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The Event of the Sacred in the Post-Secular Age: Encounters with Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutics, Hermann Nitsch's and Anselm Kiefer's Art

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Acknowledgments

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote in his reflections on *The Case of Wagner*: "All beautiful art, all great art belongs here: the essence of both is gratitude".
Since this dissertation largely engages with beauty and art – often in close dialogue with several of Nietzsche's insights – I hope that the work itself may be understood as a concrete expression of the very emotion he evokes: gratitude toward Being.

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Introduction

"Art comes under the subjection of cultural utility, and its essence is mistaken; blindness to its essential core, to its way of grounding truth" (Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2012, p. 93)

The title of this dissertation immediately evokes the interdisciplinary notions under investigation: the sacred, understood – following Rudolf Otto's seminal legacy – not as a determined and objectified being, but as an event of meaning and transcendence within history; the post-secular age, that its, the transitional epoch emerging after the crisis of modern secularism; and finally, the fields of study in which this question will be explored, namely, hermeneutical philosophy and contemporary art, situated within a German cultural constellation whose internal nexus will be clarified throughout this work.

Yet, following Hans-Georg Gadamer's legacy, the most relevant notion – acting as an active diaphragm connecting the others and allowing them to emerge in new facets – is "encounters". Our research is not a philological or historical exercise, nor an attempt to establish a new philosophical "theory", "structure", or "analytical model". Rather, it seeks to foster a hermeneutical conversation among the resonant pathways along which Gadamer, Hermann Nitsch, and Anselm Kiefer advanced – independently and without personal contact, yet sharing, a sensitivity toward reality and the religious-aesthetic challenges of the contemporary age. This sensitivity is rooted in a hermeneutical circle embedded in 20th-century German culture. The dialogue among them should not be imagined as a unitary circle, but as three autonomous circles partially overlapping without ever collapsing into one another: a spiraliform and labyrinthic conversation.

Therefore, we do not intend to analyze Gadamer's philosophical theory of art and deduce from it a normative interpretative paradigm to apply to Nitsch and Kiefer, thereby reproducing the very dualism between "theory" and "practice" that hermeneutics resists. Instead, Gadamer's hermeneutics will provide the cultural horizon – the topology – within which his insights and the artists' images and concepts may converse. That means that the artists' aesthetical insights will allow us to re-analyse Gadamer's position and, by working on it, slightly discuss and rephrase some of his ideas, adapting them to new scenarios. The dialogue, thus, is not one-sided. Rather, by bringing Gadamer's reflections into conversation with Kiefer and Nitsch, we discover aspects of Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* that still require to be re-thought and re-

discussed. Encounters and pathways, rather than systematic constructions or synthesis, will guide our work.

To pursue this, it is necessary first to introduce the philological and historical-philosophical dimensions of the concepts involved, since thought, as hermeneutics affirms, is always embedded in temporality. Gadamer's key notions – the hermeneutical circle, fusion of horizons, history of effects, pre-judice, tradition, and dialogue – together with his effort to overcome dualisms and substantialist models in order to open human experience to the richness of understanding, resonate with Nitsch's and Kiefer's desire to listen to traces of the sacred, otherness, and wisdom embedded in mythological, mystical, and religious traditions, giving them renewed life through the radical languages of contemporary art.

Art, as Gadamer shows, is a privileged locus of truth. His *Truth and Method* begins with an extensive examination of art, affirming the inseparability of hermeneutics and aesthetics. "Art in particular plays a key role in philosophical hermeneutics, and this is because a new experience of truth can be achieved only from art; thus, the need arises to free aesthetics from the quarrel with modern science"[1]. The hermeneutics of the beautiful coincides with the hermeneutics of the sacred, since the work of art is the epiphanic manifestation of ritual and transcendence. This nexus, we will argue, is also central to Nitsch and Kiefer, for whom art is a privileged encounter with truth – truth conceived not as a determined being but as an openness to a transcendent unfounded foundation, always related with the experience of the sacred.

Structurally, the dissertation focuses on four pivotal concepts – a "fourfold" – which illuminate the relation between sacred and art in Gadamer: the ontology of images, the evenemential ontology of beauty, mythical language, and religious tradition. References to Nitsch and Kiefer will already emerge here, sketching the contours of a dialogue that deepens in the subsequent monographic sections on each artist, where Gadamer's ideas will be recontextualized and re-examined alongside a broader horizon of philosophical, artistic, and religious references.

The outcome we seek is hermeneutically creative: a way of understanding contemporary art not merely as aesthetic pleasure, but as an event of meaning and immanent transcendence. No definitive conclusion on the abyssal notions of art and the sacred is possible, not only due to our own limitations, but because of the very dynamic ontology in which these notions are

[1] Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer. A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. by Niall Keane, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (Indiana) 2013, p. 48.

inscribed. As the Italian philosopher Andrea Emo, a figure who exerted great influence on Kiefer – wrote: "Art is original because it is origin, and as such it cannot be explained without losing its character of origin"[2]. Nevertheless, it is our hermeneutical conviction that this inexhaustibility does not cancel the philosophical and existential need to seek meaning in the eternal and fascinating tension between language and reality, understanding and misunderstanding, comprehension and transcendence. This critical and existential stance recalls Walter Benjamin's figure of the critic as alchemist: "If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced"[3].

The choice of Kiefer and Nitsch as case studies is not due to any direct biographical or speculative connection with Gadamer but arises from our hermeneutical conviction that they represent significant and coherent responses, within contemporary philosophy and art to the question of the relation between myth and sacred (in its ontological connection with myth, symbol, and rite). Despite their differences, Gadamer, Nitsch, and Kiefer all reflect (and perform) on this topic within the scenario of the post-secular age. Their attempts to overcome both materialistic modern approaches to the sacred and reactionary confessional stances belong within the broader effort to articulate "another postmodernism" – that is, a model of inhabiting reality that acknowledges the nihilistic collapse of the modern secular rationalist paradigm, but equally resists the relativism and deconstructionist "weak thought" that reduces philosophy to linguistic games, endless chains of signifiers without meanings, or logics of power, will, and rhetoric. Refusing substantialist and objectifying models does not entail abandoning the search for meaning and truth, as phenomenology and hermeneutics makes clear.

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[2] Andrea Emo, *Quaderno 321* (1969), cit., in Giovanni Sessa, *La meraviglia del nulla. Vita e filosofia di Andrea Emo*, Bietti, Milano 2014, p. 169.

[3] Walter Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (1913-1926), ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1996, pp. 297-360: 298 ("Will man, um eines Gleichnisses willen, das wachsende Werk als den flammenden Scheiterhaufen ansehn, so steht davor der Kommentator wie der Chemiker, der Kritiker gleich dem Alchimisten. Wo jenem Holz und Asche allein die Gegenstände seiner Analyse bleiben, bewahrt für diesen nur die Flamme selbst ein Rätsel: das des Lebendigen. So fragt der Kritiker nach der Wahrheit, deren lebendige Flamme fortbrennt über den schweren Scheitern des Gewesenen und der leichten Asche des Erlebten" [Walter Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, I.1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp. 123-201: 126]).

This theoretical search echoes social phenomena that signal the re-emergence, in contemporary societies, of archaic and even pre-modern habits and forms of knowledge[4]. In this respect, academic research and popular culture converge in expressing a search for new models to navigate an age of transition. Spirituality appears as a cornerstone of this conversation, as we will analyze in the first chapter on the post-secular age.

Art, in our view, is especially sensitive to this challenge. Several artists – including Nitsch and Kiefer as exemplary case studies – have elaborated "post-secular" artistic languages: modes of expression in which the experience of the historical Avantgarde touches new metaphysical horizons. Here, fragmentation, deconstruction, and aporia can evoke new topologies for the Event of the numinous. The theoretical and performative reflections on image, beauty, myth, symbol, and event create a common context in which Gadamer's hermeneutics and the art of Kiefer and Nitsch can be brought into dialogue in original ways.

Methodologically, we adopt Nicholas Davey's assumption: "We have to go beyond Gadamer's own formulations in constructive but probing and critical ways. This, we claim, offers an appropriate practical complement to his hermeneutical *modus operandi*. Understanding what is entailed in a philosophy is not a matter of reconstructing or re-experiencing its claims: rather, it is learning how to 'think with' a way of reasoning by applying it in new and unanticipated ways"[5]. Our attempt to be faithful to Gadamer's perspective, rigorously introducing it at a theoretical level, does not prevent us from openly exposing our own hermeneutical stance. This stance – deeply resonant with Gadamer, though not systematically theorized –is the conviction that hermeneutics reaches its explanatory peak in the encounter between aesthetics, understood as ontology of art, and philosophy of religion, understood as reflection on the relation between humanity and the sacred. Clarifying these connections may help us learn how to engage with works of art: not merely in their formal, technical or socio-political dimensions, but as the concretizations of a spiritual quests echoing the original and never-extinguished sacred dimension of art itself[6].

[4] A pioneer in this study has been Michel Maffesoli, who has written extensively on postmodernity and the persistence (or resurgence) of the archaic within contemporary societies with phenomena such as the revival of tribal forms of belonging (neo-tribes, fan communities, subcultures), the renewed importance of rituals and festivals in urban life, the search for emotional intensity and lived experiences over rational calculation and a fascination with myth, spirituality, and the sacred, even in secularized societies. Cf. among his immense production: *The Time of the Tribes. The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. by Don Smith, Sage Publications, London 1996.

[5] Nicholas Davey, *Unfinished Worlds. Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2013, p. 2.

[6] See Bryan Rennie, *An Ethology of Religion and Art. Belief as Behavior*, Routledge, London-New York 2020.

Contemporary art, in particular, cannot be adequately explained through reductive clichés and conceptualistic apparatus such as "stylistic innovation", "break with the past", "shock" (spectacle and novelty), "sociological frameworks", "political instrumentality", "market logic", or "technological fetishism". We hope that this research may also inspire art criticism, which too often – but not always – remains bound by such outdated frameworks.

At the same time, we are fully aware of the risks of generalization and of attributing excessive intentionality to artistic practices often rooted in spontaneity and emotion. Hermeneutics reminds us that interpretation is an art, not a science, and requires sensitivity, care, and balance. Art history has demonstrated that every artwork, as material artefact and iconographic structure, possesses a specific identity grounded in matter, history, signs, and techniques, and must be respected in these aspects. Artworks should not serve to "demonstrate" theories: they are not didactic instruments reducible to embedded concepts or intentions. Rather, they are poles of attraction and resonance – as images mediating between levels of reality, as symbols uniting divided realms. The morphological similarities between artistic images and theoretical notions stem from their common emanation from the same unfounded foundation – what Benjamin evocatively termed the *Strudel*, the vortex of Origin (*Ursprung*) that incessantly transforms itself in history[7]. Analogies between concepts and images express a shared creative potential, a possibility of emergence already traversed by the indistinct flow that activates it. Thus, even if philological evidence of direct connections among authors cannot always be established, philosophy can nonetheless recognize in such resonances the symptoms of a common propensity.

Conscious of these risks, we remain convinced that a hermeneutical conversation between artworks themselves (considered in their specificity), the thought of the artists (both Nitsch and Kiefer have produced extensive theoretical writings), and the hermeneutical resonances with Gadamer and a wide constellation of further sources and symbolic inspirations, can open a fruitful hermeneutical circle. Artistic formal specificities – such as Nitsch's essential performative dimension – will be considered, but cannot exhaust the meaning of works of art. A vision of culture as organic, multidimensional, and interwoven is essential. From a hermeneutical perspective, the truth of the artistic event as transformative experience of meaning unites and transcends the individual arts. This justifies our comparative approach to

[7] See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, introduced by George Steiner, trans. by John Osborne, Verso, London-New York 2003, pp. 45-46 (Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, I.1, cit., pp. 203-430: 225-227).

Nitsch and Kiefer: we are less interested in their technical differences than in their shared intensity of revealing the sacred in postmodernity through art.

The anti-nihilistic and foundational dimensions of these artistic and spiritual experiences will emerge as possible scenarios, though never obvious ones. As the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa has written: "I think there is a kind of panic in our rush, a fear of continuing to seek the truth, or rather a fear of not finding the truth. I say this in terms of resonance. There is this hope that we will hear, because there is this dance in the universe, as Nietzsche says. So, one day I will hear this music of the universe and it will be wonderful. However, since we are afraid that the universe will not speak to us, or that we will not be able to hear it and dance, we continue to run in the competitive system"[8].

We consider this dissertation as a preliminary attempt to place the reader in a resonating position that allows a positive response to Rosa's hope – favoring the suspension of our restless race and the attentive listening to this eternal and beautiful music.

[8] Hartmut Rosa, *L'alienazione ai tempi dell'accelerazione. Intervista a Hartmut Rosa*, ed. by Pierluigi Vizza, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», vol. 10, nr. 20, 2020. doi: 10.13128/cambio-8978

1. An Introduction to the "Post-Secular Age": Rethinking Religion(s) and the Sacred in the Contemporary Era

"Now many great cycles are coming to a close, lacking only the final link. Writing returns to the isolated, engraved word of signs, music to noise, language that has become inexhaustible and indefinable to the omnisignificativity of symbols" (Sergio Quinzio, *Cristianesimo dell'inizio e della fine*, Adelphi, Milano 2014, p. 42)

1.1 The "Post-Secular Turn": An Introduction to the Concept and Literature Review

The extent to which religion plays a pivotal role in contemporary geopolitical, social, ethical, and cultural challenges is visible to the public eye. Western secularization appears to be in a phase of partial – albeit irregular – decline. The German philosopher Kurt Karl Rudolf Hübner (1921-2013) has recently articulated a similar perspective, arguing that the thesis of de-secularization does not merely entail a "return to faith". Rather, it suggests "that we free ourselves from our age's characteristic blindness: the assumption that faith has nothing more to offer to contemporary man because it contradicts his humanistic idea of reason, Enlightenment, and freedom"[1]. Similarly, Gianni Vattimo (1936-2023) addresses the topic: "Whereas for many decades in this century religions appeared, according to the Enlightenment and positivistic idea, as 'residual' forms of experience increasingly destined to be deleted by the imposition of the 'modern' form of life (techno-scientific rationalization of social life, political democracy, and so on), today they appear again as possible guides for the future"[2].

Beyond the reaffirmation of the role of traditional religions, often manifesting as revanchism and radicalization, scholars have noted that the cultural crisis of modernity's main driving forces (materialism, scientism, individualism, progressivism, rationalism) appears to be opening a new phase, accompanied by the development and spread of new religious forms that seem to contradict – or even reverse – the process of secularization.

As Justin Beaumont and Klaus Eder explain: "Herein lies the empirical basis to the thesis of postsecularism. The simple version is that religion returns to the public sphere of secular society and that the project of secularism, based on the rule of law and on a universalist and rationalist ideology, continues to wane. Religion returns, as growing Pentecostalist, Islamist, and Buddhist

[1] Kurt Hübner, *Das Christentum im Wettstreit der Weltreligionen. Zur Frage der Toleranz*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2003, p. 148.
[2] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto and David Webb, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 28.

movements show (…). It also returns in the form of new religious wars and in the form of a growing variety of privatized forms of religion, fostering the diversification of sectarian movements into increasingly smaller units of believers. Religion also returns as a renaissance of traditional religious symbols and institutions. (…) Even national states such as Russia re-enthrone traditional religion, Orthodoxy, as a pillar of Russian society (…). Some (…) interpreters have taken these observations as signs of an end of secularism, an end that opens the door to the revival of presecular society"[3].

These processes also appear to reverse the famous phenomenon that the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) diagnosed as "*Entzauberung der Welt*" ("disenchantment of the world")[4]. According to Weber's theory, over the long path of Western history, humans undergo an experience of a progressive sense of disenchantment: from formerly experiencing reality in spiritual terms, they learn to understand the world rationally, interpreting it through logical reason in terms of cause and effect. Secularization, therefore, can essentially be understood as an epistemological transition from myth to *logos*: the world no longer appears as a dimension connected to invisible divine forces through subtle analogical and symbolic bonds, but rather as a fixed natural object which is accessible to natural reason. As Julien Freund (1921-1993) puts it, summarizing Weber's theory: "With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers, in spirits and demons; he has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred. Reality has become dreary, flat and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill by furious activity and through various devices and substitutes"[5].

While Weber's theory emphasizes the increasing role of world rationalization, it also draws attention to the religious sources of this process, showing religion's internal capacity for self-transformation: in modernity, science has not merely substituted religion, but rather transformed religious knowledge – in Europe, particularly Christian Protestant knowledge, according to Weber – into a new paradigm. From this theoretical perspective, modernity and secularization thus emerge as products of Christianity[6].

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[3] Justin Beaumont and Klaus Eder, *Concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity*, in Justin Beaumont (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, Routledge, London-New York 2019, pp. 3-24: 15.

[4] See Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Routledge, London-New York 2009.

[5] Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, Pantheon, New York 1969, p. 24.

[6] Max Weber has pointed out that capitalism, one of the great layers of modernity, needs to be understood as a product of Protestant spirituality (see his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons, Routledge, London-New York 2001 [Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, ed. by Dirk Kaesler, Verlag C.H. Beck, Nördlingen 2010]). Complementary is the thesis that the modern idea of progress is a secularized and "desacralized" form of the Judeo-Christian ideal of providential linear history (on that see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Harper & Brothers, New York 1959, pp. 154-162).

However, contemporary developments indicate a radical shift, potentially in the opposite direction, which the debate on post-secularism seriously addresses. Indeed, we must consider whether the world of the Internet, digitalization, and "fake news" (the potential of so-called "disinformation") represents a fluid, subtle realm, where narratives can construct and reconstruct reality – a sort of "magical" (in this sense pre-modern) worldview. Does this not signal a return to forms characteristic of magical and religious thought?

In his seminal text *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, the historian of religions Ioan Petru Culianu (1950-1991) observes a striking connection between Renaissance magic and contemporary advertising: "Insofar as science and the manipulation of phantasms are concerned, magic is primarily directed at the human imagination, in which it attempts to create lasting impressions. The magician of the Renaissance is both psychoanalyst and prophet as well as the precursor of modern professions such as director of public relations, propagandist, spy, politician, censor, director of mass communication media, and publicity agent"[7].

The foundation of this comparison lies in recognizing that these seemingly disparate domains share a worldview that rejects the strong realist and objectivistic "principle of reality". "Real" ultimately becomes that which a powerful and effective will is able to shape, define, and evoke. The "weapons" in this epistemological war include control of fundamental human impulses, creative imagination, and the manipulation of the energetic forces that drive reality. Through exercising this subtle power and comprehending the invisible connections between different layers of reality, the magician – even the post-secular one – can orchestrate resonances between things and persons, thereby becoming capable of hermeneutically understanding reality's intersubjective dimension and actively directing new pathways.

Again, we should question whether this precisely describes the practice enabled by postmodernity's liquid world[8], where the fixed structures of modernity's rational and materialistic worldview collapse. Are we witnessing processes moving toward the "re-enchantment" of the world, transforming the totalitarian and reductionist development of modern reason into a rediscovery of reality's energetic, imaginative, and mythic-symbolic dimensions within human experience?[9]

The phenomena mentioned above represent just a few instances of a broader process of rediscovering the role and value of myths, symbols, the sacred, spirituality, and religions. This process also influences, as we shall see, the understanding and practice of visual arts, and can

[7] Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. by Margaret Cook, with a foreword by Mircea Eliade, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1987, p. xviii.
[8] Cf. Zygmunt Baumann, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge-Malden 2000.
[9] See *infra*, chapter 2.3.2.

be comprehended through the notion of "post-secular". According to several scholars, this concept defines the deeper, vast, explicitly philosophical and epistemological transformation currently underway. This will also serve as the contextual framework for our research into the encounter between Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900-2002) hermeneutics and Anselm Kiefer's and Hermann Nitsch's (1938-2022) art, an encounter which demonstrates the return of the sacred in the interferences between hermeneutics and fine arts.

A preliminary review of the scholarly literature on the "post-secular" (and its related semantic constellation – "post-secularism", "post-secularity", etc.) reveals three main fields in which this concept serves phenomenological (descriptive) and hermeneutical (interpretative) functions: the political and geopolitical spectrum of religious renaissance in public discourse, with its role in shaping political power structures; the existential quest for spiritual meaning through either the reimagining of traditional religions or the development of new forms of spirituality (such as sects, esoteric groups, new religious movements, etc.); eventually, the theoretical adoption of the notion of "post-secular" within academic contexts to interpret various fields – the so called "post-secular turn", which has variously influenced cultural studies[10], cinema studies[11], theology[12], philosophy[13], technology studies[14], music studies[15], feminist theory[16], geography[17], and even urban theory[18].

[10] Cf. John A. McClure, *Post-Secular Culture: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Theory and Literature*, in «CrossCurrents», vol. 47, nr. 3, 1997, pp. 332-347.
[11] See Costica Bradatan and Camil Ungureanu, *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema. The Postsecular Constellation*, Routledge, London 2014; John Caruana and Mark Cauchi (eds.), *Immanent Frames. Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier*, SUNY Press, Albany (NY) 2018.
[12] Cf. Beaumont (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, cit., Part II "Theological perspectives", pp. 135-244; Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism. Relevance and Renewal,* Oxford University Press, New York 2018.
[13] See Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-secular Philosophy. Between philosophy and theology*, Routledge, London 1998. For a critique of the risks of "theologisation" of the philosophical discourse abandoning the notion of modernity in favor of the "post-secular", see Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern. New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2010.
[14] Cf. Sam Han, *Technologies of Religion. Spheres of the sacred in a post-secular modernity*, Routledge, New York 2016 [ebook].
[15] See Lieke Wijnia, *Resonating Sacralities*. *Dynamics between Religion and the Arts in Postsecular Netherlands*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2022.
[16] See Rosi Braidotti, *In Spite of the Times. The Postsecular Turn in Feminism*, in «Theory, Culture & Society», vol. 25 (6), 2008, pp. 1-24; Judith Butler, *Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Time*, in «The British Journal of Sociology», vol. 59 (1), 2008, pp. 1-23.
[17] See Paul Clokeand Justin Beaumont, *Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city*, in «Progress in Human Geography», vol. 37, n. 1, pp. 27-51; Andrew Williams, *Postsecular geographies: theo-ethics, rapprochement and neoliberal governance in a faith-based drug programme*, in «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», vol. 40, nr. 2, 2015, pp. 192-208.
[18] Cf. Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker (eds.), *Postsecular Cities. Space, Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2011; Krzysztof Nawratek, *Rudolf Otto's 'the Absolute Other' and a radical postsecular urban contextualization*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 20, n. 1, 2021, pp. 28-43.

Most of these layers, which we will progressively examine over the course of this chapter, share a common historiographical framework. According to this model, we can associate "secularization" with modernity and theorize two other phases: pre-modernity and post-modernity.

Premodern (i.e., pre-secular) traditional societies centered their civilizations on sacred, spiritual, and religious values. These values not only governed spiritual life, but also shaped social and political systems (for example: the Middle Age's three-estate hierarchical system and India's caste system[19]). Everything in these civilizations was oriented and influenced by sacred and religious schemes, following an integral and holistic conception of the universe expressed in the image of the cosmic liturgy and encompassing human, natural, and supernatural (divine) entities. Everything participated in divine action.

It was only from the Middle Ages that the temporal concept of *saeculum* (the "age", thus the world in historical time distinguished from eternal life) acquired a spatial determination, designating the political and profane space[20]. This period established the distinction between "religious" and "secular", creating a functional differentiation between these spheres.

From this point forward and through modernity, the profane space – the non-religious domain – progressively expanded, ultimately superseding the religious domain, which remained only as an interior and subjective personal choice. Secularization manifested as the emancipation of various spheres of existence and knowledge (politics, ethics, philosophy, art, science) from religious and theological determination. This process reached its theoretical apex during the Enlightenment with the principle of *laïcité*.

It is important to note that the "public" quality of religions extends beyond their external manifestation in the public sphere – it also reflects their authority and prestige. Humans naturally tend to externalize, share, and publicly affirm what they perceive as fundamental truth. Therefore, the withdrawal of religions into the private sphere fundamentally expresses the community's conviction that their content, in terms of truth, has diminished in primary relevance. Indeed, even while acknowledging the ethical importance of respecting individual freedom and choices in a non-authoritative context, believing communities would typically attempt to spread and gain recognition for the public value of their beliefs – an effort that appears largely abandoned in modern and secularized Western society, due to the concurrent

[19] Cf. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1980.

[20] The term "secularization" evolved to denote the transfer of territory or property from ecclesiastical authority to secular control (see Daniel Bell, *The Return of the Sacred: The Argument About the Future of Religion*, in Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow and Roy Harvey Pearce (eds.), *Progress and its Discontents*, University of California Press, Berkely-Los Angeles-London 1982, pp. 501-523: 503).

processes of religion's individualization and the erosion of sense of community. Thus, our interpretation of secularization as the "privatization" of religion cannot be entirely separated from the simultaneous "decline-of-religion thesis", which emphasizes the overall reduction of religions' importance in secularized societies. Furthermore, "the conceit of religion as a matter of individual choice (…) is already a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving religion, one that is woefully inapt for Islam and (…) Judaism, which is why neither comports easily with the privatized individual religious subject presumed by the formulations of religion freedom and tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity"[21].

It is also noteworthy that this process has not only defined the relationship between public profane space and religious domains, but has also become operative within religion itself. As Michelle Dillon notices in his recent study on American Catholicism, "secularization is sufficiently consequential that it penetrates religion itself. Thus, amid the (uneven) persistence of religious affiliation and church attendance, there has been a decline in the scope of religious authority. The secularization of religious authority is evidenced by the limited influence of religious actors, ideas, and teachings (…) the secularization of religious authority is such that religious believers largely rely on their own individual authority rather than on Church officials in determining the terms of their religious engagement"[22].

In conclusion, secularization can be defined precisely as the privatization and diminution of religious principles – both in relation to the public sphere and in the sacred relevance of religious experience itself – which has accompanied Western history alongside the spread of modern values. These values include individualism (which relegates faith to a subjective matter), rationalism, and political democratic pluralism (which stands in opposition to hierarchical systems traditionally understood as the ontological representation of hierarchical divine truth within politics[23]).

Moreover, modernity itself appears to harbor an existential and conceptual adversary, which a substantial philosophical tradition has identified as nihilism. The erosion of all traditional values down to the skeptical and deconstructive role of rationality – Fredrich Nietzsche (1844-

[21] Wendy Brown, *Introduction*, in Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and free Speech*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2009, pp. 7-19: 17.

[22] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, cit., p. 6.

[23] The correspondence between politics and theology has been brilliantly examined within the tradition of "political theology", which posits that every political system represents the secularization of an underlying theological framework. See on that the classical Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab, with a foreword by Tracy B. Strong, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2005 (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveranität*, Duncker & Humboldt, Berlin 2009).

1900)'s famous discovery of the "Death of God"[24] – is destined, through a process of heterogony of ends, to turn against reason itself (like recognizing that the utopia of radically eliminating myth is itself a myth). Indeed, if everything can be deconstructed, relativized, and thus questioned in its ontological value, why should modern reason itself remain untouched by this process? From this awareness also begins the crisis of modernity, understood as a cultural and historical paradigm rooted in Western history but universalized through the success of modern technology (which, according to Martin Heidegger, is the specific trait of Western metaphysics[25]) and the processes of globalization.

Thus, the crisis of religion in modernity simultaneously encompasses three dimensions: a crisis in the historic-political relevance of religions; a crisis in the number of believers (a sociological issue); as well as a crisis of imagination.

Regarding the latter aspect, it is important to note that our methodology is not based on quantitative or sociological analysis (measuring religious crisis in terms of declining church membership or diminishing religious influence in socio-economic structures). Rather, we examine the crisis with respect to religion as a driving force, which in modernity has progressively lost its capacity to orient, shape, and profoundly influence both individual and collective human existence. As Francesco Paolo Ciglia emphasizes, the religious expansion and development stemming from humanity's original encounter with the divine within the sacred event "are exposed, quite constitutively, to a fatal pitfall. The virtuous and vital circle, typically established between the original mystery-gratuitous experiences of the event and its resulting religious economy, can be catastrophically broken, trapping both the experiences and the economy, albeit in different forms and ways, in involutional and degenerative circuits"[26]. While the "letter" may kill the "spirit", a religious tradition's creative function is not inevitably doomed to permanent crisis, and sometimes catalyzes processes of renewal and rebirth[27].

[24] "God is dead!" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 120 ["*Gott ist tot*"; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in Id., *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 2, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1973, pp. 13-320: 145). Similar theorizations, where the crisis of Western modernity is linked to divine absence – or more precisely, to the rupture between humanity and the eternal divine – appear in Leon Bloy ("God withdraws" ["*Dieu se retire*"]) and in Friedrich Hölderlin ("Gods escape" ["*Flucht des Göttlichen*"]).

[25] See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, in Id., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt, Garland Publishing, New York-London 1977, pp. 3-35 (Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1953), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 5-36).

[26] Francesco Paolo Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché. Per una fenomenologia del mistero*, ETS, Pisa 2021, p. 193.

[27] Cf. *ivi*, p. 194.

The creative connection between culture, religious values, and the *Zeitgeist* undergoes a profound crisis in the modern age: a new imagination, founded on anthropocentric, materialist, atheist, and techno-scientific values, has supplanted the previous model, profoundly influencing visual arts as well. The religious imagination – Christian in the West – appears to have exhausted its creative and imaginative force. Modernity is established on a "horizontal" worldview: it leaves no space for the "vertical" or the "divine", rendering them even literally unthinkable[28]. At the same time, attempts to naturalize human consciousness within the image of reality constructed by science seem destined to fail: counterintuitive scientific knowledge appears aporetic in replacing spiritual and moral values, which are deeply rooted not only in culture, but also in pre-cultural common sense[29].

Indeed, as Jürgen Habermas argues: "The scientistic belief in a science which will one day not only supplement, but replace the self-understanding of actors as persons by an objectivating self-description is not science, but bad philosophy. No science will relieve common sense, even if scientifically informed, of the task of forming a judgment, for instance, on how we should deal with prepersonal human life under descriptions of molecular biology that make genetic interventions possible"[30].

This "identity crisis" continues to affect traditional religions[31]. However, as previously introduced, new phenomena are currently emerging which suggest shifts in different directions. Simultaneously, the secular sphere remains active as a genuine and significant non-religious space. Consequently, our current age appears to be characterized by an intertwined circulation

[28] See on that Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2007, p. 556.

[29] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, in Id., *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 101-115: 105-108.

[30] *Ivi*, p. 108.

[31] While acknowledging the historical tension between modern developments (like secularization) and religious traditions, we must avoid reading history in a discontinuous or abstract manner. Historical continuity remains, as Gadamer's hermeneutical model emphasizes, essential. It would be simplistic or naïve to posit an absolute opposition between religion and secularization without recognizing that secularization emerged partially from Christian tradition, particularly Protestantism (as already seen in Weber's theory). It is, we could say, a "paradoxical" offspring of this tradition, which has subsequently stood against it. "This theological affirmation of secularisation is further reinforced by the fact that the concept of saeculum originates from within Christian theology. For the Romans, saeculum was not a room, but was a question of time; the word referred quite simply to the maximum length of a person's life, being approximately a 'century'. When the early church used the concept, it was to talk about the time between Jesus's first and second coming to Earth – in other words a time that stands in contrast to God's eternity (*saecula saecolorum*: "from ages to ages"). It is also in this sense that Augustinus uses the concept in order to talk about an era when Christians and heathens had to live and work together for the common good, a meaning that is close to a post-secular understanding. The complexity of this historical background is further strengthened by the fact that, during the Roman era, Christians were actually called atheists because of their refusal to sacrifice to other gods or to pray to the emperor as the Godhead; the Christian holy was therefore the heathen profane and the heathen holy was the Christian profane" (Bengt Kristensson Uggla, *Secularisation and Religion in a Post-secular Age*, in «Parse», 6, Autumn 2017: *Secularity*, https://parsejournal.com/article/secularisation-and-religion-in-a-post-secular-age/).

of sacred and profane elements. While secularization faces a crisis due to the various aforementioned phenomena, a new, specific alternative framework has not yet been established. This is why the notion of "post-secular", although lacking specific content – and primarily focusing descriptively on what comes "after" (post-) the "secular" – proves particularly effective in characterizing this transitional phase.

Some of the previously mentioned phenomena essentially represent a reactionary return to religious conservative values. However, it would be reductive to interpret these processes as a mere reappearance of the past, since their hybridization with contemporary social demands, adoption of technological procedures, forms of engagement and communication, and the new subtle nuances which define these events distinguish them from their ancient roots. Here we explicitly refer to religion's reemergence in the public sphere, influencing political decisions and intersecting with political propaganda. Among the most significant processes, we can mention, in no particular order:

- resurgence of Orthodox Caesaropapism in contemporary neo-imperial Russia;
- Iran's Shia theological doctrine as the main point of reference for the authoritarian government installed after Iranian Revolution (1978-1979);
- Israel's messianic and eschatological ideal of "Greater Israel", with radical political theology nuances;
- Hinduism's reaffirmation in contemporary Indian nationalist ideology ("political Hinduism");
- ISIS' (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) gnostic, apocalyptic, and nihilistic ideology;
- the Islamist movements in Southeast Asia;
- the growing political engagement of Catholic communities in South America;
- the evangelical fundamentalisms in North America, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001;
- missionary Christian actions towards Africa.

All these phenomena demonstrate that there is not a necessary relationship between modernization – the material, technological, and cultural progress based on adopting recent methods, ideas, equipment commonly associated with modernity's cultural and political paradigm – and secularization. Indeed, it is possible to experience processes of "modernisation

without secularization"[32]. In the former case, institutional religions are preserved, whereas in the latter they are overcome, which leads inunpredictable directions.

Furthermore, Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood have advanced a compelling critique of the secular-religion dualistic opposition from a postcolonial and Global-South perspective. Asad addresses this issue in stating that "a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable"[33].

As Uggla observes: "One can have different understandings and conceptions of what course a development is taking – and one can interpret the post-secular state of things in different ways – but the fact remains that few people today seriously believe that religion will disappear in the foreseeable future. There is, indeed, a possible connection between secularisation and modernisation, but the relationship is not essential and not imperative. It is easy to draw attention to examples where secularisation has taken place without modernisation, and, in the same way, we can see successful modernisation without secularisation following suit. Accordingly, the post-secular age means that we must correct and adjust our writing of history as well as our self-understanding"[34].

This opens a broader discussion regarding the definition of modernity and modernization – concepts that have typically been influenced by a markedly Eurocentric and Western interpretation aimed at excluding alternative paradigms equally capable of addressing the challenges which communities are required to face.

If we distinguish between "modernization" as a "technical" model of advancement and "modernity" as the worldview produced in Western civilization's history and defined by specific cultural and ideological elements (anthropocentrism, rationalism, individualism, materialism, progressivism, democracy, Copernican-Galilean science), our reasoning advances: indeed, this modernity appears intrinsically connected to the secularization process, which represents a value based on a specific cultural-historic path, but not necessarily with the modernization process, which non-Western civilizations demonstrate they can experience without adopting Western modernity's values.

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[32] Scholars such as Peter Berger (*The Many Altars of Modernity. Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, de Gruyter, Boston 2014), Craig Calhoun (with Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan Van Antwerpen), *Rethinking Secularism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011), José Casanova (*Public Religions in the Modern World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2012) deconstruct the idea of a strict and typological connection between modernity and secularity, i.e. between modernity and the decline of religion.

[33] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 1. Cf. also Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005 and Id., *Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation*, in «Public Culture», 2006, vol. 18, nr. 2, pp. 323-347.

[34] Uggla*, Secularisation and Religion in a Post-secular Age*, cit.

Therefore, if we focus – as our research presented herein does – on the cultural and existential processes operating in the Western societies where secularization originated, we can recognize that contemporary religious demand and the simultaneous emerging of new religious phenomena are moving outside the traditional framework defined through the concepts of "modern" and "secular".

We might group these phenomena under the notion of "spirituality" which, according to Matthew Wickman, aptly describes the "amorphousness" – or, we might say, the plurality of coexisting forms – of the widespread "religious feeling: a sense of enchantment, of the sacred, better said, of spirituality"[35]. This spirituality often takes place outside, and sometimes in opposition to, institutional religious frameworks. Indeed, as Taylor argues, "this contrast reflects the rejection of 'institutional religion', that is, the authority claims made by churches which see it as their mandate to preempt the search, or to maintain it within certain definite limits, and above all to dictate a certain code of behaviour"[36].
It suggests a relationship between humanity and an invisible, subtle, enigmatic, numinous, non-material dimension of reality, helping us to "identify spirituality, broadly defined, as a persistent feature of our effort to conceptualize our complex world"[37].
This process is connected to the search for a comprehensive explanation of our world experience, emerging after the crisis of modern hermeneutical and ideological systems (the "grand narratives").

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose contribution to this field is seminal, strongly emphasizes that the notion of "post-secular" can only be applied to cultures and communities that have been secular. While defending the secularization thesis, he argues that it requires actualization and extension: in Western society, religious experiences have survived within secular societies, and a specific "consciousness transformation" is now occurring. According to Habermas, this transformation relates to three main features: the awareness that in several countries religions still perform their premodern relevant functions, making secularization appear as an exception – a *Sonderweg* – rather than a universal rule; the role of religions as "interpreting communities" of political issues, even in previously "secularized" societies; religious pluralism within Western societies, often resulting from immigrations phenomena.

[35] Matthew Wickman, *The New Immaterialism? On Spirituality in Modern Thought*, in «Poetics Today», 41 (3), September 2020, pp. 327-346: 327.
[36] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2007, p. 508.
[37] *Ivi*, p. 344.

The negotiation between secular and religious worldviews thus becomes a continuous bilateral process requiring constant adjustment and readjustment[38].

Building on Jürgen Habermas's theorization of "post-secular societies", Rosati and Stoeckl define "postsecular" societies as those contemporary communities that are neither premodern (sacral) nor secularized, where religious elements resurge while "new forms of religious pluralism" emerge "within a secular horizon that calls into question established secular institutions and practices"[39].
"In our times the secularisation story finds itself being constantly renegotiated, and being continuously revised and pluralized"[40].
It is therefore an expansion – or, more precisely, an integration – of Charles Taylor's influential depiction of the contemporary world as the "secular age"[41].

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor developed the influential concept of the "secular age" to describe the transformation from a society where life's meaning naturally emerged from shared faith in a religion capable of grounding collective identity, to an age where faith remains possible, but only as a specific individual path, no longer easily and automatically embraced due to the dominant materialistic culture – in short, one option among many others. Taylor convincingly demonstrates that secularization is not merely the subtraction of religion from society, but rather a Copernican revolution in values where a godless anthropocentric and disenchanted humanism has fundamentally transformed the human worldview by imposing new epistemic structures that affect our concrete knowledge and world comprehension. The human "porous self", open to the external unstable and heterogeneous world and its irrational and miraculous occurrences, has transformed into a "buffered self", an individual protected from osmosis with externality.
From this process emerges the "malaise of modernity": the widespread feeling that, despite the material success of our Western global society, there exists an existential emptiness due to the lack of something profound – a dimension of meaning that has been supplanted by the primacy of efficiency, capitalist productivity, and utilitarian calculation[42].

[38] See Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, cit.
[39] Massimo Rosati and Kristina Stoeckl, *Introduction*, in Id., (eds.), *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies*, Routledge, New York 2012, pp. 1-16: 2.
[40] Ugla*, Secularisation and Religion in a Post-secular Age*, cit.
[41] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit.
[42] See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto 1998.

Postmodernity (linked, as we'll see, with post-secularism) has indeed revealed that unrestrained and limitless reason necessarily leads to its own deconstruction. Consequently, the progressively opening pluralistic and rhizomatic horizons are fostering new possibilities for religious resurgence, albeit no longer in substantialist, metaphysical, dogmatic, and legalistic[43] modes from a philosophical perspective. While traditional religions and churches in the Western world continue to face crisis – even more intensely, as Taylor correctly notes from a sociological perspective –, the need for the sacred and attempts to bridge the gap between humanity and the divine represent, contrary to the latter trend, significant cultural and theoretical phenomena which lead in several different directions. Currently, these vectors often manifest contradictory and pluralistic forms (conservative defense of traditional religions, especially the Abrahamic monotheisms, New Age practices, esoteric rediscovery, spread of religions in societies foreign to them, "new religious movements", philosophical approaches to religious problems, etc.).

As the theologian John Caputo argues, following Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) legacy, we often encounter the return of "religion without religion"[44]. This phrase denotes that the new spiritual forms frequently exhibit "an unmistakable tendency today to wrest religious phenomena free from the religions, to reproduce the structure of religion outside the traditional faiths and outside the classic oppositions of religion and science, body and soul, this world and the next"[45]. And these processes lead to "the amazing symbiosis of religion and technoscience in the post-secular world"[46].

Taylor himself acknowledges that we are entering an age marked by significant religious searching, whose outcomes remain unpredictable. We inhabit a transitional period, where the value of the inner, private self, the prestige of intimacy, and individualism – the secularized cultural products of Protestantism, especially Pietism with its investigation of subjectivity and consciousness –, face new transformations, leading to the possibility of a new spiritual comprehension of the external world involving nature, cosmic structures, transcendence, communitarian ritualized practices.

[43] "Codes, even the best codes, can become idolatrous traps, which tempt us to complicity in violence". It is fundamental "not to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian, liberalism. We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it. This message comes out of a certain theology, but it could be heard with profit by everybody" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 743).

[44] See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1997.

[45] John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, Routledge, London-New York 2001, p. 89.

[46] *Ivi*, p. 71.

The immanent frame in which we live can be either open, allowing for the possibility of transcendence, or closed. Taylor argues that "Being 'spiritual but not religious' is one of the western phenomena (…); it usually designates a spiritual life which retains some distance from the disciplines and authority of religious confessions. (…) a certain diffuse ecumenical sense is widespread, and even those who subsequently take on some confessional life, and thus become 'religious', retain something of this original freedom from sectarianism. What also remains important, in both East and West, is some continuing sense of the importance of following one's own spiritual itinerary, and the sense that, in a saying of Berdyaev which Epstein reproduces: 'Knowledge, morality, art, government and the economy should become religious, but freely and from inside, not by compulsion from outside.' In any case, we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee"[47]. This broad pluralism is defined by Taylor through the image of a "spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane"[48] which has created a near-infinite number of spiritual and religious positions. Indeed, "the gamut of intermediate positions greatly widens: many people drop out of active practice while still declaring themselves as belonging to some confession, or believing in God. On another dimension, the gamut of beliefs in something beyond widens, fewer declaring belief in a personal God, while more hold to something like an impersonal force; in other words a wider range of people express religious beliefs which move outside Christian orthodoxy. Following in this line is the growth of non-Christian religions, particularly those originating in the Orient, and the proliferation of New Age modes of practice, of views which bridge the humanist/spiritual boundary, of practices which link spirituality and therapy. On top of this more and more people adopt what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions, e.g., they consider themselves Catholic while not accepting many crucial dogmas, or they combine Christianity with Buddhism, or they pray while not being certain they believe. This is not to say that people didn't occupy positions like this in the past. Just that now it seems to be easier to be upfront about it"[49].

As De Vriese and Vanheeswijck observe, Taylor "believes that 'nothing is ever lost'. The historic sediments of foregone ages may always be dug up again and may provoke us to criticize our contemporary ways of living. It is by no means predictable which road the future will take: will our society eventually ban all reference to religion, or will it rediscover the richness of its religious past? Taylor's dictum (borrowed from Bellah) that 'nothing is ever lost' also echoes, be it inadvertently, in much of contemporary deconstructionist philosophy. Jean-Luc Nancy,

[47] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 535.
[48] *Ivi*, p. 300.
[49] *Ivi*, p. 513.

for example, develops in *La Déclosion* (2005) a deconstruction of Christianity that draws attention to secular elements inherent to Christianity. Since the secular is essentially a product of monotheistic religions, it can never be fully understood without reference to its religious predecessors. Hence, it is precisely religion that withstands any full definition of 'the secular'. Paraphrasing Taylor, religion is the 'un-thought' of the secular"[50].

We should point out that the announcement of the death of modernity and the Enlightenment have often been exaggerated, considering that these patterns continue to exert a profound influence on globalized societies, especially in the Western world. However, we can recognize a fundamental demand for a new paradigm, which, although difficult to quantify sociologically, is palpable in contemporary discourse. Both aspects, as we argue, manifest within the academic debate and civil society consciousness.

Here emerges the significance of the "post-secular turn" concept in expressing academic focus on this process. The term derives from Gregor McLennan's seminal 2010 article, *The Postsecular Turn*[51]: here, the Professor of Sociology addresses the "postsecular spectrum", highlighting the plurality of phenomena that scholars associate with "post-secularism". His study focuses not on the phenomena themselves, however, but on the academic turn which, in his view, merits attention and discussion. The "postsecular turn" encompasses diverse critical theories, including: Charles Taylor's appeal to transcendence in *A Secular Age*, where the definition of the "secular" already implies its potential transcendence; the materialist stance of Slavoj Žižek, "who defends the Judeo-Christian heritage in a rather 'strategic' Leninist fashion"; theorists such as Roberto Unger and Alain Badiou, but also, from a different perspective, Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo; Jürgen Habermas' liberal and postmodern sociological approach to postsecularism; Jacques Derrida's philosophy, "gesturing ever enigmatically towards 'religion without/beyond religion'"; Dipesh Chakrabarty's anti-historicist and post-colonial position (particularly expressed in his *Provincializing Europe*); Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler's postsecular neo-vitalist feminism[52]. These theories constitute the "postsecular spectrum", though it remains problematic to define this as a structured and rigorous "turn". While these approaches share their irreducibility to "antimodern" perspectives, they move in distinctly heterogenous directions. McLennan concludes that "it is more

[50] Herbert De Vriese and Guido Vanheeswijck, *The performative force of the postsecular*, in Beaumont (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, cit., pp. 86-97: 94.
[51] In «Theory, Culture & Society», vol. 27, nr. 4, 2010, pp. 3-20.
[52] Cf. *ivi*, p. 4.

appropriate to regard postsecular reflexive enquiries as *intra*-secularist rather than *anti*-secularist; that is to say, they form part of the intellectual process that has been dubbed the 'secularization of secularism' itself, rather than straightforwardly extending the 'revival of religion' into the heartlands of Western theory"[53]. Furthermore, "it is not to deny that some postsecular authors might be sympathetic to a 'revival of religion' at the level of general cultural and political theory, nor to take it for granted that they will be unsuccessful in turning back the broadly secular habit of critical thought. But, on the whole, the postsecular turn is about exploring ways of thinking and acting that are (inclusively and modestly) secular. The problem is that important matters of theory and political principle are foreclosed rather than advanced when modest, inclusive secularism is affirmed solely in dire opposition to oppressive, exclusive secularism"[54].

As often occurs in the history of philosophy, a forceful criticism, once successfully entering the debate, helps establish a definition that other scholars frequently adopt and reframe. The genesis of Western aesthetics, for instance, is often attributed to Plato, one of art's most radical critics regarding its philosophical and epistemic value. Similarly, McLennan's skepticism toward the "post-secular" notion has facilitated the expansion and intensification of debate surrounding it.

James Hodkinson and Silke Horstkotte, for example, in their seminal work *Introducing the Postsecular: From Conceptual Beginnings to Cultural Theory*, reflect on the recent notable academic interest in religion within secular Western academia. They argue that religion's recognition beyond religious studies and theology – for instance in political and social sciences, as well as cultural and literary studies – parallels similar processes with civil society. This represents not only the "return of the religious" in new forms but also the recognition that "the once stable conceptual distinctions between 'religion' and 'secularity' are becoming increasingly blurred"[55].

Following Stoeckl, Rosati and Holton, we might say that in this context, "religion remains collectively meaningful without being opposed to secularity, because society itself is plural and Christianity has lost its monopoly on the Western imagination"[56].

According to Hodkinson and Horstkotte, "multiple secularities and multiple religiosities coexist in a postsecular society, and thus the sacred can take different forms, immanent as well as transcendent ones. Despite its misleading prefix, the adjective postsecular breaks with images

[53] *Ibidem*.
[54] *Ivi*, p. 19.
[55] James Hodkinson and Silke Horstkotte, *Introducing the Postsecular: From Conceptual Beginnings to Cultural Theory*, in «Poetics Today», 41, 3, 2020, pp. 317-326: 318.
[56] Stoeckl, Rosati and Holton, *Global Connections*, cit., p. 2.

of succession (before and after). Instead, it defines the present condition as a 'conscious contemporality/co-existence of religious and secular worldviews' and as a 'condition of permanent tension' that characterizes the contemporary period (Stoeckl 2011)"[57]. In this light, the use of the title *Postsecularities* adopted in the issue of «Poetics today» edited by Hodkinson and Horstkotte emphasizes the plural and diverse nature of this complex and stratified framework, which simultaneously reflects both content (post-secular cultural and social phenomena) and methodology (an interpretative stance: the search for new hermeneutical configurations of the relationship between the religious sphere and secular domain).

Although, as we have noted, modernization and secularization have not always coincided, especially globally, it is historically accurate that in Western modernity through the 20th-century, many theorists reflected on and actively promoted this convergence. The notion that modern European values, under the guidance of the Enlightenment, science, and rationality, would progressively weaken religious and spiritual stances' hermeneutical power held considerable influence.

Therefore, the recent theoretical deconstruction of modernity's philosophical paradigm carries significant religious implications. James K.A. Smith effectively summarizes this issue from his Christian perspective: "While it may remain a powerful aspect of contemporary political rhetoric, the theoretical foundations for the secular have been systematically dismantled. So if we are witnessing the advent of the postmodern (and not merely the hyper-modern), then we should also be seeing the advent of the post-secular"[58].

This indicates that post-secularism and postmodernism, while not entirely coincident, are intimately connected, as Beaumont and Eder explain: "No secular image of universal integrity, such as a unified scientific worldview, totalitarian ideology, or metanarrative, can now be adopted, at least not as before. In such a situation, the meaning of religion must change in comparison with the previous epoch. The previous era was a secular or modern one, but the changing meaning and value of religion cannot reflect an uncritical return to a presecular situation devoid of normative ambitions. The advent of postsecularity, at least of the debate around the alleged challenges to the hegemony of modes of secularity, reflects this unhinging of secular universal integrity and the quest for new accounts of differentiated and radically diverse, yet globally interconnected, expressions or discourses of human integrity"[59].

[57] Hodkinson and Horstkotte, *Introducing the Postsecular*, cit., p. 319.
[58] James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy. Mapping a Post-secular Theology*, foreword by John Milbank, Baker Academic-Paternoster Press, 2004 [ebook].
[59] Beaumont and Eder, *Concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity*, cit., p. 13.

Han addresses the same topic by adding: "Referring to a whole host of aspects of modernity, including Fordist capitalism, truth, rationality and knowledge, European culture and Orientalism, Gorski suggests that the idea of the post-modern 'is instructive for making sense of the post-secular' in two ways. On the one hand, some ideas around the post-modern suggest that we have entered a different era than that of modernity. On the other, some other ideas proclaim the end of 'universalistic claims associated with modernity can no longer be sustained without demurral' (Gorski et al. 2012: 1). Undoubtedly then, secularism, foundational to the social, political, and even cultural experience of modernity, must also become subject to scrutiny"[60].

Smith's comment engages with the same issue in a theological context: "Insofar as twentieth-century Christian theology (sometimes unwittingly) allied itself with the Enlightenment project, resigning itself to an 'apologetic' project of correlation with secular thought, the demise of modernity must also spell the demise of such theology. In other words, the critique of the Enlightenment project now calls for a critique of modernist theology that manifests itself across the range of liberal and conservative options. The result is – or should be – a new space for confessional proclamation in the so-called 'public' or political sphere, but at the same time a public theology that eschews the Constantinian project"[61].

[60] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, cit.

[61] Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, cit. The Constantinian project means that the interests of the church are identified with the interest of the state, in an adaptive "correlationist" perspective, which the Radical Orthodoxy Theology considered by Smith refuses, proposing instead a "call for the development of a theoretical framework and sociopolitical involvement that are distinctly Christian at their foundation" (*ibidem*).

1.2 Sociology and Philosophy Tackling the Post-Secular: Challenges and Opportunities of a Religious Revival

The theoretical reflections on secularism's crisis and the philosophical necessity of rethinking our relationship with religion engage with concrete and practical issues, which Jürgen Habermas has comprehensively taken in consideration.

Indeed, if we truly inhabit post-secular societies, how should we act and behave, and what should we reciprocally expect as citizens (and as humans)? The challenge assumes a fundamental socio-political dimension. While secularization served as a response to the religious wars that characterized European history, aiming to reduce conflict among believers from different churches, Habermas[62] observes that the separation between the liberal state and the cultural and religious autonomies it guarantees has often generated division and conflict within modern democracies. Between the universalistic Enlightenment political project and multicultural identities, there exists no theoretical contradiction (although this is a position which, as we will subsequently see, Gadamer critically rejects[63]). Historically, however, these elements have often conflicted.

Tolerance, continuously redefined within the democratic context where the boundary between positive religious freedom (the right to practice faith) and negative religious freedom (the right not to be impeded by others' religious practice) remains delicate, should be interpreted in a pluralistic and post-secular society as a reciprocal recognition of dignity and political roles. According to Habermas, religious liberalism should not imply indifference to religious values, as has frequently occurred in modern democracies, but rather cooperation with them.

Habermas further identifies two opposing rational positions on this topic: "Radical Multiculturalism" (advocating the defense of identities through communitarian relativistic perspectives) and "Militant Secularism" (a form of universalist neo-Enlightenment that views the juridical system as a regulatory framework separate from religious issues, which should remain confined to private life). Habermas proposes a mediation between these trajectories[64], founded on a "complementary learning process" between religious and secular mentalities as

[62] The following notes are extracted from Jürgen Habermas, *Notes on a post-secular society*, in «New Perspectives Quarterly», 25, 4, 2008, pp. 17-29 (Jürgen Habermas, *Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung,* in «Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik», 4, 2008). On Habermas' interpretation of postsecularity we refer also to the excellent exegesis of Eduardo Mendieta, *The postsecular condition and the genealogy of postmetaphysical thinking*, in Beaumont (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, cit., pp. 51-58.

[63] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.4.

[64] These considerations aim to avoid what Joseph Ratzinger, in his 2004 dialogue with Habermas, identified as dual pathologies: the "pathologies in religion" (manifesting as irrational and violent abandonment of reason) and the "pathologies of reason" (expressing as dangerous and unrestrained reason). See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *That Which Holds the World Together*, in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The dialectics of secularization. On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (USA) 2006 [ebook].

the fertile ground for constructing a more effective post-secular society. In his view, "it is to the credit of the secularists that they, too, insist on the indispensability of including all citizens as equals in civil society. Because a democratic order cannot simply be imposed on its authors, the constitutional state confronts its citizens with the demanding expectations of an ethics of citizenship that reaches beyond mere obedience to the law. Religious citizens and communities must not only superficially adjust to the constitutional order. They are expected to appropriate the secular legitimation of constitutional principles under the premises of their own faith"[65].
No religious majority should impose itself on others, who require respect and legal protection. However, "the state's neutrality does not preclude the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere, as long as the institutionalized decision-making process at the parliamentary, court, governmental and administrative levels remain clearly separated from the informal flows of political communication and opinion formation among the broader public of citizens. The 'separation of church and state' calls for a filter between these two spheres – a filter through which only 'translated,' i.e., secular, contributions may pass from the confused din of voices in the public sphere into the formal agendas of state institutions"[66]. This liberal openness is necessary to guarantee that religions are not understood as something excluded from the intersubjective civil society and political domains, but can enter, so to speak, the hermeneutical public discourse without creating a radical and alienating fracture between existential-religious identity and civil-political identity[67]. Indeed, "the democratic state must not preemptively reduce the polyphonic complexity of the diverse public voices, because it cannot know whether it is not otherwise cutting society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities. Particularly with regard to vulnerable social relations, religious traditions possess the power to convincingly articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions. What puts pressure on secularism, then, is the expectation that secular citizens in civil society and the political public sphere must be able to meet their religious fellow citizens as equals. (…) Secular citizens are expected not to exclude *a fortiori* that they may discover, even in religious utterances, semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse"[68].

[65] Habermas, *Notes on a post-secular society*, cit., p. 27.
[66] *Ivi*, p. 28. On the problems of relegating religions in the private realm ("programmatic secularism", such as the French historical one), creating an harsh fracture within society, see David Lewin, *Formations of the postsecular in education*, in Beaumont (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, pp. 124-134: 126-127.
[67] Also Charles Taylor extensively engages with this issue, arguing that even democratic secular systems require either a "civil religion" or at least a robust "philosophy of civility" to function effectively – neutrality as absolute condition is never possible. See on that Charles Taylor, *Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism*, in Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, pp. 34-59: 47.
[68] Habermas, *Notes on a post-secular society*, cit., p. 29.

Habermas' reflections must be theoretically contextualized within the famous *querelle* between liberals and communitarians. His work represents an attempt at mediation and transcendence on the soil of the post-secular notion, which appears to open new philosophical pathways beyond the 20th-century's opposing tendencies in the debate between neutrality and communitarian involvement[69]. In Habermas' view, legal procedure cannot impose tolerance, equity, and democracy without an accompanying redefinition of shared, substantial ethical-religious perspectives. Habermas questions whether a democratic constitutional state can establish its normative foundations solely through legal forms. Values and traditions must provide content and substance to these forms to enliven them. Moreover, "as long as religious communities play a vital role in civil society and the public sphere, deliberative politics is as much a product of the public use of reason on the part of *religious* citizens as on that of *nonreligious* citizens"[70].

The recognition of religion within public consciousness and civil society thus emerges as a pivotal value for a progressive post-secular society. This value, in Habermas' lexicon, can emerge within the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and its intersubjective communications and interactions (between individuals and others) when – and if – it is protected from instrumental reason and market-driven utilitarian structures. Traditionally, communitarian values have been nourished by state religion, but the secularization process has revealed the authoritarian nature of imposing hierarchical presuppositions. However, post-secular society must remain open to engagement with diverse religious and ethic traditions.

As articulated in a seminal dialogue with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (1927-2022) – the future Pope Benedict XVI – Habermas proposes that "the constitution of the liberal state can satisfy its own need for legitimacy in a self-sufficient manner, that is, on the basis of the cognitive elements of a stock of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions". But, at the same time, he points out that even under these premises, "a doubt remains with

[69] Possamai, offering a severely critical perspective on Habermas' position, argues that Habermas' post-secularism essentially remains "a specific type of secularism that deals with the neoliberal management of religion in the public sphere. The 'post' makes reference to a view beyond an exclusivist secularist view that did not engage with religion in the public sphere, but it is still secularist. Secularism has adapted itself to religion in the public sphere but has not moved beyond secularism" (Adam Possamai, *Post-secularism in multiple modernities*, in «Journal of Sociology», vol. 53 (4), 2017, pp. 822-835: 823). To be mentioned is also the neoliberal capitalism's promotion of individualistic and consumer-oriented spirituality, characterized by religious commodification and exploitation of religions' "cultural capital" (on this "capitalist spirituality" see Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Spirituality and the re-branding of religion*, in Gordon Lynch, Jolyon Mitchell and Anna Strahan (eds.), *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, Routledge, Abingdon-New York 2012, pp. 59-70; here emerges the "big business" embedded in the new forms of spirituality and in the neoliberal privatization of religious sphere, and also the "vanishing distinguishability of religiosity and everyday life" (Han, *Technologies of Religion*, cit.).

[70] Jürgen Habermas, *"The Political": The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology*, in Butler, Habermas, Taylor and West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, cit., pp. 15-33: 24.

regard to the question of motivation. When we bear in mind the role played by citizens who understand themselves to be the authors of the law, we see that the normative presuppositions for the existence of a democratic constitutional state make higher demands than would be the case if they were merely citizens of the society and 'addressees' of the law". All that is expected of those addressed by the law is that they do not transgress the boundaries of the law (…); the motivations and attitudes expected of citizens in their role as democratic (co-)legislators are something else. Such citizens are expected to make active use of their rights to communication and to participation"[71]. Religious identity emerges precisely at this stage as a rich source of meanings, values, and identities. Thus, in post-secular society, religions, while compelled to abandon their monopolistic claims, can acquire a new public function: "When secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates. Indeed, a liberal political culture can expect that the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole"[72]. Hence: "Postsecular society continues the work, for religion itself, that religion did for myth. Not in the hybrid intention of a hostile takeover, to be sure, but out of a concern to counteract the insidious entropy of the scarce resource of meaning in its own realm. (…) The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation. This is what the Western world, as the worldwide secularizing force, may learn from its own history. If it presents this complex image of itself to other cultures in a credible way, intercultural relations may find a language other than that of the military and the market alone"[73]. Postmetaphysical philosophy – as defined by Habermas (unlike in Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics) – fundamentally rests on this act of translating different religions' semantic content into philosophical rational discourse.

Post-secular society might therefore be understood, as Beaumont and Eder suggest, as "a society where secular and non-secular principles – beyond others – circulate simultaneously through social relations. This observation creates a particular opportunity and a particular risk for post-secular society. The opportunity is that people learn to switch between different principles of judgement when no consensus on a dispute relative to a principle of judgment is

[71] Jürgen Habermas, *Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?*, in Habermas and Ratzinger, *The dialectics of secularization*, cit.
[72] *Ibidem*.
[73] Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, cit., p. 114.

possible. By switching sites – not only from public to private, but also to new emerging sites such as social networks – people can move the dispute to other principles of judgement. If this does not work, then there is the choice of tolerating reciprocal criticism and waiting for further debate; it is the solution of permanent dialogue. Another answer would be to compromise between competing principles, for example, secular and religious criteria, a situation that runs the risk of being denounced as betraying both sides in the dispute. When there is no agreement or compromise, two solutions remain: forgiving and forgetting, or war and violence. Whatever happens and how traumatic collective experience might become, social processes will continue and produce situations in which people have to restart disputes and re-enter processes of reconciliation and negotiation with each other"[74].

What remains unresolved, in our opinion, is how to facilitate such a process which religious identities usually resist, if only because of their truth claims. One possible answer might emerge from understanding that within the post-secular, some religions are rethinking themselves: various forms of dogmatisms face crisis under postmodern philosophical deconstructionism, and the theoretical processes that religious scholars, intellectuals, and religious authorities are developing to address contemporary humanity's existential issues appear oriented toward renewal – although this orientation often remains confined to academic and research environments, rarely reaching the broader audience of believers.

Possamai clearly synthetizes Habermas' stance on this point: "Religion and spirituality, among other factors, could help us deploy a more humane type of reason and allow for progress towards more equitable and qualitative outcomes: a value-oriented output that promotes human rights, human solidarity, justice and spirituality, and that opposes religious extremism and empty secularism. Of course, in suggesting such a fusion between faith and reason in a new civilization project that would fit with our multicultural and multi-faith world, we should be mindful that some religious groups make exclusivist truth claims, use violent means and are intolerant towards others. These, including militant atheism, are not conducive to this new project of post-secularism"[75].

However, Possamai also highlights critical elements within neoliberalism's absorption and colonization of post-secularism, which we can summarize in three main points: first, he argues that genuine openness to different beliefs (whether religious or secular) is inherently challenging for humans, making Habermas's vision of self-reflective coexistence overly

[74] Beaumont and Eder, *Concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity*, cit., p. 17.
[75] *Ivi*, p. 825.

optimistic; second, there exists a significant difficulty in translating religious arguments into rational terms that can be understood and accepted in public debates including "secular" actors; third, even when such translation proves possible, communicative rationality often fails to overcome divisions on controversial topics – such as abortion, evolution, and LGBTQ+ rights[76]. The core critique thus suggests that while post-secularism may be philosophically compelling, it proves "sociologically naïve": it fails to account for the practical realities of religious and secular groups' interactions in the public sphere, which more often lead to phenomena based on intolerance (both atheistic intolerance in the West and fundamentalist religious intolerance in other contexts).

In our view, however, these sharp observations do not affect Habermas' theoretical contribution. Rather, they emphasize that his theory remains primarily a speculative proposal, rather than a precise phenomenological description of current society. The "post-secular" age, in this sense, represents not an accomplished process but an ongoing one, still requiring sociopolitical effort and philosophical-theological refinement[77]. It is from this perspective that we primarily consider this framework's methodological role in our research: not as a sociological description of accomplished events – although we certainly consider pivotal sociological processes as real transformations – but primarily as a theoretical challenge to which we hope to contribute through a specific philosophical stance, taking in consideration art's role in shaping this new paradigm.

Gianni Vattimo's considerations also prove relevant from this perspective – although the Italian philosopher does not explicitly employ the term "post-secularism", likely because in his lexicon "secularization" represents Christianity's distinctive path which, despite some excesses related to hypertrophic reason, he views positively as an ongoing process of Christianity's transcendence of its original metaphysical violence and transition toward an ethics of autonomy. Indeed, he understands the "return of the religious"[78] – or the "return of the sacred"[79] – as a concrete, existential experience of contemporary Western humanity and, once freed from rationalistic, materialistic, and positivistic prejudices about religion, as a specific, new, epochal process.

[76] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 826-827. See also Adam Possamai, *The I-zation of Society, Religion, and Neoliberal Post-Secularism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2017.
[77] A great selection of challenging contemporary philosophical stances of religions has been collected by John D. Caputo in his edited text *The Religious*, Blackwell, Malden (USA)-Oxford 2002.
[78] See Gianni Vattimo, "Return", in Id., *Belief*, cit., pp. 20-28.
[79] See Bell, *The Return of the Sacred*, cit.

This recognition sounds theoretically well founded: Vattimo explains that, at least from a hermeneutical approach, there always exists an "history of truth" inseparable from its content. Therefore, we cannot describe the contemporary "return of the religious" as merely reproducing an old phenomenon, as something that was already present but merely forgotten. Something more fundamental is at work. Any process implies the transformation of the contents involved in the experience of that process. As the religious event recurs, impacting our worldview, this very occurrence signifies a new relational, evenemential, meaningful disclosure of a different truth. This disclosure can even emerge outside the traditional forms of metaphysics and ontologies, which were characterized, on the theoretical level, by a paradigm that is difficult to accept in contemporary discourse after the philosophical achievements of the last century. This paradigm was based on radical dualism (between immanence and transcendence, divine and mortal)[80], on a realist definition of God and Truth (the latter conceived as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*), on a logocentric approach, and on an historicist bias – a model which has been radically deconstructed by the philosophies established in the wake of Friedrich Nietzsche's legacy, from Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) critique of ontotheology to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, through French deconstructivism and postmodernism (Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard [1924-1998], Jacques Lacan [1901-1981], and Gilles Deleuze [1925-1995]), to "Italian Thought" (or "Italian Theory")[81].

However, these philosophical positions do not constitutively lead to materialistic and atheist conclusions. Instead, they open possibilities for a profound rethinking and re-foundation of the divine, a philosophical direction that is complementary to the interest in religious practices recognized by contemporary sociology. The crisis of modernity also signifies a crisis of atheistic rationalism and scientist materialism: religions appear once again be recognized as bearing epistemological value.

In this debate, philosophy, religious studies, and theology appear to merge on several layers, reciprocally influencing each other methodologically, especially regarding such urgent topics as the fulfilment of eschatology, the phenomenology of the invisible, political theology, and humanistic rethinking of theological milestones[82].

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[80] On the unitive function of religion as a possible existential renewal, see Sergio Quinzio, *Cristianesimo dell'inizio e della fine*, Adelphi, Milano 2014, pp. 43-45.

[81] See Dario Gentili, *Italian Theory. Dall'operaismo alla biopolitica*, il Mulino, Bologna 2012; Enrica Lisciani-Petrini and Giusi Strummiello (eds.), *Effetto Italian Thought*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2017.

[82] Cf. on that William Franke, *Dante's theology and contemporary thought: Recovering transcendence?*, in «Forum Italicum», vol. 55 (2), 2021, pp. 627-641. Frank offers particularly a crucial insight into the theological dimension of contemporary philosophy in *ivi*, p. 638: "Philosophy itself can be understood as crypto-theology. Indeed, the humanities generally can be seen as theological in the sense of interrogating the ground or *un*ground of all things as what binds them together (*religare*). Philosophy of religion today, as specifically a philosophy of *relationality*, I maintain, has a claim to being recognized as ''first,'' or fundamental, philosophy. (…) The

Furthermore, according to Vattimo: "The common root of the widespread religious need in our society and the return of the (plausibility of) religion in today's philosophy is the reference to modernity as the age of the world image. If critical reflection wants to present itself as an authentic interpretation of the religious need of the common consciousness, it must show that this need is not adequately satisfied by a mere revival of 'metaphysical' religiosity, i.e., by fleeing the confusiveness of modernization and the Babel of secularized society in the direction of a renewed foundationalism"[83]. This theoretical need parallels Habermas' expression in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, where the German philosopher emphasizes the Judeo-Christian tradition's fertile role in providing semantic content to Western philosophy: contemporary access to this source of wisdom should be accompanied by the practice of "translating" these – and others – religious traditions' ethical insights into a "postmetaphysical" philosophical perspective[84]. Or, to adopt Caputo's language: "The God of the traditional philosophy of religion is a philosopher's God explicating a philosopher's faith, to be found, if anywhere, only on the pages of philosophy journals, not in the hearts of believers or the practice of faith. This philosopher's God is a creature of scholastic, modernist, and Enlightenment modes of thinking that deserve nothing so much as a decent burial. So who, or what, comes next? After the funeral? (…) Let us leave the guns of metaphysics at the door and let God and religious faith feel free to speak for themselves. As the great German mystic-preacher Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) said, God desires nothing more of us than that we let go of our creaturely mode of existing and let God be God in us. Let faith, or religious life, or the divine life among us, be what they are, without cutting them down to fit the presuppositions of western

postmodern thinkers who have been summarily evoked here all suggest ways of living a relation to the Unknown as at least implicitly theological transcendence. But they live this relation within the immanence of secular, worldly existence".

[83] Gianni Vattimo, *La traccia della traccia*, in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Annuario Filosofico Europeo. La Religione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, pp. 75-89: 78. Vattimo implicitly refers to Martin Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, in Id., *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 57-85 (Martin Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (1938), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5: *Holzwege*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977, pp. 75-113).

[84] Taylor (*Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism*, cit., pp. 49-50) persuasively critiques Habermas' epistemic distinction between a universal "secular reason" and "religious reason", which is more fragile and acceptable only when arriving at conclusions matching secular reasoning itself (thus rendering it essentially redundant). This position appears to remain within the same "secular paradigm" that Habermas elsewhere more convincingly attempts to transcend – specifically in overcoming both epistemic dualism and Western logocentrism. "Rawls and Habermas. For all their differences, they seem to reserve a special status for nonreligiously informed Reason (let's call this 'reason alone'), as though a. the latter were able to resolve certain moral-political issues in a way that can legitimately satisfy any honest, unconfused thinker and b. where religiously based conclusions will always be dubious and in the end only convincing to people who have already accepted the dogmas in question" (*ivi*, p. 53).

metaphysics or theology, which, as Johannes de Silentio once quipped, sits in the window all rouged waiting for the philosophers to come walking by"[85].

Although this theoretical premise will lead Vattimo to apply his notion of "weak thought" to religion, particularly through the notion of *kenosis* within a Christian context – and thereby arrives at theoretical conclusions which diverge significantly from the elaboration that will emerge in our path from the dialogue between Gadamer, Kiefer, and Nitsch (especially regarding the meaning of "demythologization" in the contemporary age)[86] – the recognition of a fundamental and essential difference between the domain which we are defining through the concept of "post-secularism" and traditional, premodern religious systems is also a premise of our interpretation of the postmodern contemporary age. The overcoming of dualistic, rationalistic, and dogmatic metaphysics should be accompanied by the openness to answer to the radical sacred call emanating from Being in its event of contemporary disclosure[87].

This fundamental challenge has been understood, for example, in the Christian context by Radical Orthodoxy Theology (RO), which aims to overcome metaphysical dualism (especially between faith and reason, and natural and supernatural) and the biased myth of "universal reason": "Engaging contemporary currents in philosophy and critical theory, particularly new French thought, RO has taken on postmodernism in a dual sense: On the one hand, it is a theological movement that speaks in the idiom of contemporary continental thought, engaging in theological reflection in the language of French phenomenology and critical theory; on the other hand, it has taken on such thought in a polemical sense, seeking to demonstrate the paucity of postmodern nihilism and then to recover an alternative, Christian vision by returning to decidedly premodern sources (without wanting simply to recover premodernity). So while RO speaks the language of postmodernism – at times to the point of obscurantism, some have charged – it is at root a critique of postmodernism, or at least certain incarnations of such"[88]. To achieve this, a postfoundationalist dialogue between postmodern philosophy and ancient

[85] John D. Caputo, *Introduction: who comes after the God of Metaphysics?*, in Id. (ed.), *The Religious*, cit., pp. 1-19: 3.

[86] Building on Bultmann's concept, Vattimo advocates for "demythification" parallel to a philosophical rethinking of Christianity. See his *Belief*, cit., pp. 54-62. He argues: "I am merely defending the right to hear the word of the gospel again, without being obliged to share in the outright superstitions that obscure the official doctrine of the Church in philosophical and moral matters. I want to interpret the word of the gospel as Jesus taught us, by translating the often violent letter of precepts and prophecies into a language more concordant with the supreme commandment of charity" (*ivi*, p. 75).

[87] Vattimo proposed that Western philosophy's Christian origin might productively lead to developing a philosophy based on analogies with Trinitarian theology and its evenemential essence, where Christ's incarnation represents a radical religious manifestation (see Vattimo, *La traccia della traccia*, cit., pp. 85-86, 89).

[88] Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, cit.

Christian sources (Plato, Neoplatonism, St. Augustine, Eastern Church Fathers) is considered fundamental to bringing forth, so to speak "an other postmodernism". John Milbank, contemporary RO's most prominent figure, particularly reflects on the line running from Augustine into medieval metaphysics, arguing polemically against philosophical postmodernism, which he interprets as a continuation of that cultural corruption and deviation from orthodox Christian discourse that constitutes modernity[89].

