, I can, by the same laws of circumstance, and selection, and competition, turn men into beasts”<sup>8</sup>.

The Victorian man was then at the mercy of an uncomfortable past, that could emerge again with its shadows and crimes, inherited from generation to generation, as in the novels cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* by Émile Zola. In the '90s of the Nineteenth Century, the revival of the Gothic, the science-fiction of Wells, novels such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad or *La bête humaine* (1890) by Zola developed according to different styles and aims the troubling sceneries linked to anthropological fears. Literature, publicity, and the Grand Guigno! Theatre contributed to the reformulation of anxieties and fears of the post-Darwinian time, generated by the loss of the specificity of human nature, by the dissolution of the subject, and by the comparison with an “Other” that is beyond definition and assimilation. Also visual arts

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*ibridi dal mito all'immaginario scientifico*, Ginevra-Milano, Skira, 2004; T. Gott, K.E. Weir (eds.), *Kiss of the Beast. From Paris Salon to King Kong*, Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery, 2005; J. Smith, *Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006; J. Voss, *Darwins Bilder. Ansichten der Evolutionstheorie 1837-1874*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 2007; D. Donald, J. Munro (eds.), *Endless Forms. Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009; P. Kort, M. Hollein (eds.), *Darwin. Art and the Search for Origins*, Cologne, Wicand Verlag, 2009; R. Milner, *Darwin's Universe. Evolution from A to Z*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> C. Kingsley, *The Water-Babies. A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, London, Penguin, 2008, p. 136. The Anglican pastor Kingsley was professor of history at Cambridge and fierce supporter of Darwin, with whom he exchanged several letters. In this highly moralistic fable we meet several times the names of Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley and other notorious scientists and explorers of the time such as Paul Belloni Du Chailu, who in the early '60s of the Nineteenth Century had brought from Africa to England the skins and some exemplars of Gorilla. The moralistic story of Tom, poor chimney sweeper, transformed by fairies into an aquatic creature, who is trying to get back to his human form, is a metaphor of evolution and transformation. Through an educational path, the boy becomes amphibian, reaches the aquatic stage and then return to humanity, going through all stages of evolution, according to a regressive and developmental interplay with the other characters of the story.

participated in such a cultural process. Let's consider for instance the symbolist Odilon Redon and his collection of dreamlike lithographies *Les Origines* (1883), dedicated to embryo, cells, chimeras, hybrids, interrupted stage of human development and strange creatures suspended between the realms of nature; or even the expressionist Alfred Kubin<sup>9</sup>, with his disturbing monsters. This element of alterity could take many forms: from the animality of man, the results of a bond of descent, to psychic and criminal deviancy; from the savage people, different in looks and customs, to the occult. The individual is called to measure himself against the irrational forces outside, and most of all with "the beast or savage within"<sup>10</sup>.

In this sense, the Gothic literary production dedicated to degeneration dealt with "the scientized fear of historical reversion, of polluting inheritance"<sup>11</sup>. The atavism, hereditariness and regression formulated by zoologists, anthropologists and psychologists inspired different novels and short stories: on the biological and moral ground the characters of these books went back to previous evolutionary stages, giving way to animal and primordial instincts that are beyond rational control. The emergence of a totally "other" behaviour, as madness, crime, violence, hysteria, was explained by the experts as the reappearance of the deep animal roots of man. The horror was therefore generated in the reader by the fact that the possibility of regression came from the very nature of man, from his evolutionary history, from his past: the beast is not outside, but inside. The monster is not the product of an anomaly, of a defect or a developmental arrest, but rather of a "normal" morphological possibility, implicit and foreseen by the evolutionary process.

## 2. The beast inside: from Stevenson to Wells

Among the many dramatizations of the degenerative process *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was the most successful case. In the 1886 famous novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, the violent and beastly Hyde, alter ego of the respectable and well esteemed Doctor Jekyll, was described in several passages as an ape, of which he acquired moves and behaviours. Going backwards in the scale of evolution, Jekyll turned into Hyde, infernal creature, deformed and dis-inhibited, incarnation of the evil and perverse personality of the doctor. Hyde, Stevenson wrote, "seems hardly human!", rather looking like "something troglodytic"<sup>12</sup>. The homicide, perpetrated with joy, is accompanied by a form of love brought to paroxysm. In his physical appearance Hyde sublimated elements of craziness and

<sup>9</sup> Concerning Odilon Redon, Alfred Kubin and Symbolism see the contributions in J. Hauptman (ed.), *Beyond the Visible. The Art of Odilon Redon*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2006; in J. Clair (ed.), *L'âme au corps* cit. and in A.-J. Zwierlein (ed.), *Unmapped Countries* cit.; B. Larson, *Evolution and Degeneration in the Early Work of Odilon Redon*, "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide" 2/2 (2003), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03index>.

<sup>10</sup> P. Goetsch, *The Savage Within. Evolutionary Theory, Anthropology and the Unconscious in Fin-de-siècle Literature*, in A.-J. Zwierlein (ed.), *Unmapped Countries* cit., p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> R. Luckhurst, *Introduction*, in Id. (ed.), *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. XX.

<sup>12</sup> R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, London, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 23.

uncontrolled violence, hosted at the bottom of every man, emerging from time to time as monster, beast, ape, savage, primitive, criminal and mad man.

The obscure path undertaken by Jekyll in order to divide the two natures – the nocturne one, devoted to evil, source of shame, and the one devoted to the good, for the progress of science – lead him to jump as an ape among the instruments of his laboratory and to act like a monkey. Only the scientist's death was able to get away of the brute sleeping in him, and trying to come to light. Demonic being, Hyde died throwing "a dismal screech, as of mere animal terror"<sup>13</sup>.

In medical-criminological terms, the description of Hyde's looks given by Stevenson closely reminds of Darwin's pages in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* of 1872, a text dedicated to the description of hate and rage. There is a particularly interesting passage in which Darwin reported the arguments of the British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley about the "strange animal-like traits in idiots"<sup>14</sup>. These phenomena, Maudsley suggested, could be perhaps interpreted as the coming back of primitive instincts, as "a faint echo from a far-distant past, testifying to a kinship which man has almost outgrown"<sup>15</sup>. Where, then, could the savage growl, the obscene language, the furious screaming of a mentally ill, originate from, if not from the brutal nature inside? Precisely this question according to Darwin has suggested the right answer. For him, in fact, the study of the expressions confirmed the fact that man derived from some inferior animal form.

Also the character of *Before Adam*, the novel by Jack London published in 1906, after the first appearance of Freud's major works, suffers from regression and dissociation of the personality, this time spontaneously and not provoked by some poison. The narrating ego of the long and intense monologue led two separate lives: during the day he was as everybody else, at night he used to go back to a primitive ego, living with the remote ancestors of man, whose history, London says at the beginning of the story, is also our history. Since his early childhood, the main character had dreamt of an epoch lost in the abyss of time, when man as we know it had not yet appeared. At night he used to fall into an existence of terror, deeply marked by the fight for survival. His nocturne ego was not going around in the streets of London as the evil Hyde, but rather in the primordial woods as his ancestor, who had left the trees to live in caves. From such memories a cross-section of the evolutionary process emerged, captured in one of its crucial moments: on the one side there were the Men of fire, armed with arch and arrows, called to succeed in the great drama of the fight for existence; on the other side there were the Man of trees, similar to apes, atavistic residues of a period on the verge of disappearance; in the middle the tribe of caves, intermediate stage in the evolutionary path towards man, who will cause its extinction.

But what was the cause of all these strange memories? The narrative artifice employed by London was, as often happens in this kind of product, a mixture of reality and fiction. The

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<sup>13</sup> R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* cit., p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> C. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, London, John Murray, 1872, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> In C. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions* cit., p. 245.

main character considered himself “a freak of heredity, an atavistic nightmare”<sup>16</sup>. He could feel the memories of his ancestor like real, thanks to a remarkably lively memory: his germinal plasma – the memory of the species passed over from generation to generation at the core of the German zoologist August Weismann’s theory – could transport indeed an excessive quantity of memories, emerging once more in his dreams.

In *The Time Machine* (1895) written by Wells, the entire humanity of the future split up into two species, one against the other. The fear of degeneration was shifting from the incumbent past to the future, from the single person to the entire human species. The father of modern science-fiction literature developed an idea implicit in evolutionism, of which he was a strong supporter: if it is true that species transformed in the past, hence man could undergo further totally unpredictable evolution in the future. The only issue was to formulate an hypothesis on what he would become. Based on the present, the scenario imagined by Wells for his Time Traveller was rather pessimistic. In the year 802.701 the human species had split into two different types: on the one side the Eloi, ethereal creature living on the surface world, on the other the Morlock, repellent and discoloured nocturnal beings living in the underground. The first ones are vegetarian, fragile, and gentle, but unaware and dazed; the second ones are carnivorous, monstrous, and violent, similarly to our apes ancestors. Although these latter provoke the greater disgust, both groups represent a regression, an involute and degenerate outcome of evolution.

The expectations of the Time Traveller to find in the future a better and more progressed civilization were about to be disappointed. The gradualism of history was broken to leave out enough space for involution and for a feeling of anxiety. Venturing further on in time, almost at the end of time, things are even worst: the Earth seems to be inhabited only by giant crustacean. Not even the shadow of the extinct man. Further on, the Traveller can see only darkness, ice and desolation: the only form of life left is a sort of green slime on the rocks.

Within the horror genre, the *fin de siècle* literature presented several writers, such as the Welsh Arthur Machen, author in 1894 of the visionary novel *The Great God Pan*, who brought to its highest point the decadent theme of degeneration, that “inverting the Darwinian process, brings humanity back to a primordial, atavistic condition, accompanied by the fear of *miscegenation*, the delivery of monstrous creatures, since racially impure”<sup>17</sup>. Highly appreciated by Howard Phillips Lovecraft (who thoroughly analysed this topics in the 1921 story *Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family*, re-published in 1924 on “Weird Tales” with the title *The White Ape*), Machen staged the coming back of the god Pan in England in the last years of the century. A doctor had given birth to such a terrible creature, and another doctor attended to its tragic ending, telling the horrors he had witnessed:

The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as

<sup>16</sup> J. London, *Before Adam*, New York, Berlin, Mondial, 2006, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> C. Pagetti, *Il ritorno del dio Pan*, in A. Machen, *Il grande dio Pan*, Roma, Fanucci, 2005, p. 119.



adamant, began to melt and dissolve. [...] I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed. [...] I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again.<sup>18</sup>

The amorphous and metamorphic entity was transforming, repeating all the creation, degenerating and evolving. Then, "as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death"<sup>19</sup>. The human form of Pan was dissolving in order to express itself as pure process of transformation and evolution.

In Italy as well, in Lombroso's country, literature and arts from the second half of the Nineteenth Century to the early Twentieth Century were pervaded by the charm of regression, particularly in relation to man. We shall consider, for instance, the poet Giovanni Pascoli. Although interpreted as progressive, the evolutionary process in Pascoli coexisted with atavism and with the topic of the "beast inside man". In his speech *L'avvento*, given in Messina in 1901, Pascoli referred to Lombroso, although not explicitly quoting him, introducing the animal component of man: "All of us, all, bring inside us the discquilibrium of the fateful ascension, through which *Homo sapiens* developed from the *pithecanthropus alalos*, and the kind of *homo* that I will call *humanus* developed from *Homo sapiens* or rational"<sup>20</sup>.

Few years later, in *La messa d'oro*, a speech given in Pisa in 1905, he imagined to have a dialogue with a scientist, revealing his great interest in the anthropology and evolutionary matters. The clamour of the ancient desires of man, he wrote,

comes from most distant origins to me, because it is in me, and it is composed by all the cries, by the gurgling of the batrachian and the squeals of monkeys, by the grunts of the pig and the roaring of the lion and the howling of the wolf. We are running away... it is millennia since our genus has run away to become human, we are running away from ourselves in order to find ourselves, spontaneously acknowledging the fault, more and more faults, in our nature. Don't you believe in that, biologists and anthropologists?<sup>21</sup>

Many of the expressions employed by the Italian poet, such as "troglodytic monkey" and "primordial beast", attest Pascoli's knowledge of the contemporary debate in biology,

<sup>18</sup> A. Machen, *The Great God Pan*, Whitefish, Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> G. Pascoli, *L'avvento*, in *Prose*, vol. 1, ed. by A. Vicinelli, Milano, Mondadori, 1952, p. 219.

<sup>21</sup> G. Pascoli, *La messa d'oro*, in *Prose*, vol. 1 cit., 1952, p. 272. See N. Valerio, *Letteratura e scienza nell'età del positivismo. Pascoli-Capuana*, Bari, Adriatica, 1980; M. Marcolini, *Il peso della cultura scientifica di fine secolo nell'opera di Giovanni Pascoli*, "Filologia & Critica" 22/3 (1997), p. 358-422; V. Roda, "The other in me" cit.

anthropology, and psychology. Referring to the renown fundamental biogenetic law of the German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel, according to which the ontogeny, the development of the individual, recapitulates the phylogeny, the development of the species, in the manuscript of the *Elementi di letteratura* he wrote: "Our childhood survives inside us. What am I saying? Due to a law, known and demonstrated by Haeckel, the childhood of human genus survives inside us. Within each of us there are the shudders of fear and the shudders of joy that shook the heart of the new man on Earth"<sup>22</sup>.

### 3. The producer of hybrids par excellence: Wells' Doctor Moreau

Wells had a good knowledge of contemporary science. Before committing to the writer profession, he had indeed studied biology in London, at the Normal School of Science of South Kensington with one of the most active pupils of Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, to whom he looked as a master, publishing also a handbook of biology and several articles on the theory of evolution<sup>23</sup>.

In the article on *The Limits of Individual Plasticity* appeared on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1895 on the "Saturday Review", Wells presented the hybridisation process, formulating the hypothesis that:

We may imagine as possible in the future, operators, armed with antiseptic surgery and a growing perfection in the knowledge of the laws of growth, taking living creatures and moulding them into the amazing forms; it may be, even reviving the monsters of mythology, realizing the fantasies of the taxidermist, his mermaids and what-not, in flesh and blood.<sup>24</sup>

One year later, in the novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, he developed the topic from a narrative perspective, presenting the condensed form of all major late Nineteenth Century worries brought along by Darwinism: the animal heritage, the regression, the arising of impure bodies as the hybrids, the fragility of progress. The main character of the story is a physiologist both ingenious and cruel, the creator of some of the most disturbing literary hybrids of the end of Nineteenth Century: the Beast men. Moreau – by which also the creator of Tarzan, Burroughs, seems to have been inspired in the story *The Monster Man*, published on the "All-Story Magazine" in 1913, then in volume in 1929 – had escaped on a desert island

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by M. Marcolini, *Il peso della cultura scientifica di fine secolo nell'opera di Giovanni Pascoli* cit., p. 393.

<sup>23</sup> See the republished articles in the anthology *H.G. Wells. Early Writings in Science and Science Fictions*, R.M. Philmus, D.Y. Hughes (eds.), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Limits of Individual Plasticity*, in *H.G. Wells. Early Writings in Science and Science Fictions* cit., p. 38-39. On this matter see also F. Porta, *La scienza come favola. Saggio sui scientific romances di H.G. Wells*, Salerno, Edisud, 1995 and Well's articles: *Zoological Retrogression*, published on "Gentleman's Magazine" in September 1891 and *Human Evolution. An Artificial Process*, published on the "Fortnightly Review" 60 (October 1896), both republished in original as appendix to the book of Porta, as well as on the above mentioned anthology.

of the Pacific in order to carry on some experiments that had shocked London for their cruelty. Moreau defined the island as “a biological station – of a sort”<sup>25</sup> in which evolution was accelerated and the technique of tissue transplant was unscrupulously applied in order to activate a process of humanisation of animals; an evolutionary process bound to failure. Moreau’s artificial monsters in fact regressed easily: “And they revert. As soon as my hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again”<sup>26</sup>, the doctor pensively remarked.

The presupposition of such painful experiments was the plasticity of each living form, of which Moreau intended to discover the extreme limit. From grafting to transplants came out the pig-man, the dog-man, the leopard-man, the wolf-man, the sow-woman, the bear-man and the monkey-man. The deformed hybrids of the island are just a parody of man and a faithful repetition of the Law imposed by Moreau the Creator, and they are just obsessively repeating to themselves, aren’t we men then?

*The Island of Doctor Moreau* grotesquely reflected as a caricature the changes brought by the theory of evolution to the idea of the human nature. Not only the humanisation process attempted by Moreau failed, but in the end it was man to discover himself as animal. The conquests of civilization transform into a fragile product. The hidden beastly instincts were ready to emerge again; men, as the monsters on the island, could degenerate; animality could get the upper hand. The escape from one’s own past, heritage, and nature was impossible. Once back to London, Prendick, the narrator of the story, could see in his fellows something not very different from the surgical hybrids of Moreau. By the way he was already reverted to their level, becoming one of the Beast men of the doctor undergoing a process of animalization.

In Wells’ work, as in the one of many *fin de siècle* writers and artists, the topics of regression, degeneration and hybridisation, studied by biologists, anthropologists, doctors, and psychologists were therefore thoroughly studied according to imagination. The result were evolutionary monsters, the product of a new vision of nature as well as of the history of man.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>25</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Rockville, Arc Manor, 2008, p. 31. See C. Pagetti, *Incubi darwiniani*, in H.G. Wells, *L’isola del dottor Moreau*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1995, p. XXIX; C. Pagetti, *Il corallo della vita. Charles Darwin e l’immaginario scientifico*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* cit., p. 79.

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# Between Uexküll and Weizsäcker: the Criticism of Functionalism and the Configuration of the Biological Act

SALVATORE TEDESCO - VALERIA COSTANZA D'AGATA

**Abstract:** Jakob von Uexküll and Viktor von Weizsäcker are the example of two different addresses of the life's sciences thinking in the twentieth century. Uexküll's theoretical biology aims at the understanding of the functions of the organic body, and considers the morphology as a descriptive science, whose contribution to modern biology would be somewhat a limited and methodologically uncertain one. For its part, Weizsäcker's "Gestaltkreis"-theory develops an innovative lexicon of the contemporary morphology, focusing on the unity of the living being, configured on the basis of his autonomy.

## 1. Methodical scheme (S. Tedesco)

The debate between morphology and functionalism develops through the history of modern biological thought, especially focusing on two patterns that I will try briefly to define as semiotic (functionalist) model and aesthetic-morphological model. As it is well-known, these alternative models have existed since the famous confrontation between Cuvier and Geoffroy and are still representative of the theoretical alternatives taken into account not only by the strictest upholders of the so-called "modern synthesis" – which played a main role within the 20th century Evolutionistic reflections – but also by such different versions of a same theoretical system as the so-called Evo-Devo. However, we would like to outline a particularly important moment in the history of morphological thought, by comparing Jakob von Uexküll's *Funktionskreis* theory with Viktor von Weizsäcker's formulation of the *Gestaltkreis*.

I personally consider it as one of the most significant moments – I regard this point as important in order to partially anticipate the results I will propose in the following pages – firstly because it takes place within a debate belonging to the continental Goethian tradition and, secondly, because this same debate develops in a period that can be considered a critical point of no return of morphological thought. In this sense – and this is a further anticipation – I will try to verify the hypothesis according to which the choices of method rather than the "superficial" thematic results can provide open solutions concerning our times.

Uexküll's morphological interpretation is a *topos* that recurs throughout the Twentieth Century, in Cassirer as well as in Merleau-Ponty and in Post-Structuralism. However, Cassirer shows us that the origin of Uexküll's thought may be completely different from the assumed Goethian inspiration; what interests us here is that such a suggestion leads to Functionalism and to Georges Cuvier rather than to morphology. In fact, Cassirer<sup>1</sup> identifies in Uexküll's thought a relationship between the acknowledgement of the independence of form, conceived

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<sup>1</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1950.

as the scheme impenetrable to the senses and determined by the *immaterial relations* between the material existing parts of the animal body (this is exactly the reason why Cassirer defines Uexküll as an example of *idealistic* morphology); the consequent tracing back of the notion of structural plan (*Bauplan*) to the connection of the *functional circles*; and also the identification of a *life regularity* whose actual conceptual base is its reference to the function. Essentially even Merleau-Ponty's interest in Uexküll's thought is given by the *functional* connection between *Planmäßigkeit* and *Melodie*.

The constitution of the *Umwelt*, the environment, is conceived by Uexküll as resulting from the *Merkwelt* (perceptual world) and the *Wirkwelt* (operative world) of organisms. Elaborating in a biological sense, of course in a problematic way, Kant's argument on the a-priori conditions of knowledge, Uexküll states that every reality is always *subjective phenomenal appearance* (subjektive Erscheinung<sup>2</sup>); the subject constructs his environment by interacting in several ways with reality, which means that precise properties of the object, and not others, relate with his perceptive organs, becoming *Merkmale* (perceptive marks); this activates a similar operative answer that recognizes in the object specific operative countersigns (*Wirkmale*, operative marks). Hence the semiotic-functionalistic aspect that we have mentioned above.

Uexküll constantly underlines the harmonic balance existing between the organism and the world, and identifies the perfect correspondence of *Merkwelt* and *Wirkwelt* as the actual point of encounter between the regularity (*Planmäßigkeit*) ruling nature and the inner accordance with the aims (*innere Zweckmäßigkeit*) of the living organism<sup>3</sup>. The organism's interaction with his environment consists and articulates in many cycles and *functional circles* (precisely *Funktionskreise*), which means, according to Uexküll's words, that "every animal is a subject which, thanks to its own structure, selects among all the world effects those peculiar stimuli to which it reacts in a particular way. This kind of reactions constitute, in their turn, precise effects onto the exterior world and affect the stimuli. This gives rise to a closed circle that can be defined as the *functional circle* of the animal"<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Uexküll can list and distinguish, for instance, the circle of feeding, the circle of enemy, that of sexuality and so on.

Kant's idea of the accordance of the structural plan to the aims (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) results in accordance to a functional project: "Without knowing the function that sets stable relations, we lack knowledge of the object regularity [*Planmäßigkeit*] and therefore we do not recognize its significance. Precisely for this reason we might talk of "functionality" [*Funktionsmäßigkeit*] rather than regularity of an object"<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* (1920, 1928<sup>2</sup>), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> The narrative style of *Streifzüge* (J. von Uexküll, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* [1934], Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1956, new it. ed. by M. Mazzeo, *Ambienti animali e ambienti umani*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2010) is in accordance with the clear conceptual statements of the *Theoretische Biologie* (here at p. 153): "The biological consideration of the functional circles requires us to analyze also in regulative terms the part of the circuit that takes place out of the body, in the environment. And that is quite new and unusual to us. In fact we are used to deal only in causal terms with what happens out of the subject. This way does not allow us to justify the biological structure that extends through the whole circle".

<sup>4</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

In this radical sense Uexküll closely connects the notion of *functional circle* with that of *structural plan/Bauplan*; actually Jakob von Uexküll even ascribes to the study of *Bauplan* the possibility of attributing to biology the status of natural science: “The doctrine of living beings”, as we read in the introduction to the *Lebenslehre* of 1930, “is a pure natural science having only one aim – researching for the structural plan of living beings, for their origin and functional performances [*Leistung*]”. This entails that the structural plan should not be thought of as *a material thing*, but as “unity of the immaterial relations between the parts of an animal body”<sup>6</sup>.

This is the reason of the attention paid to explaining the theoretical implications of the notion of *protoplasm*, drawn on by Uexküll and his contemporaries from a tradition of studies dating back to the Bohemian physiologist Purkinje. Such a notion plays a main role within Uexküll’s work at least since the first edition of *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*<sup>7</sup>, and represents the actual immutable principle that rules the unceasing becoming of living being, or – according to the Estonian biologist – a *perpetuum mobile*, a *form set in the constant metabolism of materials*<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, the formal principle detected in the protoplasm unceasingly consumes the vicissitudes of single living beings in order to assert itself. Uexküll employs an unmistakable and impressive metaphor in this regard: the protoplasm “consists of a labyrinth of rooms and paths containing any sort of liquids. These liquids combine, mix, split and reconstruct themselves. In this way the rooms’ walls are now melted, now reconstructed. Everything constantly flows within this structure similar to foam. We might even say that the protoplasm consists of thousands of ovens which do not only consume their fuel, but are also melted in order to be reconstructed immediately after”<sup>9</sup>.

And furthermore: “Protoplasm’s incandescent flow uninterruptedly develops from the parents’ germinative cells to sons and grandsons. Generations pass by – they are the Transient – the protoplasm is the Imperishable, being an archetypical outliner [*Urgestalter*] of life, from which each living being stems, acts and dies, and which continues to create from an aeon to another what is nevertheless destined to perish”<sup>10</sup>.

According to Uexküll, precisely when the protoplasm sweeps away and reabsorbs every empirically given form within its continuous course, it undertakes a project path which coincides with its eternal development; this is what suggests that we cannot consider the constraints of form in a positive sense: “Not a present, but a future structure determines the protoplasm’s function in every single case of the structure’s development. The already developed structure impedes only the protoplasm’s formative action; on the contrary the not yet present structure leads the development. A melody arises from the mutual influence

<sup>6</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Die Lebenslehre*, Potsdam, Müller und Kiepenheuer, 1930, p. 9. Cassirer draws attention on these pages.

<sup>7</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, Berlin, Springer, 1909, especially p. 11-32.

<sup>8</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Die Lebenslehre* cit., p. 15: “Man nennt das Protoplasma den Lebensstoff. Aber diese Bezeichnung ist unzulässig, denn das Protoplasma ist weder ein Stoff noch ein Stoffgemisch, sondern ein stetigem Stoffwechsel befindliches Gebilde”.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

between the first and the last sound, so that we can definitely say that the last sound is possible only thanks to the first one just as we can say that the first sound is possible only thanks to the last one. So does the development of the structure work in the case of animals and plants”<sup>11</sup>.

In *Theoretische Biologie* Uexküll provides a clearer formulation of a theoretical model that could be traced back to Schopenhauer's well-known essay on *A Comparative anatomy*<sup>12</sup>. He claims that the sequence of functional inputs exists before the organs that execute those functions, and that on the contrary “the protoplasm is able to shape the organs according to this sequence of inputs”<sup>13</sup>.

The interpretation of protoplasm as disaggregating and re-aggregating power is combined by Uexküll with a similarly clear reading of the concept of *Bauplan*: we find here an explicit opposition between a morphological meaning and a *functionalist* meaning. The former considers the structural plan as the “spatially given disposition of parts within a whole, like in crystals, that plays a leading role in pure morphology, which focuses on studying the disposition of homologous organs”<sup>14</sup>. The latter, on the other hand, refers to a machine's operative plan (*Betriebsplan*) as well as to an organism's functional plan (*Funktionsplan*), “within which not only the form is taken into account, but also the single parts' performances and introduction into the global operative apparatus”<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore two opposite models are here taken into account: the former is ruled by morphology and the concept of *homology*, the latter by the functionalist reading of *analogy*<sup>16</sup>. If Richard Owen is no doubt the implicit reference of such a dichotomy<sup>17</sup>, still it is obvious that, by carrying out an actual reversal of the History of Ideas, Uexküll clearly decides to base the explicative power of the sciences of life on the concept of analogy, which allows us to consider the organic structure as functional connection, whereas homology would provide only information on the order of parts.

According to Uexküll, the organism's functional unity (*Funktionelle Einheit*) is what provides a biology able to combine anatomic consideration and physiology<sup>18</sup>, so that the morphological homology would try in vain to supply the functions of such a combination, when the intuition of this unity is lost. Therefore Uexküll comes to reject morphology as such, considering it as the science that “has got the most unsatisfying theoretical basis among all the sciences, even though it has still got a basis”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* cit., p. 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> See A. Schopenhauer, *Vergleichende Anatomie*, in Id., *Über den Willen in der Natur*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1836, p. 40-62.

<sup>13</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>16</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 226: “By homology we mean the mutual relations of genetic elements; by analogy the relations of functional elements”.

<sup>17</sup> Confer for instance G.C. Webster, B.C. Goodwin, *Form and Transformation: Generative and Relational Principles in Biology*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> As, for instance, J. von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* cit., for ex. p. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 135.

Uexküll disregards morphology's autonomous methodical value and Goethe's principle of homology, as to support his heated criticism towards Darwinism<sup>20</sup>, which on the contrary adopted homology as the key of access to the genesis of forms and then to construct a totally hypothetical history of life.

In all likelihood his criticism is addressed to Ernst Haeckel, whose famous *biogenetisches Grundgesetz*, according to Uexküll, connects individual development and evolutionary history, realizing a vicious circle through the assumed principle of recapitulation<sup>21</sup>. However the stake is much higher and more relevant: the opposition between a functionalist and a morphological reading, and the exclusion of a potentially "multi-factorial" systemic reading that Uexküll supposes to be the most authentic explanation of the principle of homology.

In this sense, Uexküll addresses some significant ironical considerations against Darwin's *invention* (as he defines it) of the concept of "vestigial organ", i.e. a concept with which – in comparative terms – we identify a homologous structure in respects to other structures usually adopted in other contemporary or ancestral species belonging to the same phylogenetic evolution line, which has no longer its function within the species taken into account<sup>22</sup>. In systemic terms, Uexküll considers impossible that there are such structures provided with a morphological meaning but not with an actual function: "So far none of these organs has resisted an accurate verification, we have always been able to detect a specific function for them, so that it is hoped this concept will sink into oblivion"<sup>23</sup>.

We know that history did not follow Uexküll's forecasts and propositions, and, even though a similar concept is widely accepted, still it is the object of a general theoretical interest precisely because existing vestigial homologous structures require an interpretation system that can be provided only by a morphological reading and that, according to Uexküll, is still extremely questionable and even enigmatic.

Viktor von Weizsäcker, in his turn, sets as starting point of his research the enigma arisen from the mutual unceasing redefinition of form and function as well as from a conception of *Gestalt* that considers the constraint as actually able to shape the life form – and I believe that Uexküll's reversal of perspective is best expressed by one of the final passages of the book on *Gestaltkreis*, dated 1940, where the author returns to the founding term of his

<sup>20</sup> In his introduction to the first edition of *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (cit., p. 2) Uexküll clearly talks about a "breakdown" [*Sturz*] of Darwinism.

<sup>21</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> See Ch. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, London 1859, p. 453-454. Darwin deals with "rudimentary organs", which coincides with the terms adopted by Uexküll (*Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 136), who employs the expression "rudimentäre Organe"; we should notice that in the English edition of *Theoretical Biology*, transl. by D.L. Mackinnon, New York Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926, p. 112, we find the expression "vestigial organs", which corresponds to the concept developed in the late Nineteenth Century according to R. Wiedersheim's lesson (confer the English translation of his *Der Bau des Menschen als Zeugnis für seine Vergangenheit*, Freiburg, 1893<sup>2</sup>; *The Structure of Man: an Index to his past History*, London, 1895). We now distinguish between vestigial and rudimentary organ, which rather means a non-further developed draft. On the history and current use of the concept see G.B. Müller, *Vestigial Organs and Structures*, in M. Pagel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Evolution*, New York Oxford University Press 2002, p. 1131-1133 (<http://homepage.univie.ac.at/gerhard.mueller/pdfs/2002EncyclVestigials.pdf>).

<sup>23</sup> J. von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* cit., p. 137.

new perspective and states: “*Gestaltkreis* means: the biological phenomenon cannot be explained with a causal series of underlying functions, from which the phenomenon is supposed to arise; the phenomenon is rather a constitutive element of an accomplished act [...]. Every biological act, thought of as *Gestaltkreis*, is not simply a link of a chain nor a number in a series, but with respect to a *before* it is a migration towards an *after*, a *revolution*”<sup>24</sup>.

## 2. The configuration of the biological act (V.C. D'Agata)

The biological phenomenon considered as biological act (*biologischer Akt*) is configured on the basis of its autonomy, its subjectivity that is intrinsically open to a primary inter-subjectivity, and does not present itself as arising deterministically and causalistically from a progressive series of functions, causes, but as an event, i.e. as constituting a primary autonomy, whose freedom is based on choice, that is the mutual possibility of limitation, ruling the relationship between the living being and the *Umwelt*, between a living being and other living beings. Reducing the biological phenomenon to a pre-eminence of function with respect to the form would imply a complete disregard of the intrinsically mutual aspect that characterizes – according to the reading of *Gestaltkreis* – what Weizsäcker defines as intrication (*Verschränkung*), mutual action (*Wechselwirkung*), shaping ability and also constitutive opacity (*Verborgenheit*) between movement and perception, self-movement and self-perception, form and function, becoming and permanence, freedom and need, *psyché* and *soma*. In fact, only considering the co-presence and the mutual determination of the biological act's modes of self-structuring allows us to explain the spinning process by which the living being assumes the environment as its own and takes a shape by selecting the pregnant stimuli, by modifying the environment within which it perceives and acts, and by constantly transforming itself thanks to its faculty of choice and decision; a faculty that – in its intrinsically biological, but also phenomenological and ethical sense – tends to realize a sort of consistency and unstable temporary balance (susceptible to unexpected breaks and interruptions) with the surrounding reality. It is precisely the living being's possibility of responding in a non-deterministic way to the environment's disturbing action, and therefore of explicating its primary unity by newer and unexpected ways, which allows a form of freedom that does not coincide with the “unconditional” but expresses its non-ontic, becoming, metamorphic and revolutionary nature precisely through the limit, the interruption, the break with the achieved balance. Exactly when it is menaced by the possible annihilation and disappearance, the living being's existence becomes significant and is accomplished through its dynamic becoming without which no identity can be created. Passivity, which characterizes the biological phenomenon when it is overcome by the destruction of an order, transforms at the same time into full activity and autonomy by virtue of its capacity of re-configuring, expressing, responding and creating a new order. The cause and the direction of

<sup>24</sup> V. von Weizsäcker, *Der Gestaltkreis* (1940), now in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997, p. 316-317.

such a constitutive transformation cannot be determined a priori, nor do they come about in an immediate spatial-temporal succession, given that the biological phenomenon receives external stimuli (which as such cannot be defined as cause of proportional organic movements, but they are rather conditions giving rise to discontinuous structural variations), accumulates them and unexpectedly carries out a qualitative transformation, improvises a new *Gestalt*. This configuration, being simultaneously open and closed, realizes an inner balance between the centripetal force (promoting the self-preservation and the maintenance of something perdurable) and the centrifugal force (addressed towards the world) and aimed at realizing new ways of interaction and transformation, as to progressively constitute an unitary *Umwelt*, a specific world of relations.

"Since through its movement and perception the living being enters an environment of his own (*Umwelt*), these movement and perception are a unity – a biological act. Every act can be considered also as either the restoration or the new constitution of an order that had been disturbed"<sup>25</sup>.

Of course both the maintenance – following a disturbing action – of the disturbed order and the change and reconstitution of a new order are still ruled by a system of laws, although it is not possible to identify an agent cause provoking this process in a way that can be determined a priori. The Stuttgart neurobiologist's project appears as satisfying the need of introducing subjectivity into biology, physiology, medicine and pathology, i.e. of identifying categories in which the living being can be located without being reduced to a mere ontic datum, so that it can be considered according to its specific becoming aspect, its intrinsic co-presence of activity and passivity, permanence and alteration. It is precisely a consideration in *pathic* terms that allows us not only to fully comprehend the profound unity of the biological act (in which mind and body, activity and passivity are no longer separated, albeit communicating, spheres, but each of them is the other), but also to free the *pathic* subjectivity from life's indetermination, rooting it in a dense network of relations, where the living being experiences the other-than-self through its primary contact with its other-within-self. The biological existence is configured then not as Being-there of something, i.e. as object, but as constitutive decision, since – by experiencing its essential pathicity<sup>26</sup> – the living-man can see his own structural inter-subjectivity revealed.

"The biological phenomenon never finds expression through a causal series of

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<sup>25</sup> V. von Weizsäcker, *Der Gestaltkreis. Theorie der Einheit von Wahrnehmen und Bewegen*, 4. Auflage, Stuttgart, Georg Thieme Verlag, 1968, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup> Both in *Anonyma* (1946) and in *Gestaltkreis* (1940) Weizsäcker distinguishes a ontic way of existing in things, whose description only requires the assertive *is*, given that the inanimate objects simply exist, and a pathic way of existing that rather expresses living beings' life, which cannot be reduced to their mere existence. In fact the pathic existence has got a sense also in the sphere of negation (*I-want* implies that at the moment I do not owe what I want or that I currently don't have the possibility to do something, so that *I-can* refers to the fact that what I can is not yet), and furthermore it concerns the existence not only as given or lived but also as suffered (*pathema*), according to the perspective in which activity and passivity are closely intertwined and distinguishable depending on the point of view adopted to consider them. The *pathic* shows the living being's dependence on a basic relation that cannot be objectified and that expresses the creative anxiety of the living being, which becomes only according to the environment and its encounter with other living beings: a living being who is oneself only by changing.

functions, from which the phenomenon is supposed to arise; it is rather a constitutive part of an accomplished act. Its unity results from the analysis of the crisis. Its own attribute is the *pathic*, opposed to the *ontic*. Its structure emerges from the dialectical analysis of the critical decision within the categories of I-want, I-must, I-can, I'm-allowed, I-should. The order of these categories cannot be translated into an ontic category such as space, time, causality, but only through the gregarious order of I and You, of this and that, etc.<sup>27</sup>.

Therefore the function, which cannot be given a prime position with respect to form, appears in the possibility of functional change (*Funktionswandel*), i.e. in the possibility of deciding, in the faculty of making in every single case choices that assure the maintenance of the relationship between biological phenomenon and its surroundings; the organic structure already shows, on one hand, its aspect of autonomy and subjectivity and, on the other, the fundamental connective-relational nexus with the other organic functions, with the other subjectivities, with the environment (the autonomy of the biological subjectivity is based on its dependence on the environment). However, maintaining the environmental relationship consistent and constant, in spite of the unceasing becoming and changing conditions, is nothing other than the form of the relationship, that is the structure of the biological act. Precisely in constituting a continuous transformation, the function change is possible only if something remains, if something constant develops: a form, a *Gestalt*, a subject. Therefore, if "forms follow each other; but the form of all forms is not their consequence; but their encounter in an eternal return to the origin"<sup>28</sup>, then it is possible to go ahead only if we are able to go backwards, to advance in anti-logical way<sup>29</sup> towards concreteness, and by its spinning movement and addressing the other, the biological act always addresses itself, so that perception and movement always reveal themselves as self-perception and self-movement. Weizsäcker constantly highlights that "the functional change makes the improvising identification possible; quality makes possible the representative limitation of quantity. Both indicate the organism's large independence from its *Umwelt*"<sup>30</sup>. While choosing among the possible answers non-deductible from mere mechanical processes of an aprioristic causality, the self-limitation, the qualitative leap<sup>31</sup> turns quantity into a horizon of sense that cannot be reduced to mere significance. Consequently it reveals and expresses the fundamental dialectical-relational nature of the biological act through its constitutive instability, insofar as the limit appears as coessential to and dependent on the possibility of overcoming the limit itself ...

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186-187.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>29</sup> Weizsäcker points out the anti-logical nature of the organic being, whose life cannot be understood by the means of logical comprehension, since its specific characters are discontinuity, unpredictability of the decision that cannot comply with a rational order but becomes in a dialectical way by adapting to the situations and the evaluation of the means useful to reach its aims. See *ibid.*, p 201: "Antilogik: Ein Inhalt des Wahrnehmens oder Denkens, welcher sowohl einen Widerspruch wie seine Versöhnung enthält. Beispiele: In der Zeugung wird aus zwei Individuen eines; bei der Zellteilung aus einem zwei".

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> In reference to this, please see the contemporary biological debate and especially the formulation provided by G.B. Müller, S.A. Newman, *Origination of Organismal Form: Beyond the Gene in Developmental and Evolutionary Biology*, Cambridge MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003.



Therefore, the self-experience of instability and the crises that constantly affect the living being change into the possibility of authentic activity, of existing and surviving: the unceasing need to move, to transform as well as the unforeseeable and undeterminable conditions for expressing and realizing an ever dynamical and unstable consistency organism/environment, make possible the change and the movement that are coessential to the preservation of life, which therefore can in no way be definitively determined.

So, the living being is more than the mere ontic given reality and, as originally open to inter-subjectivity, presents itself as essentially becoming, flowing, moving, i.e. as an intimately relational being, able to give and take shape from whatever it encounters. Here the form expresses the aspect of dynamical balance with itself and the other-than-self, as well as the capacity of going beyond its pure *eideticity* and becoming structure, organizational ability, figure of existence, as to detect even in deformation, malformation<sup>32</sup> a source of newer and newer configurations that may allow it to keep a homeostatic relation with the outside. Within this spinning process concerning the living being and the environment, the former's suffering the disturbing actions of the surrounding reality becomes full activity, a resolution that in the critical moment activates its faculty of choice which, by an excluding force, rejects all the possibilities that were not realized, although they could have been. Passivity is also activity; the subject's freedom consists in self-limitation and autonomy in making one of the possible choices, as suggested by Weizsäcker's words: "Through limitation we make the world our own, our own Umwelt; in fact we even rule it. What we define as freedom is nothing other than a consequence of the limiting power. Only in this sense the attribute of freedom belongs to the biological act. Yet this belongs to it in this sense"<sup>33</sup>. The man's will and duty are founded on the *pathic*, which is the condition for the assumption of one's own actions and reactions, for self-awareness and for the recognition of other subjectivities' pathicity. The relationship, the fusion of subject and object, living being and environment, traces again back to the form, and to movement as principle of form and structure. In this sense the *Gestaltkreis* is realized in terms of *Krisekreis*, insofar as, given the recurring primary indetermination and the continuous break that may cause the annihilation of the biological unity of the living being, this latter becomes aware of being the subject of its own world, i.e. of that dual unity that ties it to its environment. At the same time it is exposed and open to the encounter with something new, with an irreducible otherness to which it relates on the basis of its own pain, that is what is simultaneously part-of-itself and other-than-self, or in other words an affection that separates and unites the world, that signifies the separateness, the non-identity uniting subject and environment. By virtue of its capacity of adapting to new situations and finding a new structure, the biological act also is configured as binding condition, as being intrinsically

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<sup>32</sup> We consider of vital importance the field of research which dates back to the Twentieth century authors, Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, who convincingly interpreted the thesis according to which illness, the sense of limit, the hindrance to health are the sphere in which the bodily awareness is realized. Birth and death constitute therefore life whose possibility of metamorphosis arises from the threat of its annihilation. Death becomes the illuminating principle of life just as illness presents itself as nature's effort to establish new forms of equilibrium, to heal itself and to assume unexpected possibilities.

<sup>33</sup> V. von Weizsäcker, *Der Gestaltkreis* cit., p. 179.

addressed to something, as modality that cannot be defined by causalistic determinations but only finds expression in the inter-connection of mutual self-offering. Being no longer a merely subjective question, life rather emerges from the relationship between individual, otherness and environment, insofar as what escapes our comprehension, objectivation, expectation and calculation shows its creative heuristic power: "On the contrary, life is surprising for its unlimited abundance of possibilities; the amount of un-lived life is much more than the little portion of life that we have actually lived. If we concentrated our attention on ourselves and – beyond reality – on whatever may be possible, life would destroy itself. This is what leads us to state that limit is not at all a form of impotence of human understanding, but is rather a law of self-preservation. If we perfectly knew the future, we could not live easily, and the same thing would occur with the past"<sup>34</sup>.

If life is change, expression of the significant contradiction, and if losing a given form of being is the precondition for a living being to take a form; if life's anti-logical contradiction fades insofar as a subjectivity can be detected in it, then a possible encounter of the biological act requires the ability to comprehend its global unity, the mutual explication of elements that are only apparently opposed and contradictory. For this reason the spiral is the most suitable shape to describe the living being's life process, whereas the circle (*Kreis*) refers to the movement that constantly returns to itself and that in this aim must address itself and accept to lose something; it must become something else in order to be really itself, in order to keep constant through change. In this way the *Gestaltkreis* expresses the structure of the living act considered – according to its pathic agitation – as unstable, albeit always identifiable, balance of its anti-logical dimensions, as capacity to be addressed to itself, to turn back in order to go ahead, as progressive aware becoming of its own contradictory nature, which cannot be comprehended but experienced, allows us to suffer (*pathein*) it and becomes transcendent through its concreteness, through its being in proximity and form of the encounter with other living beings.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

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# The Pontifical Gaze. Morphology and the History of the Images\*

ANDREA PINOTTI

**Abstract:** The pontifical gaze teaches how to see the same in the different, while respecting it as dissimilar. Such a pedagogy of vision is rooted in Goethe's morphology as in a methodological paradigm – open and plural, neither prescriptive nor doctrinaire – that operated deeply in the context of the humanities of the XX century. This paper addresses the articulations of this paradigm developed in the domain of the so-called *Kunstwissenschaft*, from Semper and Burckhardt, through Wickhoff, Wölfflin, Riegl, and Warburg, down to its radicalization in Benjamin and Bataille, and recently in Didi-Huberman.

## 1. "I did not see the link"

"I did not see the link among these elements, but I only suspected that in Warburg's soul these elements could be combined in a unitary form"<sup>1</sup>. Recalling his apprenticeship in 1913, Fritz Saxl confessed in 1929, in his commemoration speech dedicated to the man who was not only his teacher, but even his "second Father", the difficulties he had encountered; how could anyone hold it all together: Christianity and paganism, demonic astrology and scientific rationalism, Northern realism and ancient formulas of pathos, momentary gods and figures of chivalry?

What the then twenty three year old Fritz Saxl could do was recognize analogies, such

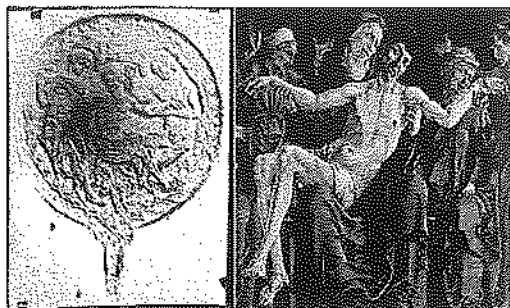


Fig. 1

as the similarity found on an Etruscan mirror, that his teacher had shown him during an unforgettable evening: "Prometheus is represented during the torture, his raised arms are held by two men. The likeness between the image on the mirror and the images of the deposition of Christ is touching"<sup>2</sup>. Between the figure of Christ and his precursor Prometheus, the apprentice's gaze, not yet fully

experienced, can fairly easily establish a network of similarities: in both cases, it is a matter of human bodies, male, half-naked, subjected to torture. Above all, the postures of the two

\* I am very grateful to Alessandra Violi and Richard Davies for their generous help in revising my text and for their valuable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> "Ich sah die Zusammenhänge zwischen den Gliedern nicht, ahnte nur, dass in Warburgs Geist diese Glieder sich zu einer einheitlichen Gestalt zusammenfügen konnten" (F. Saxl, *Rede gehalten bei der Gedächtnis-Feier für Professor Warburg am 5. Dezember 1929* [Warburg Institute Archive = WIA L.10.8.1, 18 foll., here fol. 9]). I wish to thank the Archivist of the Warburg Institute in London, Claudia Wedepohl, and Katia Mazzucco for their support and assistance.