Introducing RO's worldview, Smith argues, "what characterizes postmodern ontology", in its mainstream traits, "are a flatness and materialism that ultimately lead to nihilism – a loss of the real squandered into nothing. When the world is so flattened that all we have is the immanent, the immanent implodes upon itself. In contrast to such nihilism and materialism, only a participatory ontology – in which the immanent and material is suspended from the transcendent and immaterial – can grant the world meaning"[90].

Some hints towards a philosophical theory capable of providing a persuasive and rational foundation for this new "participatory" relation between mankind and the sacred, transcending both immanentism and transcendentalism, historicism and apocalypticism, appears to emerge from the dialogue between Gadamer's hermeneutics and contemporary philosophy of religion and theology, as we will discuss in chapters 2.3 and 2.4. of our dissertation. In this sense, the mention of Radical Orthodox Theology, which we cannot explore further here, represents one case study among many of this epochal process of rethinking religion(s).

From this perspective, the suspicious character of hermeneutics that Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) emphasized as his philosophical program's core[91] can transform into an "hermeneutics of restoration", which "is infused with moments of wonder, reverence, exaltation, hope, epiphany, or joy"[92].

[89] See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy. A New Theology*, Routledge, London 1999; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edition, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006.

[90] Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, cit.

[91] See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1970.

[92] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2015, p. 32.

1.3 Re-Imagining the Sacred in Contemporary Art: Towards a Performative Definition of Post-Secularism

The preceding debate demonstrates the vast scope of the discourse surrounding post-secularism and/or post-secularity. As we have tried to show, it is an extraordinarily productive yet fragile notion, recently conceived but already employed across diverse approaches and theoretical directions. Within this extensive research landscape, we can identify three main contexts in which the "post-secular" has served as relevant theoretical and hermeneutical lens:

- Post-secular as the return of the religious and the sacred (in traditional premodern and/or in new forms), emerging after and against modern secularization (as Charles Taylor's work suggests) – the concept of spiritual "re-enchantment of the world", transcending modern rationalism and reductionism;
- Post-secular as religion's reemergence in the public sphere within pluralistic, globalized and multi-modern societies, where multiple religions coexist and seek cultural and political recognition – moving beyond strict opposition between secular and religious yet remaining within a modern context based on their intertwinement or, we might say, their negotiation[93]. As Lieke Wijnia clarifies: "The postsecular does not posit that the secular is a feature of a bygone era, or that religion has overtaken the secular as dominant feature in societal structures. (…) it rather wants to draw attention to, and find a vocabulary for, the enduring presence of religion and how it interacts with non-religious, secular, or civil counterparts in the public domain"[94] – it is the post-secular mutuality and active engagement between the religious and the secular which is at the core of Habermas' theory[95] and to the numerous scholars who make reference to it (such as Hodkinson and Horstkotte). This perspective is directed neither towards restoring theological or metaphysical frameworks, nor towards "reenchanting" the world, but rather towards revising the theory of secularization to more consistently incorporate the contribution of religions within this long historical process;

[93] See Arie L. Molendijk, *In pursuit of the postsecular*, in «International Journal of Philosophy and Theology», vol. 76, nr. 2, 2015, pp. 100-115.
[94] Lieke Wijnia, *Resonating Sacralities*, cit., p. 7.
[95] And which, in Catholic context, has been embraced by Dillon: "I interpret the postsecular turn as extending an invitation to Catholicism to embrace reciprocal dialogue between the religious and the secular. I am not suggesting that the Church should develop a postsecular mentality. Nor am I suggesting that the public relevance of Catholicism is contingent on its embrace of postsecular expectations. What I am arguing, however, is that the postsecular recognition of the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular opens up new lines of dialogue, and thus of action, both within the Church and for its role in secular society" (*Postsecular Catholicism*, cit., p. 9). The mentioned encyclicals and discourses of the last Popes (Benedict XVI and Francis) seem to confirm the desire for a renewed public engagement of the Catholic Church, with the aim to encounter the divine within today's concrete world. "Catholicism – concludes Dillon – is a reflexive encounter with diverse, increasingly secularized realities and about finding a good-enough communal unity in and amid such diversity" (*ivi*, p. 166).

- Post-secular as a theoretical methodology ("post-secular turn") for rethinking historical processes and cultural issues previously interpreted through materialistic and secular frameworks, particularly engaging with this transformation's cultural, philosophical and theological implications.

An anticipation of this turn can be recognized in the so called "turn to religion" diagnosed by Hent de Vries in his seminal *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*[96].

This third meaning also forms the declared foundation of *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity* (2019), which examines, through interdisciplinary perspectives, the notion of "postecularity", between the processes of "the revival of religion" and "the secularization of secularism": the handbook's core assumption is that "the concept of postsecularity – the generic term covering 'the postsecular', 'postsecularism', and 'postsecular society' together – offers a path-breaking and innovative means for grappling with (at least to address in a new and hitherto overlooked or underexplored way) the most pressing intellectual, political, and human concerns of our time"[97]. This framework also encompasses philosophical attempts, often developed from postmodern or hermeneutical perspectives, to rethink speculative approaches to religious, divine, and theological domains. This paradigm thus incorporates a performative function: by transcending the notion of secularism, it suggests the emergence of a new historical epoch with an emerging global model, imposing a paradigm shift that compels us to rethink not only various disciplines but our entire worldview. In this sense, it not only describes an ongoing historical process but actively contributes to its radicalization and development[98].

Although all these aspects are of interest, fertile for exploration, and somewhat intertwined, we aim to define the "post-secular" within our research context of aesthetics and cultural studies

[96] Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1999. De Vries's seminal work argues that a turn to religion has characterized the main recent Western philosophical developments. Drawing from classical sources like Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, and inspired by the late Derrida, the study examines contemporary implications of the relationship between philosophical universality and religious particularism. De Vries demonstrates how Derrida consistently highlights unexpected alliances between radical interrogation of Western philosophy and religious inheritance, from which philosophy increasingly sought separation. The study engages with diverse thinkers (Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault and Jean-Luc Marion) to argue that philosophical thought must position itself simultaneously proximate to and distant from traditional religious and theological manifestations. The Italian periodical «MicroMega (2/2000) similarly addressed this growing philosophical interest in religion, developing the thesis expressed in the foreword: "Philosophy is concerned more and more with religion, rather than with knowledge, and seeks to enter a dialogue with religion". The issue contains contributions by, among others, Bruno Forte, Norberto Bobbio, Massimo Cacciari, Gianni Vattimo, Marcel Gauche and even the future Pope Joseph Ratzinger. Some scholars identify this "religious turn" accompanying a "theological turn" in philosophy – what might be termed a "theologisation of philosophy", though this has faced criticism from scholars like Dominique Janicaud (*Phenomenology and the "theological Turn". The French Debate*, Fordham University Press, New York 2000).

[97] Beaumont and Eder, *Concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity*, cit., p. 4.

[98] Cf. De Vriese and Vanheeswijck, *The performative force of the postsecular*, cit.

as a broad existential phenomenon. This phenomenon is connected to overcoming the modern secularized approach (private, rationalist, subjectivist, and often scientist/positivist) toward the elaboration of new existential strategies. These strategies aim to establish, on both individual and communitarian levels, the relationship between humanity and the sacred – which, as an event, is perceived as our age's radical existential call – in connection with postmodern debate's theoretical challenges.

In this context, it is noteworthy that, for Vattimo, the crisis of modernity coincides with the crisis of the status of knowledge. Given the hermeneutical assumption, shared by Vattimo following Heidegger's and Gadamer's legacy, that every act of knowledge implies interpretation, we can understand the crisis of modernity as the crisis of a perspective based on that realist, objective, dualist, reductionist metaphysically-based knowledge which "culminates in a thinking that identifies the truth of Being with the calculable, measurable and definitively manipulable object of techno-science"[99]. Yet, it is precisely this crisis of epistemological value in its positivistic attribution to technoscience that allows the conditions for the "return of religion in our culture"[100]. This return appears unpredictable in its forms, yet inescapable.

Indeed, as Bell argues, "religion is not an ideology or a regulative or integrative feature of society – though in its institutional forms it has, at different times, functioned in those ways. It is a constitutive aspect of human experience because it is a response to the existential predicaments which are the *ricorsi* of human culture (…) Religions, however, unlike technologies or social policies, cannot be manufactured or designed"[101]. Philosophical reflections, as well as artistic representations, can only contribute to the elaboration of new forms and patterns for approaching the sacred's manifestation and its new irruption into history[102].

The articulation of Vattimo's *pars destruens* allows us to rethink in the wake of newfound legacies – such as the "encounters" of Gadamer's, Kiefer's, and Nitsch's thought – a new *pars costruens* for facing the cultural, philosophical, and even spiritual challenges which have emerged to the forefront of these discussions and are addressed by our study. In this view, reflecting a pluralist worldview, the specific expressions of different cultures, religions, and

[99] Vattimo, *Belief*, cit., p. 30.
[100] *Ivi*, p. 25.
[101] Bell, *The Return of the Sacred*, cit., p. 517.
[102] Bell (*ivi*, p. 518) theorized the return of religions as a "resurrection of memory" manifesting in three different forms: "moralizing" religions grounded in fundamentalist faith; "redemptive" religions, fostering awareness of past and transcendence through mediating institutions; and the "return to some mythic and mystical modes of thought". Several decades later, the post-secular appears to validate Bell's phenomenological prediction, offering a remarkably accurate description of our contemporary religious landscape.

traditions could be incorporated into contemporary forms of societies, beginning with a communitarian hermeneutical process of rethinking, without seeing these heritages as necessarily leading to reactionary or atavistic ends.

In the European context, as we have already proposed, the crisis of religion primarily manifests as a "crisis of imagination": the divine seems no longer accessible through traditional religious schemes that have become trapped in the dualism opposing "religious" to "secular", although, as demonstrated sociologically, this existential demand for meanings continues to grow.
The dialogue we will develop from the reflections of Gadamer, Kiefer, and Nitsch will serve to provide a provisional response to this challenge, in particular by emphasizing art's fundamental role in this demanding process.

Within the "post-secular" framework, art reclaims its original sacred form and function, although, as we will see in examining Kiefer's and Nitsch's work, it operates outside premodern art's confessional and dogmatic boundaries. This represents more than merely the survival of sacred elements, topics, and structures in artistic languages – a phenomenon that the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) described with the famous phrase "the camouflage of the sacred in the profane"[103]. Rather, it reflects the artist's explicit vindication of religious symbolic intentions and purposes. To clarify: we are not witnessing the persistence of religion within (and despite) secularism – as if a partial failure of modernity's atheistic project, so to speak – but rather an affirmative, propositional stance toward a new sacred vindication.
Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman observe in a recent publication that although religious and sacred practices, symbols, and references appear in numerous artworks, few people involved in the artworld – artists, scholars and critics alike – would perceive artistic activity as anything but purely secular. The sacred and art remain on different cultural interpretative levels – yet new studies can address art's spiritual role, developing cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives[104]. This represents another sign and manifestation of the post-secular turn's fertility.

Approaching Kiefer and Nitsch, well-established artists, as case studies, we submit that a significant tendency of recent decades is precisely this growing awareness within the artistic

[103] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt Inc., London-New York 1959, pp. 201-213.
[104] Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman, *Introduction*, in Id. (eds.), *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art*, State University of New York Press, New York 1999, pp. 1-5: 1.

field of this intertwinement. This tendency appears clearer to the artists themselves than to art critics, who often seem unable to develop hermeneutical frameworks to interpret such religious or mythic-symbolic stances. While not a mainstream tendency, this connection between the sacred and the Avantgarde reconnects to an already fundamental tendency of the historical Avantgardes of the 20th-century. This tendency is now reinvigorated and reinforced with a more radical position, conscious of the ongoing transition between harsh modernity and liquid postmodernity, ideological secularism and rhizomatic post-secularism[105]. A world liberated from its "rigid fixity and dense and heavy substantiality"[106] can reopen to the sacred's manifestation.

The "post-secular", from this perspective, is paradoxical because it simultaneously describes an ongoing social and cultural process while proposing values and cultural decisions based on a genuine search for new patterns and evaluative and interpretative criteria.

This hermeneutical itinerary brings us along pathways which let a consistent perspective on the ontology of images emerge through theoretical clarifications as well as case studies of contemporary art. The present dissertation explores how images – which, following Hans Belting's seminal lexicon[107], have lost their cultic value (with all related ritual practices and narratives) under modern secularization and thus their religious power, in favor of the ideal of *art pour l'art* – can in the post-secular age reclaim their original nature and function, albeit in new styles and patterns. Furthermore, religion's manifestation in the cult image as *presence* could be reconquered in new forms. The alienation between the sacred and the artistic dimension which, according to Bell[108], emerged in modern aestheticism and passed to modernist Avantgarde, appears potentially healable within a new cultural and spiritual configuration.

[105] See on that the issue 20/24 of the Italian journal «Antarés», entitled *Avanguardia e sacro nell'arte contemporanea* (Bietti, Milano 2024).
[106] Caputo, *On Religion*, cit., p. 77.
[107] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1994.
[108] Cfr. Bell, *The Return of the Sacred*, cit., pp. 510-511.

2. Gadamer's "Fourfold"

"Truth didn't come into the world naked but in types and images. Truth is received only that way. There is rebirth and its image. They must be reborn through image. What is the resurrection? Image must rise again through image" (*The Gospel of Philip*, in Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible*, Shambala, Boston 2003)

2.1 Gadamer's Imaginative Hermeneutics: Thinking Ontology Through Images

2.1.1. The Presence of Images – Event, Mediation and Representation

A pivotal point for consideration in the Gadamerian "Fourfold" (*Geviert*) is the role of the image (*Bild*), which is a fundamental concept for a hermeneutical approach that takes into account the artistic dimension, as we have proposed to undertake. To think *through* images does not mean only to think images – i.e., to reflect on their meaning and content – a practice which can be understood as one restricted dimension of a complete philosophical theory of images –, but more properly to elaborate a theoretical pathway in which the stream of thinking is moved, directed, and even nourished by images. The understandings and interpretations that arise from the analysis and discussion of the linguistic and theoretical notions related to the conceptual field of image will appear thus in Gadamer's reflections as a constellation of meanings which can be applied not only to understand the notion of image itself, from a theoretical point of view and with particular attention for its inner pluralism, but also as a productive support in the process of thinking through the theoretical concepts themselves in a more imaginative way. To think *through* images means therefore to let the concepts of reasons and the images of intuition productively interact each other, to increase the complexity of the very reality[1]. In fact, if symbol, as we will discuss in the next pages, is characterized by Gadamer as that force which represents the whole ontology of reality. Moreover, given that symbols are connected to images, which have the power to increase reality itself, we can derive the recognition that symbolical images, such as those adopted by Nitsch and Kiefer in their masterpieces, are relevant instruments for a philosophical hermeneutics which intends to treat contemporary art creations

[1] According to Giambattista Vico (*The New Science*, trans. and ed. by Jason Taylor and Robert Miner, with an introduction by Giuseppe Mazzotta, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2020) *scire per imagines* means to productively tune and accord the faculty of imagination and the intellectual knowledge (*scire per intellectus*), letting also cooperate mind and body. On the relation between Vico's and Gadamer's approaches, see Jon Nixon, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. The Hermeneutical Imagination*, Springer, Cham 2017, pp. 16-18.

not just from an historical point of view, and not even as mere iconographic or conceptual objects, but instead as productive functions of creative imagination[2].

This cultural standpoint is particularly urgent in the contemporary age, which is often characterized as a "civilization of images"[3] *par excellence*, and which we could even more

[2] "And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in conversation: Reflections and commentary*, ed. and trans. by R.E. Palmer, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2001, pp. 41-42 ["Und was ist hermeneutische Phantasie? Das ist der Sinn für das Fragwürdige und das, was es von uns verlangt"; Hans-Georg Gadamer, in Carsten Dutt (ed.), *Hermeneutik. Ästhetik. Praktische Philosophie. Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, Heidelberg 1995, p. 17]). On the relation between hermeneutics and imagination see also Nixon, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. The Hermeneutical Imagination*, cit., and Nicholas Davey, *Hermeneutical Aesthetics and the Problem of the Imagination*, in Andrzej Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, Lit, Berlin 2011, pp. 339-352. On the Heideggerian roots of Gadamer's imagination's theory see Egor Falyov, *Heidegger's Hermeneutics*, trans. by Jafe Arnold, Prav, 2025, pp. 156-159, 231-232, 286-290.

[3] The "iconic turn" (*ikonische Wende*) (Gottfried Boehm) – together with the "pictorial turn" (W.J.T. Mitchell) –, emerged from the '90s in literature, as part of that dynamic cross-disciplinary fields of inquiry which characterizes the larger reconfiguration of the *Kulturwissenschaften* through the so called "cultural turns" (see Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. by Adam Blauhut, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016). It especially testifies the relevant contemporary interest for the world of images, highlighting their importance in the current events, in connection to the visual storage medium of the Internet and to the overproduction of images in our media society.

The main stake of this turn is to rethink reality and nature in relation to the ontological, epistemological and social role of images, refusing the famous "linguistic turn" proposed by Richard Rorty (1967): the image can no longer be considered a simulacrum that hides a truer essence, to which only the concept can access; rather it becomes the set of shared assumptions which characterize a community, it constructs its worldview (also) thanks to a sort of "logic of the image" (a "non-verbal" logic endowed with an argumentative form). The image is a complex interaction between visuality, discourse, institutions and symbols: the status of spectatorship, like the gaze and glance, builds a pivotal and fruitful visual literacy, which philosophy needs to consider. We agree with Krešimir Purgar (*Visual Studies and the Pictorial Turn: Twenty Years Later* in «Images. Journal for Visual Studies», 2, https://www.visual-studies.com/images/no2/purgar.html) that "the turn towards images (…) is a turn towards the acceptance of the proposition that images can *speak* and *tell* as much as they can *show* and *represent*". The image as the *ikonisch* (iconic) dimension is simultaneously defined as an object of study as well as a transformative process, in which images create meaning.

This turn has been mainly developed in Continental philosophy in the context of artistic and humanistic disciplines, instead in the USA academia it has more broadly touched social and political issues, with the recognition of the "common space" of iconology and ideology (Mitchell coined the notion of "dialectic between iconology and ideology").

Among the texts which have already become "classics" in this debate: Gottfried Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?*, Fink Verlag, München 1994; Gottfried Boehm *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin University Press, Berlin 2007; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jepchott, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1994; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago, Chicago 1994 and *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics*, The University of Chicago, Chicago 2015; Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans. by Elizabeth Clegg, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman, The Pennsylvania State University Press, USA 2005.

This "turn" needs to be distinguished from the "visual turn" (Chris Jenks), although several common points can be detected. The latter, in fact, was more relevant in Anglo-Saxon cultural context and has developed a critical theory, significantly influenced by postmodernism, devoted to the analysis of all kinds of optical experiences and all variants of visual practices (modes of perception, regimes of the gaze, forms of visualization), in relation to the increasing concern with the relevance of the visible dimension in cultural theory, human sciences and socio-political critical theory, especially regarding visual media. If the "iconic/pictorial turn" is focalized on the theory of image (or *Bildwissenschaft*, the "science of image") and lives in a strict relation to the iconology and history of art (understood as an historical "image science"), the "visual turn" mainly explores the visual character of

radically define as a civilization *obsessed* by images, where the "human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before"[4]. The perpetual presence of images in contemporary places – both physical, social, and imaginary – requires a theoretical comprehension of their ontology, which is not monotonic, but instead plural and internally differentiated. When up-to-date technologies and cultural models appear and interact with images, new interpretative schemes need to be developed. In this regard, Gadamer's comprehension of this complexity is relevant and finds expression by virtue of a deep linguistic attentiveness to the manifold words and notions which represent the different nuances of the concept of image, while avoiding the overlapping of its different intrinsic aspects. Images are in fact symbols, signs, allegories, forms of representations: the philosophical gaze should face this theoretical variety and elaborate a conceptual map of their internal connections.

Image should be understood, according to Gadamer, firstly as "an ontological fact": in the image, indeed, considered *universalkulturgeschichtlich*, i.e., outside specific cultural and social boundaries, being shows itself in a visible manifestation endowed with meaning. In this respect, there is a significant similarity between the image and the word: both are understood by the German philosopher outside the strict relation between signifier and signified, form and content, original (*Urbild*) and copy (*Abbild*; *Nachbild*), and rather as autonomous sections of realities (although always interrelated and based on being), which directly manifest a meaning which depends on themselves – the image and the word – and not on external attributes or qualifications. Nevertheless, this autonomous structure is embedded in the deep roots of being, and can degenerate into a simulacrum, into the virtual subjectivist representation of the planetary essence (*Weltbild*), deprived of its relational and ontological dimension, as depicted by Martin Heidegger in his *The Age of the World Picture*[5]. Image, as described by Gadamer,

contemporary culture in a crossdisciplinary approach, trying to thematize the consequences of the current (and future) techniques of imagination-making.

[4] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, New York 1999, p. 1. Anders Michelsen defines visual culture in contemporary age as a "conundrum of critical mass" (*Fleshy Creativity: Mattering And The Queer Body In Transvisual Theory*, in Heidrun Krieger Olinto and Karl Erik Schøllhammer (eds.), *XV Seminário Internacional de Estudos de Literatura, vai acontecer nos dias 22 e 23 de maio: 15th International Seminar on Literature Studies*, Editora PUC-Rio, Edicões Loyola og IUPERJ, Rio de Janeiro 2023).

[5] In Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 57-85 (Martin Heidegger, Die Zeit des *Weltbildes* (1938), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5: *Holzwege*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977, pp. 75-113). "Representation" (*Vorstellung*) as reduction of the being of beings in general to a represented being, stands for Heidegger as the pivotal element of the modern resolution of the world in image – a process which proceeds in parallel with the scientific objectification of beings, "aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure – and that means certain – of the being" (*ivi*, p. 66 ["Diese Vergegenständlichung des Seienden vollzieht sich in einem Vor-stellen, das darauf zielt, jegliches Seiende so vor sich zu bringen, daß der rechnende Mensch des Seienden sicher und d.h. gewiß sein kann"; *ivi*, p. 87]).

has a representational (although not imitative) essence, in whose visual dimension the polar relation of subject and object is preserved. This relation avoids the rise of that imaginal self-reproductive image, which is the manifestation of the technoscientific solutionism harshly criticized by Heidegger. We could thus state that the modern "world picture" ("the collective image of representing production"[6], where the image is mainly assumed as in-formation) is *radicitus* opposed to the pluralistic "ontology of the image" developed by Gadamer himself, which is an intersubjective event of meaning – meaning, however, which cannot be reduced to a mere specific and individual content, because, as clearly expressed by the philosopher Roger Scruton (1944-2020), in an artwork "the meaning does not reside in a content that could be identified just anyhow. It is a particular content *as presented* – seen, in other words, as inseparable from form and style"[7].

In this perspective, Gadamer's thought reveals the power of imagination as a meta-subjectivist, symbolic imagination. As Davey explains: "Within Gadamer's thought, the 'symbolic imagination' is discernible in two ways. Following Heidegger, there is, firstly, a tendency to attribute an ontic potency to 'the imaginary': essences or subject-matters (*Sachen*) *show* themselves as meaningful images or, better, images that intend meanings. Secondly, Gadamer's conception of the symbol as withholding aspects of its meaning once again anticipates an imaginative capacity to project a wholeness of meaning to which as yet unperceived aspects might be seen as belonging. 'Imaginative agency' – the ability to perceive in the folly of one's ways what might have been – is implicit in Gadamer's conception of religious experience as that which reveals the limits of human capacities"[8].

Image, therefore, is interpreted not according to the Western aesthetic tradition, which has interpreted the notion of *mimesis* as *imitatio* (copy): the image is not merely a "photographic" copy of a "real reality" outside the image, but instead it manifests in itself a meaning and a part of the whole being. Thus, image is characterized, according to Giovanni Gurisatti commenting on Gadamer, by a "complex polar-circular dynamic" related to the process of "transmutation in form", as long it is "not imitative, but instead translational mimesis, more inner, less immediate, because it (…) grasps a symbolic intuitive meaning"[9]. Instead of the imitative dimension

Differently Gadamer interpretates the concepts of "presentation" (*Darstellung*) and "representation" (*Repräsentation*), which express the generative and reproductive dimension of the living images.

[6] *Ivi*, p. 71.

[7] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 93.

[8] Davey, *Hermeneutical Aesthetics and the Problem of the Imagination*, cit., p. 343.

[9] Giovanni Gurisatti, *Ritrarre è tradurre – Tradurre è ritrarre. Sulla traduzione come pratica ermeneutica tra Gadamer e Benjamin*, in «Studi di estetica», anno L, IV serie, 1, pp. 53-76: 57.

underlying images, Gadamer highlights their creative and productive dimension: from an hermeneutical point of view, the image is not a thing, but rather an event – a concept which will be deepened by our research into the concept of the beautiful and Nitsch's and Kiefer's aesthetics – where what takes place is the appearance of a meaning which unifies the subject (interpreter) who looks at the image and the object (interpreted) that acquires form and content by being observed. Furthermore, *mimesis* means for Gadamer "to show", to reproduce in a visible shape: "The original mimetic relation is not an imitation in which we strive to approach an original by copying it as nearly as possible. On the contrary, it is a kind of showing. Here showing does not mean setting out something like a proof in which we demonstrate something that is not accessible in any other way. When we show something, we do not intend a relation between the one who shows and the thing shown. Showing points away from itself. We cannot show anything to the person who looks at the act of showing itself, like the dog that looks at the pointing hand. On the contrary, showing something means that the one to whom something is shown sees it correctly for himself. It is in this sense that imitation is a showing. For imitation enables us to see more than so called reality"[10]. As brilliantly expressed by Grondin, according to Gadamer's ontology of art "we must always take account of the *anamnesis* in the *mimesis*, as etymology requires us to do. The world is most often lived in the mode of forgetfulness, forgetfulness of oneself and of the world, and to allow us to (re)discover reality for its own sake is the anamnestic function of art. The lost aspect of the notion of mimesis is that of its cognitive function, universally acknowledged up to the appearance of aesthetic knowledge"[11].

The image that we look at is furthermore not a mere product of the abovementioned reproduction process, but the coming to visibility, in the aesthetic form (*Gestalt*), of the entire process: we could say, with Breidbach and Vercellone, that "images are captured in their formation (*Ausbildung*)"[12], because they always preserve a reference to the "pointing away from themselves" described by Gadamer.

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[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The play of art*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. by Nicholas Walker and ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 123-130: 128-129 ("Das mimische Urverhältnis ist nicht ein abbildendes Nachmachen, bei dem man sich anstrengt, einem Urbild möglichst nahe zu kommen – es ist vielmehr Zeigen. Zeigen heißt nicht, etwas vorzeigen, wie ein Beweisstück, an dem etwas bewiesen wird, was auf andere Weise nicht mehr zugänglich ist. Zeigen heißt überhaupt nicht, ein Verhältnis zwischen dem Zeigenden und dem Gezeigten als solches meinen. Es weist von sich selber gerade weg. Wer auf das Zeigende sieht, wie der Hund auf die ausgestreckte Hand, dem kann man nichts zeigen. Vielmehr meint Zeigen, daß der, dem man etwas zeigt, selber und richtig sehen soll. In diesem Sinne ist Nachnamen Zeigen. Denn im Nachahmen wird immer etwas mehr sichtbar, als was die sogenannte Wirklichkeit bietet" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Das Spiel der Kunst* (1977), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1993, pp. 86-93: 91]).

[11] Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. by Katryn Plant, Routledge, London-New York 2003, p. 45.

[12] Olaf Breidbach and Federico Vercellone, *Anschauung denken. Zum Ansatz einer Morphologie des Unmittelbaren*, Wilhelm Fink, München 2011, p. 19.

The essential dimension of image has been noticed in a similar perspective – although much more based on the role of flesh and on a sensuous concept of sensibility – by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who is also a relevant thinker in the context of the critical elaboration which problematize the "aesthetic differentiation" and the modern subjectivist reductionism of the experience of art. In the *Eye and Mind* (*L'œil et l'esprit*, 1961), he elaborates a convergent attempt at overcoming an imitative and dualistic conception of image, which should not be treated as "a tracing, a copy, a second thing", and even less as a drawing produced in order to copy a mental abstract image. Rather, images are a biunivocal and relational dimension: "they are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which the duplicity of feeling [*le sentir*] makes possible and without which we would never understand the quasi presence and imminent visibility which make up the whole problem of the imaginary. The picture, the actor's mimicry – these are not devices borrowed from the real world in order to refer to prosaic things which are absent. For the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual – nearer because it is in my body as a diagram of the life of the actual, with all its pulp and carnal obverse [*son envers charnel*] exposed to view for the first time"[13]. In this perspective, the production of images reveals the connection between different levels of the same reality in the continuum of existence: "Our fleshly eyes are already much more than receptors for light rays, colors, and lines", instead "they are computers of the world, which have the gift of the visible, as we say of the inspired man that he has the gift of tongues"[14]. In a similar phenomenological perspective, and explicitly referring to Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) theory of images, Günter Figal (1949-2024) has remarked that "the 'image-object' is instead directly there with the actually given image. It is there *as image* and is understood as image. Malevich's *Black Square on White Background* does not refer to a black square, but instead *is* an imagistically given black square"[15].

In addition, according to Gadamer, the concrete case of contemporary art, especially Abstract currents, lets the insufficiency of the Western mimetic tradition present itself to us: imitation must be understood in a broader sense as reproduction of the order of reality[16], i.e., a process of letting come into presence and visibility an ontological dimension which was not already

[13] Maurice Merlau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, trans. by Carleton Dallery, in Id., *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. by James M. Edie, Northwestern University Press, USA 1964, pp. 159-190: 164-165.
[14] *Ivi*, p. 165.
[15] Günter Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology. The Appearance of Things*, trans. by Jerome Veith, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 2015 [ebook].
[16] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Art and imitation*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 92-104 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kunst und Nachahmung* (1967), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 25-36).

there, and which has its own rhythm, structure, stratification. "Mimesis – explains Gadamer – then does not imply a reference to an original as something other than itself but means that something meaningful is there as itself"[17]. Reinforcing this comprehension of the generative and creative power of images, Gadamer adds: "The only relevant thing is whether we encounter a spiritual and ordering energy in the work, or whether we are simply reminded of some cultural motif or the peculiarities of this or that particular artist. For that impugns the artistic value of the work. But art is present whenever a work succeeds in elevating what it is or represents to a new configuration, a new world of its own in miniature, a new order of unity in tension"[18]. Hence, Arun Iyer accurately notes in his original comparison between Gadamer's and Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) aesthetics that "in Gadamer's reworking of the artistic image, we do have a re-presentation of reality, which reveals something about reality that reality cannot reveal by itself. The revelation is always a revelation of order, which is another name for the essence of reality, of this world in which we leave"[19].

When Hermann Nitsch introduces in his artistic performances (*Aktionen*) the bloody flesh of a lamb, he suggests through this powerful symbol of sacrifice – derived from Judeo-Christian tradition and from the famous iconography of Rembrandt's (1606-1669) *Slaughtered Ox* (1655) – a new configuration of an ancient symbolical image. Indeed, it is not an *imitatio* of the previous traditional images, but instead the insertion of them into a current hermeneutic circle, where a new world of meanings is produced and the Dionysian disintegrating forces evoked in the violent actions directed to the flesh are sublimated through the artistic gaze, becoming an intersubjective image in which the individual experience of the participants is enriched by the spiritually embodied power of the artistic presentation.

Precisely concerning the question of *mimesis*, it is clear that Gadamer, who was also a serious scholar in Greek studies, implicitly and explicitly dialogued with the Platonic question of the problem of *techne* and the meaning of *mimesis* itself. Gadamer's position is anti-Platonic if we

[17] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Poetry and mimesis*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 116-122: 121 ("Mimesis ist dann nicht so sehr, daß etwas auf ein anderes verweist, das sein Urbild ist, sondern daß etwas in sich selbst als Sinnhaftes da ist" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dichtung und Mimesis* (1972), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 80-85: 85]).

[18] Gadamer, *Art and imitation*, cit., p. 103 ("Interessant ist nur, ob wir einer geistigen Ordnungsenergie darin begegnen – oder ob wir nur an diesen oder jenen Inhalt unserer Bildung erinnert werden oder gar an diesen oder jenen Künstler. Denn das sind in der Tat Einwendungen gegen den Kunstwert eines Werkes. Aber sofern ein Werk das, was er darstellt oder als das es sich darstellt, zu einer neuen Formung, zu einem neuen winzigen Kosmos, zu einer neuen Einheit des in sich Verspannten, in sich Geeinten und in sich Geordneten erhebt, ist es Kunst" [Gadamer, *Kunst und Nachahmung*, cit., p. 36]).

[19] Arun Iyer, *The Alchemy of the Image: Gadamer and Foucault on Modern Art*, in Gert -Jan van der Heiden and Anna Novokhatko, in cooperation with Günter Figal and Bernhard Zimmermann (eds.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 21 (2022), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2024, pp. 134-150:147.

understand Plato mainly as an interpreter of art according to a reductionist mimetic function (here we are referring to the depiction of artwork as standing twice removed from truth, by being *mimesis mimeseos*, "copy of a copy")[20]. Instead, it is Platonic in the sense that Gadamer attributed a significant role in the artistic experience to the concepts of the beautiful and *Parusia*, which are typical Platonic and Neoplatonic notions (later assumed also by Christian theology in the debate on iconoclasm[21]), asserting that artistic image can manifest in the concrete reality through its sensitive forms the footprint of the ideal – which, without the image, would have otherwise remained disguised[22]. Under this interpretation, the images of reality, in order to exist, are not just forms of *imitatio* as "copy", but they also stay in communication with the ideas, they are a sort of sensible presence of the suprasensible ideas, an "ontophany" of Being[23]. In this perspective, clarifies the scholar Douglas Hedley, "images can point to an unseen reality as icons of eternal and immutable world: not as sterile abstractions but as living forms of the imagination which furnish a chariot for the soul to ascend to God"[24]. This unveiling proceeds through a Neoplatonic and Plotinian emanative process, which Gadamer describes as following: "Essential to an emanation is that what emanates is an overflow. What it flows from does not thereby become less. The development of this concept by Neoplatonic philosophy, which uses it to get beyond Greek substance ontology, is the basis of the positive ontological status of the picture. For if the original One is not diminished by the outflow of the many from it, this means that being increases"[25]. This emanative process allows for interpreting images as

[20] Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, Books II-III. This critical interpretation is expressed by Martin Heidegger in several *loci* of his work, and should have been known through this source by Gadamer himself.

[21] See Marin Bugiulescu, *Holy Icon – the reality of knowledge and vision of God*, in «Icoana Credintei», vol. 4, nr. 7, 2018, pp. 13-22.

[22] Gadamer has touched on Platonic aesthetics in various texts. The most structured and consistent analysis has been offered in *Plato und die Dichter* (1934). On the role of Plato in *Truth and Method* see Giovanni Reale, *La presenza di Platone in "Verità e Metodo" di Hans-Georg Gadamer*, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e Metodo*, ed. by Gianni Vattimo, Bompiani, Milano, 2014, pp. VII-XXIV.

[23] This notion has been discussed by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger in his *Philosophie des images*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1997, pp. 148-180. The ambiguous ontology of the image in the Platonic and Neoplatonic heritage has been precisely underlined by Anders Michelsen in his *Nothing has Meaning outside Discourse? On the Creative Dimension of Visuality*, in «Letimotiv», 5, 2005/2006, pp. 89-114: 99-100 ("Image-scepticism is on the one hand the reading of a 'reductionist lecture' yet it becomes paradoxically impregnated with a status of affirmation, an apotheosis – reflecting a divine reason for the world. In other words, the image is depreciated, untrusted – specular, mirror, surface, simulacrum, and so forth, yet it is also the opening of a dimension which we may well designate as creative").

[24] Douglas Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, T&T Clark, London-New York 2008, p. 278.

[25] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum, London-New York 2004, pp. 135-136 ("Im Wesen der Emanation liegt, daß das Emanierte ein Überfluß ist. Das, von dem es ausfließt, wird dadurch nicht weniger. Die Entwicklung dieses Gedankes durch die neuplatonische Philosophie, die damit den Bereich der griechischen Substanzontologie sprengt, begründet den positive Seinsrang des Bildes. Denn wenn das ursprünglich Eine durch den Ausfluß des Vielen aus ihm nicht weniger wird, so heißt das ja, daß das Sein mehr wird" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1, 6. Auflage, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1990, p. 145]. On the notion of "emanation" see also *ivi*, pp. 422-423 (*ivi*, pp. 427-428).

conclusive ontological solidifications of an essential movement, in which Being always exceeds its individual specific configurations, manifesting itself in new forms – visible through senses, as images – while at the same time going back through its cosmic rhythm to Being itself, understood as the supra-essential Origin[26].

This whole Neoplatonic echo, although re-read in a non-metaphysical (especially non-dualistic) way, is extensively present in the Gadamerian hermeneutics of images. As understood by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, commenting on Gadamer's hermeneutics, "the dissimilarity of the image in relation to the represented does not necessarily tarnish the presentation of the form, but on the contrary it participates, in the field of the sensitive, in its exhibition, in its staging. (…) The image therefore participates in an advent of being, in its visible deployment, which translates its superabundance, generosity or glory"[27]. Images fluctuate, wave, and vibrate between the appearance of their dense ontology and retracting in front of this ineffable dimension. This is the resonant atmosphere which emerges in several of Anselm Kiefer's artworks, where the recognizable figures are merged with an ubiquitous atmosphere that is evocative of the Origin. In *Athanor* (2007), for example, the alchemic symbology (Athanor is the alchemical furnace which transforms base metal into gold and mortality into immortality) connects the human figure with the cosmic dimension, suggesting a relational and holistic nexus, which should be understood not only as a transcription of ancient wisdom, but first of all as a representation of the ontological value of the artistic image itself: in looking at the human body (the visible, concrete, corporeal appearance, which is a self-portrait of Kiefer himself) we are immediately brought to the whole horizons of that "groundless ground", which is qualified, from the iconological perspective, through the beauty of the sky (a dynamic and eternally moving sky) and the construction of the perspective of the picture, which drives the gaze of the viewer into a dense center full of mysterious meanings.

In this ontological conception, images should thus be considered figures of mediation, which cannot be reduced to the immediate subjectivist sense (i.e., images as the cognitive result of the subject perception), but instead as representing the event of connecting – "mediating", in this sense – subject and object, the mind perceiving reality and the reality emerging in the mind. The relational dimension of mediation in which images provoke us to grasp the connections of meaning between different levels of reality is, however, not logically opposed to the

[26] On the religious paradigmatic interpretation of the relation between the Origin and the resemblance of the image see also Antonello Giugliano, *Imago-Imitago. Note filosofiche sullo status storico e metafisico del concetto di immagine (Warburg, Benjamin, Heidegger, Nancy)*, in Leonardo V. Distaso, Anna Donise and Edoardo Massimilla (eds.), *Immagine e immaginazione*, Federico II University Press, Napoli 2020, pp. 211-254: 233-238.
[27] Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, cit., p. 154.

identification of an in indestructible atemporal moment, which cannot be destroyed in which the genesis of that meaning takes place, which is always mediated by the consciousness of historical determination and by the experience of interpretation. But still, it is instantaneous if it brings to consciousness the awareness of the movement, and therefore also the awareness of the mediation itself. The recovery of the Platonic notion of *exaiphnes* – but also of its Aristotelian reinterpretation[28] – offers Gadamer the opportunity to combine mediation and immediacy precisely thanks to, and through, the figure of the image.

Image, indeed, mediates between different degrees of reality (from an ontological point of view), but also between different historical times. According to Gadamer, and running counter to several spiritual interpretations of art, it is theoretically unproductive to oppose historical time to a metaphysical eternity which would be grasped in artistic contemplation[29]: temporality is always continuous, just as the experience of the sacred in symbolic art is historically determined. Nevertheless, the artistic image can mediate between the common stream of becoming and the interior focus in the radical present of the artistic fruition, which is the present of the vivid participation in the art event. Furthermore, thanks to the concepts of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effects) and *Horizontsverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons), we can underscore that this mediation movement is not a simple transmission of something substantially inherited in the image, but depends on the relationship between the image itself and the spectators or viewers, who re-insert the image into their own hermeneutic circle. "*All encounter with the language of art*[30] – affirms Gadamer[31] – is an encounter *with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event*. This is what must be emphasized against aesthetic

[28] On this topic see Antonello Franco, *Immagine, senso, ermeneutica*, Guida, Napoli 2000, pp. 212-215.

[29] "To define the proper temporality of the work of art as 'sacred time' and distinguish it from transient, historical time remains, in fact, a mere mirroring of the human and finite experience of art. Only a biblical theology of time, starting not from the standpoint of human self-understanding but of divine revelation, would be able to speak of a 'sacred time' and theologically legitimate the analogy between the timelessness of the work of art and this 'sacred time.' Without this kind of theological justification, to speak of 'sacred time' obscures the real problem" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 120) ("Die Abhebung der eigentlichen Zeitlichkeit des Kunstwerks als der 'heilen Zeit' von der verfallenden geschichtlichen Zeit bleibt in Wahrheit eine bloße Ausspiegelung der menschlich-endlichen Erfahrung der Kunst. Nur eine biblische Theologie der Zeit, die nicht vom Standpunkte menschlichen Selbstverständnisses aus, sondern von der göttlichen Offenbarung her wüßte, könnte von einer 'heilen Zeit' sprechen und die Analogie zwischen der Zeitlosigkeit des Kunstwerks und dieser 'heilen' Zeit theologisch legitimieren. Ohne solche theologische Legitimation verdeckt die Rede von der 'heilen Zeit' das eigentliche Problem, das nicht in der Zeitentrücktheit des Kunstwerkes, sondern in seiner Zeitlichkeit liegt" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 127]).

[30] Which is the language of image, an imaginative language. The reference to art, in this context, depends on the fact that although images are also images of nature, it is precisely in the artistic creativity that human history and culture can more extensively interact in the hermeneutical production of meaning and knowledge. Furthermore, the image, in Gadamer's thought, has an ontological value not depending on its specific artistic concrete determination: pictures, but also icons and sculptures are considered in this context as different determinations of the same philosophical issue – the image (*ivi*, p. 131) (*ivi*, p. 140).

[31] *Ivi*, p. 85 ("*Alle Begegnung mit der Sprache der Kunst Begegnung mit einem unabgeschlossenen Geschehen und selbst ein Teil dieses Geschehens ist*. Das ist es, was gegen das ästhetische Bewußtsein und seine Neutralisierung der Wahrheitsfrage zur Geltung gebracht werden muß [*ivi*, p. 105]).

consciousness and its neutralization of the question of truth". From this perspective, Gadamer emphasizes that every picture[32] is always characterized by "contemporaneity" (*Gleichzeitigkeit*)[33], a notion inspired by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855): its authentic life is not the time when it has been created by the artist, but instead the time of the relation between the world contained by the image and the world which comes with the viewer's sight. Precisely here, when this relation is established, the picture becomes artistic.

But within this process of mediation, it is possible to recognize a significant moment of immediacy connected with the continuous process. For Gadamer, immediacy is not completely resolved in the hermeneutic mediation. In his rich examination of Platonic philosophy, Gadamer grasps the logical necessity for the soul to intuit the change which characterizes becoming, the movement of reality, precisely in the instant: since for Plato change is possible only on the level of appearance (becoming), it is necessary to hypothesize, in order not to violate the principle of non-contradiction, that on the level of the One (Being) the change takes place precisely in the instant (*exaiphnes*), understood as "non-place" and "non-time". The instant is thus activated through the foundation of the temporal *continuum* which, at the same time, limits this instant. Antonello Franco aptly articulates this: in the instant "of the change (of meaning) the soul is present: it grasps with a sudden act the change, which in fact is a change in the *sense* of the participation of the One in the genres and to the genera among them"[34]. The relational dimension of mediation in which images let us grasp the connections of meaning between different planes of reality is not logically opposed to the identification of an indestructible atemporal moment in which the genesis of that meaning takes place, which is always mediated by the consciousness of historical determination and the experience of interpretation, but it is instantaneous in bringing to consciousness the awareness of the movement, and therefore also the awareness of that same mediation. Consequently, from the gnoseological point of view, Gadamer rediscovers the Greek idea according to which the instant is the time for the conquest of awareness of truth (*aletheia*), which, as Linda Napolitano Valditara notes, "arises suddenly" and implies "the qualitative and topical time of the *kairós* (...) in which time (...) finally realizes and brings into action what is by nature possible to our competences, that is, the knowledge of

[32] Gadamer speaks of *Bild*, without explicitly distinguishing the theoretical concept of image from the artistic concrete picture, understanding the latter as an emblematic case of the former, and because the German word commonly refers to both concepts. In our research we prefer to translate *Bild* as image, following Gadamer's "unitary" legacy, but sometimes we'll use the word "picture" to stress the concrete aspect of the artistic image in the works of art.
[33] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 75 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 92).
[34] Franco, *Immagine, senso, ermeneutica*, cit., p. 74.

the truth"[35]. Immediacy is therefore rejected as the release of subjectivity from hermeneutic mediation but welcomed as a form of instantaneous (noetic) "intuition", which takes place in the hermeneutic process itself[36].

In this context, Gadamer's theory also reflects the pivotal role of Heidegger's notion of *Augenblick*, which resembles the kairological time of St Paul's theology and is mediated in his understanding by Kierkegaard's philosophy. Explaining Heidegger's notion, Michael Watts clarifies that it is "an expression of resolute *Dasein*'s sharpened sense, and authentic understanding, of the 'moment,' the pulsing heartbeat of time"[37]. In Heidegger's *Beiträge*, *Augenblick* connotes the authentic time of Being (*die Zeit des Seins*): "The eternal is not the everlasting, but rather that which can withdraw into the moment (*Augenblick*), in order once again to return. That which can return again (*wiederkehren*), not as the same (*Gleiche*), but as what transforms from the new, the one-only, being (*Seyn*), so that in this manifestness it is not at first recognized as the self-same (*Selbe*)"[38].

Gadamer tries to combine this care for the instant with the defense of mediation along a path which was also undertaken by authors in the Thomistic tradition, such as Jacques Maritain (1882-1873), according to whom intuition and discursiveness can happen together[39].

We could say that, according to Gadamer, what in the mediation process is recognized as meaning shows its "binding character in the very moment in which it appears": but this instantaneousness is immediately inserted into the experience of mediation, as an articulation of meaning in continuity[40]. Precisely because of that, it is characterized by a specific apophatic

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[35] Linda M. Napolitano Valditara, *Istante, presente ed attuale. Ipotesi per una temporalità "psichica" in Platone e Aristotele*, in Salvatore Lavecchia (ed.), *L'istante. L'esperienza dell'illocalizzabile nella filosofia di Platone*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2012, pp: 11-54: 33.

[36] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Intuition and vividness*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 157-170 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit* (1980), Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 189-205).

[37] Michael Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger*, Routledge, London-New York 2014, p. 277. See also Katharina von Falkenhayn, *Augenblick und Kairos. Zeitlichkeit im Frühwerk Martin Heideggers*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 2003.

[38] "*Time – eternity – moment*. The eternal is not the incessant; it is instead that which can withdraw in a moment so as to recur later. What can recur: not as the *identical* but as the newly transforming, the one and unique, i.e., beyng, such that it is not immediately recognized, in this manifestness, as the same!" (Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2012, p. 293; "Zeit – Ewigkeit – Augenblick. Das Ewige ist nicht das Fort-währende, sondern jenes, was im Augenblick sich entziehen kann, um erstmals wiederzukehren.Was wiederkehren kann, nicht als das Gleiche, sondern als das aufs neue Verwandelnde, Eine-Einzige, das Seyn, so daß es in dieser Offenbarkeit zunächst nicht als das Selbe erkannt wird!" [Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 371]).

[39] See Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (USA) 2020. See also Mirela Oliva, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and Thomism*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 10 (2011), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2011, pp. 97-105: 102-104.

[40] See Günter Figal *La filosofia di Gadamer. Ermeneutica come filosofia della mediazione*, in «Iride», 2, 2000, pp. 305-312: 309.

(ineffable) dimension, as William Franke explains in an interesting essay on *apophasis*: "Still this indeterminate 'it' may actually be, as Benjamin and Blanchot in different ways suggest, more immediate than any immediacy that is caught between the poles of presence and absence, more present than any presence, though the unmediated experience of it could only be madness, or perhaps the bliss of beatitude"[41].

The relation of image to the ineffable dimension is particularly constitutive of contemporary art, because in it the image manifests the "tragic speechlessness in the face of the unsayable"[42] – Gadamer here is referring to poetry, but we can extend it to visual art as well. The image in contemporary art thus mainly embodies an aporetic dimension: it expresses the indescribable through words, the ineffable through visual narration. As explained by Antonello Giugliano, "the image is therefore an appearing, which, whatever thing/object it represents and reproduces, tries to imitate that structural self-appearing, which makes it appear but which itself does not appear, remaining hidden in itself. Image is the form of the appearance of that structural self-appearance, which in itself and as such always remains unapparent, and therefore an appearance of it. (...) precisely that structural appearance is the image"[43].

The tragic beauty that emerges from this ontological process is particularly powerful in a specific group of images on which Gadamer concentrates his attention: images which do not offer a clear and didactic narration through the exhibition of clear and unambiguous contents, but which instead are "speechless". This category of image is speechless not because it has nothing to say, but because it "speeches" in a speechless way. Gadamer explains this more precisely, also referring to etymology: "In German the word *Stumm* (mute) is connected with the word *stammeln* (to stutter or stammer). Surely the distress of the stutterer does not lie in the fact that he has nothing to say. Rather, he wants to say too much at once and is unable to find the words to express the pressing wealth of things he has on his mind. (…) When we are at a loss for words in this way, what we want to say is actually brought especially close to us as

[41] William Franke, *Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology*, in «International Journal for Philosophy of Religion», dec. 2006, vol. 60, n. 1/3, pp. 61-76: 66. An interpretation of the notion of image through the concept of "absence" has been proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy (see in particular his *The Ground of the Image*, trans. by Jeff Fort, Fordham University Press, New York 2005).

[42] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 3-53: 9 ("von dem tragischen Verstummen im Usagbaren" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 94-142: 100]).

[43] Antonello Giugliano, *Imago-Imitago. Note filosofiche sullo status storico e metafisico del concetto di immagine (Warburg, Benjamin, Heidegger, Nancy)*, cit., p. 237.

something for which we have to seek new words"[44]. The richest images can thus refer to a huge number of meanings which cannot be restricted to a unique message because they are fragments referring to the Whole (*Ganzheit*), the ideal dimension of the essence of it. Images, indeed, can support the foundation of an aesthetics of images which should be aware of their pluralistic and dynamic dimension: according to Davey, in Gadamer, "as meaningful, the image will embody a fusion or application of the ideational and the sensual. As an aesthetic image, its meaning will be unstable: it cannot be reduced to a rational idea or concept. Yet the instability of incommensurability guarantees that any attempt to elaborate the meaning of the image will extend or change its meaning and, in turn, facilitate movement in the understanding of the spectator. The case for a hermeneutic approach to aesthetics entails a subtle but important shift of approach to the aesthetic image"[45].

According to Gadamer, modern still-life pictures are a clear example of this speechless genre of images predominant in contemporary art.

For Gadamer, the Avantgarde does not express, as many other scholars hypothesize, a subjectivist view, i.e., the pure interiority of the artist, but rather the dynamic and metamorphic quality of the nature, with its constant symbolic reminder to the ineffable Origin: "Like the crystal, it has its own timeless necessity: folds of being itself, eroded lines, runes in which time come to a standstill"[46]. This view of an autonomous manifestation of an enigmatic meaning within the artistic images and outside the rational and voluntaristic control of the artist – who actually "stands before the creation of his hand in just the same way that anyone else does"[47], being the artistic image, once visible and concrete, an autonomous fragment of existence – finds confirmation in the artistic works of both Nitsch and Kiefer, where the event of art is defined precisely according to the approach which Gadamer has perfectly synthetized as the conclusion of his reflections on the "speechless image": "The modern artist is less a creator than a discoverer of the as yet unseen, the inventor of the previously unimagined that only emerges

[44] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The speechless image*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 83-91: 83 ("Das Wort 'stumm' hängt mit dem anderen Wort 'stammeln' zusammen, und die ergreifende Not des Stammelns besteht ja wahrlich nicht darin, daß der Stammelnde nichts zu sagen hätte, vielmehr darin, daß er viel, ja zu viel auf einmal sagen möchte und die Worte nicht findet angesichts der drängenden Fülle dessen, was zu sagen wäre. Im Verstummen wird uns das zu Sagende nahegerückt, als etwas, für das wir nach neuen Worten auf der Suche sind" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Vom Verstummen des Bildes* (1965), in Id. *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 315-322: 315]).

[45] See Nicholas Davey, *Unfinished Worlds. Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2013, p. 35.

[46] Gadamer, *The speechless image*, cit., p. 91 ("Es ist in sich notwendig und wie von jeher da, wie der Kristall: Falten, die das Sein wirft, Verwitterungen, Runzeln und Runen, in denen Zeit zur Dauer wird" [Gadamer, *Vom Verstummen des Bildes* (1965), cit., p. 322]).

[47] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 33 ("steht in Wahrheit vor dem Gebilde seiner Hände nicht anders als jeder andere" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 124]).

into reality though him"[48]. To adopt Mitchell's famous expression, we should reflect not on the meaning and fixed characteristics of images, but instead directly ask them "what do pictures want?", inviting the images to autonomously express what they desire to communicate in their cultural migrations through the different pictures[49]. An art interested in letting images be free to manifest themselves and their necessities should thus be opened to the autonomous transmutation of artworks, which Anselm Kiefer claimed to be one of his aesthetic principles and which Hermann Nitsch practiced in the acceptance of blood and organic evolutions within his own creations.

What pictures want is expressed through what images present. In order to understand images, fundamental for Gadamer is the concept of presentation (*Darstellung*) – a placing (*Stellung*) there (*da*): the reproductive dimension of image is neither a mere copy (*Abbild*) nor an illustration (*Abbildung*), but rather the manifestation of the living relationship between the reproductive and the reproduced, which stands in an internal dialectic within the image itself[50]. In the image we experiment the "non-differentiation of presentation and what is represented". Thus "the irreplaceability of the pictures, its fragility, its 'sacredness' are all explained in the ontology of the picture here presented. Even the sacralization of 'art' in the nineteenth

[48] Gadamer, *The speechless image*, cit., p. 91 ("Der moderne Künstler ist weit weniger Schöpfer als Entdecker von Ungesehenem, ja Erfinder von noch nie Dagewesenem, das wie durch ihn hindurch einrückt in die Wirklichkeit des Seins" [Gadamer, *Vom Verstummen des Bildes* (1965), cit., p. 322]).

[49] See W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want?*, The University of Chicago, Chicago 2015. It is however to be underlined that the ontology supporting Mitchell's theory is based on different basis than the Gadamerian one: it is fundamental a materialistic and historic-social ontology, where visual culture is understood as a vector of social construction.

[50] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 133 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 142). "Naturally mimesis here has nothing to do with the mere imitation of something that is already familiar to us. Rather, it implies that something is represented in such a way that it is actually present in sensuous abundance. In its original Greek sense, the *mimesis* is derived from the star-dance of the heavens. The stars represent the pure mathematical regularities and proportions that constitute the heavenly order. In this sense I believe the tradition is justified in saying that 'art is always mimesis,' that is, it represents something" (Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 36) ("Mimesis heißt hier freilich nicht, etwas schon Vorbekanntes nachahmen, sondern etwas zur Darstellung bringen, so daß es auf diese Weise in sinnlicher Fülle gegenwärtig ist. Der antike Gebrauch dieses Wortes ist von dem Sternentanz her gewählt. Die Sterne sind die Darstellung der reinen mathematischen Gesetzlichkeiten und Proportionen, die die Ordnung des Himmels ausmachen. In diesem Sinne hat die Tradition, glaube ich, recht, wenn sie sagt: Kunst ist immer Mimesis, d.h., sie bringt etwas zur Darstellung" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 126-127]). In this reevaluation of *mimesis* as a natural human instinct towards the recognition of meaning (and as pleasure in it), Gadamer is deeply influenced by Aristotle. A contemporary attempt to rephrase the relation between representation and presentation outside the classical Western ontology of the image in the visual culture has been developed by Anders Michelsen (see his essay *Nothing has Meaning outside Discourse? On the Creative Dimension of Visuality*, cit., especially pp. 95-103).

century"[51]. Presentation (*Darstellung*) can also be defined as representation (*Repräsentation*)[52], a term which refers to the idea of "replacement", like when someone "represents" another person. The model of "mirror image" (*Spiegelbild*) is thus not an efficient metaphor to describe the ontology of image according to Gadamer's theory: "The mirror image is a mere appearance – i.e., it has no real being and is understood in its fleeting existence as something that depends on being reflected. But the picture (*Bild*) has its own being. This being as presentation, as precisely that in which it is not the same as what is represented"[53]. Gadamer's critique of the symbolization of image as mirror explicitly refers to that risk of mimetic reductionism which we have already noticed in discussing the Platonic tradition. However, in our opinion, there is a still more articulated hermeneutic interpretation of the notion of "mirror image" which we would like to present at this stage to extend Gadamer's reflection. The coexistence in the "mirror image" itself of two very different interpretative keys – Gadamer's comprehension of mirror as mere copy of something, from one side, and the mirror image understood as ontological increase of reality, as we shall discuss, from the other side – has been thematized by the Italian philosopher Andrea Tagliapietra. According to him[54], the image of the mirror includes in fact two possible developments, or consequences: 1) the duplication of the world 2) the transformation of the viewer into the object of the vision. If the first event remains within the imitative process, because it implies that the watcher sees in the mirror the reflected image of the real object (on the basis of the principle of resemblance) and is coherent with the Platonic distinction between the intelligible truth of an object and its mere appearance, then the second condition represents an advancement towards an increasement of reality: the watcher is included in the mirror and appears as something which without the mirror would not be at all

[51] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 134 ("Die Unersetzbarkeit des Bildes, seine Verletzlichkeit, seine 'Heiligkeit' findet, wie ich meine, ihre angemessene Begründung in der dargelegten Ontologie des Bildes. Noch die Sakralisierung der 'Kunst' im 19. Jahrhundert, die wir geschildert haben, lebt aus diesem Grunde" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 144]).

[52] *Ivi*, p. 136 (*ivi*, pp. 145-146). See also Id., *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., pp. 34-35 (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 125-126).

[53] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 135 ("Das Spiegelbild ist eben ein bloßer Schein, d.h. es hat kein wirkliches Sein und wird in seiner flüchtigen Existenz als abhängig von der Spiegelung verstanden. Wohl aber hat das Bild im ästhetischen Sinne des Wortes ein eigenes Sein. Dies sein Sein als Darstellung, also gerade das, worin es mit dem Abgebildeten nicht dasselbe ist, gibt ihm gegenüber dem bloßen Abbild die positive Auszeichnung, ein Bild zu sein" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 144). But, according to Merleau Ponty, this idea is precisely the modern and Cartesian interpretation of the mirror image: "A Cartesian does not see *himself* in the mirror; he sees a dummy, an 'outside,' which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way, but which is no more for himself than for others, is not a body in the flesh. His 'image' in the mirror is an effect of the mechanics of things. (…) The mirror image is in nothing that belongs to him. Icons lose their powers" (Merlau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, cit., p. 170).

[54] See Andrea Tagliapietra, *Lo specchio e l'enigma dell'immagine*, in Andrea Tagliapietra, Caterina Piccone, Erminio Maglione and Giordano Ghirelli (eds.), *Storie dell'idea di immagine. Dalla filosofia antica all'arte contemporanea*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2022, pp. 21-39: 24-26.

recognized. These are two possible interpretations and experiences of the same factual relation, depending on the perspectives and the interpretative attitude of the watcher.

The second possibility, which consists in a symbolical understanding of the *Spiegelbild*, is the "acknowledgment" explains Tagliapietra "that the image, somehow, is 'me'"[55], which also means that "myself" is not only my static anthropology, but instead an expanding identity which can increase in a kind of "analog 'I'"[56] – the one reflected in the mirror –, and which cannot be considered just a copy of me, but rather an expansion of my ontology. In the mirror, human externality realizes itself, transitioning from psychological interiority to bodily concreteness[57]. This process, which plays a relevant role in the psychological construction of human consciousness, also works as metaphor of the theoretical and anthropological function of images per se: their role in human perception defines men as "symbolic animals"[58], as long as through the images we "acquire awareness and consciousness of ourselves"; but that can happen "only by passing through otherness, that is by projecting ourselves and recognizing ourselves in what *we are not*, but which, consequently, *however we are*"[59]. Our objectification happens through the recognition that the image on which our identity is based is always something else from it, but that without this otherness our identity would be incomplete. It is precisely in this aporetic dimension that we recognize the transitive essence of image, which becomes a contribution to the ontological complexity of reality. Moreover, it is not only the viewer recognizing himself as an extended creature *in* and *through* the mirror, but also the depicted object of the picture that is looking at the watcher, interrogating him with its own peculiar gaze, which thus acquires an active and subjective trajectory. Therefore, we need to explain images because we are directly engaged by them. In the picture, subject and object are thus constitutively inter-exchangeable: as profoundly explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose aesthetics, much more than the Gadamerian, underlines the role of flesh within the perceptive

[55] *Ivi*, p. 27.

[56] The expression derives from Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2000.

[57] "The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body's 'invisibility' can invest the other bodies I see (…). The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself" (Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, cit., p. 168).

[58] See Tagliapietra, *Lo specchio e l'enigma dell'immagine*, cit., pp. 28-29. The expression was however coined by the German neo-kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), who defines man as "*animal symbolicum*", underlining that the comprehension of human nature should be based on the study of the symbolic way in which humans relate themselves to the concrete life and to the cultural activities in which their praxis takes place. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 volumes, trans. by Steve G. Lofts, Routledge, London-New York 2021.

[59] See Tagliapietra, *Lo specchio e l'enigma dell'immagine*, cit., p. 29. Similarly the metaphysical thinker Henry Corbin has written: "The *Imago* is the form in which both the *one* and the *other* integrally manifest themselves. This privileged imaginal form can also be called *tautegorical*" (Henry Corbin, *The Imago Templi in Confrontation with Secular Norms*, in Id., *Temple and Contemplation*, KPI, London 1986, pp. 263-390: 308).

experience, "vision is a mirror or concentration of the universe (…) the *idios kosmos* opens by virtue of vision upon a *koinos kosmos*; in short, that the same thing is both out there in the world and here at the heart of vision – the same or, if one prefers, a *similar* thing, but according to an efficacious similarity which is the parent, the genesis, the metamorphosis of Being in his vision. It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze"[60].
Gadamer situates his conception precisely in a similar theoretical path, and the "mirror image", despite the German philosopher's explicit criticism towards this metaphor, could, in our opinion, be subsumed under the legacy of the symbolic image and fruitfully adopted in order to comprehend the core of his conception.

Between the original and the artistic image there is thus a biunivocal (neither one-sided nor deterministic) relation: the image shows something more than the original itself, and the original is showed precisely thanks to the presentation of the image, in that "ontological event (*Seinsvorgang*)"[61] which is the main determination of the image itself. Without the event of the image, we could not even speak of the concept of image. In fact, the image happens (more than merely "being present") when the original is presented in an historical manifestation and with an aesthetic form *to someone*. Without the relation between subject and object in the artistic event of the sight of the image (where the image is simultaneously object and subject of the sight), which depends on a specific call to the viewer coming from the ontology of the image, the image itself is incomplete. Going back to the "mirror image": only when we understand ourselves as also existing on the ontological level of the mirror, the image of ourselves acquires an ontological consistence, which subsequently influences our own previous identity. The image thus paradoxically also affects the original: it is through the image that the represented becomes really itself. But "only the *religious* picture [*Bild*: also, image] displays the full ontological power of the picture. (…) In it we can see without any doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied. It is clear from this example that art, as a whole and in a universal sense, increases the picturability of being. Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is"[62]. Why is there an increase in the ontological dimension of the image?

[60] Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, cit., p. 166.
[61] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 135 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 145).
[62] *Ivi*, p. 137 ("Läßt aber das *religiöse* Bild die eigentliche Seinsmacht des Bildes erst voll hervortreten. […] An ihm wird zweifelsfrei klar, daß das Bild nicht Abbild eines abgebildeten Seins ist, sondern mit dem Abgebildeten seinsmäßig kommuniziert. Von seinem Beispiel her wird einsichtig, daß die Kunst überhaupt und in einem universellen Sinne dem Sein einen Zuwachs an Bildhaftigkeit einbringt. Wort und Bild sind nicht bloße

What is the difference between a religious image and an advertisement? Our research over the ensuing chapters will answer these questions by bringing into relief the deep connection between the notions of myth and sacred and Gadamer's comprehension of the world of images and symbols. For now, however, given that the holiness of images does not primarily depend on their specific contents or topics, but instead on their symbolical nature, it bears clarifying that every image which reflects the nature of the human being as "*animal symbolicum*" harbors a specific holy dimension, as Gadamer writes: "A work of art always has something sacred about it"[63].

The essence of the image is thus very specific: it "is situated, as it were, halfway between two extremes: these extremes of representation are pure indication (*Verweisung*: also, reference), which is the essence of the sign, and pure substitution (*Vertreten*), which is the essence of the symbol"[64]. Its dimension of indication or reference is always connected to an interior content: "emphasized, its ontological valence consists in not being absolutely different from what it represents but sharing in its being. We saw that what is represented comes into its own in the picture. It experiences an increase in being[65]. But that means it is there in the picture itself"[66]. In this respect, image is also comparable to word, understood not merely as a sign, but as an element of the manifestation of the truth of the world, as a stratification and embodiment of its manifested nature[67]. Images and words have their own peculiarities, but their relation can be

nachfolgende Illustrationen, sondern lassen das, was sie darstellen, damit erst ganz sein, was es ist" [*ivi*, pp. 147-148]).

[63] See *ivi*, pp. 143-144 ("Ein Kunstwerk hat immer etwas Sakrales an sich" [*ivi*, p. 155]).

[64] *Ivi*, p. 145 ("Das Wesen des Bildes steht gleichsam zwischen zwei Extremen in der Mitte. Diese Extreme von Darstellung sind das *reine Verweisen* – das Wesen des Zeichens – und das *reine Vertreten* – das Wesen des Symbols" [*ivi*, p. 157]). The German original text carries *Verweisen* (not *Verweisung*).

[65] This creative and formative power of images allows us to find a connection between the concept of *Bild* and the idea of *Bildung* as "cultivation" (*ivi*, pp. 8-17) (*ivi*, pp. 15-24).

[66] *Ivi*, p. 146 ("Das macht jene Seinsvalenz aus, die wir betonten, daß es von dem, was er darstellt, nicht schlechthin geschieden ist, sondern an dessen Sein teilhat. Wir sahen, das Dargestellte kommt im Bilde zu sich selbst. Es erfährt einen Seinzuwachs" [*ivi*, p. 158]).

[67] On the relation between image and word, see Gottfried Boehm and Helmut Pfotenhauer (eds.), *Beschreibungskunst – Kunstbeschreibung. Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1995 (especially: Gottfried Boehm, *Bildbeschreibung. Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache*, in *ivi*, pp. 23-40; and Emil Angehrn, *Beschreibung zwischen Abbild und Schöpfung*, in *ivi*, pp. 59-74 – Angehrn also interestingly relates the deconstruction of the mimetic interpretation of images with the refusal of the notion of original per se [*an sich*], interpreting image as an aporetic representational instance) and Gurisatti, *Ritrarre è tradurre – Tradurre è ritrarre*, cit., pp. 59-66. Gadamer also analyses this relation showing that in philosophical hermeneutics the word is, like the image, a dynamic and productive pole of reality, not a mere description of a reified object: "Every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 454) ("Es gibt noch

grasped through a model of mutual translation, a model which the authors of the "iconic turn" repeatedly underscore, evoking the necessity of a contemporary education oriented towards the "grammar" of images. In this respect, the Gadamerian concept of image can be defined as a morphological notion that is associable with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) *Gestaltlehre* and the fundamental phenomenology of forms which has deeply influenced modern German aesthetics[68]. For Goethe, metamorphosis means a description of the becoming of forms, but it also means research into the unity of that becoming, highlighting the hidden affinity between the different parts and manifestations of reality: the inner, temporal development of nature manifests itself in the continuity of the appearance of its forms[69]. For Gadamer as well, images, as they are taken up in the hermeneutic process of thinking, are fundamental not only to grasping the meaning of reality, but also to shaping reality itself: if we take into account the equivalence between image and word often proposed by Gadamer, and if we remember the ontological primacy of language in his philosophical system, then we can derive that images also create the "habitat" for human existence and for the human comprehension of reality. In thinking through images, we are appropriating of our world and existence.

As "showing", Being discloses itself in images, because they represent its dynamic and processual essence in the intersubjective and participatory ontology of art, where symbolic images contribute to the actualization of reality. In contrast to the Western tradition of image as appearance – or as copy of the real –, Gadamer ascribes to images a constructive and formative role: the likeness of images to the original is not a mere copy, but rather the participatory analogy between different levels of reality[70].

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eine andere Dialektik des Wortes, die einem jeden Wort eine innere Dimension der Vielfachung zuordnet: Ein jedes Wort bricht wie aus einer Mitte hervor und hat Bezug auf ein Ganzes, durch das es allein Wort ist. Ein jedes Wort läßt das Ganze der Sprache, der es angehört, antönen und das Ganze der Weltansicht, die ihm zugrundeliegt, erscheinen. Ein jedes Wort läßt daher auch, als das Geschehen seines Augenblicks, das Ungesagte mit da sein, auf das es sich antwortend und winkend bezieht. Die Okkasionalität der menschlichen Rede ist nicht eine gelegentliche Unvollkommenheit ihrer Aussagekraft – sie ist vielmehr der logische Ausdruck der lebendigen Virtualität des Redens, das ein Ganzes von Sinn, ohne es ganz sagen zu können, ins Spiel bringt. Alles menschliche Sprechen ist in der Weise endlich, daß eine Unendlichkeit des auszufaltenden und auszulegenden Sinnes in ihm angelegt ist" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 462]). In a complementary way Mitchell challenges the presumed "pureness" of the image trough the synthetic notion of "imagetext": it means more than a general comparison of images and texts, it underlines the constitutive interlacement of them, in the different media (see *Picture Theory*, cit., and *Image Science*, cit.).

[68] See Olaf Breidbach*, Goethes Metamorphosenlehre*, Wilhelm Fink, München 2006.

[69] See "Morphology", in Federico Vercellone and Salvatore Tedesco (eds.), *Glossary of Morphology*, Springer, Cham 2020, pp. 337-345. See also "Natura e 'forma originante' in Goethe", in Giovanni Sessa, *Icone del Possibile. Giardino, bosco, montagna*, OAKS, Sesto San Giovanni 2023, pp. 87-94.

[70] See Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., pp. 116-136.

As a consequence of this presentation of Gadamerian ontology of image, we can conclude that artistic image is a fundamental concept for analyzing artworks and understanding their cultural and philosophical value in a hermeneutical perspective. The "reproductive" dimension is, in fact, the fundamental feature which directly connects art as a field and image as a concept: as Gadamer explains, "we saw that 'reproduction' is the original mode of being of the original artwork itself. Now we have confirmed that painting and the plastic arts generally have, ontologically speaking, the same mode of being. The specific mode of the work of art's presence is the coming-to-presentation of being"[71]. In pictures, sculptures, and architecture, the symbolic dimension of presentation and reproduction is based not only on functional, cultural, and sociological determinations, but on the specific characteristics of the artwork itself, and hence, we may conclude, on its image. The picture eventfully manifests the truth of itself.
Furthermore, the meaning of an artistic image goes beyond the intention of the author. Gadamer explains this in terms of analyzing text, but we can compare his reflection to the case of images: "Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well"[72].

2.1.2 The Cosmos of Images: Symbols, Signs, Allegories

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, the philosophical constellation of nuances connected to the concept of image is variegated and not always theoretically determined from a definitory and assertive perspective. In coherence with his overall hermeneutical approach, Gadamer seems to pragmatically adopt some notions without introducing specific pre-definitions, inserting them into the hermeneutic circle and seeking to philosophically grasp how they pragmatically "work"

[71] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 152 ("Hatten wir den ontologischen Sinn von Darstellung darin gesehen, daß 'Reproduktion' die ursprüngliche Seinsweise der originalen Kunst selbst ist. Jetzt hat sich bestätigt, daß auch das Bild und die statuarischen Künste insgesamt ontologisch gesehen von der gleichen Seinsart sind. Die spezifische Präsenz des Kunstwerks ist ein Zur-Darstellung-Kommen des Seins" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 165]).
[72] *Ivi*, p. 296 ("Nicht nur gelegentlich, sondern immer übertrifft der Sinn eines Textes seinen Autor. Daher ist Verstehen kein nur reproduktives, sondern stets auch ein produktives Verhalten" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 301]). And he adds: "Perhaps it is not correct to refer to this productive element in understanding as 'better understanding.' For this phrase is, as we have shown, a principle of criticism taken from the Enlightenment and revised on the basis of the aesthetics of genius. Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, if we understand at all" (*ibidem*) ("Es ist vielleicht nicht richtig, für diese produktive Moment, das im Verstehen liegt, von Besserverstehen zu reden. Denn diese Formel ist, wie wir gezeigt haben, die Umsetzung eines Grundsatzes der Sachkritik aus dem Zeitalter der Aufklärung auf die Basis der Genieästhetik. Verstehen ist in Wahrheit kein Besserverstehen, weder im Sinne des sachlichen Besserwissens durch deutlichere Begriffe, noch im Sinne der grundsätzlichen Überlegenheit, die das Bewußte über das Unbewußte der Produktion besitzt. Es genügt zu sagen, daß man *anders* versteht, *wenn man überhaupt versteht*" [*ivi*, pp. 301-302]).

and which speculative effects they might provoke in the stream of thinking. In Gadamer's philosophical comprehension, there is no radical dualistic distinction between theory and practice: concepts are understood as "hermeneutical tools" for enhancing philosophical conversations and creatively acquiring determinate philosophical positions on specific topics. It is, however, important to highlight that despite some linguistic shifts, which can be recognised throughout Gadamer's incredibly broad philosophical production[73], the theoretical comprehension of the meaning of the image, as we have already shown, is broadly developed and profound. Therefore, it is possible to work on a conceptual segmentation of the main notions which Gadamer has discussed in relation to images. Thematizing in particular three of them – the notions of symbol, allegory and sign –, we will eventually notice that Gadamer's main concern pertains to the hitherto established reduction of image to the mimetic dimension and the thematization of its internal, multifaceted dimension, in order to detect the heuristic, creative, and cognitive role of images. Aesthetics, in fact, according to Gadamer, "*has to be absorbed into hermeneutics*"[74], which means that the sensible function commonly related to images – perception – has to be absorbed into knowledge, into the kind of wisdom which is usually associated with intellectual storage. This kind of hermeneutical aesthetics (or aesthetical hermeneutics) is thus based on a discursive determination[75] and needs to be structurally understood outside any ultimate definition. Instead, as explained by Cynthia R. Nielsen, it is the artistic "dynamic communicative event that speaks to and challenges our self- and world-understanding", favoring the increasing of knowledge: "Hermeneutical aesthetics, like hermeneutical movement, is symphonic, polyphonic, syncopated, and improvisational"[76]. Images, as the domain of the visual, are the engine of this movement of comprehension. In this perspective, it is important to consider these concepts in order to better understand which kind

[73] Gadamer's *Gesamtausgabe*, published by Mohr Siebeck, is constituted by 10 volumes, for an amount of around 4.500 pages.

[74] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 157 ("*Die Ästhetik muß in der Hermeneutik aufgehen*" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 170]). It is needless to underline the theoretical relevance of the verb *aufgehen* in Western philosophical tradition. On this topic see Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., pp. 22-26.

[75] "*All* images have a discursive aspect, at least insofar as we attempt to consider them cognitively or (especially) to communicate our cognition to another person. And to consider an image cognitively, to engage in discourse about it (…) is to textualize it" (John T. Kirby, *Classical Greek Origins of Western Aesthetic Theory*, in Beate Allert (ed.), *Languages of Visuality. Crossing Between Science, Art, Politics, and Literature*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1996, pp. 29-45: 36). And, according to Gottfried Boehm, "when the iconic is invoked, it never implies a withdrawal from language, but rather that a difference vis à vis language comes into play. The image is as far from innocent or immediate as is the eye; instead, it is multifariously connected to the contexts of thought, sex, culture, ideology, and speech – which of course does not mean that it could ever simply be deduced from these contexts" (Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell, *Pictorial versus IconicTurn: Two Letters*, in «Culture, Theory & Critique», 2009, 50 (2-3), pp. 103-121: 107).

[76] Cynthia R. Nielsen, *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics. Art as a performative, dynamic, communal event*, Routledge, London-New York 2023, p. 26.

of images Gadamer is interested in, and how a symbolic image – the most productive one, from a hermeneutical point of view – should be depicted and understood.

The relation between image and symbol is underscored in the German language by the words' etymology: symbol (*Sinnbild*) is a specific type of image (*Bild*), and it shares with it the quality of presentation (*Darstellung*). However, any exhaustive definition of symbol appears extremely problematic in view of the astonishingly rich and ample tradition of philosophical reflections on this notion, with so many connections with literature, theology, and art, and Gadamer seems to admit that his theory needs to take into account this traditional stock and find a theoretical trajectory which could define symbol by reassembling different views on it – a cultural mission which we can also recognize in the artistic work of Anselm Kiefer, where the reorganization of fragments and ruins contains a powerful, symbolic, expressive language.

Gadamer defines symbol as "something" which "enables one to recognize something else (…) a symbol is something which has value not only because of its content, but because it can be 'produced' (…) in every case the meaning of the symbol depends on its physical presence and acquires a representational function only by being shown or spoken"[77]. The symbol refers to a content which is present in itself. This determination is shared with the image and distinguishes it from the sign (*Zeichen*): "A symbol not only points to something; it represents it by taking its place. But to take the place of something means to make something present that is not present. Thus, in representing, the symbol takes the place of something: that is, it makes something immediately present"[78]. This means that the symbol's meaning is based on its concrete presence: the meaning to which it refers is part of itself. As Gadamer points out, "the significance of the symbol and the symbolic lay in this paradoxical kind of reference that embodies and even vouchsafes its meaning. Art is only encountered in a form that resists pure conceptualization"[79]. Unlike image, however, symbol does not necessarily cause an increase of being: it basically presents its already existing content as it is – and the symbolical being of

[77] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 63 ("Ist es das, woran man etwas anderes erkennt […]. Offenbar heißt 'Symbol', was nicht durch seinen Inhalt allein, sondern durch seine Vorzeigbarkeit gilt […] in jedem Falle beruht die Bedeutung des *Symbolon* auf seiner Präsenz und gewinnt durch die Gegenwart seines Gezeigt- oder Gesagtwerdens erst seine repräsentierende Funktion" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 78]).
[78] *Ivi*, p. 147 (["Ein Symbol also verweist nicht nur, sondern es stellt dar, indem es vertritt. Vertreten aber heißt, etwas gegenwärtig sein lassen, was nicht anwesend ist. So vertritt das Symbol, indem es repräsentiert, das heißt, etwas unmittelbar gegenwärtig sein läßt" [*ivi*, p. 159]).
[79] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 37 ("Das war der Sinn von 'Symbol' und 'symbolisch', daß hier eine paradoxe Art von Verweisung erfolgt, die die Bedeutung, auf die es verweist, zugleich in sich selber verkörpert und sogar verbürgt. Nur in dieser gegen das pure Begreifen widerständigen Form begegnet Kunst" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 128]).

symbols is part of this content, that is of their way of being. Despite this, Gadamer explains, the symbol allows recognition: something in it is recognized and the symbolic art helps men to find themselves, to find their own place (*heimisch werden*)[80]. This cognitive function is part of Gadamer's typical idea of artistic images: as we have already mentioned, they are not mere description of things, but functions of knowledge. As expressed by Fehér, commenting on Gadamer's hermeneutics: "It is not only that in recognition there is a knowing, much more the other way round: every knowing which is worthy of this name is recognition. Through it, 'more is known (...) than just what is known'. This hermeneutic conception of knowing (…) implies that only what was previously known can actually be recognized"[81]. Because of this function, the symbol plays a fundamental role in the hermeneutic circle, in which man always stands in a middle position between familiarity and strangeness towards the historical determination and the act of comprehension.

The exhibition of a symbol, according to Gadamer, depends on an "institution" (*Stiftung*) which recognizes and states this value of connection[82] as the origin of the determination of the symbolical value. This process – which is a "task that we must take upon ourselves"[83], not a condition of things –, is also necessarily characteristic of sign and encourages a comprehension of symbol outside any objectified view: being a process, the symbol upholds a performative character, it structurally produces the event of showing reality in an increased mode.

The notion of symbol also has a significant metaphysical and theological background that is stronger than what we can see in the case of allegorism (which, from an historical point of view, is dependent on its use in Christian Neoplatonism[84]) and which relates to its *anagogic* function: through symbols, according to Gadamer, "it is possible to be led beyond the sensible to the divine. For the world of the senses is not mere nothingness and darkness but the outflowing and reflection of truth. The modern concept of symbol cannot be understood apart from this gnostic function and its metaphysical background. The only reason that the word 'symbol' can be raised from its original usage (as a document, sign, or pass) to the philosophical idea of a mysterious

[80] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, pp. 140-153: 150-151 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 143-155: 152-53).
[81] István M. Fehér, *"Das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee". Gadamer und Hegel – Zwei Arten einer Metaphysik der Schönen*, in Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert et al. (eds.), *Hegels Ästhetik als Theorie der Moderne*, Akademie Verlag, München 2013, pp. 223-246: 231.
[82] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 148 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 159).
[83] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 47 ("eine Aufgabe des Aufbaus" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 138]).
[84] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 63 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 79).

sign, and thus become similar to a hieroglyph interpretable only by an initiate, is that the symbol is not an arbitrarily chosen or created sign, but presupposes a metaphysical connection between visible and invisible"[85]. Bearing this in mind, the German philosopher states: "The religious form of the symbol corresponds exactly to the original nature of 'symbolon,' the dividing of what is one and reuniting it again"[86]. Its sacred dimension, apart from the specific reference, is structurally present in the symbol itself, as Gadamer openly states: "In the case of the symbol (…), the particular represents itself as a fragment of being that promises to complete and make whole whatever corresponds to it. Or, indeed, the symbol is that other fragment that has always been sought in order to complete and make whole our own fragmentary life. The 'meaning' of art in this sense does not seem to me to be tied to special social conditions as was the meaning given to art in the later bourgeois religion of culture. On the contrary, the experience of the beautiful, and particularly the beautiful in art, is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found"[87]. This function can be broadly recognized in both Nitsch's and Kiefer's works of art. "The symbol is the coincidence of the sensible and the non-sensible; allegory the meaningful relation of the sensible to the non-sensible"[88]. Thus, the symbol appears as inexhaustible, because its indefinite interpretability contrasts that of allegory, which has a more precise reference to a meaning and is exhausted in such. It is precisely the indeterminacy of its meaning that led to the ascendance of the notion of the symbolic when the

[85] *Ivi*, p. 64 ("Es ist möglich, vom Sinnlichen aus zum Göttlichen hinaufgeführt zu werden. Denn das Sinnliche ist nicht bloße Nichtigkeit und Finsternis, sondern Ausfluß und Abglanz des Wahren. Der modern Symbolbegriffe ist ohne diese seine gnostische Funktion und ihren metaphysischen Hintergrund gar nicht zu verstehen. Das Wort 'Symbol' kann von seiner ursprünglichen Verwendung als Dokument, Erkennungszeichen, Ausweis nur deshalb zum philosophischen Begriff eines geheimnisvollen Zeichens gesteigert werden und damit in die Nähe der Hieroglyphe geraten, deren Enträtselung nur dem Eingeweihten gelingt, weil das Symbol keine beliebige Zeichennahme oder Zeichenstiftung ist, sondern einen metaphysischen Zusammenhang von Sichtbarem und Unsichtbarem voraussetzt" [*ibidem*]). Also Merleau Ponty pointed out in an aesthetic context the pivotal role of "the invisible *of* this world", which "inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible", to the extent that it is "the Being of this being" – the "cosmological" chiasm between visible and invisible is thus fundamental: the visible world appears in union with an invisibility which is the depth of the visible (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University, Evanston 1968, p. 151).

[86] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 67 ("Die religiöse Form des Symbols entspricht damit genau der ursprünglichen Bestimmung von *Symbolon*, Teilung des Einen und Wiederergänzung aus der Zweiheit zu sein" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 84]).

[87] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 32 ("Das Symbol dagegen […] daß sich dies Einzelne, Besondere wie ein Seinsbruchstück darstellt, das ein ihm Entsprechendes zum Heilen und Ganzen zu ergänzen verheißt, oder auch, daß es das zum Ganzen ergänzende, immer gesuchte andere Bruchstück zu unserem Lebensfragment ist. Diese 'Bedeutung' der Kunst scheint mir nicht, wie die der spätbürgerlichen Bildungsreligion, an gesellschaftliche Sonderbindungen gebunden, sondern die Erfahrung des Schönen, und insbesondere des Schönen im Sinne der Kunst, ist die Beschwörung einer möglichen heilen Ordnung, wo immer es sei" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 123]).

[88] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 64 ("Das Symbol ist der Zusammenfall des Sinnlichen und Unsinnlichen, die Allegorie der bedeutungsvolle Bezug des Sinnlichen auf das Unsinnliche" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 80]).

rationalist aesthetics of the Age of Enlightenment succumbed to critical philosophy and to the aesthetics of genius, giving rise to the historical opposition between symbol, considered in the terms discussed above, and allegory, understood as a univocal and determined relation between a word/image and something outside it[89].

We can thus deduce – although Gadamer does not directly define such – that the symbolic is a particularly significant type of image: this kind of image has a particular "ultra-physics"[90] and acquires a vibrant life in an exemplary dialectic between the particular and the universal. As image, it represents and it causes an increase of being, while as symbol it stands for the whole of being amidst a sort of apophatic horizons. This notion, which is a relevant expression of "negative theology", is typical in the Neoplatonic tradition and refers to the incommensurable quality of the original principle, often described as "the One", which is a "not founded fundament" – not founded not because it is without reason or basis, and yet fundamental because no other issue can be considered capable of having founded it[91]. As explained by William Franke: "If the One is to ground all that is, it must *not* be, not at least in the way of being that can be known from the things which are – otherwise its own being would itself have to be grounded. Nothing *within* the set of existing beings can furnish a support from outside for the non-self-sustaining nature of beings"[92]. Thus, it is ineffable, and yet it is not even ineffable, because it is not anything at all. In this sense, symbolic images can be understood as a sensible hypostasis of the One: their compelling form and materiality, as well as their actual presence, also involve a dimension exceeding the images themselves. And this "Beyond" is precisely the

[89] According to Gadamer, Goethe, Moritz (1756-1793), Schelling (1775-1854) and Solger (1780-1819) are in particular forerunners of this conception opposing symbol and allegory (see *ivi*, pp. 66-67) (*ivi*, pp. 81-83), while "Hegel limits the term 'symbolic' to the symbolic art of the East because of this disproportion of image and meaning" (*ivi*, p. 68) (*ivi*, pp. 84-85).

[90] This is a notion adopted by Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) in his text *Die Schere* (Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2021) as an attempt to elaborate a post-metaphysical ontological approach, where transcendence is considered as an immanent power: a physics in which the "analytical spectrum" moves from the visible to the invisible and vice versa, without stopping in a fixed dogmatic domain.

[91] The concept could be fruitfully compared to Jakob Böhme's (1575-1624) notion of *Ungrund* (the Without-Ground), Nietzsche's *Abgrund* (the Abyss) or Heidegger's *Bodenlose* (the Bottom-less). According to Douglas Hedley, in Neoplatonic tradition the One-God "is a reality who is immanent and active in all creatures through continual creative power. He is the foundation of an intelligible uni-verse as opposed to a heap of unrelated things. God does not have composite parts which he could gain or lose: he is immaterial. Yet he guarantees the uniformity of explanation – i.e. the inference from *hic et nunc* to other parts of the universe" (*Living Forms of the Imagination*, cit., p. 91).

[92] Franke, *Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion*, cit., p. 62. And he adds: "The knowability of things in general is infirmed and even evacuated by the recession of the first principle out of the world into unknowability, into a dimension to which not knowledge but only a kind of mystical experience can gain access. Viewed from within the world, things are foundationless, and yet *that* they are and even somehow hang together is given as a fact, and to account for this Neoplatonists still infer imagine that there is some kind of ground. It is just that the ground cannot be anything within the ambit of beings that we can know" (*ivi*, pp. 62-63).

"quasi-transcendental logic of the unsayable"[93] that is the obscure counterpart to the luminous word-image in the bright and Apollonian dimension. The appearance of the symbolical image allows the recognition of the Other – and, thus, a "transcendence"[94] – but, at the same time, its sensitive quality maintains an immanent value which cannot be ignored. In Gadamer's perspective, however, every immediate sense perception always comes into mediation through lingual comprehension in the hermeneutic paradigm – i.e., no direct aesthetic-sensible experience is conceived by Gadamer, because an image is always a self-representation based on mediation and on the need of mediated recognition.
In this act of mediation, the production of artwork is never a "conclusion" or a "scope", but instead is a living symbolic reference to the unsaid horizons that enable and inform the individual images. The movement between the different horizons of meaning in the hermeneutic circle of the creative action is thus preserved in the symbolic image.

Symbol infinitely generates meaning and is infinitely interpretable, bringing together mortals and gods, to adopt Martin Heidegger's "image"[95], and thus renders visible a connection which has always existed but which normally is hidden, a link between celestial and earthly – like Hermes, the archetypal god of hermeneutics[96], it does not suppress the tension between the two poles, but rather it lives in this disproportion in the form of *concordia discors*, even bringing together aesthetic and mythical consciousness to the extent that both live, in an essential way, on the lifeblood of the symbolic, as the images of Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theatre* intensely and vibrantly show. Likewise, the paintings of Kiefer open a space for the reunification of the two dimensions. This happens, for example, in *Midgard* (1980-85), where Norse mythology is revitalized and reunified with the biography of the artist. In the painting, in fact, an artist's palette is cast up on the shore alongside the sea, with a big snake which insinuates itself into that space. In Norse mythology, Midgard represents the earth raised up between heaven and the underworld by the gods. It is one of the nine worlds unified by Yggdrasill, the cosmic tree. According to myth, the monstrous snake Midgardsormr (also called Jormungandr), which lives peacefully enveloping Midgard, will wake up at the end of the time, during Ragnarök, to attack

[93] *Ivi*, p. 66.
[94] Likewise, in Paul Ricoeur's and Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) view of "exceeding" images (see Elio Franzini, *Verità dell'immagine*, Il Castoro, Milano 2004, p. 128).
[95] See Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the event)*, cit. (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, cit.); Id., *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, trans. by Andrew J. Mitchell, Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2012 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, ed. by Petra Jaeger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1994).
[96] See on this topic: Karoly Kerényi, *Hermeneia und Hermeneutiké. Ursprung und Sinn der Hermeneutik*, in Id., *Griechische Grundbegriffe*, Zürich 1964, pp. 42-52; Paolo D'Alessandro, *Testo Contesto Interpretazione. Senso e significati di una lettura filosofica*, Cuem, Milano 1989.

mankind, rampaging across the sea and the earth. In Kiefer's painting, everything is simultaneously natural and celestial, contingent and archetypal, *re*-presented and present. The artist's aim is to depict a space where this mythological dualism is present but at the same time fades away in a more original relation. We agree with John C. Gilmour that "Kiefers' Midgard is such a site, confronting us with the clash between our textual idea of nature as an ordered background and mythological accounts of cosmic forces which threaten to undermine that ideal. In doing so, he detaches elemental cosmological concerns from the rationalism of modern thought"[97].

Also at play in Kiefer's perspective – and this is shared by Gadamer and also emerges in Nitsch's artwork – is what Giampiero Moretti has explained in relation to Novalis' (1772-1801) poetry: this imaginative aesthetics elaborates a "universality which finds its guarantee both in the sensible-earthly root of the existent and in the imaginal rhythm of being, where the Kantian 'scheme', embodied in a linguistic image, in the *Zustand*, in the condition of a vibrating conscience which pronounces names of the world, is turned to the being and not to the 'I think' or to the transcendental Apperception"[98]. This *Zustand*, which is the state of aesthetic consciousness, fosters the manifestation of a new form of rationality that is connected to the sacred[99].

If symbol is the most productive possibility of an image, then the purely mimetic image is defined by Gadamer through the concept of sign (*Zeichen*), which represents a direct concern to something situated outside the image itself. "For a sign is nothing but what its function requires; and that is to point away from itself. In order to fulfill this function, of course, it must first draw attention to itself. It must be striking: that is, it must clearly foreground itself and present itself as an indicator, like a poster"[100]. The essence of the sign is eventually purely connected to the indication or reference (*Verweisung*): this means that its ontology is poor if compared to that of symbols and images, because the sign disappears when the content to which it is referred becomes visible and comprehensible. The reference of the sign is in fact based on an artificial connection between sign itself (form) and a further meaning (or content). Gadamer

[97] John C. Gilmour, *Original Representation and Anselm Kiefer's Postmodernism*, in «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», Spring 1988, vol. 46, nr. 3, pp. 341-350: 344.
[98] Giampiero Moretti, *Intorno all'immagine*, in «Estetica. Rassegna semestrale», il Melangolo, Genova, 1, pp. 7-24: 22.
[99] See *ivi*, p. 23.
[100] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 145 ("Denn ein Zeichen ist nicht anderes, als was seine Funktion fordert; und die ist, von sich wegzuverweisen. Um diese Funktion erfüllen zu können, muß es freilich zunächst einmal auf sich ziehen. Es muß auffallen, das heißt, sich deutlich abheben und in seinem Verweisungsgehalt darstellen – wie ein Plakat" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 157]). In Romantic tradition this conception of sign has often been embodied in the concept of allegory, especially in a devaluated interpretation of this notion.

writes: "By nature, the *sign* has its being only in application, and so its 'self' consists only in pointing to something 'other.' It must be foregrounded from the context in which it is encountered and taken as a sign, in order for its own being as an object to be superseded and for it to dissolve (disappear) into its meaning. It is the abstraction of pointing itself (*Verweisung*: also, referring)"[101].

Somehow in-between the notions of symbol and sign, we have allegory (*Allegorie*). Originally connected to the dimension of *logos*, as rhetorical figure[102], it soon came to be used as an aesthetical concept in a broader sense, and until the 19th-century it was mostly synonymous with symbol.[103] Although "allegory assumes not the kind of original metaphysical affinity that a symbol claims but rather a co-ordination created by convention and dogmatic agreement, which enables one to present in images something that is imageless"[104]. Under this definition, it emerges that allegory is more connected than symbol to a common cultural and interpretative context. Yet, according to Gadamer[105], when there is a common and implicit horizon of referencing, allegory can be something flexible and capable of that openness to the indeterminacy and the infinite which, as we have seen, is typical of the symbolic.

In Gadamer's historical reconstruction, the Romantic period, which saw the triumph of Goethe's interpretation of symbol, lives the experience of the "*devaluation of allegory*", although some Romantic authors, such as Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1882), still attributed a deep role to the notion of allegory in relation to the concept of beautiful[106]. According to Gadamer, "allegory is certainly not the product of genius alone. It rests on firm traditions and always has

[101] *Ivi*, p. 413 ("Im Wesen des *Zeichens* liegt, daß es in seiner Verwendungsfunktion sein Sein hat, und das so, daß seine Eignung allein darin liegt, verweisend zu sein. Es muß sich daher in dieser seiner Funktion von der Umgebung, in der es angetroffen und als Zeichen genommen warden soll, abheben, um eben damit sein eigenes Dingsein aufzuheben und in seiner Bedeutung aufzugehen (zu verschwinden). Es ist die Abstraktion des Verweisens selbst" [*ivi*, pp. 416-417]). The German original text carries *Verweisen* (not *Verweisung*).
[102] *Ivi*, p. 63 (*ivi*, p. 78). The connection between image and *logos* is pivotal in the whole iconic turn: "Understanding the image as '*logos*', as a meaning-generating process, this vision of a non-verbal, iconic *logos* was in short my motivation for ascribing paradigmatic meaning to the growing interest in the image (or, to be more precise: in pictures) and for speaking of the iconic turn as a project with a longer perspective" (Boehm and Mitchell, *Pictorial versus Iconic Turn*, cit., pp. 105-106; on the epistemological function of the "logic of image" see also: Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, cit., pp. 259-261; Emanuele Alloa, *Iconic Turn. Alcune chiavi di svolta*, in «Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and philosophy of experience, December 2012, pp. 144-159: 149-150).
[103] Also because the allegory was originally strictly connected to a religious heritage. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 63 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 78-79).
[104] *Ivi*, p. 64 ("Allegorie nicht eigentlich eine metaphysische Urverwandtschaft voraussetzt, wie sie das Symbol beansprucht, als vielmehr nur eine durch Konvention und dogmatische Fixierung gestiftete Zuordnung, die es erlaubt, bildhafte Darstellungen für Bildloses zu verwenden" [*ivi*, p. 80]).
[105] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Composition and interpretation*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 66-73: 70-71 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dichten und Deuten* (1961), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 18-24: 22-23).
[106] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 68 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 84-85).

a fixed, statable meaning which does not resist rational comprehension through the concept – on the contrary, the concept of allegory is closely bound up with dogmatics: with the rationalization of the mythical (as in the Greek Enlightenment), or with the Christian interpretation of Scripture in terms of doctrinal unity (as in patristics), and finally with the reconciliation of the Christian tradition and classical culture, which is the basis of the art and literature of modern Europe and whose last universal form was the baroque. With the breakup of this tradition allegory too was finished. For the moment art freed itself from all dogmatic bonds and could be defined as the unconscious production of genius, allegory inevitably became aesthetically suspect"[107]. Thus, it seems that, for Gadamer, the distinction between allegory and symbol is not as strong, clear, and decisive as has been presented by many other authors, especially in Romanticism. What is, however, more relevant for him is that artwork should take place, in order to be significant and productive, under the patronage of a specific kind of image, which should be furnished with the following characteristics: representation, connection between the visible and invisible, dynamic essence[108], and relational and unitive function(s). In the past, according to Gadamer, various Western authors have recognized these characteristics as present in both symbols and allegories. Once this history and genealogy has been recognized, "the contrast between symbol and allegory becomes relative"[109].

Nevertheless, as Gadamer's interpreters, we cannot deny the relevant history of these concepts, and therefore we can conclude that in the current theoretical debate, we should cite Gadamer as a thinker of the symbolic inasmuch as the German philosopher carefully and deeply underscored the limits to interpreting the notion of image when restricted to the dimension of sign or metaphor and the importance of the fusion of image and language, which was already a Romantic discovery – particularly relevant, for example, in Novalis and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) – and is directly rooted in the tradition of the reevaluation of symbolism.

[107] *Ibidem* ("Die Allegorie ist gewiß nicht allein Sache des Genies. Sie beruht auf festen Traditionen und hat stets eine bestimmte, angebbare Bedeutung, die sich gar nicht dem verstandesmäßigen Erfassen durch den Begriff widersetzt. Im Gegenteil, Begriff und Sache der Allegorie ist mit Dogmatik fest verknüpft, mit der Rationalisierung des Mythischen (so in der griechischen Aufklärung) oder mit der christlichen Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift auf die Einheit einer Lehre hin (so in der Patristik) und schließlich mit der Versöhnung der christlichen Überlieferung und der antiken Bildung, die der Kunst und Dichtung der neueren Völker zugrunde liegt und deren letzte Weltform das Barock war. Mit dem Abbruch dieser Tradition war es auch um die Allegorie geschehen. Denn in dem Augenblick, wo sich das Wesen der Kunst von aller dogmatischen Bindung löste und durch die unbewußte Produktion des Genies definiert werden konnte, mußte die Allegorie ästhetisch fragwürdig werden" [*ivi*, p. 85]).

[108] In a sense which connects Gadamer's position to some Lévi-Strauss's concepts (see in particular Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris 1962, pp. 30-31).

[109] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 70 ("Muß sich der Gegensatz von Symbol und Allegorie wieder relativieren" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 86]).

2.1.3 The Ontology of Images as Ontology of Art: Going Beyond Aesthetics

The above-mentioned critique of subjectivism[110] is also expressed in the rejection of the "aesthetic differentiation", which, according to Gadamer, arises in modern philosophy after Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and is radicalized with Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). According to the latter, aesthetic consciousness separates the artwork's form (its aesthetic qualities) from its content (its communicative dimension, the message). Furthermore, aesthetic consciousness defines artistic images as part of a specific domain of reality which is differentiated from the rest, a *Sondersphäre* in which images are separated from life and thus reduced in their power[111].

Gadamer proposes a completely different way of understanding art. The dimension of *Erfahrung*, which according to him is fundamental to understand artistic experience, brings about the "inseparability of form and content" which "is fully realized as the nondifferentiation in which we encounter art as something that both expresses us and speaks to us"[112]. This *Erfahrungsästhetik* necessarily leads to overcoming not only every empirical approach to art – in which every momentary and isolated experience is considered outside a consistent and unified process, as mere *Erlebnis*[113] – but also aesthetics itself as the modern discipline born with the famous essay of Baumgarten (1750), and thus brings us back to the ontology of art, albeit "re-viewed" in a non-metaphysical (i.e., neither substantialist nor dualistic) way and through a non-propositional (i.e., non-descriptive/representational) approach[114]. As explained

[110] On the historical reconstruction of aesthetic subjectivism, with a relevant critique of it as well as – although in my view not properly founded – of Gadamer's approach, see the chapter "Art, Philosophically" in Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology*, cit.

[111] This theoretical problem has been broadly discussed in Gottfried Boehm, *Das Bild und die hermeneutische Reflexion*, in Günter Figal and Hans-Helmut Gander (eds.), *"Dimensionen des Hermeneutischen". Heidegger und Gadamer*, Klostermann, Fankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 23-35: 31.

[112] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 51 ("Die Untrennbarkeit von Form und Inhalt wird als die Nichtunterscheidung wirklich, durch die uns Kunst als das, was uns etwas sagt und uns aussagt, begegnet" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 141]).

[113] In this perspective (*Erlebnisästhetik*) it is often assumed that there is a "pure", direct and sensitive experience, free from any pre-judice and epistemological or interpretative scheme and before any acquisition of knowledge – whereas, in a hermeneutic perspective, the experience comes to consciousness *only* through pre-judices and cognitive schemes.

[114] Gadamer's comprehension and appraisal of the importance of the role of experience in the hermeneutical aesthetics has among its theoretical sources the Heideggerian critique to an *Erlebnisästhetik* rooted in subjectivistic tendencies – a critique which is shared by Gadamer but refined through a peculiar reinterpretation of phenomenology. The ideas of art experience as event of truth and as "ongoing interplay of revealing and concealing that overtakes the one who lingers with it" (Nielsen, *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics*, cit., p. 62) have been developed by Martin Heidegger especially in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (in Id., *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 1-56 [Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5: *Holzwege*, cit., pp. 1-74]); see also Gadamer's preface to the German edition of the essay: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1987, pp. 249-261

by Nicholas Davey, Gadamer "emphasises above all the *experience* of art. The experience of art is when an artwork 'speaks to us' and this, he insists, is the *event* of art, the occasion when *it* makes a claim upon us, irrespective of our willing and doing. This is effected when an established analytic of meaning is disrupted by its speculative entailments. The importance of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics lies in the suggestion that the power of an artwork resides not in itself, as an autonomous aesthetic object, but in its dialogical capacity to 'effect' change in a spectator's field of understanding"[115]. Thus, we are dealing with an experience in which the role of the meaning of the objects of sense perception is recognised through the act of apprehension and discernment, which happens in a temporality of continuity. This is a duration which is experimented in the qualitative time of the contemplation of artworks as well as in participation in performative events, where the choice of the artist – as is the case in Nitsch's performances – can extend the duration of the artistic event by multiple days, underscoring the pivotal role of continuity in the perceiving of art.

The ontological dimension of the concept of image is also taken up by Gadamer to critique the "aesthetic differentiation" and to oppose the "aesthetic non-differentiation" (*ästhetische Nichtunterscheidung*): if the core dimension of image is representation (*repraesentatio*), then we cannot treat artworks without considering their content; if we remain on the mere aesthetic surface of art, we fail to relate it to an ontology of images, and thus we also lose its imaginative dimension[116]. Form and content, i.e., the core of the "aesthetic non-differentiation", need to be experienced together in art. In the authentic experience, as understood by hermeneutical theory, the "who" experiencing and the "what" being experienced "happen" together. The hermeneutic approach also preserves the relational nature of images and their contents through retrieving the role of interpretation, which is never understood in a relativistic and subjectivist way: it is not the arbitrary interpretation of a legislator subject, but the historical interpretation which depends on the relation of interpreter and interpreted within the historical context (again, that which is interpreting and that which is interpreted "happen" together): "*Understanding is to be thought*

(engl. ed.: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, in Id., *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. by John W. Stanley, with an introduction by Dennis J. Schmidt, State University of New York Press, USA 1994, pp. 121-138). On this philosophical topic see also Breidbach and Vercellone, *Anschauung denken*, cit., pp. 23-26, 96-101 and Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., pp. 70-80.

[115] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 11.

[116] The image has a radical cognitive efficiency *in itself*, it is not a mere visual transcription or exhibition of an intellectual concept, instead it detains its own ontology, as incarnation of the creative power of imagination. The importance of imagination – often described in Western tradition with the Greek word *phantasia* – crosses the whole history of philosophy. See, on its reconstruction within a Neoplatonic tradition which finds several parallels in Gadamer's philosophy, Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, cit., pp. 39-78. One of the pillars of this conception in the Western modern thought is surely *The New Science* by Giambattista Vico (cit.).

of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method"[117]. Interpretation is not a subjective relativistic act; instead, interpreting is the "atmosphere" in which every single act of perception and comprehension takes place. Hence, Gadamer affirms: "In fact, hermeneutics would then have to be understood in so comprehensive a sense as to embrace the whole sphere of art and its complex of questions. Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding must be acquired. This gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even that of aesthetic consciousness. *Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics*"[118]. Aesthetics, of which the image is the original engine, is eventually resolved in the Gadamerian model through hermeneutics, since the work of art is a step in that "scalar" path which leads to language – the summit of the unfolding of being[119]. But Gadamer will also highlight that the artistic experience, re-interpreted by virtue of Goethe's famous idea of symbol ("Everything is a symbol"), represents the most emblematic expression of hermeneutics in that "the individual artwork gathers into itself and expresses the symbolic character that, hermeneutically regarded, belongs to all beings. In comparison with all other linguistic and nonlinguistic tradition, the work of art is the absolute present for each particular present, and at the same time holds its word in readiness for every future"[120]. Artwork is thus considered from an ontological, and not merely aesthetic, point of view. Through a hermeneutics of images, the

[117] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 291 ("*Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr al seine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen*, in dem sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart beständig vermitteln. Das ist es, was in der hermeneutischen Theorie zur Geltung kommen muß, die viel zu sehr von der Idee eines Verfahrens, einer Methode, beherrscht ist" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 295]).

[118] *Ivi*, p. 157 ("Ja, die Hermeneutik müßte dann sogar derart umfassend verstanden werden, daß sie die ganze Sphäre der Kunst und ihre Fragestellung mit einbezöge. Wie jeder andere zu verstehende Text muss ein jegliches Kunstwerk – nicht nur das literarische – verstanden werden, und solches Verstehen will gekonnt sein. Damit erhält das hermeneutische Bewußtsein eine umfassende Weite, die diejenige des ästhetischen Bewußtseins noch übertrifft. *Die Ästhetik muss in der Hermeneutik aufgehen*" [*ivi*, pp. 169-170]).

[119] Coherently from a hermeneutical point of view, Gottfried Boehm underscores that the "iconic turn" is not to be understood in opposition to the linguistic turn (Rorty, 1976), instead as complementary to it (see Boehm and Mitchell, *Pictorial versus Iconic Turn*, cit., p. 105). Moreover, it is necessary to specify that Gadamer never wanted to restrict hermeneutics to a linguistic domain; instead, *Sprache*, in which Being manifests itself and lets itself be understood, should be considered in an extended way, as all the different expressive languages in which meanings are created, included the iconic one. For a biographical witness of Gadamer' openness to a hermeneutic of images, see *ivi*, pp. 109-110.

[120] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, in Id., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1977, pp. 95-104: 104 ("Denn die Sprache des Kunstwerks hat die Auszeichnung, daß das einzelne Kunstwerk den Symbolcharakter, der allem Seienden, hermeneutisch gesehen, zukommt, in sich versammelt und zur Erscheinung bringt. Im Vergleichen zu aller anderen sprachlichen und sprachlosen Überlieferung gilt von ihm, daß es für die jeweilige Gegenwart absolute Gegenwart ist und zugleich für alle Zukunft sein Wort bereithält" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ästhetik und Hermeneutik* (1964), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 1-8: 8]).

sensible dimension within the experience of art is converted into knowledge: "Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements – those of art and all other kinds of tradition – is formed and actualized"[121]. This process of knowledge happens in an ongoing and cumulative experience, which is opened to the event of truth (although in a non-rationalistic way), as Nielsen explains with reference to Gadamer's hermeneutics: "Art is more than an immediate subjective experience or pleasure; (…) in our dialogical engagement with art, a meaningful, even transformative experience (*Erfahrung*) is possible in which we are changed by an event of truth"[122].

[121] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 157 ("Das Verstehen muß als ein Teil des Sinngeschehens gedacht werden, in dem der Sinn aller Aussagen – derjenigen der Kunst und derjenigen aller sonstigen Überlieferung – sich bildet und vollendet" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 170]).
[122] Nielsen, *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics*, cit., p. 31.

2.2 Beauty: The "Most Radiant" Event of Revealedness and Concealment

2.2.1 Heideggerian Roots: Urged by the Revealedness of Beauty

Gadamer's interpretation of the concept of image is radically different from the one developed by his master, Martin Heidegger, in his philosophical pathway[123]. In fact, although the two thinkers share an awareness of the epochal theoretical urgency of overcoming modern subjectivist aesthetics, Heidegger analyzes the notion of image precisely in terms of evaluating it as a symptom of this negative and nihilistic cultural process[124]. If Gadamer, as we have seen in the previous chapter, does indeed valorize the symbolical and creative ontology of the image (against any aesthetical conception based on mere imitation), then Heidegger, in his seminal 1938 lecture *The Age of the World Picture* (*Die Zeit des Weltbildes*), elaborates the famous thesis that the very idea of the "world picture" as a global and comprehensive representation of the world – including that pursued by science and culminating in the techno-metaphysical machination[125], but also by all the humanistic systematic approaches aiming to defining the essence of reality – is derived from a reductionist process of the objectification the living world

[123] It is beyond the scope of our research to discuss the complex, stratified and controversial relationship that occurred between Heidegger and Gadamer – a relationship which was born at the beginning of the '20s (the first encounter of the two dates back to 1923, at the University of Freiburg) and ended only with the death of Heidegger (1976). Actually, it is a challenging topic, because it runs over simultaneously the biographies and the theoretical development of the two philosophers, in an enigmatic and proteiform process of overlapping and distancing, also considering Gadamer's rigorous but laborious search for a fruitful approach beyond the "*Heideggerei*" (the Heideggerian cultural trend of his time), but at the same time beyond the spread of the prejudicial rejection of the "last shaman" (as defined by Franco Volpi and Antonio Gnoli), especially after Heidegger's compromise with the German National-Socialist regime and the *querelle* which followed the Second World War. Although theoretically problematic, we cannot avoid mentioning the acute and successful metaphor proposed by Jürgen Habermas, who defined Gadamer's hermeneutics as a form of "urbanization of the Heideggerian province" (see Jürgen Habermas, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Urbanizing the Heideggerian Province* (1979), in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1983, pp. 189-198). A rich biographical picture of the connections between the two philosophers, with particular attention to the political controversy, has been drawn in Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2003. On Gadamer's interpretation of Heidegger, see his several published essays collected in *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. by John W. Stanley, with an introduction by Dennis J. Schmidt, State University of New York Press, USA 1994 (the 15 essays are the translation of the section *III. Heidegger a) Heideggers Wege* of Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, cit., pp. 173-332). The philosophical relation of the two authors has been cleverly interpreted, among the others, in: Walter Lammi, *Hans-Georg Gadamer's "Correction" of Heidegger*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», vol. 52, nr. 3, Jul-Sep. 1991, pp. 487-507; Stefano Marino, *Heidegger and Gadamer on the History of Being and the Relationship between Being and Language*, in «Scenari», 2017, 6, pp. 27-38; Stefano Marino (ed.), *Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Language. Essays on Heidegger and Gadamer*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2015; Giuliana Gregorio, *Linguaggio e interpretazione: su Gadamer e Heidegger*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2007; Carlo Gentili, *Fare i conti con il maestro. Sul ritorno di Gadamer a Heidegger*, in «Studi di Estetica», nr. 33, third serie, 2006, pp. 75-107.

[124] On the relation between nihilism and the question of art in modernity and the contemporary age, see Stefano Zecchi, *L'artista armato. Contro i crimini della modernità*, Mondadori, Milano 1998.

[125] An original attempt to think the scientific challenge through the theoretical lenses of Heidegger's hermeneutics heading for an "existential" and "hypothetical" not dogmatic science is discussed in Gianni Vattimo, *The Age of the World Picture*, in Id., *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, trans. by Robert T. Valgenti, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, pp. 49-64.

on the basis of a voluntaristic subjectivity[126] and the annihilation of world's dynamic and metamorphic internal relations. "This objectification of beings," Heidegger explains, identifying the cultural origin of this paradigm in the metaphysical ground of modernity and, in particular, in Descartes's (1596-1659) philosophy, "is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing [*Vor-stellen*] aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure – and that means certain – of the being"[127]. With this theoretical position, Heidegger radically criticizes the ontology of the image itself. The world as picture appears thus as a "dead" image which has been reduced to a mere object by human representational activity, which is aimed, with an arrogant ambition, at mitigating it into a fixed, governable, and exploitable datum.

The very concept of man's "worldview" (*Weltanschauung*) expresses what for Heidegger stands as a restrictive concept of the humanistic Enlightenment: the idea of the world as the creation of a productive and sovereign subject and no more as a self-giving process[128]. This is, as Krzysztof Ziarek has noted, a significant shift from the previous defence of the notion of imagination in his reading of Kant, especially in the essay *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*[129].

Although Heidegger in this lecture concentrates his argument on the specific "world picture", his criticism of the voluntaristic aspiration as such clearly emerges: the latter, in his view, is embedded in images in general, conceived as subjective schemes elaborated to control and bridle the self-opening and self-presentation of the figures of the world. In fact, "where the world becomes picture, beings as a whole are set in place as that for which man is prepared; that which, therefore, he correspondingly intends to bring before him, have before him, and, thereby, in a decisive sense, place before him. Understood in an essential way, 'world picture' does not mean 'picture of the world' but, rather, the world grasped as picture"[130].

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[126] Subjectivism and objectivism are interpreted by Martin Heidegger, under Edmund Husserl's legacy, as two radical and complementary forms of the same reductionist and dualist scheme, unable to properly think the relation.

[127] Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, cit., p. 66 ("Diese Vergegenständlichung des Seienden vollzieht sich in einem Vor-stellen, das darauf zielt, jegliches Seiende so vor sich zu bringen, daß der rechnende Mensch des Seienden sicher und d. h. gewiß sein kann. Zur Wissenschaft als Forschung kommt es erst dann, und nur dann, wenn die Wahrheit zur Gewißheit des Vorstellens sich gewandelt hat" [Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (1938), cit., p. 83]).

[128] On this aspect, see Luca Siniscalco, *All images are political*, in Constantino Pereira Martins and Pedro T. Magalhães (eds.), *Politics and Image*, Coleção eQVODLIBET, Coimbra University Press, Coimbra 2019, pp. 47-62: 59.

[129] See Krzysztof Ziarek, *Image-less Thinking: The Time-Space for the Imagination in Heidegger*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 14 (2015), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, pp. 145-162: 145.

[130] Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, cit., p. 67 ("Wo die Welt zum Bilde wird, ist das Seiende im Ganzen angesetzt als jenes, wor-auf der Mensch sich einrichtet, was er deshalb entsprechend vor sich bringen und vor sich

Gadamer's previously mentioned critique of the notion of imitation (in the descriptive sense of *imitatio*) thus appears extended in Heidegger's view also to the notion of imagination and representation. Imagination is criticized as it transmits the common sense of apprehending and perceiving beings as something present, whereby "all beyng and its opening constitute a *formed image* [*Gebilde*] that is added to what supposedly stands on its own"[131]. In this perspective, imagination is a constitutive feature of the metaphysical and onto-theological construction which Heidegger deeply opposes[132]. Representation, which is instead positively thematized by the Marburg philosopher under the creative and generative sense of *mimesis*, is likewise criticized by Heidegger: "Representation [*Vorstellen*] (…) means: to bring the present-at-hand before one as something standing over-and-against, to relate it to oneself, the representer, and, in this relation, to force it back to oneself as the norm-giving domain"[133]. From this derives that the representation is substantially a violent act: it perverts *das Sein* ("Being"), reducing it to a *Seiende* ("entity"), consequently hiding the *ontologische Differenz* ("ontological difference") between them.

Although Heidegger's critique of the notions of picture and representation distinguishes his kind of quasi-iconoclastic thought from Gadamer's positive evaluation of the iconic dimension, the importance which the philosopher of Meßkirch profusely attributes to the artistic domain – understood, as we'll shortly consider, as a possible topology for the revelation of truth –, compels the need to hypothesize that there is a hidden iconophile dimension of Heidegger's thought which remained in a kind of nutshell, not structurally articulated. Art is, in fact, necessarily expressed through images, and a theoretical appreciation of art cannot thus exist – and cannot be thought – outside a constructive relation with images.

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haben und somit in einem ent-schiedenen Sinne vor sich stellen will. Weltbild, wesentlich verstanden, meint daher nicht ein Bild von der Welt, sondern die Welt als Bild begriffen" [Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (1938), cit., p. 89]).

[131] Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., p. 555 ("Von da aus gerechnet ist alles Seyn und dessen Eröffnung ein zum vermeintlich Handfesten hinzukommendes *Gebilde*" [Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, cit., p. 312]).

[132] The notion of ontotheology is used by Heidegger to express the connection, at the roots of Western metaphysics, of onto-logy (inquiry of being as *ens*) and theo-logy (inquiry of god as *summum ens*), with the implication of the forgetfulness of the *Grundfrage* on Sein, understood as mere *Seiend*. Cfr. Martin Heidegger, "The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics", in Id., *Identity and Difference*, trans. and with an introduction by Joan Stambaugh, Harper & Row, New York-Evanston-London 1969, pp. 42-74 (Martin Heidegger, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 11: *Identität und Differenz*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2006, pp. 5-79).

[133] Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., p. 69 ("Vor-stellen bedeutet [...]: das Vorhandene als ein Entgegenstehendes vor sich bringen, auf sich, den Vorstellenden zu, beziehen und in diesen Bezug zu sich als den maßgebenden Bereich zurückzwingen" [Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, cit., p. 91]).

Signs of a different, positive conception of image, understood as a proper ontological event, are offered, for example, in the little-known 1955 text entitled *On the Sistine* (*Über die Sixtina*)[134], where Heidegger reflects on the artistic image of Raphael's (1483-1520) *Madonna Sistina* (1513-1514). Although here we must set aside his interesting considerations on the setting and place of the canvas, what is of interest to us here is that the German philosopher describes the artwork as a picture where the manifestation of truth takes place in the manner of the beautiful, which testifies to the manifest emergence of Being. In particular, Heidegger writes: "This image (*Bild*) is neither a mere copy (*Abbild*), nor merely a symbol (*Sinnbild*) of the divine transubstantiation. This image is the appearance of the time-space play as that place where the eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated"[135]. The image belongs to an original sacred world of ritual, in which it detains the faculty of opening to otherness – it owns a very specific "window" (*Fenster*) constitution, which opens to the Further[136].

Similarly, Heidegger's critical interpretation of imagination leaves some opportunities open for re-evaluating this notion under an evenemential interpretation: the imagination not as a subjective faculty, but instead as "the *event* itself, wherein all *transfiguration* occurs", as the "occurrence of the *clearing* itself"[137]. And, as thematized by Ziarek, "the disposition of the clearing's unfolding sets the tone for the sensible and lends it the spatio-temporal rhythm that allows the sensible to gain determination and obtain sense and form, which eventually lead to conceptual grasp and cognition"[138].

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[134] The text originally appeared in the book *Raphaels Sixtinische Madonna. Das Werk und seine Wirkung* (Hopfer, Tübingen 1955), written by his former student Marielene Putscher. It is now available in Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 13: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, ed. by Hermann Heidegger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 119-121. See on it also Ivica Zizić, *'Stepping into the world'. Martin Heidegger's remarks on the 'Sistine Madonna'*, in «The Heythrop Journal», LVII, 2016, pp. 807-819, where the reflections of Heidegger are connected with the theology of Incarnation.

[135] "Allein das Bild ist kein Abbild und kein Sinnbild nur der heiligen Wandlung. Das Bild ist das Scheinen des Zeit-Spiel-Raumes als des Ortes, an dem das Meßopfer gefeiert wird" (Heidegger, *Über die Sixtina*, cit., p. 121). This sentence is extremely syntonic with Gadamer's philosophy of image (except for the devaluation of the notion of *Sinnbild*, distinguished from *Bild* in a more radical way than in Gadamer's perspective).

[136] Hints at a similar view on image are also widespread in Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, trans. by Keith Hoeller, Humanity Books, New York 2000 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1981). Extremely similar considerations on Raphael's painting, although with a typical Russian mystic language, have been developed by Fëdor Dostoevskij, who, despite his critique to Renaissance "naturalism", considered *Madonna Sistina* a Western counterpart of Orthodox icons, imbued with the sacred and "pneumatological" irradiation of the divine (see on that the excellent essay of Michele Dantini, "'Amore attivo'. La Madonna Sistina in Fëdor Dostoevskij", in Id., *Le forme del divino. Problemi di arte sacra tra prima modernità e Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna 2024, pp. 67-115.

[137] Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., p. 247 ("Geschehnis der *Lichtung* selbst" [Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, cit., p. 312]).

[138] Ziarek, *Image-less Thinking*, cit., p. 159.

The focus of Heidegger's reflections regarding the ontology of art is not on images, but on the epiphanic dimension of art itself as ontological structure: understanding art as the place *par excellence* where the event of truth takes place, Heidegger grasps in an original way a hidden dimension of aesthetics, one which is also fundamental to understanding Gadamer's ontology of art and his account of artistic beauty.

In order to understand the core of Heidegger's ontology of art, we should nevertheless briefly summarize some of the foundations and principles of his theoretical approach.
According to the German author, Being (*Sein*) offers itself always in a complex relation between its *Offenbarkeit* ("revealedness") – alternatively defined as *Entbergen* ("revealing"), or, further, *Unverborgenheit* ("unhideness", "un-concealment")[139] – and its *Entzug* ("withdrawal") or *Verborgenheit* ("hideness", "concealment"): Being, in fact, never appears in a pure transparent manifestation, but it always also implies veiling, latency, subtraction, and refusal. It is in this "light and shade" dynamic of donation and subtraction that Being gives itself – and it gives itself always in "reference" (*Bezug*) to man. This phenomenological dynamic justifies an anthropological and ontological paradigm in which the world – and the relation between it and the humans – is considered outside the traditional substantialist and metaphysical conceptual definitions, and instead is interpreted through a rich, and sometimes quite obscure, variety of notions – which are discussed in Heidegger's main texts, first of all in his seminal *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1927) – as a dynamic, relational, and polar energy field.
The openness which is thematized by Heidegger – and subsequently discussed by Gadamer – as a fundamental core of the artistic experience echoes the definition of *Dasein* ("being-there") as *Erschlossenheit* ("disclosedness"), the original and constitutive openness of *Dasein* towards the world[140], discovered in its dimension of *aletheia*.

[139] *Unverborgenheit* is one of the famous and controversial translation-interpretations through which Heidegger tries to convey the meaning of the Greek notion of ἀ-λήθεια: a negative word, formed with the privative α (*un-* in German) and the verb λαθεῖν, "to be hidden". In contrast, the Latin word *veritas* and the German *Wahrheit* are positive (in linguistic terms) concepts. The phenomenon of truth, thought in the direction suggested by Greek etymology, is thus understood as a negation of concealment, a way of bringing to manifestation, and not as the logical correspondence or adequacy between thought and reality (*orthotes*, the "correct" discourse about things).
[140] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, New York 2008, par. 28-29, 31, 44, 68 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2: *Sein und Zeit*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977, par. 28-29, 31, 44, 68).

The openness of *Dasein* should be also connected to the notion of *Lichtung* ("clearing")[141], which defines the illumination of *Dasein* as a being who understands being[142], but also the "space" where Being, in its dynamic of disclosure and closure, opens the space for the historical rooting of men. In his 1963 essay, William Richardson articulately defines the clearing as the "luminosity of the There (disclosedness of the World)" which belongs to the "innermost constitution" of *Dasein*[143]. However, this notion should not be read in a subjectivist way, but instead in the vein of the intense Heideggerian attempt to overcome the metaphysical dualism between subject and object and in the horizons of the already mentioned "ontological difference" between *Sein* and *Seiende*, understood as a structure rooted in Being itself.

After *Sein und Zeit*, in his mature work, "Heidegger increasingly insists that, while *Dasein* is the *site* of the clearing, it does not bring the clearing about through its own act. Rather, the clearing brings about *Dasein*, who is in a way 'needed' for the disclosure of the world to happen"[144]. Furthermore, he explains in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, evoking the connection of this theoretical structure with the comprehension of the phenomenon of art: "There is a clearing. Thought from out of beings, it is more in being than is the being. This open center is, therefore, not surrounded by beings. Rather, this illuminating center itself encircles all beings – like the nothing that we scarcely know. The being can only be, as a being, if it stands within, and stands out within, what is illuminated in this clearing. Only this clearing grants us human beings access to those beings that we ourselves are not and admittance to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain and changing degrees. But even to be *concealed* is something the being can only do within the scope of the illuminated. Each being which we encounter, and which encounters us maintains this strange opposition of presence in that at the same time it always holds itself back in a concealment"[145].

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[141] The term is a noun derived by Heidegger from the verb *lichten* ("to thin out"). The English term is based on the loanword from the French *clairière* and refers to the act, or event, of making something free, open, sparse (for example, making a place in the forest free from the trees). "To say that it is 'illuminated' ['erleuchtet'] means that *as* Being-in-the-world it is cleared ['gelichtet'] in itself, not through any other entity, but in such a way that it *is* itself the clearing" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., par. 28). See also *ivi*, par. 36.

[142] *Ivi*, par. 31.

[143] William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, preface by Martin Heidegger, Fordham University Press, New York 2003, p. 59.

[144] See Sonia Sikka, *Clearing (Lichtung)*, in Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 152-159. Similarly, Gadamer expresses himself in *The Way in the Turn* (1979) (in Id., *Heidegger's Ways*, cit., pp. 121-139 [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Weg in die Kehre* (1979), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, cit., pp. 271-284], stressing the role of Aristotle's philosophy in enabling Heidegger to discover the contradictions of modern subjectivism.

[145] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 30 ("Eine Lichtung ist. Sie ist, vom Seienden her gedacht, seiender als das Seiende. Diese offene Mitte ist daher nicht vom Seienden umschlossen, sondern die lichtende Mitte selbst umkreist wie das Nichts, das wir kaum kennen, alles Seiende. Das Seiende kann als Seiendes nur sein, wenn es in das Gelichtete dieser Lichtung herein- und hinaussteht. Nur diese Lichtung schenkt und verbürgt uns Menschen einen Durchgang zum Seienden, das wir selbst nicht sind, und den Zugang zu dem Seienden, das wir selbst sind. Dank dieser Lichtung ist das Seiende in gewissen und wechselnden Maßen unverborgen. Doch selbst

Apart from the various theoretical implications of Heidegger's paradigm and its historical evolution, which has been philologically reconstructed across the widely available secondary literature, what is mostly relevant for our path is that the notions of *Erschlossenheit* and *Lichtung*, if connected to the ontology elaborated by Heidegger, allow us to conclude that the most relevant source of human understanding and of the experience of truth is that event in which Being itself becomes visible in itself to men. That process takes place thanks to the generative power of the "clearing" experience. And art is a great occasion in which this truthful event can take place.

In the already quoted *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*), the most important Heideggerian work devoted to the ontology of art (a theoretical discourse which the German philosopher delivered in his 1935/1936 lectures[146], later published as an essay in 1950), we can deal with the main declinations of this paradigm, based on the pivotal role of the event and on the polar, tragic (in the Greek sense), non-substantialist dynamic between self-giving and retreating in the artistic field.

A brief analysis of the application of Heidegger's evenemential ontology[147] to the description and comprehension of aesthetic categories – such as the definition of art itself and especially the notion of beauty[148], to which this chapter is mainly devoted – is necessary to approach Gadamer's position as well, which is broadly indebted to Heidegger's.

The Origin of the Work of Art addresses the possibility of a phenomenological encounter with art: the discovery of its ontology is understood as a way to overcome modern aesthetic subjectivism[149], which, as we have already thematized through Gadamer's thought, is the main

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verborgen kann das Seiende nur im Spielraum des Gelichteten sein. Jegliches Seiende, das begegnet und mitgegnet, hält diese seltsame Gegnerschaft des Anwesens inne, indem es sich zugleich immer in eine Verborgenheit zurückhält" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 40]).

[146] The first appearance of Heidegger's reflections on this topic has however to be traced back at the years 1931-1932. See Martin Heidegger, *Zu Überwindung der Aesthetik. Zu "Ursprung des Kunstwerk"*, in «Heidegger Studies», vol. 6, 1990, pp. 5-7.

[147] "Evenemential" is our English translation of the French adjective *événementiel*, which refers to the notion of event (*événement*, which translates the German *Ereignis*) and has been especially developed under the impulse of phenomenology and pragmatism and in the French reception of Heidegger's *opus*.

[148] The expressions "beauty" (*die Schönheit*) and "the beautiful" (*das Schöne*) in Heidegger and Gadamer's texts seem to be exchangeable, although the former, at least in the essays hereby discussed, appears more inclined to speak of beauty (probably because of the much more theoretical connotation by him adopted), while the latter more often speaks of the beautiful, reflecting his interest in its cultural and historical conformations. In this chapter, we have welcomed the various English translation choices adopted in the quoted text, preferring to use, in our personal thought and contextualization, the word "beauty" to stress the theoretical and ontological nuance of the concept, the expression "the beautiful" with a more culturological and artistic valency.

[149] An overcoming which is based on the discussion of the already thematized aesthetical representation. This intention is confirmed by Heidegger in his *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, written in the same period of *The Origin of the Work of Art* (precisely between 1936 and 1938) but published only posthumously in 1989:

philosophical "opponent" of hermeneutical aesthetics, which Heidegger virulently accuses of nihilism[150]. To go beyond it, Heidegger turns his attention not to the artist (as creative genius[151]), nor to the perceiving experience of the art user's, but instead to the essence of the artwork – "what is at work in the artwork"[152]. After a long and articulate stream of reflections, he concludes that the artwork can open a world, unifying a coherent and meaningful historical universe with manifold internal relations. "By the opening of a world", Heidegger explains, "all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits"[153]. As briefly synthetized by Iain Thomson, in this theoretical perspective "a work of art might yet help to gather a new historical world around itself by focusing and illuminating an understanding of being that does not reduce entities either to modern objects to be controlled or to late-modern resources to be optimized"[154].

If modern aesthetics, according to Heidegger's point of view as well as in coherence with the philosophical approach of Western metaphysics, considers artistic experience in the dualistic and representative dialectic between subject (the artist and the user) and object (the artwork), then the Heideggerian ontology of art underscores the autonomous and pre-dualistic dimension of the artistic event, which precedes the distinction between subject and object and establishes their mutual relation. Heidegger expresses this thesis through a circular phrase, which is a typical expression of hermeneutical thought: "The artist is the origin of the work. The work is

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"The question of the origin of the work of art is not intent on an eternally valid determination of the essence of the work of art, a determination that could also serve as a guideline for the historiological survey and explanation of the history of art. Instead, the question stands in the most intrinsic connection to the task of overcoming aesthetics, i.e., overcoming a particular conception of beings – as objects of representation" (Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., p. 555) ("Die Frage nach dem Ursprung des Kunstwerks will nicht auf eine zeitlos gültige Feststellung des Wesens des Kunstwerks hinaus, die zugleich als Leitfaden zur historisch rückblickenden Erklärung der Geschichte der Kunst dienen könnte. Die Frage steht im innersten Zusammenhang mit der Aufgabe der Überwindung der Aesthetik und d.h. zugleich einer bestimmten Auffassung des Seienden als des gegenständlichen Vorstellbaren" [Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, cit., p. 503]). The only history of art which Heidegger seems to take in consideration is the one based on "worship" (*Verehrung*) towards the real artistic beauty, refusing all positivistic and formalistic (see Michele Dantini, "Martin Heidegger 1931-1948: arte e storia dell'arte nei Quaderni Neri", in Id., *Le forme del divino. Problemi di arte sacra tra prima modernità e Novecento*, cit., pp. 117-143: pp. 126-138).

[150] On this aspect of Heidegger's ontology of art see Luca Siniscalco, *Heidegger contra Nihilismus: una soluzione estetica?*, in «In Circolo. Rivista di filosofia e culture», nr. 4, 2017, https://www.incircolorivistafilosofica.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Heidegger-contra-Nihilismus-Siniscalco.pdf.

[151] See also Gadamer's critique on "The Aesthetics of Genius and the concept of experience (*Erlebnis*)" in the homonymous chapter of Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 49-70 [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 61-76].

[152] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 16 ("Was ist im Werk am Werk?" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 21]).

[153] *Ivi*, p. 23 ("Indem eine Welt sich öffnet, bekommen alle Dinge ihre Weile und Eile, ihre Ferne und Nähe, ihre Weite und Enge" [*ivi*, p. 31]).

[154] Iain Thomson, *Heidegger's Aesthetics*, in «The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy», 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/.

the origin of the artist"[155]. Both are – i.e., take place, happen, – in the horizons of art as epiphany. And the essence of art is the descending upon in both – the artwork and the artist. This is a pivotal change of paradigm if we compare it to the prevailing idea of modern aesthetics, where attention turned to the perception and experience of art is predominantly concerned with the interest in "what really happens" in the artistic field[156]. Heidegger changes the focus without reducing his attention to the object of art, as in the classic realist approaches, and instead understands the importance of "what works" in the object of art: the truth of art with the work in view. It is not the sovereign subject that defines the quality of his experience, but the artwork which hits and runs over the subject – an aspect which Gadamer has noted[157].

Heidegger's theory is thus enriched by several terms and linguistic images referring to the quality of event and epiphany attributed to art, which always happens in time and history. According to Iain Thomson, "this historical essence of art is not some substance underlying the different forms of art or even a fixed property that would enable us to distinguish art from non-art but, instead, an insubstantial and ever-changing 'essential strife' that is built into the structure of all intelligibility (the structure whereby entities become intelligible as entities)"[158]. It is not only that art happens always in history, but art is, literally, history: "Whenever art happens, whenever, that is, there is a beginning, a thrust enters history and history either begins or resumes. History, here, does not mean a sequence of events in time, no matter how important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task [*Aufgegebenes*] as the entry into its endowment [*Mitgegebenes*]"[159].
In the artistic event, we come again to the above-described conclusion, i.e., the event of truth takes place: "What is at work in the work" is thus "the opening up of beings in their being, the

[155] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 1 ("Der Künstler ist der Ursprung des Werkes. Das Werk ist der Ursprung des Künstlers" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 1]).
[156] The notion of "experience" as *Erlebnis* is, according to Heidegger, a contingent and recent one. "For modern man, the more unbounded the way in which he takes charge of the shaping of his essence, everything must, by both necessity and right, become 'experience,' just as certainly, the Greeks at the Olympic festivals could never have had 'experiences'" (Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, cit., p. 71; "Notwendig und rechtmäßig dem neuzeitlichen Menschen alles zum Erlebnis werden muß, je uneingeschränkter er in die Gestaltung seines Wesens ausgreift, so gewiß konnten die Griechen bei der Festfeier in Olympia niemals Erlebnisse haben" [Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (1938), cit., p. 89]).
[157] See Gadamer, *Intuition and vividness*, cit., p. 168 (Gadamer, *Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit* (1980), cit., pp. 199-200).
[158] Thomson, *Heidegger's Aesthetics*, cit.
[159] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 49 ("Immer wenn Kunst geschieht, d. h. wenn ein Anfang ist, kommt in die Geschichte ein Stoß, fängt Geschichte erst oder wieder an. Geschichte meint hier nicht die Abfolge irgendwelcher und sei es noch so wichtiger Begebenheiten in der Zeit. Geschichte ist die Entrückung eines Volkes in sein Aufgegebenes als Einrückung in sein Mitgegebenes" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 65]).

happening of truth"[160]. In the work of art, which is "the bearer of this happening"[161], we can grasp the truth which becomes historical: here takes place an encounter between *Dasein* and *Sein*, in the *Doppelwendigkeit* ("doubleness") between *Entbergung* ("unconcealment", "disclosure") and *Verbergung* ("concealment").

Through the famous example proposed by Heidegger in this essay, Van Gogh's (1853-1890) masterpiece *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), it is possible to recognize that "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, in truth is. This being steps forward into the unconcealment of its being. The unconcealment of beings is what the Greeks called ἀλήθεια. We say 'truth' and think little enough in using the word. In the work, when there is a disclosure of the being as what and how it is, there is a happening of truth at work. In the work of art, the truth of the being has set itself to work. (…) In the work, a being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes to stand in the light of its being"[162].

Although the notion of beauty is mentioned only a few times in the essay, the final reference to it at the end of the text is incredibly fertile and deserves some reflections, especially because it allows for clarifying the connection between the already considered ontological structure of art as an event of truth and the powerful principle of beauty.

According to Heidegger's ontology, the commonplace, widespread view of beauty as a subjective human emotion – or feeling – which arises in front of a considerable artwork is unacceptable. If art is conceived as the place where the "truth of Being" (*Wahrheit des Seins*) takes place within history, then beauty should be interpreted precisely as a structural and essential mode or manner of that event, the most radiant, luminous and visible occurrence of it. Connecting the notions of art and beauty, Heidegger thematizes the latter in a non-metaphysical perspective: beauty is not something which has to be connected, compared, or juxtaposed to a truth outside of it (it is indeed distant from the notion of "correctness"), but instead it is the event itself of its very appearance: "The shining that is set into the work is the beautiful. *Beauty is one way in which truth as unconcealment comes to presence*"[163]. Heidegger expresses this

[160] *Ivi*, p. 18 ("Die Eröffnung des Seienden in seinem Sein: das Geschehnis der Wahrheit" [*ivi*, p. 24]).
[161] *Ivi*, p. 34 ("der Träger jenes Geschehens" [*ivi*, p. 45]).
[162] *Ivi*, p. 16 ("Van Goghs Gemälde ist die Eröffnung dessen, was das Zeug, das Paar Bauernschuhe, in Wahrheit ist. Dieses Seiende tritt in die Unverborgenheit seines Seins heraus. Die Unverborgenheit des Seienden nannten die Griechen ἀλήθεια. Wir sagen Wahrheit und denken wenig genug bei diesem Wort. Im Werk ist, wenn hier eine Eröffnung des Seienden geschieht in das, was und wie es ist, ein Geschehen der Wahrheit am Werk. Im Werk der Kunst hat sich die Wahrheit des Seienden ins Werk gesetzt. [...] Ein Seiendes, ein Paar Bauernschuhe, kommt im Werk in das Lichte seines Seins zu stehen" [*ivi*, p. 21]). Although not relevant for our theoretical path, we cannot avoid mentioning the relevance of the dialectic of Earth (*Erde*) and World (*Welt*) in Heidegger's theory of art.
[163] *Ivi*, p. 32 ("Das ins Werk gefügte Scheinen ist das Schöne. *Schönheit ist eine Weise, wie Wahrheit als Unverborgenheit west*" [*ivi*, p. 43]).

perspective in further detail: “Beauty does not occur alongside this truth. It appears when truth sets itself into the work. This appearing (as this being of truth in the work and as the work) is beauty. Thus, beauty belongs to the advent of truth. It does not exist merely relative to pleasure, and purely as its object. Beauty does, however, consist in form, but only because the *forma* once took its light from being and the being of beings”[164]. The structural disposition of beauty, its “figure” (*Gestalt*, which is “the structure of the rift in its self-establishment”[165]), embodies the unity of form and matter, the actualization of the possible in a dimension, which is objective and yet inseparable from the concrete and historical experience of it (otherwise it could never come to visibility in the horizons of knowledge and experience).

This is an interpretation of beauty understood as relation, rather than as a specific entity, substance, or determination, which also finds theoretical justifications in Heidegger’s 1959 *Vortrag* entitled *Hölderlins Erde und Himmel* (*Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven*), especially when the philosopher states that beauty is the enduring presence of Being (considering that “Being is what is true about beings”, according to the already introduced “ontological difference”) and can be defined also as “the original unifying One”[166]. Beauty is indeed “the pure shining of the unconcealment of the whole infinite relation, together with its center. But the center, as the centering, that is, as the mediating, is what joints and what orders. The center is the joint of the relation of the four, which spare its appearing”[167]. The researcher Franco Toscani sharply comments on this declination of Heideggerian phenomenological ontology by observing that beauty is not understood by the German philosopher “in a subjectivistic-psychological sense, but presents a broad scope, indeed the broadest possible scope, as the scope of all that is, precisely as the beauty of the tender infinite relationship of earth and heaven, mortal and

[164] *Ivi*, p. 52 “Die Schönheit kommt nicht neben dieser Wahrheit vor. Wenn die Wahrheit sich in das Werk setzt, erscheint sie. Das Erscheinen ist – als dieses Sein der Wahrheit im Werk und als Werk – die Schönheit. So gehört das Schöne in das Sichereignen der Wahrheit. Es ist nicht nur relativ auf das Gefallen und lediglich als dessen Gegenstand. Das Schöne beruht indessen in der Form, aber nur deshalb, weil die forma einst aus dem Sein als der Seiendheit des Seienden sich lichtete” [*ivi*, p. 69]).

[165] *Ivi*, p. 38 (“Sie ist das Gefüge, als welches der Riß sich fügt” [*ivi*, p. 38]).

[166] Martin Heidegger, *“Remembrance”*, in Id., *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s poetry*, cit., p. 156 (“Die Schönheit ist das ursprünglich einigende Eine” [Martin Heidegger, *»Andenken«*, in Id., *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., p. 135]). The reference to “the four” – Earth, Sky, Divinities, and Mortals – implies the notion of “Fourfold” (*Geviert*) (see: Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, cit. [Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, cit.]; Id., *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in Id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Collins, London 2001, pp. 141-160 [Id*., Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), in Id. *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 145-164].

[167] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven*, in Id., *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s poetry*, cit., p. 203 (“Die Schönheit ist das reine Scheinen der Unverborgenheit des ganzen undendlichen Verhältnisses samt der Mitte. Die Mitte aber *ist* als das mittelnd Fügende und Verfügende. Sie ist die ihr Erscheinen sparende Fuge des Verhältnisses der Vier [Martin Heidegger, *Hörlderlines Erde und Himmel*, in Id., *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., p. 179).

divine"[168]. Beauty is ultimately interconnected with truth and regards humans, under the ancient tradition, crossing Greek Patristic and Russian Orthodox culture which has always interpreted beauty as *metanoia*, "inner transformation"[169].

This briefly synthetized theoretical framework is fundamental for understanding the main thesis expressed by Heidegger in the construction of his ontology of art and, subsequently, focusing on Gadamer's philosophy, for recognizing the basis of his interpretation of beauty, which begins precisely from Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In fact, Gadamer was asked to write the introduction to the 1960 Reclam edition of the text: here, by introducing this relevant Heideggerian *Denkweg*, Gadamer not only accurately describes the content of Heidegger's thesis, but lets us understand his closeness to it, particularly underlining the centrality of art as place of manifestation of the "event of truth", which happens beyond "the revealment of being, and the forgetfulness of being", or, better, with both simultaneously, and which "cannot be fulfilled by an intentional act of our subjectivity"[170]. In particular, we should point out that Gadamer's interpretation of Heidegger's essay is extremely sensitive to the relation between beauty and event, precisely that on which we have concentrated our preliminary explanation. Gadamer seems to agree with Heidegger that the main task of an appropriate philosophy of art is to overcome modern aesthetics (that which he considers to have been born with Baumgarten and reinforced by Kant)[171] and the "dangerous process of subjectification"[172] which operates within it.

Contextualizing *The Origin of the Work of Art* in Heidegger's theoretical evolution, Gadamer underlines the cultural role of his master in the critique of contemporary Neo-Kantian philosophy and, at the same time, he recognizes him as a voice which stands far away from the irrational and vitalist tension that emerged in authors such as Nietzsche, Bergson (1859-1941), Dilthey (1833-1911), and Kierkegaard. The idea developed in *Sein und Zeit* against idealism and metaphysics – which Gadamer defines as follows: *Dasein* "knows that it is not master of itself and its own Dasein, but comes upon itself in the midst of beings and has to take itself over

[168] Franco Toscani, *L'"azzurro della scuola degli occhi". Terra e cielo di Hölderlin e di Heidegger*, CFR, Piateda 2012, p. 11.
[169] See Dantini, "Martin Heidegger 1931-1948", cit., pp. 142-143.
[170] Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 105 ("Eine gefährliche Subjektivierung" ["Ein Geschehen der Wahrheit", "Seinsentbergung und Seinsvergessenheit", "Es ist nicht möglich […] in der Subjektivität unseres eigenen Meinens gleichsam zur Erfüllung" [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 258]).
[171] See Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., pp. 15-22 (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 107-113).
[172] Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 101 ("Eine gefährliche Subjektivierung" [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 254].

as it finds itself"[173] – is presented as the theoretical core of Heidegger's ontology of art[174] beyond rationalism and irrationalism.

In Gadamer's interpretation, it is possible to recognize five main topics as the most relevant, from a theoretical point of view, in Heidegger's ontology of art: 1) the work of art "stands-in-itself", rests on the modality of "self-opening" and "self-closing-off"; 2) the work of art is not a sign of something else (an allegory), instead "it presents itself in its own Being, so that the beholder must tarry by it"[175]; 3) the concepts of form (*Form*) and matter (*Stoff*) are inadequate to grasp the ontology of art, because of their intrinsic dualism; 4) the essence of art is not the subjective experience of the ego, but instead the thrustful and tensional dimension of event, which is "a unique manifestation of truth": "Hence Heidegger's essay does not restrict itself to giving a more suitable description of the Being of the work of art. Rather, his analysis supports his central philosophical concern to conceive Being itself as an event of truth"[176]; 5) the essence of art is poeticizing (*Dichten*), certainly because of the importance attributed to poetry in relation to its specific language, but more generally, regarding all artistic expressions,[177] because the nature of the "poietic" and creative quality of art "does not consist in transforming something that is already formed or in copying something that is already in Being. Rather, art is the projection by which something new comes forth as true. The essence of the event of truth that is present in the work of art is that 'it opens up an open place'"[178].

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[173] *Ivi*, p. 99 ("weiß vielmehr in seinem eigen Selbstverständnis, daß es nicht Herr seiner selbst und seines eigenen Daseins ist, sondern sich inmitten des Seienden vorfindet und sich so zu übernehmen hat, wie es sich vorfindet" [*ivi*, p. 253]).