<sup>2</sup> "Prometheus ist dargestellt, die Arme werden ihm von zwei Männern hochgehalten in seiner Qual. Die Ähnlichkeit des Bildes auf diesem Spiegel mit Bildern der Abnahme Christi vom Kreuz ist ergreifend" (*ibid.*, fol. 8).

bodies are very similar. It is not known whether the young scholar's emotion was caused more by the analogy *a parte obiecti*, or rather by the satisfaction *a parte subiecti* of having managed to catch a glimpse of it.

But after all, it was "a despairing multiplicity of questions": "Only someone penetrated by these problems could reconstruct these data"<sup>3</sup>. How? By seizing the same in the diverse, the figural logic underlying the apparently irreducible heterogeneity, the relationship between ethos and pathos, reason and magic, North and South, East and West, modernity and antiquity. By trying not to get lost among surviving ancient deities and astrological enigmatic characters who had migrated into the iconography of the advertisements of the Twenties. By learning to see the connection that binds together, in Hopi culture, the lightning and the serpent. Warburg alone, therefore, could be expected to orient himself in such a disorder.

The young student, destined to become a specialist in astrology (precisely one of the fundamental modes of human orientation), gradually learned to recognize in *Orientierung* the common denominator of Warburg's multiple investigations. His individual enterprise seemed to Saxl like a colossal recapitulation of human endeavor as such: to find order in disorder, an orientation in the chaos of existence: "Any human thought tends to orientation. [...] The fundamental act of human knowledge is to orient man in chaos through the position of images or signs"<sup>4</sup>.

It was something that Saxl had indeed seen; but he was less able to see the ways in which Warburg tried painstakingly to build his own sense of orientation. Let's take, as a paradigmatic case, Saxl's characterization of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* project in his commemorative speech: "Precisely because it is a systematic work, the atlas becomes at the same time a historical work. The corpus of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance, as well as Dürer's work, are analyzed in their chronological succession"<sup>5</sup>. System and chronology would therefore constitute, for the pupil, the main elements of the final project of the master and, more generally, the instruments with which to reconstruct the *disiecta membra* of his intellectual wanderings.

## 2. Montage of heterogeneous elements

It would be difficult to imagine an interpretation of the *Atlas*, and of the whole of Warburg's research, more antipodal than that proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman. To the systematic work evoked by Saxl, he opposes the open project, the work in progress ("*œuvre hypothétique, irrémédiablement provisoire*"<sup>6</sup>), of a montage of heterogeneous elements; to the

<sup>3</sup> "Eine Vielheit zum Verzweifeln"; "Nur der, der von diesen Problemen erfüllt war, konnte diese Tatsachen zusammenfinden" (*ibid.*, foll. 10-11).

<sup>4</sup> "Alles Denken des Menschen strebt nach Orientierung. Dem Chaos gegenüber sich zu orientieren durch Bild- oder Zeichensetzung ist der Grundakt menschlichen Erkennens" (*ibid.*, foll. 14-15).

<sup>5</sup> "So wird der Atlas eben dadurch, dass er ein systematisches Werk ist, zugleich ein historisches. Das Werk der grossen Renaissancekünstler Italiens wie Dürers wird darin in chronologischer Abfolge analysiert" (*ibid.*, fol. 17).

<sup>6</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps de fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Minuit, 2002, p. 452.

chronological succession, the tireless practice of anachronism. An irreducible presence of heterogeneous objects, whose only common denominator seems to be black and white photography. *Mnemosyne* would therefore be a photographic device that teaches to see what is common, setting aside ethical and cultural opposite polarizations, between a Dionysian maenad and a Christian Magdalene, a nymph by Ghirlandaio and a woman playing golf, a gentleman having lunch lying on the grass and an ancient river god: a formula of bodily posture in which a pathos expresses itself. A device that teaches to perform what the young and confused Saxl failed to do ("I did not see the link among these elements"), i.e. to see the same in the diverse: not in order to leave the diverse behind, or to reduce it to the same; nor to keep its diversity obtuse and isolated. We must dialectize both terms, and browse the entire conceptual space between similarity (*ressemblance*) and dissimilarity (*dissemblance*).

The heterogeneous elements, nevertheless held together in a relationship, do not look alike, they are not similar, and yet they are not simply and absolutely different. They are dissimilar in that they are not alike, they do not superimpose on one another, nor do they diversify, moving away from one another: juxtaposed, they are precisely dissimilar.

Learning to see the same in the different, while respecting it as dissimilar: the pedagogy focused on such optics of dissimilarity did not arise abruptly, between 1910 and 1930, with Aby Warburg. It had its own archeology, which was rooted in Goethe's morphology as in a methodological paradigm – open and plural, neither prescriptive nor doctrinaire – that operated deeply in the context of the humanities of the XX century according to a complex and multifaceted story that is far from being appreciated and reconstructed as it should be.

Warburg explicitly recognized his own debt to the morphological paradigm while meditating on one of its own core concepts – that of polarity – in an entry in his diary taken in 1907 during the reading of the *Metamorphosis of Plants*: "Most of all I see that the concept of polarity [*Polarität*] which I felt to be my own creation also stands in the centre of Goethe's thought"<sup>7</sup>. Shortly afterwards, in a letter sent in July to his teacher August Schmarsow, Warburg wrote about a "psychology of polarity [*Polaritätspsychologie*]" as a new methodological approach to the problems of the history of art<sup>8</sup>.

In Warburg's terminology, beyond the use of the concept (and the methodology) of polarity, we can easily identify other typically Goethean terms: the originary phenomenon (*Urpheänomen*, for example in the text on Manet)<sup>9</sup>, or the notions of *Steigerung* and *steigern* in reference to the function of intensification (e.g. in the essays on Botticelli<sup>10</sup> and on Dürer<sup>11</sup>),

<sup>7</sup> A. Warburg, diary, 25 May 1907, transl. in E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, London, The Warburg Institute, 1970, p. 241, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> A. Warburg, letter to A. Schmarsow, 24 July 1907 [WIA GC/10667].

<sup>9</sup> A. Warburg, *Manets 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe'. Die vorprägende Funktion heidnischer Elementargottheiten für die Entwicklung moderner Naturgefühls* (1929), in *Kosmopolis der Wissenschaft. E.R. Curtius und das Warburg Institute. Briefe und andere Dokumente*, ed. by D. Wuttke, Baden-Baden, Koerner, 1989, p. 257-272, here p. 270.

<sup>10</sup> "An intensification of outward movement [*eine gesteigerte äussere Bewegung*]" (A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring* (1893), in Id., *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, introduction by K.W. Forster; transl. by D. Britt, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999, p. 89-156, here p. 89).

or, again, the reference to the “postulate of the intermaxillary bone [*die Postulate eines Zwischenkieferknochens*]”, again in the *Manet*<sup>12</sup>. Direct quotations from Goethe corpus are not lacking, especially from the *Farbenlehre*<sup>13</sup> and from *Faust*<sup>14</sup>. But more generally, we can seize a metaphorical domain inspired by the fields of botany (the *Säftesteigen*, the lymph rising from life to art), zoology (the processes of *Entpuppung* and *Entschälung*, through which the butterfly of Florentine art frees itself from the Burgundian cocoon)<sup>15</sup>, geology (the *Leitmuschel* or *Leitfossil*, index shell or index fossil that guide the researcher in determining the chronostratigraphy of astral symbols): images that, although they cannot be identified with specific passages in Goethe’s works, have nevertheless a persistent Goethean flavour.

These are not mere cultural echoes or literary reminiscences, but rather clear signs of Warburg’s belonging to the morphological tradition. The very notion of *Pathosformel*, a typical postural formula (and therefore repeatable through metamorphosis even to the inversion of its original meaning: for instance the Dionysian maenad “becomes” in Bertoldo di Giovanni the Christian Magdalene<sup>16</sup>) that immediately expresses an emotion, is a concern of typological taxonomy based on a functionalist and variational conception of images wholly belonging to the epistemological horizon opened by the scientific writings of Goethe.

### 3. The morphological paradigm

Even Goethe was surprised by the bridge the morphological vision was able to throw between apparently incommensurable natural manifestations, tracing them back to their originary phenomenon: “What a gulf – he observed in 1784 – between the *os intermaxillare* of the turtle and the elephant, and yet an intermediate series of forms can be found to connect the two!”<sup>17</sup>. The osteological transformations must be considered as variants of a generative originary

<sup>11</sup> “Emotive force of gesture [*pathetisch gesteigerte Mimik*]”; “the supremacy of the antique in all gestural rendering of emotion [*mimisch gesteigerten Lebens*]” (A. Warburg, *Dürer and Italian Antiquity* (1905), *ibid.*, p. 553-558, here p. 553 and p. 556).

<sup>12</sup> A. Warburg, *Manets 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe'* cit., p. 271.

<sup>13</sup> See for example A. Warburg, *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther* (1920), in *Id.*, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* cit., p. 597-667, here p. 651.

<sup>14</sup> See the quotation from *Faust II*, vv. 7742-743: “There’s an old book for browsing in: From Harz to Hellas all are kin [*Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern: / Vom Harz bis Hellas immer Vettern*]” as a motto in A. Warburg, *Pagan-Antique Prophecy* cit., p. 598, and its ironic transformation in *Id.*, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*: “It is a lesson from an old book / The kinship of Athens and Oraibi [*Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern / Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern*]” (transl. by M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> “From the tight Burgundian cocoon springs the Florentine butterfly, the ‘nymph’, decked in the winged headdress and fluttering skirts of the Greek maenad or of the Roman Victoria” (A. Warburg, *Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara* (1912), in *Id.*, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* cit., p. 563-591, here p. 585).

<sup>16</sup> “Wie eine Mänade das zerrissene Tier schwingt, so unkrampf die klagende Magdalena unter dem Kreuz ihren im Trauerorgasmus abgerissenen Haarschopf” (A. Warburg, *Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance* (1914), in *Id.*, *Werke in einem Band*, ed. by M. Trenl, S. Weigel and P. Ladwig, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2010, p. 281-310, here p. 304). On this subject see E. Wind, *The Maenad under the Cross*, “Journal of the Warburg Institute” 1/1 (1937), p. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> J.W. Goethe, *An Intermaxillary Bone is Present in the Upper Jaw of Man as well as in Animals*, in *Id.*, *Scientific Studies (The Collected Works, Vol. 12)*, ed. by D. Miller, New York, Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 115-116.



form: the originary vertebra (*Urwirbel*), that is never given as such, but is nevertheless present as the same theme in the diversity of all skeletal variations. The morphological vision teaches us to recognize that in the botanical domain “forwards and backwards the plant is ever only leaf [*vorwärts und rückwärts ist die Pflanze immer nur Blatt*]”<sup>18</sup>; through proteiform processes of expansion and contraction, lengthening and shortening, hardening and fluidifying, the leaf enables the expression of all parts of the plant, from the roots to the trunk, to the branches. In this way we learn to recognize the dissimilar, the same that brings together the heterogeneous manifestations of nature, respecting them in their diversity.

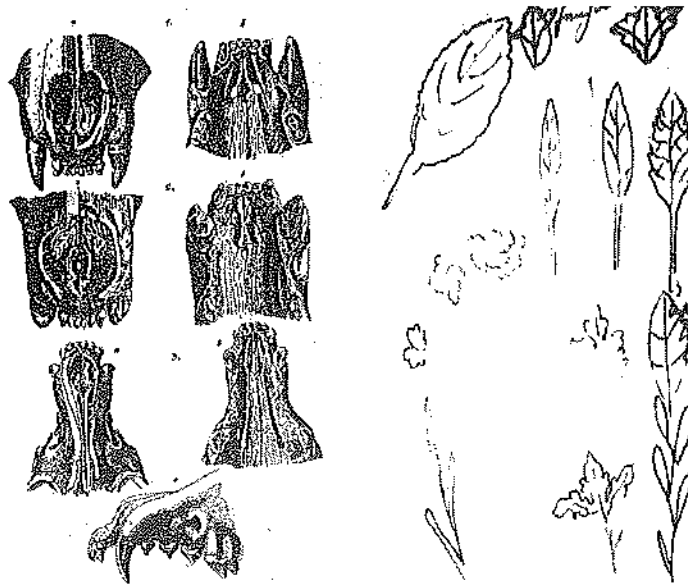


Fig. 2

In the first thirty years of the XX century the humanities assumed such a “delicate empiricism [*zarte Empirie*]”<sup>19</sup>, and learnt to see the circular relationship between the phenomenal multiplicity of the variations and their theme. History of art was no exception to this trend. Already from the second half of the XIX century, Gottfried Semper had adopted a morphological vision towards architecture, which was interpreted as a series of changes from

<sup>18</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Italienische Reise* (“Zweiter Römischer Aufenthalt”), July 1787, Rome, in *Goethes Werke. Weimarer Ausgabe, im Auftrage der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen*, 143 vols., Weimar, Böhlau, 1887-1919, section I, vol. 32 (1906), p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Selections from Maxims and Reflections*, in *Scientific Studies* cit., p. 307.

four originary roots (the hearth, the roof, the enclosure and the mound)<sup>20</sup>. Semper expressed admiration for Baron Cuvier<sup>21</sup>, grasping an analogy between his own research around originary *Typen* in architecture and the animals types collected and studied by the famous naturalist in the collections of the *Jardin des Plantes*. The paws of the dog, the wings of the bird, the rings of the earthworm, are not alike in their visible forms, but rather because they perform the same function, namely locomotion. Foucault emphasized this dissimilarity:

When we consider the organ in relation to its function, we see, therefore, the emergence of 'resemblances' where there is no 'identical' element; a resemblance that is constituted by the transition of the function into evident invisibility. It matters little, after all, that gills and lungs may have a few variables of form, magnitude, or number in common: they resemble one another because they are two varieties of that non-existent, abstract, unreal, unassignable organ, absent from all describable species, yet present in the animal kingdom in its entirety, which serves for *respiration in general*.<sup>22</sup>

In the same period Jacob Burckhardt developed an art historical typology aimed at building synoptic frames around problems or tasks (*Aufgaben*) in art; he gradually abandoned the linear reconstruction of the timeline, in order to address rather "the *recurrent, constant and typical* as echoing in us and intelligible through us"<sup>23</sup>. In painting, for instance, such an approach implies a consideration not of the chronological history, but rather of the genres (*Gattungen*) gathering together in the same class pictorial manifestations from different times<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. Optical common denominators

If we now turn to the following generation of art historians, we find that the sensibility to dissimilarities improves. Franz Wickhoff can compare objects remote in time and space, and different in genres and techniques, seizing a unitary principle operating in them: works

<sup>20</sup> G. Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, transl. by H.F. Mallgrave and W. Herrmann, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics* (1860-63), transl. by H.F. Mallgrave, Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> G. Semper, *Entwurf eines Systems der vergleichenden Stillehre* (1853), in Id., *Kleine Schriften*, ed. by H. and M. Semper, Mittenwald, Müander, 1979, p. 259-291, here p. 263. See A. Hauser, *Der "Cuvier der Kunstwissenschaft"*, in *Grenzbereiche der Architektur*, ed. by Th. Bolt, Basel-Boston-Stuttgart, Birkhäuser, 1985, p. 97-114; J. Rykwert, *Semper's 'morphology'*, "Rassegna" 41 (1990), p. 40-47.

<sup>22</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966), transl. London, Routledge, 2002, p. 288.

<sup>23</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Introductory* (1868), in Id., *Reflections on History*, transl. by M.D.H., London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1950, p. 17. On Burckhardt's typology see J. Große, *Typus und Geschichte. Eine Jacob-Burckhardt-Interpretation*, Köln-Weimar-Wien, Böhlau, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> "Hier nicht eine Geschichte der Malerci, sondern eine Darstellung der Malerei nach Gattungen" (J. Burckhardt, *Aesthetik der bildenden Kunst - Malerei* (1870), in Id., *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by P. Ganz, München-Basel, Beck-Schwabe, 2000, vol. 10, p. 11-128, here p. 70).

belonging to the period from Vespasian to Trajan, monuments such as the Arch of Titus or Trajan's Forum look like modern artifacts:

Notwithstanding the fact that single motives and figures are borrowed from Greek art, all this puts us in mind more of modern works – the Venetians, the Flemings, the Spaniards, and the modern French [i.e. the Impressionists] – than of the baroque products of the Hellenistic period which come closer in point of time.<sup>25</sup>

Wickhoff specifies: "Not only is there a resemblance in these reliefs and statues and busts to pictures by Rubens, Hals, and Velasquez, but the style is actually the same"<sup>26</sup>.

Similarly, his colleague Alois Riegl characterizes as "impressionistic"<sup>27</sup> the treatment of space in late Roman art, in which the color values of surfaces merge together. Beyond chronological distances and cultural specificities, beyond differences between architecture and crafts, painting and sculpture, what matters is the way in which the image appears to the eye as outline and color in space. According to the different way it appears, it will produce a different performative effect: either the image invites me to a closer exploration, transforming my eyes into fingers grasping the contours along the silhouette of the figures (as in the case of Egyptian visual culture), or it pushes me away, obliging me to get the right distance in order to appreciate the chromatic effects and the chiaroscuro (which is precisely the case of late Roman art). This is the famous polarization of the *haptic* and *optic*, based on the physiological optics of Helmholtz and its translation into iconic terms offered by Adolf von Hildebrand<sup>28</sup>: a categorial couple destined to innervate the entire XX century, from Panofsky to Benjamin, from Maldiney to Deleuze, down to the recent film studies<sup>29</sup>.

Wölfflin had also turned to Hildebrand, drawing from his theories the perceptological categories which enabled him to describe the passage from Renaissance to Baroque visual culture as a transformation of the "optical possibilities" from the linear to the painterly. This implies a morphological gaze, able to grasp in different artists an affinity in their type of vision: "There are hardly two artists who, although contemporaries, are more widely divergent by temperament than the baroque master Bernini and the Dutch painter Terborch". Nevertheless, if we compare them, we can grasp, setting aside their differences "a perfect kinship", that consists in "that manner of seeing in patches instead of lines", "a kind of vision

<sup>25</sup> F. Wickhoff, *Roman Art. Some of its Principles and their Application to Early Christian Painting* (1895), transl. by E.S.A. Strong, London, Heinemann, 1900, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> "The optical sketchy manner of style, appropriate for the time, which partly recalls modern impressionistic drawings" (A. Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901), transl. by R. Winkes, Rome, G. Bretschneider, 1985, p. 180).

<sup>28</sup> See A. von Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts* (1893), transl. in *Empathy, Form and Space. Problems in German Aesthetics 1873-1893*, ed. by H.F. Mallgrave and E. Ikonou, Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994 (especially the first chapter).

<sup>29</sup> See L.U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2002; A. Lant, *Haptical Cinema*, in "October", 74 (1995), p. 45-73. On the revaluation of aesthetic tactile experiences see G. Getzinger, *Haptik - Rekonstruktion eines Verlustes*, München-Wien, Profil, 2005.

in which the most heterogeneous artists can participate"<sup>30</sup>, which allows us to identify them as belonging to the same "Typus".

Of course, one cannot immediately establish equivalency between Wölfflin's morphological<sup>31</sup> comparison of two images (on the left the linear structure of the Renaissance, on the right the pictorial structure of Baroque) and the photomontages of Warburg's *Mnemosyne*, which gives us an overview of a crowd of images on the same panel.

But it would be reductive to confine Wölfflin's view exclusively to a binary pattern: while building a network of affinities, he invites us to consider the fact that

individuals fall into larger groups. Botticelli and Lorenzo di Credi, for all their differences, have still, as Florentines, a certain resemblance when compared with any Venetian, and Hobbema and Ruysdael, however divergent they may be, are immediately homogeneous as soon as to them, as Dutchmen, a Fleming like Rubens is opposed.<sup>32</sup>

The difference between two artists refers to a third one, among three to a fourth, and so on. That is to say that the purely linear or the purely painterly artist does not exist, the linear and the painterly being gradual properties, according to the terms involved in the comparison: "It is throughout a question of relative judgments. Compared with one style, the next can be called painterly. Grünewald is certainly more painterly than Dürer, but beside Rembrandt he all the same bears the stamp of the Cinquecentist, that is, the man of the silhouette"<sup>33</sup>.

Of course, it may be objected that here we have always to do with painters. And yet Wölfflin includes in his discourse apparently incommensurable objects, not only realized by artists who are different and distant in space, but also produced with heterogeneous materials and techniques, that he collects together under the title of the "optical category" that makes them possible: "A Roman baroque façade has the same visual denominator as a landscape by Van Goyen"<sup>34</sup>.



Fig. 3

<sup>30</sup> H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1915), transl. by M.D. Hottinger, New York, Dover, 1950, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> On Goethe in Wölfflin see A. Ay, *Nachts: Göthe gelesen. Heinrich Wölfflin und seine Goethe-Rezeption*, Göttingen, V&R Unipress, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History* cit., p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

## 5. Institution or recognition?

In 1915 Wölfflin pointed out the link between Roman Baroque architecture and XVII century Dutch landscapes. We are on the eve of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which was our starting point. Let us briefly recapitulate the various articulations of the morphological paradigm that we quickly traversed in the succession of a few generations: with Semper and Burckhardt, in the second half of the XIX century, the core of the paradigm was a typology based on function and tasks; with Riegl, Wölfflin and Warburg, between the late XIX and the early XX century, the morphological model switched from the notion of function to the practices of the gaze (haptic vs. optical in Riegl, linear vs. painterly in Wölfflin) and more generally to the practices of the body and its postures (pathos formulas in Warburg).

After the Thirties, the morphological optic widened further in the direction of a more generous heterogeneity. Particularly eloquent are the cases of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. During the Twenties, Benjamin had explored the world of German Baroque drama trying to collect in a Goethean way the historical events around their originary phenomenon understood not as their historical *genesis*, but rather as their non-chronological *origin*: "Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]"<sup>35</sup>. Subsequently, in his notes on the *Arcades* project, he adopted a similar approach in characterizing the dialectical image as a simultaneous presence of prehistory and modernity: the *passages* themselves appear to him as having the same status as Goethe's leaf, which "unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants" (N 2a, 4)<sup>36</sup>.

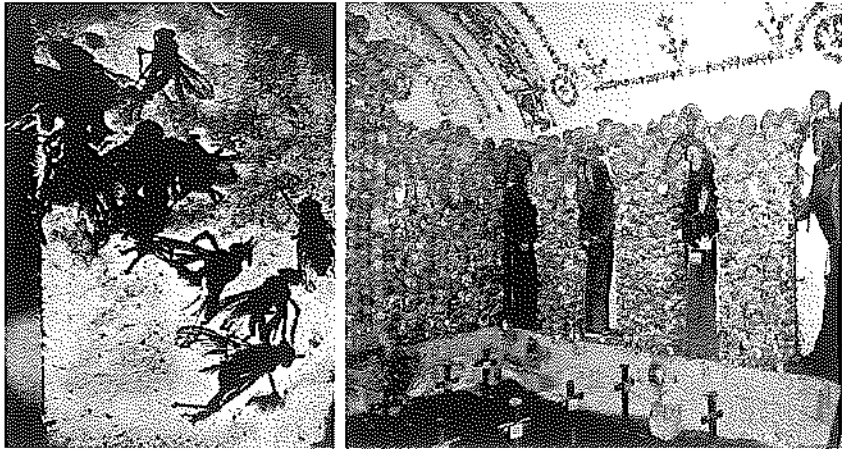


Fig. 4

<sup>35</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), transl. by J. Osborne, London-New York, Verso, 1998, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. by H. Filand and K. MacLaughlin, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 462.

In *Documents* Bataille used a “morphological approach”<sup>37</sup> whose flavour is similarly Goethean, and – true pontifex of the incomparable – he built bridges across radically extraneous phenomena, juxtaposing an obese woman’s head and a rock crystal skull, a fly-paper decorated with its victims and an ossuary of the Roman Capuchin friars<sup>38</sup>. We see here at work the ability to capture links, to establish connections, to perceive the same in the different, to learn dissimilarity.

In the wake of Benjamin and Bataille, since the Nineties, Didi-Huberman has further radicalized the widening of the morphological optic: he interprets the decorative elements of the *Madonna of the Shadows* by Fra Angelico moving from its violently anachronistic dissimilarity with a dripping by Pollock<sup>39</sup>. Again, he rejects the *Diktat* of contemporary minimalist sculpture (which prohibits the recognition of any relationship between the image and an external referent), and wants to find a certain anthropomorphism even in a cube by Giacometti or in a black box by Tony Smith<sup>40</sup>.

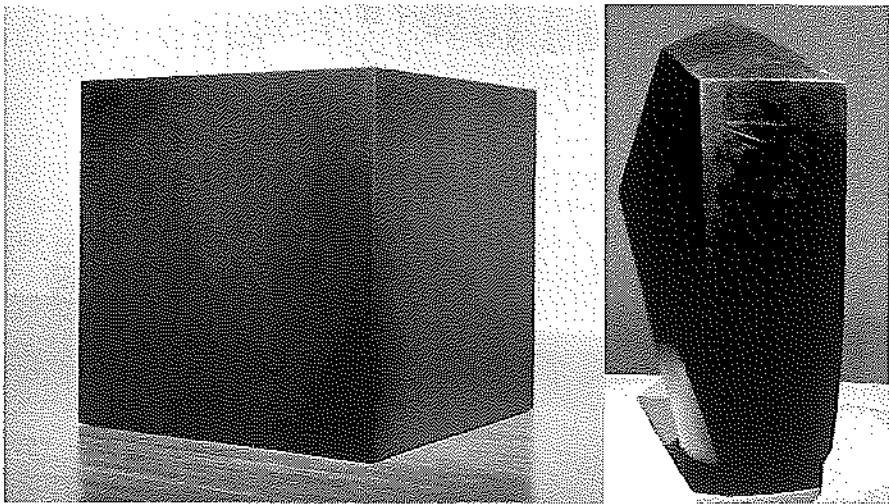


Fig. 5

Bataille’s heads, either in flesh or bone or crystal, were always heads; Warburg’s ecstatic women, separated by centuries and cultures, shared at least a posture; Riegl’s late Roman surfaces appeared confused as the paintings of the French Impressionists; Semper’s roofs, different as they might be, were always roofs. But here, with Giacometti’s and Smith’s cubes, what establishes the analogy? How far can one open up the optical system (precisely in the sense of the photographic camera)? How far can you see links, when every intuitive support

<sup>37</sup> See G. Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe, ou le Gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Paris, Macula, 1995, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> “Documents” 6 (1930), p. 354-355, and 8 (1930), p. 488-493.

<sup>39</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration* (1990), transl. by J.M. Todd, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Minuit, 1992, p. 65; *Le Cube et le visage. Autour d’une sculpture d’Alberto Giacometti*, Paris, Macula, 1993.

seems to vanish? To what extent can we dare apply Benjamin's formula of a "nonsensuous similarity"<sup>41</sup>? Benjamin himself had raised the issue of the *Anweisung*, that is of the rules or instructions governing the institution of linkages among divergent elements<sup>42</sup>.

In other words, is similarity a matter of *institution* or is it rather a matter of *recognition*? The links identified by ancient astrology between the shining and incoherent points in the sky, the constellations that configure them in forms, and human destinies; the relationship between the appearance of a sheep's liver and the fate of a man established in Babylonian and Etruscan hepatoscopy: are they bridges thrown or rather found? Is there a *fundamentum in re* which we must recognize after having learnt to identify it? Or rather is the (individual or collective) pontifical subject free to produce the most bizarre connections, justified only by the fact that they have found a possible execution in the very gesture of connecting? And by asking such questions, are we perhaps prisoners of a rigid opposition between objectivism and subjectivism that the very experience of the dissimilar makes untenable?

The problem was not unknown to morphologists. At the beginning of the morphological paradigm, Goethe himself had warned against the risks the gaze runs when it is tempted to divide everything or, on the contrary, to connect everything:

Everything that exists is an analogue of all existing things; that is why existence always and at the same time looks to us both separate and interlocked. If you pursue this analogy too closely, everything coincides identically; if you avoid it, all is scattered into infinity. In both cases contemplation stagnates, either as hyperactive, or else as done to death.<sup>43</sup>

If we turn instead to the most recent morphological developments, we find that Didi-Huberman seems to be looking for a response in Kant, where he points out that the first motor of montage is the imaginative faculty which, far from being reduced to a subjectivist arbitrary discretion, inaugurates cognitive horizons we can share in an intersubjective way: "L'imagination est d'abord – anthropologiquement – ce qui nous rend capable de jeter un pont entre les ordres de réalité les plus éloignés, les plus hétérogènes"<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> W. Benjamin, *On the mimetic faculty* (1933), transl. by E. Jephcott, in Id., *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927-1934, ed. by M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 720-722, here p. 721. See S. Weigcl, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1997.

<sup>42</sup> W. Benjamin, note (1933) about the *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*: "Ganz gewiß schließt das nicht aus, daß die Anweisungen zu solchem Verhalten objektiv vorhanden sind. Das objektive Vorhandensein von solchen Anweisungen definiert sogar den wahren Sinn von Ähnlichkeit" (Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1980, vol. II/3, p. 956).

<sup>43</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, transl. by E. Stopp, London, Penguin, 2005, nr. 554, p. 73-74.

<sup>44</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet. L'œil de l'histoire*, 3, Paris, Minuit, 2011, p. 22.

## 6. The bridges of imagination

In the first *Critique* (KRV B180) the pontifical gesture of the imagination was characterized as “a hidden art in the depths of the human soul” capable, when schematizing the concept of a dog, to offer “a rule in accordance with which my imagination can specify the shape of a four-footed animal in general, without being restricted to any single particular shape that experience offers me or any possible image that I can exhibit *in concreto*”<sup>45</sup>. Is this not precisely the dissimilarity which binds together all the dogs, their “formula”? The imaginative faculty can burst the bubble of relativistic subjectivism not because it is objectively and scientifically provable, but because it can hope to reach an agreement in the intersubjective convergence of judgments, as suggested by the instance of subjective universality stated in paragraph 8 of the third *Critique*.

It is therefore particularly significant that Hannah Arendt, the philosopher who most intensely worked on the political implications (in the general sense of the “*sensus communis politicus*”) of Kant’s aesthetic judgment, had recourse precisely to the image of the *bridge* to illustrate to her students in 1970 the Kantian theory of imagination and its importance for political philosophy. Arendt employed the general image of the bridge as a metaphor of the “scheme”, and the particular image of the George Washington Bridge as an exemplary case (as an “example” in the sense of the third *Critique*) of the scheme itself:

We can describe the George Washington Bridge because we all know: ‘bridge’. Suppose someone comes along who does not know ‘bridge’, and there is no bridge to which I could point and utter the word. I would then draw an image of the schema of a bridge, which of course is already a particular bridge, just to remind him of some schema known to him, such as ‘transition from one side of the river to the other’.<sup>46</sup>

Throwing a bridge between me and the other on the understanding of the concept of the bridge itself: this is possible if we return to a view of the “*sensus communis*” as “enlarged mentality”, an expression translating in Arendt the notion of “*erweiterte Denkungsart*” set out in paragraph 40 of Kant’s third *Critique*: a human being reveals a broad-minded way of thinking “if he sets himself apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflects on his own judgment from a

<sup>45</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787<sup>2</sup>), transl. by P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 273.

<sup>46</sup> H. Arendt, *Imagination* (seminar on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, 1970), in Ead., *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1970), ed. by R. Beiner, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989, p. 79-85, here p. 83. See also her *Lecture n. XIII, ibid.*, p. 72-77; P. Ricœur, *Aesthetic Judgment and Political Judgment According to Hannah Arendt* (1994), in Id., *The Just* (1995), transl. by D. Pellauer, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 94-109.



universal standpoint (which he can only determine by putting himself into the standpoint of others)<sup>47</sup>.

As we know, Arendt's intention was to develop her analysis of the interrelation between aesthetic and political judgment in the third and final part of her work *The Life of the Mind*, which her death prevented from completing. In the fragments she left, there is an emphasis on the criterion of "communicability", of "publicness"<sup>48</sup>, and on the pronouncements made by taste, thanks to the imagination that allows us to put ourselves in others' shoes. As a reader of Simmel – of the Kantian Simmel –, Arendt knew very well the importance of the aesthetic and political concept of "sociability [*Geselligkeit*]", understood as the "pure form" of society, "the *play-form* of *sociation*", that the German philosopher had made the object of his sociological work, especially in chapter 3 of his *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (1917), where he wrote: "The 'sociability drive' extracts the pure process of sociation as a cherished value; and thereby it constitutes sociability in the stricter sense of the word"<sup>49</sup>, happiness similar to that produced by art or games. Among the greatest achievements of this human impulse Simmel – the Goethean Simmel<sup>50</sup> – counted precisely the bridge. In his 1909 essay *Bridge and Door*, he characterized this construction as a major connective function, which was inaugurated when man made the first road as a link between two places<sup>51</sup>; a connection that at the same time dialectically emphasizes the status of separation of the two banks of the river. Man separates what is bound and binds what is separate, and cannot do the one thing without the other, because they are the two sides of the same gesture.

But this deep Simmelian conviction is precisely the core of Plato's dialectic. The Platonic Socrates, man and philosopher, is precisely a connecting-separating being. He advises Phaedrus (in the eponymous dialogue, 265d-266c) to bring "things which are scattered all over the place into a single class by gaining a comprehensive view of them"; but then he must be "able to cut things up again, class by class, according to their natural joints, rather than trying to break them up as an incompetent butcher might"<sup>52</sup>. And he declares himself "enamoured of these divisions and collections [...] because I want to be good at speaking and thinking", according to the practice of the "dialecticians", whose gaze is "capable of discerning a natural unity and plurality"<sup>53</sup>. We have to do here with a special

<sup>47</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), transl. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 175.

<sup>48</sup> "The criterion is communicability or publicness" (H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego-New York-London, Harcourt, 1978, Appendix: "Judging", p. 255-272, here p. 267).

<sup>49</sup> G. Simmel, *Fundamental Problems of Sociology (Individual and Society)* (1917), in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, transl. by K.H. Wolff, Glencoe (Ill.), The Free Press, 1950, p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> See G. Simmel, *Kant and Goethe On the History of the Modern Weltanschauung* (1906, 1916<sup>3</sup>), transl. by J. Bleicher, available on line: [http://www.generation-online.org/p/tp\\_simmel1.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/tp_simmel1.htm); Id., *Goethe*, Leipzig, Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1913.

<sup>51</sup> "Because the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating: that is why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two river banks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge" (G. Simmel, *Bridge and Door* (1909), transl. in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by N. Leach, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 63-67, here p. 67).

<sup>52</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, transl. by R. Waterfield, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

ability of the eyes, the ability designated in *The Republic* (537c) as *synopsis*, the vision typical of the person capable of being dialectical, in short, of doing philosophy.

The ultimate meaning of the morphological approach is therefore a matter not of demonstration, but rather of hope: the hope to be able to bridge heterogeneous phenomena in a pontifical imaginative gesture. “Imaginative” does not mean imaginary, phantastic, fictitious, but rather able to develop in the imagination possible links rooted in the properties of things; able to throw such bridges on the basis of a belief that they can be shared and used by others, that a community can share this kind of gaze and thereby find a consensus.

Such a gaze is “pontifical” in the strictly etymological sense and not in, so to speak, its institutional sense. It hopes for the possibility of a consensus, it does not require the papal infallibility of a dogmatic judgment. Quite the contrary, because the possibility of such a hope being fulfilled is far from guaranteed. It is constitutively exposed to the risk of refusal, refutation, denial. Consequently, the morphological researchers must humbly submit their gaze to the patient exercise of effective argumentation and philological accuracy, to make their own bridges solid and usable by others. Being aware of the fact that they can always collapse, and cancel the *Denkraum*, the space for thought and of thought, the interval that had obsessed Warburg. It is not by chance that the son of Aby, Max Adolf, wanted to conclude the commemoration of his father with the words of an ancient mystic: “Nothing, in fact, is far away from anything [Οὐ γὰρ μακρὰν οὐδὲ πόρρω οὐδενὸς οὐδέν]”<sup>54</sup>. Among the causes of the terrible and sudden collapse of his father, he may have glimpsed the collapse of the bridges whose function – as Simmel has shown very clearly, and as is icastically expressed in the ambiguous Greek word *διάζευγμα* (bridge, but also *διαζευγμός*, separation) – is at the same time to put together and to set apart.

## Images

1. *Left*: Liberation of Prometheus by Hercules and Castor, bas-relief on the back side of an Etruscan mirror, end V century B.C., Paris, Louvre. *Right*: Cosmè Tura, *Pietà*, Roverella Polyptych, 1474, Paris, Louvre (in A. Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. by M. Warnke, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2000, plates 4 and 42).

2. *Left*: C. van de Velde, intermaxillary bone of the lion, of the polar bear and of the wolf (engraving after the drawings by W. Waitz for J.W. Goethe, *Dem Menschen wie den Tieren ist ein Zwischenknochen der obern Kinnlade zuzuschreiben*, in “Nova Acta physico-medica Academiae Caesareae Leopoldino-Carolinae naturae curiosorum”, vol. 15/I, 1831, p. 1-48). *Right*: J.W. Goethe, drawing of basic forms of leaves, first half of 1789 (in *Corpus der Goethe-Zeichnungen*, ed. by G. Femmel, Leipzig, Seemann, 1958-1973, vol. 5 B, p. 78).

<sup>54</sup> M.A. Warburg, *Lecture*, c. 1964-65 [WIA III.134.4.1.1]. The quotation is from Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV 3, 11; transl. by S. Mackenna and B.S. Page; available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html>.

3. *Left*: J. van Goyen, *Landscape with huts and trees*, 1633, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie. *Right*: Façade of Sant'Andrea della Valle, Rome (in H. Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Munich, Bruckmann, 1943<sup>8</sup>, p. 91 and 77).

4. *Left*: J.-A. Boiffard, *Fly-Paper*. *Right*: Ossuary of Our Lady of the Conception of the Capuchins, Rome (in "Documents", 8 (1930), p. 488 and 53).

5. *Left*: T. Smith, *Die*, 1962, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art. *Right*: A. Giacometti, *Cube*, 1934, Zurich, Kunsthaus.

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# Frederik Adama van Scheltema and the West between Systole and Diastole

LUCA VARGIU

**Abstract:** In *Die geistige Mitte*, Frederik Adama van Scheltema accomplishes his project of a “periodic system of Western artistic and cultural development”. Being based on a close comparison between the dynamics of historical processes and those of physical and natural processes, the system presents a methodological proposal suggesting an organic – and not linear – history of Western civilization. Such an approach results in a historiographic view that, as Spengler already did, rejects the usual subdivision into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern age, supporting instead a quite Germanocentric periodization that substitutes Antiquity with a long Protohistory (*Vorzeit*), dating from Neolithic period until the year 1000.

1. The German writer (of Dutch origins) Frederik Adama van Scheltema's work *Die geistige Mitte. Umriss einer abendländischen Kulturmorphologie*, whose subtitle recalls Spengler and which was published for the first time in 1947 and for the second time in 1950, accomplishes the project of a “periodic system of Western artistic and cultural development”<sup>1</sup>. This project was started before the Second World War<sup>2</sup> and then resumed with no important modification in later essays, papers and books that focused on it, providing explanations and more-in-depth analyses<sup>3</sup>.

Scheltema was born in 1884 and died in 1968. He was especially interested in Art History and Prehistory Studies. Although nowadays he is rarely taken into account by scholars<sup>4</sup>, his writings – in particular those on Prehistory – were granted some recognition especially in the Twenties (for instance they were mentioned in Franz Boas' works<sup>5</sup>), as they continued to be during Nazism and even by the Regime itself<sup>6</sup>. Later, his work was mentioned

<sup>1</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte. Umriss einer abendländischen Kulturmorphologie* (1947), München, Oldenbourg, 1950, p. 188-189. It is important to remark that the subtitle of Spengler's *magnum opus* was *Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*.

<sup>2</sup> See, at least, F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Wiederholung. Der Weg des Einzelnen und seiner Ahnen* (1937), Bern, Francke, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> See the collection “Die Kunst des Abendlandes”, published in five volumes from 1950 to 1960 (F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Vorzeit*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1950; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1953; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Renaissance*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1957; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Barock*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1958; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Moderne*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1960); and F. Adama van Scheltema, *Antike – Abendland. Parallelen und Gegensätze*, Schwäbisch Gmünd, Neues Forum, 1964, the last volume published by the author.

<sup>4</sup> He was born in Amsterdam in 1884. After his studies of Chemistry, Prehistory and Art History in Amsterdam, Berlin, Wien and Munich, he got his *Promotion* in the last mentioned town in 1911. In 1912 he moved to Munich and in 1916 he was naturalized as German. He consecrated his whole life to his studies, working as a freelance researcher. He died in Gauting, near Munich, in 1968.

<sup>5</sup> See F. Boas, *Primitive Art* (1927), New York, Dover, 1955, p. 7, 16 and 58.

<sup>6</sup> Scheltema is mentioned as collaborator of “Germanen-Erbe”, official review of Reichsbund für deutsche Vorgeschichte, whose director was Alfred Rosenberg. Some of Scheltema's writings are in the “Nationalsozialistische Bibliographie”, which was an organ of the Nazi Regime controlling culture.

by many authors – in different fields and with different orientations –, such as Mircea Eliade, Ernst Jünger and Arnold Hauser<sup>7</sup>. His project, outlined in *Die geistige Mitte*, was not considered nor recognized; it was shortly mentioned by Hans Sedlmayr, Emilio Betti and Henry Stuart Hughes, who took it into consideration simply as an example of the renewed interest in Spengler's work after the World War<sup>8</sup>.

Scheltema's project is based on the fundamental idea that the inner structure of human civilization can be understood through Art, so that through artistic development – rather than through any other cultural field – it is possible to comprehend the repeated variations affecting the structure along human historical development<sup>9</sup>. This idea was already present, although presented in different ways and forms, in several important authors interested in Art and History in the first half of the Twentieth century: in *Ägyptische Kunst*, Wilhelm Worringer recognizes that Art History, and especially Alois Riegl's studies, "has done most important preparatory work for the morphology of culture"<sup>10</sup>. Sedlmayr, in *Verlust der Mitte*, states that, if we consider the object of its focus, art has got a peculiar status, for the evidence of his object, since it is a visual art and since it "is for the story of human societies what the dream of an individual is for the psychiatrist", as Sedlmayr adds by quoting René Huyghe<sup>11</sup>. According to this perspective, he considers art historiography as aspiring to be a "guide of modern human sciences", as it focuses on objects which "are at once independent and dependent on time, past and present"<sup>12</sup>. In other words, this perspective is a development of *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* by Max Dvořák – whose lessons Sedlmayr had been attending – which considers not only the object but also the aim of the discipline<sup>13</sup>. Such conceptual perspective belongs also to Scheltema, as the first lines of *Die geistige Mitte* show us: after expounding the thesis concerning the "primacy" of art, the author defines "the development of art as development of the spirit" as well as the "history of style as history of

<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning his collaboration with the review "Antaios", launched in 1959 by Eliade and Jünger and published till 1971. Hauser considers Scheltema as "ideologically one of the most reactionary but in matters of scholarship one of the rather competent archaeologists" (A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art* [1951], transl. by S. Godman, London-New York, Routledge, 2003, vol. 1, *From Prehistoric Times to the Middle Ages*, p. 129 footnote 2).

<sup>8</sup> See H. Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis. The Lost Center* (1948), transl. by B. Battershaw, New Brunswick, Transaction, 2007, p. 259 footnote 1 (*Postscript*, 1951); E. Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1955, 1990<sup>2</sup>, p. 148 footnote 6, 332 footnote 10, 337 footnote 34, 495 footnote 30, 1014 (472 footnote 19-a) and 1020 (528 footnote 1); and H.S. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler* (1952), New Brunswick, Transaction, 1992, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> W. Worringer, *Egyptian Art* (1927), transl. by H. Rackham, London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928, p. 81-82.

<sup>11</sup> H. Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis* cit., p. 2 (where he refers to an unspecified and unfindable writing by Huyghe dated 1939).

<sup>12</sup> H. Sedlmayr, *Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft* (1978), in *Kunst und Wahrheit. Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Mittenwald, Mäander, 1978<sup>4</sup>, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> On the relationship between the two authors and on the influence of Dvořák on Sedlmayr in addition to – of course – H. Sedlmayr, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Das Vermächtnis Max Dvořáks* (1949), in *Kunst und Wahrheit* cit., p. 81-95; see the organization provided by N. Schneider, *Hans Sedlmayr. 1896-1984*, in *Alte Meister moderner Kunstgeschichte*, ed. by H. Dilly, Berlin, Reimer, 1999<sup>2</sup>, p. 268. This latter refers to Dvořák's *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (questionably) translated into English as *The History of Art as the History of Ideas* (M. Dvořák, *The History of Art as the History of Ideas* [1924], transl. by J. Hardy, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).



the structure". A similar claim can be traced back to the early Sedlmayr<sup>14</sup>.

2. Scheltema's *Kulturmorphologie* is elaborated according to an organic conception of history, as opposed to a linear conception. The organic conception is what underlies the endogenous connections of the development of Western culture: these connections organize the sequence of historic periods in accordance with a triadic rhythm, which starts with a phase ruled rather by peripheral dynamics and then goes through a phase characterized by a more centripetal tendency, and finally ends with a phase ruled by centrifugal forces. The same rhythmic process recurs inside each step, producing an articulated structure that divides each phase – as well as its several levels and sublevels – into three parts. The periods during which the spirit tends to find a balance, in reason of the prominence of the centripetal forces, are the periods that make it possible to reach the *geistige Mitte*. They are depicted by the author as the image of a circle in which all the elements converge to the centre. The previous step, which is characterized by the peripheral events, is depicted as a circle where all the elements are connected to each other along the inward line of the circumference. The last phase, ruled by the centrifugal forces, is represented by a circle in which all the elements depart from the centre towards the circumference (fig. 1)<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, from one phase to another, the course of the Spirit follows two main movements: the centripetal movement that allows the passage from the first to the second phase, and the centrifugal movement that allows the transfer from the second to the third phase. Inspired by authors such as Goethe and Schelling – whom he explicitly mentions – Scheltema analyses this process by recalling the systole/diastole rhythm, characterized by a moment of maximum concentration, representing the attainment of the spiritual centre, and a moment of maximum expansion<sup>16</sup>. This idea is, although superficially, connected to the theory, Romantic in a broader sense, that detects a male and a female element in the structure of the spirit. This theory can be considered at first sight as one of the mainstays of the whole

<sup>14</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 5. Sedlmayr's writings that are here referred to are H. Sedlmayr, *Kunstgeschichte als Kunstgeschichte. Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft* (1931), in H. Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit* cit., p. 49-80 (H. Sedlmayr, *Towards a Rigorous Study of Art*, in *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed by C.S. Wood, New York, Zone Books, 2000, p. 133-180).