[174] In this respect, the evenemential continuity between the reflections of 1927 and the later mature considerations on art is still more prominent compared to the differences after the "turn" (*Kehre*), which have been for example emphasized, in our view too harshly, by Andrej Démuth and Slávka Démuthová in *One Phenomenological Approach to Beauty*, in «European Scientific Journal», February 2018, pp. 82-94, Doi: 10.19044/esj.2018.c3p7. Also Gadamer pointed out that the stream of Heidegger's reflections doesn't come across radical interruptions, instead encounters several subtle *Wendungen* ("twists") (see: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der eine Weg Martin Heideggers* (1986), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, cit., pp. 417-430).

[175] Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 104 ("Ein Kunstwerk […] stellt sich in seinem eigenen Sein dar, so daß der Betrachter zum Verweilen bei ihm genötigt wird" [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 256]). And Gadamer specifies (*ibidem* [*ibidem*]): "It is so very much present itself that the ingredients out of which it is composed – stone, color, tone, word – only come into a real existence of their own within the work of art itself" ("Es ist so sehr selbst da, daß umgekehrt das, woraus es gemacht ist, Stein, Farbe, Ton, Wort, selbst erst in ihm zu eigentlichem Dasein kommt").

[176] *Ivi*, p. 105 ("Heideggers Aufsatz beschränkt sich daher nicht darauf, eine angemessenere Beschreibung vom Sein des Kunstwerks zu geben. Es ist vielmehr sein zentrales philosophisches Anliegen, das Sein selbst als ein Geschehen der Wahrheit zu begreifen, das sich auf diese Analyse stützt" [*ivi*, p. 258]).

[177] Richardson clarifies this passage in the following terms: "All artistic creation bears a profound relationship to language, for the primary sense of language, according to Heidegger, is not to be simply an instrument of communication, but '…to bring beings as such for the first time into the Open…' (…) It is only because language as such is the primordial poetizing that poesy, which uses language as its medium, enjoys a primacy among other forms of art" (Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, cit., p. 410). But – we need to add – also visual expression involves language.

[178] Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., pp. 108-109 ("Er will damit sagen, daß nicht die Umformung von Vorgeformtem, nicht die Abbildung von zuvor schon Seiendem das Wesen der Kunst ausmacht, sondern der

All these considerations touch, from different angles, that "realm in which beings are known as disclosed in their unconcealedness"[179] – that is, the already-discussed *Lichtung*.

Gadamer therefore underscores that the core of Heidegger's ontology of art is the evenemential and epiphanic dimension of art. In his introduction to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Gadamer does not explicitly focus on the role of beauty, but the theoretical framework thereby developed is applied by him in other texts precisely as that hermeneutical horizon which is the background for the manifestation of beauty. These essays, together with the insights on the topic offered by *Truth and Method*, will be extensively analyzed in the next part of this chapter.

Although *The Origin of the Work of Art* is strangely never mentioned in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer was familiar with Heidegger's text while he was writing his *magnum opus*[180], and it is evident, as we shall try to show, that his mature ontology of art is born in a decisive confrontation with his master. If we take seriously Mario Perniola's intuition that the tension between the hermeneutics and the ontology of art is the core of Gadamer's search for a universal ontological structure, and that the being of the artwork corresponds to the epiphanies in which the artwork manifests itself[181], it is immediately apparent to which extent the Heideggerian legacy is fundamental to the construction of Gadamer's nevertheless original paradigm[182].

For instance, Gadamer's thesis that European culture over recent centuries has forgotten the real core of the experience of art, which is reduced to aesthetics and disconnected from any extra-methodic truth, is clearly influenced by Heidegger, as is the idea that artwork is mainly defined as that aesthetic structure which can open a world endowed with meaning. This process, which we have already discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the notion of "aesthetic non-differentiation" (*ästhetische Nichtunterscheidung*), is deeply connected to a non-

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Entwurf, durch den etwas Neues als Wahres hervorkommt: Daß 'sich eine offene Stelle aufschlägt'" [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 261]).

[179] *Ivi*, p. 106 ("Heidegger redet von der Lichtung des Seins, die erst den Bereich darstellt, in dem Seiendes als ent-borgen und in seiner Unverborgenheit erkannt wird" [*ivi*, p. 259]).

[180] *The Origin of the Work of Art* was firstly published in 1950, ten years before *Truth and Method*, but Heidegger's position on art was known even earlier by Gadamer, who attended to his 1936 lectures devoted to the ontology of art (see Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, cit., p. 155 and Gadamer's memories in *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 98 [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 252). Gadamer's introduction to the 1960 Reclam edition of the text was explicitly required by Heidegger – it was the first text where Gadamer openly and directly discussed Heidegger's philosophy, apart the almost coeval publication of *Truth and Method*, where the philosopher of Meßkirch is one of the main theoretical references. Gadamer's later reflections about his 1960 introduction are useful to clarify his position regarding Heidegger's essay. In the preface written for the already mentioned *Heidegger's ways*, published in English translation in 1994, he attributes a pivotal role to *The Truth of the Work of Art*. In fact, he recognized in it "some of the very questions I had voiced in *Truth and Method*" and which represented the beginning of a public dialogue with his master that he never stopped, in the "attempt to show that especially the Heidegger who had made this 'turn' [*Kehre*] after *Being and Time* was in truth continuing down the same path when he encountered questions probing the underpinnings of metaphysics and attempted to think an unknown future" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Preface*, in Id., *Heidegger's ways*, cit., pp. vii-viii).

[181] See Mario Perniola, *L'estetica del Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna 1997, pp. 96-97.

[182] On Heidegger's ambiguous reaction to *Truth and Method* see Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, cit., pp. 292-294.

substantialist and evenemential ontology in which reality is not disintegrated by a deconstructive force, but is instead reshaped in the dialogical movement of the hermeneutic circle.

At the end of *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger clearly expresses a provocation for contemporary thought and art, referring to the question of beauty as a pivotal issue of this challenge: "To the transformation of the essence of truth there corresponds the essential history of Western art. This can no more be grasped by taking beauty by itself than it can in terms of experience – supposing that the metaphysical concept of art is adequate to the essence of art"[183]. New concepts and theoretical configurations are indeed required.

One possible suggestion in order to reconsider this historical path for preparing a New Beginning (*Neuer Anfang*) for the comprehension of art is presented, among many other stimuli, in an account given elsewhere by Heidegger on the simple but concrete act of painting. In fact, Heidegger affirms, seeming to express the importance of the concrete and performative gesture in considering art: "Painting is essentially to project (ὑπόθεσις) the one aspect in whose unity *beauty* is shown"[184]. In his controversial *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger also refers to a mysterious "the other of art" (*das Andere der Kunst*), which seems to refer to a new kind of art where "the setting-into-the work of truth"[185] is made possible.

Is it possible to attribute to Gadamer's ontology of art, with his deepening and re-elaboration of Heidegger's theory, and with his particular focus on the notion of beauty, the capacity to develop this hermeneutical path, in which the "hermeneutic turn" is reconnected to the ontology of art[186]? In the next sections, we will try to respond to this question.

2.2.2 Towards a Renewed Evenemential Ontology of Beauty

As already argued, it is not possible to discuss Gadamer's interpretation of beauty without starting from its "Heideggerian" connection with a dynamic and metamorphic interpretation of

[183] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 52 ("Dem Wesenswandel der Wahrheit entspricht die Wesensgeschichte der abendländischen Kunst. Diese ist aus der für sich genommenen Schönheit so wenig zu begreifen wie aus dem Erlebnis, gesetzt, daß der metaphysische Begriff von der Kunst in ihr Wesen reicht" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., pp. 69-70]).

[184] Heidegger, *"Remembrance"*, cit., pp. 156-157 ("Das Malen hat sein Wesentliches im Entwurf (*ὑπόθεσις*) des einen Anblicks, in dessen Einsicht *das Schöne* sich zeigt" [Heidegger, *»Andenken«*, cit., p. 135]).

[185] "*Das Ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit*" (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 95: *Überlegungen VII-XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938/39)*, ed. by Peter Trawny, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 137).

[186] See István M. Fehér, *Kunst und Wahrheit bei Heidegger und Gadamer*, in «Philobiblon», vol. XIX, nr. 2, 2014, pp. 538-556, where the capability of hermeneutics to renew the meaning of worn out concepts – especially artistic notions – is extensively discussed.

the notion of event (defined by Gadamer as *Ereignis* and as *Geschehen*, in Heidegger's terms, but also as *Seinsvorgang*). This concept will be considered in this context under the Heideggerian philosophical perspective and not in relation with the performative studies, where this notion is also relevant, but in a different perspective, which will be taken up only in the second part of our research, in order to underline some specific elements of Nitsch's art.

The role of the very notion of *Ereignis* ("event" as "appropriation", "adaptation" from the verb *eignen*, "to appropriate", to "be apt or suitable for") in Heidegger's philosophy is undoubtedly fundamental. Its multiple complex theoretical implications cannot be touched in our research, as we will mainly focus on this notion's connection to the realm of the beautiful – in which it also retains a pivotal role[187]. It is, however, preliminarily possible to connect it to the previously approached vast lexicon related to the domain of manifestation, openness, unconcealment: all of the latter, considered through the hermeneutical lens of *Ereignis*, represent fundamental pivots in the theoretical line that unifies Heidegger and Gadamer in a post-metaphysical and non-substantialist ontology.

Ereignis is the concept through which Heidegger defines the mode of Being itself: firstly, its historical essence[188], which means that it should be thought within the dynamic categories of "happening"; secondly, its structural reference to man: by being *Er-eignis* (as appropriative event), Heidegger refers to the already mentioned reciprocal belonging of *Sein* and *Dasein*. The event is not simply everything that happens, but what, by happening, concerns the very concrete subject who experiences it in the *hic et nunc*[189,] reacting to its irruption in history through the production of actions and facts[190]. Falyov explains: "In Heidegger, event and meaning are categories of the same order, almost identical. Both of them annul subject-object duality: while thought is inherently subjective, meaning is not; Being can be 'objective', but an event can not. Both event and meaning are real from the perspective where the observer is simultaneously the

[187] In the treatment of this theoretical connection, we follow the fundamental association of Heidegger's philosophy of art with the coeval theory of *Ereignis* thematized by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann in his *Heideggers Philosophie der Kunst. Eine systematische Interpretation der Holzwege-Abhandlung „Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes"*, Klostermann, 2. erweiterte Auflage, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

[188] In the sense of *Geschichtlichkeit*, which Heidegger opposes to *Historizität*, which is referred to the mere object of historical science (*Historie*).

[189] On the possibility to attribute in Gadamer's aesthetical hermeneutics a positive role to the notion of experience understood as *Erfahrung* (against the subjectivist and empirical *Erlebnis* criticized by him and Heidegger) see the chapter 3.1.

[190] The relational nuance which transforms a mere incident into an event has been understood and highlighted by the Italian philologist and philosopher Carlo Diano (1902-1974) in his seminal essay *Forma ed Evento* (1952), now in Id., *Opere*, ed. by Francesca Diano, with texts by Massimo Cacciari and Silvano Tagliagambe, Bompiani, Milano 2022, pp. 47-87 (see also Diano's letter to Pietro de Francisci (1953), in *ivi*, pp. 91-100). Eventually, on Diano's notion of Event, see Massimo Cacciari, *Metafisica concreta*, Adelphi, Milano 2023, pp. 272-274.

creator of the observed picture and a part of it"[191]. *Ereignis* is, in conclusion, the law "which governs how entities become manifest as what they are – namely, it ordains that something's essence is disclosed in terms of that to which it is adapted or well-suited"[192].

The Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari has extensively described the ontology of the Event within the framework of his own philosophical system, but in terms which can also help us understand the ontological core of this notion in Heidegger's view: "Being, by occurring, accords in itself the indeterminable infinity of causes, of which it is also an effect, with the irreducible singularity of its own arising. In the manifestation of the latter, that indeterminable foundation is removed, goes down, *falls away* and behold: *der Fall ist*. The cause has *revealed* itself in the thing-*Fall*, ek-sists in it alone – and in the moment in which it happens, it happens precisely to us (it also takes on the proper character of the event)"[193].

For Gadamer, the event takes on a productive character because it is what basically makes things happen and lets history manifest, causing concrete interactions and reactions; it requires, therefore, a hermeneutical practice of comprehension in order to "complete" it by corresponding to it. The importance which Gadamer attributed to the evenemential dimension particularly emerges if we pay attention to the fact that one of Gadamer's first proposals for the title of his main theoretical text, which was eventually entitled *Truth and Method*, was *Understanding and Event* (*Verstehen und Geschehen*)[194].

Heidegger had already pointed out that if Being *is not*, it is rather given and "happens" in the *Ereignis*, its appearing implies a relation to be experienced and a language to be expressed. The lingual dimension of Being, which is so important both in Heidegger's and Gadamer's thought,

[191] Falyov, *Heidegger's Hermeneutics*, cit., p. 247. On the relationship between Time and Event – conceived through a Leibnizian monadological interpretation of Augustine's notion of eternity – see Falyov's chapter "Heidegger's Philosophy of History" (*ivi*, pp. 243-291).

[192] See Mark A. Wrathall, *Adaptation (Ereignis)*, in Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, cit., pp. 19-30. On the evenemential dimension of Heideggerian thought, Vincenzo Vitiello has very well written: "The *Ereignis* – this untranslatable word, like the Greek Λόγος and the Chinese Tao – names the pure happening, the event that is beyond all sense and end. Against God-cause and God-end, against any interpretation of Being as the ground and foundation of Being, Heidegger affirms the 'eventual' nature of Being" (Vincenzo Vitiello, *Utopia del nichilismo: tra Nietzsche e Heidegger*, Guida, Napoli 1983, p. 84). Similarly, Reinhard May sees in Heidegger's later thought an identification of the "clearing" with a cosmic "nothing" (*Nichts*), understood as the empty space in which what-is appears, with a comparison with Chinese philosophy (see Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources. East Asian Influences on his Work*, trans. by Graham Parkes, Routledge, London-New York 1996 as well as Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event*, Routledge, London-New York 2008). Japanese philosophy and Zen Buddhism are also significant sources with which Heidegger confronted his philosophical paradigm.

[193] Cacciari, *Metafisica concreta*, cit., p. 264.

[194] See Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, cit., p. 13.

finds its ontological roots in this evenemential paradigm[195]. It is incorrect to imagine a fixed Being which historically appears; instead, it is precisely this event which is the core of Being, its productive and creative disposition. With this awareness, Gadamer speaks of the "productivity of the course of events" (*Produktivität des Geschehens*)[196].

After all, the value which Gadamer attributes to the notion of Event is also strictly connected to Christian tradition, where the worth of the divine word (*verbum*, *logos*) cannot be separated from its historical appearance. The content of Christian doctrine is indeed nothing without its self-giving, its manifestation. This anti-dualistic epistemological structure is conveyed by Gadamer in a secular theoretical principle which emerges in statements such as: "The meaning of the word cannot be detached from the event of proclamation. *Quite the contrary, being an event is a characteristic belonging to the meaning itself*"[197]. Boehm defines this imaginative approach (expressing productive imaginative thinking) to knowledge as an "iconic Logos"[198]. The dimension of meaning – and therefore also the content of the aesthetical experience – is a relation with the manifestation (or epiphany) and its historical occurrence. In this historical occurrence, however, it is re-presented as something which is not merely historical, but which exceeds history, although our being (also according to Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit*) is always historical. As noticed by Vattimo, "the conception of representation as event brings justice to the historicity of existence. (...) it is not a question of seeking an impossible reconstruction of the original conditions in which the work was born. The meaning is not linked to the relocation of the work into its original historical world, but *happens* when the work is inserted into our world"[199]. Furthermore, as Davey explains in his seminal monograph on Gadamer's philosophy of art, "the occasion of presentation might be metaphysically arbitrary but, hermeneutically speaking, its occurrence is far from coincidental. Its emergence

[195] See Mimmo Pesare, *La metafora ontologica dell'Evento (Heidegger)*, in Id., *Le metafore della Umbildung. Saperi e trasformazioni del Soggetto contemporaneo*, vol. 1, Università del Salento, 2012, pp. 41-60, especially pp. 52-57.
[196] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 297 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 302). It happens also in language: the linguistic should take into account not only the connection between words and things in a dualistic and mimetic approach, but needs to consider also the "*process of concept formation*" (*Prozeß der Begriffsbildung*) (*ivi*, p. 426 [*ivi*, p. 431]).
[197] *Ibidem* ("Der Sinn des Wortes ist vom Geschehen der Verkündigung nicht ablösbar. *Der Geschehenscharakter gehört vielmehr zum Sinne selbst*" [*ibidem*]).
[198] Gottfried Boehm, *Das Bild und die hermeneutische Reflexion*, in Günter Figal and Hans-Helmut Gander (eds.), *"Dimensionen des Hermeneutischen". Heidegger und Gadamer*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 23-35: 32.
[199] Gianni Vattimo, *L'ontologia ermeneutica nella filosofia contemporanea*, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e Metodo*, ed. by Gianni Vattimo, Bompiani, Milano 2014, pp. XXIX-LIV: XXXIX.

presupposes that the spectator is already placed within networks of meanings compatible with the form of the presentation itself"[200].

This view is deepened by Gadamer precisely in relation to Heidegger's philosophy of art, and especially regarding *The Origin of the Work of Art.* Works of art do not appear thus in their simple material and objective presence, but instead in the event of their interpretation within the hermeneutic circle. We agree with Theodore George that in Gadamer's philosophy, "the truth claim of an artistic piece does not appear as a simple formulation of its significance, a summary of its message, either. Instead, this claim takes shape in the culmination of our interpretive experience of an artistic piece, a culmination that cannot be isolated from the event *through* and *as* which it is presented"[201].
The work of art is not the representation of the essence of something, but the "happening" which allows men to encounter the world embodied and manifested by the work of art itself. This relation detains, according to Heidegger, an essentially sacred nature, because it allows, through the imaginative pre-figuration of the evenemential transformation of *Dasein* in *Sein*, the incorporation of the invisible domain into history. Indeed, art possesses the power of tracing out the movement of truth and meaning, even without representing or expressing its specific content, just by hinting at it. In this perspective, both Heidegger and Gadamer reject the interpretation of artwork as a copy of a specific image, content or meaning, instead underscoring its role in the defense and safeguard of the mysterious and ineffable core of entities[202]. The world of art reflects the excess and resistance of beings to a full intellectual and rational capture: the overflow of life which goes also through artworks exceeds pure conceptualization[203].

Gadamer's interest in the evenemential character of the disclosure of truth and beauty does not pertain only to the ontological dimension of event[204], but, as is typical of his already discussed

[200] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 129.
[201] Theodore George, *From Work to Play. Gadamer on the Affinity of Art, Truth and Beauty*, in «Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik», Band 10, 2011: *50 Jahre Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 107-122: 110.
[202] An original theoretical foundation of a conception of beauty as "aesthetics *parusia* of mystery" has been recently developed in Francesco Paolo Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché. Per una fenomenologia del mistero*, ETS, Pisa 2021. See in particular chapter 7 (pp. 153-168). Ciglia's description of the phenomenology of the aesthetics' event of beauty as a manifestation of the mystery through figures of meditation deeply resonates with the hermeneutics proposal we are developing.
[203] See Nielsen, *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics*, cit., p. 63.
[204] In fact, Gadamer declares that when something appears, presenting itself in a specific way, "this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being. Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being" (*Truth and Method*, cit., p. 135; "ist dies kein beiläufiger Vorgang mehr, sondern gehört zu seinem eigenen Sein. Jede solche Darstellung ist ein Seinsvorgang und macht den Seinsrang des Dargestellten mit aus. Durch die Darstellung erfährt es gleichsam einen Zuwachs an Sein" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 145]). Thus,

way of thinking, is also concerned with the qualitative experience of the participant(s) in the event. In fact, although Gadamer's criticism of modern subjectivism and aestheticism[205] prevents him from reducing the ontology of the event to the mere experience of a perceiving subject, his attention to the concrete structures of reality determines a deep interest towards the human pole of (and in) the event. The inseparability of the coming to visibility of something and the recognition of it by a subject engaged in the process is a pivotal point of Gadamer's paradigm. The recognition underlined as the fundamental gain in the experience of symbolic images appears again in the discussion of the beautiful: it brings light over what is recognized – and by recognizing, the subject is transformed.

Moreover, the ontological quality of the artistic experience is preserved in Gadamer's theory from its modern separation from the everyday world. A continuity is established between art and the domain of knowledge and truth, which are all together reunified in coherence within the extra-methodic tendency of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

The Platonic legacy is also significant in this domain[206]: in fact, the human participation in the event of Being can be more articulately understood if we consider the attention which Gadamer devoted to the Platonic notion of *methexis*, that mutual relation of participation which is the "being-together" of the Origin and of the men historically taking part in it[207]. The ontology of

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we don't agree with Sallis' thesis (see John Sallis, *The Hermeneutics of the Artwork. Die Ontologie des Kunstwerks und ihre hermeneutische Bedeutung (GW 1, 87-138)*, in Günter Figal (ed.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2007, pp. 45-57: 55) that the truth in Gadamer's ontology of art is limited to ontic truth (the truth of entities), because the event always implies the preconditions of it, i.e. that "not founded fundament" of reality: Gadamer's comprehension of artistic truth should be thus interpreted under the light of that relational ontology of beauty and truth which we are trying to reconstruct in this whole chapter.

[205] According to the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the contemporary global massive process of aestheticization is accompanied by a social and cultural anesthetization: the likeness, the radical immanence and the smoothness of mainstream contemporary artworks please our subjective sense (and gratifies our "autoerotic" ego) but doesn't evoke anymore the radical shaking determined by beauty (see Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. by Daniel Steuer, Polity Press, Cambridge-Medford 2018). Han's contribution can be read also in the critical hermeneutical line born with Gadamerian ontology of art.

[206] Under this respect, Gadamer's reference to Plato and Neoplatonic authors as a possible source for his building up a new ontology of art and beauty profoundly differs from Heidegger's critique of Platonic dualism, which he sees as opposed to the early Greeks' sensitivity. On this topic see, among the others: Joe Balay, *Heidegger on the Semblance of the Beautiful*, in «Research in Phenomenology», vol. 47, nr. 3, 2017, pp. 351-365; Gentili, *Fare i conti con il maestro*, cit., pp. 97-103; Andrew Fuyarchuk, *Gadamer's Plath to Plato. A Response to Heidegger and a Rejoinder by Stanley Rosen*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene (OR) 2010, pp. 1-102. Gadamer openly discusses this topic ten years after Heidegger's death in his *On the Way Back to the Beginning* (1986), in Id., *Hermeneutics between History and Philosophy: The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. by Pol Vandevelde and Arun Iyer, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2019, pp. 247-270 ([Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Auf dem Rückgang zum Anfang* (1986), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, cit., pp. 394-416).

[207] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato as Portraitist*, in Id., *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. by Richard E. Palmer, Northwestern University Press, Evanston (USA) 2007, pp. 293-321 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato als Porträtist* (1988), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 7, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1987, pp. 228-257).

beauty requires a participatory act in an original context of interdependence, in which the connection between all the poles of the Whole of reality can prepare the openness to the new[208]. This emphasis on the human role – considered from a non-subjectivist perspective – in the artistic experience represents a sign of a rehabilitation of the humanist tradition which had been completely rejected by Heidegger in his seminal 1947 *Letter on Humanism* (*Über den Humanismus*): Plato represents for Gadamer a relevant source in this path – a "midwife for a dialogical hermeneutics of language, which can (…) be understood as a correction of Heidegger's fetishized onto-theology"[209], according to Jean Grondin.
Moreover, unlike Heidegger, Gadamer does not think of art primarily in terms of work – although in *Truth and Method* traces of this ontological "Heideggerian" perspective are still present –, but mainly as creation (*Gebilde*)[210] or, as we'll discuss later, in terms of play.

Also because of this radically non-objectifying approach, which was already promoted by Heidegger, Gadamer's comprehension of art and beauty can be understood through the notion of "epiphany". This term is not literally adopted by Gadamer in his theoretical construction, but it is, in our opinion, a relevant interpretative key to connect several other Gadamerian aesthetical notions and to find a bridge between the concepts of image, symbol, and event. In fact, if we assume the notion of epiphany as that "manifestation" which is the "modality" through which objects appear as the objective poles within the artistic experience (works of art, in this perspective, are not "substantially" art, but manifest themselves as forms of art thanks to the "background" of the artistic experience), we can define a relational way of bringing together in the artistic experience *images* as features of representation, *symbols* as that representative and unitive dimension which connects subject and object, and eventually the *event* as the extra-ordinary revelation of a new plane of reality which can be lived and understood precisely in that manifestation, when art makes a claim upon us, speaking to our senses and, simultaneously, increasing our comprehension of the world. That's why, according to Nicholas Davey, "the importance of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics lies in the suggestion that the power of an

[208] See Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., pp. 103-105. It is particularly relevant to notice that the concept of "participation" in Gadamer is characterized by "a double interactive valence: by virtue of its participation, the part is both informed by the semantic horizons in which it is placed and informs those same horizons when engaged with its meanings. (…) The notion of participation also strengthens the emphasis given to *Erfahrung* and the movement of understanding it articulates. Hermeneutical part–whole structures cannot be understood from the 'outside', as it were, but only by being participated in" (*ivi*, p. 104).
[209] Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, cit., p. 291.
[210] An artistic piece "is defined precisely by not being a piece of work that has just been turned out and could be turned out again and again. On the contrary, it is something that has emerged in an unrepeatable way and has manifested itself in a unique fashion. It seems to me, therefore, that it would be more accurate to call it a creation (*Gebilde*) than a work" (Gadamer, *The play of art*, cit., p. 126 [Gadamer, *Das Spiel der Kunst* (1977), cit., pp. 88-89]).

artwork resides not in itself, as an autonomous aesthetic object, but in its dialogical capacity to 'effect' change in a spectator's field of understanding"[211].

Thus, there is an epiphanic dimension in the main concepts adopted in Gadamer's paradigm, which tries to overcome the substantialism that, according to him (following Heidegger's legacy), is the main theoretical problem of Western metaphysics. Gadamer's philosophy is precisely an attempt to overcome metaphysical dualism, and the concept of epiphany should also be understood in this speculative context. In fact, epiphany shows the original unity of form and content, subject and object, in which the two poles are distinguished, but not mutually exclusive: by bringing things to visibility, epiphany makes the event of art, which is always, from a hermeneutic perspective, an event of interpretation and knowledge, concretely possible and evident. The correlation of the two poles precedes their distinguished manifestation: in the epiphany they can represent this original connection.

Gadamer's theory can also be understood through Husserl's reflections. As underlined in *Truth and Method*, referring to phenomenological reasoning, "we cannot conceive subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, because this concept of subjectivity would itself be conceived in objective terms. Instead, his transcendental phenomenology seeks to be 'correlation research.' But this means that the relation is the primary thing, and the 'poles' into which it unfolds itself are contained within it, just as what is alive contains all its expressions of life in the unity of its organic being"[212].

Epiphany is that dimension in which phenomena are brought to visibility, and in this respect it is the third element which stands between the observer and the observed and makes the relation possible. It consists of, we could say, the light of the manifestation. And the artwork is a specific case of epiphany, because its evenemential dimension has an exceptional, intense, and ecstatic quality[213], in the etymological sense of *ekstasis*, in which the observer is "taken out" of himself within the aesthetic experience. However, this ecstatic dimension, which according to *Sein und Zeit* is a constitutive quality of *Dasein*, is reinforced in an emblematic way in relation to beauty. This aesthetic quality was already thematized in Greek philosophy, where beauty is precisely

[211] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 11.

[212] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 241 ("Ist doch, daß man nicht Subjektivität als Gegensatz gegen Objektivität denken darf, weil ein solcher Begriff von Subjektivität selber objektivistisch gedacht wäre. Seine transzendentale Phänomenologie will statt dessen 'Korrelationsforschung' sein. Das aber sagt: das Verhältnis Ist das Primäre, und die 'Pole', in die es sich auseinanderfaltet, sind von ihm selbst umschlossene, so wie das Lebendige alle seine Lebensäußerungen in der Einheitlichkeit seines organischen Seins umschließt" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 253]).

[213] See also Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 41 (Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 55).

conceived as a kind of field of forces enabled with a strong attractive faculty, immediately dispositioning men in its favor and pushing them towards it.
Gadamer emphasizes that the epiphanic dimension of art cannot be separated from its content; instead, it itself is somehow its main content: "A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being. To be fixed in a picture, addressed in a poem, to be the object of an allusion from the stage, are not incidental and remote from what the thing essentially is; they are presentations of the essence itself. (…) With respect to the element of occasionality, these phenomena represent particular cases of a general relationship that obtains for the being of the work of art: namely that it experiences a continued determination of its meaning from the 'occasion' of its coming-to-presentation"[214].
Epiphany can also represent a bridge to the question of the sacred, a point which we will touch upon in other chapters of the research ahead, especially in relation to Nitsch and Kiefer. According to the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, in fact, the sacred manifests itself always through an epiphanic manifestation (which he calls "hierophany")[215]: the relation between men and the sacred can take place only in the epiphanic and evenemential experience.

The theoretical focus which Gadamer devotes to the notion of event should be considered together with the concrete "events" which are engaged through the hermeneutic lens. Apart from play, on which we'll subsequently turn to express significant remarks, we should mention that Gadamer is deeply interested in festivals[216]. The festive celebration is presented by him as a unitive process where the participants are gathered in a meaningful experience. In festivals, another order of reality (a different time, a different aesthetic experience) emerges: "Something drawn from within ourselves takes shape before our eyes in a form that we recognise and experience as a more profound presentation of our own reality"[217]. The quality of festivals,

[214] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 141 ("Ein Kunstwerk gehört mit dem, worauf es Bezug hat, so sehr zusammen, daß es dessen Sein wie durch einen neuen Seinsvorgang bereichert. Im Bilde Festgehalten-sein, im Gedicht Angeredet-werden, Zielpunkt einer Anspielung von der Bühne her sein, das sind nicht Beiläufigkeiten, die dem Wesen fernbleiben, sondern Darstellungen dieses Wesens selbst. [...] So stellt sich das Moment der Okkasionalität, das in den genannten Erscheinungen begegnet, als der Sonderfall eines allgemeinen Verhältnisses dar, das dem Sein des Kunstwerks zukommt, aus der 'Gelegenheit' seines Zur-Darstellung-Kommens eine Fortbestimmung seiner Bedeutung zu erfahren" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 152]).
[215] See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, cit.
[216] On the Heideggerian origin of the hermeneutical interest in the time-play-space of "the festival" see the dissertation of Mathias Warnes, *Heidegger and the Festival of Being: from the Bridal Festival to the Round Dance*, The University of British Columbia, 2012.
[217] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The festive character of theater*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 57-65: 60 ("Hier wird etwas aus uns herausgestaltet und wird vor uns selbst Gestalt, was wir al seine überlegene Wirklichkeit unser selbst erfahren und anerkennen" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters* (1954), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 296-304: 298]). See also Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World. A Theory of Festivity*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 1999.

which symbolize the construction of a communal experience where the egoistic individual is overcome, can help to express an analogy to a broader concept: the existence of what Davey defines as a "substantive horizon of ever-changing constellations of meaning that transcend subjective consciousness"[218], which corresponds to the already considered evenemential background on which our existence (and, in our perspective, our search for beauty) is founded. The *Festlichkeit* ("festive character") of the artistic experience mainly depends on the fact that "the artwork *festivises*: it reveals our personal indebtedness to past and future communities of meaning. The festive event of art demonstrates that we belong to a hermeneutic collective which serves as the effective underpinning of art's ability to communicate in a language-like manner"[219]. In the communal intersubjective atmosphere of the festival the participants are united in a creative experience where art manifests itself as a living and creative holistic organism. As expressed by Małgorzata Hołda, "Gadamer's reflection on festival plays an important role in his ontological shift from the human subject as oriented toward self-control to a hermeneutic conversation with Being. The notions of play and symbol draw our attention to the communicative function of art. He grieves the loss of the celebrative spirit and the acuteness of the separation between the self and the Other. If play underlines the cooperative character of our participation in art, festival is evocative of its communal aspect. Gadamer's investigation of play and festival as two forms of experiencing art interweaves with his insistence on the ontological backdrop of hermeneutic aesthetics"[220].

The artworks of Kiefer and Nitsch perfectly embody, from different perspectives, this festive dimension of art: the tragic theatrical nature of Nitsch's performance exhaustively confirms, with its Dionysian approach, Gadamer's thesis that ritual, play, and art are intimately connected by their shared performative nature and their rich symbolism, so that "it is only a step from ritual dance to ritual observances taking the form of representation. And from there, to the liberation of representation in the theater, for example, which emerged from this ritual context. Or to the visual arts, whose decorative and expressive function arose out of the context of religious life. All the forms merge with one another"[221]; the meditative aesthetics of Kiefer

[218] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 50.
[219] *Ibidem*.
[220] Małgorzata Hołda, *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful*, Peter Lang, Berlin 2021, p. 144.
[221] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 24 ("Aber ich hoffe gezeigt zu haben, daß das kaum noch ein Schritt ist, was da vom kultischen Tanz zu der als Darstellung gemeinten Begehung des Kultes führt. Und daß es kaum ein Schritt ist, der von da zu der Freisetzung der Darstellung führt, etwa zum Theater, das aus diesem Kultzusammenhang als seine Darstellung herauswuchs. Oder zur bildenden Kunst, deren Schmuck- und Ausdrucksfunktion im Ganzen eines religiösen Lebenszusammenhanges erwächst.

clearly rejects festival as a *topos* and as a cheerful atmosphere, instead reinstalling symbolic and mystic atmosphere in order to allow secular men to relate to a transcendent dimension through immanent instruments and functions. This merging of forms, however, acquires a paradoxical "festive" character in the unitive and communal sense, emerging in painful meditations as acts of historical mourning[222], which are proposed as the preparation of the advent of a new community. Reflecting on the German totalitarian past, Kiefer further and further develops this towards a cosmic and meta-political representation: the festival moves in his artwork from the earth to the heavenly skies.

Going back to Gadamer's reflections, we eventually come to an open treatment of the concept of "beauty". In *Truth and Method*, the philosopher proposes a brief history of the concept of the beautiful (*der Begriff des Schönen*)[223], from the Greek birth of this notion – strictly related to the metaphysical dimension – to its progressive disappearance in Western thought, which found its peak in the 19th-century[224]. Here, in fact, the philosophical attention moves from the idea of the beautiful to the topic of art: "The problems of aesthetics were transferred to art. We can now see that there was a metaphysical process behind this. This switch to the point of view of art ontologically presupposes a mass of being thought of as formless or ruled by mechanical laws. The artistic mind of man, which mechanically constructs useful things, will ultimately understand all beauty in terms of the work of his own mind"[225].

Gadamer highlights the value of Platonic metaphysical paradigm in relation to beauty, which explains the connection between aesthetics and ethics, between form and content within the work of art, and also the relational dimension of art (beauty is a figure of *parousia* and *metexis*, acting as medium between the phenomena and the ideas). Because of this interpretation, Gadamer rejects Heidegger's reductionism of Platonism as the metaphysics of "adequacy",

Das geht ineinander über" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 115]).

[222] See Daniel Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, Thames & Hudson, London 2001, pp. 118-161.

[223] A detailed discussion of Heidegger's interpretation of the history of aesthetics, including his confrontation with the classical Western sources, is offered in Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on art and art works*, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1985.

[224] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 472-474 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 481-483).

[225] *Ivi*, p. 474 ("Wir haben oben geschildert, wie erst mit dem 19. Jahrhundert die ästhetische Problematik sich auf den Standpunkt der Kunst umlegt. Wir sehen jetzt, daß dem ein metaphysischer Vorgang zugrunde liegt. Eine solche Umlegung auf den Standpunkt der Kunst setzt ontologisch eine gestaltlos gedachte bzw. eine von mechanischen Gesetzen
regierte Seinsmasse voraus. Der menschliche Kunstgeist, der aus mechanischer Konstruktion Nützliches bildet, wird auch alles Schöne schließlich von dem Werk seines eigenen Geistes her verstehen" [ivi, p. 483]).

underlining the "poetic" – in the Heideggerian sense of the *Dichter*, the seer and wise poet – quality of Plato's philosophy, in which wisdom, religion, and poetry stand in unity[226].

However, Gadamer, who is a radical critic of classical metaphysics, also thanks to Husserl's and Heidegger's theories, believes that we cannot go back to a mere objective and realistic idea of beauty – which, by the way, he does not see in Plato's philosophy, as he instead considers it to be similar and preparatory to the idea of a universal hermeneutics[227]. Because of this awareness, his position on this topic cannot be reduced to a mere form of cultural conservatism, but rather represents a kind of reshaping of this topic outside any pre-given and idealistic conception of beauty[228].

Rather, from a theoretical point of view, we need to rethink it in a non-substantialist way, interpreting the Platonic concept of beauty through the Greek idea of *aletheia* (truth as "shining revelation of what comes to presence"[229]) and the Christian metaphysics of light[230]. Beauty performs an anagogic function which operates in connecting the different levels of reality by making them visible[231]. Thus, Plato understrands beauty, like truth, not as an object of knowledge, but instead as the condition of the very possibility of its very appearance[232]: "The beautiful appears not only in what is visibly present to the senses, but it does so in such a way that it really exists only through it – i.e., emerges as one out of the whole. The beautiful is of itself truly 'most radiant' (*to ekphanestaton*)"[233].

The essence of the beautiful is characterized by its "radiance": it is not "simply symmetry, but appearance itself"[234]. In this interpretative line, Gadamer strips the Platonic view of beauty of its normative meaning, underlining its epiphanic dimension. From this perspective, it becomes

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[226] Gadamer often expressed the thesis that his studies on Plato were the most original side of his philosophical speculation. See, for example, *I greci e la poesia: Colloquio con Hans Georg Gadamer*, interview with Anna Cazzullo and Cristina Zaltieri, in «Paradosso: Quadrimestrale di filosofia», 1992, n. 1, pp. 133-138: 133.

[227] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 480-481 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 490-491).

[228] See George, *From Work to Play*, cit.

[229] Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Earth and Heaven*, cit., p. 186 ("die scheinende Entbergung des Anwesenden" [Heidegger, *Hörlderlins Erde und Himmel*, cit., p. 161]).

[230] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 477-478 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 487-488). On the importance of the metaphysics of light in relation to beauty in Platonic and Medieval Neoplatonic tradition (with the notion of *claritas*), see Umberto Eco (ed.), *Storia della bellezza*, Bompiani, Milano 2004, pp. 102-104, 125-129.

[231] See Reale, *La presenza di Platone in "Verità e Metodo"*, cit., p. XVIII.

[232] See Vincenzo Vitiello, *Cristianità. Dalla Teologia politica alla Testimonianza*, festivalfilosofia, Modena 2009, pp. 9-11.

[233] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 476 ("Das Schöne erscheint nicht nur an dem, was sinnlich sichtbar da ist, sondern so, daß dieses eben dadurch erst eigentlich da ist, d. h. sich als Eines aus allem heraushebt. Das Schöne ist wirklich von sich aus 'am meisten hervorleuchtend' (*to ekphanestaton*)" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 485]). See also Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., pp. 14-15 (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 105-106).

[234] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 477 ("Nicht einfach Symmetrie, sondern der Vorschein selbst" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 486]). See the chapter "The Radiance Theory of Beauty and Gadamer's Aesthetics" in Jean Paul Bourgeois, *The Aesthetics Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Peter Lang, New York 2007, pp. 15-19.

clear that the beautiful has an intimate relationship to the dimension of event and with the concept of epiphany: it is precisely that aesthetical and gnoseological experience which impacts men, letting them perceive the different dimension of realities as visible. Beautiful is neither a thing nor an objective quality, but instead a *relation in the event between man and truth*.

Seen from an artistic perspective, this conception helps develop the shift from the conception of art as object or work to a conception of art as enactment[235]. In fact, "if Gadamer upholds the classical triad of goodness, truth, and beauty, he is not therefore concerned with the sensuous representation of an order that belongs to a ready-made universe, but, instead, with the enactment of a measure that arises from and circulates within the freedom involved in human life and play"[236]. The beautiful helps spectators approach and draw near to that dimension of reality which is still unseen and is yet to be disclosed. We can draw out the relation of aesthetical appearing to the *Wesen* of what appears, i.e., in Heideggerian terms, the "essencing", the temporal unfolding of an *ens*, rather than to a mere copy of it.

Therefore, to affirm that the ontological status of the beauty is that of appearance does not at all mean that its essence is "false" or "superficial": its *Scheinen* takes place in the sense of *Hervorscheinen* or *Hervorleuchten*, meaning to "shine out"[237]. Artistic epiphanies do not diminish what is real and true, but rather they actualize them, bringing into relief their otherwise hidden aspects: art should be thus seen as "the raising up of this reality into its truth"[238]. This "metaphysics of radiance" points out that the appearance of something beautiful "radiates" outward from its essential being, attracting men to itself through the power of the aesthetic form of its own disclosure.

Interpreting the Platonic criticism of artwork as a mere copy not in terms of a definitory ontological statement, but instead as a form of irony against this widespread notion, Gadamer believes that "the Platonic doctrine of the beautiful immediately testifies against the artwork as a copy", adding that "this view has found followers from Plotinus to Hegel", with whom he

[235] Nicholas Davey underscores the importance attributed by Gadamer to art's "capacity to effect a transformative engagement" (*Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 12).

[236] George, *From Work to Play*, cit., p. 120.

[237] Heidegger had already similarly noted, referring to Plato (in *Nietzsche*, vol. 1-2: *The Will to Power as Art. The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins, San Francisco 1991, pp. 196-197): "The beautiful is called that which is the most radiant […]. According to its most proper essence, the beautiful is what is most radiant and sparkling in the sensuous realm, in a way that, as such brilliance, it lets Being scintillate at the same time" ("Das Schöne wird das Hervorscheinendste genannt […]. Das Schöne ist seinem eigensten Wesen nach das im sinnlichen Bereich Hervorscheinendste, das Aufglänzendste, derart, daß es als dieses Geleucht zugleich das Sein aufleuchten läßt" [Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6.1, ed. by Brigitte Schillbach, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp. 199-200]).

[238] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 112 ("die Aufhebung dieser Wirklichkeit in die Wahrheit" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 118]).

also situates his own position. "For us, however", Gadamer eventually explains, "what is essential is that we have to do here with an appearing [*Er-Scheinen*]. As a shining forth [*Scheinen*] this is in keeping with its essence as shifting appearance. And yet there is still the unique shining-forth of the beautiful that is the magic of art, whether it be in our seeing or our hearing, in our experiencing of the sculpture, poetry, or music"[239].

The beautiful, therefore, is not a technical quality of the object of art perceived by a subject, but the enchanting experience of the shining of truth in art. In this respect, Gadamer remains deeply Heideggerian: "The light that causes everything to emerge in such a way that it is evident and comprehensible in itself is the light of the word. Thus, the close relationship that exists between the shining forth (*Vorscheinen*) of the beautiful and the evidentness (*das Einleuchtende*) of the understandable is based on the metaphysics of light. This was precisely the relation that guided our hermeneutical inquiry"[240].The beautiful has thus to be understood as an image that shines forth and is beheld. In this regard, István M. Fehér is right to highlight that Gadamer's "metaphysics of beauty (…) is based on the previously developed ontological comprehension of image, or simply on the ontology of image surrounding it"[241].

In the character of its evidence, the beautiful is rooted in the long historical-philosophical tradition investigated by Gadamer, but at the same time it becomes a theoretical pledge for a future ontology, based on a reconstruction of the artistic ontological unity: "The beautiful, the way in which goodness appears, reveals itself in its being: it presents itself"[242].

In this context, according to Gadamer, Plato "describes the beautiful as that which shines forth most clearly and draws us to itself, as the very visibility of the ideal. In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience this convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: 'This is true'. (...) the essence of beauty does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality. On the contrary, we learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible

[239] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!"*, in Id., *The Gadamer Reader*, cit., pp. 192-225: 215 ("Für uns ist es wesentlich, daß es sich hier um ein Er-scheinen handelt. Als Scheinen ist es seinem Wesen nach ein wechselnder Schein. Und doch gibt es das einzigartige Hervorscheinen des Schönen wie den Zauber der Kunst, sei es im Sehen, sei es im Hören, sei es in der bildenden Kunst, der Dichtkunst oder etwa in der Musik" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wort und Bild – 'so wahr, so seiend'* (1992), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 373-399: 391]).

[240] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 478 ("Das Licht, das alles so hervortreten läßt, daß es in sich selbst einleuchtend und in sich verständlich ist, ist das Licht des Wortes. Auf die Lichtmetaphysik ist also die enge Beziehung begründet, die zwischen dem Vorscheinen des Schönen und dem Einleuchtenden des Verständlichen besteht" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 487]).

[241] Fehér, *"Das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee"*, cit., pp. 234-235.

[242] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 481 ("Das Schöne, die Weise, in der das Gute erscheint, macht sich selbst in seinem Sein offenbar, stellt sich dar" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 491]).

to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality, with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes and fateful confusion. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real"[243].

This provides a further formulation of the evenemential nature of art: an artwork operates positively – and is therefore beautiful – when it shows to the spectator the fusion between his horizons and those which in-form him. The success of this disclosure – i.e., the artwork's capacity to open up a world through its poetic language – depends on the accomplishment of a connection between the two poles of the relation: the beholder and the artwork. This accomplishment cannot be checked through propositional verification nor by scientific demonstrations, but only through the intuition of its hermeneutic possibility. Davey has clearly explained this subtle passage: "The plausibility of art's address (the persuasiveness of its cognitive content) rests upon the same hermeneutical grounding as propositional discourse. Both require the tacit acceptance of unstated presuppositions which influence the persuasiveness of the shown or stated. These presuppositions are what Gadamer refers to when he argues that artworks speak because of what speaks through them. The 'truth' of what is said depends on the viewer's sense of how plausible the fusion of declarative foreground and hermeneutic background is within the artistic disclosure. That plausibility can never be a matter of proof but is a matter of how convincing the artwork is in fusing its own disclosure with the horizons of meaning that inform it. On this basis, the artwork can be said to truly *speak* and to speak *truly*. With this suggestion our argument comes full circle"[244].

In the elaboration of this theory, another fundamental reference for Gadamer is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) aesthetics, and in particular his famous quotation "beauty is determined as the sensible appearance of the idea" (*Das Schöne bestimmt sich […] als das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*)[245]. Revising Hegel's position through his own evemenential

[243] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 15 ("Er nennt das Schöne das am meisten Hervorscheinende und Anziehende, sozusagen die Sichtbarkeit des Idealen. Das, was derart vor allem anderen hervorleuchtet, was ein solches Licht der überzeugenden Wahrheit und Richtigkeit an sich hat, ist es, was wir alle als das Schöne in Natur und Kunst gewahren und das uns die Zustimmung 'Das ist das Wahre!' abnötigt. Was wir […] entnehmen, ist, daß das Wesen des Schönen gerade nicht darin besteht, der Wirklichkeit nur gegenüber und entgegengesetzt zu sein, sondern daß Schönheit, wie unverhofft sie auch begegnen mag, wie eine Bürgschaft ist, daß in aller Unordnung des Wirklichen, in all ihren Unvollkommenheiten, Bosheiten, Schiefheiten, Einseitigkeiten, verhängnisvollen Verwirrung dennoch das Wahre nicht unerreichbar in der Ferne liegt, sondern uns begegnet. Es ist die ontologische Funktion des Schönen, den Abgrund zwischen dem Idealen und dem Wirklichen zu schließen" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 106]).

[244] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 161.

[245] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, in Id., *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Theorie Werkausgabe, auf der Grundlage der Werke*, neu edierte Ausgabe, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Band 13, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 151. And "the artwork stands in the *middle* between immediate

perspective, Gadamer affirms: "The picture is an event of being – in it being appears, meaningfully and visibly"[246]. This perspective implies a theoretical evaluation of sensibility – or perception –, although Gadamer clearly distinguishes his idea of sensitivity from any empiricist position: he would have agreed with Heidegger that *das Sinnliche* is not a phenomenon in the surface of reality, but the real (*das allein Reale, also das 'Wahre'*) in its unveiling[247]. The event of art is indeed a sensuous event full of place, time and meaning. It is precisely in this truthfulness that we can grasp the event of beauty outside any objective or materialistic perspective. Expressed in Platonic terms: "Beauty is not radiance shed on a form from without. Rather, the ontological constitution of the form itself is to be radiant, to present itself in this way. From thus, then, it follows that in regard to beauty the beautiful must always be understood ontologically as an 'image'"[248]. Like the meaning of images, the content of beauty is self-presentational: it does not represent something other than itself, something other than its own essence. If we take this insight of Gadamer's seriously, we can derive the deep unity between our analysis of the philosophy of image and the importance attributed by Gadamer to the beauty understood as the topology of manifestation and occurrence.

Both Gadamer's philosophy of image and his theory of the beautiful are directed towards overcoming the classic deterministic and logocentric interpretation of these notions: "That being is self-presentation and that all understanding is an event, this first and last insight transcends the horizon of substance metaphysics as well as the metamorphosis of the concept of substance into the concepts of subjectivity and scientific objectivity"[249]. And this transcending is made possible because "both the appearance of the beautiful and the mode of being of understanding have the character of an event" and because "the hermeneutical experience, as the experience of traditionary meaning, has a share in the *immediacy* which has always distinguished the experience of the beautiful, as it has that of all evidence of *truth*"[250].

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sensibleness [*Sinnlichkeit*] and ideal thought" (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Ästhetik*, Band 1, ed. by. Friedrich Bassenge, Berlin 1985, p. 148). Also in Heidegger's ontology of art there is a significant confrontation with Hegel: see on this topic James Phillips, *Hegel and Heidegger on the Essence of Beauty*, in «Philosophy Today», 59, 1, 2015, pp. 23-26.

[246] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 138 ("Das Bild ist ein Seins Vorgang – in ihm kommt Sein zur sinnvoll-sichtbaren Erscheinung [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 149]).

[247] See Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1-2, cit., p. 213 (Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, cit., pp. 215-216).

[248] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 481 ("Es ist nicht der über eine Gestalt ausgegossene Glanz, der von außen auf sie fallt. Vielmehr ist es die Seinsverfassung der Gestalt selbst, so zu glänzen, sich so darzustellen. Daraus folgt nun, daß in Hinsicht auf das Schönsein das Schöne immer ontologisch als 'Bild' verstanden werden muß" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 491]).

[249] *Ivi*, p. 478 ("Daß Sein Sichdarstellen ist und daß alles Verstehen ein Geschehen ist, diese erste und diese letzte Einsicht überschreiten in gleicher Weise den Horizont der Substanzmetaphysik wie auch die Metamorphose, die der Begriff der Substanz in die Begriffe der Subjektivität und der wissenschaftlichen Objektivität hinein erfahren hat" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 488]).

[250] *Ivi*, p. 479 ("Einmal, daß die Erscheinung des Schönen sowohl als die Seinsweise des Verstehens *Ereignischarakter* besitzen – und sodann, daß die hermeneutische Erfahrung, als Erfahrung von überliefertem

Thus, according to Gadamer, the beauty of the artwork does not situate itself in its content, as if transmitted as a descriptive communication, but in its own appearance, exceeding any single concept and content of meaning. Beautiful are those artworks which are not understood conceptually, but instead, to mention Günter Figal's fertile expression, as *Erscheinungsdinge* ("things of appearance"), i.e., things which are essentially characterized by an "appearance-character"[251].

Theodore George has correctly noticed that the importance attributed by Gadamer to the issue of "play"[252] should be considered not only in his contribution to the cultural studies, but also in relation to his ontology of art[253]. In fact, play itself possesses an evenemential nature and reveals, without deterministic teleological directions, a significant section of reality, by being a self-movement of living reality itself. Likewise, Gadamer's analysis of play reveals a Heideggerian nuance: his fascination with the *Übeschuss* ("excess" or "superabundance") within it recalls Heidegger's idea that art is a form of *Überfluss* ("overflowing").
Play, Gadamer explains, is a fundamental phenomenon in human life: it involves representation, self-presentation, participation, as well as the communal intersubjective relation with the other players[254]. However, the philosopher believes that the main figures of German aesthetics have offered so far a limited and one-sided interpretation of play, mainly understood as a subjective expression of humans, without taking into consideration its whole dimension, which includes an activity, derived from the play itself, which properly "captures" the players. Both Kant and Schiller represent for Gadamer this modernist and anthropocentric attitude towards the play, understood by them as "the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art" or as "the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play"[255]. Instead, according to Gadamer, play should be seen as an autonomous pre-dualistic event – "the mode of being of play as such"[256]:

Sinn, an der *Unmittelbarkeit* teilgewinnt, durch die von jeher die Erfahrung des Schönen wie überhaupt alle Evidenz *der Wahrheit* ausgezeichnet ist" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 488]).

[251] Günter Figal, *Über die Schönheit der modernen Kunst*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 9 (2010), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2010, pp. 117-128.

[252] One of the main topics of the already mentioned essay *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., pp. 22-29 (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 113-120). But the issue has been deepened also in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 102-110 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 107-116).

[253] On this topic see also Sallis, *The Hermeneutics of the Artwork*, cit.

[254] Cf. also Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London-Boston-Henley 1980; Eugene Fink, *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, trans. by Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2016 (Eugen Fink, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7: *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, ed. by Cathrin Nielsen and Hans Rainer Sepp, Karl-Alber-Verlag, Freiburg 2010).

[255] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 102 ("Die Gemütsverfassung des Schaffenden oder Genießenden […] die Freiheit einer Subjektivität, die sich im Spiel betätigt" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 107]).

[256] *Ivi*, p. 103 ("Wir fragen statt dessen nach der Seinsweise des Spieles als solcher" [*ivi*, p. 108]).

in play, a section of reality appears as self-representation (*Selbstdarstellung*), in a form which anticipates the distinction between the "players" and the "game played". There is indeed an inanimate dimension of nature which can be traced and perceived in all the concrete plays, although human intention necessarily intervenes in it. In other words, properly speaking, it is not we who express ourselves during play: it is the play which expresses itself by "being there", through its manifestation. As correctly expressed by María Guadalupe Llanes, "this Gadamerian position demolishes those conceptions of art such as the one that maintains that the work of art is only in the mind of the painter, that the painting, then, is a residue, a corpse of the true work. For the game of art includes the painter, the spectator and the work, although in the aesthetic moment what prevails is the game itself transformed into construction, and the players are diluted in it"[257].

Gadamer specifies in *Truth and Method* that art and play are not the same activity, because art wields a transformative demiurgic function, while play is consumed in its limited temporal manifestation. And here emerges a trace of Heidegger's prioritization of artwork in the dynamic idea of play when Gadamer clarifies that in his view play becomes art – as artwork – when repeated and structured in a form which has the character "of an ergon and not only of energeia"[258].

However, "the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*"[259] possesses the same mode of manifesting as the primacy of the beauty (as event of truth) over the beholders. It is thus a fruitful homology: the evenemential and medial essence of play can reach in the unitarian form of artworks a supreme complex unity – the same that accompanies the status of the artwork.

Of interest is how George comments on this topic, underlining the terminological shift in Gadamer's mature texts from a lexicon connected to the notion of art as "artwork", in Heideggerian terms, to an image of art as "play", "creation", "enactment": "Gadamer's shift of emphasis from the work to the play of art clarifies and sharpens his belief that the truth claim of art does not appear as the representation, *Vorstellung*, or even production, *Herstellung*, of an idea. Instead, by grasping art in terms of play, Gadamer sheds light on his belief that the truth claim of art appears as the presentation, *Darstellung*, or, indeed, the enactment, *Vollzug*, of that very freedom, that openness and movement, which characterizes human understanding as such. In this, Gadamer's shift from the work to the play of art suggests that whatever else our

[257] María Guadalupe Llanes, *Ontología del arte: Gilson y Gadamer*, in «Episteme NS», vol. 26, nr. 2, 2006, pp. 25-54: 42-43.
[258] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 110 ("Es hat den Charakter des Werkes, des 'Ergon' und nicht nur der 'Energeia'" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 116]).
[259] *Ivi*, p. 105 ("der *Primat des Spieles gegenüber dem Bewußtsein des Spielenden*" [*ivi*, p. 110]).

experience of art concerns — whatever matter, *Sache*, it treats and brings into focus — it always and before all else enacts the freedom at issue in human understanding in the first place"[260]. It is precisely the aesthetic process of depersonalization which Hermann Nitsch wished to evoke in his performances, as stated in various nucleus of his seminal 1978 *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project*: "the glorious focal point of the festival is the joyous awareness that creation, through the celebrating participants, gains of itself"[261].

However, the survival of traces hinting at the previous Heideggerian terminology[262] makes the question unresolved: "Although Gadamer's desire for a novel idiom to describe the experience of art comes into focus in his shift of emphasis over the course of his philosophical life from the work to the play of art, it may nevertheless remain an open question whether this shift represents simply a clarification of his *Truth and Method* view, a further development of that view, or, at the limit, perhaps even a genuine reversal of some of his ideas"[263].

The connection established by Gadamer between the ontology of play and the ontology of art also allows his aesthetical hermeneutics to recognize the continuity between art and life as a pivotal feature of contemporary art. This characteristic, which has been popularized among the 20th-century Avantgarde, is still a relevant and popular topic in current art, as well as in Anselm Kiefer's and Hermann Nitsch's way of interpreting their own productions. The continuity between art and life – where it is not that art founds life nor that life founds art – is particularly embraced by Nitsch as one of the most relevant scopes of his art: the astonishing sacred syncretism between Greek tragedy, pagan mysteries, Baroque catholic liturgy, Buddhism, and folklore rituals that characterizes his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (OMT) performances thematizes and symbolizes life itself, in its Heraclitean infinite stream – and considers life not only as the object of the representation, but as the instrument and method of it. Such is, indeed, a form of art in which it is even possible to intensify, accelerate, and enhance the process of life[264].

[260] George, *From Work to Play*, cit., p. 109.
[261] Hermann Nitsch, *Atlas*, ed. by Emanuele de Donno, Italo Tomassoni and Giuseppe Morra, Viaindustriae publishing, Foligno 2017, p. 46.
[262] This is a kind of terminology which shows the contradictions of those interpretations which attribute to Heidegger a "nominalistic position" (for example: Federico Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008, pp. 23, 136-148). The thought of *Ereignis* doesn't reduce art to everything that merely happens, in a relativistic way, but rather the characteristics of the artwork are specific – the ones that make possible the unconcealment of truth. And the necessity of integrating this "happening" with the activity of the interpretative reason is pivotal Gadamerian contribution which integrates Heidegger's position.
[263] George, *From Work to Play*, cit., p. 113.
[264] See Nitsch, *Atlas*, cit., pp. 50, 71.

Thus, the experience of play expresses a performative dimension which emerges in Gadamer's understanding of artistic mediation as well as in Nitsch's creative gestures. In fact, Gadamer explains that the presentation or performance of an artistic work "is something essential, and not incidental to it, for it merely completes what the works of art already are – the being there of what is presented in them. The specific temporality of aesthetic being, its having its being in the process of being presented, conies to exist in reproduction as a distinct, independent phenomenon"[265].

Beauty, in Gadamer's understanding, is therefore released from the characteristics of subjectivity/objectivity, absoluteness/relativity, and can be better defined through the dynamics of presence/absence: artistic representation increases the being of the entity which is represented. If we follow Gadamer's emphasis on the beautiful as the intensification of the artistic dialectic between the "closure" and "disclosure" of the meaning of Being, we should ask ourselves what differentiates art experience from the ontological process of actualizing reality. Being, indeed, discloses itself not only in the artistic experience, but through several other modalities.

First of all, we can highlight the specificity of artistic (symbolic) images, which we analyzed in the previous section: the artistic event is an iconic event, endowed with a specific visual dimension which is the one studied in the field of aesthetics. Referring to Günter Figal's theory, we can suggest that although "the imagistic" (*das Bildliche*) characterizes all images, "the essence of images is most recognizable in the masterpieces of art. Images that are artworks can be understood as 'strong images'; they are more image than others – images that are not only recognized as such, but by virtue of which one knows what an image is"[266]. A similar process of recognition regards the artistic event in itself: it is an appearance which "stands out from its surroundings, lifts itself off from these, and thereby appears", "it includes something that appears and likewise the experience for which it appears". It is thus "a complex state of affairs": "The relatedness of experience (especially perception) to something is essentially an openness to appearance, and that which is experienced, especially the perceivable, only exists in the

[265] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 129-130 ("Daß [...] etwas Wesenhaftes und durchaus nicht Akzidentelles ist. In ihnen vollendet sich nur, was die Werke der Kunst selber schon sind, das Dasein dessen, was durch sie dargestellt wird. Die spezifische Zeitlichkeit des ästhetischen Seins, im Dargestelltwerden sein Sein zu haben, wird im Falle der Wiedergabe als selbständige und abgehobene Erscheinung existent" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 139]).

[266] Günter Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology. The Appearance of Things*, trans. by Jerome Veith, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 2015 [ebook].

appearance. The appearance lies between both like an immaterial thread; it is the *third thing* that encompasses both and thus connects them"[267]. Beauty is this kind of appearance.

Furthermore, art possesses a specific capacity: through its symbolic and presentational dimension, it conveys in a specific, effective way the generative process in which meanings come to visibility. Davey correctly remarks: "As 'presentation', Being discloses itself through word and image not because either captures it but because both exhibit its processual features: both show and hide simultaneously and in their showing show that they hide. The interconnection of Being, word and image is illustrated by the argument that what Being is cannot be asserted, only shown. It is shown by what the word makes manifest and by what the image reveals through the symbol"[268]. Artistic forms are the concretization of an effective plane of Being which, without these artistic forms, would not have been disclosed. The function of art is thus to bring together the contingent and variable aspects of something and give it shape, coherence, and increase of meaning. As clearly expressed by Nielsen, "art is a concentrated, transfigured re-presentation of the play of life, of the movement of reality's play. What is presented in the play of art is the mysterious movement of life, but transfigured, composed (…), focused and intensified. (…) What draws us into the artwork's play is recognized as a true presentation of what it makes manifest, and this is in part because it incites us to see what it presents as possessing a depth, complexity, and mystery to which we previously were blinded or unaware"[269].

Art overcomes through the event of beauty any aesthetical reductionism: the aesthetical value of the artwork, the pleasure derived from it, is a step of its manifestation, but the wholeness of artistic process overcomes this specific aspect, manifesting the historical depth of the present as a hermeneutic increasing of meaning in the temporal dimension[270].

Regarding this aspect, Davey acutely remarks: "Our everyday mode of being is one of dispersal. We are to a degree absent from ourselves, passing from task to task without catching sight of ourselves. Rooted in actuality, we bear the marks of its untransformed nature: everything about us is undecided, incomplete and fragmented. There are, of course, implicit patterns and open lines of continuity in what we do but, because of our immersion in everyday projects, rarely do

[267] *Ibidem*. See the whole section "Appearances and Things" in the chapter on "Beauty" (*ibidem*).
[268] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 119.
[269] Nielsen, *Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics*, cit., p. 142.
[270] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On the Problematic Character of Aesthetic Consciousness*, trans. by Eugene Kelly, in «Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal», 9, 1, 1982, pp. 31-40 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Zur Fragwürdigkeit des ästhetischen Bewußtseins* (1958), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 9-17).

we see ourselves, albeit provisionally, as coherent wholes. When capturing a likeness, the artist enables a transformation of our being"[271].

Through this lens, we can derive that Gadamer's presentational ontology expresses the precedence of the possible over the actual: the transforming power of art increases the domain of what is already actual in Being, always leaving open new possibilities. In such a way, artistic beauty opens a bridge between the past of tradition, the present of the artwork and the future of the increased Being.

As Davey concludes: "The world can never become as complete and coherent as an artwork but the vision of a possible completeness can inspire practical action towards making the incomplete more complete. It is not a question of translating the image into actuality but of allowing that image to transform one's understanding of what is plausible or possible within actuality"[272].

This responsibility – based on the power of art to increase Being – colors Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology of art with a call to ethical responsibility.

2.2.3. Beauty in Contemporary Art: Gadamer's Challenge

A long tradition of thought echoes or deepens Barnett Newman's famous thesis that "the impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty"[273]. And this path is broadly justified, if the standpoint of our evaluation of beauty is its classic and normative definition. The crisis of traditional aesthetics can indeed be interpreted in parallel with the crisis of Platonic metaphysics (which in the traditional ontology of art has been translated into that aesthetical paradigm, realist and based on the notion of symmetry, which the Polish historian pf philosophy Władysław Tatarkiewicz has successfully defined as "The Great Theory of Beauty"[274]): in the contemporary age, philosophy seems no longer capable of defining and establishing the parameters of beauty, especially due to the crisis of the heuristic power of the intellectual framework based on concepts and reason.

Gadamer's position, however, allows us to look at this question from a different perspective and to rehabilitate, through the hermeneutical foundation of philosophical thought, the

[271] Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, cit., p. 125.
[272] *Ivi*, p. 134.
[273] Barnett Newman, *The Sublime is Now* (1949), in Id., *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by John P. O'Neill, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1990, pp. 170-173: 172.
[274] See Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline*, in «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», vol. 31, issue 2, Winter 1972, pp. 165-180.

philosophy of art, which necessarily also needs to face the contemporary results of living artists. In the construction of this model, a hidden but relevant source to which we would like to point as a possible antidote to the crisis of metaphysical dualistic thought is represented, for Gadamer as well as for us, by the Neoplatonic – particularly Plotinian – philosophical tradition[275].
Beauty is described by Gadamer, as we have already pointed out, in connection with the notions of emanation and lighting, which can be related to the Greek view in which beauty is no longer determined through specific normative parameters, but as the theoretical condition of possibility of the very aesthetic – and ecstatic – experience itself. In beauty, thus, we can experience not an object, but the structure of aesthetic experience itself[276].

For Gadamer, beauty is not rationally founded; likewise, in the Plotinian perspective, beauty cannot be caused by any specific internal factors, nor by an external metaphysical agency, but instead it is located in, and coincides with, the *Nous* (Intellect), which in Plotinus' (204/205-270) paradigm represents the second hypostasis emanating from the One, the unfounded Principle, and corresponds not only to truth, but also to beauty in itself. Thus, beauty cannot be derived from a beautiful symmetric relation between the parts of a whole, such as in the "Great Theory of Beauty" – because in this case it would also be derived from the ugly parts (which are nevertheless symmetrically related to each other), causing a contradiction. For Plotinus, the principle which makes Ideas good is their essential "good-formity" (ἀγαθοειδῆ), and it is the light (= intelligibility, which coincides with measure and beauty) radiated by the One, and which is condition of Being, of the *Nous* and of its Ideas, that makes what is beautiful recognizable as such to mankind, thanks to its inner effusive tendency. According to Werner Beierwaltes (1931-2019), for Plotinus "beautiful is what participates in form or logos and is shaped by form and logos into a single ordered whole, whether by nature or by art"[277]. Thus, there is a distinction between the formlessness of One and beauty, but not a causal or mechanical dependence; instead, there is an internal connection, an intelligible foundation conceived thanks to the notion of emanation[278]. "The beautiful, which is accessible as form or

[275] Gadamer's interest and admiration towards Plotinus is particularly evident in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Thinking as Redemption: Plotinus between Plato and Augustine* (1980), in Id., *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1996, pp. 76-90 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Denken als Erlösung: Plotin zwischen Plato und Augustin* (1980), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 7, cit., pp. 407-417).
[276] Likewise, the Platonic and Augustinian tradition according to Johann Kreuzer (see his *Erinnerte Transzendenz. Zur Bestimmung des Schönen bei Platon und Augustinus*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 9 (2010), cit., pp. 161-187).
[277] Werner Beierwaltes, *The Love of Beauty and the Love of God*, in Arthur Hilary Armstrong, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality. Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1986, pp. 293-313: 299.
[278] "Such beauty, Plotinus says in 4, 44-5 [*The Enneads*] is beautiful because it is not dependent upon something other than itself" (Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus. A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette (Indiana) 2005, p. 214).

shape and which is to be called such in the 'actual' sense, is accordingly to the self-limiting manifestation of the origin: form as 'trace of the formless'"[279]: if beauty emanates from the One, then seen from the opposite direction, from the human perspective, we can say that it allows us to ascend to that light, in an anagogic path – a super-intellectual vision, nourished by *eros* – towards the One. This is a fundamental path not only in Plotinus' philosophy, one that is also stressed in his disciple Proclus (412-485), who emphasizes the strict connection between the power of eros and the beauty of the divine – always in the direction of the One, which is in itself "beauty beyond beauty" (*kallos hyper kallos*) or a "superabundance of beauty" (*periousia tou kallous*)[280], because it is the ontological prior (the horizon, we could metaphorically say), which is the condition of the possibility of beauty and *Nous* themselves.

Eventually, science, wisdom and beauty are different aspects of the same quality of self-understanding which is the essence of *Nous*.

Just as the light of the Sun would not be perceptible, inasmuch as it is formless and infinitely diffuse, if the solid (= determined) mass of the Sun did not serve as a substratum rendering it perceptible, so is the pure light that is the One ungraspable by thought, if it is not manifested in an intelligible Sun, i.e., in the *Nous*[281]. In Gadamer's thought, although his theoretical tone is much less "mystic" than the Plotinian paradigm, this radiant dimension of beauty, as well as its enchanting power (that state of being subject to the magic and attraction of beauty), is attested and inserted into the hermeneutical paradigm as a post-secular attempt to establish a non-substantialist, evenemential and performative idea of beauty. Likewise, in Plotinus' paradigm, beauty is, furthermore, not just a sensible dimension, but instead possesses a strong inner power in terms of acquiring knowledge and wisdom[282].

The experience of beauty never be consumed, because it always exceeds the single experience, operating as the background of possibility for the very artistic experience itself, always referring

[279] Beierwaltes, *The Love of Beauty and the Love of God*, cit., p. 302.

[280] It also appears, in a revised Christian shape, in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, particularly in his treaty on *Divine Names*.

[281] See Matteo Andolfo, *La seconda ipostasi come Bellezza-in-sé*, in Id., *Plotino. Struttura e fondamenti dell'ipostasi del «Nous»*, with an introduction by Giovanni Reale, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2002, pp. 176-196.

[282] However, we need to point out that the beauty celebrated by Plotinus is first of all the beauty of nature, while the judgement on the artistic products of human *techne* seems to drift among the Platonic critique (artworks as reification of beings – iconoclasm) and, on the contrary, a still positive evaluation (*techne* as natural productive force, as the vehicle and transmission of beauty – iconophile approach). On this topic see Raoul Mortley, *Art and the seduction of beauty*, in Id., *Plotinus, Self and the World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 110-125. Particularly relevant, in our opinion, is the following conclusion: "These ambiguities in the language of Plotinus are explained not as contradictions within his thought, but by the perspective adopted at the time of writing: ontological continuity is such that at any moment one can take a positive or negative attitude in relation to a given being. Seen from below the being may appear higher and seen from above it may seem to display a diminishing of essence. Thus it is with *techne* and the objects of art: sometimes the perspective taken justifies negative remarks, but a change of point of view will produce positive descriptions" (*ivi*, p. 121).

to that unfounded horizon (the One in the Plotinian lexicon, which can be approached only through negative, or apophatic, theology). It is, as we have seen in our consideration of the Heideggerian notion of *Lichtung*, the horizon in which the meaning appears, through the aesthetic experience, as that unique fusion of sensitive and intellectual enrichment, which is the core of hermeneutical aesthetics.

Some other hints at an actualization of this aesthetic paradigm in the contemporary age, with several resonances with the Plotinian metaphysical perspective, can be recognized in the reflections of the Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913-1994), the "Nietzsche of Bogotá". This antimodern, unsystematic, and "untimely" thinker has indeed elaborated a comprehensive interpretation of the role which beauty can still play nowadays – thanks to its eternal value – and which we can use to clarify Gadamer's perspective, showing its connection with other philosophical traditions.

According to Dávila, the notion of beauty, which often appears abstract and theoretical, acquires its real meaning in the concrete and sensuous act of the perception of an artistic masterpiece: here, beauty appears as something extremely concrete and real. From this perspective, beauty is neither a logical definition nor a set of principles, but the aesthetic and ecstatic conquering of a certainty, an "untransmissible and refutable certainty, a certainty intolerant to the logical apparatus (...), a certainty that does not remain rigid and constant like the tanning stone of a future building, a dazzling and transient certainty that imposes itself on the soul but which the soul either accepts or rejects, a certainty in which the will is appeased, in which the heart is placated, in which the overburdened intelligence stays and rests"[283]. Beauty is a way of discovering the ontological structures of reality in a different modality from the intellectual one, as noticed by Gadamer; it is a "sensual hermeneutics" in which the perception of the beautiful manifests the interconnections between several meanings and levels of reality, with a persuasive effect which is deeper than intellectual reasoning, by virtue of its vivid concreteness. As explained by Antonio Lombardi, commenting on Dávila, "the *sensualidad* is this penetration of analysis into the wilderness of the concrete; it is the experience of the carnal and extremely dense patchwork of acts and individualities of which the mosaic of the unobjectionable primordial unity is composed. Reason, in this sense, is *erotic*; because it is moved by an *amorous tension* towards the ultimate meaning of things"[284]. And this meaning "happens" in

[283] Nicolás Gómez Dávila, *Notas*, trad. by Loris Pasinato, Circolo Proudhon, Roma 2016, vol. II, p. 400.
[284] Antonio Lombardi, *Conocimiento. Dios. Eros. Fondamenti dell'ontologia e della metafisica gomezdaviliane*, in *ivi*, pp. 571-605: 592.

the artist, which is not the creator of the beautiful art, instead its connector and medium[285]. Ironically, with a tone similar to the one manifested in Gadamer's critique of aesthetic subjectivism, Dávila states: "The artist finally finishes his apprenticeship when he finally gives up being great"[286]. Dávila eventually affirms, with a Platonic echo, that "beauty is the motionless symbol of mobility"[287].

Going back to Gadamer's hermeneutics, and testing it through Plotinus and Dávila's insights, we can recognize the attunement that, if "being emerges from becoming"[288], the metamorphic and dynamic nature of beauty cannot be determined through fixed normative patterns. In this respect, it is clear why both Heidegger and Gadamer express an interest in modern art: the role of the beautiful cannot be limited to its normative classic dimension, for it also manifests itself in the forms of art expressed in the "age of technology", intensively living through the risk of being completely subjected to it, but at the same time experiencing the possibility of expressing a "new beginning"[289].

The demand of meaning can find an answer in the "fusion of horizons" in which the world of the artistic presentation always implies the world of us, as observers.

For example, commenting on the paintings of the German expressionist painter Werner Scholz (1898-1982), Gadamer observes his artistic references to Greek mythology, which, represented thanks to meaningful and expressive gestures, are necessarily interpreted towards a new meaning, because they are filtered by our modern Christian sensitivity. Precisely in this dialogue, truth is manifested in the beautiful force of the gestures: "These paintings by a contemporary artist present anew the ancient enigma of man", because "the painting does not recount a story, nor interpret anew one with which we are already familiar. (…). The images before us present human life in the language of heraldic emblems and devices. In them we can recognize ourselves, even though we are unable to understand or decipher them fully. They are symbols of the unfamiliarity in which we encounter ourselves and our increasingly unfamiliar world. Just as the language of Homer and the tragic poets lives again in the reflected light of translation, so the ancient legends can still live again in the art of today, concentrated in the

[285] See Nicolás Gómez Dávila, *Escolios a un texto implícito*, Atalanta, Girona 2009, p. 95.
[286] *Ivi*, p. 392.
[287] Dávila, *Notas*, cit., p. 348.
[288] Gadamer, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, cit., p. 209 ("Das Sein kommt aus dem Werden heraus" [Gadamer, *Wort und Bild* (1992), cit., p. 386]).
[289] See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, in Id., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt, Garland Publishing, New York-London 1977, pp. 3-35 (Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1953), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, cit., pp. 5-36).

simplicity of mighty gestures"[290]. Gestures, in this perspective, are manifestations of an artistic language bound to the realm of the visible – and paintings are a kind of gesture transformed into something fixed and ordered, a "visible" text. As highlighted by Dennis J. Schmidt in his deep commentary on Gadamer's interpretation of Scholz's artworks, "what is rendered visible in these paintings is something that no object can contain or represent. One finds the becoming visible of elemental passions one is presented with the elements of life itself, as living, as moving. The character of the gestures in these paintings is never simply to be the expression of something private and inward. They present themselves as intelligible, as being able to be interpreted"[291]. That means: they recall the viewer to engage with them, creating the vibrant hermeneutical connection that is the core point of contemporary art.

This desiring attitude towards a meaning in an age such as the nihilistic one, which is mainly characterized precisely by the loss of meaning, is clearly one of the main motivations in Nitsch's and Kiefer's production as well, both artistic and theoretical.
In Kiefer, the awareness that truth cannot be perceived in the postmodern age as a substantialist metaphysics is indeed balanced by the recognition of a "pluralistic" truth, which the illusion of art – in a clearly Nietzschean perspective, in which art is seen as a "countermovement against nihilism" thanks to its capacity to sublimate and enhance life – can intensify: through art it is possible to create space (and meaning) in the cosmic void[292], and then the beautiful – including the ordered, peaceful beautiful, but also the beautiful of ruins, ashes and destruction – manifests eventually itself in the artistic capacity to transfigure the negative absolute *Nichts* of modern nihilism in the beautiful generative power of the creative and living vacuum. This is conceived by several religions and forms of mysticisms, towards which Kiefer reveals a deep, conscious interest[293] in order to represent the Origin. This means, for Kiefer, that it is also possible to imagine a paradoxical beauty within the absence of the artwork, as has been shown by many

[290] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Image and gesture*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 74-82: 81-82 ("Es ist das alte Rätsel Mensch, das uns in diesen Arbeiten eines heutigen Malers aufgegeben wird […]. Die ritterlichen Wappen unseres Menschseins stehen in Bildern vor uns, Wappen, Embleme, an denen wir uns erkennen, ohne uns verstehen und enträtseln zu können, Symbole der Unkenntlichkeit, in denen wir uns und unserer immer unkenntlichen werdenden Welt begegnen. Was dem Wort der Dichter – Homers wie dem der Tragiker – im Widerschein der Übersetzung kaum noch gelingt, vermag dem bildenden Künstler unserer Tage zu gelingen, wenn er die alte Sage in die Einfachheit der großen Gebärde zusammenzieht" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bild und Gebärde* (1967), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 323-330: 329-330]).
[291] Dennis J. Schmidt, *Heidegger, Gadamer, Klee. On Word and Image*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 7 (2008), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008, pp. 191-209: 207.
[292] See Anselm Kiefer, *In conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, trans. by Tess Lewis, Seagull, London-New York-Calcutta 2019, p. 133 (Anselm Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter. Anselm Kiefer im Gespräch mit Klaus Dermutz*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2024, p. 138).
[293] It is one of the main topics of the already mentioned (see the previous footnote) conversation with Dermutz, which Kiefer mainly interprets through references to Jewish Kabbalah.

contemporary artists, such as Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) or Christian Boltanski (1944-2021)[294].

In Nitsch's perspective as well, the relation with nihilism requires a complex artistic and existential answer: it can be symbolized as a call for a "nothing" that is not the mere nihilistic negation, but instead a paradoxical vacuum which expresses a suspension of judgment from which new meanings can be generated. In his theoretical writings, Nitsch elaborates this notion in connection with Eastern traditions, especially with the concepts of *Tao* (Daoism) and *Śūnyatā*, the metaphysical void of Buddhism. In fact, according to the Austrian artist, the void can be understood as the manifestation of a paradoxical fullness – as long as the truth as *aletheia*, in the hermeneutical paradigm, is simultaneously the manifestation and disappearing of truth. This perspective, however, is not only a theory, but an *ortopraxis*. Art possesses a fundamental function in this context: it is a postmodern rite which can constitute itself as a real and concrete search for Being – considering that Being is everywhere, and we are that Being – , and thus we are speaking of an action aimed at letting the sound and colors of the void in its fullness manifest. OMT can be thus also interpreted in the vein of this dynamic search for new perspectives.

The hermeneutical paradigm on beauty which we have tried to grasp and synthesize in the previous sections of this chapter can thus be applied not only to classic sources, but also to modern and contemporary art. This application is confirmed not only by the meta-historical approach of Gadamer, which reflects on the essential structure of the relation between man and beauty within art without specific chronological or technical determinations, preferring a unitarian approach (although understanding the historical oblivion of this very knowledge in the modern aesthetic consciousness)[295], but also by the concrete examples proposed by Gadamer in his writings, which are often taken from modern and contemporary art.

At this stage, we need to clarify that the distinction between modern and contemporary art is a complex and still unresolved matter in the history of art: in our thesis, referring especially to Nitsch and Kiefer, we focus on contemporary artistic production, considering with this notion the art produced from the second half of the 20th-century (although deeply rooted in the Avantgarde, which already expressed issues of this new tendency) to the new millennium, and endeavoring to elaborate a more comprehensive paradigm in which this production, which has

[294] See Anselm Kiefer*, L'arte sopravvivrà alle sue rovine*, trans. by Deborah Borca, Feltrinelli, Milano 2018, p. 100.

[295] This position is accompanied by the already mentioned notion of "contemporaneity" (*Gleichzeitigkeit*): the authentic artwork life is not the time when it has been created by the artist, but rather the time of the relation between its inner world and the world which comes with the viewer's sight. In this sense, every art is contemporary.

arisen and been shaped in a postmodern and post-secular cultural context, is considered as different from modernist art, which began its adventurous journey in Europe in the 19th-century, according to many scholars with revolutionary Impressionism (with Édouard Manet [1832-1883], "*le peintre de la vie modern*"), and aspired to an overcoming the realistic and scholastic Western mimetic tradition (which could be considered modern art, the art of the age of modernity). Gadamer seems, on the contrary, to ignore – or at least not to take in consideration – this interpretative scheme, and he mainly speaks of "modern art" in order to define all the artworks which are not "classics". In the essay *The End of Art?*, he explicitly expresses this terminological approach, which, to the contrary, we intend to overcome in our research: "Modern art is marked by the quest for the common and the self-evident. By 'modern art' I mean here not only the post-modernity of today but also not just the 'modern' of the early twentieth century. I mean all of it together. The modern and the most modern belong to it"[296]. In our opinion, the art of the postmodern and post-secular age can express specific cultural, philosophical, and existential trends, which we will especially discuss in relation to the reemergence of sacred and mythic-symbolic dimension in the post-secular age. It is the aim of our research to show and analyze these cultural trajectories. Nevertheless, Gadamer's reflections on the relation between 20th-century art and beauty can be fruitfully put into dialogue with Kiefer's and Nitsch's contemporary aesthetics, especially when he refers to Avantgarde or coeval artists, whom he defines as modern and whom we call contemporary.

When Gadamer considers modern art, he seems to be especially interested in a cultural and sociological interpretation of the artworks, entering into the debate on the characteristics of Avantgarde, the meaning of "conceptual" art and the philosophical scheme surrounding the fragmentation of reality (or the abstraction of it) proposed by artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) or Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). We recognize, therefore, a change of perspective and interest compared to the ontological approach predominating in the theory of art previously discussed. At the same time, Gadamer expresses a unitarian perspective, trying to underline the continuity instead of the rupture between traditional and modern art: although he is aware – and openly speaks of – the differences between them, he moreover stresses the unitarian elements

[296] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The End of Art? From Hegel's Doctrine of the Pastness of Art the Anti-art of Today*, in Id., *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Historical Dimension of Language. The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, vol. 2, ed. by Pol Vandevelde and Arun Iyer, Bloomsbury, London 2022, pp. 65-76: 70 ("Das prägt die Kunst der Moderne nach dem Gemeinsamen und Selbstverständlichen auf der Suche zu sein. Mit 'moderner Kunst' meine ich hier nicht nur die Post-moderne von heute, auch nicht nur die 'Moderne' des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts. Ich meine all das mit. Gewiß gehört dies Moderne und Modernste dazu" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ende der Kunst? Von Hegels Lehre vom Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst bis zur Anti-Kunst von heute* (1985), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 206-220: 212]).

which allow for art to always be defined as art. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, this approach allows us to adopt his already introduced theoretical notion of beauty as event to contemporary artists' production[297]. Regarding this topic, we have no hints of a counter-theory in Gadamer's philosophy and, to the contrary, several references seem to particularly valorize the comprehension of the evenemential disclosure of beauty and meaning in the artwork within contemporary art.

In this context, therefore, Gadamer's defense of the value of the beautiful based on a post-metaphysical and non-dogmatic conception can be particularly productive: it shows that a "strong", although not substantialist idea of beauty can be harmonized also with experimental, extreme, even abstract and not figurative examples of artworks. Because the beauty of these artworks depends on their still valid power of "bringing visible what is invisible"[298], as explained by Paul Klee (1879-1940) (one of the artists frequently quoted by Gadamer): here the experience of the beautiful, also through non-classical (i.e., symmetric, harmonious, idealistic) forms, can take place in an inner unity characterized by a specific sense and truthness. If we follow Gadamer, "in the last analysis, (…) it is irrelevant whether or not a painter or sculptor works to produce objective or nonobjective art. The only relevant thing is whether we encounter a spiritual and ordering energy in the work, or whether we are simply reminded of some cultural motif or the peculiarities of this or that particular artist. For that impugns the artistic value of the work. But art is present whenever a work succeeds in elevating what it is or represents to a new configuration, a new world of its own in miniature, a new order of unity in tension. This can occur whether the work presents us with specific cultural content and familiar features of the world around us, or whether we are confronted by the mute, yet profoundly familiar, Pythagorean harmonies of form and color. (…) Testifying to order, mimesis seems as valid now as it was then, insofar as every work of art, even in our own increasingly standardized world of mass production, still testifies to that spiritual ordering

[297] Convergently, Roger Scruton has noticed that great modernists self-interpreted their works "not as a break with tradition, but as a recapturing of tradition (…) in terms of a continuum. If, in modern circumstances, the forms and styles of art must be remade, this is not in order to repudiate the old tradition, but in order to restore it" (Scruton, *Beauty*, cit., p. 142). In this perspective, also Kiefer's and especially Nitsch's revolutionary art can be understood as an attempt to overcome contemporary attraction for shock and to restore – in new forms – a form of art, respectively based on pre-modern Dyonisian rituals and on a monumental collective *epos*. This attitude, connected to their interest for memories, symbols and rituals, makes them act differently from several other contemporary artists (probably the majority), whose work "exemplifies a flight from beauty, rather than a desire to recover it" (*ivi*, p. 143).

[298] "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible" (Paul Klee, *Creative Confession* (1920), in Id., *Creative Confession and Other Writings*, Tate Publishing, London 2013, pp. 7-14: 7).

energy that makes our life what it is. The work of art provides a perfect example of that universal characteristic of human existence – the never-ending process of building a world"[299].
In this perspective, Gadamer appreciates the value of still life paintings in modern art – for example in Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Van Gogh, Picasso, Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Juan Gris (1887-1927) – explaining that the value of these artworks is precisely placed in their representing themselves, through a symbolism which increases being. In this view, the artwork, "like the crystal, it has its own timeless necessity: folds of being itself, eroded lines, runes in which time come to a standstill. Abstract? Concrete? Objective? Nonobjective? It is a pledge of order. The modern artist finds himself in difficulty if he tries to answer the question what his work actually represents. But the self-interpretation of art is always a secondary phenomenon. We should follow Paul Klee here, who is in a position to know, when he rejects all 'theory in itself' and emphasizes the works themselves (…). The modern artist is less a creator than a discoverer of the as yet unseen, the inventor of the previously unimagined that only emerges into reality through him"[300].

A contemporary artwork is clearly completely different from a traditional one from a technical and aesthetic point of view, but it can be addressed in the same cultural, symbolical, and spiritual tradition, because they are both immersed in the same language: the language of art and beauty, which testifies to their affinity and bridges the gap between ancient and contemporary art. Furthermore, it is not only a linguistic affinity, but also an anthropological one: through the already analyzed notions of play, symbol, and festival, Gadamer tries to

[299] Gadamer, *Art and imitation*, cit., pp. 103-104 ("Daher ist es am Ende ganz uninteressant, ob ein Maler oder ein Bildhauer gegenständlich oder ungegenständlich arbeitet. Interessant ist nur, ob wir einer geistigen Ordnungsenergie darin begegnen – oder ob wir nur an diesen oder jenen Inhalt unserer Bildung erinnert werden oder gar an diesen oder jenen Künstler. Denn das sind in der Tat Einwendungen gegen den Kunstwert eines Werkes. Aber sofern ein Werk das, was es darstellt oder als das es sich darstellt, zu einer neuen Formung, zu einem neuen winzigen Kosmos, zu einer neuen Einheit des in sich Verspannten, in sich Geeinten und in sich Geordneten erhebt, ist es Kunst, mögen darin Inhalte unserer Bildung, vertraute Gestalten unserer Umwelt sprechend werden oder nichts als das gänzlich Stumme und dennoch Urvertraute der reinen pythagoreischen Form- und Farbharmonien zur Darstellung kommen. [...] Bezeugung von Ordnung – das scheint von eh und je gültig, sofern jedes Werk der Kunst, auch noch in unserer sich immer mehr ins Uniforme und ins Serielle verändernden Welt, die geistige Ordnungskraft bezeugt, die die Wirklichkeit unseres Lebens ausmacht. Im Werk der Kunst geschieht beispielhaft, was wir alle tun, indem wir da sind: beständiger Aufbau von Welt" [Gadamer, *Kunst und Nachahmung* (1967), cit., p. 36]).
[300] Gadamer, *The speechless image*, cit., p. 91 ("Es ist in sich notwendig und wie von jeher da, wie der Kristall: Falten, die das Sein wirft, Verwitterungen, Runzeln und Runen, in denen Zeit zur Dauer wird. Abstrakt? Konkret? Gegenständlich? Gegenstandlos? Ein Unterpfand von Ordnung. Der moderne Künstler wird sich schwerlich verstehen, wenn er auf die Frage Antwort sucht, was er eigentlich darstellt. Die Selbstinterpretation der Kunst ist immer sin sekundäres Phänomen. Paul Klee, der es wissen mußte, sollte man folgen, wenn er sich gegen jede 'Theorie an sich' wehrt, wenn er den Ton auf die Werke legt [...]. Der moderne Künstler ist weit weniger Schöpfer als Entdecker von Ungesehenem, ja Erfinder von noch nie Dagewesenem, das wie durch ihn hindurch einrückt in die Wirklichkeit des Seins" [Gadamer, *Vom Verstummen des Bildes* (1965), cit., p. 322]). On the capacity of the silent images to convey a meaning based on the phenomenologically "muting (…) as an ἐποχή" see Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology*, cit.

establish the conceptual and experiential unity of art, preferring to highlight coherence and concord instead of differences and ruptures[301]. The role of the viewer also plays a pivotal role in this context: the audience's passionate recognition of the aesthetical value of the parietal paintings of Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) or Joan Miró (1893-1983), for example, or, to quote another one of Gadamer's example, the sculptures of Henry Moore (1898-1986) or Richard Serra (1938-2024), is possible just because stability and form, although paradoxical, are recognized as exemplarily manifested also in these examples of contemporary art[302]. The reflective aesthetic pleasure is nevertheless similar, because it is based on a "new correspondence between painting and the expectation from painting"[303]. The fundamental characteristic of an artistic symbolic representation can overcome all the figurative and material specifications, because it consists mainly in the fact that "what is represented, whether it is rich or poor in connotation or has none whatsoever, calls us to dwell upon it and give our assent in an act of recognition. We shall have to show how this characteristic defines the task that the art of past and present lays upon each of us. And this means learning how to listen to what art has to say"[304].

Anselm Kiefer has further underscored the importance of the act of listening in the artistic practice itself, explaining that the artist needs to overcome his own subjective identity, opening to the plural centers of the world of nature: "The artist is then no longer a genius, but a being who listens, even to what may appear incomprehensible to him. He is the one who exposes himself, the one who distrusts everything, who ruins himself and knows that he is lost without ever really being so"[305]. On this theme, he perfectly embraces the perspective of one of the pioneers of contemporary art, Paul Cézanne, according to whom "the painters need not be

[301] For an interesting critique of this perspective within a hermeneutical approach, favoring the importance of thematizing the loss of meanings and the irreconcilable differences in the history of art, see Eddo Evink, *Gadamer and the End of Art* in *Hermeneutics and the Humanities/Hermeneutik und die Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. by Madeleine Kasten, Herman Paul and Rico Sneller, Leiden University Press, Leiden 2012, pp. 239-250.

[302] See Gadamer, *The End of Art?*, cit., p. 72 (Gadamer, *Ende der Kunst?* (1985), cit., p. 215).

[303] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Conceptual Painting? On Arnold Gehlen's Time Pictures*, in Id., *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Historical Dimension of Language. The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, vol. 2, cit., pp. 87-94: 94 ("die neue Entsprechung von Bild und Bilderwartung" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Begriffene Malerei? Zu A. Gehlen: Zeit-Bilder* (1962), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 305-314: 314]). On the unity of art see also Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit. (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit.).

[304] Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., p. 36 ("Was in ihr zur Darstellung kommt, ob reich oder arm an Konnotationen oder ein reines Nichts derselben, uns zum Verweilen und zur Zustimmung bewegt wie ein Wiedererkennen. Es wird zu zeigen sein, wie sich gerade von dieser Charakteristik her die Aufgabe ausnimmt, die die Kunst aller Zeiten und die Kunst von heute für jeden von uns stellt. Es ist die Aufgabe, das, was da sprechen will, hören zu lernen" [Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., p. 127]).

[305] Kiefer*, L'arte sopravvivrà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 120.

anything more than a receptacle for sensations. Only then will the landscape mirror itself in the artist. (…) The painter must stay silent, and become a complete echo"[306].

The paradoxical form at the core of this expectation is defined by Gadamer through the concept of "estrangement", probably the most effective parameter to evoke beauty in contemporary age (beauty understood as that disclosure of truth capable of revealing the essence of our age, its truth): "The pluralism of experimenting has thus become unavoidable in our epoch. Estrangement to the point of incomprehensibility is the rule under which the creative power of art in an age such as our own can be fulfilled the quickest. The ideal unity of convergence between the familiar contents of the figurative and poetic arts and their configured form can no longer be expected in our epoch like in the times bound by tradition. Now, it is necessary to create art within the terribly fragmented existence in which today's world constantly moves. If forms of life change at such a pace as is the case in our present, then the artistic responses to this present must also distance themselves with a particularly estranging intensity. (…) An end of art, an end of the never resting will to create, which belongs to human dreams and yearnings, will never come to be (…). Any supposed end of art will be the beginning of new art"[307]. This position is similar to the one expressed by Martin Heidegger through the already mentioned notion of *Neuer Anfang*, although this event, which realizes the safeguard of the essence of art through the abysses of nihilism, is characterized by eschatological tones which are excluded from Gadamer's humanistic position[308]. Similarly to Heidegger's philosophy is also his notion of "estrangement," which is perhaps related to Heidegger's concept of the "uncanny"

[306] Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology*, cit.

[307] Gadamer, *The End of Art?*, cit., p. 76 ("Der Pluralismus des Experimentieren ist daher in unserer Epoche unvermeidlich geworden. Verfremdung bis an die Grenze der Unverständlichkeit ist das Gesetz, unter dem sich die bildende Kraft der Kunst in einem Zeitalter wie dem unsrigen am ehesten erfüllen kann. Die ideale Deckungseinheit zwischen vertrauten Inhalten darstellender oder dichterischer Kunst und ihrer gestalteten Form kann in unserer Epoche nicht mehr wie in traditionsgebundenen Zeiten erwartet werden. Jetzt gilt es, in das schrecklich fragmentierte Dasein, in dem sich die heutige Welt ständig bewegt, Kunst hineinzubilden. Wenn sich die Formen des Lebens in solchem Tempo ändern, wie das in unserer Gegenwart der Fall ist, dann werden sich auch die künstlerischen Antworten auf diese Gegenwart in besonders befremdlicher Stärke absetzen müssen. [...] Ein Ende der Kunst, ein Ende des nie rastenden Gestaltungswillens menschlicher Träume und Sehnsüchte, wird es so lange nicht geben [...]. Jedes vermeintliche Ende der Kunst wird Anfang neuer Kunst sein [Gadamer, *Ende der Kunst?* (1985), cit., p. 220]). On the role of *Fremdartigkeit* in 20th-century art, see Eva Banchelli, *Le metamorfosi della bellezza: la cerchia dello Sturm*, in Elena Agazzi and Marco Lorandi (eds.), *Il tradimento del bello. Le trans-figurazioni tra avanguardia e postmodernità*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007, pp. 65-78: 69.

[308] Michele Dantini has very clearly synthesized this Heideggerian approach: "Art 'ends', for Heidegger, because it falls into ubiquity and irrelevance. It knows the process of reduction that invests the totality of the entity (...). In it, that simple human-divine 'conversation' above all else no longer takes place (...). Art 'ends' because, in the epoch of the 'abandonment of Being', 'beauty' withdraws, 'ends', without the 'They' (public opinion, the common cultural sense, academic circles) being aware of this 'withdrawal'. It is necessary, then, for Heidegger, to accept and go along with this destiny of 'deprivation', not to resist it (...): to accept that the 'passage' is at the limit '*without* art', waiting for something (...) to arise later in conformity with the Event of the 'abandonment of Being'" (Dantini, "Martin Heidegger 1931-1948", cit., p. 135).

(*unheimlich*), for whom being human inherently involves being uncanny. This notion, which is not easy to describe, is connected to the strange, discomforting feeling that things make sense, yet this meaningful space is fragile and can easily collapse. This sensation, which Heidegger presents as a peculiar mode of *Dasein*, particularly thematized in *Being and Time* in connection with "anxiety" (*Angst*), acquires an ontological – rather than merely psychological – dimension. Gadamer's notion of "estrangement" could be furthermore fruitfully put in dialogue with the "speechless" quality of contemporary images, which we have already discussed in the previous chapter, especially with reference to Gadamer's essay *The Speechless Image* (*Vom Verstummen des Bildes*). In fact, hiding meanings – let us think of the paradoxical language of silence, as exhibited in an iconic way in music by John Cage (1912-1992), in his famous composition *4'33'* – also means something, and something extremely relevant; likewise, contemporary images, which do not offer a clear and didactic narration through the exhibition of clear and unambiguous contents, are still able to "speak" to the public.
Art can thus combine and alternate the need to convey familiarity and the value of *unheimliche* experiences.

One effective artistic example of "estrangement" is recognized by Gadamer in the pictorial cycle which the German artist Willibald Kramm (1891-1969) dedicated to the great writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924)[309]. The value of Kramm's cycle is identified in his brave attempt to visually represent the aniconic, phantasmatic, and dreamy atmosphere evoked in Kafka's literature. This unreal quality of his aesthetic world depends, according to Gadamer, on the anxious and oppressive *Stimmung* which Kafka tries to depict (which, we could add, reflects the epochal question of nihilism), but also from the aniconic Jewish tradition to which the author reconnects himself. Furthermore, it regards more generally the universal problem of representing God, which was urgent not only in Jewish, but also in Greek and Christian traditions. In Kafka, according to Gadamer, we recognize the triumph of the disturbing paradoxical absence-presence of God, his remoteness and estrangement from the world, which leaves not only the divine, but also the sensible reality of man and the world suspended in an undefinable dimension[310]. Everything is surrounded by an impenetrable and evanescent fog. Kramm's ability is to take advantage of this structural "unrepresentability" in order to evoke the beautiful power of "estrangement": in his work, strangeness itself becomes an image. The space between

[309] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kramms Kafka-Zyklus*, in Wolfgang Rothe (ed.), *Kafka in der Kunst*, Belser, Stuttgart-Zürich 1979, pp. 120-122.
[310] Furio Jesi (1941-1980) recognized in Kafka's *Das Schloss* (*The castle*) an attempt to elaborate a more optimistic and concrete path to navigate this spiritual fog and relate to the divine and the safety. See Furio Jesi, *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del '900*, ed. by Andrea Cavalletti, nottetempo, Milano 2018, pp. 248-250.

Being and nothingness gains a physical, visible (although not figurative) reality. Thus, the lacerated, fragmented, and rhizomatic beautiful promoted by Avantgarde art testifies to new symbolic forms, which need to be chosen, exposed, and transfigured.

It is not hard to find visual confirmation of Gadamer's thesis on our age's demand for estrangement in both Kiefer's and Nitsch's artworks.
This question is present in Kiefer's desire to deepen the world of ruins and to emphasize the always incommensurable relation that is manifested in-between the fixedness of the artwork and the consuming flow of time – it is not by chance that Kiefer loves to destroy his own artworks, for example in the case of the Heavenly Palaces, or to expose them to inclement weather to contemplate their transformation: here the event of beauty acquires a cosmogonic dimension, unveiling the deep structures of the interaction between artifacts and nature.
An even more radical perception of estrangement appears in Nitsch's OMT: the "dramaturgical abreaction model" has the precise aim of letting the performance's participants experience a radically *unheimliche* condition, not only because of the topics thematized in the performance, but especially through the intensification of a sensorial experience which simultaneously determines an alienation from the social common world and access to the invisible core of the Dionysian world. In this context, the release of instinctual energies can acquire an ecstatic Dionysian power – connected to Nitsch's concept of *Abreaktion* ("abreaction") –, that is, a kind of catharsis of escape from that dimension which can be considered the "traumatic subjectivity" of Western man[311].

Gadamer, following Heidegger's insight, also notes that the ontological power of beauty is connected not only to its unveiling function, but also to the concealment which accompanies every manifestation. In this perspective, beauty is a power that operates in opposition to reification and objectifiability. This is particularly widespread and visible in contemporary art. "Revealment and concealedness are an event of Being itself. To understand this fact helps us in our understanding of the nature of the work of art. There is clearly a tension between the emergence and the sheltering that constitutes the form-niveau of a work of art (…). Its truth is not constituted simply by its laying bare its meaning, but rather by the unfathomableness and depth of its meaning. Thus by its very nature the work of art is a conflict between world and earth, emergence and sheltering. (…) The conflict between revealment and concealment is not

[311] See Hermann Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit. Aufgezeichnet von Danielle Spera*, Leykam, Graz 2019, p. 85 and Susan Jarosi, *Traumatic Subjectivity and the Continuum of History: Hermann Nitsch's Orgies Mysteries Theather*, in «Art History», 2013, 36, pp. 834-863.

the truth of the work of art alone, but the truth of every being, for as unconcealedness, truth is always such an *opposition of revealment and concealment*. The two belong necessarily together"[312].

If the performative exposition of Nitsch's aesthetic and spiritual practices seems more interested in the adoption of a radical unveiling, which illuminates and exposes the mystery of life – although, as we'll see, always detached in a symbolic form, which retains the structural dimension of concealment –, the enigmatic and cryptic atmosphere which characterizes several of Kiefer's artworks could represent an iconic expression of the abovementioned aesthetical attitude. Moreover, it cannot be excluded that Heidegger's hermeneutics had an influence on this aspect of Kiefer's production, because in a dialogue with Klaus Dermutz, Kiefer himself declares his appraisal of Heidegger's ontology of art. In fact, commenting on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Kiefer affirms: "Art is the unconcealed. It is unconcealed, but also concealed. It is concealed to the extent that you can't reach it with clear disclosure. It is also disclosed because it expresses more than any science. Heidegger understood truth as clearing and disclosure of the existent"[313]. This complex dynamic clearly appears in all the artworks where Kiefer tries to represent a path to the sacred and to Otherness in contemporary consciousness: many hints and signs appear, just as many others are disguised and hidden. Of significance in this context is, among the others, the artistic book *To Robert Fludd* (*Für Robert Fludd*, 1996): here a sequence of photographs slides over seventeen pages, exhibiting the growth of a field full of sunflowers, whose circular centers ripen and turn into a starry sky, affirming, in honor of the Hermetic and alchemist English thinker, the connection between microcosm and macrocosm – an holistic analogy between all the manifestations of reality confirmed by the portrait of Robert Fludd (1574-1637), depicted with the resemblance of Anselm Kiefer himself[314]. The images chosen by the German artist do not mimetically exhibit a univocal message, but instead undertake to convey an engaging dialogue between different sections of an invisible reality. Here the mystery is preserved instead of being exhibited and wholly exposed.

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[312] Gadamer, *The Truth of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 107 ("Dies alles soll vielmehr nur dadurch ermöglicht sein, daß Entbergung und Verbergung ein Geschehen des Seins selber sind. Das zu verstehen, hilft uns das gewonnene Verständnis des Wesens des Kunstwerks. Dort ist es offenkundig eine Spannung zwischen dem Aufgang und der Bergung, die das Sein des Werkes selber ausmacht. […] Seine Wahrheit ist nicht das plane Offenliegen von Sinn, sondern vielmehr die Unergründlichkeit und Tiefe seines Sinnes. So ist es seinem Wesen nach Streit zwischen Welt und Erde, Aufgang und Bergung. […] Streit von Entbergung und Verbergung ist nicht nur die Wahrheit des Werkes, sondern die alles Seienden. Denn Wahrheit ist als Unverborgenheit ein solches *Gegeneinander von Entbergung und Verbergung*. Beides gehört notwendig zusammen" [Gadamer, *Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks* (1960), cit., p. 259]).

[313] Kiefer, *In conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 190 ("Die Kunst ist das Unverborgene. Sie ist unverborgen, aber sie ist auch verborgen. Sie ist insofern verborgen, als man mit einem klaren Diskurs nicht an sie herankommt. Sie ist auch entborgen, weil sie mehr als jede Wissenschaft aussagt. Heidegger versteht die Wahrheit als die Lichtung und die Entbergung des Seienden" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 191]).

[314] See Daniele Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, Thames & Hudson, New York 2021, pp. 264-265.

Art is a topology where the mystery can concretely present revelation on a very original plane. Indeed, without the condition of possibility of this encounter, which art radically embodies, philosophical reasoning on it would not even be possible. As explained by Ciglia, "philosophical phenomenology of the mystery cannot, of course, even *attempt to think* of it, if before it is activated and set in motion, the *apparition*, *phenomenisation* or *parousia* of the mystery has not in fact occurred. We can well say, then, in this context, that the event of beauty constitutes *one* of the crucial and privileged multiversal places (...) within which the *apparition* of the mystery is produced, in an auroral form, so to speak"[315].

Thus, in the context of contemporary art, the opposite of the beautiful (in its truthful dimension) is even more than something "ugly" or "unpleasant": it is pure emptiness, the superficial vacuum of meaning, which often manifests itself in the form of the *kitsch*. If true artistic masterpieces show an ontological enhancement of reality, the actual artistic defeat consists is the inability to present anything, i.e., expressing images which are not symbolic, but instead mere *simulacra* in Jean Baudrillard's (1929-2007) sense.

At least in the context of aesthetics, therefore, Gadamer stands not as the "living anachronism" that he declared himself to be[316], but instead as a central author. Like Heidegger, Gadamer wants to respond to Hegel's idea of the "death of art" (the art as "thing of the past", der *Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst*)[317], working for a "new beginning" of this cultural and spiritual dimension[318]. Although elaborating the awareness of the significant evolution of Western art, Gadamer's position underscores the continuity in art to an even greater extent than the discontinuity (which was instead thematized by Heidegger in his history of philosophy): as underlined by Robert Bernasconi[319], Gadamer does not dismiss the traditional notions of beauty, imitation, participation, play, symbol, and festival when he considers modern and contemporary art, which is thus contextualized in a continuity with the great art of the past,

[315] Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché*, cit., p. 158.
[316] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Im Alter wacht die Kindheit auf*, interview with Bernhard Borgeest, in «Die Zeit», 26.3.1993, pp. 22-23.
[317] See Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, cit., pp. 5-7 (Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), cit., pp. 96-98).
[318] A perspective which, it is important to specify, stands, as should be clear at this point, far removed from the widespread postmodern awareness of the "*Wiederkehr des Schönen*" in the context of the contemporary capitalistic valorization of a the merely material and horizontal beautiful – as it emerges in advertisings, visual culture, social networks and cosmetic/aesthetic surgery. In this context, the beautiful often becomes *kitsch*. On the theoretical and anthropological problems connected to this re-emergence in contemporary society, see Cathrin Gutwald and Raimar Zons (eds.), *Die Macht der Schönheit*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2007.
[319] Robert Bernasconi, *Editor's introduction*, in Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, cit., pp. xii-xxi: xviii.

expressing the universal tension of hermeneutics. This methodological choice is relevant because it suggests the possibility for contemporary artists – as we have tried to apply this approach with respect to Nitsch and Kiefer – to think of their artworks as reshaping the Western ontology of art rather than being against it, including by virtue of premodern religious and esoteric references. As we will point out in the following chapters, both Kiefer and Nitsch try to integrate European symbolism with other significant spiritual and iconic elements, in a rich process of cultural negotiation and syncretic re-elaboration: from Jewish Qabbalah (Isaac Luria [1534-1572], Gershom Scholem [1897-1982]) and Merkabah mysticism, but also yoga, as in the case of Anselm Kiefer, and from Eastern traditions – Daoism – but most of all Buddhism, as in the case of Nitsch.

Furthermore, as already pointed out in relation to the ontology of images, contemporary art, especially in Abstract currents, allows for concretely indicating the insufficiency of any reductionism of art to an imitative act. Anselm Kiefer's and Hermann Nitsch's artworks confirm this awareness of beauty as an unveiling and evenemential power. The role of form, which in German philosophy has been developed under Goethe's legacy in a long philosophical tradition (Nietzsche, Spengler, Jünger, Benn, among others) finds also in Gadamer's lens a significant role as a theoretical pillar aimed at defending art from aesthetical relativism and nominalism: the event of art happens through forms, and the coherence and meaning which the forms express are the research objective of hermeneutical thought. The systematic value of artistic forms – because every form symbolically and analogically refers to other forms – is concretely pointed out in Kiefer and Nitsch's production, because their poetics try to restore (against the conceptual or decorative instances – in the worst case kitsch – of other contemporary artists) the ability of form to "attract life to itself by rescuing it from the disenchantment of time and the end, giving to it the chrism of eternity"[320], avoiding the risk of collapsing within it. The connection of art and life is therefore, in our opinion, not naively affirmed as a definite equation, but instead is interpreted as a vibrant, evolutive, and contradictory dynamic. It is the process which Federico Vercellone has finely taken into examination: "Beauty does not constitute a foundation or a definitive rule, but a morphological presupposition which gives orientation without dictating modalities which would reify its being and would relativize its cogency by rooting it in particular historical and geographical contexts. Only insofar as beauty affects its own being as an image and not as an objective presence, only insofar as it persists in constituting the presupposition of a recognition and self-recognition that is always to come – the 20th-century

[320] Federico Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, cit., p. 49. This is the power of the "morphologic reason".

lesson is correct from this point of view –, it can continue its task: as a rule without a normative character"[321].

Kiefer's and Nitsch's artworks can be thus considered as a "living" contribution to elaborating an answer to the crisis of aesthetics which has already had multifaceted manifestations, such as "autonomous" art, structured and reified in the scholastic art of the 19th-century, as well as "absolute" post-Avantgarde contemporary conceptual art within the rigid structures of the "system of art". Reconnecting art and life, art and knowledge, art and philosophy, art and spirituality, seems to be a relevant and urgent task. If beauty, as we have seen in this chapter, is theoretically connected to the Origin, then it is enough to thinking of the Origin so as re-establish the value of beauty in contemporary art. Hints at this path can be followed in Heidegger's and Gadamer's philosophy, as well as in Nitsch's and Kiefer's artworks. In all these authors[322], however, we do not recognize an attempt to realize a *nostos* back to the past and end up there, where, as it were, intellectual and artistic faculties were harmonized, but instead an even richer attempt to enlighten paths for a reassessment of the comprehension of beauty in a direction rooted in the past but aimed at the future.

As pointed out by the above-quoted Vercellone, "the ancient morphological intelligence – contained and entrusted to the concept of beauty – has thus faded under the push of a rationality devoted to the beyond, to transcendence, to a formalization, which makes it liable to incessant progress, that is flanked by contents in the sign of receptiveness alone. The beauty that lived in the ambivalent but not ambiguous sign of the active and the passive, which asserted the sovereign subjectivity/objectivity of the image endowed with a shining attractiveness, is now completely disavowed: rather, even better, it has flowed back into the territories of the ineffectual"[323]. Against this self-referential reason – the one also denounced by Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) for its reductionist, technical and violent dimension that is incapable of dialogue with Otherness[324] – intervenes an ontology of art able to recognize the intrinsic connection between *techne* and *physis* and its manifestation in the light of beauty. We could, therefore state with Vercellone that what we actually need is "a 'natural' intelligence of forms that does not share the invasive procedure of a bewildered and bewildering intelligence so unaware of its own origin that it has lost its reference points and can no longer even ask itself where it really is. Beauty can thus establish itself as the symbolic

[321] *Ivi*, p. 185.
[322] Apart, perhaps, Heidegger, but the question would be quite debated.
[323] Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, cit., p. 178.
[324] See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2022.

image of an enlightenment which has found or rediscovered the path of return, able to look within itself, in its own genetic path"[325].

Along this path, moreover, a fundamental issue is represented by myth, the narrative horizons of that indeterminable foundation which is the source for artistic production.

If in contemporary philosophy of art, as expressed for example by Heidegger, art is the origin of the artist, the transcendental and metaphysical dimension seems to be excluded from the artistic world as though it were redundant and superfluous. We do not need anything – surely not God – to justify the creative activity of the artist. But the genius deriving from this model, which reached its peak in the modern subjectivist aesthetics criticized by Gadamer, lacks a foundation – it evokes the already mentioned problem of an absolute and autonomous art. Referring to myth, in the broader and non-reactionary sense elaborated by Gadamer, will prove to be another perspective for approaching the Origin without "moving back" to it, as in the *nostos*, but instead "forthcoming" and acquiring it "from the future".

[325] Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, cit., pp. 179-180.

2.3 Myth: Narrating the Sacred from Antiquity to the Post-Secular Age

2.3.1 Off the Beaten Track to the Sacred

The sacred determination which accompanies the hermeneutical aesthetics that we have tried to trace in the previous chapters clearly manifests itself in the illuminating, epiphanic dimension of *Ereignis* as well as in the evenemential quality of beauty, both of which share with the sacred the powerful function of letting fundamental structures of being be shown and establishing a relation between human singularity and cosmic structure.

In the hermeneutical tradition, it is especially in the late Heidegger – at least from the '30s – that we can grasp an explicit understanding and thematization of the role of the sacred, which is discussed also as a feature of visual arts, despite being treated with particular emphasis on poetry – an immense topic which is beyond the scope of our research.

What is particularly interesting in the context of our dissertation is that the Heideggerian interest in the sacred – understood in a neither metaphysical nor substantialist dimension – finds its culmination in the search for a new ontology of art capable of revealing anew to mankind this dimension of being which has been neglected over the process of the secularisation and modernisation of Western culture – a crisis process that proceeds in parallel with the "forgetfulness of Being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*). Authentic, beautiful art is that which is aimed at letting the sacred event concretely present itself in human experience, renewing an existential possibility which is often no longer attainable by our coevals. An artwork, Heidegger explains, is properly "set up" when it achieves this specific function: "The setting up we refer to is an erecting in the sense of dedication and praise. Here, 'setting up' no longer means merely putting in place. To dedicate means to consecrate [*heiligen*], in the sense that, in the workly construction, the holy [*Heilige*] is opened up as the holy and the god is called forth into the openness of its presence"[326]. Through the sacred, the god(s) can concretely overwhelm our perception and comprehension of the world. Heidegger specifies: "Praise belongs to dedication as doing honor to the dignity and splendor of the god. Dignity and splendor are not properties beside and behind which there stands, additionally, the god. Rather, it is in the dignity, in the splendor, that the god comes to presence. In the reflected glory of this splendor there glows,

[326] Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 22 ("Solche Aufstellung ist das Errichten im Sinne von Weihen und Rühmen. Aufstellung meint hier nicht mehr das bloße Anbringen. Weihen heißt heiligen in dem Sinne, daß in der werkhaften Erstellung das Heilige als Heiliges eröffnet und der Gott in das Offene seiner Anwesenheit hereingerufen wird" [Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), cit., p. 30]).

i.e., illuminates itself, what we called 'world'"[327]. Without god(s) – whose specific Heideggerian determination has been broadly debated in the academic literature[328] – even the world, strictly speaking, does not exist – or, better, it does exist, but it cannot be "seen", understood, and lived, because it is not "illuminated", since it is lacking the typological and formative structures which coincide with the sacred archetypes. Expelling god(s) from reality, "the worlding of world"[329] ceases to be possible: only fragments, nihilistic fractures and reified processes appear on the surface of being. Art remains one possible domain where a New (or Other) Beginning (*Neuer* [or *Anderer*] *Anfang*) can be prepared, one which stands as a challenge for philosophy to be capable of thinking anew the manifestation of the sacred, considered in a non-religious way and in an ontological perspective: the sacred is, for Heidegger, the modality in which Being reveals itself in the event (*Ereignis*). The sacred thus expresses the living and unveiling dimension of reality (its "nature", *physis*, in the Greek sense) which is exposed by the *legein* (the saying) in language as a foundational dimension, where the "it is" of every being is essentially preserved. In this discourse, there is no space for magic or esotericism: we are dealing with the natural process through which everything which "is" manifests itself, thanks to its relational connection with a non-objective and evenemential background – or foundation. In addition, when Heidegger treats this topic in an aesthetical context, for example discussing Hölderlin's poetry, his perspective remains basically ontological: as recently stressed by Marco

[327] *Ibidem* ("Zum Weihen gehört das Rühmen als die Würdigung der Würde und des Glanzes des Gottes. Würde und Glanz sind nicht Eigenschaften, neben und hinter denen außerdem noch der Gott steht, sondern in der Würde, im Glanz west der Gott an. Im Abglanz dieses Glanzes glänzt, d. h. lichtet sich jenes, was wir die Welt nannten" [*ibidem*]).

[328] The indeterminacy of Heidegger's definition of the god(s), who are also fundamental features of the *Geviert* (Fourfold), has led to different interpretations: many authors have focused their attention on Heidegger's Christian mystic and theological background (especially in the Augustinian tradition) in order to interpret this topic; just as many have pointed out, connecting it to Nietzsche's and Hölderlin's inspiration, his passion for Greek culture and his critique of rationalistic objectifying theology (the so called "ontotheology", where God is reduced to a *ens*, although *summum*), pretending to grasp in his worldview a "pagan" appraisal – also because his explicit reference to "gods" (in plural), *theoi* and demons. What is certain and relevant to be underscored here is that Heidegger had no interest in elaborating a dogmatic theological or even less a religious model, instead he desired to point out the necessity (individual but also communitarian, indeed "political") for mankind to establish a new relation with the sacred in order to be ready for the epochal existential challenges of the new millennium – being the sacred an essential mode of Being and being considered as an ontological issue. Gods, in this perspective, can be considered not as specific entities, but as the ontic nods and the irradiations of the divine, in its evenemential nature. Even in Gadamer, according to Zimmermann, it is possible to recognize a similar perspective: "If one interprets the realm of the fugitive gods as the space from which we can critique the reduction of knowledge to the measuring and calculating knowledge of modernity, we are not far from Gadamer's transcendence. Like Heidegger, Gadamer refuses to make assertions regarding the content of transcendence.While Heidegger mines Hölderlin's poetry for terms that help us to conceive of transcendence, Gadamer defines transcendence and the religious feeling it evokes as the "*ignoramus*" – we do not know" (Jens Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, in Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, cit., pp. 309-322: 320).

[329] Martin Heidegger, *The Thing*, in Id., *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, cit., pp. 5-22: 18 (Martin Heidegger, *Das Ding*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, cit., pp. 5-23: 19]).

Viscomi[330], if Being stands as that unfounded foundation (*Abgrund*) which can be understood as an ontological transcendental, the sacred emerges in the movement which makes possible the realization of every single event. The sacred "saves", as it is *das Heilige* (the holy), but also *Heil* (health, salvation): it preserves the Being of beings in their potential of becoming themselves – and this possibility pertains not only to mortals, especially the "future ones" (*Zukünftigen*, i.e., the thinkers and poets able to near the New Beginning[331], who are thus even similar to gods[332]), but also the divine itself, which stands in a relational dynamic with the human considered as *Dasein*. The sacred is thus what makes it possible for beings to be in the concrete epiphanic dynamic of the event. "The shaking breaks the peace of silence. The word comes to be. The word-work which originates in this way lets the belonging together of god and man appear. The song bears witness to the ground of their belonging together, bears witness to the holy"[333]. As we have already considered, this belonging takes place in the appropriative dimension of *Ereignis*.

By thinking of thinking itself and its modes of comprehension under the "fundamental question" (*Grundfrage*: what is being? i.e. what is the *phyein* of the *Ereignis*?)[334], it is possible to prepare the irruption of that God who alone can save, recognizing the break in the world as that cosmic transcendental Otherness which has been lost in Christian tradition and which can be thought in contemporary age only as the "coming God" (*kommende Gott*) or "last God" (*letzte Gott*)[335]. "The future poets know the sacred because it is literally "what happens", and

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[330] See Marco Viscomi, *Il sacro in Martin Heidegger. I "venturi" e "l'ultimo Dio"*, Orthotes, Napoli-Salerno 2018.

[331] "Insofar as it looks at the event, according to the decision to correspond with it by making itself 'there' [*da*] of being itself, beingness occurs in a particular mode. This mode of the becoming of *Dasein* is called by Heidegger as '*Zukünftig'*, 'future'. This term indicates to us that beingness essentializes itself in the safe possibility of its existence-insistence by coming into its own 'there'" (*ivi*, p. 48).

[332] See Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin's poetizing of the essence of the poet as demigod", in Id., *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, trans. by William McNeill and Julia Davis, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1996, pp. 123-165 (Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlins Dichten des Wesens des Dichters als Halbgott", in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 53: *Hölderlins Hymne »Der Ister«*, ed. by Walter Biemel, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1984, pp. 153-206). See also Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, cit., pp. 127-128 (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., p. 105).

[333] Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, cit., p. 91 ("Das Erbeben bricht die Ruhe des Schweigens. Das Wort wird. Das so entspringende Wort-Werk läßt das Zusammengehören des Gottes und des Menschen erscheinen. Das Lied gibt dem Grund ihrer Zusammengehörigkeit das Zeugnis, bezeugt das Heilige" [Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit., p. 69]).

[334] Distinguished by Heidegger from the *Leitfrage*, the "guiding question" of metaphysical thought.

[335] A God which is present – and, at the same time absent, in constitutive *Mangel* (lack) – differently from any other being. It occurs in a similar way of *physis*, although not being *physis* itself (as in pantheism). Indeed, God doesn't coincide with the Being itself, but takes place in it – the unfolded Being lets God be God: "The last god is not the event itself and yet is in need of the event as that to which the one who grounds the 'there' belongs. This intimation, as event, places beings in the most extreme abandonment by being and simultaneously irradiates the truth of being as the innermost illumination of that truth" (Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., pp. 324-325 ("Der letzte Gott ist nicht das Ereignis selbst, wohl aber seiner bedürftigt als jenes, dem der Dagründer zugehört. Dieser Wink als Ereignis stellt das Seiende in die äußerste Seinsverlassenheit und durchstrahlt zugleich die Wahrheit des Seins als ihr innigstes Leuchten" [Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65:

they know it in a non-representational sense, in that they are involved in it both with respect to their poetising and with respect to the very *phyein* of the *legein*. The saving character of the sacred consists in that it is present in everything, in the manner of the occurrence of *physis* in the temporal and spatial sense"[336]. This God, never defined in specific religious or theological ways, is approached by Heidegger in its dimension of incommensurability: God is conceived in its extreme possibility of Being, in a dynamic between presence and absence, lack (*Mangel*) and excess. As synthesized by Viscomi: "The God-to-be consists of an *ad-ventum*, in which the essentially *ad-veniens* trait of the *Ereignis* will give itself in all its aletheic scope. In such an event, the appropriation-expropriation of God and man in the context of the contention between Earth and World should be profiled in the terms of a non-privative lack. The God, that is, should always present himself as an absence, which, however, would again manifest itself in the cogency of hints, which would allow the human to become fully *Dasein*"[337].

Heidegger's complex perspective deeply influenced the philosophy of Gadamer, representing a fruitful imaginative element of confrontation, and especially affected his attempt to elaborate a way to approach the Origin without simply "moving back" to it in a reactive or conservative *nostos*. Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics thus appears as a never definitive homecoming, and instead as a dynamic, improvisational, and symphonic engagement with the Origin in connection with the present.

The topic of the sacred plays a significant role in Gadamer's philosophy in the comprehension of the ontological and gnoseological function of myth – although the "urbanized" quality of his

Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis), cit., pp. 409-410]). See on that Viscomi, *Il sacro in Martin Heidegger*, cit., pp. 130-131, 156, 158-159, 208). We should add, with Heidegger: "The last god has his own most unique uniqueness and stands outside of the calculative determination expressed in the labels 'mono-theism,' 'pan-theism,' and 'a-theism.' There has been 'monotheism,' and every other sort of 'theism,' only since the emergence of Judeo-Christian 'apologetics,' whose thinking presupposes 'metaphysics.' With the death of this God, all theisms wither away. The multiplicity of gods is not subject to enumeration but, instead, to the inner richness of the grounds and abysses in the site of the moment for the lighting up and concealment of the intimation of the last god. The last god is not the end; the last god is the other beginning of the immeasurable possibilities of our history" (Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, cit., pp. 325-326 ["Der letzte Gott hat seine einzigste Einzigkeit und steht außerhalb jener verrechnenden Bestimmung, was die Titel 'Mono-theismus', 'Pan-theismus' und 'A-theismus' meinen. 'Monotheismus' und alle Arten des 'Theismus' gibt es erst seit der jüdisch-christlichen 'Apologetik', die die 'Metaphysik' zur denkerischen Voraussetzung hat. Mit dem Tod dieses Gottes fallen alle Theismen dahin. Die Vielheit der Götter ist keiner Zahl unterstellt, sondern dem inneren Reichtum der Gründe und Abgründe in der Augenblicksstätte des Aufleuchtens und der Verbergung des Winkes des letzten Gottes. Der letzte Gott ist nicht das Ende, sondern der andere Anfang unermeßlicher Möglichkeiten unserer Geschichte"; Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe*, Band 65, cit., p. 411]). Gadamer interprets the "last God" as a faithful and communitarian hermeneutical projection towards a new dialogical model, capable to produce an ethical comprehension of human existence (see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *L'ultimo dio. Un dialogo filosofico con Riccardo Dottori*, Meltemi, Roma 2002, pp. 142-145).

[336] Viscomi, *Il sacro in Martin Heidegger*, cit., p. 39.

[337] *Ivi*, pp. 145-146.

thought, to mention again Habermas' famous designation, induces him to adopt a less lyrical and mystical approach to this issue.

The notion of the sacred (*das Heilige*) is mentioned by Gadamer – like Heidegger – according to a use which was common in the 20th-century human sciences, and which derives from the seminal thematization offered at the beginning of the previous century by the German theologian and philosopher of religions Rudolf Otto (1869-1937). In his famous essay *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Otto discusses this notion in order to define the core of religious experience, affirming that the exposure to the sacred precedes any theological and dogmatic religious construction. Religion can be indeed considered somehow a form of "cultural appropriation", which is aimed at interpreting, communicating, and transmitting the original experience of the encounter with that *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ("tremendous and fascinating mystery") which is the sacred Wholly Other, a non-rational and ineffable surplus of divinity and meaningfulness which goes beyond every human depiction, even beyond goodness and perfection. In fact, Otto explains, "the truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb"[338].

Approaching this mysterious domain requires the notion of "holiness", which is "a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion. (…) While it is complex, it

[338] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1952, p. 28 ("Ungreifbar ist der wirklich 'mysteriöse' Gegenstand nicht nur deswegen weil mein Erkennen in bezug auf ihn gewisse unaufhebbare Schranken hat sondern weil ich hier auf ein überhaupt 'Ganz anderes' stoße das durch Art und Wesen meinem Wesen inkommensurabel ist und vor dem ich deshalb in erstarrendem Staunen zurückpralle" [Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, C.H. Bech, München 1987, pp. 32-33)]. A convincing theoretical foundation of the interconnected notions of "sacred" (*ieros*, *sacer*) and "saint" (*agios*, *sanctum*) has been recently developed in Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché*, cit., particular pp. 169-209. Ciglia underscores that both notions are implied in Otto's theoretical assumption of *das Heilige*, which implies both the mysterious, primitive and auroral impact of the sacred and the luminous and meaningful realization of the saint. See also the fascinating image, through which Bell connects the sacred and the mystery: "There is an old Midrashic parable that asks, Who first discovered water? We do not know. But one thing we do know: the fish did not. We may be in the position of the fish, for the world of religion is the world of the nonrational, and we can only go so far in our understanding, for the realization of the nonrational (a category that sociology has rarely tried to define) is the recognition that the existential predicaments we confront derive from a mystery, one that we may never be able to penetrate. For Aristotle, man's highest capacity was not *logos* (that is, speech or reason) but *nous*, the capacity for contemplation whose constitutive character is that its content cannot be rendered in speech. The eternal, for Aristotle, was *aneu logon* – without words. That is also the source of the *kairos* which breaks into time, or the 'holy sparks' of the *Shekinah*, which becomes the sacred" (Daniel Bell, *The Return of the Sacred: the Argument About the Future of Religion*, in Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow and Roy Harvey Pearce (eds.), *Progress and its Discontents*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1982, pp. 501-523: 522).

contains a quite specific element or 'moment', which sets it apart from 'the rational' in the meaning we gave to that word above, and which remains inexpressible – an ἄρρητον or *ineffabile* – in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts. The same thing is true (to take a quite different region of experience) of the category of the beautiful"[339]. It is relevant that the association between the sacred and the beautiful is offered by Otto himself; the common features of these two domains appear in symbols, myths, and archetypes, structures which are characterized by a dynamic and fruitful polarity – between form and content, matter and spirit, visible and invisible, immanence and transcendence, signifier and signified –, and which make it possible for the sacred to become something that can be structured, grasped, and thereby subsequently rationalized in concepts and doctrines. The work of art – and Gadamer recognizes the awareness of this phenomenon especially in the ancient Greek culture – represents the physical appearance of ritual and sacred epiphanies.

The encounter with the sacred dimension, which the historian of religions Mircea Eliade has qualified through the concept of "hierophany" (manifestation of the sacred, characterized by a dynamic dialectical with what is not sacred, i.e., the profane) and which Walter F. Otto (1874-1958) has grasped in his studies on Greek civilization as "theophany" (the spontaneous and autonomous self-revelation of the divine as a phenomenon perceivable by man, which only allows to relate with gods and from which the religious experience derives) deeply interested Gadamer, who often quotes in his philosophical production both Rudolf and Walter F. Otto.
Regarding the former, Gadamer speaks of "the wonderful coolness of Rudolf Otto"[340], who has engaged in a kind of "phenomenological approach to the secret of the divine"[341].
From Walter F. Otto, who was an older contemporary of Gadamer and one of the readers for his *Habilitationsschrift*[342], the German philosopher grasps not only the interest in the Greek idea of divine, but especially the evenemential definition of the sacred, which is taken to be generally coherent with the evenemential idea of truth and beauty that Gadamer derives from Heidegger. Indeed, the author of *Truth and Method* writes: "We owe the philologist Walter F.

[339] *Ivi*, p. 5. Otto clarifies: "Representations of spirits and similar conceptions are rather one and all early modes of 'rationalizing' a precedent experience, to which they are subsidiary. They are attempts in some way or other, it little matters how, to guess the riddle it propounds, and their effect is at the same time always to weaken and deaden the experience itself" (*ivi*, p. 26).
[340] "Die würdervolle Kühle Rudolf Ottos" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Marburger Theologie* (1964), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 3, cit., pp. 197-208: 197).
[341] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger and Language* (1990), in Id., *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Historical Dimension of Language. The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, vol. 2, ed. by Pol Vandevelde and Arun Iyer, Bloomsbury, London 2002, pp. 163-176: 164 ("eine Art phänomenologischer Annäherung an das Geheimnis des Göttlichen" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger und die Sprache* (1990), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 10, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1995, pp. 14-30: 16]).
[342] See Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, Continuum, London-New York 2008, p. 82.

Otto the insight that the Greek gods actually represent aspects of the world itself". Because of that, although we are distant from their religious and ritual worldview, we can still recognize the reality of them in the most radical events of our life: "We too are familiar with darkness, perplexity, madness, catastrophe, sickness and death, love and hate, jubilation, arrogance and ambition, the whole vast range of human sufferings and passions that the Greeks experienced as the real presence of their gods. Greek myth speaks about the fundamental experience which we all have of the way in which such things befall us"[343]. The notion of *ósion*, which can roughly be translated as "sacred", testifies to the prevalence in Greek culture of the real experience of a divinity as a self-revelation of reality in contrast to the more modern and subjective idea of faith[344]. Indeed, as explained by Lammi, "since the gods in effect are descriptions of reality, not to 'believe' in the gods would be to deny reality. Gadamer argues that if we take the intervention of the gods to signify that our thinking and our decisions involve more than subjective acts and that our true being always exceeds our self-knowledge, the gods begin to look like an eminently reasonable way of describing these matters"[345]. From this perspective, the phenomenological awareness that the event of the sacred could be rationally described and interpreted both as a human phenomenon (based on creativity, phantasy, desire for meaningful explanations) and as a superhuman event (caused by the real irruption of the divine within history) – and the never decidable quality of the question on a rational level –[346] seems to be solvable in favor of the latter explanation, especially if we take into account its effective power, in the human being's lived, existential experience of an alterity which seems to overcome any subjective construction.

This is an experience which will echo in the artistic contemporary "reconnaissances" by Kiefer and Nitsch. As already stressed by Walter Otto – and appreciated by Gadamer – in the sacred it is possible to "recognise the ecstatic outwardness of the moments of life and insights into the world". "And, in my opinion", Gadamer specifies, "it is also not possible to draw a fundamental line between the mythical setting and the poetic representation of mythical tradition. Every myth is a narration of the divine and participates in the freedom of the imagination as well as

[343] Gadamer, *Image and gesture*, cit., pp. 76-77 ("Wir verdanken insbesondere dem Philologen Walter F. Otto die Einsicht, daß die griechischen Götter Aspekte der Welt sind (…). Beschattung, Düsternis, Wahnsinn, Unglück, Krankheit, Tod, Liebe, Haß, Enthusiasmus, Prahlerei, Eifersucht, das ganze große Panoptikum menschlicher Leiden und Leidenschaften, das die Griechen als die Wirklichkeit göttlicher Gestaltungen erfuhren, ist auch uns nichts Unbekanntes. Es ist die uns allen bekannte Grunderfahrung, daß etwas über den Menschen kommt und wie es über den Menschen kommt" [Gadamer, *Bild und Gebärde* (1967), cit., p. 325]).
[344] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Sokrates' Frömmigkeit des Nichtwissens* (1990), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 7, cit., pp. 83-117: 88-89.
[345] Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, cit., p. 85.
[346] See Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché*, cit., pp. 174-182.

in the high persuasive power which is effective in all true – i.e., living – narrations. The work on myth has always begun and never comes to an end"[347].

Walter Otto's position – together with the perspective of Karoly Kerényi (1897-1973) – is thus interpreted by Gadamer in continuity with Schelling's philosophy as an attempt to reevaluate the spirituality of the ancients[348]. Gadamer takes a special interest in Walter Otto's hermeneutics of Hölderlin's *Empedokles* (*Empedocles*) in a 1943 review of the yearbook *Geistige Überlieferung*: here Gadamer seems to appreciate Otto's deep interpretation, although he proposes a different reading of Hölderlin's approach to the divine, one that is not based, as in Otto's explanation, on his tragic renounce of the return *of* and *to* gods in the age of nihilism, but instead underscoring his awareness of the possibility to recognize, in the dawn of the future, the spiritual awakening of human community, with the expectation of a whole reconciliation of the Greek gods with the "One and Only" (*der Einzig*)[349]. This is an interesting emphasis of Gadamer's "optimistic" conviction – which we will subsequently broadly discuss – that the secular process has not completely removed the opportunity to meet the sacred and that modern reason can collaborate with mythic tradition to enhance this existential pivotal encounter.

Thus, if neither monographic nor systematic discussion of the notion of *das Heilige* can be recognized in Gadamer's analysis, which however, as already mentioned, often adopts this term do define in different cultural contexts the sphere of spirituality, extremely significant is his interest for one of the most relevant figures of the sacred, myth, which is a linguistic and imaginative form which can be understood precisely as an attempt to give shape and offer communicative power to the original experience of the sacred.

[347] "Die ekstatische Äußerlichkeit erhörter Lebensaugenblicke und Welteinblicke wirklich wiedererkannt zu haben. Man kann also auch nicht, wie ich meine, zwischen der mythischen Setzung und der dichterischen Darstellung mythischer Überlieferung einen grundsätzlichen Schnitt ziehen. Aller Mythos ist Erzählung von Göttlichem und hat an der Freiheit der Phantasie ebenso teil wie and der hohen Überzeugungskraft, die in aller wahren Erzählung, das heißt in aller lebendigen Erzählung wirksam ist. Die Arbeit am Mythos hat immer schon begonnen und kommt nie zu Ende" (Gadamer, *Sokrates' Frömmigkeit des Nichtwissens* (1990), cit., pp. 91-92).

[348] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics and historicism* (1965), in Id., *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 507-545: p. 509, (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik und Historismus* (1965), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1993, pp. 387-424: 389-390).

[349] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Geistige Überlieferung. Ein Jahrbuch. In Verbindung mit Walter F. Otto und Karl Reinhardt, hrsg. von Ernesto Grassi. Küpper (vorm. Bondi)*, *Berlin 1940* (1943), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 5, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1985, pp. 357-363.

2.3.2 The Mythical Horizon: Language, Narration, Hermeneutical Perspectivism, and Demythologization

"In the German culture of the last hundred years", Furio Jesi states, "myth seems to be alternately a medicine and a poison, a source of renewed humanism and an instrument of barbarism and murder"[350]. In this context, Gadamer's comprehension of myth can help us theoretically move towards the first mentioned potentiality embedded in the mythic phenomenon.

In fact, apart from the colloquial use of "myth" as "mistaken belief", "mystification" or "false notion", which sometimes appears in his writings, Gadamer takes seriously the theoretical and religious question of myth, assumed outside any neopositivist or reductionist materialist view, and runs in the vein of the interdisciplinary renaissance of interest in myth which characterized the 20th-century Western *Kultur- und Geisteswissenschaften*, especially in the German cultural context.

Gadamer's focus on myth is firstly based on the central role of language in his philosophical approach. Considering Gadamerian interest in language as such, his hermeneutics could not have denied the importance of reflecting on myth as one of the fundamental, original expressive forms at the roots of European culture. The connection between *mythos* and *logos* is therefore key to understanding Gadamer's approach on this topic and probably also its most original result, which is, as we shall see, an attempt to create an intersection between them, making myth "logical" and logos "mythic".

This perspective is nevertheless not completely new, but rather is broadly rooted in a vast tradition of the history of philosophy, which, since Plato, has often hosted a fruitful dialectic between these two powers, capable of feeding off each other. Heinz Gockel has correctly remarked on this point: "Few words in European intellectual history are as epistemologically questionable as the word myth. Few words, however, mark the boundary between two seemingly only alternatively formulated epistemological positions as clearly as this one. Its dubiousness in both a positive and negative sense results (...) from the latent or open confrontation with its contrasting term logos"[351].

In Gadamer's view, due to his interpretation of the history of Western philosophy mainly as a continuous stream, the forgetfulness of the role of myth in modernity should be rectified thanks

[350] Furio Jesi, *Germania segreta*, cit., p. 37.
[351] Heinz Gockel, *Mythos und Poesie. Zum Mythosbegriff in Aufklärung und Frühromantik*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 1.

to its placement precisely within the same tradition. There is no aspiration for a revenge of myth against reason, as proposed by some mystic or irrational thinkers, but instead the desire for a constant and reflective dialogue with this specific cultural and sapiential form of thought.
But what precisely is myth for Gadamer? It could be defined as an essential form of narration (*Erzählen*) which is articulated in acts of invocation (*Anrufung*) and naming (*Nennen*) – not in the sense of a mere nominalist definition of things, but as an attempt to grasp what is hidden in the abyss of reality through the gnoseological power of the forms which myth itself offers.
Myth is, in fact, characterized by specifics "forms of narration" (*Erzählformen*)[352], which significantly contribute to its own theoretical definition: an account – i.e., the enumeration – of divine names is an invocation of the depth of the transcendence which through names eventually becomes communicable. Furthermore, this communication is completely different from a mere description or list of facts, for it "is never an exhaustive report that is 'on record' like a protocol"[353]. Like image, which we have come to regard as a visual increase of being, myth is not the "copy" of a story, but rather can be conceived as a productive exhibition of its inner and plural meaning – a meaning which seems to exceed every specific determination, always reshaping its own mystery. Furthermore, this meaning is not only "in" the thing, but happens in the relation with the subject (be it the reader, the listener, or the user), and therefore deeply regards the public: the man who listens to myths being told – or who admires mythic histories in visual representation – becomes himself a participant in the mythic narrative. As explained by Mircea Eliade[354], *homo religiosus*, experiencing myths, restores the "authoritative precedent" embodied in mythical narratives, the authority of which is mainly founded on the conviction of their truth, based on their persuasive capacity to speak in a "truthful" way; in myths the *illud tempus* of the mythical time (a paradoxical "timeless time") is reinstated in the present, not as an act of past restoration, but instead as the discovery of the Origin in our present – every myth is contemporary if we are able to look at it through the lens of wisdom, focusing on the interpretation (through actualization) of the myth and not only on its immediate content.

In the essay *Mythos and Reason* (*Mythos und Vernunft*), Gadamer considers the polarities of *mythos* and *logos* as the two fundamental vectors of the Western cultural tradition: according to him, the evolutionary historical interpretation of myth as that domain which has been completely overcome by reason in the process of the affirmation of modernity is incorrect: it is

[352] See the chapter "Logik und Wahrheit mytischer Erzählformen" in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Mythologie und Offenbarungsreligion* (1981), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 174-179: 175-178.
[353] *Ivi*, p. 176 ("ist niemals ein sacherschöpfender Bericht, der wie ein Protokoll 'aktenkundig' wird").
[354] See: Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, cit.; Id., *Myth and Reality*, ed. by Ruth Nanda Anshen, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Harper & Row, New York-Evanston 1963.

improper both in the Enlightenment progressist view and in the opposite, but complementary, irrational and reactionary perspective, which put forth both a dualistic and reductionist interpretation. Myth and reason are rather grown together as two intertwined – sometimes peacefully, other times conflictually connected[355] – elements which can both aspire to a relevant role in the contemporary age, because both can be understood as relevant topics of modernity: reason stresses the role of intellect which has found its peak in the Enlightenment[356], while myth underscores the archetypal function of imagination which has fascinated Romanticism as a whole (although later, we should add, it was rejected by other currents, such as positivism, materialism, historicism, and so on). Ancient Greek tradition offers a particularly interesting example of this interconnected development, as the *logos* of philosophical discourse deeply merged with the recognition of the profound truths of the religious metaphysical heritage – an awareness which is particularly true in the cases of Plato and Plotinus, who were understood to simultaneously be intellectual and religious authorities[357].

In this sense, Gadamer also rejects Max Weber's thesis on the "*Entzauberung der Welt*" (disenchantment of the world) as a law of historical development[358]: the historical scheme is not linear, but instead is structurally traversed by waves of different conformations and directions which appear chaotically in the relation between myth and reason[359].

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[355] From a philological perspective, see Furio Jesi, "Mythos *e* lógos", in Id., *Mito*, Aragno, Torino 2008, pp. 17-26.

[356] Here we are referring to the modern Enlightenment. According to Gadamer, it is possible to identify three "waves" of the Enlightenment impulse (understanding this tendency in a meta-historical way): the Greek Enlightenment, which culminated in sophism; 18th-century rationalistic modern Enlightenment; 20th-century rationalism, which coincides with the "atheistic religion" (on this classification, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Mythos und Logos* (1981), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 170-173: 170).

[357] See on that Gadamer, *Thinking as Redemption: Plotinus between Plato and Augustine* (1980), cit., pp. 82-84 (Gadamer, *Denken als Erlösung: Plotin zwischen Plato und Augustin* (1980), cit., pp. 412-413).

[358] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Mythos und Vernunft* (1954), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 163-169: 164. On the notion of *Entzauberung der Welt* as a cultural and political process, see Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, trans. by Oscar Burge, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999. According to Gauchet, we already live in a post-Christian religion: Christianity itself, with its rational and critical background, would have configured the theoretical basis for its own overcoming. On the crisis of the sacred, although differently interpreted as a process of social "paganization", see also, from a sociological perspective, the pioneering Sabino S. Acquavita, *L'eclissi del sacro nella civiltà industriale*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano 1961.

[359] On this insight, Gadamer's position could be compared to the controversial one recently developed by Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm in his *The Myth of Disenchantment. Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of Human Sciences* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017). Storm challenged Weber's thesis of the "disenchantment of the world", arguing that the survival of magical thought in the Western world has been significant and culturally productive during modernity, where several thinkers have been inspired by mystical sources. In this way, similarly to Gadamer, Storm challenges the dualism between modern reason and mythic-symbolic thought. Gadamer's interpretation, however, is more focused on the recognition of the crisis of the mutual relation of myth and *logos* in modern centuries (and in this sense he partially recognizes "disenchantment" as a real process in the secularized context, despite refusing its necessity and irreversibility) – a structural problem which is not thematized in Storm's work, which is more unbalanced in concentrating on the search for magical and occult thinking structures in the modern West (with a specific focus on sciences).

Both of them share the already mentioned linguistic dimension: in fact, according to Gadamer, "'mythos' initially denotes nothing more than a form of authentication. Myth is what is said, the legend, but in such a way that what is said in this legend allows no other possibility of experience than that of being told. The Greek word, which the Latins render as 'fabula', therefore stands in conceptual contrast to logos, which thinks the essence of things and from this possesses a knowledge of things which is inferable at any time"[360]. Thus, on a different level, *logos*, which embodies the idea of collecting and enumerating, is the linguistic expression of the "inner correspondence of thinking consciousness and the rational order of being" and in this respect "underlies the whole of Western philosophy"[361].

Myth and reason appear reciprocally interrelated at several stages of ancient Western culture – for example in Platonic philosophy[362], partially also in Aristotle[363] – but they progressively take different routes: myth, representing the time of origins, a specific relation with tradition, and a way of mediation with the divine, increasingly influences the domain of art and poetry, losing its role in the religious domain, due to the rational critique affirmed by Christianity, which for Gadamer is a "son" of Western reason; reason tends to be progressively more relevant in the philosophical field and impacts modern science. In this vehement process, reason eventually moves against itself: its critical, overcoming, and deconstructive impulse can't leave out from its disruptive power reason itself. According to Gadamer, "the impossibility of this demand to recognize everything that is real as rational means the end of Western metaphysics and leads to a devaluation of the concept of reason itself. It is no longer the faculty of absolute unity, no longer the understanding of the ultimate unconditional ends, but rational now means the finding of the right means to a given end (…). The rationality of the modern apparatus of civilization

[360] Gadamer, *Mythos und Vernunft* (1954), cit., p. 165 ("'Mythos' bezeichnet zunächst nichts als eine Beglaubigungsart. Mythos ist das Gesagte, die Sage, aber so, daß das in dieser Sage Gesagte keine andere Erfahrungsmöglichkeit zuläßt als eben die des Gesagtbekommens. Das griechische Wort, das die Lateiner als 'fabula' wiedergeben, tritt daher in begrifflichen Gegensatz zum Logos, der das Wesen der Dinge denkt und daraus ein jederzeit ableitbares Wissen um die Dinge besitzt").
[361] *Ivi*, p. 166 ("Aber gerade diese innere Entsprechung des denkenden Bewußtseins und der vernünftigen Ordnung des Seienden ist es, die in dem griechischen Urgedanken des Logos gedacht war, der dem Ganzen der abendländischen Philosophie zugrunde liegt"). On the Greek etymology of *mythos* (from *mythein*) and *logos* (from *legein*), see Gadamer, *Mythos und Logos* (1981), cit., p. 171.
[362] See Gadamer, *Mythos und Vernunft* (1954), cit., pp. 166, and Id., *Mythos und Logos* (1981), cit., pp. 172-173. In Neoplatonic tradition, which we have seen as a relevant source of Gadamer's aesthetical inspiration, the relation between myth and philosophy is similar to the already thematized between (artistic) image and philosophical reasoning: among different interpretations, it is possible to deduce a strict connection between the two planes, although myths often appear in Neoplatonic discourse to be used more as allegory, in order to explain theoretical reasonings, than as proper mythical events endowed with a specific ontological and evenemential value.
[363] See Gadamer, *Mythos und Logos* (1981), cit., p. 173.

is therefore, at its ultimate core, a rational irrationality, a kind of revolt of the means against the dominant ends"[364].