<sup>15</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 33 (Abb. 2). Also F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Wiederholung* cit., p. 230 (Abb. 50); F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Vorzeit* cit., p. 113 (Abb. 30); F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* cit., p. 12 (Abb. 1); F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Renaissance* cit., p. 11 (Abb. 1); F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Barock* cit., p. XI (Abb. 1); and F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Moderne* cit., p. 11 (Abb. 1).

<sup>16</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 8, 15, 28-29, 33, 73, 109 and 180; Id., *Die geistige Wiederholung* cit., p. 231-233; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* cit., p. 219 footnote 2; Id., *Die Kunst der Renaissance* cit., p. 9 and 203 footnote 1 and 2; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Barock* cit., p. X; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Moderne* cit., p. 304; and F. Adama van Scheltema, *Antike – Abendland* cit., p. 120-122. Scheltema refers here to Goethe's *Maximen und Reflexionen* and his exchanges with Eckermann as well as to Schelling's incomplete writing about the world's ages. See J.W. Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections* (1832-1842, post.), transl. by B. Saunders, London and New York, Macmillan, 1908, p. 158 (n. 433 = n. 278, 1825); J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann* (1836-1848), transl. by J. Oxenford, ed. by J.K. Moorhead, Boston-New York, Da Capo, 1998, p. 51-52 (Monday, March 22, 1824); and F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (1861, post.), transl., with an Introduction, by J.M. Wirth, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 21, 90, 94 and 97.

system: according to its significance, attaining the *geistige Mitte* entails the prominence of the female element, which provides balance and stillness, whereas the first and the last phases, being characterized by a movement from or towards the periphery, are ruled by the male element. Besides a brief reference to the Taoist couple of *yin* and *yang*<sup>17</sup>, Scheltema rather refers to Romantic conceptions<sup>18</sup>: he mentions Schiller's *Glockenlied* – which he considers as the work in which the opposition masculine-feminine is best explained – and Goethe as poet of the eternal feminine as well as Johann Joseph von Görres, and especially Johann Jakob Bachofen, and Jacob Grimm (the former having focused on the *Mutterrecht* and the latter on the *Muttersprache*), since they introduced such an opposition into the philosophy of history. The influences are innumerable and we might also add Carl Gustav Jung<sup>19</sup> to the mentioned authors. As an example closer to his disciplinary interests, Scheltema especially claims the influence of the natural religion of the Germanic peoples in the Bronze Age, which was founded on the bipolar couple of Earth (feminine) and Sun (masculine)<sup>20</sup>.

This system results in an organization of the historic material that, like Spengler's theory, rejects the traditional subdivision into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern Age. Spengler considered this subdivision rather banal, flat and non-morphologic and therefore as an obstacle that prevented Western history from being understood in its specificity and its connection with global human history<sup>21</sup>. This perspective leads Spengler to a wider and less Eurocentric consideration – the “Copernican discovery” of History, as he defines it<sup>22</sup> – and to detect eight great civilizations that have appeared in different times and places of Earth and among which Western civilization is the last and the only one still existing. Unlike Spengler, Scheltema only focuses on Western civilization, although he also rejects the traditional subdivision, because it is excessively linear and unable to distinguish endogenous and exogenous connections. He especially focuses his analysis on the Germanic peoples rather than on the Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, so that he sets as starting point of his historic-morphological system a long Proto-history (*Vorzeit*) – instead of Antiquity – which is divided into three phases, Neolithic Age, Bronze Age and a final “Germanic Iron Age” (*germanische Eisenzeit*) that can be dated until 1000 AD, that is until the Germanic and Viking time. The *Vorzeit* is followed by the Middle Ages (*Mittelalter*), divided into Romanic, Gothic and Later Gothic period. The following phase is the Modern Age (*Neuzeit*), which includes the Renaissance – subdivided into Early Renaissance, High Renaissance and Mannerism – the Baroque Age – subdivided into Early Baroque, High Baroque and Later Baroque or Rococo – and the Later Modern Age – subdivided into Enlightenment, Romanticism and Modern Age in the strict sense of the word (*Moderne*). This last period in its

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> The Jungian influence has been remarked by G. Cocks, *Treating Mind and Body. Essays in the History of Science, Professions, and Society Under Extreme Conditions*, New Brunswick, Transaction, 1988, p. 61; and G. Cocks, *Psychotherapy in the Third Reich. The Göring Institute*, New Brunswick, Transaction, 1997, p. 148-149, 156 footnote 90, 294 and 303 footnote 33.

<sup>20</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 122-123.

<sup>21</sup> See O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, transl. by C.F. Atkinson, New York, Knopf, 1926, vol. 1, p. 15-18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 18.

turn includes three phases, Realism, Impressionism and Expressionism. The triadic rhythm of History does not take into account the Prehistory (*Urzeit*) that Scheltema reduces to Paleolithic and Mesolithic ages, given that – as we have just seen – the Neolithic Age is considered the first phase of the Proto-history (fig. 2)<sup>23</sup>.

3. The author considers such a system as a response to the problems that had affected the historic disciplines from Idealism onwards. Adopting Kant's well-known statement, according to which intuition without concept is blind and the concept without intuition is empty, he considers the philosophy of history proposed by German Idealism as well as Hegel's "great image of history" as basically empty, because of their exaggerated abstraction and disregard of the facts<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, the later positive and empirical research, which paid more attention to the concrete facts and rejected any systematic tendency, appears as being blind in front of general problems. In fact, such an approach considered any possible periodisation of the historic course as irrelevant and relentlessly arbitrary. According to Scheltema, only in recent times the historic debate experienced a turn, thanks to the fertile and exemplary contribution of Art History: he identifies the analysis of the stylistic types, of their alternation and recurrence (here we might read a reference to Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin) as "the fruitful attempt to provide a new overall – now deeply-rooted in the facts – explanation of the historical events"<sup>25</sup>.

Such a turn did not prevent Art Historiography from being limited to a merely descriptive approach, which does not go further than a superficial and flat consideration and which therefore does not comprehend the endogenous and exogenous connections of the historical and art-historical course<sup>26</sup>. The adopted periodisation already shows the difference between organicity and linearity, from which it actually derives. This seems to be confirmed by the references to Hegel and Spengler, who upheld a separation between the ancient Germanic world, the Eastern world and the Greek-Roman world so strong as to affect the characterization and analysis of the whole Western civilization, here defined in a "Germanocentric" sense<sup>27</sup>:

We firstly come to know that on this side of the Alps there was a Protohistoric

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<sup>23</sup> See the illustrative schemas in F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 188-189; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Vorzeit* cit., p. 18 and 185; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* cit., p. 217; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Renaissance* cit., p. 201-202; F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Barock* cit., p. 185; and F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Moderne* cit., p. 301-302.

<sup>24</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 36-37 (the expression is quoted at p. 36), 130-131 and 170 (with a reference to Kant's first *Critique*; See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781, 1787], ed. and transl. by P. Guyer, A.W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 193-194). As it is well-known, Kant's statement is the following: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind [*Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind*]", but Scheltema paraphrases it according to the *vulgata*: "Kant had defined intuition without concept as blind and the concept without intuition as empty [*Kant hatte die Anschauung ohne Begriff als blind, den Begriff ohne Anschauung als leer bezeichnet*]".

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 5, 37 and 45.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 37.

ancient-European civilization, almost exclusively agricultural-primitive, that, as such, clearly and specifically differs from the great and partially contemporary civilizations of the Eastern world and of Antiquity. Secondly, in this Protohistory that lasts until the Middle Ages we can see the very first stage of development of that Western civilization which will later manage to span the entire world. We consecrated such a disproportionately wide part of our research to the Prehistoric and Protohistoric manifestations, not only because they definitively highlight the complex breath of history motion, but also because, by replacing the organic periodisation Protohistory – Middle Ages – Modern Age to the mere chronological subdivision into Antiquity – Middle Age – Modern Age, we are sure to deal with this history motion within only one essential sphere of civilization, in other words we deal with the gears of only one clock.<sup>28</sup>

The origin of Western civilization is the Germanic world and not Antiquity, to which it has often been referred in a retrospective way. Similarly, in Hegel's philosophy of history the Germanic world is considered the "perfect maturity" of the spirit; yet, only by their Christian conversion, the Germanic peoples "are established in the possession of the West", given that Hegel thought that the primitive Northern and Germanic religion "had by no means taken deep root in the spirit"<sup>29</sup>. According to Spengler the history of the Western civilizations begins between the 10th and 11th centuries, so that its prehistory coincides with the Merovingian and Carolingian period<sup>30</sup>: the previous Germanic world should be counted among the "pre-Cultures", which means that it is devoid of history and only able to produce "zoological happenings". In fact Spengler considers as history in the proper sense of the word only what emerges from the eight superior civilizations that have inhabited the Earth<sup>31</sup>. On the contrary, Scheltema thinks that history already starts with Protohistory and, definitively, with Germanic Protohistory. This period begins in the Neolithic age and ends in the Vikings' epoch, which is the eve that Hegel situated between the first and the second period of the Germanic World – in other words between the epoch of Barbarian migrations and the Middle Ages – and that Spengler considered as previous and therefore primitive<sup>32</sup>. This same period is still considered by Scheltema as the Iron Age. Adopting the subdivision into Antiquity – Middle Ages – Modern Age prevents us from seeing the difference between endogenous and exogenous manifestations and leads us to confuse them. In fact, even though the different factors – inner and outer – are to be held as equally important for any given historical event (which is then to be considered singularly), it would be nevertheless a methodological error to connect them

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.

<sup>29</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837 post.), transl. by R. Alvarado, Aaltcn, Wordbridge, 2011, respectively p. 99, 313 and 312.

<sup>30</sup> See O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* cit., end of 2nd volume (*Tables illustrating the comparative morphology of history*).

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, in particular vol. II, p. 33-51, 89-92 and 204-230. The quotations are drawn from p. 35 and 48.

<sup>32</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* cit., p. 311 ff.; and O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* cit., for ex. vol. 2, p. 181.

instead of distinguishing them according to their origin<sup>33</sup>. This is exactly what occurs if, on the base of the traditional periodisation, we connect the history of the Western civilization with the Eastern world or the Greek-Roman Antiquity.

In this perspective, he addresses his criticism to many authors: to Jung, because he completely disregarded the Germanic Proto-history; to Hegel, because he did not properly adopt the new periodisation and essentially followed the traditional one; and to Spengler, because he rejected the traditional periodisation but did not deduct the correct consequences<sup>34</sup>. His other remarks were generally addressed to the studies on Prehistory and Protohistory, as they developed from the 19th century onwards. In fact, these studies had created separated disciplines and had not been able to understand the "genetic significance" of the analysed epochs for Western civilization. Further remarks concern those who had not grasped the triadic scansion of Western history and therefore the rhythm of systole/diastole: here the remarks are especially addressed to Wölfflin<sup>35</sup>.

On the other hand, these remarks confirm the fact that the periodisation Protohistory – Middle Ages – Modern Age is considered as "a mere endogenous line of development, an homogeneous sphere of development"<sup>36</sup>. This recurrent statement is based on an organic theory according to which the spirit, following the alternated rhythm of systole/diastole, takes his path through history by parting with animality, and advances – as Hegel suggested – towards "consciousness of absolute spiritual freedom"<sup>37</sup>. On one hand, Scheltema thinks that, by stressing the "endogenous forces of development", he can provide Western history with a greater "autonomy and character" than that given by the conception which relentlessly resorts to the influences coming from the East or Southern Europe<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, he needs to strengthen his perspective with concrete data, in order to show that it is based on empirical grounds and is not an "idle conceptual construction"<sup>39</sup>, and also that his theory can answer many questions with respect to which Art History had been "blind and unsure"<sup>40</sup>. Like several contemporary authors, Scheltema is aware that in his epoch systematic thought is not well accepted and for this reason he feels the need to justify his own system. He specifies that, by virtue of its character of immanence with respect to the life of spirit, it is not "strictly systematic, but extremely easy and lively in each singular part"<sup>41</sup>. He considers the repetitive

<sup>33</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 38 and 39-40.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 27-28, 36-38 and 120. The quotation is drawn from p. 37-38. Scheltema is aware that Hegel's "error" – i.e. the fact that he did not detect in the "Prehistory" (*Vorgeschichte*) "any spiritual movement, any development and therefore any history" – partially depends on the pioneering character of the researches, which developed only after the philosopher's death. See *ibid.*, p. 42 (from where the quotation is drawn), 36-37 and 131. For these reason, the reproach towards Hegel is less strict than that towards Spengler. We should remember that, after his masterpiece, Spengler focused on the relation between history and prehistory, as testified by the *Nachlass* (that Scheltema could not possibly know). See O. Spengler, *Prühzeit der Weltgeschichte. Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, ed. by A.M. Kocktauck, M. Schröter, München, Beck, 1966.

<sup>35</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 72-76, 81, 82, 91, 96-99 and 109-110.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35. See also *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 39, from where the quotations are drawn.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46. See *ibid.*, p. 184-185.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

tri-partition – the constant repetition of the historic movement “inside and beyond itself” – as preventing “any dull systematic character”<sup>42</sup> and making the analysis of historic phenomena more relative.

4. Such words as systole, diastole, endogenous, exogenous etc, testify the influence of his earlier chemical studies as well as his interest in natural sciences, especially biology. However they are not just expressions borrowed from other disciplines, but rather they show a fruitful inspiration that even affects the way of conceiving science and knowledge in a wider sense. The author of *Die geistige Mitte* cannot be considered as one of those experts who radically separate the sciences of nature from the sciences of spirit, by distinguishing their respective object, method, structure and aim. Nor can he be counted among those authors who, on the bases of such a separation, tried to create a link between the two spheres, detecting any correspondence or relation between the principles and aims of the different theoretical approaches. He is rather closer to an organicist conception, inspired by Goethe, Hegel, Karl Ernst von Baer and Hans Driesch, according to which the living nature is not other to the spirit, but it is a moment of the latter: hence the intimately spiritual character of any manifestation within nature and history. Consequently, the unity of knowledge does not need to be assumed or recovered *a posteriori*, but comes directly from the primary and original unity of spirit-nature and is expressed by the close confrontation between the historical processes and the natural and physical processes, proposed by the German author.

Adopting the aforesaid polarity masculine-feminine as the basis of historical development is equal in value to a heuristic use of this conceptual couple that is generally employed in a mere metaphoric sense. This polarity is not an immanent law of history and spirit, as the alternation of centripetal and centrifugal motion is. Nor does this polarity represent – as Scheltema writes inspired by Goethe and Spengler – “the authentic original phenomenon [*das eigentliche Urphänomen*]”<sup>43</sup>. It would not make any sense to attribute either a masculine or feminine aspect to those natural manifestations or spiritual oppositions based on the coexistence of a peripheral and a central element, such as the celestial bodies or the atom’s particles on one hand and the I/world or subject/object relationship on the other. Similarly, we must avoid any personification of the myth that considers the Earth as feminine and the Sun as masculine. Particular attention must also be paid to avoiding depth psychology, according to which – as the author mentions without directly quoting Jung – within a dream the individual’s most intimate sphere usually appears as a feminine figure, Anima, that externally relates to a masculine entity<sup>44</sup>. In the end they are just “figurative borrowings” from

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.* Actually Jung tackles the question in a more complex way, since he bases it on the polarity of Anima (feminine) and Animus (masculine). See, among the others, C.G. Jung, *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* (1934-1954), in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 9/1, transl. by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 3-41; C.G. Jung, *Concerning the Archetypes, with Special Reference to the Anima Concept* (1936-1954), in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 9/1 cit., p. 54-72; and C.G. Jung, *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* (1938-1954), in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 9/1 cit., p. 73-110.

the sexual sphere and do not allow us to detect the *Urphänomen*<sup>45</sup>. In this perspective, even such concepts as systole and diastole are just terms of a comparison, which are useful in describing the process of the spirit's development, as already suggested by Goethe and Schelling: a double centripetal and centrifugal motion consisting in contraction and dilatation, which implies an existing centre.

Unlike the polarity masculine-feminine, now reduced to a "figurative borrowing", the often mentioned parallelism between the individual's biological development and the development of human civilization represents one of the general laws of spirit. This parallelism is the background of the historical analyses carried out in *Die geistige Wiederholung*, in which, drawing on Julian Huxley's considerations as well as Ernst Haeckel's basic biogenetic law ruling both physical and spiritual lives, the author relates the "law of the bodily repetition" with the "law of the spiritual repetition", so that the biunique connection between the "cultural-spiritual development" and the "individual-spiritual development" is extended to every single phase and sub-phase of the historical periodisation as well as to every single step of the individual's progress<sup>46</sup>.

In *Die geistige Mitte*, this conception, albeit presupposed, is limited to few explicit notes, such as one concerning the identification of a correspondence between childhood and Protohistory. As Scheltema clearly states, childhood "does not correspond to the great Eastern or Ancient civilizations, but to the Northern Protohistory"<sup>47</sup>; this specification is in accordance with the assumed organic structure that replaces Antiquity with Protohistory. Childhood's middle phase, corresponding to the period from six to twelve years of age, can be compared to the Bronze Age, not only because of its structure but also because of its representations. They are both a phase in which the spiritual centre is reached thanks to the feminine predominance: within the individual's history such a moment is represented by the greatest awareness reached by the love towards one's own mother; within the history of civilization it is represented by the main role played by women in Germanic societies – whether there was or not a matriarchal social organization, this point is considered irresolvable<sup>48</sup> – or in the religious sphere characterized by the Great Mother, who is – as Jacob Grimm had already suggested – "the main figure of the pure Northern natural religion"<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 7-8.

<sup>46</sup> See Id., *Die geistige Wiederholung* cit. The "law of the bodily repetition" is dealt with at p. 7-10; the "law of spiritual repetition" is dealt with at p. 11-23. A global perspective on the parallelism between ontogenesis and philogenesis is proposed in the final pages, p. 303-310. A mention about Scheltema's reference to Haeckel in I. Heidemann, *Der Begriff des Spieles und das ästhetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1968, p. 223. We have to emphasize that Huxley and Haeckel are mentioned only a few passages, as based on indirect knowledge of their texts. A reference text is Oscar Hertwig's work (*Das Werden der Organismen. Zur Widerlegung von Darwins Zufallstheorie durch das Gesetz in der Entwicklung*, Jena, Fischer, 1922) cit. for instance in F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Wiederholung* cit., p. 20 and 23 (footnote 10).

<sup>47</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 26. The author considers a parallelism with the situation of Archaic Greek civilization irresolvable, about which he briefly mentions the well-known arguments proposed by Bachofen (mentioned according the anthology *Mutterrecht und Urreligion. Eine Auswahl*, Leipzig, Kröner, 1927).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28 (with an undefined reference to Jacob Grimm; See nevertheless J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, vol. I [1875], reprinted in *Die Werke Jacob Grimms*, vol. 26, Hildesheim, Olms, 2003, p. 207).

5. The unity of spirit and knowledge as well as the parallelism between the dynamics ruling the historic-spiritual processes and those ruling the physical-natural processes allow us to compare the different disciplines and their different approaches, orientations and results. Such a comparison in accordance with the art-historical perspective perhaps does not allow Scheltema to take a general stock of the situation but makes it possible to draw issues useful in defining the context within which his attempt of a “morphology of Western civilization” can be collocated. This problem was already tackled in the very first lines of *Die geistige Mitte*. After mentioning Dvořák and early Sedlmayr contributions, the author necessarily complains about his discipline being behindhand and stranded at the descriptive stage and therefore unable to deal with its own main concepts. “Only nowadays – so does he state – art science [*Kunstwissenschaft*] hesitantly goes beyond the condition that affected biology several centuries ago”<sup>50</sup>. Although he does not analyse it further, such merciless comparison with biology shows a wide gap with respect to the more behindhand art historiography. For this reason he needs to take into account the “brilliant partial results” that have nevertheless been reached and to formulate a system that allows him to go from the descriptive to the organic stage<sup>51</sup>.

The comparison with biology is recalled, when he tackles the question of style, providing a synthetic but rich analysis based on the wider consideration that in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a spiritual turn within several, even very distant, scientific spheres such as physics, biology, medicine, psychology, economics and historiographical research. This turn leads to a dispute with late 19<sup>th</sup> Century materialism – between Haeckel and Driesch, as he specifies – and provides the spiritual development with a centripetal orientation, “from the material sphere towards the living shaping strength [*lebendigen, gestaltschöpferischen Kraft*], which, tending to an aim [*zielstrebend*], uses this outer sphere as field of action and expression”<sup>52</sup>. In this rapid characterization of the end-of-century Vitalism, Scheltema complies with its vocabulary: this is testified by his use of Baer’s notion of *Zielstrebigkeit*, which had been presented in that epoch as an argument against Darwinism and then later transformed into a key-word in the discussions of theoretical biology and philosophical anthropology<sup>53</sup>. This notion does not play a secondary role in Scheltema’s thought, still the German author is more interested in another more traditional concept, i.e. Aristotle’s notion of entelecheia drawn on by Driesch (who is not mentioned here) who transformed it into “the innermost key to the whole biological system of things”, according to Cassirer’s words<sup>54</sup>. Scheltema considers this notion as able to assume a new value within every phase

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid.*, where the expression is drawn from cit.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> See, among others, A. Orsucci, *Dalla biologia cellulare alle scienze dello spirito. Aspetti del dibattito sull'individualità nell'Ottocento tedesco*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992, p. 236; and S. Tedesco, *Forme viventi. Antropologia ed estetica dell'espressione*, Milano, Mimcsis, 2008, especially p. 50-56 and 162-166.

<sup>54</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge. Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, transi. by W.H. Woglom, C.W. Hendel, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 196. See H. Driesch, *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1908, vol. 1, especially p. 143-144, 224-227, 294-296; and vol. 2, *passim*.



characterized by the attainment of the spiritual centre: within Scholasticism, the Baroque, with Leibniz and especially with Goethe and during Romanticism. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the Vitalistic turn takes place at the same time in the different mentioned disciplines, which thanks to the new-founded concept of entelecheia can grow and develop, by integrating the "blind causalism" with a finalistic perspective and a reaffirmation of the notion of totality (*Ganzheit*)<sup>55</sup>. We would like to emphasize that thanks to Driesch this notion, too, comes to play a fundamental role in biology, as correlated to entelecheia<sup>56</sup>.

This turn is also the context within which the notion of style is introduced into the recent art-historical research, which according to Scheltema is "still greatly disunited". The style, "an actual concept of totality", is taken in its mere collective sense as style of a historical period and synthetically defined as "spiritual structure of an epoch [*geistige Struktur eines Zeitalters*] that arises from the global manifestation of artistic forms and genres"<sup>57</sup>. In its turn, the inner regulations of the historical change of style can be considered as "a repercussion of the organic tension to an aim [*Auswirkung der organischen Zielstrebigkeit*]", in other words as depending on the finality immanent in the law of organic development of civilization. This perspective leads the German author to find a double fault in the art historiography, especially in that belonging to the German-speaking culture, first of all Riegl, whom he nevertheless considers genial. First he reproaches art history for having failed to formulate the notion of style as well as the notion of style variation through history. Secondly, as suggested by his notion of *organische Zielstrebigkeit*, he reproaches this discipline for having completely disregarded theoretical biology, or better, the "philosophy of the organism' arisen from biology"<sup>58</sup>.

As he had clearly expressed in his work about Renaissance art, here he mainly refers to Driesch's work with the same title, which he praises as "a book that could have exhaustively solved the whole question of the influences affecting the history of art and spirit"<sup>59</sup>. Aiming at elaborating a history of Western civilization based on the organic connections, by "question of the influences" Scheltema means the need to distinguish such connections from the external, extra-Western contributions, attributing to them a suitable role and demonstrating his ability to read them not simply in mechanistic terms but in the perspective of an "internally regulated, organic assimilation"<sup>60</sup>. This is a general question that must necessarily concern the notion of style:

The art historian must take account of this: so far as every cultural community

<sup>55</sup> See F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 163, where the expression is drawn from cit.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to H. Driesch, *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism* cit., *passim* (especially vol. II); see H. Driesch, *Die Lehre von der Ganzheit*, "Die Geisteswissenschaften" 1 (1913-1914), p. 224-229; and H. Driesch, *Ganzheit und Wohlordnung*, "Annalen der Philosophie und philosophischen Kritik" 6 (1927), p. 274-283.

<sup>57</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 164.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Renaissance* cit., p. 204 footnote 18 (with reference to H. Driesch, *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism*, mentioned according to the 4th German ed. of 1928 [H. Driesch, *Philosophie des Organischen*, Leipzig, Quelle & Meyer, 1928]). See also F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst des Barock* cit., p. XI.

<sup>60</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die Kunst der Renaissance* cit., p. 21.

[*Kulturgemeinschaft*] has got its own artistic form [*künstlerische Gestalt*] – a “style” – it is endowed of a soul, it is an animated organism, which is granted a specific place within the hierarchical order of organisms.<sup>61</sup>

In this sense, style coincides with the *künstlerische Gestalt* of a civilization, according to an organicist position in which every civilization is considered as a living being. This contribution of the philosophy of organism to the art historiography – we have to point out that Driesch employs the word “soul” before adopting the term “entelecheia”<sup>62</sup> – is used in an extreme way by Scheltema in *Die geistige Mitte*, where he states that this philosophy could “provide the uncertain, hesitant German artistic research with a conceptual apparatus”<sup>63</sup>.

This shows the nucleus that inspired the author’s theoretical proposition of an art-historical and (more in general) historical-cultural morphology, grounded on the law that underlies and rules the organic development of the spirit according to the repeated rhythm centripetal/centrifugal. However, Scheltema does not tackle the question whether theoretical biology could provide a more precise and suitable contribution to art history, beyond the general perspective, the basic concepts and questions such as those concerning the influences and the theory of style. If, on one hand, the historical variation of styles must be traced back to the law ruling the organic development of the spirit, on the other hand, dealing with the specific methods and notions employed in the analysis of particular artistic phenomena, the German author adopts and discusses concepts drawn from the considerations of such authors as Wölfflin, Ludwig Coellen, Wilhelm Pinder, Moritz Hoernes, Vilhelm Grønbech, Nils Åberg, Sophus Müller etc. These concepts arose and developed in the studies of art history as well as of prehistoric and proto-historic archeology. Therefore, also in Scheltema’s system, the conceptual apparatus mainly consists of terms, notions and methods elaborated by specific disciplines and only partially shows his borrowings from biology, although he employs them for fundamental concepts and questions.

Therefore, precisely Scheltema’s criticism on the questions of influences and style shows how ungrateful he is towards the disciplinary tradition to which his own contribution also belongs. Although partially, this can be justified by the fact that, since modern German-speaking art history imposed itself as scientific discipline – Gottfried Semper, Riegl and the Vienna School, Wölfflin, the *allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* – it has often been interpreted (and has often interpreted itself) on the basis of the separation of natural and spiritual sciences; this separation has also been considered in such a strict way that any communication of knowledge, methods and concepts between the two spheres seemed to be impossible. The situation is much more complex and this is testified, for example, by Semper’s acknowledgement of his debt to Georges-Léopold Cuvier or in Wölfflin’s adoption of an organicist perspective of art and style, based on the notion of inner form, which plays a

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204 footnote 18.

<sup>62</sup> See H. Driesch, *Die Seele als elementarer Naturfaktor. Studien über die Bewegungen der Organismen*, Leipzig, Engelmann, 1903; and, for a subsequent definition, Id., *Entelechie und Seele*, “Synthese” 4 (1939), p. 266-279.

<sup>63</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 164.

central role even in the historical and aesthetic theory of Betti, who was one of the most convinced supporters of the separation between *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*<sup>64</sup>. If we consider them in a wider perspective, these examples show that the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries debate on the construction of a cultural science – within which art history played the main role – claimed to have an all-embracing character and to integrate also heterogeneous theoretical models<sup>65</sup>. However, Scheltema's reproaches also confirm that, except for some examples, the debate, both on the side of the *Kulturwissenschaft* and on that of art history, actually took place in the closed circle of the spirit sciences, considered more and more independent. This is testified by the aforesaid conceptions by Dvořák and Sedlmayr, which were before and in addition to that by Betti.

Actually Scheltema's approach stems from an organicist perspective that assumes the primary unity of spirit and living nature. However the different approach as well as the placement of art historiography within the sciences of spirit can justify Scheltema's reproaches but cannot convince about the criticism of German art history for having failed to provide a conceptual formulation of the notion of style. We would briefly point out that this criticism can be considered as the counterpart of that addressed by Erwin Panofsky to Wölfflin, when the former states that the latter had provided a formulation in his theory but not the explanation of the surveyed facts<sup>66</sup>.

After all, the main and most lasting heritage of German art historiography is undoubtedly the reformulation of the discipline in historic-stylistic terms. Riegl as well as Wölfflin, Coellen and Pinder free the notion of style from its regulative aspect and use it in a descriptive and value-free way, in order to realize a historiographic model that is not based on the idea of progress thought in an evolutionary sense, endowed of archaic periods and decadent times. Therefore a perspective based on the stylistic criticism allows both to legitimate art as independent phenomenon and to found an art historiography as science, and precisely as science of spirit. Hence, the sequence of styles are identified as "backbone of art history" – according to Bernhard Berenson's words<sup>67</sup> – and all the conditions exceeding the stylistic-formal question are set as secondary, if not apart – "purpose, function, the significance of its content", according to Hans Georg Gadamer's effective expression<sup>68</sup>. This

<sup>64</sup> See G. Sempcr, *Entwurf eines Systems der vergleichenden Stiltheorie* (1853), in G. Sempcr, *Kleine Schriften* (1884), reprinted Mittenwald, Müander, 1979, p. 259-291; and H. Wölfflin, *Über Formentwicklung*, in *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte. Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes*, Basel, Schwabe & Co., 1947<sup>5</sup>, p. 8-15. On the role of the notion of inner form in Betti, see at first the p. of his *magnum opus* where he analyses the writing *Innere Form* by Reinhold Schwinger: E. Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione* cit., p. 334-336 and 448-463 (with reference to R. Schwinger, *Innere Form. Ein Beitrag zur Definition des Begriffs auf Grund seiner Geschichte von Shaftesbury bis W. v. Humboldt* [1934], reprinted in R. Schwinger, H. Nicolai, *Innere Form und dichterische Phantasie. Zwei Vorstudien zu einer neuen deutschen Poetik*, München, Beck, 1935, p. 3-90).

<sup>65</sup> See, about these considerations S. Tedesco, *Il metodo e la storia*, "Aesthetica Preprint: Supplementa" 16, Palermo, Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica, 2006, p. 35-36.

<sup>66</sup> See E. Panofsky, *Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst* (1915), in *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1998, vol. 2, p. 1009-1018, here 1017.

<sup>67</sup> B. Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Art*, St. Clair Shores, Scholarly Press, 1979 (1948<sup>1</sup>), p. 229.

<sup>68</sup> H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), transl. by W. Glen-Docpel revised by J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, London-New York, Continuum, 2006, p. 74. On art historiography of German-speaking culture as history of style, see H. Sedlmayr, *Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft* cit.; H. Belting, *Vasari and Its Legacy. The History of*

seems to be confirmed by Sedlmayr's words in his essay-manifesto of 1931, where he states that still in his epoch "the aims of the [...] study of art have been too much those of art history, and its practice has become too much the history of style"<sup>69</sup>.

As Władysław Tatarkiewicz observes, adopting whatever theoretical perspective does not imply any complete awareness of the employed concepts, nor an explication of the definition, nor even its methodical separation from the theory<sup>70</sup>. So, the historical-stylistic approach of art historiography does not entail that the definition and the use of the notion of style are clear. In this sense, the above observations about Scheltema's lacking acknowledgement of his debts may not affect his criticism. On the contrary this criticism appears even stronger, if we consider that it is not isolated: in fact the notion was judged vague by many authors, such as Werner Sombart, according to whom the word 'style' itself is a mere *Verlegenheitsphrase*, a "stock phrase which constitutes a hindrance"<sup>71</sup>. However, German art historiography should be recognized as having – since Semper – a full awareness in providing a theoretical elaboration of the notion of style as well as, since Riegl and Wölfflin, in reformulating it in descriptive value-free terms and in employing it in a historical sense<sup>72</sup>. Secondly, we should admit its equal capacity in thematizing not only the fluidity of the notion (even considering its ambiguity and aporias) but also its wealth. This emerges also from Wölfflin's considerations on the "double root of style" – as implicitly demonstrated by Panofsky's criticism too – and, in the Vienna School, from Julius von Schlosser's essay *Stilgeschichte und Sprachgeschichte*, written according to an orthodox Crocian perspective<sup>73</sup>.

The situation, therefore, appears to be wider than suggested by Scheltema's criticism. His reproach to the philosophy of the organism for its failure to contribute to art history attests his lack of consideration for the role of the tradition to which he is in debt for many of his theoretical reflections.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

*Art as a Process?* (1978), reprinted in H. Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (1983), transl. by C.S. Wood, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 67-94; H. Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* cit., p. 5-23; H. Belting, *La fin d'une tradition?*, transl. by J. D'Yvoire, "Revue de l'art" 69 (1985), p. 4-12; H. Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (1995), transl. by C. Saltzweil, M. Cohen, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 26-36, 126-147, and *passim*; and the large review carried out by H. Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst. 1750-1950*, München, Fink, 2010<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> H. Sedlmayr, *Towards a Rigorous Study of Art* cit., p. 154.

<sup>70</sup> See W. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas. An Essay in Aesthetics* (1976), transl. by C. Kasparek, The Hague-Nijhoff-Warsaw, Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> W. Sombart, *Vom Menschen. Versuch einer geisteswissenschaftlichen Anthropologie*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2006<sup>3</sup> (1938<sup>4</sup>), p. 234.

<sup>72</sup> See, about Riegl, H. Bauer, *Form, Struktur, Stil*, in *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, ed by H. Belting et al., Berlin, Reimer, 2003<sup>6</sup>, p. 157-174, here p. 169. On value-freedom in Wölfflin and the questions to which it gives rise, see L. Dittmann, *Stil Symbol Struktur. Studien zu Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, München, Fink, 1967, p. 74-80; G. Carchia, *Il problema della forma classica* (1984), in *Il mito in pittura. La tradizione come critica*, Milano, Celuc, 1987, p. 103-128, here p. 123-124; and G. Carchia, *Arte e bellezza. Saggio sull'estetica della pittura*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>73</sup> See H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1915), transl. by M.D. Hottinger, Mineola, Dover, 1950, p. 1-13; E. Panofsky, *Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst* cit.; and J. von Schlosser, "Stilgeschichte" und "Sprachgeschichte" der bildenden Kunst. Ein Rückblick, "Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-Historische Abteilung" 1, München, Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1935.

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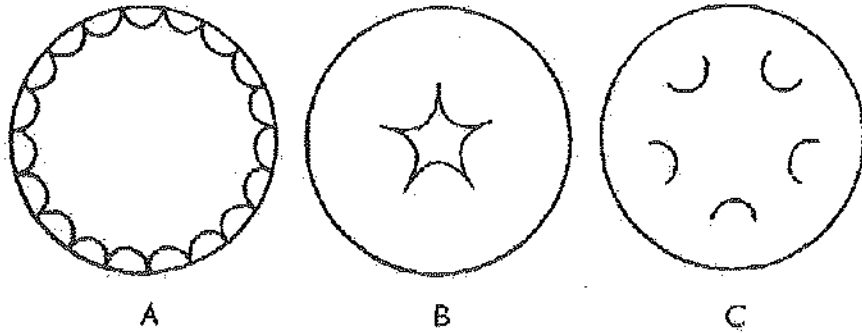


Abb. 2; Schematische Darstellung des geistigen Entwicklungsrythmus  
 A: Der Zustand peripher-geistiger Bindung. B: Der Zustand zentral-geistiger Bindung. C: Der Zustand zentrifugal-geistiger Entbindung

Fig. 1 – Scheme of the spiritual rhythm of development (from: F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 33).

DAS PERIODISCHE SYSTEM DER KUNST- UND

KULTURENTWICKLUNG DES ABENDLANDES

STUFEN DER URZEIT (Altsteinzeit, Faltsteinzeit)

STUFEN DER VORZEIT

a-Äpöche: Vorzeit	A-Periode: Jungsteinzeit Mittelstein	a   Stilphasen der Jungsteinzeit b   Ornamentik c   Ornamentik
	B-Periode: Bronzezeit	a   Stilphasen der bronzezeitigen b   Ornamentik c   Ornamentik
	C-Periode: Eisenzeitliche Eisenzeit	a   Stilphasen der germanischen b   germanischen c   Hellenismus

STUFEN DES MITTELALTERS

a-Äpöche: Mittelalter	A-Periode: Frühes Mittelalter Romanik	a   Stilphasen b   der c   Romanik
	B-Periode: Hohes Mittelalter Gothik	a   Stilphasen b   der c   Gothik
	C-Periode: Spätes Mittelalter Spätgotik	a   Stilphasen b   der c   Spätgotik

STUFEN DER NEUZEIT

a-Äpöche: Neuzeit	A-Periode: Frühe Neuzeit Renaissance	a   Stilphase: Frührenaissance b   Stilphase: Hochrenaissance c   Stilphase: Manierismus der Spätrenaissance
	B-Periode: Rückfall zur Barock	a   Stilphase: Frühbarock b   Stilphase: Hochbarock c   Stilphase: Spätbarock Kokette
	C-Periode: Späte Neuzeit	a   Aufklärung b   der c   Aufklärung
		a   Romantik b   der c   Romantik
		a   Frühromantik b   der c   Romantik
		a   Medienz b   der c   Expressionismus

Fig. 2 – The periodic system of the development of Western art and culture (from: F. Adama van Scheltema, *Die geistige Mitte* cit., p. 188-189).

## The Form of the “Denkraum”: Technique and Representation in the Kreuzlingen Lecture

CLIO NICASTRO

**Abstract :** In 1895 Aby Warburg decides to complement his theoretical research with field anthropological observation, directly experiencing habits, rituals and customs of the Hopi natives. Warburg meticulously documents his journey with his Box Camera Kodak, one of the first devices ever produced by the firm. Within the theoretical framework of unitary knowledge, that is a space of integration between different methods and disciplines, his choice of expressive media offers the opportunity to explore and experiment its peculiar potential. His interest in technique is combined with a non-formalistic aesthetic stance, according to which art coincides with a specifically human biological need. It is then a true device for space/time orientation, the pulsating hub of the symbolic polarity oscillating between *Nachleben* and *Pathosformel*.

Form und Inhalt

Form und Inhalt sind zur Erklärung des Dualismus im Kunstwerke

Zu abstrakte Begriffe: es müßte heißen Eingeschaft und Lebewesen

[momentane Mimik und potentielle Energetik (Lektüre von Hirth: epigenetische Energieformen, 2.III.98),

Subjekt und Prädikat. --

Das Eigenthümliche am Kunstprocess ist, daß das Prädikat

Gleichzeitig mit dem Subjekt in die Erscheinung tritt.

Je stärker die Künstlerkraft desto stärker das Prädikat ausgebildet,

Je schwächer, desto mehr das [umschriebene] [Zusatz ca. 1895?]

Subjekt [sc. Ausgebildet]. Ueberwiegt das Interesse am Subject, so

Tritt der “Verfall” ein<sup>1</sup>.

(A. Warburg, *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*)

The question of form certainly represents the core and body of Aby Warburg’s thinking. We just need to choose from which morphological stratum to access his multiform system; it will suffice to recall his two biographical main terms, his debut with the dissertation on Botticelli’s paintings *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* (in 1893) and the famous and monumental efforts of *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* carried on by our scholar from Hamburg till his very last days. It is however possible to detect a precise moment in Warburg’s life, when the question of form is vehemently thrown onto stage and pervades the whole field of enquiry. It becomes indeed at the one time his object, his method of analysis, and his painful existential condition. The reference here is the famous Kreuzlingen lecture, *Eine Reise durch das Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Neu-Mexico und Arizona* in April 1923 (and posthumously published with the title *Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht*), given by Warburg during his hospitalization at Bellevue, the clinic directed at the time by Ludwig Binswanger. The outburst of the First World War had indeed a destructive effect on his psychological stability as well as on his sensitivity as an

<sup>1</sup> A. Warburg, *Frammenti sull’ espressione, Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*, ed. by S. Müller, transl. by M. Ghelardi, G. Targia, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2011, p. 57.

historian trained by the comparative study of Nietzsche, Burckhardt, Lamprecht and Usener; furthermore serious fear for the ever more frequent anti-Semitic episodes in Europe was increasing. His painful personal experience adds to the failure of a certain optimistic idea of technical progress and of its corresponding historiographical model, considered absolutely successful until then. His premonitions as "seismograph of history" are then confirmed and chaos takes over any attempt of an harmonious organization of the diverse levels of reality. The questions of composition and space play in fact a crucial role also in Warburg's daily life, where the order and disposition on his desk of many newspaper cuts, collected in order to try and understand the reasons of the First World War, have the same importance of the symbolic connections in the Renaissance's paintings or in the positioning of stars and planets<sup>2</sup>: "Im welchem [Zusammenhang] steht das derzeitige Leben mit den Erscheinungsformen der Menschen in der Kunst mit der Lebensauffassung des Einzelnen?"<sup>3</sup>.

Here, the underlying connecting principle of Warburg's system is first of all the bond between theory and praxis, between experience and theoretical research, as to reveal their coplanarity and avoid the setting of a qualitative hierarchy, thus preserving their specific functions and differences. In Warburg this means primarily an idea of method in close and necessary relationship with the object of enquiry, alternating study in the library and field research, and reinvesting in the practice the results of the theoretical research. We could here refer to his never ending elaboration of a system of book cataloguing, that avoids the dichotomy between abstraction and sensitive/perceptual knowledge, and where questions from several disciplines touch and challenge each others, according to the "rule of good neighbourhood". Once more we are dealing with a theory of knowledge according to specifically human space-time coordinates.

If we go back to the time spent at Bellevue (1921-1924) and we follow the preparatory work to the drafting of the lecture *On Serpent ritual*<sup>4</sup>, precisely the interlacement of the two concepts of form and orientation must be taken into account, in close connection with the dialogue between theory, praxis, and existential dimension. As briefly mentioned, after several failed attempts in other psychiatric institutions, Ludwig Binswanger finally became Warburg's doctor, after his last violent crisis when he threatened his relatives with a revolver. The diagnosed schizophrenia and manic-depressive syndrome seemed to irreversibly end the work of the scholar from Hamburg, as well as his normal daily life. Unexpectedly, Warburg during his therapy was able to restore connection with his family and some colleagues, first of all Fritz Saxl, who provided crucial support in the preparation of the lecture. This was a path of

<sup>2</sup> "Die Ordnung auf seinem Schreibtisch war ihm genauso wichtig wie die Konstellation der Sterne, ein Teil der kosmischen Harmonie". K. Königseder, *Warburg in Bellevue*, in "Ekstatische Nymphe...trauernder Flußgott" *Portrait eines Gelehrten*, ed. by R. Galitz, B. Reimers, Hamburg, Dölling und Galitz, 1995, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> A. Warburg, *Frammenti sull'espressione, Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished lecture given in Kreuzlingen on April 21<sup>st</sup> 1923; first ed. (reduced) *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual*, "Journal of the Warburg Institute" 2 (1939); already *Il rituale del serpente*, "aut aut" 199-200 (January-April 1984); *Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht*, ed. by U. Raulff, Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 1988; Eng. transl. by M.P. Steinberg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995; It. trans. by G. Carchia and F. Cuniberto, *Il rituale del serpente*, Milano, Adelphi, 1998.

re-orientation in the world based on distance. Distance in time and space, as well as metaphorical distance. When Binswanger encourages Warburg to go back to work and publicly speak in front of the doctors and patients of Bellevue, in order to prove his recovery, the scholar decides to focus on the materials collected twenty-seven years before, during his stay in the villages of the American natives Hopi. Arrived in America in 1896 in occasion of his brother's wedding, he soon decides to venture himself in the savage lands of Arizona and New Mexico, tired, as he declared<sup>5</sup>, of the sterile aesthetizing formalism of the Western World, hiding the true nature of art. Art is indeed a biological need, specifically human, that is able to give shape and expression to man's vitality and historical development. Images have not primarily an aesthetic-formal value, or better, this latter is essentially linked to their capacity to transport, condense and transmit the process of development/shifting in time and space. Hence Warburg's definition of an image-Engram as the energetic pole within which the human conflict between the primitive and chaotic energies and the rational faculty to organize the world is continuously pulsing. The image-Engram (fulcrum of the Atlas Mnemosyne) includes both the process and the result, since it does not follow a linear time logic, progressive and uninterrupted, but rather it meets phases of inversion, draw backs, stops and accelerations. Among the preparatory material to the *Schlangenritual*, Warburg takes from the 1897 text, *L'évolution régressive en biologie et en sociologie* by Demoor, Massart and Vandervelde, the concept of "regressive evolution"<sup>6</sup>, that seems indeed to be the underlying paradigm of the oscillation between *Nachleben* and *Pathosformel*, as of the internal logic of the "Denkraum"<sup>7</sup>, where the conquest of prudence (*Besonnenheit*) is always exposed to "change and disappearance". Prudence, as the German term reveals, through the ambiguity between enlightening and being blinded by the sudden flash of a brightening up, can be taken as an evolutionary passage, contemplating regression, as it is sometimes necessary for progress itself. The morphological strata are thus included in a relationship of open and never definitive exchange. We could here recall for instance the movement of the hair and dress of Botticelli's Venus, that although it lost its original meaning, it is very far away from being pure ornament or a slavish and anachronistic reformulation of the ancient<sup>8</sup>. Since the dialectics of what Warburg defines as space pertaining to thinking, *Denkraum*, is not the simple harmonization between two poles made of primitive energies and rational order, but rather a constant fight to open the right passage, the right distance between subject and object, the scholar from Hamburg aims to directly experience its mechanism. The natives of New Mexico have in this sense a peculiar position. They do not live any more in the primitive dimension of Greif-Menschen, where the object is fully absorbed by and in the present, but

<sup>5</sup> Entwurf für den Kreuzlingen Vortrag, 17 March 1923, p. 1, from E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. Una biografia intellettuale*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> WIA, III.93.4, 23.

<sup>7</sup> On this topic we refer the reader to C. Brosius, *Kunst als Denkraum. Zum Bildungsbegriff von Aby Warburg*, Pfaffenweiler, Centaurus, 1997; B. Villhaüer, *Denkraum und Dynamisierung: philosophische Probleme der Grundlegung von Kulturtheorie bei Aby Warburg*, Jena, Diss., 1998.

<sup>8</sup> S. Papapetros, "ohne Füße und Hände". *Historiographische Bemerkungen über die unorganische Bewegung der Schlangen von Philo von Byblos bis Aby Warburg*, in C. Bender, T. Hensel, E. Schüttpeitz (eds.), *Schlangenritual: der Transfer des Wissenformen vom Tsu'it'kive der Hopi zu Aby Warburg Vortrag*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2007, p. 218-266.

yet they are not fully into technique as the western men who can make projects for the future and make previsions on possible results. Therefore, precisely because they live in such an intermediate dimension between Greif- and Begriffmensch, their artistic and crafted products, their rituals and dances are the most appropriate material in order to research the origin of the relationship between religious, magic, and scientific thinking. We shall not attempt any hazardous philological reconstruction of Warburg's illness, but we would like to bring attention to the fact that the chosen topic of his Kreuzlingen lecture takes the relationship between form and distance as its object, method and purpose. Particularly in this period, Warburg tries to elucidate the internal dialectics of the *Denkraum*, that, as space of symbols, in line with the *Einführung* of Friedrich Theodor Vischer<sup>9</sup>, is the arena where appropriation and detachment fight one against the other. The objectification of phobic elements (as in the famous Hopi dance of the serpent ritual) fights against the knowledge of the self, "Erinnerung beim Thier nur an solche Dinge mit denen Collision stattgefunden"<sup>10</sup>.

Der Urkategorie kausaler Denkform ist Kindschaft. Diese Kindschaft zeigt das Rätsel des Materieell feststellbaren Zusammenhangs verbunden mit der unbegreiflichen Katastrophe der Loslösung des einen Geschöpfes vom anderen. Der abstrakte Denkraum zwischen Subjekt und Objekt gründet sich auf dem Erlebnis der durchschnittenen Nabelschnur.<sup>11</sup>

In the Kreuzlingen lecture, for the first time, primitive thinking is not explicitly considered as a superseded stage, but rather as an essential part of the process of orientation in the world, that presupposes for its very nature a traumatic distancing; this is why it must be compensated with the research of a perspective each time adapted to the object. Here we discover the unavoidable biological foundation of the image intrinsic to the human condition itself, grounded on distance and oriented to its conservation, in order to prevent the two opposite risks of assimilation or estrangement between subject and object. Although Warburg is against the publication of the text of the 1923 lecture, – probably he fears to have departed, especially in the conclusive sections, from the space of prudence (*Besonnenheit*), – Warburg's remarks on technique are rather distant from pure conservative positions. A tangible proof is provided by the rich number of slides<sup>12</sup>, indispensable support to Warburg's words, that the scholar has taken during his stay in the Pueblo villages, and that represent the core of the Kreuzlingen lecture. One year after he came back from America, in 1897, Warburg presented his work three times, first in Hamburg, then in Berlin, to some societies and clubs of photography

<sup>9</sup> See F.T. Vischer, *Das Symbol* (1887), II, trans. *Il simbolo*, in A. Pinotti (ed.), *Estetica ed empatia*, Milano, Guerin e Associati, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> A. Warburg, *Frammenti sull'espressione* cit. p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> A. Warburg, Notiz 4 für den Kreuzlingen Vortrag *Bilder aus Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord Amerika*, quoted from K. Königsdor, *Warburg in Bellevue*, in "Ekstatische Nymphe...trauernder Flußgott". *Portrait eines Gelehrten* cit., p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Cestelli Guidi, F. Del Prete, N. Mann (eds.), *Photographs at the Frontier: Aby Warburg in America 1895-1896*, London, The Warburg Institute-Mercat Holberton, 1998.

lovers. The instrument he used for his reportage is one of the first portable Kodak devices, a Box Camera Bulls-Eye, with which he meticulously documented his experience, avoiding stereotyped exposures.

At first, Warburg must deal with mistrust in photography as a media, and with the risk to broaden the distance to the objects, producing passages of unexpressed symbolization, rather than possible thinking spaces. Photography, however, turns out to be one of the most appropriate instruments to simultaneously document reality and the image's reality in its formation process. On the one hand, indeed, for Warburg, photography has at first no aesthetic value – and this is not at variance, as we said, with the indisputably high quality of his work – but it is rather a document, like an individual and collective mnemonic trace, a process of abstraction from reality, that through a form of emotional distancing, echoing Lamprecht, can precisely grasp emotional variations. On the other hand, it seems that, especially the long series of the American journey, reveals the pragmatic and anthropological component of the image, according to which it finds its place within an ever developing symbolization, uncrystallized polarity between magical realm and scientific realm. Moreover, we know that precisely the study of Hopi rituals and dances were essential to his further researches on the ancient world's influence on Renaissance's art and on the analysis of the universal symbolic constants. What Warburg criticizes of the conclusions of the Kreuzlingen lecture is clearly not progress as such, – that would be in clear contradiction with the setting of his library-laboratory, – but rather the passive attitude that fossilizes words and techniques crystallizing them into fetishes. The process of increasing technology does not fill the gap between the individual and the objects of the world, as it does not coincide in itself with the definitive order of reality. Once such awareness is missing, there is no distinction between the technique and the belief in magic-primitive thinking, since once more we would face the annulment of all intervals and interstices oxygenating the logical-causal form of thinking.

The photographic document thus allows to track an action evolving in time, representing it according to a form of synchronicity and spacial proximity that is indifferent to the "nature" of the observed object (may it be a face, a landscape, a monument, a vase, a stamp...) <sup>13</sup>. This peculiar mimetic mode pushes the research towards the specificity of each object, towards its authentic, vital, force of expression, that means, first of all, the free expression of its metamorphic potential. Those lumps of primitive energy acquire their physiognomy within an historical determination, and, as we said, require a non-linear evolution.

The photographic media, chosen as instrument of enquiry based on distance, seals the unremitting research on the forms of expression shifting and stratifying in space and time, preserving inside the primigenial trauma of detachment.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>13</sup> See U. Raulff, *Der unsichtbare Augenblick. Zeitkonzepte in der Geschichte*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 1999.

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## Man and Technique: Photography as the Art of Modernity in Franz Roh and László Moholy-Nagy's Thought

EMANUELE CRESCIMANNO

**Abstract:** A great turning point took place in '20s and '30s of the Twentieth Century for the definitive awareness of the expressive and heuristic potential of photography: it becomes, indeed, together with Cinema, the art of reference for its technical – and hence very modern – nature. The greatest interest of photographers and theorists of photography focuses then on those experimental images that are really “photographic”: images that are the result of a mature and correct usage of the photographic media, showing in addition the new look imposed by it on reality. Contemporary to Walter Benjamin's theories on photography and the work of art technically reproduced, László Moholy-Nagy and Franz Roh's theories are developed: they make clear how photography is the most appropriate media for the full understanding and the consequent *mis en forme* of modernity, since its technical nature guarantees its performance; moreover thanks to an experimental and innovative usage it can open up to new visions of the real, hence imposing a new perspective on things.

Each time in history requires to be investigated at a certain distance in order to fully grasp its highlights and to offer a fair representation of itself; the Twentieth Century, besides this difficulty, met a further complicating factor: the revolutionary role of technique in the last century has introduced an additional acceleration in the changing process, making then any possible de-codification of its peculiarities even more complex. The art and images produced by it have been greatly affected by the situation: technique has indeed shaped the way of thinking, living, seeing, “imposing” also to art its perceptive and behavioural habits. However a serious consideration of the role of technique and its relationship with art activities, underlining their fruitful connections – besides any easy demonization or simplistic enthusiasm – can avoid the imposition of the first on the second and consequently allow art to be fully aware of its technical matrix, thus shaping its time at best. Any perspective devoid of such awareness, imitating then the well known critical remarks of Baudelaire in the Parisian *Salon* of 1859, has considered photography as a monster compared to the other arts, hence not recognizing its abilities in well shaping the reality it represents. We shall not follow here the complex and conflictual relationships between photography and painting since the invention of the first. It will suffice however to recall that Baudelaire's critical remarks were not only too near to the birth of photography and then highly influenced by its pictorial employment, but also negatively influenced by the technical (industrial) nature of the new invention: such an activity, under this perspective, could then only have an exclusively servile position in relation to sciences and arts<sup>1</sup>.

Technique certainly implies deep modifications in how man sees himself, acts, experiences the world, represents himself, mediates its relation to the world; however, even more radically, we could say that technique, since its new development in the Twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch. Baudelaire, *The Modern Public and Photography* (1859), in Id., *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, London, Penguin, 1992.

Century, has had a fundamental role in man's modes of experience, for it is able – as Arnold Gehlen effectively pointed out – to compensate all man's deficiencies, allowing him a much more performing action. An anthropological theory of technique, such as the one supported by Gehlen, takes on the necessity of tracing a continuity line between what is immediately and clearly specific to man and the tools that he had to produce in his evolution in order to better develop his very nature. Once granted, indeed, that the satisfaction of some needs was clashing with the finitude of his tools, first of all his hand and eyes, man has pursued his evolution making tools that could make him more powerful and his experience more complete and articulated: the technical tool is thus a substitute for human organs, it widens his range of action and his precision, also saving his energies. Such a theory of technique stresses moreover on the absolute integration between man and his tools, on the human ability to plan and anticipate the results of an action, to fully develop then specifically human skills: technical development is therefore a biological product, since it is part of the same evolutionary direction, also helping man to make such evolution faster, more efficient and performing. The anthropological theory of technique, moreover, allows us to avoid the radical opposition between this latter and any other imaginable state of nature of man: such an opposition would claim the progressive dis-humanization imposed on man by technique and his consequent alienation and anaesthetization. If it holds true that technique and the needs it conveys are purely anthropological, then the presumed dominion of technique on man and the dozing of his sensibility is due to a pathology of technique, i.e. to the erroneous thinking that dis-humanizes it and considers it in opposition to man.

When we deal in further details with Gehlen's position<sup>2</sup>, it becomes clear that technique is truly as ancient as the man: it is indeed the specific human ability to transform through intelligence any given state of things in nature; i.e. to act for his protection and survival transforming a potentially hostile environment into his own world, a place responding to his needs, that can be entirely experienced. It will suffice to consider the first technical tools ever produced by man in antiquity, weapons, enhancing his possibilities to protect and attack, and by consequence strengthening his overall chance of life (according to the dynamic that Gehlen exemplifies with the terms integration intensification, facilitation). The awareness, underlined by Gehlen, of organs' imperfection as man's peculiarity is immediately positively overturned by the possibility to circumscribe such a limit and overcome it through intelligence. Biological necessities, potentially nullifying all difference from other animals, are even unfavourable to man, because of his less perfect sense organs, but they are finally overcome by exploiting nature thanks to the knowledge of its properties and laws. Man exploits properties and laws and contrasts them one another, revealing by consequence how technique, generally intended, is already inherent to man's essence.

Technique then, within the frame of Gehlen's anthropological philosophy, makes the camera something not radically different from man and his eyes, but on the contrary his physiological extension: as there is no division between the psychic-spiritual realm and the physical-material one, thus there is no division between senses and any device extending their

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<sup>2</sup> See A. Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology* (1957), New York, Columbia University Press, 1980.

range of action. We shall rather consider the co-belonging of man and technique, making man today something different from the past: technique is indeed, according to Gehlen a specific feature of man, the peculiarity distinguishing him from any other animal, allowing man to be creative and hence positively modifying his relation to the world<sup>3</sup>. Art deliberately grounded on technique is consequently identified by the operator's ability to be *dominus* of the technique, making an expressive use of it, neither mechanical nor didactic.

The '20s and '30s of the Twentieth Century are the years of the definitive awareness of the innovative value introduced by the images produced by photography and cinema in the general universe of representation: what Paul Valéry in 1928 considered a far away and futuristic prevision – “so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign”<sup>4</sup> – in those years become increasingly more real, since it is finally recognized the role of images in the comprehension not only of one's own experiences and perspectives, but also of one whole time vision. Valéry himself insisted on the innovative and revolutionary element of photography and cinema:

In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.<sup>5</sup>

We remark then a whole new genuine enthusiasm for the new potential of technique, for the new epistemological horizons opened up by it, for the productive modes it determines. People are rapidly recognizing that the images produced by photography and cinema generate a new reality, underlining a new and peculiar way to look at reality and to shape it. Through them, you can look at and get to know, accordingly to the modern fashion, the new world engendered by the Twentieth Century, since both the new world and the images representing it fall under the sign of the new technique. Those images are then a new opening towards the real, since they can capture the still elusive meaning of the upcoming modernity and they can re-configure reality: they create by consequence a new visual universe, proper to the Twentieth Century.

If we had to choose a sort of slogan to condense those years' ferment, it would suffice to say the photographic research, both in theory and practice, was aiming to a new, truly

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<sup>3</sup> On the relation between this theory of technique and the modes of experience I refer the reader to S. Tedesco, *Forme viventi. Antropologia ed estetica dell'espressione*, Milano, Mimesis, 2008, p. 118 ff.

<sup>4</sup> P. Valéry, *The Conquest of Ubiquity* (1928), in Id., *Aesthetics*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p. 226. Moholy-Nagy envisages the spreading of “domestic picture-galleries”, new collections of photos and videos available in all houses (L. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* (1927<sup>2</sup>), London, Lund Humphries, 1969, p. 25).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Clearly not incidentally Benjamin employed this quote as exergue to the work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

photographic form, to the experimentation of new perspectives and a sort of expressive freedom that could fully develop photography's potential; they aimed after all to legitimize "a true visual culture"<sup>6</sup>. Photography is therefore the place for experimentation and opening towards new dimensions of the sensible world, perfectly autonomous from painting, from which it is definitively emancipated; photography moreover has new modern applications and fields of action, as, for instance, press, advertising, technique and industry, science, making it perfectly homogeneous to the new developments of time. Technique and experimentation are key words in order to understand the turning point we are dealing with, in order to claim that photography is able to impose a new vision of reality. In 1929 Albert Renger-Patzsch can thus rightly say that after almost 100 years, photography

has acquired an immense significance for modern man. Many thousands of people live from it and through it, it exerts an immense influence on wide sections of the population by means of film, it has given rise to the illustrated press, it provides true-to-life illustrations in most works of scientific nature, in short, modern life is no longer thinkable without photography.<sup>7</sup>

It can be useful, at this point, to distinguish some turning moments in this process, and some significant circumstance where the new attitude is the most effectively and abundantly expressed. The Stuttgart exhibition *Film und Foto* in 1929 is undoubtedly one of these interesting turning moments: it presents indeed the best of photographic experimentation of those years (around 1200 works by more than 150 artists) and it received great appreciation both by the critic and by the public, who saw it in its itinerary between Berlin, Munich, Wien, Zagreb, Basel and Zurich. The exposition displayed the best of the European and American research in photography and cinema, with special care for all avant-guards and experimentations, as well as for the links between different media of expression<sup>8</sup>.

A great survey of the Stuttgart exposition is offered by *foto-auge* of Franz Roh, German historian and art critic, and of Jan Tschichold, typographer and contributor to the exhibition, published in 1929: the volume not only presents the most significant photos exhibited, but can also be considered a manifesto through images (with a short introduction) of the new way to take photos, of the new functions and usages of photography. The main point "proved" by the photos is that photography can now be used constructively, rather than according to its more

<sup>6</sup> F. Roh, J. Tschichold, *photo-eye* (1929), New York, Arno Press, 1973, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> A. Renger-Patzsch, *Photographie und Kunst* (1929), in C. Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989. Similar remarks and with a similar stress on terms such as "experimentation" and "technique" can be found in Alexander Rodchenko (see S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko. The Complete Work*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986). Not incidentally Moholy-Nagy biography edited by his wife is entitled *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (New York, Harper, 1950).

<sup>8</sup> Besides the presentation of photos by the American Steichen, Weston, Abbott and Sheeler; by the German Baumeister, Burchard, Renger-Patzsch and Schwitters; the French Kertész, Krull and Lotar; by Moholy-Nagy and by Rodchenko, of the photomontages by Hearfield, a cinema festival was organized with the screening of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* by Dreyer, *L'Etoile de Mer* by Man Ray, *Battleship Potemkin* by Ejzenštcju, *Variety* by Dupont, *Man with a Movie Camera* by Vertov.

straightforward and simply mimetic use; this latter is indeed considered improper, supporting a "simple" function of representation. In order to be constructive, productive, photography must employ unusual cuttings and angles, new perspectives, producing images not necessarily of the entire object<sup>9</sup>. Only so, photography will be a fully modern practice, the technique of the present time, i.e. a technique showing enthusiasm for the progress and that is able to exploit it to the fullest; consider, for instance, the great managability and easy employment of the new photographic devices, the "new" *Leica*, light, practical and easy to use, producing images that reflect their new performativity. We shall first of all remark that the presented images are all fully aware offspring of the technique producing them: certain angles, certain frame cuttings could only be achieved by a small, light, not encumbering reflex, a camera in perfect harmony with its own time and its objects<sup>10</sup>.

Reality is then shown under a new viewpoint, revealing daily-life according to a new manner: this task is made possible mainly by the fact that "the appliances of the new photographic technique are so simple that in principle **everybody** can handle them"; consequently the technical simplification allows all efforts to be put in the "creative" side of the work, in the *mis en forme*. Thanks to the technical developments the novelty of the photographic devices "lies in obtaining increasingly complex results while the handling of the apparatus becomes more and more simple": such a condition does not make the user stupid or passive, but rather let him/her free to focus on the fundamental needs of the production; the new performing cameras become then "a keyboard for the expression of many"<sup>11</sup>.

New photography is thus inspired by daily-life, it makes reference to it and tries to review its experience: its aim is to give a visible form to reality through a representation that is "full of expression and finished to the very corners can be an impelling inner necessity"; its form is then productive in so far as it presents "new, tenser, and more constructive seeing"<sup>12</sup>; it is as well aware of the expressive potential of the employed technical media. A good photo is by consequence a *mis en forme* individually organizing a "fruitful fragment of the reality" and, in order to fully respond to the spirit of its time, it must take into account "a hundred possibilities of **focus, section and lighting** in photography, and above all in the **choice** of the object"<sup>13</sup>: the way is then open to all the new objects of modernity that through photographic representation rise to artistic dignity.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Galassi in his work *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1981) underlines how the overcoming of the classical perspective constitutes a fundamental origin for the birth of photography as a reference to a certain style of painting (take, for instance, Edgar Degas) employing a different perspective from the central one, in order to suggest the instant and relative visual experience of every day life; its aim was then to reduce the distance with the spectator thanks to a special type of involving framing, according to the key words of the daily visual experience: immediacy, fragmentation, and relativity. The camera and its conscious look on reality show then how perspective and its organization of space impose as well an absolutely artificial mode of vision.

<sup>10</sup> See. F. Roh, J. Tschichold, *photo-eye* cit., tables 11: Sasha Stone, *Files*; 14 Hans Finsler, *Incandescent Lamp*; Paul Schuitema, *Grammophon*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14 (bold in the original text).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 (bold in the original text).

One of the most interesting and experimental photographers reviewed in the *Film und Foto* exhibition is no doubt the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, who between 1925 and 1927 had published *Painting Photography Film*, fundamental text for the understanding of the early Twentieth Century developing practices: this text as well, as the one by Roh, includes many illustrations “because continuity in the illustrations will make the problems raised in the text VISUALLY clear”<sup>14</sup>. Moholy-Nagy, Bauhaus member since Walter Gropius’ direct call in the ’20s, was the director of the Chicago branch in 1937. He is certainly a key figure in the historical evolution of photography under consideration, since he raises questions on some fundamental points, that will determine a further development in the autonomy and awareness of photography specific nature following the lead of the technical management<sup>15</sup>. We owe indeed to him and his thinking the new awareness of a new artistic nature of the industrial work, of a new relationship that is thus established between art and technology. Finally, both in his theories and in his photos, he stresses on the project and idea supporting the photographic work of art (in opposition to the simple manual side).

Photography is able to reveal the new vision of the world, a modern vision of the world aware of its novelty, of its relative and prospective value, a vision that is able to support the modern experience of reality. Photography is then the practice that is the most able to tell its time, the ongoing tensions, revealing the new characterizing relationship with technology. All this happens not only thanks to the unusual perspectives applied on reality, the different fragmentation of objects and the importance given to details: those are indeed the perspectives pertaining to modernity, but they cannot on their own provide a full account of it. The main novelty lies in the new understanding of the experiential relationship with reality, in the “modern” experiencing: if the horizon of experience is indeed extended, also the tools for its understanding must be extended and adapted to the new dimensions. Photography is the most appropriate tool for a correct visual exploration of modernity: thanks to it we understand the turning point towards the image of modernity, since it is a *mise en forme* that is able both to re-configure reality and to re-invent it; photography is then able to impose a new vision of

<sup>14</sup> L. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* cit., p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Only the Bauhaus – a school theorizing and practising the fruitful interactions between technology and artistic practices – could positively underline the role of technique in the definition of productive and experiential models; specifically concerning photography Moholy-Nagy had the merit to elaborate a theory model “able to account for the usage of the photographic *medium* by a single culture” and then “to let us understand how the identity of an instrument must be carefully retrieved and verified within the culture surrounding the very practice of the instrument” (F. Alinovi, C. Marra, *La fotografia. Illusione o rivelazione?* [1981], new edition with a previously unpublished introduction by R. Barilli and a note by C. Marra, Bologna, Quinlan, 2006, p. 248). A different survey concerns the assonances between Moholy-Nagy’s remarks and the slightly posterior ones by Walter Benjamin, mainly in the *Little History of Photography*; this topic exceeds the limits of the present survey dealing with the theory and practice of photography. However it is useful to remind that the topic of the central role of photography for the understanding of the Twentieth Century turning point, the topic of technique, the topic of the new and deeper modes of perception are also present in the German philosopher’s thought (besides some undeclared literal quotations from Moholy-Nagy’s text). For a thorough analysis of the two texts I refer the reader to H. Molderings, *L’esprit du constructivisme. Remarques sur la “Petite histoire de la photographie” de Walter Benjamin*, “Études photographiques” 18 (2006), p. 26-51.

reality characterized by objectivity and dynamism, peculiar feature of the experience of modernity<sup>16</sup>.

Photography, as any form of art, produces indeed a new configuration (*Gestaltung*) according to the nature of its specific matter: photography then composes through light and its several forms of manifestation; the main issue for a photographer is then the mode of capture and shape light; he/she must indeed develop his/her normative aesthetics in light usage considering the specificities of his/her own *medium*<sup>17</sup>. The work of re-configuration of reality in the photographic image requires first of all an "*aesthetic education*, in the literal sense: an education to the use of senses, an extension of their range of action, that is a refinement and a new articulation, in order to allow the modern individual to more consciously and more efficiently relate to the surrounding environment"<sup>18</sup>. We should moreover remark that "the aesthetic, will be taken, in proper Baumgarten terms, as the sphere [...] including a definite use of the sensory system", then requiring "a "definite use" of the sensory system – and schematically we can only claim that it is a pregnant and conscious use of it"<sup>19</sup>. Such a new and more thorough vision of the world, not defined any more by, – or confined to, – the eyes' limits, but rather supported by optical tools, raises the issue as to its correct and complete image rendering: we are not dealing with a simple description of the visual, but rather with the production of something absolutely new. The optical supporting technique widens indeed the possibilities of representation as a consequence of the visual field widening, not limited any more by the physical limits of the eyes, but supported by technical devices. Moreover the distortions possibly produced by the photographic lenses offer new perspectives on the surrounding reality, hence a more general new insight.

However Moholy-Nagy is not content to be aware that "**we see the world with entirely different eyes**": he believes that after a century of photography and more than twenty years of cinema, it is necessary to "**produce** systematically, since it is important for life that we create *new relationships*"<sup>20</sup>. The simple reproduction through an image of the relationships and configurations already present in nature is no progress and no creativity, since Moholy-Nagy main point is that there is a great difference between production and re-production: the aim is to develop a "productive creativity"<sup>21</sup> through a careful, experimental and innovative employment of the basic techniques of photography (and of all the new experiential modes of modernity, such as the gramophone, the television, etc.). The chosen model is precisely technique, i.e. the full mastering of the scientific usage of photography, a "**clear**

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<sup>16</sup> See in the Moholy-Nagy's volume, for instance, the tables and relative comments *Gramophone record* (photo: Moholy-Nagy at Von Löbbecke's): "Heightened reality of an every-day object. A ready-made poster" (p. 62); *The City* (photomontage: Citroën/Bauhaus): "The experience of the sea of stone in here raised to gigantic proportions" (p. 107).

<sup>17</sup> See table p. 70 *Shell. Triton Tritonis* (X-ray photo: J.B. Polak. From: "Wendingen", Amsterdam).

<sup>18</sup> A. Somaini, *Fotografia, cinema, montaggio. La "nuova visione" di László Moholy-Nagy*, in L. Moholy-Nagy, *Pittura Fotografia Film*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, p. XI.

<sup>19</sup> F. Alinovi, C. Marva, *La fotografia. Illusione o rivelazione?* cit., p. 241.

<sup>20</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* cit., p. 29 (bold in the original text).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30. See *ibid.*, p. 91: table *Photograph from above* (Photo: Moholy-Nagy): "The charm of the photograph lies not in the object but in the view from above and in the balanced relationships".

**understanding of the means**<sup>22</sup>, that is equivalent to the knowledge of the effects of lights on photosensitive surfaces and the experimentation of every possible effect. Moreover it is necessary to exploit photography ability to be in perfect syntony with technical progress, thus grasping the modern world inner “beauty”, “the inexhaustible wonders of life”<sup>23</sup>, of what is under our eyes, but that we would never aesthetically see: the modern man sensitivity is indeed in syntony and synchrony with the specific transformations of its time. It is a useful tool because of its uncountable modes of application, and it can thus let us see and get to know the world under a different perspective<sup>24</sup>. Moholy-Nagy’s attitude towards technique – the marking element of the fruitful turning point of photography in the late ’20s –, can be summerized by the offer of a new fully conscious usage of technique: it must support and extend sensibility in the act of experiencing reality in order to obtain a full and thorough experience accordingly to the new epoch.

In conclusion, photography as theorized and practised between the ’20s and ’30s of the last century presents itself as a conscious employment of new technical tools, as the re-evaluation of its specific mode of vision and representation coherently with the contemporary time, as the correct choice of expressive media in order to produce a composition with its own order: the image thus produced has therefore its own completeness and coherence, it is significant in itself and is able to explain an element of reality otherwise difficult to fully grasp.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35 (bold in the original text).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also A. Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist Schön*, München, Einhorn Verlag, 1928: natural forms, manufactured goods and industrial landscaped photographed in their simple objectivity reveal their beauty and show how the photographic image is a new mode of display of the contemporary reality splendour.

<sup>24</sup> See also F. Roh, *photo-eye* cit., table 38: Moholy-Nagy, *Sewers of Paris*; see L. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* cit., table *In the sand* (Photo: Moholy-Nagy): “Formerly regarded as distortion, today a startling experience! An invitation to re-evaluate our way of seeing. This picture can be turned round. It always produces new vistas”.



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**Form, *Gestalt* and “Dominion”:** Echoes from the *George-Kreis*.  
**Friedrich Wolters’ Case. (*Herrschaft und Dienst, Richtlinien, Gestalt*)**

DAVIDE DI MAIO

Lass völker brechen unterm schicksaldrucke  
Gefechte bebem nicht beim jähsten rucke..  
Vorn Herrm gilt gleich der in- und aussen-krig  
Wo solche sind wie du – da ist der sieg. (GA IX, 102)

**Abstract:** Friedrich Wolters was one of the most active collaborators to the intellectual board of the *Kreis* (*Jahrbücher für die geistige Bewegung*) and the author of the monumental *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst*. Following his clear predisposition to the institutionalization of the *Kreis* in terms of absolutism and State involvement, accompanied by the undeniable religious and mystical tones in his writing, Wolters’ contribution focuses mainly on three programmatic essays, *Herrschaft und Dienst, Richtlinien* and *Gestalt*. His aim is to extrapolate the peculiar declination acquired by the concept of form (*Gestalt*) within the frame of a cosmological system. In it, Wolters places the two forces of “dominion” and “service”, according to a dialectical relationship, where the poet is called to “dominate” by shaping (first of all as *Gestalt* accomplished in itself, that means expressing a sort of “shaping necessity” culminating in the end in the *Gestalt* of the work of art), and the person recognising him as dominator is devoted to the “service”, to sequence and abnegation.

“Provisionally, we shall take as “form” [*Gestalt*] [...] the measures as they are presented to the eye intuiting in a glance that the world is subsumed by a stronger formula than the cause and effect formula, although it cannot see the underlying unity of the compendium. [...] In the form the whole is enclosed, including more than the sum of its parts, thus being an unattainable goal in such an anatomizing period. This is the sign of the time to come: in it we will see, feel, and act again under the dominion of forms”<sup>1</sup>. Such a wish for the return to the “dominion of the forms” was expressed by Ernst Jünger in 1932 in the volume *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (*The Worker, Dominion and Gestalt*); passionate, and problematic, lecture on the modern (bourgeois) “*Krisis*” of culture, of politics and western society. A year before the German and European catastrophe, Jünger summarised in few sentences the core of the “matter”, certainly following the line of a long history behind him, that certainly endorsed a peculiar declination in Germany in the first years of the Twentieth Century (just consider the *Gespräch über die Formen* (1905) by Rudolf Borchardt). Not always free from the danger of an aura connotation, the concepts of form and “*Gestalt*” have indeed offered in the first place – mainly to the most conservative fringes of the German intelligentsia – a straightforward answer to the undeniable holistic tension in opposition to the modern process of “fragmentation”, in all its manifold meanings.

In 1934 Gottfried Benn claimed the importance of “formalism” for “Europe and

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<sup>1</sup> E. Jünger, *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt*, 3. Aufl., Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 2007, p. 33 [my translation].

particularly for Germany” in those years, thus re-defining it as an “awareness, acquired in the fight, of the new possible ritualism”; as the “almost religious attempt to bring back art from the realm of aesthetic to the anthropological one; a proclamation as anthropological principle. Sociologically speaking – he added – we would say: to bring back to the core of cults and rituals the anthropological principle of the form, of the pure form, of the formal despotism”. As Jünger, also Benn grasps here an essential element of the question on the form of time, and he does it providing an enlightening remark: the force, the law, the “despotism” of form. “Despotism” is a key-word in the aesthetic and philosophical context dominated by the philosophy of life and by the very strong echoes of Nietzsche dominant *Übermensch*. “Despotism” seems to take the place of Schiller’s classical “impulse” (“*Trieb*”) towards the form, thus levelling the tension toward the (aesthetic) appropriation of the phenomenon, the thing in itself, to the (mainly poetic) expression, according to an uninterrupted attitude of discomfort in relation to the present time. “The phenomenon”, Benn concludes, “the single case, the sensible object has no validity: only the expression and the search for a style, generating laws, has value”<sup>2</sup>.

And this is not all. In parallel line to the tendency to bring what is fragmented back to unity, also the attempted “reading” of fragmentation as including a systematic movement is developed in the same context, almost looking for an internal structure in it<sup>3</sup>. It is true, then, that the concept of “form” is still connected to its hylomorphic classical matrix – indeterminate inert matter, determinant active form – but it is also true that in Germany Early Twentieth Century it also acquires further value in reference to the above mentioned holistic tension. It also breaks the limits of a strictly aesthetic-philosophical-literary definition, getting to “political projects to be considered as totalitarian”<sup>4</sup>. Specifically, the term *Gestalt*, – in German only<sup>5</sup> – although referring to the same semantic field, can be distinguished from the term *Form* under many respects, and allows to follow such an evolution.

The term *Gestalt*, taken from a conceptual, methodological and normative point of view<sup>6</sup> finds its place among the mythical materials of the theories developed in Germany in the circle of the poet Stefan George. This circle proliferated mainly through the *Jahrbücher für die Geistige Bewegung*, promoting a fruitful combination of *Lebensphilosophie* and

<sup>2</sup> G. Benn, *Doppelleben*, in Id., *Prosa und Autobiographie. In der Fassung der Erstdrucke*, ed. by B. Hillebrand, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2006, p. 392; see here in particular E. Goulen, *Gesetze der Form: Benn 1933*, in U. Hebekus, I. Stöckmann (eds.), *Die Souveränität der Literatur: Zum Totalitären der Klassischen Moderne 1900-1930*, München, Fink, 2008, p. 19-44.

<sup>3</sup> A. Simonis, *Literarischer Ästhetizismus. Theorie der arabischen und hermetischen Kommunikation der Moderne*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 2000, p. 383-384.

<sup>4</sup> U. Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung. Zum politischen Ort der Literatur im Zeitraum der Klassischen Moderne*, München, Fink, 2009, p. 64; see on the “form” in general: D. Burdorf, *Poetik der Form. Eine Begriffs- und Problemsgeschichte*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler, 2001, on the “*Gestalt*”: A. Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin. Diskursgeschichte einer deutschen Denkfigur*, Köln-Weimar-Wien, Böhlau, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin* cit., p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Kolk, *Literarische Gruppenbildung. Am Beispiel des George-Kreises 1890-1945*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1998, p. 375-376.

Neoplatonism, and a harsh cultural criticism culminating in a strong "aesthetic opposition"<sup>7</sup>, corresponding to an extreme form of cult of beauty<sup>8</sup>. Although some influences (more or less deliberate) from phenomenology, existentialism and gestaltic psychology are undeniable, the "*Gestalttheorie*"'s development within George's circle was a real *unicum*, representing exclusively Stefan George's poetics, and with it, its aesthetic-philosophical declination, i.e. a proper field of interest and action<sup>9</sup>. Starting from these rough premises, I will try to elucidate the peculiar conceptual setting of the "*Gestalt*" in relation to a specific theory, supporting the absolute function of poetry, the corresponding mythical value of the "*Gestalt*", and the ethical-pragmatic declination of such principles in the George's concept of "beautiful life" ("*schönes Leben*"). All this in the light of the theories of Friedrich Wolters, one of the most fervent and influential supporters of George, developed in the first three of his essays *Herrschaft und Dienst (Dominion and service)*, *Richtlinien (Outlines)* and *Gestalt*, presenting the main lines of his reasoning.

Why absolute function? and why myth? Wolters conceives the (mythos-)poetic function in terms of an absolute performative action, through which the poet, being the sovereign ("*Herrscher*") and the "*Gestalt*" accomplished in itself, can bring what has been separated back to unity, thus creating something otherwise inaccessible. We could say that Wolters makes an extreme use, that is an absolute use, of the already cited concept of "*Spieltrieb*"<sup>10</sup>, employed by Schiller, according to which, as it is very well known, the whole of man is accomplished in its aesthetic dimension, or even better, conforming to the just as much absolute Nietzsche's verdict claiming that "only as *aesthetic phenomena*, the existence and the world are eternally *justified*"<sup>11</sup>. Wolters thus defines in philosophical-mythical-cosmogonical terms an aesthetic dimension within which the key role is played precisely by the "*Gestalt*". In his cosmogonic vision Wolters indicates a "*geistiges Reich*"<sup>12</sup> ("spiritual reign") precisely ordered, in synthesis, by the dialectical relationship of force and clash, chaos and order. Within this context, as we shall see, a sort of "performing necessity" is developed and the poet perceives it acting among opposite forces. He is far away, we shall remark, from the classical notions of "serenity" and "disinterestedness" (Kant)<sup>13</sup>. In order to fully understand the further development, not only theoretically, but also politically speaking, of

<sup>7</sup> G. Mattenklott, *Bilderdienst. Ästhetische Opposition bei Beardsley und George*, Frankfurt am Main, Rogner & Bernhard, 1985<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> See S. Breuer, *Ästhetischer Fundamentalismus. Stefan George und der deutsche Antimodernismus*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995 and Wolfgang Braungart, "*die schönheit die schönheit die schönheit*". *Ästhetischer Konservatismus und Kulturkritik um 1900*, in J. Andres, W. Braungart, K. Kaufmann (eds.), "*Nichts als die Schönheit*". *Ästhetischer Konservatismus um 1900*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2007, p. 30-55.

<sup>9</sup> See F. Rossi, *Gesamterkennen. Zur Wissenschaftskritik und Gestalttheorie im George-Kreis*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> F. Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, 3. Aufl., München, Hanser, 1962, p. 618.

<sup>11</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in Id., *Werke in drei Bänden*, vol. 1, München, Hanser, 1954, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> F. Wolters, *Herrschaft und Dienst*, Berlin, Lühorn-Press, 1909; hence (LHD2) followed by page number.

<sup>13</sup> We shall remark, concerning this matter, that in the second series of the *Blätter für die Kunst* Paul Gérardy emphasized the new idea of poetic "beauty" in terms of "severity" and "force": "a pure language, with a full sound, severe and beautiful with nothing of this thoughtless and absent-minded fashion, today so lively. No obscurity, no muddle, what the new poets aim to is the vigorous beauty, the delicacy without frail frills"; see P. Gérardy, *Geistige Kunst*, "Blätter für die Kunst" 2/4 (1894), p. 113.

our last remark, we shall recall, for instance, that one of Pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany most considered texts, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*Twentieth Century Myth*, 1930), by Alfred Rosenberg, would set the difference between Greek aesthetic and “North-European” aesthetic precisely in the stillness of the first and in the controversial and aggressive dynamism of the second, since “it was not the externals to become form – he wrote – but the value of the soul battling against other values and opposite forces”<sup>14</sup>. The very concept of “*Gestalt*” already contains such premises, since its etymology refers to a precisely defined act (to put: “*gestellen*”), entailing an actor performing it, who already has in itself the charismatic features of a figure acting while shaping<sup>15</sup>.

Concerning the role of myth, furthermore, we shall remark that in this context, the “*Gestalt*” is the key to the interpretation of a cosmogonic theory, being the “*Sein*” fixed into a form, subtracted to the chaotic dispersion of the ever moving “becoming” (“*werden*”). Although the references to Plato and Aristotle are here more than clear, it is precisely how both authors are interpreted by the *George-Kreis*, together with Plotinus, Bergson and Nietzsche – just to mention the most clearly recurrent references –, that can provide us with the keys to the interpretation of the “line of thought” developed in Germany on the topic of morphology and in particular of *Gestalt*.

Friedrich Wolters’ figure is undoubtedly controversial<sup>16</sup>. Michael Landmann in his memories of 1988 remarked that “Karl Wolfskehl, Friedrich Gundolf and Max Kommereff [...] were renown outside the George’s circle”, contrary to what happened, inexplicably, to Wolters, who in fact was “a stronghold and a main point of reference in the circle, and outside of it a schermatrice as no other”<sup>17</sup>. Nine years later, Carola Groppe, in his canonic study on the circle, also remarked how Wolters’ figure was not until then considered “neither for his meaning for the George’s circle development after the *fin de siècle*, nor for the history of his actions prior and after the First World War”<sup>18</sup>; Groppe reacted to such a situation providing an accurate description of his activities within the circle. In order to understand the reasons for the embarrassment Wolters generated, truthfully speaking, right from the start in some early

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in U. Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung* cit., p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> See A. Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin* cit., p. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> On Friedrich Wolters see M. Philipp (ed.), *Stefan George-Friedrich Wolters. Briefwechsel 1904-1930, “Castrum Peregrini”* 233-235 (1998), p. 5-61; C. Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung. Das deutsche Bürgertum und der George-Kreis 1890-1933*, Köln, Böhlau, 1997, p. 213-289; W.C. Schneider, *Staat und Kreis, Dienst und Glaube Friedrich Wolters und Robert Boehringer in ihren Vorstellungen von Gesellschaft*, in R. Köster, W. Plump, B. Schefold, K. Schönhärl (eds.), *Das Ideal des schönen Lebens und die Wirklichkeit der Weimarer Republik. Vorstellungen von Staat und Gemeinschaft im George-Kreis*, Berlin, Akademie, 2009, p. 97-122.

<sup>17</sup> M. Landmann, *Figuren um Stefan George. Zehn Porträts*. 2 vol., Amsterdam, Castrum Peregrini Presse, 1988, p. 23. Also according to Edgar Salin, Friedrich Wolters, together with Karl Wolfskehl, and Friedrich Gundolf, should be counted among the leading figures of the *Kreis*, claiming “dass niemand den ganzen Umkreis von Georges meisterlicher Wirkung umspannen wird, dem eine dieser drei Gestalten, dieser drei Kräfte fehlt”; E. Salin, *Um Stefan George. Erinnerung und Zeugnis*, 2. Aufl., München-Düsseldorf, Helmut Küpper (form. Georg Bondi), 1954, p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> C. Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 213. Differently seems to think G. Zöfel, *Die Wirkung des Dichters. Mythologie und Hermeneutik in der Literaturwissenschaft um Stefan George*, Frankfurt am Main-Bern-New York, Peter Lang, 1987, p. 55.

followers already, we shall refer not only to his clear predisposition for the institutionalization of the *Kreis* in terms of absolutism and State involvement – thanks to Wolters the “*Kreis*” is soon understood as “*Staat*” (State)<sup>19</sup>, – that is not in the last related to Wolters’ historical interest, particularly, in the phenomenon of Seventeenth Century Absolutism<sup>20</sup>, in addition to the undeniable religious and mystical tones of his thinking, but also to the increasingly nationalist verve of his writings especially in the ’20s<sup>21</sup>. And yet Wolters set so to speak the ground for a line of thought that will follow a clear path through some of the most celebrated and well considered texts of the George’s circle. In 1914, Heinrich Friedemann’s *Platon* put emphasis on the statue value of the circle gathered around the master-poet, while in 1927 Max Kommerell in *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* claimed that “in the poet and only in the poet is kept the harmony of man in confusing paths, and only him, and no school of wisdom, no form of State and no religion can give back to man his nobility”<sup>22</sup>. Differently, in the very same year, Ernst Kantorowicz, in his *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite*<sup>23</sup> established an intimate connection between *Dichter* and *Herrscher/Führer/Kaiser*, in the opposite direction, starting from the exemplary experience of the Learned Emperor to get to the “imperial” qualities of the poet<sup>24</sup>. One of the testimonies of the vast Georgan memorialists’ literature, that, in my opinion, can better elucidate Friedrich Wolters’ personality and activities, is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s, who, going back through the steps of his juvenile encounter with Stefan George’s poetry, recalls his attendance of Wolters’ lectures on the history of economy in Marburg: a “man – Gadamer writes – whose importance for the organization of the circle according to a State model cannot be underestimated and who for this very reason had fierce opponents within the circle itself. He – Gadamer adds – was one of Gustav Schmoller’s dearest pupils, however he was not a scientifically convincing teacher. I attended an economy lecture, in which, with a rhetorical pathos somehow inadequate, he was dealing with a very sober subject matter, without convincing suggestions. Yet differently he directed his seminar. There you could get something of his pedagogical verve and his attention to young people and their education. On the contrary, his public lesson on the German men of the Nineteenth

<sup>19</sup> See R. Boehringer, *Mein Bild von Stefan George*, 2. Aufl., Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1967, p. 129 and E. Salin, *Um Stefan George* cit., p. 132; see also C. Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 245-247.

<sup>20</sup> In 1908 Wolters published an essay *Über die theoretische Begründung des Absolutismus im 17. Jahrhundert* within the collective volume in honour of Gustav Schmoller. We shall remark that in the letter addressed to the poet dating 25.7.1908, referring to his essay, Wolters says that he could understand his study precisely through the action of the poet: “Möchte Ihnen meine studie gefallen! Das bild jener welt begriff ich erst in Ihrem bilde” (S. George, F. Wolters, *Briefwechsel 1940-1930*, with an introduction by M. Philipp, “Castrum Perogrini” 233-235, 1998, p. 70). In this essay are included the first references to *Herrschaft und Dienst*; see C. Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 229.

<sup>21</sup> As the claim on the poet creator of unity of the “ganzen”, still standing in the ’20s, when Wolters has decidedly started a publishing activity politically oriented, in the *Vier Reden über das Vaterland* (1927); see in particular, F. Wolters, *Der Rhein unser Schicksal*, in Id., *Vier Reden über das Vaterland*, Breslau, Hirt, 1927, p. 162-163.

<sup>22</sup> M. Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik*, Berlin, Bondi, 1928, p. 247.

<sup>23</sup> E. Kantorowicz, *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite*, Berlin, Bondi, 1927 (*Werke der Wissenschaft aus dem Kreise der Blätter für die Kunst, Geschichtliche Reihe, Ergänzungsband Quellen und Nachweise*, Berlin 1931).

<sup>24</sup> See U. Raulff, *Die Souveränität des Künstlers*, in B. Gockel, M. Hagner (eds.), *Die Wissenschaft vom Künstler. Körper, Geist und Lebensgeschichte des Künstlers als Objekte der Wissenschaften, 1880-1930*, Preprint 279 (Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte), Berlin, 2004, p. 136-137.

Century was a great provocation. He offered in it, with great rhetorical pathos, a summa of the cultural criticism, represented in the Georgean circle, most of all, and radically, by George himself. [...] The dogmatic demeanour of the man was transmitted to his supporters, causing between me and those who were my friends every kind of tensions”<sup>25</sup>.

In 1909 Friedrich Wolters published on the eighth series of the *Blätter für die Kunst*, a short article entitled *Herrschaft und Dienst*<sup>26</sup>; afterwards enlarged and published as a book in the same year. Here he followed the line of the short text *Der Eroberer (the conqueror)*, appeared on the *Blätter* in 1899, in which Ludwig Klages had considered the artist in terms of “Feldherr” (leader) and “Held” (hero), also following the steps of Nietzsche, and almost in response<sup>27</sup> to Friedrich Gundolf’s article *Gefolgschaft und Jüngertum*<sup>28</sup> published on the same issue of the *Blätter*. Here the value of “apprenticeship” was basically grounded on the relationship of unconditioned love and faith in relation to the master, embodying the ideal of “*schönen Leben*”, so that the closure of the essay is the image of the “Christ’s disciples” – “among Christ’s disciples nobody was a genius and besides Judas was a personality in the sense intended today · however since they – poor fishermen – were faithful and fully obliging · they were faith and love · they became fuller in themselves and more fruitful in the world”<sup>29</sup> – in *Herrschaft und Dienst*, Wolters fixed the terms of the master (*Meister*) – pupil relationship, as between bard and learner, in the “authority”, in the “dominion” on the one side, and in the “service” on the other. Thus sharply shifting the axis of thought.

As briefly recalled earlier, Friedrich Wolters sketches in *Herrschaft und Dienst* the structure of a “spiritual reign”<sup>30</sup>, where there are only two different but complementary forces at stake : “dominion” and “service”. The “Spiritual reign” has its shape, that is spherical (*Kreis*). Being that it is invisible, Wolters distinguishes two “levels of reign” (“Ebenen des Reiches”): nature<sup>31</sup> and the soul (*Seele*)<sup>32</sup>:

the Reign’s levels · on their base and on their form (*gestaltung*) appear great figures (*bilder*) · flowing from the living centre of the circle (*runde*) that hosts them. In such an unlimited extension rise, partitioned, the forces (*Gewalten*): the one that is simple as to its transmitting source · refracts his white light on the multiplicity of nature and the soul · it covers everything that lies and happens with his coloured ray and constantly pervades the immeasurable levels with shaping

<sup>25</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Stefan George (1868-1933)*, in H.-J. Zimmermann (ed.), *Die Wirkung Stefan Georges auf die Wissenschaft. Ein Symposium*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1985, p. 41; see also L. Thormaehlen, *Erinnerung an Stefan George*, Hamburg, Hauswedell, 1962, p. 200-201.