This crisis – i.e., the nihilistic loss of confidence and epistemological persuasiveness – of both myth and reason (here understood in the Greek sense of *logos*, and not as the currently prevailing technical, mechanical, utilitarian reason) is indeed a crisis of their mutual relation. If Gadamer's studies on language, dialectic, and dialogue can be considered an attempt to restore the role of a "humanistic" oriented reason, his interest towards myth could be interpreted as an answer to the contemporary necessity to acquire a "recognition of the truth of ways of knowing that lie outside science. They must not remain relegated to the non-binding nature of mere imaginative formations"[365]. This historical necessity moves towards the already mentioned attempt to elaborate a "morphologic reason", which could be the fruit of a renewed dialogue between reason and myth[366]. The mythical figures which still nowadays appear in some artistic masterpieces, such as the poems of Rilke mentioned by Gadamer at the end of his essay *Myth and Reason*, are indeed not arbitrary or oneiric production, but instead "they are answers, in which human existence constantly understands itself. That is precisely what is reasonable about such experience, that a self-understanding is gained in it – and the question is whether reason is ever more reasonable than in such a gaining of a self-understanding of something which transcends itself"[367].

Eventually, as explained by Salman, Gadamer thinks that "the spiritual history of mankind is not (...) an unravelling of myth through *logos* (reason), as the Enlightenment judged, because reason is insufficient in itself and has little understanding of mythical reality (...) myths are not masks of historical reality which reason could remove in order to fulfil itself as historical reason: they rather reveal the actual force of history"[368].

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[364] Gadamer, *Mythos und Vernunft* (1954), cit., p. 167 ("Die Uneinlösbarkeit dieser Forderung, alles Wirkliche als vernünftig zu erkennen, bedeutet das Ende der abendländischen Metaphysik und führt zu einer Abwertung des Begriffs von Vernunft selber. Sie ist nicht mehr das Vermögen der absoluten Einheit, nicht mehr das Vernehmen der letzten unbedingten Zwecke, sondern vernünftig heißt nunmehr die Findung der rechten Mittel zu gegebenem Zwecke […]. Die Rationalität des modernen Zivilisationsapparates ist daher in ihrem letzten Kerne eine rationale Unvernunft, eine Art Aufstand der Mittel gegen die beherrschenden Zwecke").

[365] *Ivi*, p. 168 ("Die Anerkennung der Wahrheit von Erkenntnisweisen, die außerhalb der Wissenschaft liegen. Sie dürfen nicht in die Unverbindlichkeit bloßer Phantasiegestaltungen abgedrängt bleiben").

[366] Gadamer briefly mentions Ernst Cassirer's *The philosophy of the symbolic forms* as an interesting attempt to recognize the value of myth within a criticist philosophical approach (see *ibidem*). A compared study of the two philosophies of myth could led to fruitful future research.

[367] *Ivi*, p. 169 ("Sie sind zustande gebrachte Antworten, in denen sich das menschliche Dasein dauernd versteht. Das gerade ist das Vernünftige an solcher Erfahrung, daß sich in ihr ein Selbstverständnis gewinnt und es fragt sich, ob die Vernunft je vernünftiger ist als in solchem Gewinn eines Selbstverständnisses an etwas, das sie selbst übersteigt").

[368] Wasim Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi. Intorno alla teoria della storia degli effetti (Wirkungsgeschichte)*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2012, pp. 151-152.

If myths reveal the hidden secret of reality, in its historical process, then the art of hermeneutics, which aims to detect and interpret reality, could be recognized as endowed with a mythical essence. Its origin is explanatory of it, if we assume the much-discussed Greek etymological relation between the words for interpreting and interpretation (*hermeneuein*, *hermeneia*) and the god Hermes[369]. Aside from this philological determination, between the Greek god and hermeneutics there is surely a symbolic connection as well as one of content.

Hermes was indeed the messenger of the gods, a daimonic and pontifical figure mediating between Zeus and the mortals, the sensible and the supersensible; therefore, as Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, traces of his sacred origin remain in philosophical hermeneutics, in its authoritative judgement which makes possible to understand what, in human knowledge, remains hidden. Hermeneutics is thus, in the proper sense, the art of Hermes, an active practice of communicative exercise which gives theory to an operational and relational dimension.

The truthful content of the divine messages of which Hermes was the bearer was indisputable, yet at the same time extremely obscure, difficult to penetrate. On the other hand, it is precisely this obscurity that necessarily requires the act of interpretation, the unveiling of the truth hidden within the open glade, the *Lichtung*, according to the Heideggerian teaching. Thus, if *in claris non fit interpretatio*, the figure of Hermes reproduces on an archetypal level certain key elements of hermeneutic theory, even in his mythical vicissitude, and does so in close connection to the rhetorical and linguistic dimension as well as the invention of writing. Hermes is the god who chairs the (ambiguous) power of word, in its dynamic function of "translating" – between languages, but also between different levels of reality. Within the textual dimension presided over by Hermes, the tremor of the sign-word becomes a kind of mantra capable of opening epiphanies, nearing the very origin of language.

The connection between hermeneutics and mythology[370] is thus intrinsic: both reflect a narration of reality and produce an interpretation of it. Both are related, albeit with different

[369] See Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz, Harper, San Francisco 1982, p. 29 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 12: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 115).

[370] Here we generally refer to mythology as "discourse on myth". We have not recognized in Gadamer's production a clear-cut theoretical distinction between "myth" and "mythology" – as we can find, for example, in Karoly Kerényi and Furio Jesi. We can, however, deduce from his non-substantialist approach that Gadamer, when he speaks of myth, doesn't refer to the fixed ontological truth of a mythical substance, but always to his historical, cultural, narrative – and thus performative – function and adoption: what Jesi defines as the "science of the science of myth" or the "mythological machine" (see Jesi, *Mito*, cit., pp. 53-55, 149) – although Gadamer seems more open to the possibility of the achievement in the contemporary age, through art and poetry, of an aesthetic experience where the sacred mythic event can be restored. Indeed, the insertion of myth within the hermeneutical circle makes it vital and productive again, in terms of knowledge and experience, as a source for the enhancement of the symbolic-interpretative process. This integration of myth in rational Western philosophy overcomes any merely historicist and positivist approach: myth, for Gadamer, is not a spontaneous and immediate experience but

nuances, to *logos*, considered not in a rationalist perspective, but instead as a unifying, collecting, and shaping tool of human spiritual activity. Although myths do not have the structure of a written canonic text, they "speak" to us, and in this performing act they interact with us as their interpreters. Against the structuralist approach to myth, Gadamer states that the hermeneutical interest in myths "begins not so much with the question of what the myths betray in terms of hidden structures as rather what they say to you when you encounter them", which means a sort of phenomenological rehabilitation of the existential and epistemological value of myths. Gadamer comments further: "What they say to you resides in the declaration [*Aussage*] which they are, and which necessarily presses forward toward determinate form, perhaps even crystalizing into myth-interpreting poetry. In this way the hermeneutical problem of myth-exegesis finds its legitimate place among the forms of explicating the literary word"[371]. From this view we can deduce that what happens in the hermeneutical interpretation of myth is not an act of truth disempowerment or deconstruction, but instead a cultural vindication through the reconfiguration of our communal heritage.

One key aspect of Gadamer's perspective on myth is the thematization of its role in shaping our understanding of the world. He sees myth not as a mere collection of outdated beliefs or stories, but rather as a fundamental aspect of human existence, which models our worldview and our interpretations of reality.

Under this aspect, myth should be understood in Gadamer's hermeneutics also as part of the reevaluation of prejudices (*Vorurteile*) and fore-meanings which this German author continuously carries out. From a purely logical point of view, Gadamer shares Hegel's conviction that without pre-judice, no rational -judice could arise: the process of thinking does indeed need a starting point, which is the product of history, language, culture and education, and such constitutes the *sensus communis* from which a society moves and takes its own steps. Thus, prejudices, when they are not radicalized in dogmatic ideologies, constitute the minimal notions which model the common basis of our thinking. Against "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment", which "is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its

is in itself an element of mediation, which can enrich and existentially transfigure human experience. A similar approach will be recognized and discussed in Kiefer's and Nitsch's aesthetics.

[371] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On the Truth of the Word*, in *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. by Richard E. Palmer, Northwestern University Press, Evanston (USA) 2007, pp. 132-155: 140-141 ("Das hermeneutische Interesse beginnt mit der Frage, was einem die Mythen nicht so sehr verraten, als was sie einem sagen, wenn sie in Dichtung begegnen. Was sie einem sagen, liegt in der Aussage, die sie sind und die wohl notwendig in die Fixierung drängt, und vielleicht sogar in die kumulative Fixierung durch die mythendeutende Dichtung. So wird das hermeneutische Problem der Mythendeutung unter den Formen des literarischen Wortes seinen legitimen Platz haben" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Von der Wahrheit des Wortes* (1971), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 37-57: 43]).

power"[372], Gadamer recognizes prejudices as epistemological conditions of understanding: a reasonable position towards them is a mediation between refusal and idolatry, which is a dialectical engagement with them in a dialogue between what can be defended and reproduced and what reason suggests deconstructing and smoothly rearranging. The relation with prejudices means in fact the relation with tradition. In this view, the already discussed expressive "freedom" and openness of myth are balanced with its rootedness in an historical, cultural, linguistic and religious tradition. This notion is understood by Gadamer, especially in *Truth and Method*, not as a static and dogmatic historical record, but rather as the inescapable ground on which every judgement arises. Like the overall horizon of the world, it permanently appeals to man, it necessarily calls him to the existential "appointment" of nomination, founding a need – never unambiguous – and stimulating the demand for meaning. "Tradition" is therefore transmission – from the Latin *tradere* – and at the same time com-prehension, insofar as it is precisely the reception of the transmitted – *traditum*.

Mythical narratives are indeed forms of tradition and cultural prejudice which can also be considered from this epistemological angle. From this angle, myths stay in reciprocal relation with tradition and critical historical consciousness: "The effect (*Wirkung*) of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute a unity of effect, the analysis of which would reveal only a texture of reciprocal effects. Hence we would do well not to regard historical consciousness as something radically new – as it seems at first – but as a new element in what has always constituted the human relation to the past. In other words, we have to recognize the element of tradition in historical research and inquire into its hermeneutic productivity"[373].

One of the clearest and most direct definitions of myth proposed by Gadamer is to be found in his essay *Composition and Interpretation* (*Dichten und Deuten*). Here, in discussing Greek culture, he defines *mythos* in a quite traditional way, as "the histories of gods and men", but he also emphasizes that mythical narrative can "only enjoy existence in the recounting of them"[374], which means that myth exists only in its happening as narration within poetry: myth is neither

[372] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 273 ("Dies grundlegende Vorurteil der Aufklärung ist das Vorurteil gegen die Vorurteile überhaupt und damit die Entmachtung der Überlieferung" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1, 6. Auflage, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1990, p. 275]).

[373] *Ivi*, p. 284 ("Die Wirkung der fortlebenden Tradition und die Wirkung der historischen Forschung bilden eine Wirkungseinheit, deren Analyse immer nur ein Geflecht von Wechselwirkungen anzutreffen vermöchte. Wir tun daher gut, das historische Bewußtsein nicht – wie es zunächst scheint – als etwas radikales Neues zu denken, sondern als ein neues Moment innerhalb dessen, was das menschliche Verhältnis zur Vergangenheit von jeher ausmachte. Es gilt, mit anderen Worten, das Moment der Tradition im historischen Verhalten zu erkennen und auf seine hermeneutische Produktivität zu befragen" [*ivi*, p. 287]).

[374] Gadamer, *Composition and interpretation*, cit., p. 70 ("Die Geschichte von Göttern und Menschen, um die es sich dabei handelt, ist dadurch charakterisiert, daß sie nur im Gesagtsein ihr Dasein hat" [Gadamer, *Dichten und Deuten* (1961), cit., p. 22]).

a set of abstract beliefs nor a univocal description of reality, but instead is a perennial "storytelling" which allows, through the power of words and interpretation, for its narration to be perceived in an always new and living way. Cultic experience appears thus vivified and renewed within poetic myth. It is an infinite and unlimited process: "This means that when stories are told concerning the gods, the very form of transmission implies the moment of continuation – 'and so forth' – which goes beyond what has already been said to something that still lies beyond it. The dimension of the divine that is recounted in stories – the behavior of the gods and their dealings with men and heroes – yields an infinite range of possibilities for storytelling, and the epic form of literature is an expression of this range"[375].
In this sense, myth is associated with the narrative capacity of literature and art to express meaning – a meaning which is always contemporary, as long as it is embodied in different but analogical human forms of expression.

Myth, however, is not expressed in a generic language, but in a specific one: symbolic language, with its evenemential and reproductive power. Gadamer's comprehension of the value of symbol, which we have already thematized in our chapter on his philosophy of image, reflects in relation to myth the impact of several philosophical and historic-religious legacies. Gadamer's thought is in fact deeply influenced in this perspective by German Romanticism (especially the debate around *Neue Mythologie*) and Stefan George's (1868-1933) aestheticism. In addition, the role of Walter F. Otto, Károly Kerényi, and Friedrich Nietzsche in taking myth seriously should not be underestimated[376]. Furthermore, "an impressive testimony to the hermeneutic dimension of myth" is recognized as a quality of Hans Blumenberg's (1920-1996) research[377]. In *Truth and Method*, the parallel between myth and symbol is also developed by

[375] Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, cit., p. 144 ("Das bedeutet aber: wenn in der Form des Erzählens vom Göttlichen gesprochen wird, so liegt in dieser Form der Übermittlung selber eine Überschreitung des wirklich Gesagten auf etwas jenseits seines Gelegenen hin. Die Sphäre des Göttlichen, von der man Geschichten erzählt – das Verhalten der Götter, das Zusammenhängen von Menschen und Helden mit Göttern –, all das ergibt eine unendliche Reihung von Geschichten. Die epische Form der Literatur ist der Ausdruck dieser Erzählungen" [Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), cit., pp. 146-147]).
[376] A rich and insightful historical path of the modern rediscovery of myth and of the science of myth has been offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his *Myth in the Age of Science* (1981), in Id., *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*, cit., pp. 91-102 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Mythos im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (1981), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 180-188).
[377] Gadamer, *Hermeneutics and historicism* (1965), cit., p. 539, note 6 ("Ein eindrucksvolles Zeugnis für die hermeneutische Dimension des Mythos" [Gadamer, *Hermeneutik und Historismus* (1965), cit., p. 391, note 24]). It is a pity that Gadamer's confrontation with Blumenberg on myth has not been deepened, because, despite the different philosophical approaches – in Blumenberg it is indeed pivotal the reference to Arnold Gehlen's *Philosophische Anthropologie* – several theoretical conclusions are shared by the two: the fictitious *Grenzlinie* between *mythos* and *logos*; the narrative quality of myth; its orientating and shaping function; its significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*); its original position outside any hierarchy between original and copies/variations/reception (according to Blumenberg, the *Grundmythos* is not the given one, instead what remains of it at the end of the process of transmission and variations); the antithesis between myth and dogma. See Hans Blumenberg,

virtue of reference to Schelling[378]: mythological representation is simultaneously particular and universal.

If we refer to our previous discussion of the notion of symbol, we can stress that myth shares the same functions of mediation, unveiling, and presentification: both manifest new levels of reality wielding an ontological function – the idea itself acquires in its sensible manifestation a concretization of its own transcendent essence. By being represented, narrated and illustrated, myth manifests its vast hermeneutic and productive function.

This Romantic heritage, however, is not resolutely assumed by Gadamer in an uncritical way. In fact, according to Gadamer, if the Enlightenment mistake was the presupposition of a radical contrast between *mythos* and *logos*, with a preference for the second, then Romanticism, which we should acknowledge for having properly rediscovered the mythic-symbolic dimension, similarly remained stuck in such a dualistic conception. Hence, Gadamer explains: "The Romantic reversal of the Enlightenment's criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason. All criticism of the Enlightenment now proceeds via this romantic mirror image of the Enlightenment"[379]. Gadamer basically rejects the irrationalistic, esoteric, and occult nuances implied in several Romantic representations of myth as the "original": "The presupposition of a mysterious darkness in which there was a mythical collective consciousness that preceded all thought is just as dogmatic and abstract as that of a state of perfect enlightenment or of absolute knowledge. Primeval wisdom is only the counterimage of 'primeval stupidity'"[380].

This position is coherent with Gadamer's hermeneutics, which assumes that any kind of knowledge always takes place in historical, linguistic, and dialectical forms. In his paradigm, there is no space for purely intuitive and immediate forms of knowledge: every pre-, meta- or supra- historical reality should be understood only in a dialectic with an imaginative projection of a previous knowledge – in the hermeneutic circle. Through this perspective, Gadamer's

Paradigms for a Metaphorology, trans. with an afterword by Robert Savage, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 2016 (Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, Kommentar von Anselm Haverkamp, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2021) and Id., *Work on Myth*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace, The MIT Press, Cambridge-London 1985 (Id., *Arbeit am Mythos*, 4th edition, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986). See also Angus Nicholls und Felix Heidenreich, *Mythos*, in Robert Buch and Daniel Weidner, *Blumenberg lesen. Ein Glossar*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2014, pp. 214-227.

[378] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 66 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 82-83).

[379] *Ivi*, p. 275 ("Durch diese romantische Umkehrung des Wertmaßstabes der Aufklärung wird aber die Voraussetzung der Aufklärung, der abstrakte Gegensatz von Mythos und Vernunft, gerade verewigt. Alle Kritik der Aufklärung nimmt nunmehr den Weg dieser romantischen Um-Spiegelung der Aufklärung" [*ivi*, p. 278]).

[380] *Ivi*, p. 276 ("In Wahrheit ist die Voraussetzung des geheimnisvollen Dunkels, in dem ein allem Denken vorausliegendes mythisches Kollektivbewußtsein liegt, ebenso dogmatisch-abstrakt, wie die eines Perfektionszustandes vollendeter Aufklärung oder die des absoluten Wissens. Die Urweisheit ist nur das Gegenbild der 'Urdummheit'" [*ibidem*]).

hermeneutics of myth is not compatible with any metaphysical conception in which the mythic archetypes are substantially situated in an extra-temporal dimension – a level of reality with hermeneutics, due to its rootedness in historicity, cannot accept.
Hermeneutics also debunks and deconstructs any idea of a pure and whole disclosure of an immediate and complete truth: myths are the products of human historical and cultural development, and they must not be treated in a dogmatic or irrational mode. In the same way that it is not possible to strictly distinguish between original and copy in a univocal, static, and determinative sense, so also is the life of myths – characterized in mythologies by several phenomena of hybridization, recombination, negotiation, even productive misunderstandings and betrayals – undetachable by the contrasts between "true" and "false", "original" and "copied". The "truth" of myth is its manifesting itself, its presence, its narrative capability to "perform" reality – and *in* reality – imposing its storytelling and giving shape to a world consisting of meaningful relations, agencies, and forms of interpretation.

In this respect, myth wields a significant artistic value: it is a *poietical* force (in the Greek sense of *poiesis*): its archetypical, fixed, and universal dimension (which cannot be wholly neglected, unless we aspire to reduce myth to a mere nominalist structure, with no kind of foundation) always stands in dialectic with the historical, contingent, and particular manifestation of it, which is connected to the plastic creative and demiurgic activity. Hence, Gadamer affirms: "Even the contrast between genuine mythical thinking and pseudomythical poetic thinking is a romantic illusion based on a prejudice of the Enlightenment: namely that the poetic act no longer shares the binding quality of myth because it is a creation of the free imagination. It is the old quarrel between the poets and the philosophers in the modern garb appropriate to the age of belief in science. It is now said, not that poets tell lies, but that they are incapable of saying anything true; they have only an aesthetic effect and, through their imaginative creations, they merely seek to stimulate the imagination and vitality of their hearers or readers"[381]. But this "aesthetic effect", if understood in the hermeneutical ontology of art we are discussing, is a deep tool to embrace the horizons of the existential travel towards knowledge.

[381] *Ibidem* ("Damit hängt zusammen, daß auch der Gegensatz eines echten mythischen Denkens und eines pseudomythischen dichterischen eine romantische Illusion ist, die auf einem Vorurteil der Aufklärung beruht: daß nämlich das dichterische Tun, weil es eine Schöpfung der freien Einbildungskraft sei, an der religiösen Verbindlichkeit des Mythos keinen Teil mehr habe. Es ist der alte Streit der Dichter und der Philosophen, der hier in sein modernes, wissenschaftsgläubiges Stadium getreten ist. Nun heißt es nicht mehr, daß die Dichter viel lügen, sondern daß sie überhaupt nichts Wahres zu sagen haben, da sie nur eine ästhetische Wirkung ausüben und lediglich durch ihre Phantasieschöpfungen die Phantasietätigkeit und das Lebensgefühl des Hörers oder Lesers anregen wollen" [*ivi*, p. 279]).

Rather than attempting to eliminate myth from our interpretation, Gadamer advocates engaging with it critically and recognizing its significance and function in modelling our understanding of reality. The German philosopher argues that myth is not something to be dismissed or transcended, but rather is essential for understanding the historical and cultural contexts within which we interpret the world.
Overall, Gadamer's perspective on myth underscores its importance in human interpretation and understanding, viewing it as a crucial aspect of our cultural heritage that informs our engagement with the world.

Gadamer's approach, however, cannot deny the theoretical and practical complexities involved in interpreting and adopting myth in contemporary secularized age. In this context, he discerns an urgent confrontation with the existential problem connected to the forgetfulness of the meaning, function, and power of myth in modern consciousness – although, as we have seen, according to Gadamer, significant mythical elements also survive in the modern worldview, as displayed by Romanticism itself, which was a simultaneously modern and mythic-symbolic process. More than a cultural topic, this is a specific epistemic and gnoseological issue: traditional myths are often no longer able to properly and fruitfully speak to the new generations, although myths possess a sort of universal and non-contingent quality – connected to their vitality and dynamism – which allows for imagining the possibility of always revivifying them.
Unlike the secularized modern horizon, where rationalist, materialistic, analytic, and reductionist mainstream philosophy tried to annihilate the power of myth, which was broadly criticized or even refused as mere superstition, in the postmodern age myths return to the scene of society and contemporary culture – although in various, often contrary perspectives. In this respect, we could say that the resurrection of myth in the contemporary age represents the unveiling of the mythic-symbolic component of modernity which was hidden and disguised in its late phase.
Myths are colonizing our imaginary – or, better, they never completely left it –, but their vectors and functions, which are even more important than their content, playing a transformative and performative role in the development of social, political and individual life[382], are often twisted in meaning – or, we could hypothesize, represent a *Doppelgänger* of the traditional one.

[382] This function has also been highlighted in Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralist theory of mythology, where the constituents of a myth, the "mythemes", are considered in their relations and in their power of creating new relations. See, among others, his *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson, Basic Books, New York 1963.

The recognition of the survival of mythical structure in current culture and consciousness brings Gadamer together with Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) seminal theory of the "*Mythen des Alltags*"[383]: according to Barthes, myth is not "something" (the object of a message or communication), but a formal quality, or, a mode of signification, intrinsically connected to a specific modality of interpreting and communicating reality, i.e., "a type of speech", a narratival one, which has survived in modernity. This position is compatible, in our view, with Gadamer's understanding of myth. What is completely different is, from one side, the subjectivistic connotation of Barthes' view, in contrast to Gadamer's recognition of a mythic matrix within reality, and, from the other side, Barthes' attribution of a negative and bourgeois value to myth: for him, contemporary myths, considered through semiotic analysis (based on a specific "second-order semiological system"), are instruments for the ideological inversion proposed by the capitalist market[384] – a view which is radically different from hermeneutical openness to the constructive and positive dialogue between the myth and its receiver. In Barthes' view, myth reduces complexity, synthesizing vibrant life into a cluster of signs[385], while in Gadamer's perspective myth always remains a creative, demiurgic, and generative power.

But how can we evaluate the truth of a myth? How can we state whether a myth is "authentic", a source of misunderstanding – often because of power and instrumental abuses – or even a betrayal of myth itself?

Gadamer clearly states that we cannot get stuck in a substantialist and univocal interpretation of myths: "A myth is always only believable, not 'true'. But the kind of credibility that a myth has is not just *Wahrscheinlichkeit* (verisimilitude, probability, true-seemingness) deficient in demonstrated certainty; it bears its own riches within it, the *Schein des Wahren* (radiance, bank note, appearance of the true), the sameness of semblance in which the true appears. This truth is, to be sure, not the story itself, for it can be told in various ways; it is what appears in it – not just something that is meant, something that would always need to be verified, but what becomes present in it"[386]. Again, Gadamer refers to a meaningful truth, characterized by an

[383] See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers, Jonathan Cape, London 1973.

[384] "The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence. (…) *myth is depoliticized speech*. (…) Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (…) it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth" (*ivi*, pp. 142-143).

[385] See Stephanie Wodianka and Juliane Ebert, *Inflation der Mythen? Zur Vernetzung und Stabilität eines modernen Phänomens* in Id. (eds.), *Inflation der Mythen? Zur Vernetzung und Stabilität eines modernen Phänomens*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 7-26: 10-11.

[386] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reflections on the Relation of Religion and* Science (1984), in Id., *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics*, cit., pp. 119-127: 126 ("Ein Mythos ist immer nur glaublich und nicht 'wahr'. Aber die Glaublichkeit eines Mythos ist nicht bloße Wahrscheinlichkeit, die der gesicherten Gewißheit ermangelt, sondern

artistic quality, which does not correspond to identity between thought and fact (i.e., validity), but rather an evenemential disclosure of a hidden side of reality. Myth opens this accessibility. And therefore, it is a specific quality of myths to possess a structural ambiguity and multiplicity. In a similar perspective, the historian of religions Mircea Eliade highlights the polysemy of symbol, arguing that an essential characteristic of it is "its *multivalence*, its capacity to *express simultaneously several meanings the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience*"[387].

As noticed by Wodianka and Ebert, myth stands in a subtle position between its rootedness into truth and its lacking a specific set of rules or practical requirements objectively dependent on this belonging: "Myths – even in the modern age – gain stability through the creation of relative coherence between individual and collective beliefs. In contrast to ideology, however, myth as a belief system only creates a relative and partial, not an absolute coherence of beliefs – or, in other words: the stronger the ideological functionalization of a myth, the more intensively it is used to create coherence in the set of collective beliefs"[388].

However, the possibility of distinguishing between a "genuine" (in the sense of Goethe's *Urphänomen*), communicative, and meaningful myth and a "technicized myth" (to adopt Karoly Kerényi's notion[389], popularized in Italy by Furio Jesi[390]), i.e., a degraded and "demonic" instrumental form of political storytelling, can be identified if we undertake to implement Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to myth, with the solid relation between the horizon of interpretation and the interpreter, i.e., between the human subjectivity embedded in the act of interpretation and the unveiling of myth itself through a dynamic which involves patterns similar to those that characterize the relational dimension of *Ereignis*. Indeed, in a post-metaphysical hermeneutical perspective, the truth of myth cannot be recognized in the descriptive content of its narrative, but instead it appears in its concrete capacity to "function" and "perform" as an interpretative driver in which the community of the interpreters immediately perceive an increase in their comprehension of reality.

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hat ihren eigenen Reichtum in sich, den Schein des Wahren, das Gleichen des Gleichnisses, in dem das Wahre erscheint. Dies Wahre ist dann freilich nicht die erzählte Geschichte selber, die auf verschiedene Weise erzählt werden kann, sondern das in ihr Erscheinende – nicht etwa bloß das Gemeinte, das immer auf Verifikation angewiesen wäre, sondern das darin Gegenwärtige" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft* (1984), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, cit., pp. 156-162: 161-162]).

[387] Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne. Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol*, trans. by J.M. Cohen, Sheed and Ward, New York 1965, p. 203.

[388] Wodianka and Ebert, *Inflation der Mythen?*, cit., p. 15.

[389] See Karoly Kerényi, *Dal mito genuino al mito tecnicizzato* (1964), in Id., *Scritti italiani (1955-1971)*, ed. by Giampiero Moretti, Guida, Napoli 1993, pp. 113-126. The genuine myth is an event of truth, which is hosted, once it took place, by the world as the solemn and original poetical word.

[390] See Jesi, *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del '900*, cit., pp. 37-38 and Id., *Mito*, cit., pp. 113-114.

The problem of modernity is the collapse of this communal horizon: in fact, according to Gadamer, if the shared, communitarian horizon of interpretation is in crisis, if the communal symbols and references shift to individual – or tribal – schemes, if tradition has lost its self-evident status, then this breakdown is necessarily mirrored in the languages of art, which fundamentally coincide with the expressive language of myth. Our age, characterized by a broad discussion of the value of interpretation and perspectivism, seems to no longer be able to find – nor found – a communitarian narrative. "This", explains Gadamer, "stems from the fact that we live in a time which, in spite of tireless efforts to discover the definitive word of interpretation, is marked by the renunciation of certainty expressed in Hölderlin's *Mnemosyne*: 'We are a sign without interpretation'"[391]. This awareness represents a radical crisis of the traditional – i.e., Greek for the Eurocentric Gadamer – myth, which is precisely based on a shared identity, one which allows existential recognition: "It is a disturbing question whether modern painting can possibly contribute to the task of such self-recognition. Recognition, as understood by Aristotle, presupposes the continuing existence of a binding tradition that is intelligible to all and in which we can encounter ourselves. Myth played this role in Greek thought, providing the common subject-matter for artistic representation. And it was the recognition of myth in pity and fear that deepened our familiarity both with the world and with ourselves. The recognition of who we are, which takes place through the terrifying stories presented in Greek theaters, was made possible and supported by the whole world of Greek religious tradition, its pantheon and the mythical tales that linked the Greek present with the mythical – heroic past"[392].

This narrative power of Greek myth has been inherited by Christian sacred art, which contains a mythopoetic quality that emerges in the attempt to give symbolic forms to the content of the religious revelation. But the contemporary crisis of myth is also derivative of the crisis of this model, which was wholly manifested in the nihilistic "death of God" and already anticipated by several connected cultural processes. Gadamer clarifies this passage by underscoring a light-

[391] Gadamer, *Composition and interpretation*, cit., p. 73 ("Am Ende ist sie durch die Gemeinsamkeit unseres Menschseins in einer Zeit gegeben, die angesichts aller unermüdlichen Versuche, das deutende Wort zu finden, von der abweisenden Gewißheit geprägt ist, die Hölderlins 'Mnemosyne' ausspricht: 'Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos'" [Gadamer, *Dichten und Deuten* (1961), cit., p. 24]).

[392] Gadamer, *Art and imitation*, cit., p. 100 ("Aber wieder fragt man sich mit Bestürzung, was die moderne Malerei zu dieser Aufgabe des Sich-Wiedererkennens in der vertrauten Welt beizutragen vermag. Die Wiedererkennung, wie sie Aristoteles meint, hat zur Voraussetzung, daß eine verbindende Tradition besteht, in der sich alle Kunst und Nachahmung verstehen und in der sie sich selbst begegnen. Das ist für das griechische Denken der Mythos. Er ist der gemeinsame Inhalt der künstlerischen Darstellung, dessen Wiedererkennung unsere Vertrautheit mit der Welt und mit dem eigenen Dasein vertieft, sei es auch in Mitleid und Furcht. Dieses Erkennen 'Das bist du!', das in den schauerlichen Vorgängen auf dem griechischen Theater sich vor unseren Augen abspielt, dies Sich-Erkennen im Wiedererkennen, war getragen durch die ganze Welt der religiösen Überlieferung der Griechen, durch ihren Götterhimmel und durch die Heldensage und durch die Herleitung ihres gegenwärtigen Tages aus ihrer mythisch-heroischen Vergangenheit" [Gadamer, *Kunst und Nachahmung* (1967), cit., pp. 32-33]).

and-shade process, where the absence of myth paradoxically speaks to its permanence: "We cannot hide the fact that over 150 years ago, Christian art also lost its power to speak as myth. It was not the revolution of modern painting but the close of the Baroque, the last great European style, that really signaled an end – the end of the whole tradition of pictorial imagery within Western art, along with its humanistic heritage and its Christian message. Of course, it is true that the modern viewer also recognizes the subject-matter of such art insofar as he or she is still aware of that heritage. Even in most modern pictures, we can still recognize something we understand – if only fragmentary gestures rather than stories once rich in meaning. To that extent, the ancient concept of mimesis still seems to possess some truth. Even in those modern pictures built up out of meaningful elements that dissolve into something unrecognizable, we can still sense a last trace of familiarity and experience a fragmentary act of recognition.

But is that sufficient? Can we not on reflection see that we are quite unable to understand such a picture as long as we look at it as a purely objective pictorial representation of something? What is the language of modern painting? Surely a language in which gestures suddenly acquire momentary significance only to sink back again into obscurity is an unintelligible language. In the language of such pictures, we seem to encounter the rejection of meaning rather than its expression. The concepts of imitation and recognition fail us and we find ourselves at a loss"[393]. Presenting new artistic and mythopoetic strategies in the post-secular age is precisely the concrete choice which Kiefer and Nitsch have adopted in order to elaborate an answer to the failure and loss which Gadamer seems to perceive in the language of modern painting. An answer which needs to transform, to requote Hölderlin's image, the signs of our being in the unveiling of our multileveled living symbolism.

[393] *Ivi*, p. 101 ("Auch die christliche Kunst hat, wie wir uns nicht verbergen können, ihre mythische Sagkraft seit 150 Jahren verloren. Nicht erst die Revolution der modernen Malerei, sondern bereits das Ende des letzten großen europäischen Stiles, des Barock, hat ein wirkliches Ende gebracht – das Ende der natürlichen Bildhaftigkeit der abendländischen Überlieferung, ihres humanistischen Erbes wie der christlichen Verkündigung. Gewiß, auch der moderne Beschauer erkennt noch den Gegenstand solcher Bilder - solange er von diesem Erbe noch weiß. Selbst in den meisten modernen Bildern bleibt etwas zu erkennen – wenn auch das, was da wiedererkannt wird und verstanden wird, nur fragmentarische Gebärden, keine vieles bedeutende Geschichten mehr sind. Insofern scheint an dem alten Begriff der Mimesis etwas Wahres zu bleiben. Sogar in dem Aufbau des modernen Bildes aus ins Unkenntliche verschwebenden bedeutungshaften Elementen ahnen wir immer noch etwas, einen letzten Rest von Vertrautheit, und vollziehen ein Stück Wiedererkenntnis. Aber trägt das noch? Nehmen wir uns nicht sofort zurück und sehen ein, daß das eigentliche Gebilde, das hier vor uns steht, nicht verstanden wird, wenn man es auf seine rein gegenständliche Abbildhaftigkeit hin abliest? Was ist das für eine Sprache, die moderne Bilder sprechen? Nun, eine Sprache, in der Gebärden auf Augenblicke in ihrer Sinntransparenz aufleuchten, um sich sofort wieder zu verdunkeln, ist eine unverständliche Sprache. In der Sprache solcher Bilder scheint weniger Aussage als Abweisung von Sinn zu liegen. Nachahmung und Wiedererkenntnis kommen zum Scheitern, und wir bleiben ratlos [*ivi*, p. 33]).

In contrast to this theoretical and aesthetical path, the myths which seem to spontaneously flourish in the current age are individual mythologies, which are contradictory insofar as myth, understood as a hermeneutic language, is always communal (or, properly speaking, is not myth). An individual myth, which is not able to communicate itself spontaneously and immediately, will need more myths as forms of mediation to establish intersubjective communication. The risk of individual mythologies, with their solipsistic and irrational degeneration – recognized by Gadamer, for example, in aspects of Nietzsche's and George's aestheticism[394] – has been widely debated also in the Cultural Studies field, where cultural memory has been understood as a possible attempt to avoid this dangerous risk, going through the roots and cultural representations of a communitarian identity[395]. But cultural memory stands as a methodological concept which offers research and interpretative keys in order to understand our past (and its influence on our age and current life), but not for existentially living out the symbolic and productive life of myth. Instead, the language of art, which is intrinsically connected, as we have already seen, with that of myth, can still play this creative and productive role: as noticed by Elena Agazzi, "repeated attempts have been made to destroy the risk of a proliferation of 'individual mythologies', in art as in literature, harbingers of an irrationalistic approach to history. The difficulty of reconciling the semantic exclusivity of the artist and the writer and the shared planning in the democratic construction of a modern response to the crisis of a society that has lost its solid reference values is there for all to see. However, if this project reveals itself as utopia, the very fact that it contains a promise means that the artistic project, once realized, can produce a new stimulus within an overall renewal of artistic expression"[396].

[394] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Karl Immermanns 'Chiliastische Sonette'* (1949), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1993, pp. 180-192: 191. The risk of myths politicization and ideologization – which brutally appeared in the totalitarian 20th-century regimes – has also been repeatedly stressed by Gadamer, who, for example, sees in Wagner's and Nietzsche's attempt to establish a new myth a dangerous proposal: "Myth forfeits the spontaneity [*die Unvordenklichkeit*; more precisely: the 'immemorial', as 'preliminarily-unthinkable'] and validity that belonged to its early period. This becomes clear if we consider the Führer cults of totalitarian states and – still more uncanny – the enigma of brainwashing. Only a scientifically superstitious consciousness could reduce such 'turnabouts' to chemical effects. The 'dialectic of enlightenment' hits upon the truth of the matter" (Gadamer, *Myth in the Age of Science* (1981), cit., p. 97 ["Damit büßt der Mythos die Unvordenklichkeit seiner Frühe und seiner Geltung ein. Das wird deutlich, wenn wir an die Führerkulte totalitärer Staaten denken und – unheimlicher noch – an die Rätsel der Gehirnwäsche. Nur ein wissenschafts-abergläubisches Bewußtsein konnte sich eine Weile einbilden, solche 'Umdrehungen' auf chemische Einwirkungen reduzieren zu können. Die 'Dialektik der Aufklärung' trifft die wahre Sachlage"; Gadamer, *Der Mythos im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (1981), cit., pp. 184-185]).

[395] See Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2008.

[396] Elena Agazzi, *Sperimentazioni postmoderne nella scrittura tedesca e austriaca*, in Agazzi and Lorandi (eds.), *Il tradimento del bello*, cit., pp. 177-192: 179. The problem represented by the relation between the "individual mythologies" founded by poets and artists and the official religious systems has been recognized and debated also by Furio Jesi (see his *Germania segreta*, cit., p. 134).

Gadamer's hermeneutics contains some hints at a path which leads in directions which are by no means pessimistic, and which reconnects to the scenario mentioned by Agazzi. In fact, the expired communal horizon should not be seen in a substantialist way, as a metaphysical foundation which can neither be restored nor evoked, but as a dynamic pattern which is for sure disguised, but which is still there, with the chance to (re)appear. According to Gadamer, "the horizon is (…) something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. The surrounding horizon is not set in motion by historical consciousness. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself"[397]. Between historical consciousness and historical horizon, a fruitful, mutual, constructive dynamic presents itself: myths – new forms and shapes of traditional myths – will probably manifest themselves when a new relation between our interior and cultural development and historical agency will find a new agreement. We can recognize some attempts to move in this direction in Kiefer's and Nitsch's art, in their facilitating – in some cases even forcing – this unveiling within artistic experience. Their attempt to elaborate a communal (which is particularly clear in Nitsch's rituals) – although not global and undifferentiated – myth is part of their effort: this also means establishing a myth which cannot easily be bought and consumed in the frenetic capitalistic surplus of superficial daily myths. To the contrary, this means contemplating the generative abyss of mythical forms and encouraging their spontaneous life and manifestation. This constitutive and demiurgic openness seems to be one of the main characteristics of myth, a fundamental aspect which founds the value of myth and distinguishes it from a mere descriptive and plan language: "Thanks precisely to its open indeterminacy, myth is able to produce constant new invention from within itself, with the thematic horizon continuously shifting in different direction"[398].

The connection to the past, which is a inherent feature of myth, is harmonious with the quality of return: in myth, archetypes and recurrent figures always appear to remind us of a common past, a common heritage, a common horizon. But this very re-appearance is at the same time

[397] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 303 ("Der Horizont ist [...] etwas, in das wir hineinwandern und das mit uns mitwandert. Dem Beweglichen verschieben sich die Horizonte. So ist auch der Vergangenheitshorizont, aus dem alles menschliche Leben lebt und der in der Weise der Überlieferung da ist, immer schon in Bewegung. Es ist mehr erst das historische Bewußtsein, das den umschließenden Horizont in Bewegung bringt. In ihm ist sich diese Bewegung nur ihrer selbst bewußt geworden" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 309]).
[398] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Appendix* II, in *ivi*, p. 499 ("Dank seiner offenen Unbestimmtheit vermag der Mythos aus sich immer neue Erfindung hervorgehen zu lassen, wobei der thematische Horizont sich immer wieder in andere Richtung verschiebt" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Exkurse I-VI* (1960), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, cit., p. 380]).

characterized by the change and transformation which defines this transitional movement. Myth happens precisely in-between this dynamic relation amidst fixity and movement, stability and dynamism. Here it takes its shape only to quickly abandon its fixity in a perpetual tension for a transfiguration which is at the same time a return to its source.

If traditionalist and conservative interpreters of myth tend to focus on the eternal and typological dimension, Gadamer seems to balance between the two impulses. This intellectual posture, if we refer to the previously considered Plotinian and Neoplatonic influence, seems to us clearly described by a particularly significant consideration by Ernst Jünger: "Return is unthinkable without the resting center (...). If we assume that in the center of events there is, as in the axis of a wheel, a resting, timeless and unextended innermost being, then we may also assume that the constellations such as 'earlier' and 'later', 'I' and 'you', 'East' and 'West' meet here. They remain qualities that emerge on the spokes. We can also imagine the figures, such as gods, humans and animals, father and mother, man and woman, on peripheries or spherical shells that are arranged around the center. Return can then also be interpreted spatially as entering these or those layers that are always present"[399]. The meaning of the eternal recurrence of the same – or, better, the similar – that figures in mythical narrative is thus overlaid upon an internal dialectic between universal and contingent, identical and different, single and plural: the recognition of this relation reveals to mankind the intrinsic proteiform and symbolical nature of reality. Every god is a symbol of the same plurality Being. And the faculty of remembering (*memoria*) – which is always a form of preserving (*Bewahren*) – can save "what we are", i.e., the "manner in which the true can be for us humans"[400].

This perspective, as we have already pointed out, is not an irrational one, but instead an attempt to elaborate an original *logic of myth*, which is different from logocentric rationalistic logic in that it is based on the value of *polarity*. This notion, as pointed out by Alberto Giacomelli, refers to "the necessary connection and the mutual dependence on two opposing principles,

[399] "Wiederkehr ist undenkbar ohne den ruhenden Mittelpunkt […]. Wenn wir im Zentrum des Geschehens, wie in der Achse des Rades, ein ruhendes, zeitloses und unausgedehntes Innerstes annehmen, so dürfen wir auch vermuten, daß sich hier die Konstellationen treffen wie etwa 'früher' und 'später', 'ich' und 'du', 'Ost' und 'West'. Sie bleiben Qualitäten, die auf den Speichen hervortreten. Wir können uns ferner die Figuren, etwa Götter, Menschen und Tiere, Vater und Mutter, Mann und Weib, auf Peripherien oder Kugelschalen denken, die um das Zentrum angeordnet sind. Wiederkehr ist dann auch räumlich auszudeuten als das Betreten dieser oder jener Schichten, die stets vorhanden sind" (Ernst Jünger*, Der Gordische Knoten*, in Id., *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 7: *Essays I. Betrachtungen zur Zeit*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 375-479: 475-476).

[400] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The verse and the whole*, in Id., *On Education, Poetry, and History. Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, State University of New York Press, New York 1992, pp. 83-91: 91 ("die eigentliche Weise, in der uns Menschen das Wahre sein kann" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der Vers und das Ganze* (1979), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, cit., pp. 249-257: 257]).

phenomena, terms or concepts. Unlike simple dualism, polarity implies a condition of complementarity between opposites, such that each of the two poles, although limited by the other, also finds its reason and its constitutive foundation in the other"[401]. Analogical, morphological, and symbolical methods are the instruments of this polar logic, which is rooted in a long Western philosophical tradition: deeply relevant in Neoplatonism, assimilated by Christian theologians like Augustine (354-430), Scotus Eriugena (810-877) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), taken up by Renaissance alchemists and German mystics like Jakob Böhme, it has been variously re-elaborated in modernity by Goethe, Schelling, and even Nietzsche and Jung (1875-1961). This kind of polar logic, if understood not in a static way, and instead as a dynamic, vibrant interpretative scheme of the rhythms of reality, can represent a safeguard against the contemporary risk of the consumption of the images and their creative and meaningful value in favor of the dimension of *simulacrum*, or the figure completely dissolved in the value of the sign and deprived of any real communicative function. Indeed, a world of simulacra is a world where no mythical narrative can take place.

What Gadamer proposes is a kind of non-relativistic, hermeneutical perspectivism: the German philosopher seems in fact to reject any nominalist and merely culturological interpretation of myth – but, at the same time, he doesn't recognize in it a substantial, dogmatic, or metaphysical truth. Mythic properties are grounded in the nature of things: myth appeals to the subject as being a value-property of a state of the world, i.e., a manner in which the state presents itself to the subject. Myth is thus a sort of "narrative cluster", a "model", in the sense recently highlighted by Carmelo Calì, that is, a concrete device or pattern which is able to shape reality and simultaneously to be shaped by reality itself, in a biunivocal and reciprocal sense[402].
Thus, myth seems to be a productive matrix from which different narrations and interpretations can be infinitely produced[403]: however, only those which are able to fruitfully connect the community of interpreters to the matrix itself, in its inexhaustible source of meaning, can reach a fixed and meaningful ontological status, which corresponds to a successful narratological concretization. Gadamer explains that the readiness of myth to be told – and re-told – in different ways and modes is not an attribute of irrelevance or falsity, as if it were an inconsistent emptiness, but instead testifies to and proclaims its capability to express the plurality of being

[401] See "Polarity", in Vercellone and Tedesco (eds.), *Glossary of Morphology*, cit., pp. 425-429: 425.
[402] See "Model", in Vercellone and Tedesco (eds.), *Glossary of Morphology*, cit., pp. 331-332.
[403] See the idea of myth as "limit-concept" in Furio Jesi (cfr. Id., *Letteratura e mito*, Einaudi, Torino 1981, p. 17; Id., *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Rainer Maria Rilke*, D'Anna, Messina-Firenze 1976, p. 52).

itself[404]. Indeed, "it is not a weakening of the presence of the narrative that there are such possibilities of telling the same story in different ways. This is because it is always based on the premise that the fullness of what is to be told and what has happened cannot be exhausted. In this respect, it is linked to the nature of storytelling that a narrative does not want to be a documentary report. The Muses know about their own ambiguity, as the Hesiod proem teaches us. The freedom that narrative allows (and which is later called 'poetic freedom') is not mere arbitrariness"[405].

Similarly, Viveiros de Castro has written: "Myth proposes an ontological regime ordered by a fluent intensive difference bearing on each of the points of a heterogeneous continuum, where transformation is anterior to form, relations superior to terms, and intervals interior to being (…) Myth, the universal point of flight of perspectivism, speaks of a state of being where bodies and names, souls and actions, egos and others are interpenetrated, immersed in one and the same presubjective and preobjective milieu"[406]. Unlike "cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism" and which "presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation", perspectivism in the anthropological definition elaborated by de Castro, and is also applicable, in our opinion, to hermeneutic perspectivism, proposes "on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit – the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as 'activated' or 'agencied' by a point of view – and, on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism"[407]. "Relational multiplicities"[408] are the ground-breaking epiphanic frames surrounding this interpretative model.

This process is possible in the hermeneutical perspective because the very structure of myth is the word, the basic structure of language, which can be understood as the synthesis of thinking (subjective process) and substance (reality), the liminal section of the world where subject and

[404] This idea echoes the famous Aristotle's thesis: "Being is said in many ways" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book Γ, 2, 1033a33).
[405] Gadamer, *Mythologie und Offenbarungsreligion* (1981), cit., p. 176 ("Es ist keine Schwächung der Präsenz des Erzählten, daß es solche Möglichkeiten verschiedenartigen Erzählens von demselben gibt. Denn immer steht dahinter die Voraussetzung, daß die Fülle dessen, wovon erzählt werden soll und was geschehen ist, unausschöpfbar ist. Insofern ist es mit dem Wesen des Erzählens verknüpft, daß eine Erzählung kein dokumentarischer Report sein will. Die Musen wissen um ihre eigene Zweideutigkeit, wie uns das Hesiod Proömium lehrt. Die Freiheit, die das Erzählen erlaubt (und die später 'dichterische Freiheit' heißt), ist keine bloße Beliebigkeit").
[406] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, ed. by Peter Skafish, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis 2014, pp. 67-68.
[407] *Ivi*, p. 72.
[408] *Ivi*, p. 73.

object appear simultaneously interrelated. In fact, Gadamer explains, "the starting point for the formation of the word is the substantive content (the species) that fills the mind. The thought seeking expression refers not to the mind but to the thing. Thus the word is not the expression of the mind but is concerned with the similitudo rei. The subject matter that is thought (the species) and the word belong as closely together as possible. (…). Thomas [Aquinas] points out that in this respect the word resembles light, which is what makes color visible"[409].

Myth, as thematized by Gadamer, is thus not a figure of irrationality, nor of pure transcendence, but a concrete and factual "presence", which reveals itself only in close connection with the historical dimension. In myth, the immemorial is made present, a "what" of the past that constitutively precedes the "to be thought" (the Heideggerian *zu-Denkende*) of philosophy – but which can only reveal its traces within history in the present. The "immemorial" is the presupposition of consciousness which is never completely resolved in the self-consciousness – so that the Beginning (*Anfang*) is never resolved in the effective phenomenon, as there is always something exceeding it. "Here", Pietro Montani correctly highlights, "Gadamer gives the Hegelian conceptuality an even more conspicuous twist by very appropriately recovering the Schellingian concept of an 'immemorial' as 'preliminarily-unthinkable', of an '*Unvordenkliches*' not to be understood as an 'object' which, at a later time, thought would come to appropriate, but precisely as the 'cause' of thought, that which calls us to think and which does not stop doing so"[410].

"Myths", Gadamer succinctly states, "are the original thought of mankind"[411]. Myths are "original" not in the sense of "old", "primeval", but rather in reference to the unfounded foundation which is the ultimate horizon of reality.
If we consider myth as that dynamic instance which influences human knowledge and leads it to set ideas "in movement", we need to recognize its connection to the Origin – but, as we have already thematized, not in a metaphysical and hierarchical way, but instead as an immemorial function which is the horizon of possibility of the thinking itself. In this perspective, specific

[409] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 425 ("Ausganspunkt der Bildung des Wortes ist der Sachgehalt selbst (die *species*), der den Geist erfüllt. Das Denken, das seinen Ausdruck sucht, ist nicht auf den Geist, sondern auf die Sache bezogen. So ist das Wort nicht Ausdruck des Geistes, sondern geht auf die similitudo rei. Der gedachte Sachverhalt (die *species*) und das Wort sind es, die auf das engste zusammengehören. [...] Thomas verweist darauf, daß das Wort darin wie das Licht ist, in dem die Farbe erst sichtbar ist" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 430]).
[410] Pietro Montani, *Presentazione*, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Scritti di Estetica*, Aesthetica Edizioni, Milano 2022, pp. 7-20: 17.
[411] "Mythen sind Urgedanken der Menschheit" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Prometheus und die Tragödie der Kultur*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, cit., pp. 150-161: 150).

mythical narratives are historical determinations of an original hypothetical myth, which can be imagined as completely undetermined, without any specific content, but first of all performing and operating as a dynamic force.

Just as the points that make up the plot are always original points, and the line of becoming passes through them, making them vital and interconnected, but not connecting them in a hierarchical and univocal sense, so can myth, understood through this textile metaphor, exhibit a diffuse and rhizomatic genealogy.

In terms of a case study, Gadamer devotes particular attention to the myth of Prometheus, highlighting in his hermeneutics of the Greek myth, which he understands as the "fateful myth of the West"[412], that "for us, its origin is indistinguishably linked to the history of its transmission, reinterpretation and renewal, which stretches from the days of Hesiod to our own age"[413]. Thus, identity and alterity are the polar connection that lead us to understand the development of myth in its ever transformative origin.

A similar conception of myth has been sketched *in nuce* by the historian of religions Ioan Petru Culianu, the most prominent pupil of Mircea Eliade, who tried to develop his master's conception of myth in a more dynamic and less substantialist direction[414]. Combining Eliade's morphological and hermeneutical approach with the theory of the biomathematician D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (1860-1948), comparative linguistics (Saussure, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson), the discoveries of contemporary physics, and postmodern theories, in the last phase of his production he developed the "morphodynamic" method which integrates morphology with the temporal dimension – a brave attempt at a *mathesis universalis*[415].

History is understood by Culianu neither in linear shape nor in its archaic circular, deterministic dimension, but instead as an open process which can be defined through the concept of a "fourth dimension"[416]. Also taking into account Benoît Mandelbrot's (1924-2010) theory on fractals, he theorizes the morphodynamic concept of religion as a self-replicating model, composed by different, fractal modelled actualizations of possible forms of reality, which eternally exist in

[412] "Er ist wie ein Schicksalmythos des Abendlandes" (*ivi*, p. 151). The judgement is based on the capacity of the myth to express the cultural and technical work thanks to whose effort European civilization has always tried to give shape and orientation to its world.

[413] "Sein Ursprung ist für uns ununterscheidbar zusammengegangen mit der Geschichte seiner Überlieferung, Umdeutung und Erneuerung, die von den Tagen Hesiods bis in unser Zeitalter hineinreicht" (*ivi*, p. 150).

[414] Probably the most relevant international publication on the Romanian scholar is a recent Italian one: Horia Corneliu Cicortaş, Roberta Moretti, and Andrea Scarabelli, (eds.), *Antarès*, nr. 18 – *Ioan Petru Culianu. Argonauta della Quarta Dimensione*, Bietti, Milano 2021.

[415] See Horia-Roman Patapievici, *I. P. Couliano: A Mathesis Universalis*, in Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, Ed. Nemira, București 1995, pp. 345-378.

[416] See Ioan Petru Culianu, *System and History*, in «Incognita», vol. I, 1, 1990, pp. 6-17 and Id., *Out of this World. Otherwordly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, Shambala, Boston 1991.

the plurality of levels of being and expand themselves through rhizomatic ramification. The structure of this fractal process had already been recognized in previous research as based on binary classifications, which are particularly evident in the dualistic myths (which are studied by Culianu especially in gnostic tradition)[417]. The system, when it is operative in action, tends to express all its interior possibilities of associations.

Through this framework, myths can be understood as narratives which are protean ramifications of the model (or matrix): they are "mind games"[418], the variable topography in which all things and events can appear and acquire form and meaning in differing yet often replicable conformations.

This theory also explains in a new way the similarities existing between different religions which have emerged without demonstrable cultural exchanges: they could depend on the mind's operational unity which manifests itself in the variety of historical religious traditions.

Although Culianu's perspective broaches the lands of the history of religion and cognitive science, which Gadamer never engaged with, his hermeneutical comprehension of myth seems to us a bridge to unite the traditional philosophical and linguistic interpretation of mythical narratives with the new borders of scientific and cognitive sciences.

From this perspective we may derive that myth, from a philosophical point of view, can prevent the risks of reification and objectification that are embedded in modern strategies of apprehending reality. If contemporary rational and neo-positivist mainstream Western culture proposes a form of knowledge mainly based on the category of the object – to know means to recognize the objective essence of the object, desubjectifying it[419] – then myth suggests an altogether different worldview, one in which the perspective of the subject is considered as a pivotal force to be taken into account, and which is capable of acquiring the point of view of what is supposed to be known. It is no more a matter of a desubjectified object, but instead an

[417] See Ioan Petru Culianu, *Les gnoses dualistes d'Occident. Histoire et mythes*, Paris, Plon 1990 (see also the English rehelaborated version: Id., *The Tree of Gnosis. Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. by Ioan Petru Culianu and Hillary Suzanne Wiesner, HarperCollins, San Francisco 1992).

[418] See the section "Juggling Notions of 'Religion': Ioan Petru Culianu's Mind Games", in Daniela Dumbravă and Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, *In-cognita. Ioan Petru Culianus' Approaches to Religion*, Zeta Books, București 2021.

[419] As perfectly synthetized by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in Western modernity "to know is to objectify by distinguishing between what is intrinsic to the object and what instead belongs to the knowing subject, which has been inevitably and illegitimately projected onto the object. To know is thus to desubjectify, to render explicit the part of the subject present in the object in order to reduce it to an ideal minimum (and/or to amplify it with a view to obtaining spectacular critical effects). Subjects, just like objects, are regarded as the results of a process of objectification: the subject constitutes or recognizes itself in the object it produces, and knows itself objectively when it succeeds in seeing itself "from the outside" as a thing. Our epistemological game, then, is objectification; what has not been objectified simply remains abstract or unreal. The form of the Other is the thing" (de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, cit., p. 60). The objectifying tendency here discussed is thus complementary to a convergent and complementary process of reductionist subjectification, as already discussed in the first chapter of our research.

object of knowledge transfigured in a subjective agency. This radical perspective, which, in our opinion, can be coherently derived from Gadamer's interpretation of the forms and functions of mythic gnoseology, has recently been coherently developed by the above-mentioned anthropologist Eduardo Vivieiros de Castro in his studies on shamanic Amerindian cultures. If we take into account the cultural value of ethnological and anthropological studies in the discovery of the mythic mindset as it appears still dominant in some non-Western cultures, we can find an experimental justification of the theoretical reflections discussed in the wake of Gadamer's legacy. According to de Castro, Western modern objectivist epistemology proceeds in an opposite direction compared to the Ameridian "multinatural perspectivism", "conceiving the intentional attitude as a convenient fiction adopted when the aimed-for object is too complex to be decomposed into elementary physical processes. An exhaustive scientific explanation of the world, it is thought, should be capable of reducing every object to a chain of causal events, and these, in turn, to materially dense interactions (…). Thus if a subject is an insufficiently analyzed object in the modern naturalist world, the Amerindian epistemological convention follows the inverse principle, which is that an object is an insufficiently interpreted subject. One must know how to personify, because one must personify in order to know. The object of the interpretation is the counter-interpretation of the object"[420].

The "ontological turn" implied in de Castro's position, who is particularly interested in recognizing a significant role (and even rights) to non-human agencies and to overcome the naïve dualism between nature and culture[421], represents a different, but somehow complementary, approach (in a different field) to the interdisciplinary and transcultural search for a rigorous, non-metaphysical and pluralistic comprehension of Being (and beings)[422].

Coming back to Gadamer's philosophy, it is necessary to emphasize another feature of his theory on myth: radical openness to the call of tradition and, at the same time, the non-dogmatic character of mythic experience. The symbolism of otherness declares hermeneutics as an approach to knowledge which is open to recognize truth-content in the most disparate fields of expression of the human *Geist*: from artistic experience to the structures of language, the latter

[420] *Ivi*, pp. 61-62.

[421] "The translation of 'culture' in the worlds of extrahuman subjectivities has for its corollary the redefinition of several natural objects and events as indexes from which social agency can be inferred. The most common case is the transformation of something that humans regard as a brute fact into another species' artifact or civilized behavior: what we call blood is beer for a jaguar, what we take for a pool of mud, tapirs experience as a grand ceremonial house, and so on. Such artifacts are ontologically ambiguous: they are objects, but they necessarily indicate a subject since they are like frozen actions or material incarnations of a nonmaterial intentionality. What one side calls nature, then, very often turns out to be culture for the other" (*ivi*, p. 62).

[422] See Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon and Peter Skafish (eds.), *Comparative Metaphysics. Ontology After Anthropology*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London-New York 2017.

being the regent element in which hermeneutics finds implementation, the "absolute mediation of subjective consciousness and objective spirit", since "every encounter with the world, even with things in their so-called immediacy, reveals itself to be a linguistic encounter"[423] – and this extends up to myth itself. Myth is, therefore, in the proper sense, one of the ways in which truth allows itself to be grasped, along lines which are very similar to those of art, precisely because of the "structural commonality" subsisting between the two fields.

Myth can be an exemplary manifestation insofar as it is intrinsically functional to communicative forms of mediation: first and foremost, between past and present, according to a reintegration of tradition in contemporaneity, which is divorced from any static preservation, dogmatic reification or mere past-tense restitution. Rather, in myth there lives an intense connection with the "immemorial", unfounded foundation: "If we are dealing with mythical tales, legends and prehistoric times, there is obviously another interest in the narration, not just the expansion of one's own knowledge of the world, but a 'transcendental' interest that goes beyond everything that can be experienced. It is true that the narrated is always treated as an event and is therefore a past. At the same time, however, the reference to the present and the listener is constitutive of mythical lore"[424]. In mythical consciousness, there is no separation between past and present: in every contemporary act, myth allows to see the "commemorative re-presentation of an overwhelming certainty"[425].

The mythical hermeneutics discussed here can thus aspire, in contrast to a mere accumulative-statistical and critical-historical knowledge, to "recover that unknown component which makes meaning possible, which transforms events into experiences: in a word, the poetic basis of the mind, the 'imaginal' dimension that allows us to look at the world moving from a consciousness bounded with life and cosmos"[426]. The premise of this orientation is the conviction that being is one but manifold: there is no single plane of reality, but rather a plurality of ontological states which are mutually connected and even entangled.

This moving in depth, along the secret ridges of the rhythms to which the individual himself belongs, becomes, from a philosophical point of view, an act of "listening to" the *Abgrund*, the

[423] Gianni Vattimo, *Introduzione 1972*, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, ed. by Gianni Vattimo, Bompiani, Milano 2014, pp. XXIX-LIV: L.

[424] Gadamer, *Mythologie und Offenbarungsreligion* (1981), cit., p. 177 ("Sofern es sich nun um mythische Erzählungen handelt, um Sage und um Vorzeit, ist offenbar noch ein anderes Interesse am Erzählten im Spiele, nicht nur die Erweiterung der eigenen Weltkenntnis, sondern ein über alles Erfahrbare hinausgehendes 'transzendentales' Interesse. Zwar ist das Erzählte immer als ein Geschehenes behandelt und ist insofern ein Vergangenes. Aber zugleich ist der Bezug auf die Gegenwart und den Hörer der mythischen Kunde konstitutiv").

[425] *Ivi*, p. 178 ("gedenkende Vergegenwärtigung einer überwältigenden Gewißheit").

[426] Giovanni Sessa, *Itinerari nel pensiero di Tradizione. L'Origine o il sempre possibile*, Solfanelli, Chieti 2015, p. 21.

abyss that is the essential horizon for man who has overcome the notion of the subject as an atomistic *res cogitans*, but resolutely sets out to listen to the Origin and near it. It is that paradoxical hermeneutic objectivity which transpires from the cognitive process of the philosophical dialectic: insofar the manifestation of the original becomes actual in the instant, and here, in a Heideggerian sense, the provocative call of the event and the correspondence of the observer come to coincide. An empathic objectivity, then, not in a sentimental or empirical sense, of course, but rather as an affirmation of the inescapable need to immerse oneself in otherness and, at least temporarily, identify with it, as a law of general understanding.

Just as myth restores unity within difference, performing in a symbolic way, so does hermeneutics invite us not to remove temporal distance, as if we could look at history and past culture from an objective and extra-temporal viewpoint – a naive historicist presupposition – but to recognize how this is bridged by a continuity of transmission and communication which removes any hypostatized division in the continuous stream of existential and linguistic exchange. It is precisely this horizon that constitutes a challenge for any relativist posture: every hermeneutic act of interpretation is possible and desirable, but not all of them can exhibit the essentiality of a thought in its living and productive relation to the inescapable horizon of its own presentation. Myth, like art, is not a dream, a hallucination, or an arbitrary fantasy, but rather a solid response on the part of a being to the cognitive and truthful need of being, not at all separated from reason.

Gadamer's consistent reevaluation of the aesthetical, gnoseological and cultural role of myth overcomes the challenge of confronting a demythologizing philosophical tendency with which Gadamer himself was widely – and without prejudice – confronted. This wave has been particularly nourished by Rudolf Bultmann's (1884-1976) notion of "demythologization". Although in Bultmann's production we cannot find an exact definition of the concepts of "myth" and "mythology", which he seems to use as interchangeable words, his comprehension of the mythological dimension can essentially be associated with a narrative representation of an historical phenomenon of the past, which is conceived in modern age as something foreign and distant and thus acquires a "mythic" shape.
Especially in the 1941 essay *The New Testament and Mythology* (*Neues Testament und Mythologie*)[427], he underlines the theoretical risk embedded in a mythical contextualization and

[427] Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologieserung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, in Id., *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie, Band 7, Evangelischer Verlag Albert-Lempp, München 1941, pp. 27-69. English translation: *New*

comprehension of the religious revelation. The mythological lexicon which runs through the Bible (in particular the New Testament) represents for Bultmann a significant challenge to an authentic approach to the Christian faith. Instead of valorizing the transcendental dimension of it, myth tends to reify the "good novel", whose spiritual core is defined by Bultmann as *kerygma*. Christina Ernst offers a summation of the issue: "The intention of myth is to express human existential consciousness as an experience of contingency and powerlessness, and to thematize the transcendence and unavailability of the powers that rule man and the world. However, myth itself has not yet found an adequate form of expression for this. Through objectifying speech, its content and intention are distorted, the myth is alienated from itself and must be 'demythologized'"[428].

"Demythologization" therefore means liberating the Biblical text from all the mythical features which are not part of the core of the religious revelation, in order to let it be clarified, made understandable for modern rational consciousness, and freed for the disclosure of its infinite potential. The obsolete mythical world should be overcome by "a truth which is quite independent of its mythical setting"[429] and "which arises *necessarily* out of the situation of modern man"[430]. In fact, "demythologization" should be considered not as a method or an interpretative operation, but instead as the very autonomous process of the Biblical self-revelation, which moves towards contemporary non mythical sensitivity.

Furthermore, theology should point out the essential irrepresentability of God's transcendence (its *ganz andere* dimension, referring to Rudolf Otto), whose linguistic and artistic representations constitute only mere attempts to approach it, and often cause intellectual mistakes. Thus "Bultmann sees in this myth-creating activity of man the turning away from God, the exercise of his own claims to power and thus sin"[431]. This is an approach which is clearly contextualizable within the Christian theological mistrust of images and God's representation, which is part of the aniconic tradition present in the three "Religions of the Book", and which, with respect to Christianity, is especially relevant in the Protestant Church – and a matter of debate with the Catholic iconophile dominant perspective[432].

Testament and Mythology. The Mythological Element in the Message of the New Testament and the Problem of its Re-interpretation, in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*, trans. by Reginald H. Fuller, S.P.C.K., London 1953, pp. 1-44.

[428] Christina Ernst, *Mythologie und Theologie – Der Mythosbegriffe als Zugang zu Differenz und Dynamik von Glaubenserfahrung und Glaubensreflexion*, in Stefan Matuschek and Christoph Jamme (eds.), *Die mythologische Differenz. Studien zur Mythostheorie*, Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg 2009, pp. 235-261: 240.

[429] Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, cit., p. 3.

[430] *Ivi*, p. 7.

[431] Ernst, *Mythologie und Theologie*, cit., p. 243.

[432] Under this methodological lens, we can also read the interesting reflections on the topic offered by the philosopher Hans Jonas: "Everybody demythologizes to some extent: we try to find under the mythological covering other meanings (moral, etc.). Demythologization has a validity of its own: in a certain liberation from the

Bultmann's revolutionary conception is, however, rooted in a long philosophical tradition, which sees theology as an intellectual domain standing on the side of *logos* and therefore opposed to myth, understood as irrational representation and narration of reality. Bultmann adamantly states: "There is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age"[433]. Thus, the Christian message requires a new language to be expressed, on that is adequate to the contemporary age.
This is a dualistic perspective which, as is immediately intelligible, is quite distant from Gadamer's attempt to overcome the dualism between *logos* and *mythos* and to recognize the common features of the two domains.

Gadamer's encounter with Bultmann took place in the context of the University of Marburg, where they became colleagues. The intellectual relation between them was rich and conversational: while Gadamer devoted to Bultmann several reflections in his texts and even some specific essays, Bultmann also appreciated and discussed Gadamer's hermeneutics, to the point of openly stating that *Truth and Method* is a relevant book for theology[434]. Wasim Salman has recently demonstrated that several theoretical trajectories of Gadamer's hermeneutics were anticipated by Bultmann's insights in his theological model[435].
The picture which Gadamer displayed of him in his *Philosophical Encounters* (*Philosophische Begegnungen*)[436] is characterized by a sincere appraisal for the richness and theoretical rigor which characterized Bultmann's position and their relevance in the academic theological and

condensation of the myth. It comes to a difference of degree. If demythologization reaches the point of eliminating all the stumbling-blocks of faith, and everything becomes an existential truth, then the meaning of religion itself vanishes. My feeling from a certain time on was that Bultmann, more than he would have liked, was in the traditions of the Enlightenment and of liberal rationalism. Bultmann transformed, through demythologization, God and Christ into categories of experience. To that extent, I think that Bultmann went too far, or, at least, had the tendency of going further than Christianity, as a living creed, would tolerate" (Ioan Petru Culianu, *From Gnosticism to the Dangers of Technology. An Interview with Hans Jonas*, in Id., *Gnosticismo e pensiero moderno: Hans Jonas*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 1985, pp. 133-153: 144-145).

[433] Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, cit., p. 3.

[434] See Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Band 4, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1967, p. 120.
See also the Gadamer's 8 September 1961 letter to Bultmann, which testifies the strict theoretical relation among them: "In my book [*Truth and Method*] I have tried to explain the fact that historical consciousness – entirely in my own field of experience, the experience of the philosophical classics, of art, and of the humanistic tradition – is permeated with a claim required by the content, which it seems to me is something that corresponds exactly to the situation of theology in recent decades, especially with regard to your own theological work" (in Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, cit., p. 279).

[435] See Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit., pp. 130-142.

[436] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Rudolf Bultmann*, in Id., *Philosophische Begegnungen*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 10, cit., pp. 387-392.

philosophical context of Marburg University[437], based on his pedagogic charisma and his adoption of hermeneutics in the theological context[438].

However, Gadamer's engagement with Bultmann's demythologization has been nuanced and critical. For sure, his appreciation for the great humanist, one who brought himself to face Greek tradition and promote an original hermeneutical theology, was relevant and represented a sort of counter-influence to the previous fascination for Stefan George and his symbolist and post-Romantic circle. We could interpret Gadamer's philosophy of religion also as an attempt to find a balanced solution between these two very different sources and inspirations. But, at the same time, Gadamer's theoretical appreciation of myth seems to represent an unavoidable different tendency from Bultmann's standpoint.

Based on his interpretation of theological dialectic (Karl Barth [1886-1968] in particular) and the philosophy of existence (with a focus on Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*)[439], Bultmann's position is particularly centered on the seminal role of the word in the Christian Gospel as announcement. According to Bultmann, the message of the New Testament should be preserved from Greek conceptual philosophy – and here lies another relevant difference from Gadamer, whose synthetic approach to Western tradition considered Greek philosophy and Christian tradition to be fundamental, conjugable pillars. By way of synthetic summary, we could say that if Gadamer saw the axis of spiritual Western wisdom in the dialogue between Greek pagan philosophy and myth on the one hand, and Christian theological identity on the other, then Bultmann's thought was directed at elaborating a balance between Christian faith and modern rational scientific knowledge. Gadamer himself critically recognizes this tendency: "Admittedly, R. Bultmann defines 'myth' and 'mythical worldview' precisely as the opposite

[437] See Gadamer, *Die Marburger Theologie* (1964), cit.

[438] Gadamer's view of the preunderstanding (*Vorverständnis*) is not religiously determined, but in Bultmann's hermeneutics it is based on the Christian interpretation of the sacred scriptures. But similar is the role attributed to human finitude and to the relation between reason (*intelligo*) and faith (*credo*), which, in Christian religion, synthetizes and harmonizes Greek philosophy and Jewish spirituality. On the relation between the two hermeneutical models and the influence of Gadamer on theological hermeneutics (especially the post-Conciliar one) see Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit. If we agree with Salman that the role of hermeneutics is to make the two systems of thought comparable and on many levels coherent (especially considering the concepts of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the process of interpretations of texts and the criticism towards historicism, positivism and objectivism), then we endeavor to argue that the reflections on the mythical sphere proceed in two very different directions.

[439] An Heideggerian legacy which was considered too unilateral in the context of Catholic theology. See Pontificia Commissione Biblica, *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa*, 1993 (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19930415_interpretazione_it.html), where, instead, only positive words are expressed to synthetize Gadamer's philosophy and hermeneutics as system. On the Catholic appreciation of Gadamer's philosophy, see also Giovanni Paolo II, *Telegramma di cordoglio per la morte di Hans-Georg Gadamer* (16 marzo 2002), in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXV, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2004, p. 372.

of the kerygma, which is 'understood' in faith. But this is a questionable dependence on the world image of 'science', which cannot restrict the hermeneutic principle"[440].

In the wake of the fertile recent developments in the history and science of religions, it is difficult to imagine an insistence on maintaining the binary opposition between myth and religion derivable from a certain interpretation of Bultmann's writings. And this depends not only on the fact that both the Bible and "sacred writings" need an hermeneutics process – whose importance is recognized by Bultmann himself – so as to be revitalized and enter into the existence of the believer, acquiring, so to say, a mythical shape[441], but also, and more radically, because it is possible to recognize in the theological teaching of salvation relevant mythical forms and functions, which perform in reality in a similar way to myths proper. This is not necessarily a sign of an irrational or superstitious dimension to the Christian faith, but a determination of a universality and non-contingent essence. Eliminating this dimension, the content of the Christian message risks being diminished too.
We could say that Gadamer's hermeneutics engages with mythology on a philosophical level which tends to historical (and therefore rational) work on myth, without annihilating its potential, but instead trying to sublimate it. Furthermore, as we have already discussed, Gadamer always highlights in his philosophical approach the role of continuity and tradition. While he acknowledges the need for the reinterpretation and adaptation of tradition to contemporary contexts, he is wary of approaches that sever ties with tradition entirely – as Bultmann's perspective does.

What instead appears to Gadamer to be particular remarkable is Bultmann's idea of "self-understanding", which, extracted from the already overcome transcendental idealism, where it was connected to the notion of "transcendental consciousness", comprehends the dimension of historicity (*Geschichtlickheit*): only in the historical event of the relation with God/Christ can the believer understand himself and find his "authenticity" (in the Heideggerian sense). It is

[440] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Mythopoietische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien* (1967), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, cit., pp. 289-305: 294 ("Freilich definiert R. Bultmann 'Mythos' und 'mythisches Weltbild' gerade als das Gegenteil des Kerygmas, das im Glauben 'verstanden' wird. Aber das ist eine fragwürdige Abhängigkeit von dem Weltbild der 'Wissenschaft' die das hermeneutische Prinzip nicht einschränken kann").
[441] This process of *Umkehrung* is actually a dynamic typical of myth: the actions and experience of gods and heroes are transferred to our personal experience; likewise God's revelation is transmitted as faith to the believers. Bultmann is somehow aware of this process, which, despite "demythologization", remains relevant in his own paradigm. The theologian develops it on a philosophical plane as the "existentialist interpretation" (*existentiale Interpretation*) of the sacred scriptures, which allow the reader to translate the teachings in its own life experience and to better understand human existence. Christ is the Redeemer not because the event of the Cross is historical truth, but thanks to his encounter with the believer, which is ever renewable.

probably because of this preference – and also because of the non-polemical attitude of Gadamer's personality – that Bultmann is mentioned in *Truth and Method* especially regarding the notion of self-understanding, while less space is given to the issue of demythologization[442]. To the concept of self-understanding Gadamer even devoted a specific essay[443]. Gadamer is aware that historical understanding and genetic inquiry, which are typical features of hermeneutical practice, are possible only when the subject does not feel immediately connected to a specific tradition. Hence, in a premodern, mythic and enchanted world, no hermeneutical event is required. Thus, philosophical "hermeneutics became a universal, methodical attitude" when "it presupposed the foreignness of the content that is to be understood and thus made its task the overcoming of this foreignness by gaining understanding"[444]. But the premises of hermeneutics are themselves philosophically based – and thus biased. Modern hermeneutics, in fact, has been founded on the central core of modern historical rational subjectivity as the anthropological subject of knowledge. This issue has installed in the hermeneutics process the importance of secularization and disenchantment as fundamental interpretative schemes and trajectories. But Gadamer shows that it is not always true that myth and *logos* need to be reciprocally opposed: the Greek world, for example in Plato's philosophy, fruitfully tried to embrace both of them in a common dialogue[445]. "In truth, myth is obviously and intimately akin to thinking consciousness. Even the philosophical explication of myth in the language of concepts adds nothing essentially new to the constant movement back and forth between discovery and concealment, between reverential awe and spiritual freedom, that accompanied the entire history of Greek myth"[446]. Furthermore, Gadamer explains: "In the last analysis, *all* understanding is self-understanding, but not in the sense of a preliminary self-possession or of one finally and definitively achieved. For the self-understanding only realizes itself in the understanding of a subject matter and does not have the character of a free self-realization. The self that we are does not possess itself; one could say that it 'happens'. And this is what the theologian is actually saying when he asserts that faith is an event in which a new man is

[442] Cf. Gadamer, *Hermeneutics and Historicism* (1965), cit., p. 520 (Gadamer, *Hermeneutik und Historismus* (1965), cit., pp. 403-404).
[443] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On the Problem of Self-Understanding*, in Id., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, cit., pp. 44-58 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses. Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zur Frage der 'Entmythologisierung'* (1961), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, cit., pp. 121-132).
[444] *Ivi*, p. 47 ("Gerade dadurch wird die Hermeneutik zu einer universalen methodischen Haltung, daß sie die Fremdheit des zu verstehenden Inhaltes voraussetzt und damit deren Überwindung durch die Aneignung des Verstehens zur Aufgabe macht" [*ivi*, p. 123]).
[445] See *ivi*, p. 51 (*ivi*, pp. 126-127).
[446] *Ibidem* ("In Wahrheit ist der Mythos dem denkenden Bewußtsein so innerlich verwandt, daß selbst die philosophische Explikation des Mythos in der Sprache des Begriffes nichts wesenhaft Neues hinzu bringt zu jenem beständigen Hin und Her zwischen Entdeckung und Verhüllung, zwischen ehrfurchtsvoller Scheu und geistiger Freiheit, der die gesamte Geschichte des griechischen Mythos begleitet" [*ivi*, p. 127]).

established. The theologian says also that we must believe and understand the Word, and that it is through the Word that we overcome the abysmal ignorance about ourselves in which we live"[447]. We can derive that such understanding of ourselves is not a subjective act, but instead a fusion of horizons between our intimacy and the self-giving of a meaning. Myth and religion, in this context, appear to Gadamer as the cultural and spiritual background within which this meaningful event can take place. "The proclamation of the gospel speaks through all these mediations" – i.e. the theological (re)interpretation and the sum of readings, transcribing, elaborating occurred in history – in a way that is comparable to the repetition of a legend or the continual renewal and transformation of mythical tradition by great poetry"[448]. Thus, "demythologization" can acquire a useful function only in the sense of symbolical reappropriation and actualization – but that, as we have seen, is precisely the narrative and existential function of myth itself.

Gadamer's positive evaluation of myth therefore seems to be an attempt to avoid the dualism which appears in Bultmann's distinction between religious transcendence and mythic-linguistic world representation; in fact, this distinction seems to inevitably carry in itself an opposition between two worlds: the faithful comprehension of transcendence and the linguistic/empirical perception of the immanent world. The problem inlaid in this position is that it implies the following: "Talking about faith is in itself an impossibility and can only point to its own inadequacy. Experiences of faith thus become incommunicable, their presentation is not a revealing communication, but rather obstructs access to faith"[449]. To the contrary, however, mythic narratives help men to acquire an experience – which is real, concrete and polyvalent – of this otherwise incommunicable transcendence. The world experience (*Welterfahrung*) acquires through myth an epiphanic and sacred comprehension, where the dualism between reality and sacred is overcome by a transcendent immanence – the symbolic interpretation of

[447] *Ivi*, p. 55 ("Alles Verstehen ist am Ende Sichverstehen, aber nicht in der Weise eines vorgängigen oder schließlich erreichten Selbstbesitzes. Denn es verwirklicht sich dieses Sichverstehen immer nur im Verstehen einer Sache und hat nicht den Charakter einer freien Selbstverwirklichung. Das Selbst, das wir sind, besitzt sich nicht selbst. Eher könnte man sagen, daß es sich geschieht. Und das sagt nun wirklich der Theologe, daß der Glaube ein solches Ereignis ist, in dem ein neuer Mensch gegründet wird. Und er sagt weiter, daß es das Wort ist, das geglaubt und verstanden werden soll und durch das wir die abgründige Unwissenheit über uns selbst, in der wir leben, überwinden" [*ivi*, p. 130]).
[448] *Ivi*, p. 58 ("die Verkündigung des Evangeliums spricht durch alle diese Vermittlungen hindurch, vergleichbar der Weise, wie eine Sage weitergesagt wird oder wie eine mythische Überlieferung durch die große Dichtung ständig gewandelt und erneuert wird" [*ivi*, p. 132]).
[449] Ernst, *Mythologie und Theologie*, cit., p. 245.

myth assumed by Gadamer is clearly distinct from the allegorical proposal of Bultmann, for whom the mythical form of kerygma needs to be read as metaphor of the faith truth[450].
Furthermore, in Gadamer's view, the mythic world experience can also survive in the religious context: as explained by Christina Ernst, "every religion, including the Christian faith, contains such mythical experiences. It occurs when the cognitive content of faith proves to be real in a sensory experience – on the level of theoretical knowledge – and, conversely, when the cognitive content of faith communicates itself as present in a sensory experience – on the level of a practical knowledge"[451]. Gadamer has perfectly clarified this role of myth in stating that "'mere myth' must not be defined on the basis of modern science, but positively from the point of view of the acceptance of the *kerygma* – in terms of the inner claim of faith. The great freedom that the Greek poet possessed and employed in order to interpret the mythical tradition of his people is another example of such demythologizing. Here too we do not deal with 'enlightenment', but rather with a religious basis for the poet's exercise of his spiritual power and critical insight"[452]. Faith and understanding are in a dynamic, intertwined relation, which we can imagine as another occurrence of the powerful symbol of the play, understood in the intersubjective and evenemential dimension which we have already considered in the context of Gadamer's aesthetical hermeneutics. If the "back and forth movement" of play has a specific autonomous dimension, then the relation of faith and understanding can also be understood within this non-subjective dimension, dominated by the Grace and the self-given of religious experience.

Gadamer's contribution to the philosophical discussion on myth theory can thus be understood as a completion of the 19th-century *Mythos Debatte*[453] and to its extension in the thought of the

[450] The non-allegorical interpretation of myth in Gadamer could be contextualized in the German history of ideas according to the schematization proposed by Furio Jesi in his reconstruction of the development of theories of myth in modern debate. Although Gadamer is not mentioned by Jesi, his recognition of the autonomous character of myth and of the juxtaposition of content and form (image), which are never divisible, render Gadamer's position intelligible as an outcome of the 19th-century theoretical discoveries, such as those of Philip Karl Buttmann (1764-1829) and Kark Otfried Müller (1797-1840), which indeed deeply influenced Walter Otto and Karoly Kérenyi, who are, in fact, relevant sources for Gadamer's position on myth (see Jesi, *Mito*, cit., pp. 55-60).
[451] Ernst, *Mythologie und Theologie*, cit., pp. 248-249.
[452] Gadamer, *On the Problem of Self-Understanding*, cit., p. 53 ("Nicht von der modernen Wissenschaft aus, sondern positiv, von der Aufnahme des Kerygmas her, vom inneren Anspruch des Glaubens aus, muß sich bestimmen, was bloßer Mythos ist. Ein anderes Beispiel solcher 'Entmythologisierung', ist eben die große Freiheit, die der griechische Dichter angesichts der mythischen Tradition seines Volkes besaß und betätigte. Auch sie ist nicht 'Aufklärung', Es ist ein religiöser Grund, auf dem der Dichter seine geistige Kraft und sein kritisches Recht ausübt" [Gadamer, *Zur Problematik des Selbstverständnisses* (1961), cit., pp. 127-128]).
[453] "After Vico and Herder served as forerunners, the Romantic movement in particular turned its critique on the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its 'sad atheistic twilight' (Goethe) in recognition of the religious significance of myths. At the same time the mythic luminosity possessed by the holy story of Christianity acquired new brilliance. A new feeling for the mythical is discernible in the poetic creations of the age, whether in Novalis and his many friends and followers who extolled the Christian epoch, in the rediscovery of Dante, or in Hölderlin's

second half of the 20th-century, with some approaches that radiate fundamental conceptual cores for the new millennium as well.

This theoretical path has led hermeneutical philosophy to the following conclusion: today myth can be approached only through reason; likewise, reason, under attack and crisis, needs myth to be revitalized. This is a dialectical concept which had already been discovered in Romanticism, where there emerged a vast interest – enlightened for example in the famous *Systemprogramm* – in "a new aesthetic mythology – one that was both to be a mythology of reason [*Mythologie der Vernunft*] and to unite the intellectual and sensory side of religion"[454].

Under this perspective, Gadamer's position seems to embrace the proposal of a "re-enchantment" of the world – re-elaborating the Romantic heritage in the context of the transition to the post-secular age. His position, aiming at cultural transformation, seems to be developed under the recognition of the historico-cultural process which Ernst Cassirer has so aptly described: "The world of human culture may be described in the words of this Babylonian legend. It could not arise until the darkness of myth was fought and overcome. But the mythical monsters were not entirely destroyed. They were used for the creation of a new universe, and they still survive in this universe. The powers of myth were checked and subdued by superior forces. As long as these forces, intellectual, ethical, and artistic, are in full strength, myth is tamed and subdued. But once they begin to lose their strength, chaos is come again. Mythical thought then starts to rise anew and to pervade the whole of man's cultural and social life"[455].

If we adopt the notion of "re-enchantment", however, we need to carefully specify the meaning which we attribute to it. Indeed, as convincingly explained by Graziano Lingua[456], the notion of "re-enchantment" of the world has been met with – in the academic context as well as in the popular culture – several interpretations, sometimes radically differing from one other, because the very meaning of Weber's concept of "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*) was ambiguous too. Indeed, Weber referred with this concept to two different

poetic revival of the world of the Greek gods, which 'the individual' enters through reconciliation" (Gadamer, *Myth in the Age of Science* (1981), cit., p. 91 ["Nach der Vorläuferschaft eines Vico und eines Herder hat vor allem die romantische Bewegung ihre Kritik am Rationalismus der Aufklärung und ihrer 'tristen atheistischen Halbnacht' (Goethe) in die Anerkennung der religiösen Bedeutung der Mythen umgewendet. Zugleich gewann die mythische Leuchtkraft, die in der heiligen Geschichte des Christentums steckte, neuen Glanz. Man spürt einen neuen Sinn für das Mythische in den dichterischen Schöpfungen des Zeitalters, sei es bei Novalis und vielen seiner Freunde und Folger im Lobpreis des christlichen Weltalters, sei es in der Entdeckung Dantes, sei es bei Hölderlin in der dichterischen Erweckung der griechischen Götterwelt, zu der 'der Einzige' versöhnen hinzutritt"; Gadamer, *Der Mythos im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (1981), cit., p. 180]).

[454] *Ivi*, pp. 94-95 ("Eine neue ästhetische Mythologie, die zugleich eine Mythologie der Vernunft sein würde und die geistige und die sinnliche Seite der Religion harmonisch zu vereinigen vermöchte" [*ivi*, p. 184]).

[455] Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1974, p. 297.

[456] See Graziano Lingua, *Oltre il disincantamento del mondo?*, in Alberto Martinengo (ed.), *Oltre il disincanto. Prospettive sul reincantamento del mondo*, presentation by Federico Vercellone, Aracne, Roma 2015, pp. 63-83.

phenomena: in a restricted sense, as that sort of demagification of the religious sphere which occurred within Christianity, because of its rational trajectory; in a broader sense, as the process of rationalization and technologization that has characterized the development of Western civilization as a whole and its secularization. If we consider the process of "re-enchantment" as a reaction to the phenomenon recognized by Weber, then Gadamer cannot be considered among those authors who call for a return to a premodern, irrational, and holistic worldview, a traditionalist perspective which Gadamer always lacked and even battled; instead, his advocacy for an integration of techno-scientific reason and an interpretation of the role of myth – along with, as we shall see in the next chapter, religious traditions – could be seen as an attempt to oppose the rationalistic and technician disenchantment of the modern world. In fact, the meaning of the world and of human experience cannot be clarified only within the process of rationalization: re-enchanting the world means, in this perspective, to reject the negative outcomes of a totalitarian and reductionist development of modern reason. It represents, as expressed by Lingua, a "critical instance against the way in which instrumental reason has been translated into the domination and exploitation of nature, in the constriction of social ties under the law of merely economic interest, in the oblivion of the *imaginary* and symbolic dimensions of human existence"[457].

With myth, beyond archaic myth, in its relationship of light and shade with *logos*, Gadamer seems to aspire to transfigure modern "technical reason" into a "symbolic reason".

2.3.3 Myth and Visual Arts: The Renewal of an Ancient Alliance

The intrinsic connection between myth and art is not only reflected in the representation of myth as the pivotal content of several artworks – in both Western and Eastern sacred art, but also in various examples of profane modern and postmodern art – but is also to be considered in a more structural way[458].

The key core of this affinity is, in our opinion, the interaction that symbolical images and the evenemential disclosure of meaning realizes in both fields (the mythic and the artistic): the theoretical framework which we have developed under Gadamer's legacy in relation to images and beauty can in fact be widely adopted for the question of myth – because it is the same framework which appears in the unveiling of mythical structures themselves, and which we can aesthetically grasp in myth itself.

[457] *Ivi*, p. 83.

[458] Gadamer speaks of the "structural common ground" of the experience of the world offered by myth and by art ("strukturelle Gemeinsamkeit" [Gadamer, *Mythos und Vernunft* (1954), cit., p. 168]).

Gadamer has deeply understood this connection and its deepness. It is not just a matter of content: every authentic artistic production is, as we have already argued, symbolical, and thanks to this characteristic it participates in the dynamic and metamorphic life of genuine myths.

"The difference between aesthetic consciousness and mythical consciousness", Gadamer dryly states, "can hardly be considered absolute"[459]. Art inherited myth as that figure of mediation which connects a specific artistic production to the immemorial dimension which we have thematized with reference to Schelling's philosophy: the repetition (in variation) which characterizes the narrative structure of myths is condensed in the artwork in its dimension based on *ergon* (work). According to Gadamer, in fact, the linguistic dimension embedded in both fields urges to be expressed: myth adopts the expressive strategies which we have described (mainly: the narrative repetition), and art acts in a similar way, but by fixating itself in a *Werkgestaltung*. For Gadamer, this formal and ordered structure of the artwork is something essential, a sort of lowest common determinator of what art is: even experimental forms of art possess their own identity because "something presents itself here as something upon which we pass judgment. Even if it has only been seen or heard once, it still represents something that has taken shape as a work"[460].

An historical transition can be traced from ritual and mythical narratives to artistic work, in the sense that the work is a formal "solidification" of the dynamic and metamorphic myth. In fact, the virtual, metamorphic, and dynamic life of myth can be "frozen" in art, in the image of the artwork; as explained by de Castro, this happens in "the instantaneous sorting of the precosmological flux of indiscernibility that occurs when it enters the cosmological process. (…) The original transparence or infinitely bifurcated *complicatio* gets explicated in the invisibility (of human souls and animal spirits) and opacity (of human bodies and animal somatic 'garb') that mark the constitution of all mundane beings. This invisibility and opacity are, however, relative and reversible, even as the ground of virtuality is indestructible or inexhaustible; the great indigenous rituals of the recreation of the world are precisely *dispositifs* for the counter-effectuation of this indestructible ground"[461].

[459] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 70 ("Und wenn der Unterschied zwischen mythischem und ästhetischem Bewußtsein kein absoluter sein sollte" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 87]).
[460] Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, cit., p. 145 ("Es ist etwas, über das geurteilt wird, auch wenn es nur einmal gesehen oder gehört worden ist. Es ist für uns eine Werkgestaltung" [Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), cit., pp. 147-148]).
[461] De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, cit., p. 66.

Gadamer reflects on this topic when he discusses the transition from mythical poetry (epic) to literature (poetry, choral lyric, tragedy), but this perspective can also be applied to visual arts. In fact, starting from Gadamer's comparison between word and image, we can face the same transition from sacred performative rituals and visual religious models to a sacred art characterized by a certain autonomy, from which profane art is progressively derived under the pressure of modernization and secularization.

In our opinion, however, contemporary tendencies seeking to go back to mythical sources and symbolic imaginaries in order to enhance artistic production – also outside any specific dogmatic religious discourse, but in a post-secular context – represent an attempt to slightly thin the distance between mythic and aesthetic experience, which certainly played such a significant role in our historical development, and openly repair the intimate connection between mythic and aesthetic consciousness. In this context, artistic reflection on myth can be understood as an attempt to rework aesthetic consciousness against the already mentioned Hegelian "death of art": myth could prove to be key to revitalizing artistic discourse, carrying it in a different direction from the pure subjectivist idea of the freedom of the artist (as genius) that was the first modern attempt to overcome the crisis of traditional art and establish a self-evident integration between community, society, and religious consciousness, on one hand, and the self-understanding of the artist, on the other hand, a relation which has now mostly disappeared.

Dynamicity, repetition, and indetermination, which are fundamental characteristics of the mythic discourse, according to Gadamer, seem to be with every passing day increasingly more appreciated in the assortments of contemporary art, which we can encounter in the main art exhibition, galleries, fairs, and events. For now leaving aside the presence of mythical inspiration, contents, and themes as specific iconic topics of artworks (a relevant topic which we will consider in Kiefer's and Nitsch's artwork analyses, showing how much the mythic-symbolic dimension is inescapable for understanding the aesthetics of the two), it is important to notice that even the form of myth seems somehow to be resurrected in the artistic methodology itself: the pursued aesthetic experience shares more similarities with the mythic than with a conceptual or intellectual one, as is the case, to the contrary, with other – perhaps still predominant – contemporary tendencies.

Referring to the main sources of our artistic analysis, the narrative, plural, and reproductive character of mythic storytelling is represented in Anselm Kiefer's passion for the artistic series.

Updating the function of the famous painting series of the past – suffice it to mention only one of the most fascinating for philosophical discourse: the *Mont Sainte-Victoire* by Paul Cézanne –, Kiefer often works on the same topic from a circular perspective: he introduces it in a single artwork and, through the repetition of some elements and the variation of others, he creates around it a net – or wave – of images, which illustrate the same content from different angles and perspectives. This is precisely the circularity which characterizes the hermeneutical paradigm of myth: dynamic forms recur as *Leitmotive*, always referring to that original unsayable dimension which is never completely accessible – that dimension which Jesi defined as the "obscure God", a sort of metaphysical, ineffable background which in some religions coincides with the figure of *Deus absconditus*[462]. The stories narrated by Kiefer are repeated in many artworks, so they can be performed in a continuous way, which in turn stresses the fundamental relation between identity and differences in manifesting an archetype in its dialogical and multifaceted dimension.

This process clearly appears in the famous *Heroic Symbols* (*Heroische Sinnbilder*), a series of photographs undertaken in performances in 1969, in which the artist represents himself offering a Nazi salute in a significant place of German identity – a violently provocative confrontation with the dark side of German recent history: here the identitarian reactionary myth is deconstructed, exposed in an action of mourning, and the multiplicity of pictures acquire a persuasive storytelling which seems to convert the negative political myth into the offering of a renewed personal freedom that is gained only upon looking into the abyss of the past. This is a way to subtract sides of the vital experience to the dominion of the negative archetype of the past in order to vivify it in a new artistic myth. But why do we need myths? Are rational explanations not enough? Kiefer is very clear about this: "Mythology is always more complete than science. In science, it's always a question of partial knowledge, especially today, when everything is compartmentalized, when everyone works only on his own small part of the whole. Mythology contains knowledge that is not immediately legible, it must be interpreted, but it is more integrated"[463].

[462] See Jesi, *Germania segreta*, cit., pp. 239-242.

[463] Kiefer, *In conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 117 ("Die Mythologie ist immer vollständiger als die Wissenschaft. Es geht in der Wissenschaft immer nur um Teilerkenntnisse, besonders heute, in einer Zeit, in der alles in Einzelteile zerlegt wird, in der jeder nur an einem sehr kleinen Flecken des Ganzen arbeitet. Die Mythologie umfasst ein Wissen, das zwar nicht direkt ablesbar ist, es muss interpetiert werden, aber es ist ganzheitlicher" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 122]). But myth should not be understood in opposition to science: fundamental mythological experiences and scientific findings are used by Kiefer in an intertwined way in his art: "Some knowledge helps illuminate mythological experience and some knowledge is gained through a mythological experience" (*ivi*, p. 134 ["Manche Erkenntnis hilft, die mythologische Erfahrung zu erhellen, und manche Erkenntnis entsteht durch eine mythologische Erfahrung"; *ivi*, p. 139]).

In other series, such as the paintings entitled *The Secret Life of Plants*, but also *Sol Invictus* and *Sephiroth*, the reiteration of figurative attempts around the same topics create a living constellation of meanings which seems to offer a foundation for the elaboration of a postmodern mythology in neither a merely metaphorical nor an allegorical perspective: in the syncretic horizon of globalized mankind, the encounter with the sacred is evoked through figures who reflect different spiritual aspects emerging in the contemporary age, such as, to refer to the three mentioned series, the pantheistic empathy with nature, the awareness of the deep and invisible relation between microcosm and macrocosm, and the spiritual power of the void. "The greatest myth is man himself", as he represents a conjunction element in the chain of creatures from his concrete and spontaneous life to his narrative production: "Art and mythologies are other forms of knowledge. Myth gives answers to the questions: from where we know, where we go, what we are. You are dust and to dust you shall return. And over your cities grass will grow"[464]. Myth is not an escape from reality, but rather – thanks to artistic representation – a dive into its inner abysses.

The separation between artwork and mythic experience is even more narrowed in Nitsch's OMT, and it can appear completely cancelled if we take seriously the artistic attempt to propose a real, effective, and inner transformative ritual for contemporary mankind, calling for radical symbolic images. OMT can be infinitely reproduced, and it already has been since the death of the Austrian artist[465]. From an external viewpoint, Nitsch's performances can be aesthetically evaluated, but from inside his discourse, what really counts is the pure *Ereignis*, which is an encounter with an ecstatic estrangement in which beauty and the sacred are identified and overlapped. Also in Nitsch's case, it is not only the figurative inspiration of the performances that intrinsically wields a mythical content – derived from the syncretic association of figures taken from several religious and esoteric domains (Catholic liturgy, Eleusine mysteries, Dionysian rituals) – but it is the performative structure and narrative of the artwork itself that possess a mythic quality. We could apply to OMT the interpretation adopted by Lammi of

[464] The cited sentences are pronounced by Kiefer in the movie *Anselm. Das Rauschen der Zeit* (2024), by Wim Wenders. Kiefer explicitly quotes *Genesis* 3, 19 ("you are dust and to dust you shall return") and he also synthetizes Isaiah's image according to which grass, as symbol of nature, will grow again over the ruins of human civilization ("The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow" [*Isahia*, 35, 7]. This passage is particularly relevant in his aesthetic of ruins to the point of being used as a title of a documentary on La Ribaute, the silk factory near Barjac which became the artist atelier (*Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, 2010).

[465] On 30-31 July 2022 the first two days of "das 6-tage-spiel" were performed in Prinzendorf Schloss: https://www.nitsch-foundation.com/press/the-orgies-mysteries-theater-160th-action-the-6-day-play-2nd-version/. And on 28 May 2023 Rita Nitsch organized the realization of the "Tag des Dionysos" (the third day): https://www.nitsch-foundation.com/press/das-orgien-mysterien-theater-6-tage-spiel-2023/.

Gadamer's theory on art and cultic experience: "Art belongs in the end in the neighborhood of theory, *theoria*, which in its fundamental meaning likewise exhibits a heightened presence of reality, and whose origins Gadamer similarly traces to being a spectator at a play and participation in religious festivals"[466]. OMT is in fact openly proposed as a postmodern myth in itself: the experience of the participants, through the radicalness of the performance, expresses the existential transformative function which in premodernity was sought and transmitted through myths, rites, and liturgies. Ecstatic rhythms, actions of repetition, and intoxication of the senses create an experience in which the cosmic process of life is narrated and interpreted. Nitsch describes in a manifesto this radical mythopoetic transfiguration with the following lyric words: "we fall into the abyss of darkness and into an abyss of light. at the same time, we suffer worlds of death, of cruelty, and race through worlds of immeasurably bright shining blinding white blissful experiences of light. raw meat, bloody and moist and rent in the course of dionysian excess, is set against the taste of fruit on the morning of the resurrection. the dual abyss of light and dark is BEING"[467]. Is this transformative experience, in which the individual destiny is transfigured though the interior effort and tuning in with the cosmic rhythm, not precisely a postmodern variation of the traditional "hero's journey"[468]? It is Nitsch himself who explicitly refers to the mythic value of the cultural sedimentation of the symbolic references emerging in his performances: in the "christian myth, the tragic event has become a myth. the undoing of the hero becomes the mythic figure of jesus christ dying on the cross. (…) in close keeping with the Greek tragedy, mass prompts churchgoers to identify with the hero or heroine. through the eucharist and communion, christ evolves into the imitation of christ, summoning us to identify with christ, with the tragic hero"[469].
In our opinion, the only relevant difference between the premodern conception and Nitsch's view of myth, which we will discuss in broader terms while deepening the Austrian artist production, is that there is neither a "vertical" nor hierarchical process in the latter: post-secular mythology does not invite us to move from the darkness to the celestial light of transcendence, but instead to "horizontally" recognize the inner identity of everything as irradiations of the same being – a transcendent immanence.

The artistic examples discussed here, which will be completed with other references to the mythic-symbolic inspiration of Kiefer and Nitsch in the subsequent part of the dissertation,

[466] Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, cit., p. 92.
[467] Nitsch, *Atlas*, cit., p. 50.
[468] See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New World Library, Novato (USA) 2008.
[469] Nitsch, *Atlas*, cit., p. 74.

testify to the deep interaction of myth, conceived through the philosophical hermeneutical interpretation, and symbolic art, considered as a vital contemporary practice that is capable of transferring to the public (or the participants, in the case of performances) a renewed form of knowledge based on an ancient wisdom and made accessible to contemporary postmodern consciousness thanks to new expressive languages.

2.4. Hermeneutics of Religion(s) in New Horizons: Rethinking an Aesthetics of the Sacred

2.4.1. Art and Religion(s): A Complex Relationship

The exploration of myth's role in artistic creation in connection with the sacred inevitably leads also to examining the relationship between art and religion. While traditional myths emerged from religious contexts, it is important to note that religions and myths share not an identity, but rather a dynamic, historically-determined relation. This relationship is shaped by various configurations between religious values, doctrine, and power structures, on one side, and artistic values, tendencies, and insights, on the other. These configurations have manifested in multiple ways: among them, we can mention cooperation, overlapping, unbalanced relations, indifference, and sometimes outright conflict.

This extremely challenging topic goes beyond the scope of consideration in our research from a theoretical and universal systematic point of view[470]; instead, we will try to specifically limit our focus to the problem of the relation between art and religious values in the specific context of the contemporary age, examined under the already thematized framework of postmodernism and post-secularism. We will explore this through a dialogue between Hans-Georg Gadamer's

[470] It is nevertheless our conviction that a universal theory on this question would be impossible, given that the distinction between myth and religion is primarily historically determined – not a qualitative distinction, but rather a matter of perspective and ideological treatment. Indeed, both religions and myths serve as methods of representing, interpreting, and communicating the sacred, making it existentially accessible to humanity. In this chapter, we will explore the significant parallels and similarities between myth and religion's roles in shaping aesthetical issues. Considering myth's dynamic and metamorphic character, we can observe an inverse relationship: the more rigidly a religion is fixed in strict dogmatic rational theology, the less space remains for mythic narratives to flourish. Conversely, the more a religion spontaneously lives through the symbolic and mythic forms of a communitarian tradition, the more it tends to foster a dynamic relationship with the divine, based on a sort of empirical, imaginative, and living theology. Within this framework, we concur with Kurt Hübner's assertion that "every faith, every religion takes its origin from a mythic experience (…). If myth can be separated from religion, there is no religion without myth" (*Die Wahrheit des Mythos*, C.H. Beck, München 1985, p. 344) and that "an alive faith can be experienced only in a mythic way" (*ivi*, p. 23). From this perspective Franz Overbeck's (1837-1905) critique (1873) of the static and fixed dimension of "Christian theology" remains relevant. Overbeck argued that theology, in both its its liberal and conservative forms, is doomed to never fully grasp the original Christ message – the Event of Christ. As he states, "although theology believes it serves religion, in essence it is by nature alien to religion" (*How Christian is our present-day theology?*, trans. by Martin Henry, T & T Clark International, London-New York 2005, p. 42). Despite some naive elements in his argument, Overbeck importantly highlights the gap between living spiritual mythopoetic experience and its theological-dogmatic representation. Ernst Jünger expressed similar views in the following century, convinced that theology attempts to conceptualize and, thereby, rationalize and reify, the realm of the sacred. In Jünger's perspective, this dimension cannot be reduced to any dogma or static formula, being inherently dynamic, varied, plural, and changing by virtue of its ontological structure. As Jünger declared: "I think that the theologians and intellectuals who practice demythologization today with such zeal resemble an army of ants that have entered a pithy kitchen: they devour and destroy all the delicacies they find there, but they do not stop telling each other how delicious they are" (Alessandro Gnoli and Franco Volpi, *I prossimi titani. Conversazioni con Jünger*, Adelphi, Milano 1997, p. 97).

hermeneutical reflections and the artistic works and theoretical contributions of Anselm Kiefer and Hermann Nitsch.

This investigation is complicated by the differing perspectives on religion held by these three figures. For Gadamer, religion primarily represents a theoretical problem, which is considered in the context of the history of Western thought, encompassing ancient Greek reflections on the divine (*to theion*, *divinum*), Christian theology, and modern philosophy of religion. In contrast, Kiefer and Nitsch approach religions as universal human expressive languages, studying them both as responses to existential questions and as iconographic sources for exploring the relationship between humans and the divine.
Bearing this in mind, it is nevertheless possible to identify common ground in their non-dogmatic, dialogical, and interreligious approaches, particularly in their shared recognition of the intimate connection between religions and myths, and of the crucial role of artistic imagination as a topology of encounter between humanity and the event of the sacred.

In the artistic process, religion, like myth, functions in two distinct ways:
- As a subject: the agency and the creative stimulus, or inspiration driving the artwork's creation, including the imaginative framework and values embedded in the artistic practice, typically expressed through *forms* or *styles*, aimed at expressing sacredness and mystery).
- Art as an object: the narrative content of the artwork, typically representing religious figures, themes, and imagery.
In traditional premodern sacred art, these two aspects were inseparable. Each religious tradition developed its own aesthetic approach, where style was considered not merely aesthetically pleasing, but truthful and necessary for successful artistic creation (i.e., the most appropriate and efficient, in some traditions even metaphysically founded or revealed by God himself[471]). Religion was the main agency of the artistic domain, operating through the educated artists, but also the object of art, offering the main images and narratives to the artistic creations.

[471] Comparative religious studies have identified several myths that narrate humanity's archaic experience of the revelation of artistic techniques and creative skills by God(s). These myths often present the ability to create as a divine gift, enabling humans to operate in ways similar to the divine (whether conceived as a demiurge or creator god). A significant example appears in the *Ṛgveda*, where the creator is portrayed as a divine blacksmith. This symbolism of the blacksmith as a participant in world creation appears across various cultural traditions, reflecting a widespread association between divine creative power and human artistic craftsmanship. The figure of the blacksmith-creator serves as an archetypal bridge between divine and human creative acts (see Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown, Penguin Publishing Group, London 1996, pp. 97-99).

The artistic style function was to communicate the religious content in an appropriate way, based on a strict and indissoluble relationship between form and content. As clarified by Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), "an art cannot properly be called 'sacred' solely on the grounds that its subjects originate in a spiritual truth; its formal language also must bear witness to a similar origin. (…) No art merits that epithet unless its forms themselves reflect the spiritual vision characteristic of a particular religion"[472].

We could then hypothesize that the separation between form and content represents a fundamental aesthetic dimension of secularization and modernization. This rupture of the form-content unity, which traditionally characterizes the artistic expression, that unity which conveyed also religious values in meaningful ways, characterizes Western modern artistic production, reaching its apex in the 20th-century Avantgardes.

Understanding this transformation requires examining not only art theory, but also the dynamics of perception within the artistic experience. The relationship between the sacred and the artistic domain is in fact also a relationship between the emergence of specific religious trajectories in the artistic event and the connection between them and the viewer (or participant) within artwork: this sacred event, which, in hermeneutical theory, as we have already seen, is intrinsically linked to the evenemential emergence of beauty, transcends mere representation of religious sources in terms of topics and inspiration.

Currently, it is in fact common not only to observe purely profane artworks, completely divorced from religious commitment, but also two complementary cases of what we could define as an "alienated" or "dissociated" sacred art: from one side, an explicitly sacral, even religious style and aesthetical forms and approaches applied to non-religious objects – or even to theoretically religious topics which are concretely no longer able to intimately speak to contemporary religious consciousness –, and, from the opposite side, a profane agency applied to religious topics, treating the latter as a mere historical or cultural object or domain – but accompanied neither by living sacred purposes nor by spiritual functions. In the first case, the artistic tendency to Otherness and to a suprasensible domain is applied to objects which are traditionally not part of the religious sphere (such is the case of several contemporary artists who feel the importance of spirituality but don't have any specific connection to an aesthetics embedded in a religious tradition, and operate spontaneously, through an individual expressive code); in the second case, on the contrary, the religious topics are treated but as mere subject matter, divorced from their hierophanic function.

[472] Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West. Its Principles and Methods*, trans. by Lord Northbourne, Perennial Books, London 1967, p. 7.

The situation reflects the fundamental problem that we have already encountered in our discussion of myth: the radical separation between aesthetic consciousness and the mythic-religious identity of the community. Contemporary society seems unable to produce coherent artistic values aligned with religious experience, while aesthetic consciousness appears increasingly disconnected from the sacred.

However, following Gadamer's perspective, this separation is never absolute. Indeed, it should be understood as a never complete process, considering that every artistic action incorporates a symbolic and transcendent dimension, thanks to the symbolic qualities inherent to images[473]. This sacred trace maintains the connection between the event of beauty and the event of the sacred in contemporary culture, though our cultural perception often fails to recognize it. This process is intimately connected to the question of nihilism: all values (religious, political, social, moral) have lost their value, in Nietzsche's sense, thus their traditional authority, and art too, is caught in this simultaneously liberating and tragic transformation.

Religion, like myth and art, functions as a mode of self-recognition: through religious narratives and rituals, humanity has shaped both the world and its own identity. Thus, the already mentioned need for a new mythology parallels the need for new religious forms, as extensively discussed in post-secular discourse.

If these reflections are not enough to highlight the importance of the current dialogue between arts and religions, we can also point out that the theoretical and epistemological structures of aesthetics and philosophy of religion(s) seem to share significant functions and forms. In the context of Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, this connection is particularly evident through the concept of "presentation". This notion is crucial not only for understanding the ontology of images, which particularly characterizes artistic symbolic images, but also for comprehending the divine beyond metaphysical dualism. As Jean Grondin observes, we can recognize in the "assimilation of the spectator's sense of the *presentation* of the work, a distant echo of Bultmann's conception of *kerygma*"[474]. Just as the Christian message engages believers not through direct historical perception, but through mediated predication, which interacts, in its deep and metamorphic meaning, with modern believers' self-understanding, so does the artwork's meaning emerge through its presentation and its evenemential relationship with the viewer – a relationship characterized by dialogue, address, and actualization beyond historicism[475].

[473] See *infra*, chapter 2.1.
[474] Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, cit., p. 45
[475] *Ivi*, pp. 46-47.

This understanding confirms Gadamer's ontology of art: aesthetic experience must acknowledge its subordination to something that precedes it, embracing this recognition as an act of freedom. This recognition becomes particularly significant in examining the crisis of Christian art, which many scholars identify as symptomatic of Christianity's broader crisis in Western culture.

Several scholars have emphasized that the crisis of Christianity – diagnosed through Nietzsche's famous recognition of the "death of God" – is particularly evident in the phenomenon of the crisis of sacred Christian art. This crisis, manifest in mainstream artists' abandonment of Christian themes and traditional styles since the 19th-century, reflects Christianity's diminishing influence as the dominant religious perspective of the Western world and primary source of inspiration for European artists. This separation between aesthetic and religious consciousness has radically interrupted a fertile cultural process, opening different and new perspectives. Following Alessandro Di Chiara's hermeneutic framework in his *Aesthetics of the Sacred*[476], we can argue that Christian theurgic symbolism – a "pragmatical" symbolism that is rooted in specific aesthetic forms to achieve spiritual purposes and is based on the recognition of the theandric-reciprocal participation of God and humans – has been lost even in Christian art. In its place, we find a merely descriptive – rather than creative – conceptualization of mimetic processes – which we have seen criticized in Gadamer's ontology of art[477]. This conceptualization, where humanity no longer engages with the existential mission of assuming its existence from the theandric (divine-human) perspective and through artistic symbolism, drives the fundamental process of Western art's desacralization[478].
This represents a fundamental crisis of imagination. With this notion, we want to underscore that our methodology is not based on a quantitative or sociological analysis (e.g., religious crisis as loss of church members or the decline of religious issues in socio-economic structures), but rather examines the crisis of the religious dimension as a driving force, which in modernity has

[476] Cf. Alessandro Di Chiara, *Per un'estetica del sacro: l'esperienza artistica come simbolo teurgico dell'esistenza*, in Giorgio Nonveiller (ed.), *Estetica del sacro*, il Poligrafo, Padova 2008, pp. 15-24. On the Christian relation between theurgy (θεουργία) and artistic creativity – especially in the Christian Orthodox world and from the perspective of Pavel Florenskij (1882-1937) and Nikolaj Aleksandrovič Berdjaev (1874-1948) – see also Michele Dantini, "La bellezza di Dio. Arte e culto in Pavel Florenskij", in Id., *Le forme del divino. Problemi di arte sacra tra prima modernità e Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna 2024, pp. 145-187.
[477] On that, see the first chapter of our dissertation.
[478] From this perspective, many works that formally qualify as sacred art – being subordinated to specific theological patterns – also fail to genuinely manifest the sacred. Instead, they remain confined to didactic and pedagogical functions, having lost art's essential pneumatic and liturgical dimensions. The mere adherence to religious iconography or theological prescriptions does not guarantee the work's capacity to mediate genuine sacred experience.

progressively become unable to orient, shape, and deeply influence individual and collective human existence. As underlined by Francesco Paolo Ciglia, the religious expansion and development of the original encounter of mankind and the divine within the event of the sacred "are exposed, quite constitutively, to a deadly pitfall. The virtuous and vital circle, which is normally established between the original mystery-gratuitous experiences of the event and the religious economy that emanates from it, can be ruinously broken, trapping both the experiences and the economy in question, albeit in different forms and in different ways, in involutional and degenerative circuits"[479]. If the "letter" kills the "spirit", the creative function of a religious tradition enters a crisis – although this crisis is not structurally doomed to be definitive, and sometimes leads to process of renewal and rebirth[480].

In the context of our research, the creative connection between art, religious values, and the *Zeitgeist* experiences a deep crisis: a new imagination, based on materialist, atheist, and techno-scientific anthropocentric values, has replaced the previous model, deeply influencing visual arts. The religious imagination – in this case Christian – appears to have exhausted its creative and imaginative forces. Modernity is founded on an "horizontal" worldview: it leaves no place for the "vertical" or "divine", rendering them even unthinkable[481].

Gadamer seems to be aware of this process well in advance. Indeed, in his interpretation, he emphasizes that during the process of modernization, Christian art has lost the cultural and existential function of representing the most significant act of communitarian self-recognition: "Recognition, as understood by Aristotle, presupposes the continuing existence of a binding tradition that is intelligible to all and in which we can encounter ourselves. Myth played this role in Greek thought, providing the common subject-matter for artistic representation. And it was the recognition of myth in pity and fear that deepened our familiarity both with the world and with ourselves. This recognition of who we are, which takes place through the terrifying stories presented in Greek theaters, was made possible and supported by the whole world of Greek religious tradition, its pantheon and the mythical tales that linked the Greek present with the mythical – heroic past. What is that to us? We cannot hide the fact that over 150 years ago, Christian art also lost its power to speak as myth. It was not the revolution of modern painting but the close of the Baroque, the last great European style, that really signaled and end – the end of the whole tradition of pictorial imagery within Western art, along with its humanistic heritage and its Christian message"[482].

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[479] Ciglia, *La rosa e il perché*, cit., p. 193.
[480] Cf. *ivi*, p. 194.
[481] See on that Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2007, p. 556.
[482] Gadamer, *Art and Imitation*, cit., p. 100 ("Die Wiedererkennung, wie sie Aristoteles meint, hat zur Voraussetzung, daß eine verbindende Tradition besteht, in der sich alle verstehen und in der sie sich selbst

The religious crisis, which Gadamer diagnosed as an evident historical process of the 20th-century, is, however, accompanied by the already mentioned awareness that a mythic-religious substrate persists, likely because it is somehow intrinsic to human cognition and part of our processes of comprehending reality. Just as myth has survived in logocentric cultures, religion, as a communitarian and theological representation of the original encounter with the sacred, has somehow endured in materialistic and techno-scientific Western society. Gadamer emphasizes the continuity of tradition within the recognition of this radical evolution: although in some instances reversed, modern secularization remains strictly connected to sacred Medieval civilization. Even within modernity, there are trajectories that resist scientific rationalization, demonstrating the persistence of religious traditions and mentalities[483].
But this survival occurs through transformative processes: as Filoramo explains, traditional definitions of religions are largely inapplicable to current phenomena in which religious, existential, and sacralization issues continue to emerge. Rather, we are witnessing a "diaspora of the sacred"[484].

To better understand this scenario, it is useful to briefly engage with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's theoretical elaboration, whose paradigm has become a classic in the study of secularization and contemporary religions. Taylor developed the influential concept of the "secular age" to describe the transformation from a society where life's meaning spontaneously emerged from common faith in a religion capable of founding collective identity, to an age where the faith remains possible but only as a specific individual path, no longer easily and automatically embraced due to the dominant materialistic culture – in short, one option among many others[485]. Taylor convincingly demonstrates that secularization is not merely the subtraction of religion from society, but rather a Copernican revolution in values where a

begegnen. Das ist für das griechische Denken der Mythos. Er ist der gemeinsame Inhalt der künstlerischen Darstellung, dessen Wiedererkennung unsere Vertrautheit mit der Welt und mit dem eigenen Dasein vertieft, sei es auch in Mitleid und Furcht. Dieses Erkennen ‚Das bist du!', das in den schauerlichen Vorgängen auf dem griechischen Theater sich vor unseren Augen abspielt, dies Sich-Erkennen im Wiedererkennen, war getragen durch die ganze Welt der religiösen Überlieferung der Griechen, durch ihren Götterhimmel und durch die Heldensage und durch die Herleitung ihres gegenwärtigen Tages aus ihrer mythisch-heroischen Vergangenheit. Was soll das uns? Auch die christliche Kunst hat, wie wir uns nicht verbergen können, ihre mythische Sagkraft seit 150 Jahren verloren. Nicht erst die Revolution der modernen Malerei, sondern bereits das Ende des letzten großen europäischen Stiles, des Barock, hat ein wirkliches Ende gebracht – das Ende der natürlichen Bildhaftigkeit der abendländischen Überlieferung, ihres humanistischen Erbes wie der christlichen Verkündigung" [Gadamer, *Kunst und Nachahmung* (1967), cit., pp. 32-33]).

[483] Cf. on that Pietro De Vitis, *Secolarizzazione e Tradizione in Gadamer*, in «Archivio di Filosofia», vol. 79, nr. 2, 2011, pp. 199-219: 199-200.

[484] See on that Giovanni Filoramo, *Le vie del sacro*, Einaudi, Torino 1994, pp. 22-23.

[485] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit.

godless, anthropocentric, and disenchanted (in Weber's previously discussed view) humanism has fundamentally transformed the human worldview, imposing new epistemic structures that affect our concrete knowledge and world comprehension. The human "porous self", open to the external unstable and heterogeneous world and its irrational and miraculous occurrences, has transformed into a "buffered self", an individual protected from osmosis with externality.

From this process emerges the "malaise of modernity": the widespread feeling that, despite the material success of our Western global society, there exists an existential emptiness due to the lack of something profound, i.e., the lack of a dimension of meaning that has been supplanted by the primacy of efficiency, capitalist productivity and utilitarian calculation[486].

Gadamer poses similar questions: "It is no longer waging war for the true god against the false ones or defending one's own religion against the attacks of unbelievers, whether those belonging to another faith or that of scientific atheism. Today the issue is much more the question whether humanity needs religion at all. (…) the uniqueness of today's situation seems to me that even the question about the meaning of religion becomes pointless when more and more people actually live without religion. The atheism of indifference does not even recognize the question anymore. Has the end of an illusion arrived? Or is it precisely the illusion: thinking that human beings can live without religion?"[487].

Although Taylor's description is broadly convincing, his descriptive paradigm primarily characterizes the shift towards modernity and nihilism, and the current survival of this paradigm in a "defensive" position, relative to new emerging processes that Taylor seems not to take so much in consideration. These processes include the rich and heterogenous discovery of religions and the spread of new religious movements, interests, and sensitivities, which is part of the post-secular framework[488].

Postmodernity has indeed revealed that an unfolded and limitless reason necessarily leads to reason's own deconstruction; consequently, the pluralistic and rhizomatic horizons progressively opening are hosting new possibilities for religious resurgence, albeit no longer in substantialist, metaphysical, and dogmatic modes from a philosophical perspective. Traditional

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[486] See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto 1998.

[487] Gadamer, *Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science*, cit., p. 119 ("Es ist nicht mehr der Kampf für Gott gegen die Götzen oder die Verteidigung der eigenen Religion gegen den Ansturm der Ungläubigen, die einem anderen Glauben folgen, und sei es dem des wissenschaftlichen Atheismus. Heute geht es vielmehr um die Frage, ob die Menschheit überhaupt der Religion bedarf. [...] das Einmalige der heutigen Situation scheint mir zu sein, daß sogar die Frage nach dem Sinn von Religion gegenstandslos wird, wenn mehr und mehr Menschen tatsächlich ohne Religion leben. Der Atheismus der Indifferenz kennt die religiöse Frage überhaupt nicht mehr. Ist das Ende einer Illusion gekommen? Oder ist gerade das die Illusion, zu meinen, daß es menschliches Leben ohne Religion geben kann?" [Gadamer, *Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft* (1984), cit., p. 156]). An interesting comparison between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Taylor philosophical communitarian framework has been developed in De Vitis, *Secolarizzazione e Tradizione in Gadamer*, cit., pp. 216-219.

[488] See chapter 2.

religions and churches in the Western world continue to face crisis – even more so, as correctly pointed out from a sociological perspective by Taylor – but the need for the sacred and attempts to overcome the distance between humanity and the divine still represent significant cultural and theoretical phenomena which lead in several different directions. Currently, these vectors are often contradictory and pluralistic (conservative defense of traditional religions, especially the Abrahamic monotheisms, New Age practices, the rediscovery of esotericism, the spread of religions in places and ways hitherto foreign to them, "new religious movements", philosophical approaches to religious problems, etc.).

Taylor himself recognizes that we are entering an age marked by significant religious searching whose outcomes remain unpredictable. We live in a transition period, where the value of the inner, private self, the prestige of intimacy, and individualism – the secularized cultural products of Protestantism, especially Pietism with its investigation of subjectivity and consciousness –, face new transformations, leading to the possibility of a new spiritual comprehension of the external world – nature, cosmic structures, transcendence, communitarian ritualized practices. The immanent frame in which we live can be open, allowing for the possibility of the transcendence, or closed. Taylor argues that both positions are "spin" and "involve a step beyond available reasons into the realm of anticipatory confidence"[489] or faith. He further argues that "Being 'spiritual but not religious' is one of the western phenomena (…); it usually designates a spiritual life which retains some distance from the disciplines and authority of religious confessions (…) a certain diffuse ecumenical sense is widespread, and even those who subsequently take on some confessional life, and thus become 'religious', retain something of this original freedom from sectarianism. What also remains important, in both East and West, is some continuing sense of the importance of following one's own spiritual itinerary, and the sense that, in a saying of Berdyaev which Epstein reproduces: 'Knowledge, morality, art, government and the economy should become religious, but freely and from inside, not by compulsion from outside.' In any case, we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee"[490].

Art as well, in our research perspective, plays a crucial role in intercepting, interpreting, and revealing these epochal processes. As Gadamer emphasizes: "Thought is evidently directed back to the fundamental question to which religions have always offered their answers. Thus the question arises as to whether we are ultimately using concepts that are at all appropriate

[489] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 551.
[490] *Ivi*, p. 535.

when we approach religions from the point of view of scientific knowledge and inquire about the extent to which their certainties derive from a 'genuine' faith that must forever remain scientifically unprovable"[491]. Art could be a significant field where these "new" concepts can be elaborated and tested.

This is, indeed, a dialectical process between deconstruction and reconstruction. Following Filoramo, we can recognize that "the movement of the deconstruction of religion, which modernity, with its critical reason, has operated and continues to operate, is accompanied by a movement of reconstruction in metaphorical forms (…). Modernity, in other words, has certainly deconstructed, starting with Christianity itself, traditional religions in function of a complex (…) and disenchanting (…) process that would characterize the Jewish-Christian tradition. But this process has not been a one-way street: in turn, de-Christianization has given rise to phenomena of reactions and, therefore, of re-Christianization, translated into attempts to respond appropriately to the deconstructing challenge, as the events of the Catholic Church in this part of the century demonstrate. Moreover, if it is true that secularization has taken a whole series of fields away from traditional religions, making them profane and autonomous, it is also true that these fields have returned to being, independently of traditional religions, producers of the sacred"[492]. Art is, in our research, precisely one of these domains, where the general dissociation between the sacred and religion defines new spaces for encountering a sacred which still needs configuration in forms and concepts (and thus, potentially, to subsequently become religious).

Furthermore, two specific religious phenomena have emerged and continue to grow: first, religious diversity, which is typical of pluralistic multicultural societies in the age of globalization, which appears to spread parallel to the Christianity's crisis in Western Europe; second, the emergence of new religious patterns, which are typical of the post-secular age and seem to transcend traditional religious schemes – such as new religious movements, New Age spirituality, and religious cosmological forms of syncretism[493]. Amid the spread of materialistic

[491] Gadamer, *Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science*, cit., pp. 125-126 ("So ist die Frage zu stellen, ob wir am Ende überhaupt unangemessene Begriffe gebrauchen, wenn wir im Blick auf die Religionen von dem Wissen der Wissenschaft ausgehen und die Religionen unter die Frage stellen, wieweit ihre Gewißheiten einem ‚echten' Glauben entspringen, der doch immer wissenschaftlich unausweisbar bleiben muß" [Gadamer, *Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft* (1984), cit., p. 161]).

[492] Filoramo, *Le vie del sacro*, cit., p. 25.

[493] Gadamer takes into consideration under this class also those communitarian and ideological groups, and even subcultural sects, which share traditional religious ritual practices' exigence for mystical pantheism and the value of altruistic *caritas*. Cf. Gadamer, *Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science*, cit., p. 119 (Gadamer, *Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft* (1984), cit., p. 156). On the phenomenology of the emerging spiritual sensitivity and the new religious movements see Filoramo, *Le vie del sacro*, cit., pp. 42-102 and Massimo Introvigne, *Le nuove religioni*, SugarCo Edizioni, Milano 1991.

atheist positions, often grounded in a scientific worldview, we can identify a renewed interest in religious perspectives – an interest which in the Western world still seems to seek new forms and directions, while in several other geographic areas (and in European communities originating from these areas) appears to strengthen, often through radical identitarian claims[494]. In any case, the public role of the religious and spiritual sphere is emerging in opposition to the previous process of "privatization"[495].

Both tendencies – the reemergence of traditional religions as well as the search for new spiritual configurations – face the significant challenge of acquiring an artistic identity capable of expressing themselves in new forms, speaking to contemporary humanity with its transformed anthropology and cognition, and fostering a genuine aesthetic encounter with the sacred.

The intersection between Gadamer's hermeneutics with the art of Kiefer and Nitsch will lead us to especially focus on the second process: the search for new mythologies and new artistic interpretations of religion and human spiritual attitude in the Western post-secular age.

Indeed, we agree with Ebert's depiction of the cultural – and spiritual – responsibilities embedded in the role of great masters of contemporary art living in this extremely complex age: "We *are* living in an age when all the previous structuring Forms of civilization – Derrida's transcendental signifieds, Castoriadis' imaginary significations, Heidegger's various turnings of Being – are in complete disintegration and disarray. And in such an age of breakdown, the contemporary artist *is* necessary as a sort of fisherman of Forms: he is busy extracting them from this middenheap temporary singularities that may serve, at some point or other, to construct a new cosmology for a new epoch. The artists of contemporary art are experimenters with new forms: most will fall by the wayside, but then, as with the mystery cults of the ancient Mediterranean that eventually produced the single world-sphere of the City of God, it is possible that one or two of them might stumble upon a new set of Forms that will become constitutive of the next (…) phase of Western civilization. And it is *only* the artist, as ontological fisherman, who can do this for us"[496].

[494] We refer not only to Islam, but also to Evangelical, Jewish and even Hinduist identities.

[495] See, despite his rejection of the idea of a "return of the sacred" due to its defense of the interpretative value of the secularization model, José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2012.

[496] John David Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, Amazon, 2013, p. 219.

2.4.2 Hermeneutical Ecumenism: Religions and Christianity in Gadamer's Post-Metaphysical Philosophy

While Gadamer's focus centered primarily on Christianity – unlike his mentor Heidegger, who also explored Eastern traditions – he explicitly maintained that a rigorous hermeneutical approach must extend beyond the dialogical elaboration of a single religious identity to engage with the languages of all religions[497]. To misunderstand this would be to incorrectly interpret hermeneutic dialogue as a conversation exclusively with the voices belonging to European tradition. The "relational logic"[498] characterizing Gadamer's philosophy naturally encompasses configurations of meaning from diverse cultures. When properly practiced, hermeneutics is inherently intercultural: what could be more fundamentally hermeneutical than confronting a heterogenous religious domain, given that its function is to translate unfamiliar meaning (the meaning of 'other') into familiar meaning ('our' meaning)? Indeed, as Fred Lawrence concludes in his comprehensive analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, "Hermeneutic philosophy shows that, even independently of divine revelation and grace, the human quest for meaning is shaped as 'faith seeking understanding.' In making manifest the ever mysterious nature of human self-understanding in time, Gadamer opens up philosophy to theology, and challenges theology to be philosophical"[499]. This alliance of philosophy and theology in direction of the elaboration of paradigms addressing "the need for some find of global solidarity to counteract the fragmentation of humanity" is broadly recognized by Zimmermann as the core of Gadamer's religious interest[500].

In his essay *The Philosophy and the Religion of Judaism*, Gadamer identifies three main traditions underlying Western culture: Greek, Jewish, and Christian. These traditions collectively contribute to European identity, forming what he terms "the noble unity of the intellectual tradition of Western philosophy". In this essay, he reconstructed this unity with particular attention to the various intercultural and interreligious exchanges. As Gadamer explains: "The primordial Greek word for the essence of things is logos and the world which is

[497] The historian of religions Mircea Eliade emphasized that the fundamental aim of religious hermeneutics is to achieve a universal understanding of human spirit and its evolution. In this perspective, hermeneutics constitutes "the search for sense, meaning, or meanings, which a given idea or a given phenomenon has held over the time" – ultimately, the "discovery of the deepest sense of these expressions" within religious traditions (Mircea Eliade, *La prova del labirinto. Intervista con Claude-Henri Rocquet*, Jaca Book, Milano 1980, p. 119).
[498] See Francesco Camera, "La logica relazionale dell'alterità", in Id., *Sotto il segno di Hermes. Pensare in prospettiva ermeneutica*, il melangolo, Genova 2011, pp. 141-165.
[499] Fred Lawrence, *Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology*, in Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 242-281: 273.
[500] Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, cit., p. 312.

seen in the light of this logos is called the cosmos. The grand cosmic order, which rules the processes of nature, encompasses also the apparent chaos of human fates and permits, in their ups and downs, the return and stability of the same total order. Another primordial word was spoken originally by the Jewish religion and has come to resound no less deeply in the soul of Western humanity: the word of the personal God, who addresses his own with vengeance and punishment but also with promise. Although the claim to be the chosen people and to stand under the special protection of the Omnipotent is irritatingly and tragically divisive, the Jewish doctrine of being chosen revealed a completely new area beyond the Greek perception of the world, the area of history as a path toward salvation. Logos and the Word of God, the philosopher and the prophet as the interpreters and mediators of these primordial words, cosmos and the history of salvation as the content of their teaching – these are the two great separate roots from which the world tree of our age would grow"[501].

In celebrating these traditions' foundational character, Gadamer acknowledges the relational logic that guided their mutual influencing throughout Western history, leading ultimately to the emergence of modern atheistic tendencies – the latest product of the "tribunal of the radical belief in reason"[502], which, after centuries of dialogue with faith, appears to have abandoned any possible mediation with it: "Between the synagogue and the religion of liberal education, between the Christian church and the liberal optimism for progress, no permanent balance could succeed"[503]. Nevertheless, references to Jewish and Christian religions persist in 20th-century philosophical discourse, not merely as philological subjects, but as fertile cultural resources for reconceptualizing the relationship between humanity and the Origin. Gadamer particularly

[501] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Philosophy and the Religion of Judaism* (1961), in Id., *On Education, Poetry, and History*, ed. by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, State University of New York Press, New York 1992, pp. 155-164: 156 ("Das griechische Ur-Wort für das Wesen der Dinge ist der 'Logos', und die Welt, die im Lichte dieses Logos gesehen ist, heißt Kosmos. Die großartige kosmische Ordnung, die den Naturlauf regelt, umgreift auch noch die scheinbare Wirrnis der menschlichen Geschicke und läßt in ihrem Auf und Ab das gleiche Ordnungsganze wiederkehren und bestehen. Ein anderes Ur-Wort aber ist es, das die jüdische Religion zuerst gesprochen hat und das nicht minder tief im Gemüte der abendländischen Menschheit zum Widerklingen gekommen ist: das 'Wort' des persönlichen Gottes, der zu den Seinen spricht, rächend und strafend, aber auch verheißend. So ärgerlich und tragisch trennend der Anspruch des auserwählten Volkes ist, unter der besonderen Obhut des Allmächtigen zu stehen, so hat doch diese Erwähltheitselhre des Judentums zu dem griechischen Weltdenken einen ganz neuen Bereich hinzu erschlossen, den Bereich der Geschichte als eines Weges zum Heile. Logos und Wort Gottes, der Philosoph und der Prophet als die Deuter und Vermittler dieser Ur-Worte, Kosmos und Heilsgeschichte als der Inhalt ihrer Lehre, das sind die beiden großen getrennten Wurzeln, aus denen sich der Weltenbaum unseres Säkulums erhoben sollte. Von den christlichen Vätern an hat sich die Geschichte der griechisch-abendländischen Philosophie aus dieser anderen Wurzel unseres Seins mitgenähhrt, die bis in den Grund der jüdischen Urzeit recht" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Philosophie und die Religion des Judentums* (1961), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1987, pp. 68-77: 69]).

[502] *Ivi*, p. 159 ("Forum des radikalen Vernunftsglaubens" [*ivi*, p. 72]).

[503] *Ivi*, p. 161 ("Zwischen Synagoge und Bildungsreligion, zwischen christlicher Kirche und liberalem Fortschrittsoptimismus konnte kein dauerhafter Ausgleich gelingen" [*ivi*, p. 75]).

recognizes Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) and Martin Buber (1878-1965) as pivotal figures in reimagining Jewish thought.

This religious *traditum* (*Überlieferung*), simultaneously transmitted and betrayed – even within the same cultural tradition –, manifests itself in multiple symbols, forms, and vectors that periodically achieve coherent order. From this perspective Greek, Jewish, and Christian traditions can find a partial reconciliation precisely through their differences: the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes* appears to Gadamer as a modern ideological construction incapable of grasping tradition's communal dimension. Instead, the theorized metamorphic dynamicity enables considerations of religious traditions beyond the risks of assimilation or exclusion[504], fostering fertile dialogue that is at once internal and external to cultures.

This openness toward different religions becomes theoretically challenging when examined through a purely theological lens, where determining the truthful characteristics of one religion becomes the primary objective. Western mainstream theology, predominantly based on a long theoretical, argumentative, and logical tradition founded on Aristotelian and Thomistic conceptual structures – and therefore on a logocentric[505], naturalistic, and rationalist approach – provides a theoretical dialectic aimed at pursuing religious truth in a coherent and integral form: a religious affirmative proposition about reality, history, or values must be either universally true or false. In contrast, according to hermeneutics' relational logic, "otherness cannot be regarded as a gap to be bridged or overcome once and for all by the act of understanding; rather it is an 'excess' that persists and continues to make its presence felt: it stimulates (disquiets or threatens) belonging to one's own tradition or culture and becomes part of every process of identity formation"[506]. This position represents a manifestation, within the field of philosophy of religion, of the hermeneutical perspectivism which we have previously applied to myth. "According to Gadamer, the pressing philosophical task is to prepare a dialogue between the world religions by discovering in each one a moment of 'the great chain we call transcendence' (LJ, 80): 'We can only come to our senses by means of the notion of transcendence, and we should be willing to say, 'certainly we have to realize that this is the task

[504] See Camera, "La logica relazionale dell'alterità", cit., p. 161.

[505] A significant philosophical exchange occurred when Jacques Derrida initially criticized Gadamer for "logocentrism". However, Gadamer's persuasive defense led Derrida to revise his position, recognizing that the hermeneutical perspective does not reduce everything to rational structures, but rather emphasizes the fundamental importance of listening to language itself. This shift in understanding highlights the distinction between rationalistic reduction and hermeneutical openness to linguistic experience (see Gadamer, *L'ultimo dio*, cit., pp. 61-63).

[506] Camera, "La logica relazionale dell'alterità", cit., pp. 162-163.

of philosophy.' I am of the opinion that this task of philosophy is the preparation of a global dialogue (*eines Weltgesprächs*), and we have to seize the opportunity or we will perish'"[507].

Furthermore, while scholastic natural theology was founded on the premise that one could rationally demonstrate God's existence as supreme Being and therefrom logically deduce fundamental determinations of the divine revelation, the God rediscovered in post-metaphysical Christian postmodernity is the living God of the Book, the One who gives Himself to us, and who "is not" in the sense that he is not an objective and rationally determined being, but rather the abysmal openness itself, without determinations.

Sacred texts do not merely provide objective descriptions of historical facts; they engage believers in a call to salvation that makes the scripture perpetually contemporary to the reader – just as art, as we have seen, at least from an hermeneutical perspective, remains always contemporary to its audience.

This post-metaphysical and non-substantialist approach to the divine aims to recognize the sacred (in Rudolf Otto's previously discussed sense) as the fundamental original experience of transcendence which configures the common basis of religious experience. This approach, as we have already seen, can also be traced back to the Greek heritage, where the divine is conceived as a givenness permeating everything, revealing its power both within and beyond the boundaries of daily human experience. Art emerges as a privileged space for realizing this encounter. As Walter Lammi explains, "the work of art invokes the divine, which it strangely shelters within itself to be brought to life by each observer's participation and understanding. This means experience, and experience seeks to come to language. This play of the conceptual and non-conceptual is a circle, a kind of hermeneutical circle"[508].

This hermeneutical openness to the evenemential core of religion strongly characterizes Gadamer's approach, but it can even be recognized in Heidegger's religious understanding of language. Heidegger's influence cannot be understated in this specific field: Gadamer's initial interest in theological and religious questions indeed grew up under Heidegger's legacy and was influenced by the intellectual relation between Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. In Gadamer's perspective, religious problems should be explored through an "alliance" between philosophical hermeneutical discourse and the substantial content deposited in theological tradition. This tradition needs revitalization, but Gadamer approaches it with fewer prejudices

[507] Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, cit., pp. 313-314.
[508] Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, cit., p. 115.

than Heidegger, despite awareness of its potentially "imperialistic" function[509]. Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to transcendence and anthropology, considering the religious role of hermeneutical conservation, can thus promote what Jean Paul Bourgeois terms a "vertical-ontological dimension of dialogue", where "a radiance metaphysics" connecting "beauty, truth and disclosure" engages with an "anthropology that emphasizes the necessity of being receptive to his disclosure of truth"[510]. The ontological and existential role of beauty in this context has been extensively discussed in our previous chapter.

Beyond the already examined thematization of the sacred, Gadamer's understanding of language itself can be considered from a religious perspective, following Heidegger's paradigm. As Giovanni Moretto (1939-2006)[511] recognizes, according to Heidegger, Being manifests itself in the unveiling gift of the Word, in a sort of kerygmatic revelation, and every person is called to acknowledge dependence on this manifestation of meaning – not a precise meaning, but the awareness of being claimed by Being itself and prompted to respond to a radical existential meaningful question. Indeed, language is authentic only when it expresses, as previously discussed, the evenemential character of the *Lichtung*, the spontaneous self-giving of Being itself in linguistic forms. According to Camera, Heidegger was particularly influenced on this topic by the Johannine tradition: "Just as there is a *Logos* that becomes flesh, in the same way there is a *Sage*[512] that manifests itself and becomes an event. The testimony of revelation is expressed in human words that do not describe a state of affairs but take on a symbolic form and follow a hermeneutic path"[513].

Gadamer himself, in *Truth and Method*, refers to the significance of the Christian conception of incarnation as an idea that can do "justice to the being of language": "This cornerstone of Christian thought is all the more important for us because for Christian thought the incarnation is closely connected to the problem of the word. First in the Fathers and then in the systematic

[509] See, for example, the following declaration released in an interview to Riccardo Dottori: "No, I do not hold it against theology, which, as I told you, was the protagonist of the great cultural debate that we had in Europe at the time of the Reformation, and which contributed in this way to heightening sensitivity to problems which were not only religious, but also philosophical and ethical, as well as to the birth of hermeneutics itself. I just want to warn against the use of theology when it becomes the definitive doctrine of a Church. Then it embodies the instrument of its imperialism, and the fault lies not with theology per se, but with those who subordinate the religious sense as such to theology, i.e. to a doctrine" (Gadamer, *L'ultimo dio*, cit., p. 145).

[510] See Jean Paul Bourgeois, *The Aesthetic Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Peter Lang, New York 2007, p. ix.

[511] See Giovanni Moretto, *L'esperienza religiosa del linguaggio in Martin Heidegger*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1973.

[512] The original "saying" according to Heidegger's lexicon. See on that Carlo Sini, "Heidegger. Linguaggio simbolico ed ermeneutica", in Rosa Brambilla (ed.), *Heidegger. L'esistenza tra tempo ed eternità*, Biblioteca Pro Civitate Christiana, Assisi 1987.

[513] Francesco Camera, "L'ermeneutica in una prospettiva ecumenica", in Id., *Sotto il segno di Hermes*, cit., pp. 200-216: 212.

elaboration of Augustinianism during the Scholastic period, the interpretation of the *mystery of the Trinity*, the most important task confronting the thinking of the Middle Ages, had to do with the relationship between human speech and thought. Here dogmatic theology relied chiefly on the prologue to the Gospel of John and, although theology was applying Greek ideas to its own theological tasks, philosophy acquired by this very means a dimension foreign to Greek thought. If the Word became flesh and if it is only in the incarnation that spirit is fully realized, then the logos is freed from its spirituality, which means, at the same time, from its cosmic potentiality. The uniqueness of the redemptive event introduces the essence of history into Western thought, brings the phenomenon of language out of its immersion in the ideality of meaning, and offers it to philosophical reflection. For, in contrast to the Greek logos, the word is pure event"[514].

The divine incarnation and the power of language are united in their evenemential yet historical (not suprasensible) dimension. This reveals itself, according to a Scholastic view which Gadamer appears to embrace, in the multiplicity of word forms. This connects to theological notions, particularly to the Augustinian (especially in *De doctrina christiana*) and later Thomist concept of *verbum interius* ("inner word")[515]. It represents an attempt to introduce another philosophical stimulus into the hermeneutical construction that Gadamer intends to oppose to the modern oblivion of language. Mirela Oliva has carefully explored the possibility of connecting Gadamer's hermeneutics to Thomism – toward which Gadamer maintained a less

[514] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 418 ("An dieses Hauptstück des christlichen Denkens dürfen wir uns um so mehr halten, als die Inkarnation auch für das christliche Denken mit dem Problem des Wortes aufs engste zusammenhängt. Die Ausdeutung des *Geheimnisses der Trinität*, wohl die wichtigste Aufgabe, die dem Denken des christlichen Mittelalters gestellt war, lehnt sich schon bei den Vätern und schließlich in systematischer Durchbildung des Augustinismus in der Hochscholastik an das menschliche Verhältnis von Sprechen und Denken an. Die Dogmatik folgt damit vor allem dem Prolog des Johannes-Evangeliums, und so sehr es griechische Denkmittel sind, mit denen sie ihre eigene theologische Aufgabe zu lösen sucht, so gewinnt doch das philosophische Denken durch sie eine dem griechischen Denken verschlossene Dimension. Wenn das Wort Fleisch wird und erst in dieser Inkarnation die Wirklichkeit des Geistes sich vollendet, so wird damit der Logos aus seiner Spiritualität, die zugleich seine kosmische Potentialität bedeutet, befreit. Die Einmaligkeit des Erlösungsgeschehens führt den Einzug des geschichtlichen Wesens in das abendländische Denken herauf und läßt auch das Phänomen der Sprache aus seiner Versenkung in die Idealität des Sinnes heraustreten und sich dem philosophischen Nachdenken darbieten. Denn im Unterschied zum griechischen Logos gilt: das Wort ist reines Geschehen" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., pp. 422-423]).

[515] The concept of an inner, "archetypal" language is theologically distinguished from the *verbum prolatum* ("outer verbum") – the concrete, spoken national language. This polarity mirrors, at the linguistic level, the theological doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation: external human language originates in an internal language (reflected in thought) just as Jesus expressed the eternal Father in history (and through a body). Thus, if the Word's incarnation expresses divine truth, the human word expresses thought, which finds its sublimation in its own expression. As Oliva explains, Gadamer's approach is twofold: he "starts with Incarnation, he continues with inner-trinitarian process showing that the miracle of language consists not in the fact that it incarnates but in the fact that what is incarnated was always by God and within God. Second, Gadamer derives the event-character of language not only from Incarnation, but also from the emergence of the inner word within Trinity. For this reason, Aquina's articulation of *verbum mentis* as act is decisive" (Mirela Oliva, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and Thomism*, cit., p. 101). See also Bernd Springer, "Die Bedeutung von Augustinus verbum interius für die Hermeneutik Gadamers", in Id., *Die antiken Grundlagen der neuzeitlichen Hermeneutik*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 338-343.

critical approach than his master Heidegger. In her interesting essay, she particularly examines the concepts of act, intuition, and analogy as potential bridges between these two conceptions. While acknowledging these connections, we align more with Oliva's own recognition that "many aspects of Gadamer's philosophy seem to contradict Aquinas' ideas and his legacy. The mediation of language and interpretation could be seen as opposed to Thomistic realism; Gadamer's rejection of a recourse to an infinite intellect as opposed to the firm foundation of our knowledge and our values in God; the epistemological modesty displayed by Gadamer as opposed to a Thomistic confidence in the fulfilment of our knowledge; finally, Gadamer's inclination to connections and fusions of horizons rather than analytical precision as opposed to Aquinas' technical keenness"[516].