<sup>26</sup> F. Wolters, *Herrschaft und Dienst*, “Blätter für die Kunst” 8 (1908/09), p. 133-138, hence (HuDI) followed by page number.

<sup>27</sup> See N. Maximilian, *Werte und Wertungen im George-Kreis. Zur Soziologie literarischer Kritik*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1976, p. 56 and C. Groppc, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 243.

<sup>28</sup> F. Gundolf, *Gefolgschaft und Jüngertum*, “Blätter für die Kunst” 8 (1908/09), p. 106-112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> HuDI 133.

<sup>31</sup> HuDI 133.

<sup>32</sup> HuDI 133-134.



forces (*formenden Gewalten*) · that to the rough hands of those who touch are as incomprehensible as to the spirit's antennas in the evaluation of actual realities, them representing the only reality.<sup>33</sup>

The *Herrschaft* is therefore the "power" (*"Macht"*) emanating his light from the centre and, most of all, "ordering" and governing the "surrounding forces" (*"Gewalten"*), thus determining the Reign: "Thus the Reign is formed according to the image of the dominion: this, however, is generated and supported by the dominator". At the core of Wolters' thinking the "dominion" (*"Herrschaft"*) is placed, as well as the "dominator" (*"Herrscher"*) determining the form of the "Reign's levels" through his action (*"Kraft"*): "the spiritual action" (*"die geistige Tat"*)<sup>34</sup>. According to the coordinates of such a structure, in which regarding to its idea of circularity and forces we believe to recognize first of all the echoes of Nietzsche's early thinking (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), Wolters reads the whole work of one particular "*Herrscher*", the poet Stefan George. It is very well known that precisely on such settings, and in particular on the figure and role of Stefan George in the *Kreis*, a sort of "sociology of dominion" (*"Herrschaftssoziologie"*) gained ground, starting from Max Weber. The latter, in his work *Economy and society* (posthumously published in 1922)<sup>35</sup> set the theory base for the analysis of the concept of "charismatic leader"; a fruitful analysis not only in the sociological field, but also in the *George-Forschung*, that still refers to this element today. Wolters has certainly greatly contributed to the cultural and mythicized shaping – both when George was still alive and afterwards through memorials<sup>36</sup> – of the figure of the poet as charismatic "lord", as *Herrscher*. Starting indeed from the premise that "the greatest possibility is only this · that in One man the dominator is born", Wolters explicitly means "the dominator · whose subject matter is the language · whose work is poetry"<sup>37</sup>. This explains why the poet (George), as *Herrscher*, neither is inspired by nature (*mimesis*), nor creates from nothing, but rather, as briefly said earlier, through what, in the second augmented edition of *Herrschaft und Dienst*, Wolters calls "shaping violence" (*"formende Gewalt"*), that gives unity to the male and female soul of the double matter of poetry: the language and its "inner face"

<sup>33</sup> HuD1 134.

<sup>34</sup> HuD1 136.

<sup>35</sup> M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5. rev. Aufl., bes. von J. Winckelmann, Tübingen, J.B. Mohr, 1980, p. 140-148; confer A. Brodersen, *Stefan George und sein Kreis. Eine Deutung aus der Sicht Max Webers*, "Castrum Peregrini" 91 (1970), p. 5-24.

<sup>36</sup> Starting from the poem *Der Prophet* (1891) by the young Hugo von Hofmannsthal after their first meeting ("Von seinen Worten, den unscheinbar leisen, / Geht eine Herrschaft aus und ein Verführen", see H. v. Hofmannsthal, *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Nachlaß (1889-1929)*, in id., *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden, Reden und Aufsätze*, 3, 1925-1929, hrsg. von B. Schoeller, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1980, p. 341); to proceed, for instance, with S. Lepsius, *Stefan George. Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Berlin, Die Runde, 1935; L. Thormaehlen, *Erinnerung an Stefan George* cit.; K. Breysig, *Begegnungen mit Stefan George*, "Castrum Peregrini" XLII (1960), p. 9-32; E. Glöckner, *Begegnung mit Stefan George. Auszüge aus Briefen und Tagebüchern 1913-1934*, ed. by F. Adam, Heidelberg, Stichtm, 1972; see also S. Brucer, *Ästhetischer Fundamentalismus* cit., p. 21-26.

<sup>37</sup> HuD1 137.

("innerem gesicht").<sup>38</sup>

It is now appropriate to go back to the source, that is a "theory" claim of George on his "poetics of form"<sup>39</sup>. In the *Tage und Taten*, with the aim of distinguishing his poetry from the one that "means to 'say' something or act", George writes that "the value of poetry is not decided by the sense (in that case it would be erudite wisdom) but by form, and this does not mean at all something exterior - but rather the deep solicitation according to measure and sound, through which at any time the original beings the masters distinguished themselves from the ones who are followed by second rate artists"<sup>40</sup>. Measure and sound determine an idea of plastic poetry, originated by a performative activity<sup>41</sup> emphasizing the "technical" element of poetic creation. Although he did not theoretically defined the term "*Gestalt*" - differently from his followers - neither in his artistic production nor in his more theoretical analyses, and although he did not make a clear distinction between bodies, figure or apparitions<sup>42</sup>, Stefan George emphasized and embodied these two elements. We already mentioned that we are not dealing here with a *creatio ex nihilo*, although the conceptual premises to claim so could apparently be all in place, since - and this is the peculiarity of the Georgean gestaltic idea - the work of art does not come out at first of a will or a subjective necessity. The essence of the true work of art is so to speak already existing "*Gestalt*", and the poet is the one who can enter inside it and give a voice to it. In Gundolf's transposition of this premise we read: "each accomplished work of art is a closed sphere, and the person entering it as creator or admirer, as long as he/she is such, cannot come out of it"<sup>43</sup> (Benjamin's idea of the work of art as monad without windows<sup>44</sup>, then endorsed by Adorno<sup>45</sup>, does not seem far away from this vision). This explains the reciprocity of the formative act between creator and (artistic) creature, especially in relation to the embodiment of poetic beauty in Maximin, that George expressed in his famous verses of *The Seventh Ring*: "Me creature of my own child"<sup>46</sup>. In this sense the qualification "*Sprachschöpfer*" ("creator of language"), seems to me very appropriate. The expression is employed by Zöfel<sup>47</sup> in order to explain the mythopoeic process in the gestaltic perspective, as a "giving voice", demiurgically, to the

<sup>38</sup> HuD2 14.

<sup>39</sup> See D. Burdorf, *Poetik der Form* cit.

<sup>40</sup> S. George, *Tage und Taten. Aufzeichnungen und Skizzen*, in Id., *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*, vol. 17, Berlin, Bondi, 1933, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> See W. Braungart, "Was ich noch sinne und was ich noch füge/Was ich noch liebe trägt die gleichen züge". *Stefan Georges performative Poetik*, "Text und Kritik, Zeitschrift für Literatur", (Stefan George), 168 (2005), p. 3-18.

<sup>42</sup> See F. Rossi, *Gesamterkennen* cit., p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> F. Gundolf, *Goethe*, 2. Teil, Berlin, Bondi, 1920, p. 486.

<sup>44</sup> See W. Benjamin, *Oskar Walzel, Das Wortkunstwerk. Mittel seiner Erforschung*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, vol. 3: *Kritiken und Rezensionen*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. by R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 268.

<sup>46</sup> S. George, *Einverleibung*, in Id., *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*, vol. 6/7: *Der siebente Ring*, Berlin, Bondi, 1931, p. 119: "Ich geschöpf nun eignen sohnes"; see F. Wolters, *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte seit 1890*, Berlin, Bondi, 1930, p. 314-315.

<sup>47</sup> G. Zöfel, *Die Wirkung des Dichters* cit., p. 82.

"Uverlebnisse"<sup>48</sup>, according to Gundolf's terminology. At first we could talk about a "revisited version" of the concept of "genius", originated with the Sturm und Drang, then finding, through Hamann and Herder, its highest point in Schiller and especially in the Prometheic Goethe. It is true then that George – in line with many of his contemporaries – seems to embody such a deep-rooted aesthetic-literary *topos*, but a further element must be added: the "coercive" nature of the poet's action (*Tat*) – Hugo von Hofmannsthal will talk about George's "tyrannical gestures"<sup>49</sup> and Max Kommerell about poetry set on "violence"<sup>50</sup> – that the poet has accomplished through a continuous determination of his poetic and "legislative" will<sup>51</sup> –. Let's consider, for instance, the renown, peremptory verse, dear to Heidegger<sup>52</sup> of *Das Neue Reich*: "nothing may be where word is missing"<sup>53</sup> – crossing all the path of his poetic activity<sup>54</sup>. Laconically and with great clarity, George has condensed the meaning of such an aesthetic-pedagogical setting in the renown triad "tone movement gestalt"<sup>55</sup>.

Besides the *Blätter für die Kunst* (1892-1912), another "official" organ of the circle was the already quoted *Jahrbücher für die Geistige Bewegung*, edited from 1910 to 1912 by Friedrich Gundolf and Friedrich Wolters<sup>56</sup>. In his essay *Richtlinien*<sup>57</sup> of 1910, closing the first issue of the *Jahrbuch*, Wolters attempts a first systematization of his theory centred on the dichotomy dominion/service, adding, on the one hand, a remarkable verve of cultural criticism, and on the other, a careful caesura between art and science, according to two distinct "typologies" of force: "creative force" ("schaffende Kraft") and "ordering force" ("ordnende Kraft"). The latter occupies the "periphery of the sphere of being"<sup>58</sup>, playing the role of experimentalism and analysis, that is the scientific method, – it acts through "research" ("Forschen", "Methode"), "application" ("Anwenden", "Technik") and "knowledge" ("Wissen", "System")

<sup>48</sup> To be precise Gundolf distinguishes between "original experience" and "cultural experience" as follows: "By original experience I mean, for instance, in Goethe the religious, titanic or heroic element; by cultural experience I mean his experience of the past German history, of Shakespeare, of classical antiquity, even his experience of classical society"; see F. Gundolf, *Goethe* cit., p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> H. v. Hofmannsthal, "Gedichte von Stefan George", in Id., *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden*, ed. by B. Schoeller, vol. 8: *Reden und Aufsätze 1 (1891-1913)*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1979, p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> M. Kommerell, *Essays, Notizen, Poetische Fragmente*. Aus dem Nachlass hrsg. von I. Jens, Olten-Freiburg, Walter Verlag, 1969, p. 232: "Magische Urfunktion der Sprache. Versuch, so eine in George verkörperte Weltwende zu vollziehen. [...] George – vielleicht der erste, der die Dichtung auf Gewalt gestellt hat".

<sup>51</sup> See E.R. Curtius, *Stefan George im Gespräch*, in Id., *Kritische Essays zur europäischen Literatur*, 2. Aufl., Bern, Francke-Verlag, 1954, p. 100-116.

<sup>52</sup> We refer here to the famous conference of the philosopher in 1958 with the title *Das Wort*; M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12: *Unterveg zur Sprache*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1985, p. 205-225.

<sup>53</sup> S. George, *Das Wort*, in Id., *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*, vol. 9: *Das Neue Reich*, Berlin, Bondi, 1928, p. 134: "Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht".

<sup>54</sup> Maurizio Pirro has recently insisted on the substantial homogeneity of George's opus, against a well established critical tradition; see M. Pirro, *Come corda troppo tesa. Stile e ideologia in Stefan George*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> S. George, *Vorrede der ersten Auflage*, in Id., *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*, vol. 10/11: *Dante. Die göttliche Komödie*, Berlin, Bondi, 1932, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> See C. Groppc, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 226-251.

<sup>57</sup> F. Wolters, *Richtlinien*, in *Jahrbuch für die geistige Kunst*, ed. by F. Gundolf and F. Wolters, Berlin, Verlag der Blätter für die Kunst-Otto von Holtz, 1910, p. 128-145; hence (R) followed by page number.

<sup>58</sup> R 130.

– while the first “relies on the divine foundation, as source emanating life and shaping life”<sup>59</sup>; it acts through the three modes of “action” (“Handeln”, “Tat”), “shaping/creating” (“Gestalten”, “Werk”) and “vision” (“Schauen”, “Verkündigung”)<sup>60</sup>.

By emphasizing in several occasions the anthropological motivation for the re-positioning of the “dethroned” man in the centre<sup>61</sup>, Wolters defines the meaning of genius as: “creator, whenever he is uncomfortable in the fixed order, however making his personal acting into the source of new events: he does not need the best social order, but rather *his* stronger action”<sup>62</sup>. On this very base, we get a clear understanding of the shifting, few lines after, from the concept of *mimesis* to the one of *Gestaltung* (Uwe Heebekus speaks of “representation” [“*Repräsentation*”], following the line of Schmitt, as inversion of the *mimesis*). In consequence of the perverting of the stoic concept of nature, and then of the detachment of the sensible world from the actual being of man – the reference to the Hellenistic period, as the highest manifestation of the “totality” of the artistic expression, is here very clear<sup>63</sup> – nature would have been considered with circumspection and fear, so that “living according to its dictates corresponded one time to the greatest sin, and another time to the purest morality, its imitation was soon the only path and equally soon the safest precipice for art”<sup>64</sup>. The difference between before and after, however, is articulated by the entering of the “*Begriff*” (concept). Before, the “*schaffende Kraft*” was shaping “gestures and deeds”<sup>65</sup> in absolute independence, within the context of a perfect harmony between external and internal world, but as soon as “[the creative force] failed, the concept took over the dominion and the gesture became ‘natural’, art ‘naturalistic’”<sup>66</sup>. Regarding the negative meaning of “*Begriff*”, Wolters is perfectly in line with the sharp context of the famous dichotomies of poetry/literature (Mann, Hofmannsthal), *parole brute/parole essentielle* (Mallarmé), just to quote two relevant examples of the time. Such a reference is very useful so that Wolters can clearly (critically) depart from naturalism and once more state 1) the absolute value of the work of art uniquely in its performative function – “gestalt-ifying”, if we wish to slightly force the language – distinguishing the “poet-*Herrscher*” from the “mimetic” one; 2) the difference, also fundamental, between “*Inhalt*” and “*Gehalt*”, typical of the morphological line of thought on the *Gestalt*<sup>67</sup>; 3) the necessary “unity of senses”, that is the necessary complementarity between internal sense and external sense, that can be referred back

<sup>59</sup> R 128.

<sup>60</sup> R 129-131.

<sup>61</sup> R 137.

<sup>62</sup> R 134. See on this matter George’s words referred by Boehring: “Es gibt augenblicke – im organischen leben zeugung, geburt und tod, im geistigen leben liebe und gestige empfängnis, in der geschichte ein entscheidendes geschehn, unter den menschen das genie – in denen sich die gleichförmigen leben von generationen zusammendrängen”, see R. Boehringer, *Ewiger Augenblick*, Düsseldorf-München, Holmut Küpper (form. Georg Bondi), 1965, p. 33.

<sup>63</sup> R 136.

<sup>64</sup> R 135.

<sup>65</sup> R 135.

<sup>66</sup> R 135.

<sup>67</sup> Consider first of all Oskar Walzel’s work, in particular *Gehalt und Gestalt im Kunstwerk des Dichters* of 1929; see on this matter A. Simonis, *Gestalttheorie von Goethe bis Benjamin* cit.

primarily to the *Lebensphilosophie's* gnoseology:

The partial phenomena of each sense have been considered as the eternal objectivity and we requested the fullest imitation of it from the art belonging time after time to the single sense. This, however, since its application came out to be correct only for some plastic arts – such as painting and sculpture, here as well just in appearance –, brought the other arts – poetry, architecture and music – to the clear folly of a naturalism purely concerning content; for the content does not even lightly touch the art being, and if this is shaped (*gestaltet*), then it is not the holder of the work, but rather the systematic function of a work created from the start. We can follow the mistake even deeper if we remember that only the spiritual *unity of senses* can create a work of art, that means, not the faithful rendering of what is perceived – or of what is borrowed from history, that is just a pitiful subspecies of naturalism – but rather the essential requirement of the work of art is the *sensible birth in the spirit*; if we consider that, as Goethe claims, “art is called art precisely because it is not nature”, since, this means, it should not take its forms (*Gestaltungsformen*) from the state outside the sensible unity, but it should rather *create* within the latter. [...] There is no program of photographic faithfulness that is helpful to the artistic shaping (*gestaltung*), but rather a creating genius, who, in the hardest work, shapes (*formt*) his work according to *his* internal image.<sup>68</sup>

The implications of such a setting are numerous, since Wolters' implicit aim is also to sketch a program of cultural renovation for Germany following the desired accomplishment of a “schöne[n] Bildung”<sup>69</sup> (“beautiful education”) for the new and more aware German young people<sup>70</sup>. Friedrich Wolters, for this reason<sup>71</sup>, can indeed be added to the list of “conservative revolutionaries” (*Konservative Revolution*) – among which we can count also Borchardt, Hofmannsthal, Schmitt, Spengler, Jünger etc. – fierce opponents of positivism and of any idea of progress, demolished by cult-orientated values and models, and in philosophical terms, of any idea of linear becoming (Bergson) of the *Zeitgeist*, in favour of a circular, then mythical (*Kreis*, myth) one<sup>72</sup>. To this it was added, as notorious, an increasingly nationalistic tone, supporting – precisely in the case of some of the *George-Kreis'* members – a highly spiritual, as well as mythical, idea of the concept of nation, culture and people. On this matter, we should remind that the first article of the first *Jahrbuch für die Geistige Bewegung* signed by

<sup>68</sup> R 135-136.

<sup>69</sup> R 141.

<sup>70</sup> See S. George, F. Wolters, *Briefwechsel 1940-1930* cit., p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Rather than counting Wolters *tout court* among the members of the *konservativen Revolution*, Groppe prefers to talk about Wolters as the representative of a “conservative-revolutionary cultural ideology”, see C. Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 268.

<sup>72</sup> See A. Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch*, 3., um einen Ergänzungsband erw. Aufl., Darmstadt, Arcs-Verlag, 1989 and S. Breuer, *Anatomie der Konservativen Revolution*, 2. Aufl., Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995.

Karl Wolfskehl, emphasizing a more anciently rooted tendency (for instance Herder and the late romanticism), placed the fulcrum of the ethical-cultural renewal of the “secret Germany” (“*Geheimes Deutschland*”), in its language and its people – thus dictating the guide lines of the *Jahrbuch* itself –. In the essay many references to other European countries occur, the language and literature of which (France, Holland, England) are taken as functional to the claiming for Germany – whose historical delay, especially in reference to the Renaissance is recognized<sup>73</sup> – of a unique role of artistic innovation, through language. “The language is the demon of each population”, writes Wolfskehl, “a magical secret, the custody of which is the highest necessity, and of which only very few can be custodians”. These few elected people are claimed by Wolfskehl precisely for the “secret Germany, for which every word of ours is uttered, from which every verse of ours takes life and rhythm, and the unending service of it means fortune, necessity and sanctification of our life”<sup>74</sup>. Wolfskehl tributes to words the mythical and authentic substratum confirmed by Gundolf in his *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (*Shakespeare and the German Spirit*), as well as in the biography *Goethe*, equalizing the language not only to the *Bildungserlebnis*, but also to the *Urerlebnis*; or as we read in the *Goethe*: “die letzte Zuflucht des Gottes im Menschen”<sup>75</sup>. But what word exactly? In *Richtlinien*, the answer to this question, now set on a much more theoretical and methodological base, is according to Wolters one and only : the word of the “schaffende Kraft”, to be precise: “A new world rise not when the word becomes number, but when it becomes flesh. Only the creating force shapes the face of time, only its will lifts again states and people from the ground”<sup>76</sup>. Wolters recognize then the “ethical” and social value of the word emanated by the “schaffende Kraft”, the poetic one par excellence, and hence of the resulting “*Gestaltung*”, the consequence of which is the positioning of the (bard)poet in the dimension of a leader, an *auctoritas*.

Wolters’ main contribution, where many of the concepts here introduced are condensed into a more systematic theory and where, most of all, a more accomplished definition of the concept of “*Gestalt*” takes shape, can be found in the essay<sup>77</sup>, entitled after the concept itself, published in the second issue of the *Jahrbuch* of 1911. Already its partition into three parts – *Contradictions of time*, *The essence of the Gestalt* and *The shaping of similars* – provides an immediate grasp of its programmatic value: the analysis of the contradictions of time is followed by a “final” formulation of the concept of “*Gestalt*”, prelude to a sort of exhortation to conform to the accomplished “*Gestalt*”, in a relationship learner/teacher, pupil/master. We shall leave out, for the purpose of our analysis, both the recurrent opposition

<sup>73</sup> K. Wolfskehl, *Die Blätter für die Kunst und die neueste Literatur*, in *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung*, hrsg. von Friedrich Gundolf und Friedrich Wolters, Berlin, Verlag der Blätter für die Kunst/Otto von Holtz, 1910, p. 17-18.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> F. Gundolf, *Goethe* cit., p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> R 132.

<sup>77</sup> F. Wolters, *Gestalt*, in *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung*, hrsg. von Friedrich Gundolf und Friedrich Wolters, Berlin, Verlag der Blätter für die Kunst/Otto von Holtz, 1911, p. 137-158; hence (G) followed by page number.

to the actual time, notably here to the theoretical and hermeneutic legitimacy of the (positivist) idea of the linearity (*Entwicklung*) of history<sup>78</sup>, that seems to lose sight of man's centrality, or better in Wolters' words the "centre of the creative man" (*schaffende[] mensch-mitte*)<sup>79</sup>; and the specific implications of the "shaping of similars", that is essentially a more systematic formulation of the concept of "*Dienst*" presented in *Herrschaft und Dienst*. We shall then pay attention to the fact that, first of all, in the highly criticized "*Kritik*" and "*Entwicklung*", Wolters recognized the two major "sources of danger" of his time, for the unfolding of the "active free will" ("*t ä t i g e n freien willen*")<sup>80</sup> – also in this case the reference to Nietzsche is clear – that can put man in front of his responsibility in a unitary, compact dimension of life ("*Lebensgesamtheit*")<sup>81</sup>, not fragmented and according to the "union of body and spirit", that is the principle "shaping gestures" ("*das gebärde-formende*")<sup>82</sup>, already present in the Greek world. For Wolters, "Gestures" are in this sense the first immediate result of the "active free will", distinguishing the artistic expression derived from it, for instance, from the "romantic-musical" one, that, as he defines it, is rather centred on feelings and not on performing action.

The tension towards the "urseinform" – visible par excellence in the Greek world – forces man to look for the *Gestalt*, and to adapt to it, so to speak, according to a relation of dominion and service: "we conceive the perfectly accomplished, the Whole-One of the world only as a contraposition, mobile in itself, between creative shaping and chaotic nothing, between being and becoming"<sup>83</sup>. From such an opposition we get to conceive and think the phenomenon. In what sense? The category of *Gestalt* in Wolters' theory has certainly a cosmological value, but also an hermeneutic one. It allows to perceive, see and touch the "phenomenic revealing of the possibilities of being", and therefore "what can be thought" by man:

The phenomenic revealing of the possibilities of being is then what can be thought by man. It is nothing but what can be thought by man, but what can be thought is revealed only sensitively as *Gestalt*: the content of the spirit is the same as the content of sense and the spiritual unity of senses is the only eye of the world. It watches what is phenomenically revealed, but what generates the first look is what is observed. Everything that is, becomes a particular being, *Gestalt*: without it there is nothing that can be thought, nothing that can be observed, but only the vanishing of what is thought, the dismemberment of what is observed.<sup>84</sup>

It is clear that with such premises all elements are in place for the natural development of a

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<sup>78</sup> G 138.

<sup>79</sup> G 139.

<sup>80</sup> G 142.

<sup>81</sup> G 142.

<sup>82</sup> G 142.

<sup>83</sup> G 145.

<sup>84</sup> G 145-146.

mythopoesis of the poetic function (of George, in particular), considered as “*Gestalter*”, but also as “*Gestalt*”. He is indeed the one who makes “sensibly” visible as “*Gestalt*” the “always renewed creation of the world, the spirit becoming life”, as Wolters adds, but at the same time he is also (visible) “*Gestalt*” accomplished in itself:

The Gestalt, not a chaotic and indistinct set, but a distinct life, born in a particular seed, a triple commissure that, while unwinding itself, arranges what it grasps according to its own image, has become visible to us in a creator man, who, in an always incomprehensible way, beyond the conditions of becoming, has found the Archimedes’ point, the self-setting, the new law, coming from outside time, he became the dominator of time, visible to us in the man, thinkable in the poet, in our spiritual dominator, Stefan George.<sup>85</sup>

While pursuing his line of thought on the “worker’s form”, Ernst Jünger claimed that “the vision of forms is a revolutionary act, as it recognize a being in the intact and unitary fullness of its life”. This was however the premise to an even more absolute assumption, essentially dangerous, that of an alleged “overpowering superiority” of such a truth determined by its being “beyond moral and aesthetic criteria, as well as scientific”<sup>86</sup>. Comparing *tout court* the theoretical system developed by Wolters during his intense activity within the Georgean circle – especially in its early years – to the absolute tones of Jünger (in 1932!), would be, under many respects, somehow forced. The essay *Richtlinien*, however, raises difficulties and ambivalences as it is clear that Wolters is unable to trace a clear borderline between poetry and life<sup>87</sup>. Not only his typical mystical-liturgic tones, or even sectarian<sup>88</sup>, if one wish, raise problems to the peculiar declination of the concepts of form and *Gestalt* in this context, dominated, on the one hand, by the cult of beauty and poetry, and on the other by the cultural criticism. We should rather look at the hidden over-crossing of the aesthetic absolutism into the contingency of the *vita activa*, mainly in his late works; in other words: at the hazardous transposition of the concepts of “dominion” and “service” in the socio-political sphere. The alleged un-political position of Wolters, shared by many intellectuals of the time, and in many ways essential to the German catastrophe, is also confirmed by such a faint hazard.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

<sup>85</sup> G 146.

<sup>86</sup> E. Jünger, *Der Arbeiter* cit., p. 39.

<sup>87</sup> On this point correctly insists C. Gropp, *Die Macht der Bildung* cit., p. 244.

<sup>88</sup> See R. Boehringer, *Mein Bild von Stefan George* cit., p. 186-87.



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# Constraints, Boundaries, Responsibility: some Remarks on Contemporary Morphological Lexicon, between Aesthetics and Theoretical Biology

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**Abstract:** the role of Morphology in evolutionary theory is nowadays a topic of discussion in Evo-Devo and Extended Synthesis debate. The present paper aims to examine the relevance of aesthetics in contemporary morphological lexicon, with specific reference to the relationship among biology, aesthetics, and ethics.

"*Don't know much biology*", admitted an old hit by Sam Cooke, and almost thirty years before that, one of the most deserved success in our aesthetic discipline, *Art as Experience*, through an even more surprising *understatement*, presented very similar opening words. John Dewey, starting moreover to sketch the main extraordinary lines of a theory of the relationship between living organisms and environment, nevertheless defined the objects of his enquiries as "biological commonplaces". Although humbled but not blinded by such authoritative warning, we shall get a closer look at things and discover that Dewey himself provides precious remarks, pushing to organize the commonplaces according to some topic related indexes, not at all irrelevant to the destiny of our discipline. I shall here simply list and recall some of the "theoretical most important elements", since my main focus here is our contemporaneity (*don't know much about history*, to go back to our song), fully oriented towards the most recent debate, referred to in biology as *Evo Devo* (evolutionary developmental biology) and towards the reformulation of morphology and typology.

Dewey then: the first point – all essential to our enquiry – is the intimate relation between experience and form. An analysis of experience is not generally explicable without the reference to the organic form that is the subject of the experience and to the form, configuration/*Gestaltung*, proper to that very experience. One of the greatest thinkers of morphology in the Twentieth Century, Viktor von Weizsäcker, has given the name of *biological act* to such a configuration, that is also easy to detect in our Dewey as well.

Given the idea of the correlation between form and experience – an idea purely borrowed from the morphological tradition, from Goethe onwards, detected with outstanding clarity in the 1987 work by Rupert Riedl, biologist, philosopher of biology, and exceptional interpreter, contemporaneous to Goethe – the main tenets of the *humanist naturalism* (as defined in *Experience and Nature*) of John Dewey's aesthetics are entailed as corollaries.

Experience, according to Dewey, always has a starting point, that is made of an *impulsion*, through which the living organism is in contact with the environment; this is an impulsion that moves the whole organic body and regulates first of all the rhythmic relation with the environment and the border line between the body and what is external. We are always dealing with a rhythmical *pattern* and a shifting border, a *scheme of expression* of needs and opportunities (we could define them as constraints, according to the positive

meaning of the term, on which I shall say more), connecting the living organism to its environment: "a dynamic acknowledgement", Dewey says, "of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings". This is what, in reference to one key point in Darwin's theory, Dewey defines several times as the basic adaptations between organism and environment.

However, I would like to emphasize how the positive connotation of the concept of *constraint* has an active role in Dewey's aesthetics: according to its first meaning the constraint as a barrier provides the emotional component of the impulsion, emphasizing the role of impulsion in the (biological) self's manifestation. We should remark that such a first meaning is mentioned by Dewey negatively: "Impulsion forever boosted on its forward way would run its course thoughtless, and dead to emotion [...] Nor without resistance from surroundings would the self become aware of itself".

According to its second meaning, the constraint positively considered actively contributes to create the peculiar time configuration of the organic impulsion: environmental resistance and control, according to Dewey, "bring about the conversion of direct forward action into reflection; what is turned back upon is the relation of hindering conditions to what the self possesses". The manifested element of *reflection*, as Dewey says, does not entail a mere *quantity* increase, but rather leads to a "qualitative leap", originated by the "transformation of energy into thoughtful action".

Such is, according to Dewey, the constraint's environmental and organic function: the constraint originates a form of behaviour – and yet: the unity of a biological act – without antecedents; a form of behaviour, the outline of which refers, in Dewey's own words, to the time configuration of acquired experience: "the junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored', material is literally revived".

If, as I believe, the structuring function of the concept of constraint, positively intended by Dewey's thinking, – and without which it would not be possible to grasp the expressive value of the relationship organism/environment, nor the qualitative innovation produced in the form *and* in the experience – is now clear, at least two other biological-evolutionary implications of aesthetics must be here recalled, and both deal with the configurative time and space of the biological act: first of all, Dewey claims, the aesthetic experience would not be generally possible if our living world was identified by pure flux, or, on the opposite side, by mere stasis: "Because the actual world, that in which we live, is a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of aesthetic quality"; in close relation to this point, biological time is not equivalent to chronology's, although it is as *punctuated* (as S.J. Gould would say), salient, converging to the *anamnesic-proleptic* character (Weizsäcker again!) of the present: "What the live creature retains from the past and what it expects from the future operate as directions *in the present* [my italics]", as Dewey says.

John Dewey's *biological commonplaces* can now almost provide a methodic grid, a topology – in line with rhetorical lexicon – that is worth of consultation when we aim, along a



long path, still at least partially a work in progress, to the definition of an *evolutionary aesthetic morphology*. This point shall be made clear, in order to develop it further in the following: Dewey's *loci communes* should be taken, in my opinion, in the technical sense of a formal-systematic interpretation of the argumentative rhetorics. This means that the object of the locus is not directly the biological notion – that the philosopher clearly cannot (lacking the adequate experimental ground) autonomously elaborate beyond a certain degree of competence, without falling into arbitrariness – it is not, then, the biological notion, but rather its *mode of functioning*, the theoretical place it occupies in the system of knowledge of life; such a mode – that I will try to understand in the light of the concept of *homology of function* – should then interact with the aesthetic-philosophical theory.

However, we should already admit that the methodological significance of the principle of homology of function – that I will illustrate later – can be granted, clearly, only if not merely “defining”. This is a rather tortuous way to recall that Dewey's *biological commonplaces* presuppose precisely that the aesthetic experience is the experience of an *organic form*. Furthermore, we know that in biology, as Dobzhansky said, *nothing make sense except in the light of evolution*.

The extraordinary interest, and current value of Dewey's remarks, here, lies in the recognition of the central role of the biological concept of organism, as the true “ground for mediation” between aesthetic theory and evolution: it is not without relevance, neither it is given for granted, that such a ground can be generally open to theoretical elaboration.

Indeed, the main reference for Dewey's evolutionism is Darwin himself (and the paradigmatic text of the 1909 lecture on Darwin's influence on philosophy and science), but the hard core of the evolutionary theory, that is actually the leading paradigm of the Twentieth Century, is a *modern synthesis* shaped in decades of extraordinary researches. Such a synthesis led to the triumph of an interpretation of life based on quantitative analysis of the continuous graduated variation and of the selection within the field of the so-called *population genetics*; such a methodological system entails wide consequences on the evaluation of the organic form, solving, most importantly, the *qualitative* problem of innovation and of the origin of form precisely in the terms of a *quantitative* analysis.

The main features of such a paradigm of interpretation have been defined by the principle of continuous graduated variation, by the genetic focus – according to the almost mythological idea of the direct expression and perfect correspondence between genotype and phenotype, solving the latter into not much more than the “vulgarisation” of the information encrypted in the code – and finally by the so-called *externalism*, that is the primacy of the adaptive selection as the only source of the evolutionary direction, almost as if the formal articulation and the organism's matter were neither negatively nor positively as many *constraints* and *open possibilities* of transformation.

It is thus configured, quoting Gerd B. Müller, one of the main protagonists of the current questioning of the paradigm, an *abstract scenario* related to the behaviour of genetic variation in ideal populations; in such a scenario *the organism in its formed individuality* disappears, together with the problem of its origin, its presence and its time. Space is left only

to one single actor, the natural selection, that continuously challenges and dissolves in the adventure of life the *continuum* of provisional adaptive solutions, appropriating everything and everything referring to itself.

*Form* is then, according to this perspective, nothing more than a instantaneous stasis in the action of *force*, or even better a perspective epiphenomenon, a wrinkling on the piece of paper where the diagram of natural forces is drawn. Hence, the idea of the gene as a “unity of information”, as much as its quasi-substantialisation by much popularisation, have paradoxically produced the same result, supporting the dissolution of the living unity of form into the invisible grid of instructions and functions.

Pace Jean-Marie Schaeffer, who, starting mainly from a similar socio-biological-Dawkinsian interpretation of the theory of evolution, places at the core of his proposal precisely the idea of *humanity as Mendelian population*, I will venture to suggest that – lacking an adequate biological concept of the organism and innovation as qualitative facts – aesthetics (and by that I mean both the *morphological* consideration to which our essay is dedicated, and the *qualitative* characterization of experience) has simply no relevance at all, if not marginal, compensational, secondary.

Getting out of this kind of interpretation of evolutionism will mean, not in the last, to get away from those drifts – of analytical origin in philosophy and adaptive in philosophy of biology – that I would call *strategies of irrelevancy*, that are the intentional theorization of the “objective marginality” of aesthetics. They technically go through (1) the idea that aesthetics should be taken only as an *attitude* (hence deprived of *form*, severed from the unity of the biological act), (2) the idea that such an attitude is a mere *by-product* of other activities more relevant for the species’ survival or (2bis) is *modular adaptation* appointed to the control and examination in itinere within the mind’s massively modular functioning (Tooby and Cosmides’ hypothesis). This leads (3) to the rather paradoxical result of the silence of evolutionary aesthetics precisely on those intrinsic questions as to the definitions of aesthetics itself (attempting a short, partial and biased listing: the intersubjective/interpersonal character of the aesthetic judgement, the responsibility of form, the value of perception in relation to the environment and the technique), that are peculiarly required in the time of biotechnology, genetic engineering, and biotechnological *enhancement* of perception itself.

However, precisely the re-discovered theoretical importance of the organism and of the form has been articulated, particularly in the biological debate of the last thirty years, into a program of research, or better, a multiplicity of programs of research, certainly not without frictions, but also full of remarkable convergence points, that we shall attempt to describe, starting from S. J. Gould’s work. In relation to such elements of convergency the transition from a semiotic-functionalist paradigm to an aesthetic-morphological one determines a perspective overturning with great theoretical consequences.

Whereas the functionalist model worked solving the organism into single *characters* explained as structure adaptively optimized by natural selection in relation to their function,

the morphological model considers the organisms as unities strongly integrated and constrained by their architecture, their history, by their internal system of development.

The *Spandrels of San Marco* that give the title to a famous article by Gould, namely those oblong triangular shaped spaces that, in San Marco cathedral in Venice, connect the dome of the Ascension to the supporting arches, are the paradigmatic example of the priority of the morphological constraint on the actual functional usefulness (the architectonic *constraints* comes first, then the *functionalization* in relation to the figurative project of the mosaics), precisely because on a methodological level the aesthetic reference, that is here even an aesthetic-artistic reference, allows the overcoming of biological prejudices (Gould, joining in to the warm appeals by Sam Cooke and John Dewey, talks precisely about *biological biases*) guiding the adaptationist model that give shape to the modern synthesis.

The elaboration of an evolutionary concept of organism, following previously introduced terms, implies vice versa the description of a hierarchical system of relations, that calls upon not only the making of the organic form and its environmental interactions, but also, very specifically, the possible modes of *experience building* by a living organism.

We shall start, regarding this matter, from an intuition on the overall rather clear from a plastic perspective, on the base of which, if we assume the existence of interactions between whatever *traits* (whatever kind of entities, as for instance anatomical structures and elements, processes, behaviours...), we are confronted anyway with an anything but homogeneous distribution of the "weight" of the existing constraints among the single traits, whose position within the chain of interdependencies comes out to be *hierarchically* different. So that, the "higher" the elements are positioned, the most difficult is to modify them, and the greatest are the implications of the success of any possible evolutionary change. The highest, then, is the *responsibility* of some traits in hierarchically restraining the whole structure's interplay. Hence, the drastic reduction of the *randomness* of change and a strongly unequal positioning within the morphological space.

The concept of the responsibility of the *burden*, formulated by the already mentioned Rupert Riedl, and the one, somehow similar, of *generative entrenchment* introduced by William Wimsatt, have in my opinion the great advantage of articulating the ethical responsibility of form, not as a more or less pathetic appeal, but rather as a soberly descriptive concept, whose relevance on the several hierarchical levels of the biological act of form/living experience can be possibly argued and discussed.

Back to the concept of constraint, the Evo-Devo and the new extended synthesis focus, rather than on the gene and the linear relation between adaptation and selection, on the developmental *constraints* and on the *co-evolution* of organism and environment, revealing a *multiplicity of evolutionary factors* acting on several level on the properties of the organic systems, so that the genetic level ultimately entails an anchorage, i.e. a "routinization" of interactions (physical, environmental, epigenetic) concerning in particular the modes of development of the organism. Precisely on such a hierarchical level of the structure, the great morphological issue (Goethe, Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire) of the unequal distribution of form in the logic space finds renewed scientific actuality: certain phenotypes and certain traits

(morphological, behavioural, etc.) are more accessible than others, determining the positively considered constraints as proper evolutionary trajectories; and, first of all, as for instance Paul E. Griffiths remarks, "Evo-Devo also problematizes the idea that the unit of selection is the individual gene because it describes emergent levels of organization in the developing phenotype. Although characters at these levels of organization are constructed through the interaction of gene products, they retain their identity when they are constructed using different developmental resources", therefore according to the primacy of the *morphological* constraint on the *force* of the functional reference.

From a methodological point of view, what I am eager to emphasize is the existing nexus between the question of the unity of the organism and the question of the qualitative innovation, that is the question of the origin of the organic form, not to be confused with its mere variation.

The upcoming of a new character in an already existing body plan is referred back, by Gerd Müller and his research team at the Konrad Lorenz Institute of Wien, to the function undertaken by the positively considered structural *constraint*. This means that we deal with an innovation connected to the phenotype and to the systems of development guiding its formation, that is only secondarily fixed as resulting from a genetic "program".

Since the evolutionary change acts on biological organisms characterized by the dynamic interaction of very diversified levels of the developmental systems, the evolutionary change of certain structures entails as a *secondary* consequence the modification of other structures.

More than other things, the heterochronies in the processes of development attract Müller's attention, who, in a deliberately provocative mode, takes on Ernst Haeckel's Nineteenth Century terminology. The "chronologic phase difference" in the processes of development leads indeed to the appearing of structures in which sometimes proper vestiges recapitulating the ontogenetic history of the species *palingenetically* return, sometimes the embryonic life structure instead *coenogenetically* stays, and sometimes formations that are just the side-effect of the new modes of development simply take place.

Already the elaboration of such a theory of the epigenetic evolution is an authentic methodological revolution for its qualitative, morphological, distinctively not adaptationist and not gradualist. However, the peak of theoretical tension in the system is, probably, the analysis of the *generic* properties, we could say physical properties, of the organic material; such an analysis – for which we can easily refer to D'Arcy Thompson as a tutelary deity – has been carried on in recent times by Stuart Newman as an absolute priority.

The turning point of Newman claim is the idea of organisms as "material entities rather than [...] mere expressions of their genetic content". The analysis of the physical behaviour of such materials allows, according to Newman, to sketch how the morphological features of the *structural plans* of modern organism came out of the physical properties of primordial aggregates.

The main idea shared by Newton's and Müller's researches from a philosophical perspective is undoubtedly the contraposition between the qualitative innovation and the mere quantitative variation taken into account by the standard theory of Neo-Darwinism.

The Twentieth Century evolutionary thinking is characterized, according to Newman, by a true "escape from materiality", as well as by the tendency to indifference in regard to the *organic support*, on which the biological concept of life is based. Therefore the rootedness in the generic material properties (physical, chemical) of cellular tissues entrails (back to Dewey analysis) an overturning of quantity into quality. Whereas the Neo-Darwinian paradigm considers the function, hence the force applied in the selective pressure, as the matrix of form, here we can instead legitimately argue that in the origin of features the function follows the form.

Additionally, whereas the Neo-Darwinian metaphysics of the *struggle for life*, in connection with the *escape from materiality*, describes an essentially extraneous world, that is an object of conquest and potential (bio-)technological appropriation, the "physical-evolutionary" instead – not incidentally focusing on the developments of the concept of *Niche Construction* – considers the living *at home in the universe*, in the original *common matter*.

Here as well, if we may, the ethical question is formulated in the methodological alternative pertaining to two different declinations of the theory of evolution, and, I would claim, in regard to two different poetics ultimately expressed also in Darwin's pages, the ones entitled after the "fight for existence", the others after the "biodiversity", i.e. the *endless forms most beautiful* mentioned by the last pages of *The Origin of the Species*, and precisely our feeling "at home" in these morphological and material configurations of reality, within the *boundaries* of our world and our body.

The main issue, and for us here also the conclusive one, is the possibility to find the same multiplicity of dimensions as aesthetic articulations of value in the morphological configurations themselves. This means to go back to the issue of the *modes of functioning* of the "biological commonplaces" of the aesthetic theory. I will simplify the path referring to the point of arrival, authoritatively expressed by one of the fathers of contemporary morphology.

"The perception of form", Rupert Riedl once remarked in reference to the current theoretical relevance of Goethe's researches, "is even able to order hierarchically fields of similarity".

I shall try to articulate this last claim in three passages, made of two premises and one conclusion. First, when Riedl refers to "fields of similarity" (*Ähnlichkeitsfelder*) it is necessary to distinguish between the *functional* analogy, that is the identity in function among different traits (for instance the "similarity", i.e. the analogy, between the eyes of an insect and that of a human being) and the *structural* homology, that is the identity of traits (Owen), the identity of their *Bedeutung* within the system, although *according to any variety of forms and functions*, as it is the case for the homology between the arms of a human being and the wings of a bird.

The analogy *establishes* then a similarity of traits based on functional criteria. While homology *sees* the identity of traits as a *structural constraint* much deeper than the “quantitative” variation of adaptive forms and functions.

Goethe’s morphological perspective was already as such, as we read in the final remarks of the *Metamorphosis of Plants*: “Whether the plant grows vegetatively, or flowers and bears fruit, the same organs fulfill nature’s laws throughout, although with different functions and often under different guises [Es mag nun die Pflanze sprossen, blühen oder Früchte bringen, so sind es doch nur immer *dieselbigen Organe*, welche, in vielfältigen Bestimmungen und unter oft veränderten Gestalten, die Vorschrift der Natur erfüllen]”.

However, we could not understand, if not in a trivially metaphorical sense, neither Goethe’s theory of homology in the structures of plants, nor Riedl’s theory of hierarchical order, if we were not to emphasize, – and this is the second premise – their systematic nature. Precisely under such conditions the concept of homology can allow to overcome the risks of a deterministic interpretation of the relationship between different hierarchical levels, i.e. for instance in genes interactions, processes development, morphological structures, behavioural structures. It has been indeed remarked that non-homologous traits on one level can give way to homologous traits on an other level and vice versa. Contemporary analyses on homology have named this phenomenon as *Hierarchical Disconnect*: the same result can be achieved in more than one way, and different results can be achieved starting from the same model. Just one example: the composite eyes of insects and those of the invertebrates are simply analogous, and yet the relevant developmental processes are started by regulator genes (respectively *eyeless* and *Pax-6*) that are homologous.

Once it has been clearly stated that the morphological enquiry does not aim to confer to some particular level the ability to determine the other levels (as it is, by any chance, – in the structuring of the relationships between biological and symbolical – the claim of adaptationism, or the recurrent misunderstanding following the endorsement of some neuroscience models), but that on the contrary, in relation to this matter, morphology provides a methodological antidote, we should still ask whether or not morphology is ultimately confined to such a negative meaning. In other words, we raise the issue of the *function* of the morphological perspective. Quoting Riedl: “The perception of form is even able to order hierarchically fields of similarity”.

From our two premises, the homology as identity of structural constraint according to any variety of form and function and the non-deterministic interpretation of hierarchical relationships, follows the conclusion that the morphological perspective – coming, as we have seen, from the evaluation of the organism in its unity and of the constraint in its ability to organize space for evolution, – focuses precisely on the recognition of the *homology of function* of biological and aesthetical concepts. These are, once again, our starting points, Dewey’s *biological commonplaces*, in their argumentative meaning.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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## Ethics of the Formlessness: Imagination, Sublime and Morality in Kantian Aesthetics

SERENA FELOJ

**Abstract:** this essay aims to show how the absence of form can support a reference to morality and then build an “ethics of the formlessness”. In order to do that, I will compare the feeling of sublime with the Kantian theory of symbol and I will claim that the movement of imagination in the *Analytic of the Sublime* does not find a symbol of morality in any empirical phenomenon, thus establishing a direct relation between aesthetics and morality. I will take into account three different elements: 1. the role of imagination in the relationship between ethic and shape; 2. the relationship between the activity of the imagination and the feeling of the sublime; 3. an interpretation of the sublime in comparison with the theory of symbol.

In Kant’s philosophy the concept of form has, as it is well known, an essential role. In the *Appendix to the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements* Kant defines form as “determination” of matter; the essential form of an object is then how the material *essentialia* are combined<sup>1</sup>. The form of the phenomenon, as Kant defines it in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, is then “that which allows the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations”<sup>2</sup>.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the notion of form has a totally different meaning. As it is well known, the universal practical laws can be conceived only as “principles that contain the determining ground of the will not by their matter but only by their form”. The form of moral law is, then, what is left when “one separates from it [i.e. the law] everything material, that is, every object of the will (as its determining ground)”<sup>3</sup>. Moral law should not contain then any empirical element.

In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant’s idea of form becomes, if possible, even more complex, since, on the matter of the *Anwendung*, that is the application of morality to the empirical world, he still maintains some elements of the notion of form of the logical judgement, as well as of the moral judgement. For this reason, however, we can properly speak of “ethics of form” only in the third Critique. There, the term “form” stands for both the mode of combination of the material elements of a phenomenon, according to the definition provided in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, and what is left when all sensible attractiveness is removed. If we consider the judgement on beauty, we remark that it takes into account only the form of the object: what is attractive to the senses, as, for instance, colours, do not fall under the judgement of taste<sup>4</sup>.

The formal nature of the judgement of taste is comprehensive, therefore, both of the formality of logic knowledge, that is not taking into account the material and specific content

<sup>1</sup> KrV, A266 | B322 [p. 370].

<sup>2</sup> KrV, B34 | A20 [p. 155].

<sup>3</sup> KpV, p. 27 [p. 160].

<sup>4</sup> For this reason, in figurative arts, “the drawing is what is essential, in which what constitutes the ground of all arrangements for taste is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases through its form” (KU, p. 225 [p. 110]).

of the phenomenon, and of the formality of morality, that does not allow sensible inclinations or attractions in the judgement on the actions of man. In this contribution, however, I would like to show that the peculiarity of the aesthetic judgement lies mainly in the fact that it can be formulated also in absence of form, and furthermore, that precisely when form is absent it supports a direct reference to morality. In the introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant writes:

the susceptibility to a pleasure from reflection on the form of things (of nature as well as art), however, indicates not only a purposiveness of objects in relation to the reflecting power of judgment, in accordance with the concept of nature, in the subject, but also, conversely, one of the subject, due to the concept of freedom, with regard to the objects, concerning their form or even their lack of form; and thereby it happens that the aesthetic judgment is related not only to the beautiful, merely as judgment of taste, but also, as one that has arisen from a feeling of spirit, to the sublime.<sup>5</sup>

The feeling of sublime suggests therefore a judgement formulated in absence of form. By the term "form" we intend in this case the two meanings previously presented. On the one hand, in the feeling of the sublime the absence of the form of the empirical phenomenon can be detected, since nature is taken in its "most chaotic and bizarre" aspects, where no connection among material elements subsists. On the other hand, the feeling of the sublime in this respect, identical to the moral sentiment, not only foresees the total absence of sensible attractiveness, but also springs out of a movement contrary to senses: the sublime comes out, indeed, from the contemplation of natural phenomena, in front of which the subject is, at first, rejected. The absence, then, does not pertain only to the object, but also to the pleasure of senses.

What I would like to show now is how the absence of form can support a reference to morality and then build an "ethics of the formlessness". In order to do that, I will compare the feeling of the sublime with the Kantian theory of symbol and I will claim that the movement of imagination in the *Analytic of the Sublime* does not find a symbol of morality in any empirical phenomenon, thus establishing a direct relation between aesthetics and morality.

## 1. Imagination between form and morality

As it is well known, the bond between empirical nature and rational supersensible is assured by the judgement of taste in the theory of aesthetic ideas through the concept of symbol. The aesthetic idea is "a representation of the imagination"<sup>6</sup>, inclined towards "something lying beyond the bounds of experience" and offering "a presentation of concepts of reason"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> KU, p. 192 [p. 77-78].

<sup>6</sup> KU, p. 316 [p. 194].

<sup>7</sup> KU, p. 314 [p. 192].

through the phenomenon that is judged beautiful. On the basis of the theory of aesthetic ideas, Kant can thus claim that beauty, in its formal nature, is a symbol of morality<sup>8</sup>. The bond between sensible and supersensible is then established in the judgement of taste thanks to the symbolic activity of imagination.

In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, the role of morality does not present, on a first level of interpretation, any difficulty. The sublime, in fact, is an aesthetic feeling traditionally belonging to the moral realm, identified by Kant himself with the respect of the practical law. The bond between sublime and morality, however, is somehow problematic if imagination is taken into account and if we ask whether it is possible to consider the activity of such a subjective activity as symbolic.

The function of imagination in the two *Analytics* of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* is certainly different: in the judgement of taste the imagination faculty apprehends the forms of the empirical phenomena and it orders them according to intellectual regularity; in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, instead, imagination is called to provide comprehension of multiplicity in relation to the idea of totality of reason. In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, therefore, through the faculty of imagination "no particular form is represented in the latter, but only a purposive use that the imagination makes of its representation is developed"<sup>9</sup>.

Although its function in the two *Analytics* is rather clear, it is still unclear what role imagination has in the whole of the third *Critique* and, most of all, in relation to the faculty of judgement. As Victor Basch claims, imagination is the most interesting element of Kantian aesthetics, although it raises the most concerning issues<sup>10</sup>. It is difficult to assign a place to imagination already in the *Introduction* where Kant, while defining the superior faculties of the transcendental subject<sup>11</sup>, does not give any role to imagination, due to the lack of a principle of its own. The absence of a principle, however, does not allow imagination to be the ideal faculty assuring the mediation between nature and freedom, since, as Kant already said in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it can present a synthesis that is not necessarily faithful neither to the intellectual concept nor to the rational idea.

Accordingly to the interpretation of many scholars<sup>12</sup> and mainly with the interpretation of Rudolf Makkreel, I believe that imagination in the third *Critique* can be considered as the subjective faculty that activates the mediation indicated by the faculty of judgement, thanks to its indefinite and conceptually detached nature. Such an interpretation explains both the absence of the faculty of imagination from the table of subjective faculties, and the first rate role it assures in relation to beauty and sublime. The scholars following this interpretation mainly focus, however, on beauty. About it, Kant indeed offers clearer and more numerous

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<sup>8</sup> KU, p. 353 [p. 227].

<sup>9</sup> KU, p. 246 [p. 130].

<sup>10</sup> See V. Basch, *Essai critique sur l'esthétique de Kant*, Paris, Alcan, 1896, p. 171 and p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> KU, p. 196-197 [p. 81-82].

<sup>12</sup> See H. Mörchen, *Die Einbildungskraft bei Kant*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1970.

elements. Only few studies, instead, are available on imagination in relation to sublime, describing the connection established with morality<sup>13</sup>.

The activity of imagination in relation to sublime is described by Kant already in the first pages of the second *Analytics*, where Kant writes:

to take up a quantum in the imagination intuitively, in order to be able to use it as a measure or a unit for the estimation of magnitude by means of numbers, involves two actions of this faculty: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*). There is no difficulty with apprehension, because it can go on to infinity; but comprehension becomes ever more difficult the further apprehension advances.<sup>14</sup>

Imagination then has the task to apprehend empirical multiplicity, that, since intellectual regularity is missing, appears as infinite and infinitely various, and to comprehend the apprehended multiplicity in relation to an idea of reason<sup>15</sup>. The imaginative faculty naturally fails its task of providing a comprehension of the infinite empirical multiplicity and the sublime, “hence as an emotion it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination”<sup>16</sup>. In its failure, however, imagination is stretched beyond its limit, that is beyond sensible experience, until it let the subject have an intuition of his/her moral destination<sup>17</sup>.

The reference to morality in the feeling of the sublime takes place through an intuition, exclusively by the movement of imagination, and in the absence of any object representation in it. This means in the absence of any empirical form.

## 2. Imagination and the feeling of sublime

The claim that, in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, the reference to morality takes place through an intuition, originated by the movement of imagination itself, has two main consequences: on

<sup>13</sup> See R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; K. Hyun Park, *Kant über das Erhabene. Rekonstruktion und Weiterführung der kritischen Theorie des Erhabenen Kants*, Bonn, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009; C. Prica, *Übergänge ohne Brücken: Kants Erhabene zwischen Kritik und Metaphysik*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> KU, p. 251 [p. 135].

<sup>15</sup> Makkreel claims that introducing an aesthetic mode of comprehension, Kant attributes to the activity of the imagination an element contrasting the previously assigned functions. Makkreel claims that, although both in the first and in the third Critique Kant assigns to imagination the task to collect what is apprehended by the internal sense. Totally different is the contribution of imagination in respect to logic and aesthetic experience. This difference is “due in large measure to the fact that in the third Critique the theory of the imagination includes the idea of an aesthetic comprehension” (R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation. The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 71). In a later work, Makkreel claims that also aesthetic comprehension as well as the regress of imagination are key elements in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, in relation to the task of integrating the two faculties that in the first two Critiques were left separated (R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Temporality in Kant's Theory of the Sublime*, in R.F. Chadwick, C. Cazcaux (eds.), *Immanuel Kant. Critical Assessments*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 378).

<sup>16</sup> KU, p. 245 [p. 129].

<sup>17</sup> KU, p. 255 [p. 138].

the one hand, it discloses the indefinite nature of the bond between sublime and morality, that can be theoretically described only with great difficulty. On the other hand, it reveals that the reference to morality in the feeling of the sublime does not require the mediation of the form of the object, symbolically referring back to the rational supersensible. The intuition of the moral destination of man, takes place, instead, with no mediation and it resembles, according to Christine Pries' interpretation, a "passage with no bridges", produced by the movement of apprehension and comprehension of imagination. The study of the imaginative faculty for the general understanding of the relationship between sublime and morality is thus fully justified.

In the attempt of providing aesthetic comprehension, imagination is called to collect in one single instant all the multiplicity apprehended. It thus engages into a movement of temporal regression. After undertaking apprehension according to the course of time, it tries to bring the multiplicity of natural phenomena in the same moment of time. Therefore, if comprehension occurs, it would spring out of an instantaneous representation of the empirical variety. Once the comparison with intellectual categories is missing, the only reference left to imagination is the idea of reason, which requires an intuitive and simultaneous comprehension<sup>18</sup>. Thus, if the comprehension of multiplicity is performed not by the intellect, but through the faculty of representation, that means intuitively, it is accomplished in one single instant and it is

a regression, which in turn cancels the time-condition in the progression of the imagination and makes simultaneity intuitable. It is thus (since temporal succession is a condition of inner sense and of an intuition) a subjective movement of the imagination, by which it does violence to the inner sense, which must be all the more marked the greater the quantum is which the imagination comprehends in one intuition.<sup>19</sup>

Kant happens to be describing the infinite power of imagination and, with it, its inability to measure itself with reason<sup>20</sup>. Aesthetic comprehension, defining imagination in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, should not, however, be considered simply as the location of the imaginative faculty's failure. As Claudio La Rocca claims, the experience of sublime can be fully accounted only if we consider the extension of imagination, just next to its defeat<sup>21</sup>. Reaching out towards its limit, imagination acts on the internal sense, on temporality. It extends its faculties and its very nature: it gets to have a glimpse of the moral supersensible. Thanks to

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<sup>18</sup> As Scaravelli writes, the imaginative apprehension's function "is based on the process of production of the "reognition of the concept", of which a double aspect is made clear: the continuity of the process, and the indifference of the process itself concerning the qualitative variety of the synthesised multiplicity" (L. Scaravelli, *Scritti kantiani*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1973, p. 462).

<sup>19</sup> KU, p. 259 [p. 142].

<sup>20</sup> "The systematic division of the structure of the world contributes to this, representing to us all that is great in nature as in its turn small, but actually representing our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as paling into insignificance beside the ideas of reason if it is supposed to provide a presentation adequate to them" (KU, p. 257 [p. 140]).

<sup>21</sup> C. La Rocca, *Strutture kantiane*, Pisa, ETS, 1990, p. 169.

the activity of imagination, then, the subject becomes aware of its superiority on nature and can conceive the supersensible, although he/she cannot provide an image of it.

I wonder, however, if the regressive movement of imagination, that does not reach any representation, can have a synthetic nature. If the regress of imagination could be taken as synthesis, the judgement on sublime should be placed, as Makkreel claims, in the pre-cognitive sphere, in relation to a kind of knowledge inferior to conceptual knowledge<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, the chances of the activity of imagination to have synthetic nature rest on the absence of form, that allows to think, although not to comprehend, the infinite and to have an intuition of morality. On this matter Kant writes:

the beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality.<sup>23</sup>

Imagination, therefore, goes from the apprehension of the infinitely big to the comprehension of its totality; its activity, then, is the expression of the relationship between aesthetic *Zusammenfassung* (comprehension)<sup>24</sup> and the regress of imagination. Within such dynamics, is it still possible to talk about synthesis?

Certainly the process of synthesis described in *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>25</sup> does not foresee any imbalance among cognitive movements, as it happens, instead, in the judgement on sublime<sup>26</sup>. We should remark, furthermore, that, as Makkreel recalls<sup>27</sup>, in the description of aesthetic comprehension, Kant never refers to synthetic elements<sup>28</sup>: imagination, in fact, tries

<sup>22</sup> See R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* cit., p. 49. For the same reason, Paul Guyer, in his study on the harmony of the faculties, claims that the contributions of imagination are described as a preconceptual synthesis of the apprehension as well as of the reproduction of the *Subjective Deduction* of the first Critique (see P. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 86). However, Makkreel adds, we should remark that Kant refers to an apprehension without concepts, and not to a synthesis without concepts. The synthesis of the apprehension in the *Subjective Deduction* was an elementary process of intuition concerning the multiplicity of senses. It cannot therefore be identified with the aesthetic apprehension of the form by imagination (cfr. R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* cit., p. 50).

<sup>23</sup> KU, p. 244 [p. 128].

<sup>24</sup> See Refl. 5661, AA 18: 320.

<sup>25</sup> In the first Critique Kant writes that by synthesis we mean the possibility that appearances follow a rule and that the manifold of their representation takes place in a "combination, composition, and nexus" (KrV, A77 [p. 210]). Moreover in the *Transcendental Analytic* Kant claims: "by synthesis in the most general sense, however, I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition. Such a synthesis is pure if the manifold is given not empirically but *a priori* (as is that in space and time)" (KrV, B 103/A 77 [p. 210]).

<sup>26</sup> See L. Scaravelli, *Scritti kantiani* cit., p. 464; S. Maruccci, *Intelletto e «intellettualismo» nell'estetica di Kant*, Ravenna, Longo, 1976, p. 90; C. La Rocca, *Strutture kantiane* cit., p. 163-164.

<sup>27</sup> R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* cit., p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> The lexicon employed by Kant in the *Analytic of the Sublime* reveals his will to clearly distinguish aesthetic comprehension from logic comprehension. In logic or mathematic comprehension the content of senses is taken as a multiplicity, that it a compound of parts temporally determined; in the aesthetic comprehension, instead, the content of senses is taken as a multiplicity of indeterminate parts of a whole: according to this perspective, only a

to establish a relation of temporal simultaneity in the multiplicity without a conceptual synthesis, nor Kant explicitly identifies this operation as a process of reproduction or recognition, that can be assimilated to the synthesis described in the first Critique.

It seems then rather difficult to define the function of imagination in the *Analytic of the Sublime* as synthetic. This brings to the claim that, given the absence of synthesis and the absence of form, the feeling of the sublime has nothing to do with knowledge, differently from beauty<sup>29</sup>. Sublime, therefore, only allows to “think” the object of the judgement it originates and the activity of imagination, unable to provide a representation of the totality, however goes after an intuition of it. On this point, what Kant writes in the § 27 is particularly meaningful:

the measurement of a space (as apprehension) is at the same time the description of it, thus an objective movement in the imagination and a progression; by contrast, the comprehension of multiplicity in the unity not of thought but of intuition, hence the comprehension in one moment of that which is successively apprehended, is a regression which in turn cancels the time-condition in the progression of the imagination and makes simultaneity intuible.<sup>30</sup>

The movement of imagination described by Kant in this passage cannot be considered a synthesis, but rather it is a “description”, an intuition. This peculiar non-synthetic activity of imagination is what allows an intuition of morality and the formlessness to have a moral meaning. According to the interpretation of Paul de Man, the activity of imagination in the feeling of the sublime presents a disarticulated structure of nature in the pure materiality of what can be seen, as well as absence of unity, but it does not recognize the indeterminate unity provided by aesthetic comprehension<sup>31</sup>. What appears to the eyes and is comprehended

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non-synthetic regress of imagination makes an intuition possible as well as a comprehension of multiplicity of this kind.

<sup>29</sup> Differently from sublime, the judgment of taste can be formulated starting from a well definite image of the object, therefore, the form, although still indeterminate, is not all the same (see K. Düsing, *Beauty as the Transition from Nature to Freedom in Kant's Critique of Judgment*, “Noûs” 24, 1990, p. 82). For this reason many interpreters of the judgment of taste have formulated the hypothesis that, although clearly distinct from the determining judgment, it has the very configuration of a judgment of knowledge. See R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* cit., p. 66; S. Rajiva, *Is Hypothetical Reason a Precursor to Reflective Judgment?*, “Kant-Studien” 97 (2006), p. 114-126; K. Goudeli, *Kant's Reflective Judgement: The Normalisation of Political Judgement*, “Kant-Studien” 95 (2004), p. 51-68.

<sup>30</sup> KU, p. 258-259 [p. 142]. Already in the *Dissertatio* of 1770 Kant claims: “For it is only through the idea of time that it is possible for the things which come before the senses to be represented as simultaneous or successive. Nor does succession generate the concept of time; it makes appeal to it. And thus the concept of time, regarded as if it had been acquired through experience, is very badly defined, if it is defined in terms of the series of actual things which exist one *after* the other. For I only understand the meaning of the little word *after* by means of the antecedent concept of time. For those things comes *after* one another which exist at different times, just as those things are *simultaneous which exist at the same time*” (MSI, p. 398 [p. 392]).

<sup>31</sup> P. De Man, *Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant*, in G. Shapiro, A. Sica (eds.), *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1984, p. 143.

in one second is not a mere empirical intuition, but rather refers directly and with no mediation to morality<sup>32</sup>.

### 3. Symbol and sublime

The reference to morality makes the activity of imagination described in the *Analytic of the Sublime* very similar to the one presented in the theory of aesthetic ideas<sup>33</sup>. In the aesthetic idea, indeed, imagination is called, as for the sublime, to represent something ideal that cannot be described<sup>34</sup>. Sublime and aesthetic idea are configured, then, as two peculiar intuitions of imagination<sup>35</sup>, referring to moral supersensible and to human reason, thus obtaining both an extension of imagination beyond its limits<sup>36</sup>, and a comparison between sensible and intelligible.

Sublime and aesthetic ideas can be distinguished, however, in relation to form: the feeling of sublime, in fact, springs out in the absence of form<sup>37</sup>, the aesthetic idea, instead, expresses itself precisely through the artistic form. In the theory of aesthetic ideas, imagination seems to “give much to think about”, that is it seems to produce a representation that, starting from intuition, gives way to the ideas, but it cannot find the corresponding concepts<sup>38</sup>. In the case of sublime, instead, imagination is not capable to grasp in the form of

<sup>32</sup> See R.A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* cit., p. 75-77.

<sup>33</sup> I share Eljo Franzini's claim that the feeling of the sublime and the aesthetic ideas tend to a common exhibition, that takes place any time that spontaneity of imagination is pushed towards the non-representable and it is not able to provide a scheme in order to judge an intuition. Face to such an impossibility or failure, imagination calls upon, then, a non-categorical representation, allusive or symbolic, indicating supersensible and reason (E. Franzini, *Schema, simbolo e sentimento del sublime*, “Rivista di estetica” 37/4 (1997), p. 83 [my translation]). The possibility to realise this type of representation is the essential mark of humanity and the exhibition of its nature, since, as Franzini in conclusion says, “the sentiment is that analogical scheme, that is that symbol of thought, that is the a priori condition of each possible thinking: ‘thinking’ to the productive sense of humanity, looking for that median point – one more analogy of a scheme – ‘between the superior culture and the simple nature’” (E. Franzini, *Schema, simbolo e sentimento del sublime* cit., p. 84 [my translation]).

<sup>34</sup> On this matter, the reader should refer to what Franzini writes: “the aesthetic idea, in vertu of its symbolic and pre-categorical qualities, cannot be ‘exhibited’, but not ‘exposed’: in fact by ‘exposition’ (*expositio, Erörterung*) Kant means the clear, although not exhaustive, representation of what belong to the concept, while by ‘exhibition’ (*exhibitio, Darlegung*) the bond between the concept and the corresponding intuition” (E. Franzini, *Schema, simbolo e sentimento del sublime* cit., p. 81 [my translation]).

<sup>35</sup> See KU, p. 240 [p. 124]; KU, p. 342 [p. 218].

<sup>36</sup> Gabriele Tomasi claims that, thanks to the extension of imagination, “the concept is then ‘aesthetically’ extended ‘unlimitedly’” and there is “the possibility of a positive relationship between imagination and reason, to be taken into account for the correct evaluation of his [Kant's] concept of beauty”. Hence, the imagination is creative when “is not limited to match the concept to the corresponding intuition, but it extends it, since the presented intuition is linked to such a great multiplicity of ‘partial representations’ (*Teilvorstellungen*), to give much more to think than the given concept” (G. Tomasi, *La forma che fa apparire l'idea. Immaginazione, intelletto e ragione nella concezione kantiana della pittura*, “Rivista di estetica” 37/4 (1997), p. 54 [my translation]). Imagination, therefore, moves “towards what is beyond the limits of sensibility, not pretending di provide a full exhibition” (G. Tomasi, *La forma che fa apparire l'idea* cit., p. 62 [my translation]).

<sup>37</sup> KU, p. 245 [p. 129].

<sup>38</sup> La Rocca, promoting an interpretation that considers aesthetic experience as “exchange between linguisticities and images”, claims that “the interpretation of an aesthetic form induces the multiplication in beauty of iconical senses and linguistic meanings in a intricate interplay” (C. La Rocca, *Soggetto e mondo. Studi su Kant*, Genova, Marsilio, 2003, p. 257 [my translation]). Imagination, therefore, act on such a great number of representations



apprehension a kind of totality, that, if comprehended, satisfies reason. This determines, in my opinion, a different relation to morality. As we saw earlier, the formlessness allows an immediate reference to the rational supersensible. Through the aesthetic idea, instead, imagination indicated beauty as a medium in order to reach morality and it establishes a symbolic bond. On the one hand, then, it seems that there is a single common imaginative process of intuition of the ideas of reason<sup>39</sup>, but on the other it does not seem convincing that the theory of symbol can support all the imaginative processes of access to morality.

Some scholars, especially nowadays, have presented interesting interpretations of the sublime as symbol of morality; where Kant writes that beauty is a symbol of morality, he would then intend a reference not only to the judgement of taste, but actually to both the instances of the aesthetic judgement<sup>40</sup>. In particular, Kap Hyun Park claims that sublime is nearer to morality than beauty<sup>41</sup> and that an interpretation of sublime as a symbol of morality is, not only more plausible, but also more functional to the solution of the problem of the application of morality to the empiric world<sup>42</sup>. According to Park, the main difference between § 59 and the *Analytic of the Sublime* lies in the principle of finality<sup>43</sup>, applied to the object of nature in one case, fully subjectively in the other<sup>44</sup>: the bond between nature, starred sky, morality, the law of reason, is guaranteed by the unity of the subject, that is the premise of the description of sublime, more than it is of beauty<sup>45</sup>. Park advocated the validity of such an interpretative hypothesis on the basis of the arguments presented by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, Milton Nahm and John Zammito<sup>46</sup>, who identify the feeling of the sublime with the symbol of morality. Although such interpretation is charming and, possibly, partially shareable, in Kant's text there are not many elements supporting it, and the risk to end up understanding the symbol in the light of a theory that is different from Kant's is very high.

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that "occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it" (KU, p. 314 [p. 192]). La Rocca insists on how this passage of § 49 can actually refer to the possibility of a schematism without concept: imagination, as a matter of fact, produces in the aesthetic idea links among the images orientated to the translation into concept, "excluding that this process has to end with a determinate concept or with the simple conceptual cognition of imagination" (C. La Rocca, *Soggetto e mondo* cit., p. 258 [my translation]).

<sup>39</sup> See S. Borutti, *Immaginazione e pensiero del limite. Darstellung e Einstimmung in Kant e Wittgenstein*, "Paradigmi" 3 (2009), p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> See R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* cit., p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> K.H. Park, *Kant über das Erhabene* cit., p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> On this matter, see what Kant writes in the *Reflexion* 992: "§. – A. Deduction of the aesthetic power of judgment concerning the beautiful in nature; B – concerning the sublime in nature. §. The culture of both in nature is preparation for moral feeling: the first with regard to imperfect duties, the second with regard to perfect duties. – For in both there is subjective purposiveness of nature. The first, with respect to its quality, the second with regard to the magnitude of the purposive determination of the subject" (*Ref.*, Bd. 15, p. 437 [p. 522]).

<sup>44</sup> K.H. Park, *Kant über das Erhabene* cit., p. 174.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>46</sup> See T. Cohen, *Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality*, in T. Cohen, P. Guyer (eds.), *Essays in Kant's Aesthetic*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1992, p. 234; P. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 263; M.C. Nahm, *Sublimity and the Moral Law in Kant's Philosophy*, "Kant-Studien" 48 (1957), p. 517. Zammito explicitly claims: "the sublime was the aesthetic experience which par excellence symbolized the moral dimension of human existence" (J.H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgement*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 279).

Kant, in fact, provides a very precise, almost restrictive, definition of what he means by symbol. Symbol for Kant is a mere analogy, that interests both the phenomenic object, and the schematic process that allows its comprehension<sup>47</sup>. In the aesthetic ideas it is then possible to establish an analogy with morality: the process undertaken by imagination, trying to find a proper object in order to express the idea, is very similar to the one undertaken by moral judgement. The aesthetic idea, moreover, express itself through the beautiful form, into an empirical object. The object thus acquires a symbolic value and becomes a medium between nature and freedom.

In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, instead, the movement of imagination is different: the regress movement avoids the synthesis and the accomplishment in a sensible or ideal representation. The distance between the sublime and aesthetic ideas is marked, besides the absence of form, also by the absence of concept. In the theory of aesthetic ideas, indeed, an indeterminate concept of the supersensible is given, so that the imagination tries to express it through representation. In the theory of sublime, instead the multiplicity is given, in his infinite greatness and power; no concept is adequate to its comprehension and imagination establishes a relationship with the rational idea of totality. Sublime then rests exclusively in the dimension of the non conceptual.

The non synthetic and non conceptual nature of the imaginative activity motivates the feeling of the sublime diverging from the theory of aesthetic ideas and the theory of symbol. The reflection of nature in the theory of sublime and in the theory of aesthetic ideas entails, in both cases, "the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond"<sup>48</sup>. The feeling of sublime, however, presents total absence of the given concept. Such an absence prevents the assimilation of the feeling with the theory of symbol; the absence of concept is linked, moreover, with the absence of form. The symbolic representation, indeed, is accomplished when an object refers, by analogy, to morality:

a regard to this analogy is customary even for the ordinary understanding, and we often designate beautiful objects of nature or of art with names that seem to be ground in a moral judging [...] Taste a sit were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap by representing the imagination even in its freedom as purposively determinable for

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<sup>47</sup> "All intuitions that are ascribed to concepts a priori are thus either schemata or symbols, the first of which contain direct, the second indirect presentations of the concept. The first do this demonstratively, the second by means an analogy (for which empirical intuitions are also employed), in which the power of judgment performs a doubletask, first applying the concept to the object of a sensible intuition, and, then, second, applying the mere rule of reflection on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the first is only the symbol" (KU, p. 352 [p. 226]). The same definition is applied in the *Preisschriften der Fortschritte der Metaphysik*, where Kant claims: "the symbol of an idea (or of a concept of reason) is a representation of the object according to an analogy" (AA 20: 280).

<sup>48</sup> KU, p. 353 [p. 227].

the understanding and teaching us to find a free satisfaction in the objects of the senses even without any sensible charm.<sup>49</sup>

When Kant writes that analogy entails also “objects of senses with no sensible attractiveness”, he may seem to refer to the sublime. It is clear, however, that the judgement on sublime simply refers to the mood of the subject and does not refer to any object. Therefore, the definition of the symbolic representation as an exhibition of the intuition of an object that is inadequate to the given concept, although analogous to the moral good, cannot include, without clear issues, the feeling of sublime.

The idea that the sublime should not be taken as symbol of morality certainly does not seem to weaken its bond with practical philosophy. The claim that the feeling of sublime refers, by analogy, to morality could, indeed, be considered as rather limited, since this sentiment reveals a deeper, essential bond, with morality.

In the first lines of § 27 of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, as a matter of fact, Kant writes that the feeling of sublime is moral respect, and not only its representation. The absence of form comes out to be essential to the bond between sublime and morality. The activity of imagination in the theory of sublime is thus linked with moral disposition,

in that it is grounded in the feeling of a vocation of the mind [...] (the moral feeling), in regard to which the representation of the object is judged as subjectively purposive. In fact a feeling for the sublime in nature cannot even be conceived without connecting it to a disposition of the mind that is similar to the moral.<sup>50</sup>

The absence of form justifies, then, the strong bond between the feeling of sublime and morality, so that it is possible to claim the existence of an ethics of formlessness in Kant's aesthetics.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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Where possible, I use the English translations of Kant's writings from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. References are given according to the volume and page numbers of the German Academy edition of Kant's works. I use the following abbreviations for Kant's writings:

AA: KANT, Immanuel, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

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<sup>49</sup> KU, p. 354 [p. 228].

<sup>50</sup> KU, p. 268 [p. 151].

KrV: KANT, Immanuel, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 3-4, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1911 [KANT, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by GUYER, Paul and WOOD, Allen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000].

KpV: KANT, Immanuel, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 5, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1913 [KANT, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. by GREGOR, Mary J., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996].

KU: KANT, Immanuel, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 5, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1913 [KANT, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by GUYER, Paul, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000].

MSI: KANT, Immanuel, *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1910 [KANT, Immanuel, *On the Form and the Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*, in *Theoretical Philosophy (1755-1770)*, ed. by WALFORD, David, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992].

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# Form and Fragment: the Unfeasibility of Sense in T.W. Adorno

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**Abstract:** according to Adorno, art has a double-edged character: as autonomy and as social fact. Art draws its materials from the empiric realm, but “only to recoil at the actual touch of it”: its relationship with reality cannot be immediate, and, at the same time, must not reject the external world. In fact, the unsolved antagonisms of reality emerges in the artwork as problems immanent to its form, and precisely in its detachment from the empirical. However, the impossibility of fixing the artistic creation in definitive schemes is connected to the impossibility of a synthesis, i.e. an organic form, that would turn itself into a false conciliation. By their own structure, artworks are not and cannot be organisms: on the contrary, they refuse their organic aspect as illusory and affirmative. The form, turning into a fragment, converges therefore with the criticism of the existing: its “law of transfiguration” represents freedom against a world of unfreedom.

According to Adorno, art has to bear on its shoulders the burden of a irrational historical progress; therefore, its relationship with the world is essential. Art is supposed to be contemporary and not to be settled into ancient fashions of expression, since “the world of imagery, itself thoroughly historical, is done an injustice by the fiction of a world of images that effaces the relations in which people live”<sup>1</sup>. The way in which culture must become part of the present is a problem where a decisive role is played by dialectic mediation, or, in other words, aesthetic distance. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to consider a mode of expression which clings itself to an immediacy that is already lost. Adorno believes that the relation between man and reality is a negative one; macrocosm and microcosm, the world and the I, are both marked by an intrinsic struggle. The scientific disenchantment of nature does not allow any direct relationship neither with life, nor with tradition, nor with the world: the respective mediation of work, conscience and language are necessary. Secondly, the relationship between the man and his world is upset by the autonomisation of the relations of production.

In this framework, the absolute freedom of art denies the perpetual state of unfreedom of the whole: the autonomy achieved by art, releasing itself from its cultural dimension, was fed on the ideal of humanity; and the more upset this ideal was, the more inhuman became the true face of progress. The autonomy of art is not under discussion, but Adorno is wondering if, on the contrary, its own possibility of existing is: “whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions”<sup>2</sup>. Separating itself from theology, and so

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<sup>1</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London-New York, Continuum, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* The precarious existence of art in the modern world is also linked, to Adorno, to the urgent need for rethinking aesthetics, whose traditional categories are no longer suitable to understand the sphere of artistic: “Yet the flagging interest in aesthetics is not only predicated on aesthetics as a discipline but equally, and indeed more so, on its object. Insofar as aesthetics concerns itself primarily with the how rather than with the fact of art, it seems silently to imply the possibility of art. This position has become uncertain. Aesthetics can no longer take the fact of art for granted in the way that Kant’s theory of knowledge presupposed the mathematical natural sciences”. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

“from the unqualified claim to the truth of salvation”<sup>3</sup>, art is doomed to offer a “redemptive surrogate”: a consolation that strengthens pattern of domination from which it would like to set itself free. Art’s autonomy becomes therefore a part of conciliation; positing the totality out of itself, as something that is accomplished in itself, art conveys the image of its harmonic universe to the world, and from which it has drawn its materials. Proposing itself, as a unity, fundamental figure of reification<sup>4</sup>, culture escapes from “its own truth”: negation<sup>5</sup>.

By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world – a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus is no mere escape, but a law immanent to it – art sanctions the primacy of reality. [...] In the face of the abnormality into which reality is developing, art’s inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber. Yet art is not to be dismissed simply by its abstract negation. By attacking what seemed to be its foundation throughout the whole of its tradition, art has been qualitatively<sup>6</sup> transformed; it itself becomes qualitatively other. It can do this because through the ages by means of its form, art has turned against the *status quo* and what merely exists just as much as it has come to its aid by giving form to its elements.<sup>7</sup>

Art has a double-edged character: as autonomy and as social fact. It draws its materials from the empiric realm, but “only to recoil at the actual touch of it”<sup>8</sup>. As a form of knowledge, art actually involves the knowledge of what is real by grasping its essence, not as a superficial form of mimesis: not through imitation, but initiating it into art; that is to say, by dissolving its elements, and by reconstructing them according to their own formal laws. Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which is repressed by reality’s compulsion to identity<sup>9</sup>. Only by virtue of the separation from empirical reality, which models the relation of the whole and the part according to the work’s own need, the artwork achieves a heightened order of existence: “artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> “In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one”. T.W. Adorno, *Prism. Essays in Cultural Criticism and Society*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 15. See also T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 34: “Art is modern when, by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has developed under the given relations of production. This involves a negative canon, a set of prohibitions against what the modern has disavowed in experience and technique; and such determinate negation is virtually the canon of what is to be done”.

<sup>6</sup> In an endless process of becoming, art finds its definition in its being not reducible, from a dialectical point of view, to a unique determination: “The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition. [...] Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. The tension between what motivates art and art’s past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not”. *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 4.



is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience"<sup>10</sup>. By withdrawing the materials of reality from the univocity of the "enlightenment", art detaches itself from the domination of the empirical sphere. Not once and for all, but always and again, in an unconscious dispute against the undifferentiated attitude of such a domination<sup>11</sup>. If art is inconceivable without its relationship with the objective spirit of its age, it cannot even forgo to transcend it. "When culture simply denies the separation and feigns, harmonious union, it falls back behind its own notion"<sup>12</sup>. As a matter of fact, the predominance of its empiric side on the autonomous moment brings about the fact that art is mediated by the whole society, that is to say by the dominating structure. It is not by accident that the cultural industry, nemesis of any intellectual authenticity, is loudly demanding the removal of any "shameful" difference between art and life. In a world on a (had) entertainment scale, the illusions of progress become more believable.

The reduction of the aesthetic distance matches the compromise with barbarism: a risk that is run by knowledge itself, as well as by art. Nothing but the distance, which is to be seen as a tension field and not as a security area, can guarantee knowledge; the obstinate research of an equation, of an identity that can explain the multiplicity of the empiric – as in the attempts of neopositivism criticised by Adorno – is a "kid game". The concept cannot fully exhaust the subject, given the presence, within itself, of something that is not conceptual<sup>13</sup>; it must aim to go beyond, targeting the transcendence of its subject:

Only at a remove from life can the mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical. While thought relates to facts and moves by criticizing them, its movement depends no less on the maintenance of distance. It expresses exactly what is, precisely because what is never quite as thought expresses it. Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it. Thus every thought resembles play, with which Hegel no less than Nietzsche compared the work of the mind. The unbarbaric side of philosophy is its tacit awareness of the element of irresponsibility.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> A paradigmatic example is the composition technique of the new music in Schönberg's work: "The indescribable tension of the musical forces in Schönberg's *oeuvre* and his immediate school springs from the fact that their works possess not only a total constructed unity, but also all the nuances and contrasts of the soul divided against itself, as it is against the world; and that this legacy of subjectivism, which is all too cheaply derided today, is not abstractly negated, but is preserved and raised to a higher level, as the double meaning of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* would have it. While all the elements interpenetrate, they also remain distinct, and the unity comes into being only through the function each of them has and by virtue of which it influences the others". T.W. Adorno, *Sound figures*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Prism. Essays in Cultural Criticism and Society* cit., p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> See T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Oxon, Routledge, 2000, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, London-New York, Verso, p. 126-127.

It is only at a certain distance that the autonomous movement of the subject can be satisfactorily followed. Philosophers, as well as artists, are asked to be, at the same time, in the matter [*Sachen*] and outside of the matter [*Sachen*]. It is not surprising that the gesture of Münchhausen, pulling himself out of a swamp by his pigtail, becomes the pattern of any knowledge that wants to be something more than a statement of facts. The “broadening” knowledge lingers over every single phenomenon until it breaks its isolation: not subsuming it to a universal, but solving in itself what is tangible. A more precise expression of it is:

the double-edged method which has earned Hegel’s *Phenomenology* the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such – in a “pure looking-on” – and yet that their relation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, expresses this morality most directly and in all its depth of contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

It is not through the immediate revelation of the essence that art tries to give justice to what is oppressed. By opposing to the rationality that dominates nature with its fixed determinations, art revokes its “violent act”. Not giving in to the temptation of a univocal synthesis<sup>16</sup>, but assuming the conformation of a *constellation* of elements, art succeeds in referring back to its *other*:

Art is related to its other as is a magnet to a field of iron filings. Not only art’s elements, but their constellation as well, that which is specifically aesthetic and to which its spirit is usually chalked up, refer back to its other. The identity of the artwork with existing reality is also that of the work’s gravitational force, which gathers around itself its *membra disjecta*, traces of the existing. The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and that is the same principle by which spirit organized the world. The synthesis achieved by means of the artwork is not simply forced on its elements; rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another; thus the synthesis is itself a product of otherness. Indeed, synthesis has its foundation in the spirit-distant material dimension of works, in that in which synthesis is active<sup>17</sup>. This unites the aesthetic element of form with noncoercion. By its difference from

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73

<sup>16</sup> See T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> “The distance acquired, which is its result, not only reveals the objective character of the artwork. It also affects the subjective comportment, in that it severs primitive identifications and puts the recipient qua empirical psychological person out of action, which benefits his relation to the work” (*ibid.*, p. 243). This is a clear reference to Husserl, and in particular to his letter to von Hoffmannsthal: “The artist, who “observes” the world in order to gain “knowledge” of nature and man for his own purposes, relates to it in a similar way as the phenomenologist. Thus: not as an observing natural scientist and psychologist, not as a practical observer of man, as if it were an issue of knowledge of man and nature. When he observes the world, it becomes a phenomenon for him, its existence is indifferent, just as it is to the philosopher (in the critique of reason)”. E. Husserl, *Letter to Hoffmannsthal*, “SIFB Magazine” 26-27 (2009).

empirical reality the artwork necessarily constitutes itself in relation to what it is not, and to what makes it an artwork in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

The unsolved antagonisms of reality emerge in the artwork as problems immanent to its form, and precisely in the detachment of the latter from the empirical. If contradictions are immediate and can only lead to division, nevertheless, within the form "their mediation, implicitly contained in the empirical, becomes the for-itself of consciousness, only by the act of stepping back from it, which is what art does. This stepping back is, as such, an act of knowledge"<sup>19</sup>. The form<sup>20</sup> is conceived as the organisation of what is manifesting within the artwork, in an agreement that, to a certain extent, disagree. The form, as the authentic thought, is actually a synthesis<sup>21</sup>, but not a violent one, since it preserve the element of dissonance in its contradictions. The truth of the artworks, as it is stressed by Adorno, "depends on whether they succeed at absorbing into their immanent necessity what is not identical with the concept, what is according to that concept accidental"<sup>22</sup>. Such a relation with extraneousness allows the form to converge with the criticism of the existing: its "law of transfiguration" represents freedom against a world of unfreedom, and makes the form itself intrinsically critical.

In its being a *sedimentation of content* [*sedimentierte Inhalt*], the form succeeds in communicating with the empirical, while still opposing it, within the artwork<sup>23</sup>. This notion is a reference to Warburg's meditation: the image cannot be defined once and for all, but it is the result of movements and meanings settling within itself over time: *sedimented*. Warburg's images are linked to the survival [*Nachleben*] of a sensitive dimension that cannot be acknowledged in a conclusive way. Composed of different layers of relations and determinations, linked to religion, poetry, faith and drama, it is neither limited to the meanings that are attributed to it, nor to any representation that can be rendered. As a sort of trace of a lost world, the image is also a present memory, through which ancient reminiscences of the past can come back to life. According to Adorno, the form, as a *sedimented* content, cannot utterly deny the materials it comes from. As a matter of fact, the

<sup>18</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> The philosopher remarks: "It is astonishing, however, how little aesthetics reflected on the category of form, how much it, the distinguishing aspect of art, has been assumed to be unproblematically given. [...] Because form is the central concept of aesthetics and is always presupposed by it in the givenness of art, aesthetics must gather all its forces to think the concept through. If aesthetics is not to be trapped in tautologies it must gain access to what is not simply immanent in the concept of form [...]. An aesthetics of form is possible only if it breaks through aesthetics as the aesthetics of the totality of what stands under the spell of form. Whether art is in any way still possible depends precisely on this. The concept of form marks out art's sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art's right to exist is uncertain. Art has precisely the same chance of survival as does form, no better". *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

<sup>21</sup> "It is only through the relation to these elements of identity that the sought-after nonidentity is achieved; without sameness of any sort, chaos itself would prevail as something ever-same". *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> "Aesthetic categories of form such as particularity, development and resolution of conflict, even the anticipation of reconciliation through homeostasis, are transparent with regard to their content even, and most of all, where they have separated themselves from the empirical objects. Precisely by distance from it art adopts its stance toward the empirical world". *Ibid.*, p. 145.

success of the artwork relies on its ability to awake what is latent, so to speak, in itself. Nonetheless, it would not be correct to state that works draw their content from reality. The content is a counter-movement impressed in those creations that take distance from it: "the artistic progress, provided that it is appropriate to talk about it, is the totality of this movement. This contributes to the content with its determined denial"<sup>24</sup>. Constituted by "mimetic impulses that are drawn into the world of images that is form"<sup>25</sup>, and not by external materials, the content is to be simultaneously thought in opposition and through the form; keeping in mind that it does not exhaust itself in what is visible. Artworks become authentic by generating a "more", "stolen" to nature<sup>26</sup>, even if they cannot represent it; their form is no longer sufficient to its description. As a memory of the ancestral thrill and wreck of the religious dimension of art<sup>27</sup>, the manifestation of the more is "the paradoxical unity or the balance between the vanishing and the preserved"<sup>28</sup>. The image becomes the apparition of what is not visible and material<sup>29</sup>:

The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks [...] Fireworks are apparition *kat'ecsochen*: they appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign from heaven yet artificial, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning. [...] It is not through a higher perfection that artworks separate from the fallibly existent but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently in an expressive appearance. They are not only the other of the empirical world: everything in them becomes other.<sup>30</sup>

Neither entity nor universal concept, what manifests itself through art has, in itself, a critical essence, which represents the unsumable and, as such, challenges the ruling principle of reality: that of exchangeability. What appears is not exchangeable; given its evanescent character, it does not represent a particular that can be replaced with another, and it also cannot be subsumed within an empty universal<sup>31</sup>. Opposing to the *status quo*, the nonexistent

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> "Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: this is the idea of art". *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 108-109.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Alfieri comments this passage by arguing that: "Truth, in art, can only be felt, indirectly grasped through the form. The non-factuality of the truth, its un-objectivity, can be perceived, felt and participated by men only in its passing through the activity of form [...]. As Adorno had already theorised in its *Negative Dialectic*, it is always and only from sensibility that truth can develop itself [...]. There is no truth without sensibility. The reference to Nietzsche and to the core of his philosophy, which revaluated sensibility by attributing it a primary role compared to transcendence, is absolutely clear. The same paradoxical relation between form and content that is to be found in Adorno was at the heart of Nietzsche's thought in *The Birth of Tragedy*". A. Alfieri, *I paradossi dell'arte nella Teoria estetica di Theodor W. Adorno*, "Dialogesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofia" 10 (2008).

<sup>30</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 83.

hides in itself a *promise of happiness*, while finding a fleeting glimmer in art. In its rising as if it was existent, even if it is not, "art promises what is not; it registers objectively, however refractedly, the claim that because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible"<sup>32</sup>. In other words, the artistic image as apparition is able to express the tension towards otherness, contrasting the homologating mechanism of the reified reality. Still, it cannot be referred to nothing present<sup>33</sup>: art becomes utopia, but in a negative way; in order to not betray its utopian character and become a form of consolation, it cannot fulfill its aspiration, or else it would end. "Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively. A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia"<sup>34</sup>. This shows the truth character of the artwork: because truth is what is not matching with the reified world. The seal of the authentic artwork is linked to the manifestation of its semblance (apparition of what is not visible) with no chance for lies, even if its truth cannot be grasped by discursive knowledge. The heart of artistic truth is not a concept, which would reply the ruling universality, but is "something plural" escaping from the strength of identification:

Although this truth content, conceptless, appears nowhere else than in what is made, it negates the made. Each artwork, as a structure, perishes in its truth content; through it the artwork sinks into irrelevance, something that is granted exclusively to the greatest artworks. The historical perspective that envisions the end of art is every work's idea.<sup>35</sup>

Trespassing into the fleeting manifestation of the non-existent, *tour de force* that tries to carry out the impossible, the artwork spiritualizes itself; and what is manifesting, not separable from the manifestation itself but not even identical to it, is its spirit. The spirit transcends *Sachlichkeit*, and, nonetheless, the phenomenic is necessary to it, since it finds its origin from the configuration of the sensible moments of artwork – even if it does not perfectly match with their organisation<sup>36</sup>. The place of spirit is "the configuration of what appears"<sup>37</sup>: being within a process of endless becoming, it is not simply to be defined (and delimited) as the artist's intention, neither as the idea that the artwork is supposed to symbolize, nor as a layer of its manifestation. "Spirit forms appearance just as appearance forms spirit; it is the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131-132.

<sup>36</sup> This is the starting point of Adorno's critics of Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit, as a static idea that does not involve an opening towards the differentiation, but hypostatizes the subject as absolute identity (see *ibid.*, p. 120): whereas the spiritualization in art must be able to recover the differentiation, otherwise "art deteriorates into a violent act of spirit" (see *ibid.*, p. 93). Moreover, Hegel's aesthetics is a theory of beauty as the sensible manifestation of the Idea, becoming therefore, according to Adorno, an apology for immediacy: in other words, the exact opposite of a radical spiritualization: "Paradoxically, Hegel's metaphysics of spirit results in a certain reification of spirit in the artwork through the fixation of its idea. [...] Not everything that exists is spirit, yet art is an entity that through its configurations becomes something spiritual". *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

luminous source through which the phenomenon radiates and becomes a phenomenon in the most pregnant sense of the word<sup>38</sup>. Sensibility is recognised as a crucial element of the artistic process, but only in its reflected form, mediated by spiritualization – a detachment from nature – which should revoke the separation itself. In its spiritual configuration, as an anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not exist, art gets closer to natural beauty: considered by Adorno, in contrast with Hegel, as “the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity”<sup>39</sup>, that is, the “more” of nature, image of its original state of freedom which is at the same time the cipher of possible<sup>40</sup>. Art must restore nature, repressed and enticed in the dynamics of history<sup>41</sup>. Natural beauty can express its (unachievable) tension towards truth, as well as the hope of succeeding in opening up men’s eyes. The issues of the first nature are undertaken by the spiritualization of art, which stands in for nature itself through “its abolition in effigy”. The resistance to empirical reality that the subject marshals in the autonomous work is at the same time “resistance to the immediate appearance of nature. For what becomes perceptible in nature no more coincides with empirical reality than does – according to Kant’s grandly paradoxical conception – the thing itself with the world of ‘phenomena’”<sup>42</sup>.

However, the mimetic taboo directed against mere existence (the second reified nature) is not falling apart; the spirit releases itself from the sensible configuration of moments that is at its origin, in a breaking point which is at the same time the instant of the artistic apparition. The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance with themselves<sup>43</sup>: artistic images are actually representations, but they involve no reference to anything external. Art is not self-referential, despite being the representation of itself, by virtue of its form, which represents its settled content, always new and always different in its relationship with history and temporality. As argued by Di Giacomo, continuing the comparison between Adorno and Warburg, “the time of images is the time within the images, through which the presence is to be seen in its connection with the absence. The fact that there are no pure forms, but only [...] impure ones means therefore that forms without a *sedimented content* cannot exist. Warburg understood that was necessary to give up fixing [the meaning of] images”<sup>44</sup>; images cannot be reduced to an unambiguous determination, since they offer an implementation of temporality, of a memory that is immanent in their sensible structure. Adorno himself, also influenced by Benjamin’s *On the concept of history*, believes that it is absolutely crucial to give voice to the *defeated*<sup>45</sup>, to the substratum removed by the totalitarianism of thought. Nonetheless, the

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> “Art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty”. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> G. Di Giacomo, *Sul rapporto arte-vita a partire dalla Teoria estetica di Adorno*, “Idee” 58 (2005), p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize “how it really was.” It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger [...] The danger threatens the stock of tradition as much as its recipients. For both it is one and the same: handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes. In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it. [...] The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is

impossibility of fixing the artistic creation in definitive schemes is connected here to the impossibility of a synthesis that would turn itself into a false conciliation. By their own structure, artworks are not and cannot be organisms: on the contrary, they refuse their organic aspect as illusory and affirmative<sup>46</sup>. The demand for unity is nothing but an illusion that disenchanting art cannot bear anymore:

As little as art is to be defined by any other element, it is simply identical with form. Every other element can be negated in the concept of form, even aesthetic unity, the idea of form that first made the wholeness an autonomy of the artwork possible.<sup>47</sup>

This issue is reflected on form itself: undoubtedly, the latter, as aesthetic unity, has made possible the existence of the artwork, in its autonomy, as a whole; however, it is true that "in highly developed modern works, form tends to dissociate unity, either in the interest of expression or to criticize art's affirmative character"<sup>48</sup>. Relocated within the artistic horizon, the affirmative element consists in trying to give life a positive meaning. This operation, considering the current historical and social conditions, is linked to the creation of ideology, as it is clearly proved by the fake harmony of cultural industry. Art must reflect the division between the I and the world, deflagrated by the progress which constantly moves towards the erosion of the individual within the collectivity.

Artworks, as it has already been noted, are manifestation in their bringing to light the nonexistent, whose "appearance is that of essence"<sup>49</sup>. Nonetheless, the identity of essence and manifestation is an unreachable utopia, not only for art, but for knowledge itself: "The essence that makes the transition to appearance and defines it also explodes it; in being the appearance of what appears, what appears is always also a husk. This was denied by the aesthetic concept of harmony and all its related categories"<sup>50</sup>. Within this framework it is possible to better understand Adorno's statement, according to which the truth core of harmony is dissonance. Since it has proved as unattainable, if it does not want to side with the conservation of *status quo*, harmony must display its unfeasibility as part of its own existence. Adorno makes use of Goethe's *Iphigenia* to prove his point, in an attempt to demolish the

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convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. [...] Where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it yields a shock to the same, through which it crystallizes as a monad. [...] In this structure he [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour [*Stillstellung*] of events, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past". W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, New York, Classic Books, 2009, p. 8-12.

<sup>46</sup> See T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 121. See also *ibid.*, p. 219: "That today any walk in the woods, unless elaborate plans have been made to seek out the most remote forests, is accompanied by the sound of jet engines overhead not only destroys the actuality of nature as, for instance, an object of poetic celebration. It affects the mimetic impulse. Nature poetry is anachronistic not only as a subject: its truth content has vanished".

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

prejudice according to which this play is an example of pure classicism. On the opposite, far from the *smoothness* of Thorvaldsen and Canova's artworks, the tragedy does not flatten the antinomy between the subject and civilization, but it is grounded on it. In the monologue of Orestes' madness, whose attitude is that of poetry, it is possible to sense the image of an integral conciliation: an utopia that is immediately accused of madness. Harmony is impossible, and it faces the risk of turning into a principle of domination: "Iphigenia prophesies enlightenment's transformation into myth. By condemning myth as something he is distant from, if not something he has fled from, Orestes identifies himself with the principle of domination through which, in and through enlightenment, the mythic doom is prolonged"<sup>51</sup>.

The renunciation to classicism, which portrays life as a complete sensible form, results from the "coefficients of friction" of harmony: emancipating itself from it becomes therefore an essential requirement for modern art, arising from the consciousness of a loss of systematicity, unity and sense; in other words, from the impossibility of a synthesis between form and life:

Art that makes the highest claim compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary. The plight of form is most emphatically manifest in the difficulty of bringing temporal art forms to a conclusion; in music composers often speak of the problem of a finale, and in literature the problem of a denouement, which came to a head in Brecht. [...] The continued use of traditional endings only simulates the temporal convergence of the particular elements with the concluding instant as a totality of form. In many modern works that have attracted a large audience, the form was artfully held open because they wanted to demonstrate that the unity of form was no longer bestowed on them.<sup>52</sup>

The mention of the fragment goes far beyond the immediate reference to Benjamin<sup>53</sup>, and place Adorno in the context of the German philosophical tradition – precisely, romanticism. Aside from Hegel's influence, and the reference to the kantian *Critique of Judgement*, the presence of Schlegel can be also added to the pattern of suggestions founding Adorno's works. By definition, "transcendental poetry" aims to investigate the relation between the ideal and the real; an intention which is very close to the utopian destination of art, according to Adorno. Transcendental poetry acknowledges the indissoluble contrast between the conditioned and the unconditioned, through the reflection of irony<sup>54</sup>. Being part of an

<sup>51</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 168.

<sup>52</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> "Just as mosaics [...] the value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the glass plate [...]. The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject matter". W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York-London, Verso, 1998, p. 28-29.

<sup>54</sup> "It contains and incites a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the unconditioned and the conditioned, between the impossibility and the necessity of a complete communication. It is the freest of all licences, for by its



evolving dimension<sup>55</sup>, romantic poetry cannot be complete nor conciliate itself: its nature is that of the fragment, sort of project that anticipates a future utopian dimension, transcendental component of the spirit of history. Schlegel's fragment is not a sketch meant to be extended: created as a fragment, it is completely separated by the surrounding world and perfect in itself: "as a hedgehog"<sup>56</sup>. As a project, it is a future hope in its relationship with the connection and separation between the ideal and the real, a connection at the core of its transcendental character.

A project is the subjective germ of a developing object. A perfect project should simultaneously be entirely subjective and entirely objective – an indivisible and living individual. Projects [...] could be called aphorism of the future. [...] Since the word transcendental refers precisely to the unification and separation of the ideal and the real, one could easily say that the sense for aphorisms and projects is the transcendental part of the historical spirit.<sup>57</sup>

The romantic experience thrives in the (paradoxical) attempt to find the relationship with the ideal in the artwork; and Adorno himself reflects this pattern in its definition of aesthetics as the last shelter of an art which is what metaphysics always wanted to be. As it has been seen, art is spiritualized existence "in precisely the fashion that idealism simply asserted extra-aesthetic reality to be"<sup>58</sup>. Commenting upon romantic poetry and referring in particular to Schlegel's work, Ophälders uses words that could perfectly fit Adorno's vision: "romantic poetry critically mirrors the poverty of experience of an age, the loss of active forces, the loss of the unity of nature, so that, in regards to the mean and finite reality, replies with an increasing thoughtfulness [...]. To the issues raised by reflection one must not answer resorting to immediacy, or to the forms and contents of the tradition, supposedly sheltered from the crisis, but increasing the activity of reflection itself, with its 'huge power of the negative'<sup>59</sup>. The *romantisieren*, that is, making poetry become lively and life become poetry, suggests that art could have a civil function that Adorno himself continues to acknowledge, refusing any cultural form that does not contribute to open the eyes of its audience. Implicitly, the philosopher refers back to this tradition, recognizing that "ultimately, the doctrine of

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means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary". F. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Minneapolis-London, University Of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> According to the definition of a "progressive universal poetry". *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> "A fragment, like a little work of art, must be quite separated from its surroundings and complete in itself – like a hedgehog". *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 344.

<sup>59</sup> M. Ophälders, *Poesia della poesia. Riflessioni su Friedrich Schlegel*, in *Labirinti. Saggi di estetica e critica della cultura*, Milano, Mimesis, 2008, p. 107. See the substantial agreement expressed by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*: "The more, however, art itself – in order not to barter away semblance for lies – is driven to reflect on its own presuppositions and when possible to absorb into its own form such reflection as if it were a counterpoison, the more skeptical it becomes toward the presumption of having self-consciousness imposed on it externally". T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 339.

imitation should be reversed; in a sublimated sense, reality should imitate the artworks"<sup>60</sup>. Moreover, romantic poetry itself is totally aware of the need of mediation within the critic to what merely exist; irony prevents any direct attack to the empirical, which would otherwise translate itself in a subjection to the logic of domination. Every display of power is averse to it. The distance from romanticism appears to be a matter of nuances: as if the difference was mainly due to a contingent, despite tragic, historic circumstance; to the mourning that art must not forget to wear.

Considering the impossibility of conciliation, the artwork is lost: and by losing itself, it can simultaneously find itself again. Its authentic form is the episode, and its value reveals itself precisely in the fact of being "forcibly squeezed" by the impossibility of the form itself – for instance, in the works of authors such as Beckett or Karl Kraus, which would be inconceivable without the collapse of the language. Apart from formal difficulties, the artist is supposed to deal with the disintegration of the materials, which have lost their substantiality because the cultural industry has "sucked their marrow"<sup>61</sup>; there are no words for the noble, the true and the beautiful that have not been violated and turned into their opposite by the ruling universality<sup>62</sup>. Contemporary art must therefore break up the classical canons of beauty – harmony, perfection and unity – if it aims to denounce and affirm the disharmony and fragmentariness of the world: "Spiritualization in new art prohibits it from tarnishing itself any further with the topical preferences of philistine culture: the true, the beautiful, and the good"<sup>63</sup>.

The disintegration of materials clearly involves the need for a radical metamorphosis of the artistic practice. Adorno points out that the new art, in contrast to traditional forms, must self-display its own process of creation. Its being an endless becoming, a *work in progress*, as in the example of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, must be, to a certain extent, sublimed: craftsmanship represents, to Adorno, an apology of making, meant as a nature-ruling capacity. In fact, French art is accused of a conciliation with the *status quo* since it "never [...] has entirely eradicated the pride in making little pictures"<sup>64</sup>.

The contradiction between what is and what is made, is the vital element of art and circumscribes its law of development, but it is also art's shame: by following, however indirectly, the existing pattern of material production [...] "Perfection – as Nietzsche put it – must not have become", that is, it should not appear made. Yet [...] the endless pains to eradicate the traces of making, injure works of art and condemn them to be fragmentary. [...] Taste is the ability to keep in balance the contradiction in art between the made and the apparent not-having-become;

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> See T.W. Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia. Essays on Modern Music*, London-New York, Verso, 1992, p. 265.

<sup>63</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 93. "The ugly, the disharmonious and the repulsive become for modern art "test of the power of spiritualization and [...] a cipher of the opposition in which this spiritualization proves itself" (*ibid.*). The aesthetic Platonism is totally upset: the ugly, and no longer the beautiful, holds the possibility of a future reconciliation, enabling art to transfigure the empirical.

<sup>64</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life* cit., p. 226.

true works of art, however, never at one with taste, are those which push the contradiction to the extreme, and realize themselves in their resultant downfall.<sup>65</sup>

What embeds art in the present age is not technique, whose updated use, according to the dictates of the critical conscience, is nonetheless required, but the authenticity of its mode of experience, that has to deal with the growing difficulty of establishing itself, within the artwork, as a connection of sense. Long before the Holocaust, it was not possible to assert the existence of a positive sense in modernity: and this is reflected as well in the artwork. "When artworks have nothing external to themselves to which they can cling without ideology, what they have lost cannot be restored by any subjective act"<sup>66</sup>. The lack of a sense of reality is seized by the artwork and becomes its self-conscience: integrated within its structure, it turns in its absurdity into a denunciation of the *status quo*<sup>67</sup>. Such crisis, provoked by the "unstoppable dynamism of nominalism", is linked with extra-aesthetic experience, "for the inner-aesthetic nexus that constitutes meaning reflects the meaningfulness of the world and its course as the tacit and therefore all the more powerful apriori of artworks"<sup>68</sup>. According to Adorno, Beckett is the model of this process, and it is not by accident that *Aesthetic Theory* was meant to be dedicated to him. In his plays, the lack of sense is not hypostatized as a conciliatory universality, or claimed as a positive sense, dully reflecting the merely existing. For authentic artworks, the denial of sense is not configured as an assertion, even if they draw their own content from it, expressing the lack of sensibleness as their sense: an aesthetic sense which is not immediately identical to the theological one. Against its own will, "the artwork that rigorously negates meaning is by this very rigor bound to the same density and unity that was once a requisite to the presence of meaning"<sup>69</sup>.

[Translated by Mirko Zangrandi]

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226-227.

<sup>66</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* cit., p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> Even if they are often accused of poor engagement in their double lack of scope and sense: see *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

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## Deductive Reasoning and Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt's Provocation of Logic

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**Abstract:** in her text *The origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt points to logic as the mainstay of totalitarianism: once terror destroys bonds among men, logic keeps people reasoning in check within the deductive chain, thus preventing any chance of renewal. In this essay we will try to respond step by step to the data Arendt brings forward in support of her claim, referring as well to the most recent developments of logic, in particular recalling the existence of non-monotonic logics, i.e. logics taking into account the possibility to change the consequences of the premises if further information is acquired.

Hannah Arendt describes the totalitarian regime as a novelty of the Twentieth Century, and as a very peculiar variation on tyranny. They both share the absence of legality and a terror basis, however she adds the call for an "iron logicality", as the peculiarity of totalitarianism. Terror destroys bonds among men; logic destroys bonds with reality, preventing any chance of renewal. For a professional "logician", this sounds as a strong provocation deserving careful listening and attention. We shall at first follow the re-construction of totalitarianism by the author in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Tyranny and totalitarianism share the use of terror in order to destroy bonds among men, through the two steps of isolation and alienation. Isolation is pre-totalitarian: power emerges from the cooperation of men; if they are separated, they are forced to powerlessness, to be unable to act and stop tyranny. Isolation is a political concept, i.e. it refers to man in its political dimension, and it corresponds to being unable to act, since nobody can act together.

After isolation, the possibility of a bond with the human consortium through the work in the realm of human artifice is still available; man still has his own creativity, the "capacity to add something of our own to the common world". In the tyranny it is so. If, on the contrary, man is decayed from *homo faber* to *homo laborans*, even that possibility of bond is lost: we say that man becomes "alienated" (loneliness), that is different from "solitude" (solitude), the latter requiring to be *physically* alone; to be alienated it is not necessary to be alone, but rather it is perceived in the company of other men. When man loses the bond with the others, he loses his ego as well:

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, Harvest Book, 1951.

In this situation, according to Arendt, only logic is left: "The only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience"<sup>2</sup>.

The psychological explanation of the self-delivery to logic performed by the estranged man runs as follow: "The 'ice-cold reasoning' and the 'mighty tentacle' of dialectics which 'seizes you as in a vise' appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon"<sup>3</sup>.

"It is the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man's identity outside all relationships with others"<sup>4</sup>.

She also adds:

The elementary rules of cogent evidence, the truism that two and two equals four cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness. It is the only reliable 'truth' human beings can fall back upon once they have lost the mutual guarantee, the common sense, men need in order to experience and live and know their way in a common world.<sup>5</sup>

She claims that, delivering ourselves to logic, the destruction of the bond with reality is started, since we enter the tunnel of deductions from the premises, where we are forced to stay, with no confrontation with reality, keeping the non-contradiction rule as the only rule to follow. As soon as logic is applied to an idea, the latter becomes a premise, and then

The purely negative coercion of logic, the prohibition of contradictions, became 'productive' [...] This argumentative process could be interrupted neither by a new idea (which would have been another premise with a different set of consequences) nor by a new experience [...] its thought movement does not spring from experience but is self-generated, and, secondly, it transforms the one and only point that is taken and accepted from experienced reality into an axiomatic premise, leaving from then on the subsequent argumentation process completely untouched from any further experience. Once it has established its premise, its point of departure, experiences no longer interfere with ideological thinking, nor can it be taught by reality.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, ordering facts according to an absolutely logical mechanism, starting from an axiomatically given premise, and deducting everything else from it, we proceed *with a consistency not at all existing in the realm of reality.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 478.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.



This is why Arendt stresses on the fact that logic has nothing to do with truth, and claims: "But this 'truth' is empty or rather no truth at all, because it does not reveal anything. (To define consistency as truth as some modern logicians do means to deny the existence of truth.)"<sup>7</sup>.

Logic, then, is connected to ideology. The latter is indeed "quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the 'idea' is applied"<sup>8</sup>,

Ideologies have three intrinsic elements specifically totalitarian:

- 1) an explanation of history, i.e. what is becoming and not what it is,
- 2) the "emancipation" from sensory experience: history is explained overcoming it, looking for what lies 'behind' it,
- 3) the completion of the distance from experience "through certain methods of demonstration": "Thirdly, since the ideologies have no power to transform reality, they achieve this emancipation of thought from experience through certain methods of demonstration"<sup>9</sup>.

The loss of bond with other men and with reality is essential to a totalitarian regime:

The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought. The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.<sup>10</sup>

While claiming that logic (by definition) is opposed to freedom, Arendt adds that:

1) "The tyranny of logicity begins with the mind's submission to logic as a never-ending process, on which man relies in order to engender his thoughts. By this submission, he surrenders his inner freedom as he surrenders his freedom of movement when he bows down to an outward tyranny. Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin"<sup>11</sup>.

2) "the self-coercive force of logicity is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking—which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction"<sup>12</sup>.

This means that logic, as relentless prosecution of deductions from the premise, is opposed to freedom, as new-starting and prosecution with no rules.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

In support of her re-construction of the features of a totalitarian system, Arendt reminds that: "According to Stalin, neither the idea nor the oratory but 'the irresistible force of logic' thoroughly overpowered [Lenin's] audience"<sup>13</sup>. On this base, Russian working class were to lose also those rights gained with the force from the tsarist oppression, and likewise the German people was to suffer a state of permanent war carelessly of their survival. Hence, she draws as a consequence that:

It is in the nature of ideological politics—and is not simply a betrayal committed for the sake of self-interest or lust for power—that the real content of the ideology (the working class or the Germanic people), which originally had brought about the 'idea' (the struggle of classes as the law of history or the struggle of races as the law of nature), is devoured by the logic with which the 'idea' is carried out.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover she offers an example of how, for the sake of iron logicity, some people unjustly accused by Stalin should have accepted to declare themselves guilty and their conviction:

We are all agreed on the premise that history is a struggle of classes and on the role of the Party in its conduct. You know therefore that, historically speaking, the Party is always right (in the words of Trotsky: "We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right."). At this historical moment, that is in accordance with the law of history, certain crimes are due to be committed which the Party, knowing the law of history, must punish. For these crimes, the Party needs criminals; it may be that the Party, though knowing the crimes, does not quite know the criminals; more important than to be sure about the criminals is to punish the crimes, because without such punishment. History will not be advanced but may even be hindered in its course. You, therefore, either have committed the crimes or have been called by the Party to play the role of the criminal—in either case, you have objectively become an enemy of the Party. If you don't confess, you cease to help History through the Party, and have become a real enemy. The coercive force of the argument is: if you refuse, you contradict yourself and, through this contradiction, render your whole life meaningless; the A which you said dominates your whole life through the consequences of B and C which it logically engenders.<sup>15</sup>

Arendt remarks that

by teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated. If this practice is compared with that of tyranny, it seems as if a way had been found to set the desert itself in motion, to let loose a sand storm that could cover all parts of the inhabited earth.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt believes, however, that tyranny carries in itself germs of self-destruction: she is simply sorry for the birth in history of such a form of government, which “as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on, just as other forms of government which came about at different historical moments and rested on different fundamental experiences have stayed with mankind regardless of temporary defeats”<sup>17</sup>. However, each man is a starting point, hence a potential carrier of freedom and novelty. Provided that he does not enter the tunnel of logic!

### **1. First (Preliminary) remarks**

I would like to start my confrontation with the severe judgement of logic by Arendt resting precisely on some of her claims.

1) Tendency towards consistency exists: it is a *psychological* given, widely exploited also by door to door vendors. It has positive aspects, of social utility, since guaranteeing the respect of “pacts” is essential to the survival of society<sup>18</sup>. However, if generalized to every situation, it means to have one’s hands tied. R. Cialdini in *Influence: Science and Practice* claims that the need for consistency is a central need in behavioural motivation<sup>19</sup>. Experiments show that the most effort is put to take on a commitment, the most freedom we perceive in accomplishing it, and the most public is involved in the act, the biggest the impulse towards consistency will be<sup>20</sup>. The first reason for such an efficacy of the commitment to consistency is in its affecting public image: good consistency is highly praised in the society, since the very capacity to respect pacts holds together society itself. A second reason is the automatism allowed by consistency “an outstanding luxe: we have no more to think about an issue for a long time, we should not necessarily check all information that we receive every day in order to identify relevant facts; we have not to consume mental energy in order to evaluate pros and cons”<sup>21</sup>. A third reason is the fact that “there are some annoying things we really prefer not to know. Given that automatic consistency is a method of

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 478.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See K.M. Sheldon, R.M. Ryan, L.J. Rawsthorne, B. Harzi, *Trait Self and True Self*, “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology” 73 (1997), p. 1380-1393.

<sup>19</sup> See L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1957; F. Heider, *Attitude and Cognitive Organization*, “Journal of Psychology” 21 (1946), p. 107-112; T. Newcomb, *An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts*, “Psychological Review” 60 (1953), p. 393-404.

<sup>20</sup> See J.T. Tedeschi, B.R. Schlenker, T.V. Bonoma, *Cognitive Dissonance: Private Ratiocination or Public Spectacle?*, “American Psychologist” 26 (1971), p. 685-695.

<sup>21</sup> R. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2001 (tr. it. *Teoria e pratica della persuasione*, Urgnano, Roberti, 2009), p. 126 [my translation].

instinctive and pre-programmed answer, it can provide a safe place from fastidious intuitions<sup>22</sup>. Hence, the impulse to be and look consistent can represent a powerful weapon of social influence leading to acts often contrary to self interest. If we are successful in making another person take on a commitment, we have set the ground for his/her automatic and thoughtless behaviour, according to the initial commitment. When the commitment has an active, public and difficult dimension, its efficacy in modifying the person's image and his/her behaviour is maximized. To make someone *write*, is then, a powerful weapon: in order to know what people really believe and feel, the best testimony comes not from words but from facts. Until proved otherwise, the readers will think that who wrote something really believe it, and what other people think about us has great impact on what we think ourselves (for instance: to let the client fill in their order papers seems to be a very good tactic to avoid contract withdrawal). Moreover, written certificates are efficient since they can easily be made public and they require more effort. Cialdini, referring to these results in the field of psychology, also provides some suggestions in order not to be imprisoned in such a *psychological mechanism*: listen to body signals. "The first signal is easy to recognize: we feel it at the entrance to the stomach when we feel trapped by a request we wouldn't like to accept"<sup>23</sup>. However this happens only if we already *think* that what we are going to do for coherence sake is wrong. If we make an unconscious evaluation of what we are going to do, only deep inside we can find certitude, asking ourselves: "Knowing what I know now, if I could go back, would I take on the same commitment?" and trusting the first flash of feelings we get as an answer<sup>24</sup>.

2) Logic is deduction from an idea. In fact, logic helps drawing consequences from premises and keep the same premises all along the deduction (*only in order* to make the deduction, *not* to be faithful to the idea). Arendt opposes logic to the ability to start over, since, whenever we are about to make a deduction from a premise, we follow that premise: "Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning"<sup>25</sup>. It is true: its task is to *receive premises* in order to carry on a deduction. And it does carry it on. It does not discuss the premises. It is not its task. However it is not afraid of different premises: certainly it cannot add them while at work, but it could very well start over the deduction from other premises. Logic is not one *single* deduction, but the deducting itself. Hence, *in primis* it does not fight for self-affirmation (and to impede its enemy, i.e. thinking). Logic is not a person: it's a set of tools managed by an exterior "subject", who is in charge of feeding it with premises, who makes deductions till the end because he/she is interested in them, and afterwards can commit to something else (or even decide to stop that activity because he/she has something better or more compulsory to do). Moreover, nobody can fear the end of logic, that logic ends up being out of work or meaningless, if its premises are questioned. Logic will simply work on new premises.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127 [my translation].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194-195 [my translation].

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199 [my translation].

<sup>25</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* cit., p. 473.

3) Logic forces to accept the consequences of a premise. No, logic says: "if these are the premises, then, these are the consequences", that means "if you accept this, then you must accept this". Logic, finally, opens our eyes on the consequences entailed by the ideas we intend to accept. Hence it can also be used to discuss premises, precisely because it provides an overview of their consequences. The application of logic to an idea, if leading to destructive consequences, can ring the alarm bell for the revision of the initial idea. This is undoubtedly not the task of logic: logic simply makes deductions; however thanks to it some paradoxical conclusions can be pointed out, hence acquiring foresightedness on the outcomes of an idea (or a set of ideas). Concerning this point, we shall spontaneously refer to Roberta De Monticelli, who claims in her text *Esercizi di pensiero per aspiranti filosofi* that logic is the "ethics of thought". Also De Monticelli, indeed, suggests that logic is an instrument for the critic of society, although grounding her claim on a different motivation: as it encourages responsibility in the usage of language, that is to say "the capacity and will to respond of every single claim of ours, first of all putting them together so that they can be true, and secondly showing to whoever may ask the reason or the evidence on the base of which if anybody wish can see their truth until proven otherwise; or, if we do not dispose of enough evidence, we shall clearly admit it"<sup>26</sup>.

4) Arendt believes that logic is the instrument supporting totalitarianism, since it consistently verifies it developing its basic ideas. It is interesting to remark that a different interpretation of the role of logic in totalitarian societies has been given by G. Orwell in the novel *1984*. He underlines how the lack of a clear distinction between what really happened and what did not happen, between a property and its contrary, i.e. the lack of respect for the principle of non-contradiction is one of the instruments in the hands of power in order to avoid any sketching of protest. The oligarchy dominating Oceania's society, where the novel is set, keeps the population subdued through a constant state of war (and poverty), preventing any contact with reality, that is with the "enemies" and with History: it is necessary to believe what the oligarchy wants, to perpetrate its power. To this aim, history is constantly re-written (and previous documents disappear), and the vocabulary is progressively reduced, as to prevent the exercise of thinking required by the choice among words, as well as to make people less and less sensitive to inconsistencies. In order to shrink the lexicon, only one word for each semantic area is left (for instance: "excellent", "splendid", "marvellous", etc. will be replaced simply by "good"), the contrary is formed simply by adding "un" as a pre-fix, and superlatives with "plus" or "doubleplus". It is clear that thus the concerned semantic areas will drastically change, from unification to unification, until words previously perceived as very distant in meaning will be incorporated together. "In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered only by six words – in reality, only one word"<sup>27</sup>. For instance: "There is a word in Newspeak. I don't know whether you know it: *duckspeak* to

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<sup>26</sup> R. De Monticelli, *Esercizi di pensiero per aspiranti filosofi*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 39 [my translation].

<sup>27</sup> G. Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, New York, Penguin, 1960, p. 51.

quack like a duck. It is one of those interesting words that have two contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it is abuse; applied to someone you agree with, it is praise<sup>28</sup>.

Who is in charge of modifying History must exert "doublethink", that means he/she must in a given moment (i.e. while he/she is correcting history data) make a very refined use of logic (in order to correct data so that they make a consistent whole, as long as a little bit of the sense of inconsistency is left in the population), and the moment after he/she must switch to blindness in front of the biggest logical mistakes. Insensitivity towards inconsistency<sup>29</sup> is important since the official ideology is full of inconsistencies, also where there is no practical need for it, and since:

All past oligarchies have fallen from power either because they ossified or because they grew soft. Either they became stupid and arrogant, failed to adjust themselves to changing circumstance, and were overthrown, or they became liberal and cowardly, made concessions when they should have used force, and once again were overthrown. [...] It is the achievement of the Party to have produced a system of thought in which both conditions can exist simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

In the end, when people mind shaping is completed, the Party can ask someone to say, truly believing it, that  $2+2$  is 5: "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it"<sup>31</sup>. This is then a violation of classical logic, not its consequence, holding totalitarianism together, preserving it and blocking any possible mechanism that, historically, from inconsistencies provokes revolutions. Arendt believes  $2+2=4$  beyond any possible doubt and takes such a certitude as the initial trap for the person accepting an idea and then relying on logic; Orwell, instead, believes that the Party can let you think that  $2+2=5$ , precisely because the Party completely dominates the dazed minds insensitive to logic.

We may ask: can the respect of the principle of non-contradiction really be ambivalent, that is being both in favour and against the democracy of society?

In general terms, yes, since the instrument, as such, i.e. as unable of self-determination, is given to the person who uses it in order to be played this way or the other, positively or negatively; however, an adequate education always leads to the use of logic – and in particular of the principle of non-contradiction – as a critical instrument.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> According to Arendt it is very relevant that the distinction between true and false is not possible any more (she believes this is the base of a totalitarian regime), but she does not link it to the principle of non-contradiction (expressed on a meta-theoretical level, that is in reference to statements), whereas to the eradication from reality. True and false can be distinguished only on the base of a confrontation with reality. If such a confrontation is missing, everything is flattened as equally acceptable. According to Orwell, instead, departing from reality is indeed a premise of a totalitarian regime, but then also within the double reality created by the regime, everything is accepted as true or false, changing from moment to moment, also because sensibility for inconsistencies is basically nullified.

<sup>30</sup> G. Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* cit., p. 215.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

## 2. In defence of logic: the hypothesis of omniscience

I here come to discuss more general questions concerning the role of logic in totalitarian sociality. Hannah Arendt seems to suggest that any ideology (particularly the totalitarian one) shares the hypothesis of logic omniscience, that is: if I believe A and A implies B, then I believe B. Such an hypothesis was always considered unrealistic, and, in the study of alternative logic systems not implying such an hypothesis, serious issues have come out confirming its unrealistic nature. Indeed, Frixione<sup>32</sup> says: “the lack of logical omniscience is less and less a *semantic* problem, but rather it is connected to the more general problem of the limits of the inferential capacity of cognitive subjects” and he quotes Fagin and Halpern (1988), according to whom the lack of logical omniscience can be traced back to four main sources.

1 – *Lack of awareness*. It can happen that a subject has no opinion about the truth or falsity of a sentence in relation to the whole of his/her beliefs for the simple reason that the sentence contains concepts he/she does not know, so that he/she is not fully aware of the truth or falsity of the sentence itself. For instance, it is nonsensical to wonder if a Bantu believes or not in the truth of the sentence “calculators’ prices are going down” if he has no clue as to what is a calculator.

2 – *Limited resources*. A rational subject can ignore a certain number of logical truths, or ignore certain logical consequences of his/her beliefs because of the lack of time or memory resources for their deduction. Or, because they are too complex to be grasped.

3 – *Ignorance of differentiation rules*. Real reasoners often ignore or do not know how to apply some rules of reasoning. For instance, researches in cognitive psychology has made clear that many subjects find the application of the rule of contraposition difficult: “if A implies B, then non B implies non A”. The following mistake is very common: “If A implies B, then non A implies non B”.

4 – *Multiplicity of mental contexts*. People do not simultaneously use in their reasoning all information they may have. In particular, it seems that human beings find it difficult to simultaneously use information coming from heterogeneous contexts. It is reasonable to think human memory as structured in several contexts, in several “frames of mind”, rarely communicating to each other. It may happen that, although each frame is consistent, the information in one frame is inconsistent with the information in another frame.

What consequences to infer?

Caution accepting ideological beliefs: it is always necessary to be ready to revise them, on the base of their actual consequences. Also because it is very difficult that all the starting axioms can be made explicit. An example is provided by Arendt herself. We shall follow it step by step<sup>33</sup>. “We are all agreed on the premise that history is a struggle of classes and on

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.dif.unige.it/cpi/hp/frixione/contesti.pdf>, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* cit., p. 473.

the role of the Party in its conduct." No precise indication of the role of the Party is (here) given.

"You know therefore that, historically speaking, the Party is always right (in the words of Trotsky: 'We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right')."

Probably this passage suffers from the vague definition of Party. Why should the Party always be right? Maybe because it is the most recent product of dialectics incarnated in history? Probably a single historic period has been here crystallized, made absolute.

"At this historical moment, that is in accordance with the law of history, certain crimes are due to be committed which the Party, knowing the law of history, must punish." Why is this inevitable? Why is everything that happens necessary? Isn't this a justification for any given historical situation? And who is deciding the objectivity of the process and the conformity to it?

"For these crimes, the Party needs criminals." Why? A reason is here missing.

"It may be that the Party, though knowing the crimes, does not quite know the criminals; more important than to be sure about the criminals is to punish the crimes, because without such punishment, History will not be advanced but may even be hindered in its course."

How the lack of punishment of a crime would interfere with history?

"If you don't confess, you cease to help History through the Party, and have become a real enemy"<sup>34</sup>. Here it seems that a distinction is introduced between the Party "objective enemy" (the "guilty" or the "guilty defendant", who subdues to the sentence, hence, at least helping history) and the "true enemy" (who refuses to be unjustly charged with a crime and, then, hinders the course of history).

In what, according to Hannah Arendt, would be the logic deduction of the necessity to plead guilty of a crime, although being innocent, new masked axioms emerge at each step. They are assumed as implicit, but they must be *added* to the starting idea, finally revealing how much caution is necessary, not only when accepting an idea, but also when stating that something logically derives from it.

### 3. In defence of logic: on the monotonicity of logic

It is important to remark that, in the current terms, the status of a kind of logic where the adding of new premises does not invalidate old conclusions (that is the "ideological" status described by H. Arendt) is called "monotonic"<sup>35</sup>. Formally, this is expressed as follows: a kind of logic is monotonic if the function  $f(x)$ , associating to each set of formulas the set of its theorems, has the following property:

for each set of premises  $S$  and for each set of premises  $S'$

<sup>34</sup> G. Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* cit., p. 648.

<sup>35</sup> The term comes from mathematics, where a monotonic function is a function always increasing or always decreasing.



$S$  included in  $S'$  implies  $f(S)$  included in  $f(S')$ .

The issue is that in every day human reasoning, particularly in the political-social one, contrary to what happens in the idealized reasoning of classical logic or mathematics, it is very rare to deal with a set of complete and sufficient information. It is however necessary to be able to infer plausible conclusions from given knowledge, in order to make decisions and plans, etc. Since the inferred conclusions are just an attempt, they can be retracted when new information is added to basic knowledge: this is "non-monotonic reasoning". A definition of the scheme of non-monotonic reasoning, i.e. the non-monotonic law, can be found in the following:

given the information  $\alpha$ , and in absence of contrary evidence, infer conclusion  $\beta$ .

For instance, given the piece of information – coming from numerous observations – "All birds fly", I can infer that a new bird – let's say a penguin – flies, provided that I must be ready to revise such a deduction after a series of accurate observations of the animal in its daily life. Hence, in non-monotonic logic it is possible to deduct formulas that are not the logic consequence of the premises and, once acquired new pieces of information, formulas already deducted can be discarded. Building the logic of non-monotonic reasoning means to give a formal representation of such a scheme and at the same time to indicate the criteria to say that a given knowledge can be considered acquired. Possible solutions:

1. Assume the hypothesis of the closed world, i.e. that our data base contains all possible information (if a formula *cannot* be deducted, then it must be negated). This is a non-monotonic logic (if it is not possible to deduct  $A$ ,  $\neg A$  is deducted; however, if we add  $A$ , it is not possible to get  $\neg A$  any more), and it requires some adjustments in order to avoid inconsistencies. For instance, if we have only  $Pa \vee Pb$ , we cannot deduct neither  $Pa$ , nor  $Pb$ , hence we deduct both  $\neg Pa$  and  $\neg Pb$ , at variance with  $Pa \vee Pb$ . In order to avoid that, a restriction must be added:  $A$  can be deducted only if there are no disjunctions including it.

2. Augment the deductive system with the *default* law:

$$\begin{array}{l} A \\ \text{It is consistent to believe that } B \\ \hline B \end{array}$$

That means: given the premise  $A$ , if assuming that  $B$  is true does not imply inconsistency with everything we know, then we can assume that  $B$  is true<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to remark how this scheme is implicit in the juridical principle according to which everybody is innocent until proven guilty.

Such a rule is clearly non-monotonic: if at some point we should learn that B is false, the inference would block. In order to handle with situations where B is consistent but also  $\neg B$  would be such, default systems must be refined through the notion of extension, that is a minimal set of formulas that can all be justified on the base of the given deductive system. In one extension we would keep B and in another extension we would keep  $\neg B$ . It is furthermore necessary to establish if the formulas common to *all* extensions are accepted as theorems or if all the formulas of *one* given extension are<sup>37</sup>.

3. Modal or auto-epistemic non-monotonic logic. Modal non-monotonic logic introduces a new intensional operator G with one instance such as its meaning is "it can be consistently assumed". It has the advantage of a greater expressive flexibility, since it is possible to iterate G and it is also possible to formalize default conditionals so that  $A \& GB \rightarrow C$  is the consequent of a conditional, and encapsulated conditionals as well (consequent default of another default). In the auto-epistemic logic an intensional operator C is introduced (CA means "A is believed"), and a law of default is expressed with " $A \& \neg C \neg B \rightarrow D$ " (if A and if it is not believed nonB, then D). Here the derivable formulas are characterized through "stable expansions" Y of a set of premises X, that means, in intuitive terms, derivable formulas from the set of premises that are also characterized by the fact that what is in Y is believed and what is not in Y is not believed<sup>38</sup>. The advantage is given by the fact that they have a clear (Kripkean) semantics.

4. Circumscription logic. An enlargement of axioms is made assuming new formulas in order to minimize the extension of some predicates (those indicating exceptions). For instance, if we take as first premise "not anomalous birds can fly", and as a second premise "Penguins are anomalous birds", we start circumscribing the predicate "to be anomalous" to the empty set. If we add a further premise "Pingu is a bird", we get "Pingu can fly". But, if we receive the information that Pingu is a penguin, then we will re-circumscribe the predicate "to be anomalous" to the one element set, writing "the only anomalous bird is Pingu" (and then we will *not* infer "Pingu can fly"). The idea is very simple, but in order to formalize it, we require a second order logic<sup>39</sup>, and it is very tricky to find the right "balance" between what is limited and what is let free to variate (for instance, between exceptional birds and flying birds). Further issues arise if more than one exception predicate are present.

We have pointed out that several different approaches to logic have been studied in order to describe dynamical situations in which new information allows to retract previously deducted conclusions. It is not logic's responsibility, then, if someone chooses to stay within a monotonic logic.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, work is being done on the appropriate semantics.

<sup>38</sup> Formally it is thus expressed:  $Y = \text{deductive closure of } X \cup CY \cup \neg C(Y)$ , where " $\cup$ " stands for "union of sets".

<sup>39</sup> That is a kind of logic quantifying not only over individual variable, but also over predicative variables. An example of formula circumscribing "I" can be:  $\forall \Phi (X(\Phi) \& \forall x (\Phi x \rightarrow Ex) \rightarrow \forall x (Ix \rightarrow \Phi x))$ , where  $\Phi$  is a predicative variable,  $X(\Phi)$  is the conjunction of the formulas of X where E was replaced by  $\Phi$ .

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## Website-graphy

FRIXIONE, Marcello, *Contesti di credenze e onniscienza logica*  
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## Living Forms (of Art). Edoardo Kac's Transgenic Art between Ethics and Aesthetics

ELISABETTA DI STEFANO

**Abstract:** The Twentieth Century produced a remarkable progress in physics and biology, thanks to the support of new technical instruments, generally enlarging the horizon of scientific research. The genetic alterations are tolerated in those fields, such as medicine, where they are beneficial to man, whereas they provoke perplexity and anxiety in the artistic field, where the intervention on living forms, since it is not justified by a principle of utility, seems to fall into futile hedonism. After a brief review of the main theories on the relationship between ethics and biotechnologies, started in the 70s, we will analyse some transgenic works by the Brazilian artist Edoardo Kac, in order to, on the one hand, emphasize the ethical, philosophical and social value of these living forms of art, and on the other, clarify how the arrival of new technologies has influenced the transformation of traditional aesthetic categories.

The Twentieth Century produced a remarkable progress in physics and biology, thanks to the support of new technical instruments, generally enlarging the horizon of scientific research. Charles Darwin's theory on natural selection and Gregor Mendel's theory on the inheritance of certain traits have found today new consensus and wide acknowledgement also in the general public. The experiments on genetically modified organisms enhance hope for their benefits. For instance, the Golden rice, a variety of rice that can accumulate provitamin A, has been very beneficial in South-East Asia, where many people suffer from sight impairment due to vitamin A deficiencies. The S. Marzano GM tomato, to quote another example, was made resistant to a virosis that was endangering the whole production. However, besides some immediate advantages, there are also concerns about possible negative consequences in the future. In the *communis opinio* a great deal of perplexity, in relation to technologies operating on living forms, prevails and it is due to a static understanding of the biological world, rather oriented towards an harmonic balance and the preservation of the *status quo*. On the base of such an Edenic vision of nature, inherited by classical and humanistic culture, any human intervention replacing the creating divinity is condemned as an act of arrogance (*hybris*). There are also some myths, as for instance Frankenstein's, that feed the common imagination with prejudices, according to which the biologist who manipulates the laws of nature is often compared to Faust, who makes a deal with the devil. The main issue concerns the criterion of what is just, that means whether it is possible to take the operations on living organisms, that man can today accomplish thanks to technological development, as ethically correct. The genetic alterations are tolerated in those fields, such as medicine, where they are beneficial to man, whereas they provoke perplexity and anxiety in the artistic field, where the intervention on living forms, since it is not justified by a principle of utility, seems to fall into futile hedonism. After a brief review of the main theories on the relationship between ethics and biotechnologies, started in the 70s, we will analyse some transgenic works by the Brazilian artist Edoardo Kac, in order to, on the one hand, emphasize the ethical, philosophical and

social value of these living forms of art, and on the other, clarify how the arrival of new technologies has influenced the transformation of traditional aesthetic categories.

### 1. Ethics and biotechnology: the issue of what is just.

The debate starting in the 70s and developed in the field of bioethics has tried to provide an answer to a fundamental question: whether or not everything that is operatively possible is also ethically justifiable. The principle of responsibility<sup>1</sup>, revisited by the German philosopher Hans Jonas, is finally very relevant. Jonas believes that the augmented operative potential of man forces him/her to ethical actions that are compatible with the permanency of life on earth<sup>2</sup>, thus limiting his/her freedom of action. Opposite to Jonas' "precautionary" responsibility, we find Tristram Engelhardt's concept of "emancipating" responsibility<sup>3</sup>, supporting the legitimacy of ethical pluralism and establishing the principle of the agent autonomy, that is the compulsory acknowledgement of each individual's right to decide about his/her own good. Actually, according to Roberto Marchesini, both Jonas' position and Engelhardt's derive from a misunderstanding of man's position in relation to culture, technoscientific activities and nature itself. Jonas' analysis expresses indeed a conservative hardening and employs old concepts, such as *hybris*, to prevent any intervention in relation to the intangible alterity; Engelhardt's theory instead supports human prerogatives and rights, leaving nature out of consideration, according to a self-referential and anthropocentred scheme. Therefore, according to the Italian scholar, both the supporters of precautionary responsibility and the supporters of emancipating responsibility adopt the same presupposition adopted by the theorists of incompleteness, according to which, from Herder to Gehlen<sup>4</sup>, man is biologically deficient and only thanks to culture it is possible to compensate his/her deficiencies and adapt to the environment. To the contrary, Marchesini claims that cultural conquests shift continuously the threshold that supports the hybridisation processes between *bios* and *techne*<sup>5</sup>, thus producing previously unexpected needs. Accordingly, he then presents a theory in bioethics that recognizes alterity and etero-reference as essential moments of technological activities. Marchesini's remarks on the concepts of threshold and chimera can guide us to a better understanding of the biotechnological arts, and of the reason why, whenever they overcome the boundaries of experts' culture, they provoke controversies in the media as well as people's indignation, and they are condemned as mere spectacularity.

<sup>1</sup> See L. Battaglia, *Dimensioni della bioetica*, Genova, Name, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel Verlag, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> H.T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986. See R. Marchesini, *Bioetica e biotecnologie. Questioni morali nell'era biotech*, Bologna, Apèiron, 2002, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, Berlin, Junker und Dünhaupt, 1940 and *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter. Sozialpsychologische Probleme in den industriellen Gesellschaft*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1957. On the concept of "deficient being" see M.T. Pansera, *L'uomo progetto della natura. L'antropologia fisiologica di Arnold Gehlen*, Roma, Studium, 1990, p. 76 ff.

<sup>5</sup> R. Marchesini, *Il concetto di soglia*, Roma-Napoli, Theoria, 1997<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Art and biotechnologies: the issue of what is useful.

Since ancient times the binomial art-life refers to the theory of art revolving around the principle of imitation of nature. Classical and humanistic sources, from Pliny (*Naturalis historia*, XXXV, 65-66) to Vasari (*Le Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani*, Florence, 1550, 1568), are full of anecdotes referring to paintings that are so realistic to seem true, or to sculptures that seem to breathe<sup>6</sup>, however the enlargement of the artistic horizon in the second half of the Twentieth Century, while replacing pictorial and sculptural representation with real exhibition of human and animal (living) bodies, has given a proper content to what was before just a metaphor. Nevertheless, whereas classic aesthetics (Horace, Vitruvius<sup>7</sup>) strictly respected the laws of nature and condemned chimeras as unlikely monsters, today the topic of hybrid has a revived actuality, thanks to those technologies allowing disturbing grafts among different species<sup>8</sup>. If it is true, as Marchesini claims<sup>9</sup>, that the relationship between biological world and technological production can be traced back to the time when, through agriculture and animal breeding, man has deeply modified the ecosystems' conformation, we shall remark that today biotechnological interventions on vegetable and animal organisms should not be placed on the *monstrum* axis, i.e. the line of violation of nature, but simply on the axis of the development and refinement of procedures applied since forever. Consequently, the employment of biotechnologies by artists should not provoke great sensation, since the aim of art has always been an early grasp of cultural transformations and their – also provocative – popularization.

In the 70s genetics appeared as a discipline for experts with scanty consequences on daily life. The hermeneutic tools in the hands of the non-expert public, in order to understand what was happening, were totally inadequate to grasp the importance of the ongoing biotechnological revolution. Common imagination was yet shaped by myths and metaphors (Frankenstein) branding the manipulations on living forms as a transgression of ethical and religious laws, by which man was attempting to replace God<sup>10</sup>. In such a context, the works of several artists, particularly sensitive to the ongoing cultural transformations, made use of biotechnologies in their artistic productions, in order to orientate the debate on some of the most important questions of our time. Among them, Edoardo Kac<sup>11</sup> has gained international

<sup>6</sup> Reference to *spirantia signa* can be found in Virgil and Statius, but also in Petrarca and Poliziano. See E. Di Stefano, *Dal Medioevo al Seicento*, in L. Russo (ed.), *Estetica della scultura*, Palermo, Acsthetica, 2003, p. 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Horace (*Ars poetica*, vv. 9-10), although he was giving to poets and painters equal power to attempt anything, exhorted them to avoid the *adynaton*, the creation of centaurs, syrens or other ridiculous monsters. Similarly Vitruvius (*De architectura* VII, 5, 3) protests against the proliferation of that kind of wall painting that was mixing realistic and fantastic element, thus creating unlikely figures half man half animal.

<sup>8</sup> E. Fiorani, J. Ceresoli, *Ibridazioni. Nuovi territori della scienza e della tecnica, dell'arte e della mente*, Bologna, Apèiron, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> R. Marchesini, *Bioetica e biotecnologie* cit., p. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Edoardo Kac (Rio de Janeiro, 1962) lives in Chicago where he works as professor of Art and Technology at the School Art Institute of Chicago. He is also a member of the staff of the prestigious review *Leonardo* published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His interests focus on dialogical exchanges and communication among different forms of life. His artistic path, aiming to analyse social transformations caused

renown to the general public as well through the mass media. The Brazilian artist has troubled the souls with his creation of fluorescent animals, very often taken as the exhibition of a mere spectacularity, that is, a useless inflicted suffering in order to emulate, not only on a metaphorical level any more, the creative power of God.

The analogy between the artist and God has given substance to the Renaissance's aesthetics, as to emphasize the creativity of the work of art and the intellectual value of its author. However, when we shift from simple representation to proper generation of manipulated living organisms, the metaphor acquires a troubling concreteness. As a matter of fact, although the reference to divine creation appears in more than one of Kac's works, as in *Genesis* (Ars Electronica, Linz, 1999) and *The Eighth Day* (2001), the primary focus of his research does not revolve neither around this aesthetic category, nor around the new possibilities opened up by technology. His works focus on other questions, as for instance the dialogical relationship between artist, artwork and public. In his productions, as in most of biotechnological art, the artist is not a god generating vegetable beings and nonexistent animals, but rather the person who starts a project that is able to establish relationships. The work is in fact accomplished thanks to the public who decides unpredictably its evolution. We can then apply to his productions the categories of "collective" author and "plural" artist<sup>12</sup>, that in the relational art<sup>13</sup> as in the interactive art (employing digital technologies) defines the figure who is able to creatively relate with the public as well as with a team of collaborators (IT technicians, experts from several disciplines). In Kac's transgenic art the element of dialogical relationship acquires further ethical, social and emotional connotations, since it concerns the relationship between author, public and living forms of art. Consequently, the concept of responsibility of each member of the public in relation to the organisms becomes very important whenever one decide to participate in the work. Moreover, responsibility etymologically means "the ability to give a response". Thus the concept can properly enter the aesthetics of dialogue<sup>14</sup> promoted by Kac in all his artistic projects.

*Genesis* by Eduardo Kac is a polemic artwork on the human dominion, decided by God, on the other living forms (*Genesis* 1, 26: "Let man have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"). The biblical verse is translated in Morse code; this latter is then converted in couplets of DNA nucleotide bases. An artificial gene is thus created, the "artist gene", then grafted into (non pathogenic) bacteria of *Escherichia Coli*. Afterwards they are exhibited in an art gallery. The public, through their presence or from whatever part of the world, through the Web, can switch on a

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by technological development, focuses in the 80s on Telecommunications Art, a series of works employing telecommunication media in order to let displaced users interact. In the 90s with the Telepresence Art, he promotes distance interaction combining telecommunication with robotics and internet. At the end of the 90s he gets to the Biotelematic Art, where he connects living species (human, animal, vegetable) to telecommunication and robotics. See <http://www.ckac.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Plural artist is the definition of Paolo Rosa and Andrea Balzola (*L'arte fuori di sé*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2011, p. 153).

<sup>13</sup> On the relational art developed in the middle of the 90s circa see N. Bourriaud, *L'esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> E. Kac, *The Aesthetics of Dialogue*, interview realized by S. Osthoff, "Revista do Mestrado de Arte e Tecnologia da Imagem" 0, (1994) (<http://www.unb.br/vis/revista/k.htm>).



UV wave lamp provoking alterations in the DNA of the bacteria. Accordingly, the word of God, genetically incorporated in the bacteria, is modified, thus questioning the divine command and human supremacy on the other species. The polemic and symbolic intent is made clear when, afterwards, through the opposite process, the artist gene is translated back into Morse code and then in English, producing new meanings<sup>15</sup>.

*Genesis* has further symbolic value, since it emphasize the responsibility of the common man as well in the biotechnological era. *To click or not to click* becomes then an ethical dilemma between the acceptance of the *status quo* and the risk of unpredictable changes. Not clicking, the public accepts the divine law, clicking, instead, he/she cannot anticipate the new generated meanings. With *Genesis* Kac denounces the confidence of genetic engineering that in due time will be able to permeate daily life. A simple click, a familiar gesture already, can have unaccountable consequences, according to what Kac has defined as the "paradoxical condition of the non-expert in the biotechnological era"<sup>16</sup>. The use of new technologies is indeed today increasingly easier, thanks to straightforward interfaces: it suffices to digit on a keyboard or to touch an icon. The person who does these gestures however is not always perfectly aware of the applied algorithms, the activated processes, and their more or less big consequences: for instance, in Kac's work, a genetic mutation. Therefore the aim of Kac's project is precisely to revive the topic of the responsibility of the subject and a new ethical protocol in art. Only endorsing an ethical responsibility and an educational role, the artist who employs new biotechnological media can give full sense to his/her artistic operations. In a period of wide-spread aestheticism, where everything is played on the level of image (of objects, people, life-styles), art can still be the vehicle of a new "ethics of form"<sup>17</sup>, however it must orientate technology so that its use is not empty, self-referential, or destructive.

*The Eighth Day* as well provides new hard content to ancient aesthetic categories. Now art not only completes the work of nature, as a classic *topos* suggests, but also generates unnatural hybrids. Thanks to technology man is able to continue the work of God in the "eight day" when transgenic organisms and bio-mechanical hybrids are created. For the first time, in this work several fluorescent creature (plants, amoebas, fish, mice) are independently developed in several laboratories and are then gathered together in a biological robot<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Id., *L'arte transgenica: geni sintetici, transgenici e biobots*, in F. Fischnaller (ed.), *E-art. Arte, società e democrazia nell'era della rete*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2006, p. 109-112.

<sup>16</sup> Id., *Bioestetica, arte transgenica e il coniglio verde*, interview realized by M. Bolognini, in S. Lux, *Arte ipercontemporanea un certo loro sguardo...ulteriori protocolli dell'arte contemporanea*, Roma, Gangemi, 2006, p. 433-439, in particular p. 434. See also E. Kac, *Bioestetica e arte transgenica*, in M. Bolognini (ed.), *Postdigitale. Conversazione sull'arte e le nuove tecnologie*, Roma, Carocci, 2008, p. 75-80.

<sup>17</sup> The appeal to an ethics of form in relation to the new technologies is brought forward both on the side of aesthetics (P. Montani, *Bioestetica. Senso comune, tecnica e arte nell'età della globalizzazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, p. 109-112) and on the side of art criticism (A. Balzola, *Principi etici nelle arti multimediali*, in A. Balzola-A. M. Monteverdi, *Le arti multimediali digitali*, Milano, Garzanti, 2004, p. 424-47), however with no reference to biotechnological arts. On the relationship between ethics and bioart see J. Zylinska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> By biobot Kac means a robot with an active biological element commanding some aspects of its behaviour. In *The Eighth Day* the biobot has a colony of amoebas GFP working as brains cells: since they form a network inside the bioreactor that is the brain structure of the biobot. When the amoebas divide, the biobot slowly moves forward and backwards in its environment. The biobot also works as an avatar for the public, who can control the

(biobot), in order to shape a new artificial and bioluminescent ecosystem, enclosed in a transparent perspex dome (a sphere of one metre and twenty centimetres in diameter with an internal clear blue light) evoking the image of the earth seen from out of space<sup>19</sup>. The work represents the expansion of biodiversity beyond natural forms of life. It is clear that genetic engineering will have increasingly deeper repercussions on the social, medical, political and financial sphere and by consequence art cannot be indifferent to these topics. The ethical engagement is very clear in Edoardo Kac's own words, who in several interviews declares to be interested in analysing the several social implications of genetics. According to him the task of art is to make the implicit meanings of the biotechnological revolution explicit, and to contribute to the shaping of alternative points of view, making the language of genetics more accessible<sup>20</sup>.

From these remarks it becomes clear that the production of chimeric animals in Kac's artistic projects is very far from the hedonistic and decorative purpose of other transgenic forms, such as the GloFish<sup>21</sup>, GM fluorescent fish on sale to decorate your fish tank. The Brazilian artist's goal is to open the dialogue among artists, scientists, and philosophers, as to awaken public opinion on important issues in relation to genetics: for instance, the relation between genes and environment, the identity of living beings as not only genetic organisms, the sense of equality and alterity among living beings, the communication among different species. He is then trying to reformulate the role of the artist as an individual, who is able to stimulate thinking, not only on abstract aesthetic categories, but also on urgent, actual problems, highly relevant in our political and social context.

Aware that new technologies always push further the threshold between *bios* and *techne*, and that today society is now oriented towards post-humanism, where biotechnological hybrids will co-exist, Edoardo Kac wants to awaken through his projects the awareness and the sense of responsibility of individuals in relation to genetically modified organisms. Such is the meaning of his Transgenic Art:

There is no transgenic art without a firm commitment to and responsibility for the new life form thus created. Ethical concerns are paramount in any artwork, and they become more crucial than ever in the context of bio art. From the perspective of interspecies communication, transgenic art calls for a dialogical relationship between artist, creature/artwork, and those who come in contact with it.<sup>22</sup>

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audiovisual system of the biobot, through a specific device connected to the web. The biobot's movements allow the public to have a changing perspective on the environment. The visitors of the gallery can see the terrarium with the transgenic creatures both from outside the dome and from inside, thanks to a computer that provide the public with the same experience of the people in internet. Since it provides the possibility to live the environment inside the dome from the point of view of the biobot, the work allow a first person thinking of the meaning of transgenic ecology. E. Kac, *L'arte transgenica: geni sintetici, transgenici e biobots* cit., p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> J. Hauser (ed.), *Art Biotech*, it. ed. by P.L. Capucci, F. Torriani, Bologna, Clueb, 2007, p. 58-59.

<sup>20</sup> E. Kac, *L'arte transgenica: geni sintetici, transgenici e biobots* cit., p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> See the official website <http://www.glofish.com>.

<sup>22</sup> In 1998 Kac invents the expression "transgenic art" in a written text that is also its manifest: E. Kac, *Transgenic Art*, "Leonardo Electronic Almanac" 6/11 (1998) (now available here <http://www.ekac.org/transgenic.html>): "Transgenic art, I propose, is a new art form based on the use of genetic

It is not by chance that Kac's transgenic projects have often taken into account "pet" animals, with whom man has always established an inter-relation, such as the dog (*GFP K-9*) and the rabbit (*GFP Bunny*). GFP is the acronym of Green Fluorescent Protein, a protein extracted from the jellyfish *Aequorea Victoria* (a species of the North-West Pacific Ocean), that becomes fluorescent when exposed to UV light. The implantation of a gene carrying this protein in the DNA of the mammal embryo leads to the birth of organisms fluorescent under specific light conditions. As Kac has emphasized several times, the GFP has long been used as marker in the laboratories of molecular biology and it is inoffensive for the animal health, not altering its vital functions<sup>23</sup>.

At the end of the 90s the artist tried to implant the protein in the DNA of a dog. The dog is the pet animal par excellence and its temperament predisposes it to social interaction. According to Kac "the dog is a quintessentially dialogical animal"<sup>24</sup>. But the project *GFP K-9* was left to an early stage because of several difficulties, among which the lack of a complete mapping of the dog genome, without which the project could not be carried on safely for the health of the animal. In 2000 the artist attempted the experiment again with a rabbit<sup>25</sup>, a species that man has long been using for hybridisation and selective breeding. *GFP Bunny* was thus born, the green rabbit, tenderly called Alba. Both projects envisaged three phases equally important for the success of the artwork: the first one, properly creative, is the genetic manipulation in laboratory with the help of scientists and it is concluded by the birth of the transgenic organism<sup>26</sup>; the second one (that we could call communicative or expository) is the museum exhibition and media communication of the transgenic animal, in order to solicit public debate and shake common people consciousness; the third one, that we could call dialogical or relational, is the integration of the transgenic animal in a domestic environment<sup>27</sup>. Therefore also in *GFP Bunny* the concept of responsibility of the public is present, as care of the other living being perceived as different. The hybrid, in fact, is not the monster generating fear (hence the choice of animals such as the dog or the rabbit), but rather biodiversity with which we should learn how to co-exist:

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engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, to create unique living beings".

<sup>23</sup> Id., *Bioestetica, arte transgenica e il coniglio verde* cit., p. 435.

<sup>24</sup> Id., *Transgenic Art* cit.

<sup>25</sup> The transgenic rabbit is made in Jouy-en-Josas (France) in collaboration with the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) that since 1995 was using the GFP in experiments on embryos of frogs and cats. Since 1998 it was working on the injection in whitish rabbits' ovaries of the fluorescent green protein, following a safe procedure, finalized to the chemical tracing of some events in the body of the rabbit, as the growth of tumours or the development of genetic illnesses. F. Fischmaller, *E-art. Arte, società e democrazia nell'era della rete*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2006, p. 51-52.

<sup>26</sup> Alba was born in 2000 from the collaboration of the Brazilian artist, the zoosystemist Louis Bec and the scientists Louis-Marie Houdebine and Patrick Prunnet. See E. Kac, *GFP Bunny*, in P.T. Dobriša, A. Kostic (eds.), *Edoardo Kac: Telepresence, Biotelematics, Transgenic Art*, Maribor (Slovenia), Kibla, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Kac's artistic project envisaged to live with the rabbit in a room especially arranged for the exhibition and to bring it afterwards to Chicago in order to insert it in the domestic life of his family, as to develop the analysis on the insertion of the different in the social and family context. S. Lux, *Arte ipercontemporanea un certo loro sguardo* cit., p. 425.

Molecular genetics allows the artist to engineer the plant and animal genome and create new life forms. The nature of this new art is defined not only by the birth and growth of a new plant or animal but above all by the nature of the relationship between artist, public, and transgenic organism. Organisms created in the context of transgenic art can be taken home by the public to be grown in the backyard or raised as human companions.<sup>28</sup>

The aesthetic tension of the work, as the artist remarks, comes from the conflict between the familiar bunny and the hypothetical monstrosity of the transgenic being. According to Kac it is important that society learns how to accept and welcome clones and chimeras. He is not interested in emotional and spectacular aesthetics, but rather in the involvement of another subject<sup>29</sup>. Also this project is therefore included in the dialogical aesthetics characterizing all his artistic productions: "GFP Bunny gives continuation to my focus on the creation, in art, of what Martin Buber called dialogical relationship, what Mikhail Bakhtin called dialogic sphere of existence, what Emile Benveniste called intersubjectivity and what Humberto Maturana calls consensual domains: shared spheres of perception, cognition and agency in which two or more sentient beings (human or otherwise) can negotiate their experience dialogically"<sup>30</sup>.

The artist however could not accomplish the project that was blocked by censorship at the first stage. He tried anyway to get to the second phase through a massive media communication that made the image of the green rabbit known all around the world. The reasons behind the censorship, marking the boundaries between scientific research and artistic project, are nevertheless very interesting. Kac's transgenic art proceeds indeed parallel to scientific research (in the use of laboratories and instruments, in the collaboration with technicians, biologists, geneticists, in the common sharing of some goals), but it diverges from it in the analysis of the results: for the field of research the transgenic rabbit is the vehicle of an ongoing scientific study and it must therefore be kept in the laboratory, for the field of art, instead, it is full of expository and aesthetic values. Although thanks to Kac for the first time an operation of genetic engineering is associated with the supposed uselessness of art<sup>31</sup>, as a matter of fact, artists, as scientists, have as their own purpose to contribute to knowledge. However, differently from the scientists, often working in the secrecy of their laboratories, the artists aim to shake people's sleepy consciousness and animate a debate, in which ethics and aesthetics can collaborate to inform the general public on the ongoing cultural transformations.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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<sup>28</sup> E. Kac, *Transgenic Art* cit.

<sup>29</sup> Id., *Bioestetica, arte transgenica e il coniglio verde* cit., p. 436.

<sup>30</sup> Interview conducted online, with questions posted to the Genolog website, July-September 2000 (<http://genolog.com/slash>). Cfr. <http://www.ekac.org/genointer.html>.

<sup>31</sup> E. Kac, *Bioestetica, arte transgenica e il coniglio verde* cit., p. 435.

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## Shared Responsibility: Author and Public in JR's Experience

EMANUELE CRESCIMANNO

**Abstract:** New forms of art have implications that go beyond the aesthetics and the theory of the arts: they emphasize ethical, political and social aspects. The understanding of the new relationship between author and users is crucial to JR's works and theories. In this paper we will provide a theoretical explanation of his work through the tools developed by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*. What is the form of artwork today? What are the duties and the role of the artist? What are those of the users? And what are the effects on the social, political and ethical sphere?

We shall argue that JR's live actions are able to overcome some of Bourriaud's theoretical limits: his activity takes place not in museums (like the models presented by Bourriaud) but between people. Hence, through his work a new ethical and political community is born and grows up. Finally, JR turns everyday situations in artistic situations because he works directly on the real world. He is capable to create a new dimension of relationships and he reveals a new way to make art.

The new forms of artistic practice in recent times have implications that go beyond the realm of aesthetics and the theory of the arts. They closely entail indeed an ethical, political and social dimension. It is necessary then to detect what form is taken up by the work of art today, what are the tasks, roles and duties of the artist and what are those of the users. Already 1960s avant-guards questioned the linearity of the artistic process, going progressively from the artist to the public through the artwork; new social and political conditions have led to new artistic proposals, finally dismantling the traditional institutional frame and increasingly emphasizing the creative function of the public. However, already Dewey in 1934 in *Art as Experience* had stressed on the fact that, rather than referring to the work of art, we should refer to the actual experience of the work of art, thus opening the way to the inclusion of all new practices, that, from being daily life simple experiences, they now tend to acquire aesthetic features. Along the way of such a perspective, it would be possible then to detect in the whole history of art of the Twentieth Century the constant tendency to bring in daily practices previously not considered as artistic, and to transform daily objects into works of art, thus emphasizing the spin-off provided by such transformations to the social dimension connected to the work of art.

### *1. JR's artistic action in the streets of the world*

A particularly successful example of the new set of interconnections and fruitful possibilities of interventions on reality claimed by today artistic practices is provided by JR, a still anonymous *photographeur*, who since the very first years of our Century has carried out several projects half way between photography and street art; he is a street artist who from Paris' *banlieu* arrived to the world wide visibility of *TED conferences*. JR's work is mainly to put up posters in places hosting conflicts and social tensions in order to clearly show to everybody that reality is not as it appears at a quick and superficial gaze, and that therefore it

deserves more attention. It is ultimately an invitation to exert vision the best possible way in order to get rid of *clichés* and formats of vision established by social dynamics. The big posters he put up depict the very inhabitants of the places he has chosen for his action in the attempt to represent them differently from their representation in the media, that are exclusively interested in these situation during emergencies or moments of social tension with the power in charge. The aim is therefore to grant a possibility to express themselves to those who are generally unable to do it, who are generally superficially misrepresented, to minorities otherwise silent or left in a condition of un-expression.

Since the early years of the Century, JR has carried out his work in Paris *banlieu*, while shocked by the protests of the young *casseurs*. He has put up giant posters of Israeli and Palestinian people on the wall dividing the two populations in Palestine, with the aim of emphasizing the common traits among the two rather than the differences and contrasts exacerbated by media and politics. He has given a voice to women from the south of the world, from Rio de Janeiro *favelas* to Africa *slums*. And he did that with local population involvement, clearly explaining the aim of his projects and emphasizing that without their active participation they would have been meaningless. One example, above all, can clarify the best JR's *modus operandi*: in the *favela* of Morro da Providencia in Rio de Janeiro, JR has involved in the project *Women are Heroes* resident women in order to show that what claimed by mass media does not correspond to the truth and that an attentive policy that is able to involve residents can be more efficient than whatever authoritative intervention from above. JR has then listened to these women's stories. He took their photo as they are, with no artifice or will to let them appear different from what they are, with the signs of time and life fatigues on their faces, in order to tell through their portraits their authentic story. JR shows to be an artist who is aware of his media of expression, of its logic and potential. He has therefore taken the photo of these women using a lens of focal length 28 mm, as it reduces the physical distance between the photographer and the subject to only 10 centimetres. He focused on the face filling the whole framing, arranging things so that the face can alone reveal the identity of the person portrayed in his/her entirety. The grimace or caricatural expression taken by the photographed subjects provides a possibility of personal expression, it enhances the visage's modes of expression as the giant dimensions of the image augment the signifying power and the amount of useful details for a more complete and complex representation. JR has afterwards gone back to the *favela* with the giant posters of the portraits and has put them up on houses facades, on the stairs running through the *favela*, finally changing their appearance and showing that "Art can find a place anywhere, just like those flowers that sometimes emerge between slabs of concrete"<sup>1</sup>.

JR can rightly claim then that he "owns the biggest art gallery in the world" and that the simple principle of his art lies in the fact that "he exhibits freely in the streets of the world, catching the attention of people who are not typical museum visitors. His work mixes Art and Act, talks about commitment, freedom, identity and limit"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> JR, *Women are Heroes*, Paris, Alternatives, 2009, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.jr-art.net/jr>



The highest acknowledgement of JR's work is the *TED prize* awarded to him in 2011, as a recognition of the fact that his work was able to incarnate the fundamental principles of TED. The main element of all of JR's projects is indeed the participation and involvement of the photographed subjects, their active role, and, finally, the overcoming of the rigid distinction between author and public, hence transforming local inhabitants into co-authors of the work of art. JR's aim in short is to show in real terms that a different understanding and a different practise of art can create new forms of relationship and engagement, thus shaping a fruitful place of encounter and mutual exchange. The sphere of influence and efficacy of art is therefore extended to the social, ethical, and political realm. He has moreover reformulated the role and responsibility of the artist in the light of all those artistic practices that have definitively overcome the traditional, rigid taxonomy, according to which the work of art is a product of the artist, offered to the public when finished. In fact, when he accepted the prize in March 2011, JR wondered: "I mean, technology, politics, business do change the world, not always in a good way, but they do. What about art? Could art change the world?"<sup>3</sup>.

Our specific aim, here, however, is not exclusively related to the issue of the status of the artistic action and of the artist and public duties, but rather it would like to focus on the implications and spins-off of this new understanding of the artistic work. While granting to his actions the possibility to contribute to a positive change of the world, JR wondered how he could possibly find a form that is able to actively involve the public and give them the whole creative power, not belonging exclusively to the artist any more. The new relation between the artist and the public and its multiple consequences entails in fact not only a new mode of articulation of the form-content relation, but also the endorsement of a new ethical responsibility: the giant super close-up portraits of youngsters in Paris *banlieus*, of Palestinian and Israeli people on the wall dividing Israel from Palestine in the Middle East, of women from the *favela* of Providencia in Rio de Janeiro or from the bidonville of Nairobi, from Liberia and Sierra Leone, visible in those very places, under the modifications perpetrated by time and passers-by, deeply question the great classical models of the work of art. While *Facebook* is becoming the larger vehicle of images, taken directly from the daily life of every single user, images conceived to be shared and commented, JR has shown that there is also a totally different way to offer images in the streets, and that those images have a deeper and larger potential of sharing:

in some ways, art can change the world. Art is not supposed to change the world, to change practical things, but to change perceptions. Art can change the way we see the world. Art can create an analogy. Actually the fact that art cannot change things makes it a neutral place for exchanges and discussions, and then enables you to change the world.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.ted.com/talks/jr\\_s\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_use\\_art\\_to\\_turn\\_the\\_world\\_inside\\_out.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jr_s_ted_prize_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out.html)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

The communicability and socialization of a kind of knowledge, that is a mode of looking and acting on reality, opens up to the ethical dimension a public, participated dimension, generating a form of thinking in continuous dialogue and restructuring, that is organized while displayed as the images produced by JR. The moment when he puts up the images is far from being the completion of the creative process. It is rather a moment of genesis, when the life of the image starts and a whole series of relations are generated, when the power of art to act as an analogy is fully displayed: that means, to question what seems to be granted, to present new connections and to reveal new possible operational paths<sup>5</sup>.

The main question JR asks is related to the shared meaning of such practices, to the relations established among co-participants. He tells in fact that

to a man who did not understand, I heard someone say, "You know, you've been here for a few hours trying to understand, discussing with your fellows. During that time, you haven't thought about what you're going to eat tomorrow. This is art". I think it's people's curiosity that motivates them to come into the projects. And then it becomes more. It becomes a desire, a need. [Indeed] what we see changes who we are. When we act together, the whole thing is much more than the sum of the parts.<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact we face the issue of the ethical relevancy of art, and of its ability to create new and positive relations among the subjects involved. However, what we should really ask is how the necessary involvement in JR's projects is different from the already traditional models of public participation to the creation of the work of art, disseminated in the whole second half of the Twentieth Century?

## 2. Relational aesthetics: some social functions of art

In 1998 the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud published the essay *Esthétique relationnelle*, theoretical manifest for his intense activity in the '90s. Bourriaud's theoretical proposal springs out of the recognition of one recurrent peculiarity of the works of art of the period, that is the constant and continuous labelling as *work in progress* requiring a relevant active involvement of the public, and in general terms a reformulation of the existing relations in the world of art, an opening towards new dimensions and spaces and the attempt to involve

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<sup>5</sup> We should acknowledge JR's ability in touching nerve centres, not only concerning the communication aspect of his work, as well as its social and political aspects, but also concerning the artist's approach to its work. In the *TED conference* in fact he shows full theoretical awareness when he raises the issue of the relation between his images and the advertising on city walls, between the images he put up and the spray varnish surrounding them, the latter often surviving to the images themselves (that are not ultimately conceived to last very long), when he refers to the modifications introduced by time, weather, simple passers-by (we shall remark that the people walking next to the images in the streets acts as a sort of "curators" on the images) and to the practical utility of giant pictures (some of them, printed on waterproof plastic material, have been used as roofs in a shantytown in Kenya).

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.ted.com/talks/jr\\_s\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_use\\_art\\_to\\_turn\\_the\\_world\\_inside\\_out.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jr_s_ted_prize_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out.html)

new public. Nothing of all this is actually an absolute novelty. However the relational perspective, once aware of the confusion imposed by the dimension of spectacularity on the normal dialectics of experience, investigates the possibility to generate new relations to the world through artistic practices. Instead of supporting a further theory of art, relational aesthetics, acknowledging that human specificity rests on the capacity to understand life as an aesthetic form, looks for a new definition of interpersonal relations generated by the universe of art. It is then presented as a theory of form: form is the result of an artistic practice somehow coherently connecting heterogeneous dimensions, aiming precisely to a relationship with the world. The modes of expression often undertaken by today works of art are decided by the dialogue established between the artist and the public, by the answers the latter gives. The form taken today by the work of art is then an opening towards the other, an exchange modifying relationships through continuous dialogue, thus creating an interaction that leads to the improvement of all involved subjects.

The relation between the artist and the public is then under the sign of prototype, experimentation and constant, unavoidable *feedback* action. Once acknowledged the situation and pushed by the contingencies of his work as curator and art critic, Bourriaud analyses the artistic landscape of the last years of the Twentieth Century and singles out some common features revealing an interesting tendency. The first element that has to be emphasized is the change in the financial-social-political situation at the end of the Century and of the Millennium, that had to be taken into account by the art-world. Ideologies had definitively fallen, modernity and post-modernity had been overcome, and the horizon of action seemed devoid of true holding points. Furthermore the new prevailing role of technology forced to a radical reformulation of the operational modes of art. The logic of mass communication is characterized by imposed control, while the artistic practices activate new connections escaping by nature from any form of control; technology allows quick and efficient actions and transforms users into consumers; "the social bond has turned into a standardized artefact" following some simple, controllable and repeatable principles; the reference model is the one described by Guy Debord: "human relations are no longer 'experienced', but start to become blurred in their 'spectacular' representation". Consequently, we shall formulate the following question: "is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field art-history traditionally earmarked for their 'representation'?"<sup>7</sup> Is it possible to subvert Debord's prevision and allow art to cover the role of experimenting new social relations? Today's definition of art must (or should) indeed insist on the fact that it is an activity that can produce new relations to the world, through signs, forms, gestures and objects.

Not unlike the avant-guards of the '60s, contemporary artists are keen to reformulate the relation between art and life; however unlike them, they understood the utopian and impossible content of some positions, and they try to closely follow daily life and its needs asking to be grasped and satisfied. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Bourriaud remarks that "art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling

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<sup>7</sup> N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 1998, p. 9.

possible universes”<sup>8</sup>; we face in short new more limited horizons, where the acting potential of artists can be defined as

*learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution. Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.*<sup>9</sup>

An urging question comes up: are we sure that such apparently more limited horizons have not a bigger potential, than the avant-guard wider ones, since they can modify the daily life and hence expanding like a wild fire from the horizon of the single person to the horizon of the entire community? After all, once we acknowledge the less strong influence of art on large scale contemporary social and political contexts (as it is clear to JR, as we have seen), could this not be the right and appropriate way to focus the action on smaller contexts where the force of art can be displayed with full efficacy? That is an environment where the artist, starting from actual circumstances, imagines new forms, less pretentious and less compromising, in order to start again to transform and improve the world – yet that little portion of it – in the here and now of his life and action.

Such awareness entails a new and immediate overview of the possible relations supported by this new mode of doing art: “a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space)” engendered by the social transformations of the second post-war period. Life in the metropolis has imposed in short a “system of intensive encounters” and, consequently, as a corresponding artistic practice, “an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning”<sup>10</sup>. In Bourriaud’s proposal then intersubjectivity is not a simple background for the artistic practice (as it has always been, art being a stimulus to social participation and dialogue), but rather is imposed on it, as the incrementation of the need to be together and to collectively find meaningfulness, with an explicit opening to the social, ethical, and political consequences entailed by the new relations. Such practices are then able “to *tighten the space of relations*”, since, compared to other media such as television or literature, for private consumption, or cinema and theatre, gathering together small communities in front of univocal images, they instead foresee to strengthen and encourage in real terms the space for relation (according to a model that may be thus sum up : “I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time”<sup>11</sup> in relation with the others).

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

On the same line as Marx, according to Bourriaud, it is possible to claim that an artwork is a “social *interstice*”, that acts as a catalyst for new forms of relation, since it “is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system”. Today, an art exhibition “creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the “communication zones” that are imposed upon us”<sup>12</sup>. These places are in counterposition to the technical and artificial ones created by the automated machines. Here the exhibition creates an “arena of exchange” that has to be aesthetically judged; art is then “a state of encounter”<sup>13</sup>. In this sense art acquires the faculty to indicate new modes of relation among subjects. Once more it is worth to remark that such a function can be performed even more efficiently in liminal areas and periods, where the official culture, the forms of social control, and power dynamics can be more easily and more effectively questioned. Once more, therefore, the acceptance of a certain marginality of the role of art within the globalist system, rather than be perceived as a sign of impotence, it can work as an exemplary action from the bottom up, that is able to involve and also to shock. Microscopic interventions on the territory benefit from an efficacy that the great revolutionary and utopian interventions could not reach. Bourriaud’s invitation, starting from the numerous examples illustrating his theory<sup>14</sup>, is to focus on the increasing weight of intersubjective relations in contemporary artistic practices. Through the artwork the author and the public meet in “a specific ‘arena of Exchange’. And this ‘arena of exchange’, must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the ‘world’ it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it”. According to the perspective of the *materialism of the encounter*, as theorized by Louis Althusser, “the point of departure” is “the world contingency, which has no pre-existing origin or sense, nor Reason, which might allot it a purpose”. Relational aesthetic then “does not represent a theory of art” since “this would imply the statement of an origin and a destination, but [it is] a theory of form”<sup>15</sup>.

The following question then concerns the form: “What do we mean by *form*? A coherent unit, a structure (*independent entity of inner dependencies*) which shows the typical features of a world. The artwork does not have an exclusive hold on it, it is merely a subset in the overall series of existing forms”<sup>16</sup>. If then we maintain, according to critical materialism, that the world is made of material and random encounters (it will suffice to refer to the philosophy of Lucretius, Hobbes, Marx, Althusser), also the forms of art depend on random encounters. A common understanding of the form is well enough. It is then a “structural unity

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> One among the many quoted examples by Bourriaud can clarify which are the contexts and situations hosting relational art’s events: consider Rirkrit Tiravanija’s performances, during which the artist cooks Thai dishes and offers them to the public; hence a typical convivial occasion generates encounters and opinions exchanges as a work of art (see *ibid.*, p. 25 ff.).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

imitating a world. Artistic practice involves creating a form capable of "lasting", bringing heterogeneous units together on a coherent level, in order to create a relationship to the world"<sup>17</sup>.

The different modes of holding together are the different modes of manifestation of art during the centuries; today the bond is less rigid and clear than the "classic" one of figurative arts, such as painting and sculpture. It will suffice to think about cinema editing or the unity of an installation. Or rather, differently also from art based on it, "an artist's artwork thus acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be reactivated by the beholder-manipulator"<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the reference to the concept of form allows us to emphasize how the artwork is presented as a social fact and reaches out beyond its natural borders: "The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line"<sup>19</sup>.

Hence, through art, elements otherwise distant and different find a place of encounter and exchange, a place of action and participation, "new 'possibilities of life'"<sup>20</sup>, a place that exists only thanks to the active and participative intervention of the public, proceeding side by side with the original and inventive intervention of the artist. Consequently, "form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise"<sup>21</sup>; form is not produced by the artist presenting a finished product to the public, but rather it is given by the dialogue engendered by the interplay of human interaction, following a continuous opening that connects all the subjects involved, through what we could call, only for commodity sake, the artwork, but that is actually revealed only in the relations it cultivates. The pretension that the artistic form is stable in the artwork is an illusion: "form only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence) when it introduces human interactions"<sup>22</sup>; the artist then starts a dialogue (that is such when it meets an answer: "someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees fit"<sup>23</sup> and from here are generated those human relations necessarily innervating the artistic form.

It is worthy, however, to be more precise on the meaning of the public participation and on what are the interpersonal relations Bourriaud emphasizes as his specific proposal: it is in fact true that since the '60s, with the happenings and the performances, the role of the public has radically changed. If it is then true that one of main streams of contemporary art requires an increasing participation of the public, that is increasingly more active and supported by new technologies, it is also true that there are channels of conviviality where just the illusion of more democracy participation and interactivity is created, since this is a necessary condition "imposed" by the technological media, and not a proper active participation. And yet, late Twentieth Century art has proposed something new, intercepting a specific need, that is to say the production of relationships external to the field of art: "relations between

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

individuals and groups, between the artist and the world, and, by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world"<sup>24</sup>. An artist has ethical responsibility towards the world whenever he/she generates that very network of relations that his/her work is, i.e. an artwork and a specific practice producing relations with the world. Not incidentally art is increasingly placed out of museums and conventional or institutional places, moving in the streets and in daily life, thus creating new formal domains where human relationships become proper "artistic 'forms'. Meeting, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such"<sup>25</sup>. Convivial and social practices become then artistic practices. The public transforms the practices of its daily experience into artistic practices, thus entering the fleeting borderline supporting today's dialogue between the world of art and the world of life.

Whereas traditional art was placed under the sign of availability, – you could see it any time –, "contemporary art is often marked by non-availability, by being viewable only at a specific time". The clearest example here is the performance: "[the art work] elapses within a factual time, for an audience *summoned* by the artist. In a nutshell, the work prompts meetings and invites appointments, managing its own temporal structure"<sup>26</sup>. Art has therefore a gathering function. It creates convivial relations. Whereas the avant-guards of the '60s and '70s tackled the issue of enlarging the borders of the world of art, in the '90s the main aim is to test art's resistance within the global social field<sup>27</sup>, creating external relations in the daily life.

### 3. Beyond relational aesthetics: JR's field action

After sketching this outline, we shall focus on the ethical aspect and on the consequent responsibility entailed by the relational proposal. All relational artworks in fact determine a common practical and theoretical horizon based on new social relationships. Modes of social exchange, interactivity with the public within the presented aesthetic experience, are put into place with the explicit aim to connect individuals and groups. The great novelty of relational art does not lie however in interactivity, but rather in considering interactivity and intersubjectivity as essential elements of the work of art, starting points as well as conclusive moments, as organizing principles. Relational artworks produce then new relational time-spaces, engendering new interpersonal experiences attempting to get rid of the oppressive logic of mass communication: the final aim is therefore the production of alternative models of social participation.

What are the elements of Bourriard's theory that can be useful to the full understanding of the challenge implicit in the idea of art practiced by JR? First of all we shall remark that, along the line of a certain Twentieth Century tradition, we face a shifting from the singular

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

dimension to the public and collective dimension of aesthetic consumption; such a dimension rests on the idea that relational art sets the aim of generating intersubjective encounters where any meaning is formulated on a collective level rather than by individual consumption. It is clear that the aim of JR's action is to build up a community that is able to overcome the limits of the simple enjoyment of an artwork, to the benefit of any perspective aiming to constantly relaunch the moment of production and make it infinite (let's consider for instance the modification in time of the posters). Even more relevant is the emerging ethical and political dimension in the practice, that comes from the possibility to build a community out of new active forms of participation. Such a kind of artwork invites therefore to evaluate, besides the obvious aesthetic consequences, as the ethical and political ones.

More importantly, we shall remark that, in relation to Bourriaud's model (as well as in relation to some critics addressed to such a model<sup>28</sup>), JR activity entails a further new opening. All Bourriaud's examples, as well as his corresponding activities as a curator, pertain to definite artistic operations (professional artists, institutional places of artistic practice, a public that is aware of the nature of the activity they are participating in), hence they take place according to clearly recognizable modes and rhetorics. JR instead, as we said, acts directly in the field, transforming situations of a different nature into art. Basically JR transforms real daily-life situations into art, while in Bourriaud's model we deal with artistic situations becoming social situations, hence similar to daily situations.

The difference is in the nature of the produced experience. What kind of aesthetic (and ethical, social, political, etc.) experience JR's artwork produces? Clearly, it is not a simple activation of relationships, but rather the constitution of a community that acts in order to state its identity, besides any possible misunderstanding, due to the lack of access to mass media or to being unable of self-expression. Nor it is simply the transformation of simple social practices into "art", thanks to the involvement and the organization brought by the artist. However, if we go back to the fruitful lesson offered by Dewey in *Art as Experience*, and we put emphasis on the experiential moment as the true fundamental element of each aesthetic dimension, then it is possible to detect all the enormous potential of JR's proposal, interpreted according to the tools provided by Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, without sticking to the limits of his proposal. Drawing moreover on Paolo D'Angelo's theory of aesthetics as *philosophy of experience*, "that philosophy considering that particular experience that is the aesthetic experience (not restricted to the experience of art only), recognizes something significant in our experience generally"<sup>29</sup>, it is ultimately possible to understand what kind of experience is generated by JR's action. The aesthetic experience thus conceived is indeed

<sup>28</sup> See C. Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, "October" 110 (Fall 2004), p. 51-79: Bishop remarks that all Bourriaud's examples are related to precise institutionalized artistic situations, radically differentiated from daily and ordinary experience; accordingly, the relations are formed under the sign of the artificial and with an elitist flavour.

<sup>29</sup> P. D'Angelo, *Tre modi (più uno) d'intendere l'estetica*, in L. Russo (ed.), *Dopo l'Estetica*, Palermo, Acsthetica Preprint: Supplementa, 2010, p. 39 [my translation].



*a sort of reduplication, of doubling of the experience* usually undertaken, and in such reduplication the characters of the experience are both mitigated and intensified. Mitigated, as the aesthetic experience is detached from immediate goals, it seems to be “for free”, without definite aims to pursue; intensified, as precisely such an orientation on itself let emerge very strongly the nature of the experience we make. Aestheticity is not of a different fabric from common experience, but rather it is a *different organization and finalization* of experience.<sup>30</sup>

Bourriaud’s model entails a kind of public that is able to distinguish what is art from what is not, despite the resemblance between the event presented as art and daily life; in such a model daily social forms are indeed used to produce real relations and communities, however the accomplished experience must present such an organization as to depart from daily experience to the aim of revealing its aestheticity. The public of a relational artwork has an experience that is indeed similar to the one he/she has every day, but it is arranged according to modes and relational forms that are, precisely, *only models*. Everything happens within a frame that should be able to differentiate the space of the aesthetic experience from the one of ordinary experience; such an aesthetic experience, although lived through the form of a relation, has to be accordingly something different from the experience you live in the every day relational field. Although Bourriaud clearly refers to real relationships and real micro-utopian communities, after all, he does maintain a hint of artefact, hence, theoretically, an element of difference from daily-life real encounters and relationships.

In conclusion, following Bourriaud, it is correct to claim that a relational artwork’s structure can produce relationships, except then charging the responsibility of *reporting aestheticity* and organizing the frame that allows the whole functioning of the structure to specific inner-frame subjects. Those subjects, although main actors in the artwork building together with the public, according to explicit anti-authoritarian principles, they end up having, in virtue of their task, a superior positioning than general public. The institutional frame in which a relational work can be presented, thus, aiming to avoid full identification of the work of art with *any* relation with similar features, eventually out of galleries and museums, finally gets a silent but strong support to its function. As it tries to *appear* as an *authentic* relation perfectly matching daily-life ones, relational artworks have been supported by an intense process of sense effect building, just to delete all its traces afterwards. The *fiction work* is thus accomplished, by which art is oriented as to reduplicate experience in the public. According to this perspective, we can put relational art into a three phases circle: the first one draws on social models codified in daily-life experience, then it proceeds to their reorganization according to aesthetic experience, thus being able to get back to the daily-life dimension. Moreover, if we evaluate the aesthetic experience by the relations it establishes, by the attention paid to it, we realize that it determines an opening towards something that goes beyond biological needs towards the specifically “human”. It is indeed grounded in

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

human cognitive functions, that are not devoted to mere survival and species reproduction. The aesthetic experience takes place when experience is not limited to the perceptive level, to pure real data, but when it opens to a dimension of imagination prefiguring possible situations, the formulation of alternative scenarios, thus developing cognitive abilities, ultimately allowing freedom from the worries of immediate goals as well as the right distancing from purely instinctual reactions.

The aporetic and fictional factor in Bourriaud's theory, that is ultimately guaranteed only by the frame's efficacy in creating new social relations is happily solved by JR's projects making. There, the potentially compromising frame does not exist any more. Since he works directly on reality, and he sets as his first target the production of new relationships and the actual improvement of existing situations, JR's practices release true relations and new communities, thus resolving into pure awareness in the young African, finally understanding the meaning of his participation in the project, as during the time spent within the project, discussing with the others and in the attempt to understand the process, he was no longer thinking about food supplying. These subjects therefore are not content of watching any more, or sustaining representational model that are actually deforming reality, and they come out of anonymity giving life to a form of art that is the awareness of themselves and of their own life, beyond the limits of what is strictly necessary. Once discovered how art can change their life, they cannot let it go any more.

[Translated by Tessa Marzotto]

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