However, fostering a contemporary philosophical dialogue between these two approaches and traditions, the strategic and fertile adoption of some Thomistic concepts, especially in the context of philosophy of language, could allow for overcoming the significant differences inherent in Gadamer's overall approach to hermeneutics and philosophy of religion. This is especially true when considering pioneering interpretations of Thomas Aquinas or neo-Thomistic approaches – such as those proposed by Gustav Siewerth (1903-1963), Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), and Johannes Baptist Lotz (1903-1992)[517], where the theoretical perspective seems to admit an evenemential and non-substantialist approach[518]. Zimmermann further notes that "only in the Christian logos does Gadamer find the thought that the inner word is a genuine embodiment (incarnation) of the intended thing itself. (...) Just as God is fully expressed in the incarnation, and yet remains ultimately incomprehensible, the word which corresponds to what we want to say is not a subjectivist intuition but a true expression of our intended meaning. The word does not express our mind but aims at the intended thing itself. (WM, 430) Gadamer does not merely use the theological model as a heuristic device but believes, and indicates in *Truth and Method*, that the correspondence of inner word and intended meaning is itself an indication of the divine or religious transcendent"[519].

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[516] *Ivi*, p. 97.

[517] See John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas. An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*, Fordham University Press, New York 1982, especially pp. 211-245.

[518] Hermeneutical theological approaches, such as that recently developed by Claude Geffré (1926-2017), exemplify the fertile application of Gadamer's philosophical legacy to contemporary theology. Geffré's work is fundamentally grounded in achieving a "fusion of horizons" between original Christian revelation and contemporary (post)historical experience through the *sensus fidei* (the sense of faith). This approach represents a sophisticated theological elaboration of Gadamerian hermeneutics, demonstrating how philosophical hermeneutics can enrich theological understanding while respecting both traditional doctrine and contemporary experience. See Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit., pp. 209-223 and pp. 259-264.

[519] Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, cit., p. 318.

Extending beyond this specifically theological interpretation, the hermeneutics of the word may also contribute to a broader philosophical recognition of the plurality of ways in which human beings search for meaning, transcending specific religious traditions. These meanings are given in an infinite – and infinitely interpretable – revelation through different forms (different words, narratives, myths, and even different religions). This represents another formulation of the previously discussed hermeneutical perspectivism in relation to religion(s).
Thus, Heidegger's legacy as well as Gadamer's understanding reveal a dual movement of thought: first, a sacralization (as a non-dogmatic openness to transcendence) of language, which forms the core structure and dynamic fuel of hermeneutical practices; second, the recognition of a pre-confessional religious experience, which can be considered as the "common space" for subsequent doctrinal formalization.

These two aspects profoundly influenced Gadamer's approach to religious questions. Moreover, Gadamer's view on the connection between hermeneutics and religion can be understood by considering the genesis and development of European hermeneutics, which flourished in the modern age precisely through interpreting sacred scriptures and discussing them in the controversies between different Christian confessions[520]. Indeed, there are structural religious roots in the genealogy of hermeneutical practices.
Through this path, Gadamer recognizes the need to "comprehend religious experience in a non-dogmatic way"[521], while simultaneously evaluating religions' creative function in an existential understanding of humankind. The religious question remains perpetually relevant for understanding fundamental events of any age – even of an age where religion appears undermined.

Gadamer's interest in religion as a fundamental source for philosophical reflections stands in open controversy with Kant's philosophy of religion. Specifically, Gadamer emphasizes that after Kant's epistemological criticism and critique of traditional metaphysics, followed by Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God", Western philosophy largely abandoned

[520] The historical configuration of philosophical hermeneutics finds a crucial turning point in the Protestant Reformation, particularly in the reformers' defense of their scriptural interpretation against Tridentine Catholic theologians. Luther and Schleiermacher, as pioneers of "theological hermeneutics", emerge as essential precursors to philosophical hermeneutics itself. However, the genealogy of hermeneutics can be traced even further back to the ancient art of exegesis and its foundational interpretative principles. The historical progression demonstrates how hermeneutics evolved from biblical interpretation to a broader philosophical methodology. See Francesco Camera, "Logos e allegoria", in Id., *Sotto il segno di Hermes*, cit., pp. 33-51.
[521] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La religione e le religioni*, in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Annuario Filosofico Europeo. La Religione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, pp. 197-207: 202.

understanding the divine as a philosophically objective tenet. In doing so, it also abandoned this notion's role in addressing the questions of death, destiny, and sin. Through this loss, philosophy also relinquished a serious attempt to answer existential questions – which should be primary philosophical concerns – and thus has remained imprisoned in subjectivism.

In this context, we can better understand Gadamer's desire to rethink and actualize the Greek realist roots on this topic: "In our situation, the meaning of ancient, thoroughly self-evident 'realism' is that the experience of supraindividual ontological realities is not to be won from the empirical pride that nominalistically levels everything out. Rather, the Greeks discerned in the being of the universal, the common and binding, the higher reality of being. As Euripides simply put it: 'To embrace one's friends – that is god' […]. Such 'humanistic' experience of the divine is perhaps most compellingly expressed in Hölderlin's poetry. That it does not do justice to the Christian conception of God cannot be ignored. Yet, when modern philosophy begins to entrust itself to the ancient path of thought, perhaps thinkers will learn once again to discern the ancient content of the concept of God"[522].

As Salman synthetizes, "the solution to the Kantian break consists in returning to the more realist ancient way, which sees the highest reality of being that is God, i.e. God as the foundation of human existence"[523].

Camera explains that "the hermeneutic task of understanding the other (the stranger, the different) opens to transcendent otherness, which constitutes the presupposition of the great universal religions and in fact represents an alternative to the objectivist immanentism of the prevailing scientific worldviews and the planetary economic standardization. However, the otherness that delimits the boundaries of finiteness cannot be fully understood with the conceptual tools of philosophy. This is a singular position, which marks the end of all philosophical theology but leaves room for myth and faith as privileged ways of experiencing otherness 'beyond' knowledge"[524]. In approaching reality's mysterious foundation, also influenced by Heidegger's reflections, Gadamer appears sympathetic to negative theology,

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[522] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kant and the Question of God*, in Id., *Hermeneutics, Religion, Ethics*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999, pp. 1-17: 16-17 ("Es ist in unserer Lage die Bedeutung des antiken, ganz und gar selbstverständlichen 'Realismus', daß er die Erfahrung überindividueller Seinswirklichkeiten nicht erst einem nominalistisch eingeebneten Erfahrungsstolz abgewinnen muß, sondern daß der Grieche im Sein des Allgemeinen, Gemeinsamen und Verbindenden die höhere Wirklichkeit des Seins sah; so wie Euripides es einfach sagen konnte: 'Die Freunde umarmen – das ist Gott' […]. Solche 'humanistische' Erfahrung des Göttlichen ist vielleicht am überzeugendsten in der Dichtung Hölderlins zur Aussage gekommen. Daß sie dem Anspruch des christlichen Gottesbegriffs nicht Genüge tut, ist nicht zu verkennen. Aber wenn sich das moderne Philosophieren erst auf die alten Wegen des Denkens zu getrauen beginnt, wird der Denkende es vielleicht wieder lernen, im Gottesbegriff die alten Inhalte zu gewahren" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kant und die Gottesfrage* (1941), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, cit., pp. 349-360: 360]).

[523] Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit., p. 112.

[524] See Francesco Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", in Id., *Sotto il segno di Hermes*, cit., pp. 166-182: 173.

which he presents as essential for maintaining the double positioning that approaches the divine while maintaining "silence" towards it, acknowledging the impossibility of fully grasping it[525].

Just as art was understood as an authentic *Erfahrung* (the meaningful hermeneutical experience, based on the inseparability of form and content, distinct from mere *Erlebnis* – the direct, subjectivist, empirical sensitive experience), religion is primarily a form of *Erfahrung*. Its interreligious core is based, according to Gadamer, on the ritualization of death and the elaboration of specific wisdom founded on acknowledging human limits – which is, notably, also a fundamental aspect of hermeneutics itself, understood as a methodological approach to human finitude. Through religious experience, awareness of concrete human life boundaries enters into dialogue with what transcends it. Gadamer indeed states that religions are intimately connected to "our need for transcendence"[526], which is also, from a temporal point of view, a vital connection between the "horizons of remembering, memory, coming from and having become" and an "horizon of a future in which expectation and hope seek to overcome all fearfulness"[527]. This need – essentially religious because it represents a cultural and cognitive movement of transcending the self-given human condition toward listening to God(s) and developing a relation with him/them – forms the fundamental basis, according to Gadamer, for an ecumenical interreligious dialogue[528]. As Zimmermann argues: "With respect to world religions, this entails that we must abandon dogmatic pretensions and particular religious doctrines in order that we may admit the extent to which all human beings ultimately seek the same thing and that we may respect the limits of our own knowledge"[529]. Interreligious dialogue can represent the only effective hermeneutical attempt to move beyond contemporary materialism[530] in a *multi*cultural context – which still awaits understanding through an *inter*cultural approach[531].

This dialogue can be justified by the fact that all religions share a common space, grounded in the encounter with transcendence and the sacred: "There is no such thing as *the* religion per se,

[525] Cf. Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, cit., pp. 5-6. In the same trajectory moves the deepening of the Greek notions of *apeiron* (the unlimited) and *arrheton* (the unsayable) (*ivi*, p. 87).
[526] Hans-Georg Gadamer *L'ultimo dio*, cit., p. 131.
[527] Gadamer, *La religione e le religioni*, cit., p. 205.
[528] See Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, cit., p. 313-314. On the implication of Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics toward a comprehension of the religious as ontological and not ontic domain (in Heideggerian sense), see *ivi*, p. 322.
[529] *Ivi*, p. 314.
[530] See Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", cit., p. 171.
[531] On the qualitative difference between multicultural (the state of the coexistence of different cultures) and intercultural (the movement through which specific cultures interact with each other under a self-challenging issue) see Giacomo Arrigo, *Etica interculturale o etica interreligiosa*, in Mariafilomena Anzalone and Oreste Tolone, *Etiche applicate e nuovi soggetti morali*, Orthotes, Napoli 2024, pp. 323-328. On the role of art as instrument of interreligious dialogue see Di Chiara, *Per un'estetica del sacro*, cit., pp. 23-24.

as every religious experience gives itself in a plurality of different forms, is already always the result of interpretations or mediations and is conditioned by the respective tradition and its forms of expression"[532]. This point of view is not based on a transhistorical metaphysical gaze, but rather on the concrete and living relationship between humanity, in its mediating role and function, and the evenemential openness of the *Ereignis* of the sacred – which, as we have already discussed, is also an event of beauty. The multiplicity of these epiphanic moments coincides with the multiplicity of historical religious comprehensions. It is significant that, even in this field, Gadamer's interest in philosophy of religion can be thematized coherently along his aesthetic perspectives. As Jean Paul Bourgeois proposes in his study on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988)[533], this can be interpreted through the previously discussed notion of "radiance"[534]: just as Truth, which is the Beautiful, radiates out of itself, the divine passes through several sources, being at the same time itself and other.

However, even within this intercultural and interreligious dialogical horizon, Gadamer's focus is, due to his education and personal interest, primarily addressed to the Christian religion when considering religious topics. His understanding of Christianity shares the previously introduced general approach to religion, but it also stems from his desire to isolate and recognize the core of Christian religious experience beyond different Churches and confessions. This core should be neither a specific – and therefore secondary, according to Gadamer – dogmatic affirmation of faith, nor the universal common space of religious experience of the sacred, which, as we have seen, exists on a broader and more universal level as the fundamental interreligious basis. Rather, Gadamer recognizes Christianity's core in the main theme of the evangelic message: the overcoming of death through the suffering and the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ[535]. This "good news" (or "gospel": "good spiel"), the literal translation of *evangelion*, shares with myth the narrative structure of a performative announcement, requiring from the listener a concrete life choice, with a real existential impact to acquire a concrete and historical determination.

Gadamer variously thematizes the relationship between myth and revealed religion, attributing a peculiar character to Christian religion – a *novum* that cannot be wholly subsumed under the mythical-symbolic dimension – while simultaneously finding common ground between the two spheres on the basis of their shared linguistic-narrative structure. What distinguishes Christian

[532] Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", cit., p. 179.
[533] See Bourgeois, *The Aesthetics Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar*, cit.
[534] See chapter 3.2.
[535] See Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", cit., p. 172.

religion from myth, according to Gadamer, is God's revelation of the good news, which we can define, through Bultmann's lexicon, as *kerygma*, based on the revolutionary messianic promise of salvation[536].

Gadamer considers Christian religion as a distinctive manifestation, in the religious sphere, of hermeneutic wisdom. Indeed, the Gospel proposes to "report" and "transmit" the divine word, inviting the faithful to enter the hermeneutic circle – in this case, the "circle" of the evangelic message. It is not coincidence that Christianity is one of the "religions of the Book": the religious relation with the authoritative written words and the need to interpret them is recognized as a fundamental practice shared with secular philosophical hermeneutics[537]. Religious and poetic discourse both inhabit Christian spirituality – in both, the fundamental dimension of the symbol is pivotal, expressing original knowledge through being "known" and "recognized".

However, Gadamerian reflection extends beyond identifying affinities between these two systems of thought – the mythic-poetic and the religious –, attempting to grasp their *proprium*, and with it their differences. Gadamer recognizes that this distinction between "aesthetic experience" – which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is closely connected to mythic experience – and "religious experience", depends on historical factors, not ontologically qualitative differences. This distinction emerged specifically within Christian religious and Western culture contexts, whereas it remains absent in the Greek world as well as in Indian or Chinese traditions, where religious spheres often intertwine or even overlap with mythic-poetic ones[538].

Here, the core of the messianic promise appears to Gadamer as different from the identitarian dimension of myth and art – "identitarian" because it is based on recognizing something's

[536] For a detailed discussion of Bultmann's concept of *kerygma*, see chapter 2.3.2 Christ's revelation, in this framework, can be understood not as a harmonizing force reconciling fragmented aspects of reality (as in mythic-symbolic worldviews), but rather as a disruptive and messianic announcement whose core lies in the paradoxical recognition of abandonment and loss as religiously significant. This interpretation emphasizes the radical nature of Christian revelation as breaking with, rather than fulfilling, conventional religious expectations (see on that Vincenzo Vitiello, *Deserto. Ethos. Abbandono. Contributo ad una topologia del religioso*, in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Annuario Filosofico Europeo. La Religione*, cit., pp. 135-168, in particular pp. 154-157 and 162-165).

[537] Also on this basis, new attempts at reshaping contemporary Christian theology have been defined in terms of "hermeneutics of religion". This tendency has been thematized and discussed by Ulrich H.J. Körtner in his *Hermeneutik der Religion? Die hermeneutische Frage in der gegenwärtigen Theologie*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 5 (2006), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2006, pp. 15-38. Here the complex relation between a *Kulturtheorie der Religion* and a religious *Theologie* is treated as a methodological and theoretical urgent question.

[538] Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, cit., p. 140 (Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), cit., p. 143).

natural essence, which, instead, the Christian promise completely transcends. The *kenotic*[539] power of *kerygma* lies in its capacity for disorientation, in its revelation of humanity's radical experience of misery, but also in witnessing the truth characterizing the transcendent world, which "is not of this world"[540]. This deconstructive force paradoxically gave rise, through various passages and certain leaps, to modern Enlightenment and rationalism – the very current of thought that later became the main source of the rejection of the Christian religion itself[541]. Gadamer thus states: "The recognition that the work of art procures for us is always an expansion of that infinite process of making ourselves at home in the world which is the human lot. The situation is quite different in relation to the proclamation of the good news and the messianic promise. What is the meaning of 'this is you' in the context of the incarnation and Easter message? It is certainly not a further step in the process of making ourselves at home in the world (…): 'this is you' – a man helplessly exposed to suffering and death"[542]. Christ's announcement of death's overcoming is based on a symbolic language that is common to mythic narratives and reinforces the community of observants, but there is something more: the promise of something revolutionary, which tends to destroy every act of recognition,

[539] *Kenosis* refers to the theological concept of Christ's self-emptying – the voluntary renunciation of divine glory and certain divine attributes by the Son of God in becoming incarnate and accepting death. This principle of divine self-emptying has inspired contemporary theological reflections toward a more mystical and less dogmatic understanding of Christianity, wherein human sufferance assumes a theological primacy over the judgement of sins. Gianni Vattimo has extensively developed this concept from a hermeneutical perspective, exploring how *kenosis* suggests a "weakening" of traditional metaphysical interpretations of Christianity in favor of a more experiential and existential approach (see Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto, Columbia University Press, New York 2002; Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, truth, and weakening faith. A dialogue*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello, trans. by William McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010).

[540] On the irrevocable presence of the kingdom which is not of this world and therefore it is made of things which "here-not-are" ("ci-non-sono"), see the recent provocative article of Giorgio Agamben, *Sulle cose che ci-non-sono*, in *Una voce. Rubrica di Giorgio Agamben*, in «Quodlibet», 3 June 2024, https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-sulle-cose-che-ci-non-sono.

[541] The relationship between rational modernity and Christian religion should not be interpreted as a simple dualistic opposition, but rather as a complex and ambiguous interplay. The historian of religion Giovanni Filoramo has persuasively demonstrated that religion itself – as distinct from premodern intuitive sacred experience – is fundamentally a product of modernity due to its universal and interpretative dimension. This relationship can become oppositional only when reason and faith actively deny their interconnection in pursuit of radical autonomy. See on that Filoramo, *Le vie del sacro*, cit., pp. 3-9, 35-36. However, contrary to Filoramo's view that postmodernity merely intensifies modern paradigm, we argue that the concept of the post-secular age (as expression of postmodernity) helps distinct contemporary patterns that cannot be reduced to a simple replay of the modernity-religion dialectics. As evidenced in the artistic works of Nitsch and Kiefer, a new sensitivity toward the sacred appears to be emerging – not an accomplished phenomenon, but as a potential trajectory for future communal development.

[542] Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, cit., p. 151 ("Ohne Zweifel bereitet das Werk der Kunst etwas wie Wiedererkennung, die uns aufs neue hilft, heimisch zu werden, die dem Menschen als die nie bis zu Ende lösbare Aufgabe seiner Existenz gestellt ist. Wie anders ist demgegenüber die Verkündigung und messianische Verheißung! Was bedeutet im Inkarnationsgeschehen und in der Osterbotschaft die Wiedererkennung im Sinne des ‚Das bist du!'? Doch gewiß nicht einen weiteren Schritt des Heimischwerdens des Menschen in der Welt [...] ‚Das bist du!' - dieser dem Leiden und dem Tode hilflos Ausgesetzte" [Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), cit., pp. 152-153]).

confirmation, and plausibility through a paradoxical "impossible possibility" toward a radical salvation that does not inhabit our phenomenal reality.

Another distinction arises from the fact that while mythical narratives are continuously re-told, modified and altered during the transmission – thus acquiring a poetic and *poietic* dimension – the story of salvation is announced one and forever in the Bible[543]. This fundamental characteristic distinguishes myth from all revealed religions: their truth is eternally fixed[544]. In Christianity, Gadamer explains, "we do not encounter Holy Scripture as a random collection of legends that pass on a mythical tradition, or as an elaborate epic, but as the Scripture that 'stays written'. As such, it belongs to worship, i.e., it is itself a part of the cult reality which has characterized the entire tradition of our culture. It is, so to speak, an incomprehensibly abstract idea that a person brought up in a religious tradition, whether a Jew or a Christian, should relate to the Scriptures in the same way as, for example, someone standing in a Greek or Roman cult reality might relate to their own mythology handed down in poetry or theatre. According to its claim, Holy Scripture is more than the mere transmission of a mythical story. What it tells of is intended to be God's word, and the narrators and listeners are not inventors or listeners of songs, but are themselves the Church of Christ. Accordingly, the founding documents of the Christian Church, the Pauline letters, which are truly historical documents, themselves form a part of Holy Scripture"[545].

Still, as we have already seen, both languages – the mythic, dynamic, metamorphic and poetic one, and the religious, revealed, eternal one – are forms of narrative expressing experienced truth.

The German philosopher maintains that religion is an inescapable component of every cultural tradition; excluding religion in the name of rational thought is consequently irresponsible for

[543] It is important to note that Christianity itself demonstrates significant hermeneutical flexibility, embracing the diversity of human cultures and acknowledging the necessity of interpreting Biblical passages through the lens of local traditions and the specific contextual situations of interpreters. This hermeneutical openness has historically enabled Christianity's successful inculturation across different societies and continues to inform contemporary approaches to Biblical interpretation and theological understanding.

[544] See Gadamer, *Mythologie und Offenbarungsreligion* (1981), cit.

[545] "Nun begegnet aber die Heilige Schrift nicht als eine beliebige Sammlung von Sagen, die eine mythische Überlieferung weiterreichen, oder als ein kunstvolles Epos, sondern als die Schrift, die 'geschrieben steht'. Als solche gehört sie zum Gottesdienst, d. h., sie ist selber ein Teil der Kultwirklichkeit, die die gesamte Tradition unserer Kultur geprägt hat. Es ist sozusagen ein unvollziehbar abstrakter Gedanke, sich als ein in einer religiösen Tradition Erzogener, sei es als Jude oder als Christ, zu der Schrift so verhalten zu sollen, wie etwa ein in griechischer oder römischer Kultwirklichkeit Stehender sich zu der in Dichtung oder Theater überlieferten eigenen Mythologie verhalten mochte. Die Heilige Schrift ist ihrem Anspruch nach mehr als die bloße Überlieferung einer mythischen Kunde. Das, wovon sie erzählt, will Gottes Wort sein, und die Erzähler und die Hörer sind nicht Erfinder oder Zuhörer von Gesängen, sondern sind selber die Kirche-Christi. Es entspricht dem, daß die Gründungsakten der christlichen Kirche, die Paulinischen Briefe, die wahrhaft historische Dokumente sind, selber einen Bestandteil der Heiligen Schrift bilden" (*ivi*, p. 178).

developing a discerning hermeneutics. Beyond any form of gnoseological reductionism, hermeneutics should embrace not only philosophy but the entire spectrum of the *Geisteswissenschaften* – including religion and art. The reason Gadamer appreciates is an "open" reason, representing not an opponent of religions, but rather that "communality of human reason, which rises above all facts of nature and history to the infinite conversation concerning human destiny, which we call philosophy"[546]. Here, ancient pre-modern myths, the Greeks' notion of the divine, Christian revelation, and Jewish religion are called to an epochal dialogue, to evoke new philosophical trajectories for conceiving the relationship between human and the divine.

This awareness makes the contemporary artistic incapacity to deeply express religious aesthetics particularly tragic for Gadamer: such represents not (merely) a confessional problem, but rather the existential risk of losing a fundamental pillar of our tradition – in two senses: the risk of losing religious universal language as a fertile way to approach, interpret, and transmit the original mystery of the sacred, and the risk of losing the specific Western Christian tradition as a rich source of meaning production. Conversely, the reconquest of Greek philosophical and mythopoetic tradition and the valorization of Christian theology and the philosophy of religion represent for Gadamer a fundamental defense of a millennia-old tradition characterized, to use Schelling's expression, by something "immemorial".
Hermeneutics should not be understood, from this perspective, as a rationalization or secular "translation" of religious concepts and values, but rather as the epistemological and existential horizon in which the religious experience – and its surrounding theoretical and conceptual constellation of meanings – can be preserved, nourished, and dialectically engaged with. While Gadamer advocates this cultural position, a complementary position has been elaborated by those theologians who, inspired by the successful application of hermeneutics to religious sciences, have tried to elaborate different paths. Jean Paul Bourgeois, for example, has proposed an extremely interesting comparison between Gadamer's hermeneutics and von Balthasar's thought – both part of the same post-Heideggerian, relational, and hermeneutical-dialogical rethinking of the bond between the ontology of art and the sacred. Bourgeois clearly states that the aesthetic categories which in Balthasar's theological system are specifically integrated within the revelation of the Triune God remain in Gadamer "food for thought" for philosophical

[546] Gadamer, *The Philosophy and the Religion of Judaism* (1961), cit., p. 164 ("Die Gemeinsamkeit der menschlichen Vernunft […], die sich über alle Gegebenheiten von Natur und Geschichte hinaus zu dem unendlichen Gespräch über die menschliche Bestimmung erhebt, das wir Philosophie nennen" [Gadamer, *Die Philosophie und die Religion des Judentums* (1961), cit., p. 77]).

reasoning – i.e., a philosophy of religion that can enter into dialogue with Christian revelation, but takes place outside this specific confessional scenario[547].

The "rest" of religious experiences which, in Gadamer's view, has survived within modernity and secularization appears on a public level under the post-secular lens, which serves indeed at this stage as a fertile category to challenge the religious-secular dichotomy.

2.4.3. Revitalizing Religion(s) in the Post-Secular Age. An Artistic and Religious Paradigm

Although Gadamer occasionally affirms the uniqueness of the Christian religious message, he frequently emphasizes the importance and radical contemporaneity of Greek mythic and religious tradition. As Camera correctly observes, Gadamer understands that "*mythos* indicates a further background in which man remains 'pre-understood', because from the mythical word springs an announcement which needs no verification or certification. In this sense, it can be said that the word of myth is marked by an excess that becomes a trace of the religious"[548].

This acknowledgment further demonstrates Gadamer's distinctive ecumenism: from this perspective, the sacred reveals and approaches us through both the Greek pagan and Christian religious paths. It represents an "implicit claim to the 'ecumenical' (or universal) character of all religious experience, if it is understood as an experience of transcendence and otherness, even before any confessional or dogmatic concretization"[549]. This religious universality is not founded, however, on a relativistic historical disempowerment of religious truth: all great religious traditions offer knowledge and wisdom not merely because they are civilizational creations deserving general respect and a democratic understanding, but because the truth experienced by the religious individual through listening to the divine manifests in different forms, all the while paradoxically remaining the same, the original revelation of the sacred abyss and the Great Otherness[550] in dialogue with human awareness of the experience of being, an experience of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*, in Heidegger's sense), incompleteness, and mortality. As Salman explains, we must distinguish between "a *bad pluralism*, which stems from an ideological approach, which distrusts any truth or hierarchy of values, from a *good*

[547] See Bourgeois, *The Aesthetics Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar*, cit.
[548] Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", cit., p. 175.
[549] *Ibidem*.
[550] In this perspective, despite the evident radical historic-cultural differences, it could be possible to compare Gadamer perspective, more than the ecumenical modernist approach, to the Perennialist idea of an interreligious dialogue based on faith. See our *Unità metafisica e pluralità religiosa. Scenari possibili, a partire dalla philosophia perennis*, in «Nuovo Giornale di Filosofia della Religione» (ISSN 2532-1676), n. 13/14, maggio-dicembre 2020, pp. 162-172.

pluralism, which bears witness to a necessarily plural humanity, and presents diversity as a *chance* to progressively conquer truth"[551].

Moreover, we cannot discount how Gadamer's historical experience in 20th-century Germany, with its tragic spectacle of split between revanchist ideological paganism and Christian institutions – both in individual consciousnesses and public space – led him to emphasize the necessity of dialogue between the archaic mythic-symbolic roots of European tradition and Christian culture, toward a harmonious and future-oriented sublimation of these different branches.

Gadamer's position thus oscillates between two poles. On one side stands his Christian fascination (philosophically revitalized by his encounter with Rudolf Bultmann's theological system in Marburg[552]), founded on the recognition of subjective faith's primacy and Christian transcendence's exclusivity[553]. On the other side emerges a more cosmogonical and ecumenical perspective, grounded in his personal passion for Ancient Greek culture and openness to interreligious dialogue in the age of globalization[554] – an era where the intolerance power of technoscience and capitalist ideology seem to have replaced absolute religious systems and created new idolatries. This latter perspective was refined through serious meditation on the reflections on the sacred elaborated by thinkers such as Rudolf Otto, Walter Friedrich Otto, and Martin Heidegger.

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[551] Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit., p. 225.

[552] See *ivi*, pp. 129-157.

[553] According to Gadamer, "the uniqueness of the gospel message lies in the fact that it must be accepted against all expectation and hope," because "the claim of the Christian message – and this is what gives it is exclusivity – is that it alone has really overcome death through the proclamation of the representative suffering and death of Jesus as a redemptive act" (Gadamer, *Aesthetic and religious experience*, cit., pp. 153, 151; "Wenn man es als die Auszeichnung des Evangeliums versteht, daß man diese Botschaft gegen alles Erwarten und Erhoffen annehmen soll", weil: "Das war ja der Anspruch der christlichen Botschaft, und das verleiht ihr ihre Ausschließlichkeit, daß nur die christliche Botschaft den Tod wirklich überwunden hat, indem sie das stellvertretende Leiden und Sterben Jesu als Erlösungstat verkündet" [Gadamer, *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung* (1964/1978), cit., pp. 155, 153]). See also Gadamer, "La religione e le religioni", cit., p. 205. From the point of view of his personal faith, Gadamer once described himself as "disgracefully agnostic", despite his religious predisposition and receptivity in religious matters (on that cf. Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. A Biography*, cit., pp. 21-25). A slightly different nuance emerges in a dialogue with Zimmerman, who reports the following exchange: "When I asked him whether he considered himself a confessional Christian or believed in one religion over another, his answer was that these apodictic framings of religion were too exaggerated (*zu übertrieben*): 'There doesn't exist one correct church in this sense'" (Zimmermann, *Ignoramus: Gadamer's "Religious Turn"*, cit., p. 321).

[554] In his study *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine* (cit.), Walter Lammi emphasizes the interreligious significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics. While Gadamer did not develop an explicit philosophy of religion, his thought consistently engages with reality's incomprehensible, mysterious, and unfathomable dimensions – those aspects of the "divine" and "transcendence" that constitute religion's primary focus. Gadamer's deliberate choice to reflect more broadly on the concepts of the "sacred" and "divine", rather than pursuing a specific conception of God, aligns with his theoretical approach to understanding transcendence through hermeneutical engagement rather than dogmatic definition.

This broader perspective manifests itself, for example, when Gadamer recalls Schelling's notion of *das Unvordenkliche* (which we previously considered in connection to myth) to propose a possible rediscovery of religiosity in the contemporary age as an alternative to the scientific-analytical and objectifying worldview. Here, he also mentions Heidegger's notion of *Andenken* ("remembrance" as that unique form of thought which consists in thinking of what has been while simultaneously thinking of what is yet to come – a neither utilitarian nor teleological reflection accompanying the process of "thinking" and "poetizing" characteristic of the *Zukünftigen*)[555]: "Schelling's word gives resounding expression to what we are looking for when we speak of mythic experience. But the word *unvordenklich* articulates something unreachable by the longing of thought and, from that viewpoint, something that is therefore not described in terms of its own being and appearance. Most fundamentally, what seems to me to point in the right direction is still Heidegger's concept of 'Andenken,' which has its origin in Hegel's philosophy of religion and designates the connection between health and the holy. This is indicative of the experience with which we are concerned here. Just as health is not known in the same way as a wound or disease, so the holy is perhaps more a way of being than of being believed"[556]. The holy as a "way of being": this is the path of the *Andenken*, the simultaneously philosophical and poetic approach to the Origin from the perspective of the indeterminate future. A path which leads circularly, in the sense of the hermeneutic circle, to the fundamental role of the word in the Heideggerian and Gadamerian conception. Under this legacy, as Ziarek recognizes, "the human being catches or intercepts (*auffangen*) this signal beginning (*Anfang*) of the word and carries out this beginning by bearing the word into signs. Bearing this beginning word into signs means that human beings not only carry it into words but also bear it, that is, direct and influence it. It is through such directing and bearing that human beings can either keep the momentum of the beginning and carry it *into* sense or lose its inceptive force amidst beings, signs, and meanings. Letting Da-sein obtain, the human being serves as the hinge both of the event and of its word by sounding the event as words/signs (*Wörter*) into language"[557].

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[555] See Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, cit. (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, cit.).

[556] Gadamer, *Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science*, cit., p. 127 ("Schellings Wort läßt das, was wir suchen, wenn wir von der mythischen Erfahrung sprechen, gewiß anklingen. Aber das Wort 'unvordenklich' ist doch von der Sehnsucht des Denkens aus als ein für es Unerreichbares artikuliert und nicht in seinem eigensten Sein und Erscheinen beschrieben. Am ehesten scheint mir noch Heideggers Begriff des 'Andenkens', der in Hegels Religionsphilosophie seinen Vorfahr hat, in die rechte Richtung zu weisen, und vor allem der Zusammenhang des Heilen mit dem Heiligen. Da wird auf Erfahrung hingedeutet, auf die es offenbar ankommt. Wie das Heile nicht in der Weise gewußt ist, wie das Wunde oder das Kranke, ist vielleicht auch das Heilige mehr ein Dasein als ein Geglaubtsein" [Gadamer, *Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von Religion und Wissenschaft* (1984), cit., p. 162]).

[557] Krzysztof Ziarek, *Image-less Thinking: The Time-Space for the Imagination in Heidegger*, in Günter Figal (ed.), «International Yearbook for Hermeneutics», vol. 14 (2015), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, pp. 145-162: 161.

Along this path, we can recognize in Gadamer's hermeneutics of religion a sensitivity which, within the contemporary religious debate, would align with a pluralistic position – in the sense of the "good pluralism" mentioned above. Indeed, we can identify three main positions within the current Christian discourse: "exclusivism", which affirms that only Christianity expresses the truth, in contrast with all other religions (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*); "inclusivism", which considers other religions as preparations – or incomplete paths – to true faith (fulfilment theology); and "pluralism", which, despite recognizing the absolute and definitive manifestation of God in the Evangelical Revelation, accepts the value of other religions and their providential role[558]. This latter perspective, developed in the theology of the already mentioned Geffré, transcends the ancient conception of the *semina Verbi* to elaborate a positive and fertile relation between Christianity and other religions, with their specific – and authentic – relation to the divine, considered under the providential cosmic plane through a relational perspective, according to which "The Spirit breathes where he will, and you hear his voice, but you do not know from where he comes and where he goes" (*John*, 3:8)[559]. Although Gadamer, as we have seen, never explicitly expressed theological positions, more attentive analysis of his thought suggests his alignment with this latter position – which was indeed elaborated upon hermeneutical inspiration.

The multiplicity of historical encounters with the sacred coincides with the multiplicity of linguistic and imaginative horizons in which religious languages are variously deepened and developed. At this point, Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to religious phenomena deeply resonates with Kiefer's and Nitsch's sensibility. From the hermeneutical perspective, religions can be understood as a fundamental component of that historical tradition which is the language through which our individual comprehension of the world achieves meaningful construction and development. "Every language", Camera explains, "is a symbolic network of intersections and encounters, in which each speaker is in contact with the other". And not only properly 'linguistic' languages, but all expressive ones participate in this dynamic: "Cultural and religious pluralism is thus the result of the presence of mutually intersecting voices or idioms and for this very reason has a productive significance"[560].

[558] See Salman, *Gadamer e i teologi*, cit., pp. 226-249.
[559] And this means, in a Christian theological perspective which stands outside the scope of our research but is at least worth mentioning, that "the experience of grace is not exclusively Christian, and the experience in non-Christian religions carries in its human openness to the Absolute" (*ivi*, p. 244).
[560] Camera, "L'ermeneutica nello spazio del religioso", cit., p. 182.

With the globalization process and the entrance into the post-secular age, artists like Kiefer and Nitsch have attempted to create artistic productions that position within the hermeneutical circle of artistic creations various images, narratives, and symbols derived from different mythological systems and religious traditions. They thus confirm the essential pluralistic configuration of postsecular art, which scholars have highlighted through concepts such as the plural notion of "postsecularities"[561]: the artist engages with the sacred neither from a religious confessional-dogmatic perspective (premodern sacred art) nor in a reductionist and merely illustrative-descriptive way (secular modern art), but rather through productive ambivalent existential engagement. This represents a response to the existential uncertainty that Taylor describes as the artistic characteristic of our age: "The loss of pre-modern languages shows how embedded we are in the buffered identity, but the continued attempt to devise subtler languages shows how difficult it is just to leave things there, not to try to compensate for, to replace those earlier vehicles of now problematic insight". This tendency "testifies in the same sense as the concern for lost meaning. It bespeaks the malaise, the uncertainties, which inhabit the buffered identity"[562]. Yet this doubtful *Stimmung* finds in Kiefer and Nitsch also a radical *Streben* towards a constructive process of overcoming.

While Kiefer has particularly cultivated references derived from Jewish Qabbalah (Isaac Luria, Gershom Scholem) and Merkabah mysticism, while also drawing from Christianity, yoga, and Western paganism, Nitsch's artworks prominently feature syncretic elements bringing together Christianity, Greek/Roman religion (Dionysus, Orpheus, Eleusinian mysteries), and Oriental traditions.

Similar to their treatment of mythical themes, both artists consider religions not merely as topics or themes for their artworks, but as a fundamental structural feature of their production. We might even assert that Kiefer's and Nitsch's artistic creations represent two forms of religious synthesis – not in the sense that they propose new dogmatic religions, but rather that they attempt to grasp possible ways of encountering and representing the sacred in the contemporary age. Their artworks thus provide visual confirmation of Di Chiara's insight regarding art's interreligious dialogical function in contemporary age: through openness to other religions, it becomes possible to develop "an aesthetics of the sacred capable of going beyond the cultural

[561] Cf. James Hodkinson and Silke Horstkotte, *Introducing the Postsecular: From Conceptual Beginnings to Cultural Theory*, in «Poetics Today», 41, 3, 2020, pp. 317-326: 319-320.
[562] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 361.

and religious identity of a tradition by virtue of the common divine image that dwells in every particular determination of consciousness (*Seelengrund*) and human creativity"[563].

Art precisely constitutes the event of disclosure of that Origin which can acquire both aesthetic and religious definition through the devices of symbols and rituals. The challenge for the contemporary age consists in transferring individual, subjective perceptions of the sacred into symbols and images that are capable of conveying and transmitting the language of the divine at a communal level.

Both artists openly confront this challenge. While their production does not present a structured theory of religion(s) – which they instead assume in the general sense of belief and ritual practices of worship of a supernatural/metaphysical being, usually understood as God(s) – each develops distinctive approaches. In Kiefer's work, religion acquires a meditative function aimed at recognizing spiritual and existential issues common to different traditions – the problem of death, spiritual life, the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm, the conflict between evil and good – and proposing to the public an inner journey into suprasensible knowledge reflected in human moral agency. For Nitsch, the more urgent task involves elaborating a specific codified linguistic and perceptive paradigm through artistic performance instruments to ritualize the sacred and codify a new religious syncretic language, one in which the function of Dionysus and the role of the sacrificed Christ merge in a new, paradoxically materialistic metaphysics.

Nitsch has explicitly declared his deep relationship with religious traditions as a fundamental source of inspiration: "I love all religions and do not want to contradict with any of them, I want the intense dedication that each of them from time to time requires. Each religion teaches in its own way the intoxication of being, projects an ideal of will. It is necessary to proclaim a Dionysian Christianity"[564]. Behind this intent lies an even stronger concept: a theory of art performance's liberating function. This function relates to the need to overcome traditional religious dogmas and theological rationalistic categorizations so as to refuse all absolutizing representations of God and allow the divine power of Being to freely manifest itself.

Kiefer likewise interprets religions as dialogical poles of his artistic productions: the symbolic nature of the proposed images simultaneously constitutes a foundational ontology of art and a religious epiphanic event, always included in a sophisticated dialectic between the visible and the mysterious invisible.

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[563] Di Chiara, *Per un'estetica del sacro*, cit., pp. 23-24.

[564] Hermann Nitsch, *La composizione testuale del teatro delle orge e dei misteri*, trans. by Flavia Foradini, Edizioni Morra, Napoli 1994, p. 2.

The ritual role of artistic practices, valorized by both Kiefer and Nitsch in different ways, reveals itself through art's concrete function: a perpetual externalization of inner experience made communicable through the artwork. Similarly, religions must not remain merely interior occurrences but need to acquire communicative and intersubjective dimension based on exteriorizations and communal practices, such as rites and liturgies.

Gadamer addresses this parallel: "The performance of a play, like that of a ritual, cannot simply be detached from the play itself, as if it were something that is not part of its essential being, but is as subjective and fluid as the aesthetic experiences in which it is experienced. Rather, it is in the performance and only in it – as we see most clearly in the case of music – that we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in the religious rite"[565]. This element unites myths and religions, resonating with Gadamer's understanding of "aesthetic" and "religious" experiences. Indeed, even subjectivist and intimist forms of spirituality – such as Lutheranism – practice the proclamation of the Gospel as a ritual device: "The words of the sermon perform this total mediation, which otherwise is the work of the religious rite – of the mass, for example. We shall see that in other ways too the word is called on to mediate between past and present, and that it therefore comes to play a leading role in the problem of hermeneutics"[566].

As Lammi correctly summates, Gadamer discovers, especially through studying Greek culture, that "the work of art (...) constitutes the bodily appearance of cultic epiphany. Like cultic epiphany, the work of art is characterized by a heightened level of being. (…) Both involve a moment of instantaneous unity, the latter in the coming together of past and present in the absolute presence of the divine, the former also in a kind of absolute presence grasped in an instant of understanding by the attunement to the work that Gadamer calls 'tarrying'. Gadamer calls the absolute presence of the divine in the immediate presence of the work of art its 'aura'. In both cases this presence is the result of a spontaneous kind of phenomenological reduction that constitutes its own self-referring temporality. It is possible to view religious rites neither in terms of group membership nor as merely ceremonial or commemorative, but as a

[565] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, cit., p. 115 ("Die Aufführung eines Schauspiels ist auch nicht einfach von ihm ablösbar als etwas, das zu seinem wesentlichen Sein nicht gehört, sondern so subjektiv und fließend ist wie die ästhetischen Erlebnisse. in denen es erfahren wird. Vielmehr begegnet in der Aufführung und nur in ihr – das wird am klarsten an der Musik – das Werk selbst, so wie im Kult das Göttliche begegnet" [Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 121]).

[566] *Ivi*, p. 123 ("Das Wort der Predigt leistet eben dieselbe totale Vermittlung, die sonst der kultischen Handlung – etwa der heiligen Messeobliegt. Daß das Wort auch sonst berufen ist, die Vermittlung der Gleichzeitigkeit zu leisten, und daß ihm daher im Problem der Hermeneutik die Führung zukommt, werden wir noch sehen" [*ivi*, p. 132]).

methodology, technique, or techne of access by means of which cults are able to create religious experience through group activity"[567].

The intersection and overlapping of myth and religion which appears in Gadamer's thought[568] – but which is denied in several passages where his Christian perspective pushed him towards a more divisive stance – emerges as a specific characteristic of Kiefer's and Nitsch's art. In their artistic production, the shared aesthetic iconophile approach sublimates the narrative and transformative power of both mythic and religious traditions, considered not merely as inspirational models, but as specific matrices of Being's unveiling process. Of this Event – and of its human experience – art is the symbolic action of a shared, deep, but concretely possible, theandric dimension, where human-divine proximity is conquered as the result of knowledge and practice of the analogic creative faculty. An inner spiritual freedom, where the artistic product is not merely a depiction of a religious content, but rather an active exercise of the transcendent presence within artistic creativity, appears as the ultimate desired aim of this symbolic-religious process of re-building[569].

[567] Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, cit., pp. 91-92.
[568] In this theoretical direction see Heinz Hillmann, *Über Gott reden – in Mythos, Poesie und Religion*, in Grażyna Kwiecińska, (ed.), *Die Dialektik des Geheimnisses*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 19-47.
[569] See on that Di Chiara*, Per un'estetica del sacro*, cit., pp. 18-20.

3. Hermann Nitsch: The Festive Communal Myth of Orgien Mysterien Theater

> "i wanted to give theater something new. to expand it. give it new, formal possibilities, sermons, lecturers on theater. sermons on being. establish an order as extension of the theater experience into real life. orders of perversity. intensity promoted at all costs" (Hermann Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), in Michael Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln 2015, pp 39-46: 44 ["ich wollte dem theater neues auflasten. es ausweiten. neue, formale möglichkeiten. predigten, vorträge auf dem theater. seinspredigt. ordensgründung als ausweitung des theatererlebnisses ins tatsächliche leben. orden der perversität. intensität wird um jeden preis gefordert"; Hermann Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), in Id., *das orgien mysterien theater. die wortdichtung II*, Freibord, Wien 1996, pp. 13-22: 22])

The extreme and provocative artwork of Hermann Nitsch has long provided art historians, critics, and cultural theorists with a wealth of material to analyze, interpret, and debate. As a revolutionary figure in 20th-century Western performative art, Nitsch inaugurated a thought-provoking artistic challenge to mainstream modern culture. Standing in opposition to bourgeois society, social conformism, and religious conservatism, he revealed to the art world the cultural and existential weaknesses of the puritanism which characterized postwar Austrian society. Despite having overcome the authoritarian and violent political legacies of the first half of the century, this society still appeared to him as haunted by the repression of vital Dionysian instincts – instincts that remained repressed and denied, producing suffering and discrimination. Public discourse, often stimulated by media attention and political controversy, has primarily focused either on Nitsch's formal and technical innovations – especially capturing the attention of performance studies scholars[1] – or on the revolutionary socio-political implications of his work. However, relatively few studies have undertaken a comprehensive examination of the philosophical and religious-symbolic core of Nitsch's aesthetics. His artworks, especially through his masterpiece, the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (Theater of Orgies and Mysteries), together with his extensive intellectual production (books, essays, manifestos, interviews), articulate a complex and multifaceted aesthetic program. In this program, the need for new artistic forms is primarily connected with the need for new sacred experiences attuned to the spiritual condition of postmodern and post-secular humanity.

[1] Cf. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain, Routledge, London-New York 2008.

Nitsch's program constitutes a rich, non-systematic worldview in which theory functions as a communicative and practical attempt to give voice to what is fundamentally ineffable. In this respect, several interpretative layers that emerge in the analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutics also appear in Nitsch's thought: the rejection of metaphysical dualism and substantialism in favor of an evenemential ontology; the dialogue between mythic-symbolic tradition and contemporary philosophical sources (often treated in a creative and not strictly "philological" way); the existential and epistemological centrality of art; an ontology grounded in symbolic imagery; and a search for the sacred beyond both dogmatic religion and reductive materialist atheism. Nitsch's position thus reflects a form of hermeneutic creative perspectivism.

All these philosophical dimensions are developed through dialogue with an extraordinary diverse range of sources and authors. His main cultural models, Nietzsche and Wagner, are placed alongside other figures from Western philosophy – the Presocratic thinkers, Spinoza, German Romanticism, Schopenhauer, Heidegger – as well as Christian mysticism (Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Angelus Silesius), and Eastern traditions, especially Buddhism. His artistic influences range from modern Western masters to 20th-century Avantgardes such as Futurism, Surrealism, and Art Informel; his theatrical references extend from Greek tragedy to Antonin Artaud; and his literary inspirations include, among others, Goethe, Hölderlin, Mallarmé, George, Joyce, Musil, and Benn.

By engaging with key philosophical aspects of what might be called Nitsch's comprehensive "book of life" – his interpretation of reality as a whole – this chapter proposes a dialogue with hermeneutic philosophy. In doing so, it demonstrates how Nitsch's concepts, insights, and artistic practices offer a compelling model for a contemporary reenchantment of the world, where the search for the sacred demands new forms, languages, and configurations.

3.1. Sacred Place and Ritual Art in Hermann Nitsch's Aesthetics

3.1.1. Sacred Place as Evenemential Space: Thinking (and Experiencing) Beyond Dualism

Contemporary art's engagement with the sacred, and its attempt to evoke it in our time, requires a reflection on the topology that enables this specific evenemential disclosure. Philosophical and theological theories, mystical experiences, languages, and rituals are undoubtedly essential in defining sacred places – both within religious traditions and in post-secular forms of

spirituality. However, spatiality and embodied sensory experiences also play crucial roles in this process[2].

This chapter focuses on the latter, particularly as they emerge in the dialogue between philosophical interpretations of space and place and Nitsch's development of a ritual art, wherein the liturgical relationship among participants, mythic-symbolic imagery, and spatial configuration is foundational. The chapter's specific research objective is to analyze the relationship between qualitative spaces – which, through particular events of meaning-disclosure, become concrete sacred places – and the role of premodern archetypal images in facilitating this process.

While contemporary art reveals the inherently heterogeneous nature of its spatiality – where sacred place manifests in diverse forms, from designated religious exhibition spaces to the subtle yet vibrant void between artwork (painting, sculpture, and installation) and their viewers, and even extending into digital realms, where virtual artistic experiences proliferate – Hermann Nitsch's work is particularly relevant. It underscores the depth to which an artist can become engaged in constructing a concrete and resonant artistic space, especially when driven by an interest in the sacred and its mystical function. His oeuvre serves as a case study for the widespread contemporary artistic, philosophical, and esoteric process of rethinking the modalities through which a sacred place can be created.

Through his art, Nitsch transforms a performance area – an artistic *space* – in a sacred *place*, simultaneously maintaining its aesthetic qualities. According to Yi-Fu Tuan's (1930-2022) well-known theory[3], space is not merely a physical container or passive backdrop, but a dynamic, relational, and open field, in which everything is in flux and open to exploration. This web of infinite possibilities acquires a specific, localized, and meaningful dimension when it becomes a place. A place is characterized by a stable identity – cultural, social, emotional, or symbolic – defined through human practices that shape the meanings of spaces.

[2] The "spatial turn" in the humanities also led to new interpretations in the context of religious and aesthetic studies. The classic authority in this field is certainly Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford-Cambridge 1991. A detailed overview of theories of space in different disciplines can be found in Susanne Rau, *Räume*, 2nd edition, Frankfurt am Main, Campus 2017. See also the chapter "The Spatial Turn" in Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. by Adam Blauhut, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 211-243.

[3] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2001. Susanne Rau's interpretation of Tuan's theory has also offered us several insights on this distinction (cf. previous note).

We will argue that Nitsch's ritual actions anchor a tragic Dionysian meaning to the spaces of the performances, thereby transfiguring them into sacred places. In this transformation, Nitsch's performance space begins as *Raum*, but it becomes *Ort* through ritualized and liturgical actions. Furthermore, Nitsch's approach offers furthermore a potential response – mainly based, as we will see, on a dialectic between traditional symbols and postmodern philosophical thought – to recent scholarly inquiries. For example, the religious studies scholars Aaron French and Katharina Waldner have explored this issue in a volume dedicated to the relationship between modernity and sacred places. They contend that "revisiting the ways in which architects and artists have endeavored to create sacred spaces and buildings for the modern world addresses also the underlying question of how new religious ideas – especially those related to Western esotericism and modern currents of alternative religiosity – have transformed the way sacred spaces are constructed today"[4].

Following Heidegger and Gadamer's conception of the sacred event as *Ereignis*, a sacred topology in the contemporary context must involve a non-dualistic space, i.e., a space where the subject of contemplation and the contemplated object manifest themselves not as fixed ontological determinations, instead as dynamic and metamorphic poles. From a hermeneutic perspective, sacred experience involves translating artistic meaning into personally meaningful truth. This process transfigures the subject participating in the experience itself. In this sense, the sacred functions simultaneously as experienced "object" and experiencing "subject". Similarly, the human participant is at one the "subject" experiencing, and the "object" "grasped" by the Great Other and its meaningful content. This dynamic extends to spatial experience, where subjectivity both shapes and is shaped by space itself: indeed, the experience of spatiality overcomes subjectivity, because an experienced spatiality has its own nature independently from the perception and consciousness of the one who is in it, but at the same time precisely that subjectivity is essential part of the space itself.

Within this theoretical framework, it is possible to point out that the space of sacred experiences also – and to the fullest extent – exhibits a liminal nature: the space is a system which simultaneously opens and closes, isolating participants while making them accessible to other dimensions. It is the horizon, the "where" (*wo*) of the experience, but it is also necessarily part of the "what" (*was*) of the same experience.

[4] Aaron French and Katharina Waldner, *Introduction. Modernity, Space and the Sacred*, in Id. (eds.), *Modernity and the Construction of Sacred Space*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2024, pp. 1-14: 2.

The notion of the sacred inherently contains a spatial dimension – and ritual, as we will see, is fundamental in opening this possibility. A sacred place is indeed the one that is "set apart", distinguished from profane place, which is the area outside the *sacrum* (*pro-fanum*, literally "in front of the temple")[5].

A line of separation can therefore be traced, one founded in the fertile tension between, on the one hand, the actions and intentions of cultural agents seeking the sacred and, from the other side, the spontaneous manifestation of the numinous dimension. Roman religious practice highly formalized the simultaneously ritualistic and topographic aspect of spirituality because of the importance attributed to the *templum*, the sacred boundaries and the spatial rituals (cf. for example the rites of cities foundation). But space is often encoded in all Indo-European forms of religion and confirmed by several studies in comparative mythologies and linguistic – even the concept of sacrifice, which is central to Indo-European cultures, as it is to Nitsch's art, involves division, setting apart, and boundary[6]. Indeed, as Wijnia argues, "in contemporary culture, art has such a special status, taking place in set-apart contexts, protected from violation and disturbance. This set-apartness from routine, the everyday, common hierarchies, and to some extent financial value, is generally described by means of the notion of *liminality*. Defined as 'in betwixt and between,' liminality is a zone that is separate from the usual social order one belongs to, where norms and values are suspended, reversed, or fundamentally different, and which potentially impacts one's personality and position once returned to the regular order"[7].

Sacred space manifests therefore as what Michel Foucault terms heterotopia – a space distinguished as "other" from its surroundings through specific characteristics. A heterotopia is a disturbing phenomenon which secretly and mysteriously subverts conventional associations between worlds and things. Furthermore, it serves an active function: it "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are incompatible in themselves. Thus, it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; (…) perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. (…) The traditional garden

[5] See Veikko Anttonen, *Space, Body, and the Notion of Boundary: A Category-Theoretical Approach to Religion*, in «Temenos», vol. 41, nr. 2, 2005, pp. 185-201: 189-190. Although the term "sacred" is usually considered derived from the Indo-European root *sak-, as we'll see in this chapter, there is also the sporadically attested hypothesis of its derivation from the root *sek-, "to cut" (from which derives the Latin *secare*), which has relevant affinities with the spatial conception of the sacred discussed here.

[6] Cf. on that Roger D. Woodard, *Indo-European Sacred Space. Vedic and Roman Cult*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Chicago 2006.

[7] Lieke Wijnia, *Resonating Sacralities*. *Dynamics between Religion and the Arts in Postsecular Netherlands*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2022, p. 151.

of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm"[8]. Among his examples, Foucault includes ritual heterotopias – spaces created through procedures, gestures, and narratives that establish distinct identities.

In Heideggerian terms, the topology where the Event occurs partially constitutes the Event itself. As its frame, sacred space becomes symbolic space in a process of re-semantization founded on the dynamic identity between the visible and the implied invisible, manifest and hidden-unmanifest (which is that paradoxically "unfounded foundation", which makes possible the manifested itself[9]). In the interaction between these different ontological levels, a *topo-morphosis* takes place: a new spatial form is produced in the relational connection between the disclosure of the sacred artistic meaning and its "user" – or interpreter.

Thus, sacred topology represents a clear disruption of the mimetic/representative concept of image that is central to classical Western art. Indeed, the space where art is exposed is not merely "artistic" because it contains artworks, or because it is structured to add value to those artworks, which, by representing some contents, speak autonomously by themselves. The sacred topology hereby discussed is that space arrangement, structuring, and dispositioning which, through the specific forms, symbols, and performative items structurally embodied in that space, allows or even enhances the encounter with the sacred through its artistic manifestations. It necessarily follows that topology as such is part of the unveiling of the sacred art itself.

Within this hermeneutical circle, where the relation between the contemplative subject and the contemplated object appears continuously modified in its dynamic, transferring one function into the other, the Event of the sacred emerges only as a result of a living biunivocal relationship. This connection metaphorically resembles a thick tapestry or network, where each thread forms an interrelated part of a whole: the meaning – simultaneously aesthetic and sacred – is the happening of the whole; the lines in the tapestry (or network) are the multiple configurations of a *pluriversum* where the Event contemplates its own appearing.

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[8] See Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*, trans. by Jay Miskowiec, in «Michel Foucault, Info» (https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/).

[9] In the end, Being is no more than a "*simple plain presence that is without why*" ((Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. by Reginald Lilly, Indiana University Press, Indiana 1991, p. 127 ["*das einfache, ohne Warum schlichte Vorliegen*"; Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 10: *Der Satz vom Grund*, ed. by Petra Jaeger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 186]).

Nitsch recognizes that space is of a "living" nature and is not merely abstract. While he does not explicitly reference Heidegger's spatial concepts, the philosophy of the Meßkirch thinker – which he studied and which, being part of our theoretical framework, extensively resonates with his idea of art – likely influenced his perspective on this topic[10].

In his minor but fascinating 1969 brief essay *Art and Space* (*Kunst und die Raum*)[11], Heidegger argues that the relationship between the artist and the space is a fundamental core of the circular relationship which unifies art, artist, and artwork. To better approach the issue of space, Heidegger challenges space's classical Western definition as merely the area a body possesses and occupies – which only thanks to and through the body acquires its shape. Understanding humans as living and dynamic beings rather than mere bodies reveals that we are inherently spatial – constitutively disposed within space and structurally related to other beings inhabiting it[12]. More radically, everything has a space, because everything is made up of space. Humanity does not shape space, nor is space merely a subjective faculty (as in Kant's philosophy, rooted in Cartesian thought[13]). Rather, it is the horizon[14] of the relationship which enables the emergence of "being-for" (*das Sein zum*), which is the fundamental relationality of all beings, which humans uniquely recognize as reality's essential structure. Therefore, spatiality stands beyond presence and is simultaneously essential to the concrete presencing of beings. Addressing the sacred directly, Heidegger explores "space" (*Raum*) as "clearing-away" (*räumen*), referring to its etymology: "Clearing-away, thought on its own, is the freeing of

[10] On Heidegger's notion of "space" see, among others: Alejandro A. Vallega, *Heidegger and the Issue of Space. Thinking on Exilic Grounds*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 2003; Francesca Brencio, *La spazialità: un filo rosso nel pensiero heideggeriano*, in «Filosofia in movimento», 14 November 2018 (https://filosofiainmovimento.it/la-spazialita-un-filo-rosso-nel-pensiero-heideggeriano/).

[11] In *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. by Günter Figal, trans. by Jerome Veith, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2009, pp. 305-309 ([Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (1969), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 13: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, ed. by Hermann Heidegger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 203-210). It is a limited-edition text firstly published by Erker (St. Gallen) in 1969 for the vernissage of Erhart Kästner: the essay was a revision of the lecture *Raum, Mensch und Sprache* pronounced on the 3 October 1964 in the gallery "im Erker" in the context of the sculpture's exposition of Bernard Heiliger.

[12] On this point, Heidegger's theory resonates with Foucault's considerations on the non-void character of concrete spatiality: "We do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias*, cit.).

[13] See on that Salvatore Spina, *Abitare e produrre. Ripensare lo spazio con Martin Heidegger e Henri Lefebvre*, in «Mechane», nr. 4, 2022, pp. 107-120.

[14] "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary" (Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in Id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Collins, London 2001, pp. 141-160: 152 ["Die Grenze ist nicht das, wobei etwas aufhört, sondern, wie die Griechen es erkannten, die Grenze ist jenes, von woher etwas sein *Wesen* beginnt. Darum ist der Begriff: ὁρισμός, d. h. Grenze"; Martin Heidegger, *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), in Id. *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 145-164: 152]).

places through which the fates of dwelling humans turn toward the safety of a home, toward the calamity of homelessness, or even toward indifference concerning both. Clearing-away is freeing of the places at which a god appears, the places from which the gods have fled, places at which the appearance of the divine hesitates for a long time. Clearing-away brings forth each place that prepares a dwelling. Profane spaces are always the privation of sacred space, often ones which lie far back"[15]. The space, thus, opens the possibility itself of experiencing something (because everything is experienced in a space), and in particular of experiencing something which has a relationship with other beings in the concrete human dealing with reality. In the clearing away, artwork makes possible the event of Being. The "making-space" prepares the possibility of admitting place, which "opens a region in which it gathers things into their belongingness in the region"[16].

Such is a concrete dealing, which Heidegger grasped already in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), arguing that the spatial dimension of "being-in-the-world" is the place of *Dasein*, which is not geometrically defined, but concretely lived – an essential mode of existence[17].

However, in *Art and Space*, place is understood from a different perspective – not as the beingness of beings, in terms of entities, but as a "making room", a performative dimension of letting beings be[18].

This Heideggerian framework illuminates our artistic case study: understanding space as the foundational horizon enables the *Dasein-Sein* relationship in the event of truth to reveal why and how artistic space is neither incidental nor contingent. By engaging with the ontology of space through the unveiling power of art, it is possible to evoke a richer meaning than that found in the simple act of shaping an individual artwork, which merely stands, as it were, as an object within a space. Furthermore, place "opens a region in which it gathers things into their belongingness in the region"[19].

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[15] Heidegger*, Art and Space*, cit., p. 307 ("Räumen ist, in sein Eigenes gedacht, Freigabe von Orten, an denen die Schicksale des wohnenden Menschen sich ins Heile einer Heimat oder ins Unheile der Heimatlosigkeit oder gar in die Gleichgültigkeit gegenüber beiden kehren. Räumen ist Freigabe der Orte, an denen ein Gott erscheint, der Orte, aus denen die Götter entflohen sind, Orte, an denen das Erscheinen des Göttlichen lange zögert. Räumen erbringt die jeweils ein Wohnen bereitende Ortschaft. Profane Räume sind stets die Privation oft weit zurückliegender sakraler Räume" [Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (1969), cit., pp. 206-207]).

[16] *Ivi*, p. 308 ("Der Ort öffnet jeweils eine Gegend, indem er die Dinge auf das Zusammengehören in ihr versammelt" [*ivi*, p. 207]).

[17] Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, New York 2008 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2: *Sein und Zeit*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977); in particular see par. 22-24.

[18] See Vallega, *Heidegger and the Issue of Space*, cit., pp. 178-179.

[19] Heidegger*, Art and Space*, cit., p. 308 ("Der Ort öffnet jeweils eine Gegend, indem er die Dinge auf das Zusammengehören in ihr versammelt"Heidegger" [Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (1969), cit., p. 207]).

For sculpture, the artistic genre explicitly addressed by Heidegger in his essay, the German philosopher argues against viewing art as an "occupation of space": "Sculpture would not be a confrontation with space. Sculpture would be the embodiment of places which, opening and preserving a region, hold something free gathered around them, granting a stay to each thing, and a dwelling to humans in the midst of things"[20].

In his later works, such as *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger presents even more concretely the connection between *Dasein* and *Sein* as a living form of inhabiting. This involves assuming spatiality as the horizon in which humans relate to the world – with the character of sparing and preserving the essential being of reality, and of caring for its free and safe autonomous presencing[21]. As Dissegna argues, for Heidegger "space is not an object, but it is unity as such precisely because *we tell* it and, at the same time, *we are told about it*. (…) it is precisely from here that it is possible to understand the link that exists between existence and space, with particular reference to the concept of *place*. In fact, the possibility of dwelling is only realised when space is conceived as *locus*, as *Ort*: assuming, that is, the traits of a localisation that situates without oppressing, that locates without caging"[22].

And this process, again, takes place through building – or, on an artistic level, creating – things capable of bringing space into existence, "something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary"[23]. Locational artifacts (such as buildings) are therefore not merely "fillers" of already existing autonomous spaces; rather, they are what give essence to spatiality itself. Man, as the "demiurge" of these artifacts, plays a pivotal role – a role that must, however, be interpreted beyond any subjectivist framework: "Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them *space*; for when I say 'a man,' and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner – that is, who dwells – then by the name 'man' I already name the stay within the fourfold among things (…) Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man"[24].

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[20] *Ivi*, p. 308 ("Keine Besitzergreifung des Raumes. Die Plastik wäre keine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Raum. Die Plastik wäre die Verkörperung von Orten, die, eine Gegend öffnend und sie verwahrend, ein Freies um sich versammelt halten, das ein Verweilen gewährt den jeweiligen Dingen und ein Wohnen dem Menschen inmitten der Dinge" [*ivi*, p. 208]).

[21] "Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth" (Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, cit., p. 146 ["Das Wohnen ist die Weise, wie die Sterblichen auf der Erde sind"; Id., *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), cit., p. 150]).

[22] Giovanni Dissegna, *Che cosa significa abitare? Martin Heidegger e lo spazio occidentale, settant'anni dopo i "Colloqui di Darmstadt"*, in «Atti e rassegna tecnica della società degli ingegneri e degli architetti in Torino», LXXV, nr. 2, 2021, pp. 33-38: 34.

[23] Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, cit., p. 152 ("Ein Raum ist etwas Eingeräumtes, Freigegebenes, nämlich in eine Grenze" [Heidegger, *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), cit., p. 156]).

[24] *Ivi*, pp. 154-155 ("Doch der Raum ist kein Gegenüber für den Menschen. Er ist weder ein äußerer Gegenstand noch ein inneres Erlebnis. Es gibt nicht die Menschen und außerdem *Raum*; denn sage ich 'ein Mensch' und denke

It is particularly interesting that Heidegger addresses the etymological connection between the Greek *techne* and the notion of "bringing forth", or "producing" (*tikto*). *Techne*, however, is not merely "technique", as thematized by Heidegger, but also "art", in the sense of "making something appear" in a particular way. "Art as *techne*" thus becomes a mode through which the relation between human beings and space can be grasped – a first step toward a deeper understanding of "dwelling", that quintessential human characteristic which overcomes all the specific definitions Heidegger attempts. Through this interpretative lens, Heidegger reaffirms the centrality of relationality at the core of our inquiry.

Thus, from a Heideggerian perspective, the artistic relationship with space – as it manifests in happenings and artistic actions – appears as a meaningful attempt to engage with a deeper stratum of reality.

Nitsch's mystical conception and his interest in ancient wisdom also manifest in his treatment of the concept of space. He integrates a philosophical, qualitative understanding of space with an esoteric vision of the world as a living organism. In esoteric traditions, the universe is understood as a macrocosm and as an external manifestation of the internal spiritual world coinciding with the human soul. Nature is not a static or inert reality, but rather the living *physis*, inhabited by divine *potestates*, numinous forces, and entities that mediate between immanence and transcendence. This macrocosm-microcosm relationship, central, among others, in Hermetic and Kabbalistic traditions, exemplifies the esoteric conviction that the structure of the cosmos is mirrored in the human soul.

This symbolic conception, which Nitsch identifies as the *file rouge* connecting premodern esotericism, Presocratic Greek philosophy, and Christian mysticism through to its resurgence in German Romanticism, underpins his conception of space as the topology through which nature reveals its essence[25]. Nature should not be understood in opposition to God or transcendence, but rather as the sacred, immanent miracle of Being (*das Sein*) in its totality. It is precisely the horizon, the spatial condition of our existence in the world as beings[26]. Nature,

ich mit diesem Wort denjenigen, der menschlicher Weise ist, das heißt wohnt, dann nenne ich mit dem Namen 'ein Mensch' bereits den Aufenthalt im Geviert bei den Dingen. […] Räume öffnen sich dadurch, daß sie in das Wohnen des Menschen eingelassen sind" [*ivi*, pp. 158-159]). On the "Fourfold" (*Geviert*) see *infra*, note 166, chapter 2.2.1.

[25] But, Nitsch roughly clarifies, "I could never warm up to anthroposophy" ("Für die Anthroposophie konnte ich mich nie erwärmen" [in Wolfgang Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund. Hermann Nitsch am Wort. Von A bis Z*, Wieser Verlag, Klagenfurt/Celovec 2008, p. 12]).

[26] On the connection between esoteric knowledge and contemporary science on the notions of space and time, see the chapter "The Metamorphoses of Hermes: Neognostic Cosmologies and Traditional Gnosis", in Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, State University of New York Press, New York 1994, pp. 275-296.

in this sense, is a continuous, eternal "event of creation"[27], with space representing the "external" side of this cosmic manifestation[28].
If sacredness characterizes in this perspective the inner ontology of reality, then a concrete recognition of this ontology is necessary to transform space in a living, sacred place. In this transformative process, symbolic and ritual acts play a fundamental role.

Furthermore, it is our conviction – and, as we shall see, several insights offered by Nitsch support this interpretation – that the spatial dimension in Nitsch's performances may be understood primarily as ritual space, that is, as a space configured in such a way that the sacred – or the holy – (understood here in light of Rudolf Otto's legacy, referring to his already treated notion of *das Heilige* as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) – can manifest itself through enacted ritual gestures. Moreover, it must manifest itself in this very specific space, and not in any other, thereby, configuring it, as we have argued, as a *place*.
Sacred place is manifested through ritual gestures as a form of "sacred topology" – a structure integrating symbolism, the metaphysics of spatiality[29], and sacred art. From this perspective, space is not merely a quantitative and extensive dimension (transcending the modern Cartesian notion of *res extensa*), but rather emerges as a pattern characterized by specific essential qualities. These qualities reveal the essence of being through the fascinating and disturbing power of Otherness – the "Wholly Other" (*ganz Andere*) – and can subsequently be grasped and appreciated through the hermeneutic power of myths and symbols, and ultimately conceptualized in theological or religious terms.
The previously discussed connection between the religious sacred and artistic sublime implies that everything that is touched by the appearance of the sacred manifests as an epiphany, emanation, or irradiation of the sacred itself. Whereas traditional art focuses on employing artistic techniques to transform the artistic object into poles of sacred manifestation, it may be hypothesized that, in the case of Nitsch's work, performative art exploits the dynamic energy of space – artificially configured through specific techniques – precisely to evoke the same sacred presence.

Furthermore, sacred place is inherently heterogeneous: it possesses qualities which distinguish it from profane place and imbue its elements with cosmic significance – it is no coincidence

[27] See Hermann Nitsch, *das sein. zur theorie des orgien mysterien theaters*, 3 volls., Styria, Wien 2009, vol. III, p. 676.
[28] Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1981.
[29] Which Tuan has recognized within the "oriented mythical space" lived by religious communities. See on that Tuan, *Space and Place*, cit., pp. 91-96.

that Nitsch has inserted in his *Partituren* several pictures of constellations and galaxies[30], probably interpreted as a fascinating, visible, yet distant exterior manifestation of the creative principle of the whole of reality. Indeed, these elements do not mean only what their material shape refers to, but they always symbolically embody a reference to transcendence – to something which overcomes their visible surface[31]. Phenomenologically, space – sacred or profane – transcends self-reference. It emerges indeed as something which means more than itself, as if a neutral object made of quantity and extension; rather, it emerges through the corporeal and incorporeal actions which interact with them within temporality – this is also why space is always temporal (the temporal structure of experience regards not only consciousness, but also embodied actions). As explained by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "hermeneutics transcends the Newtonian 'common sense' model of space, which sees space as uniformly empty and filled with discrete objects and believes that all distances are clearly measurable. For a hermeneutics of place, space is not geometrical, but experiential. A hermeneutic vision of place distinguishes neither objective space markers nor purely subjective experiences that can be made within the place, but insists on a dialectics between the individual and a space that is always already at work for that individual. The place we experience has always already presented itself to us as meaningful. Being in a place always presupposes that we are already engaged with the place. In the end, we can also understand ourselves through places"[32].

Roberto Tagliaferri argues, adopting a postmodern perspective which we will recognize as pivotal in Nitsch's comprehension, that "sacred space is use-less, non-functional, because it is not inhabitable, it is the coming and going of the threshold, which makes us uninhabit both the inside and the outside. In it we experience the unreliability of our securities, the incompleteness of our words, of our feelings; we feel the irreconcilable laceration of life. The threshold makes us 'inhabit distance' in that existential situation that K. Jaspers calls 'being-between' (*Zwischenwesen*). The disorientation of sacred space, which makes us strangers in our own home, avoids that 'too near' to God where words cannot be spoken and that 'too far' from God where words cannot be heard. (...). Sacred space does not guarantee cures, nor does it delude us with supposed remedies; it simply shows us where we are and awakens a longing for

[30] Cf. Hermann Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater. die partituren aller aufgeführten aktionen*, 8 volls., Freibord, Wien 1979-1998. On Nitsch's personal fascination for the starry sky, see Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, pp. 87-88.
[31] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt Inc, London-New York 1959, pp. 20-21.
[32] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Hermeneutics of Play – Hermeneutics of Place: On Play, Style and Dream*, in Bruce B. Janz (ed.), *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, Springer, Cham 2017, pp. 97-114: 98.

home"[33]. This existential longing – we need to integrate Tagliaferri's reflections on this point – is complemented by ritual practices precisely aimed at healing the laceration. Sacred place, including within postsecular age, is not merely for existential reflection, but promises the reunification of divided polarities in higher unity. Nitsch's work exalts life's tragic and conflictual dynamics through recognizing its divine and meaningful essence, finding justification in symbolical reference to the Origin – which for Nitsch coincides with the lifeworld and the whole universe.

3.1.2 Space, Performance, Ritual: An Intriguing Triangle in Nitsch's *Aktionen*

Analyzing Hermann Nitsch's aesthetics and its embodiment in ritual sacred places requires examining the performative dimension of his art. However, this research pursues a hermeneutical approach focused on Nitsch's religious, philosophical, and symbolic references rather than performative aesthetics per se. While performative theory provides crucial insights into Nitsch's formal methods, and is also particularly connected to his evemenential philosophical perspective, we argue that the hermeneutical comprehension of his mythic-symbolic content offers a more theoretically promising avenue for understanding his contribution to contemporary sacred art.

It is necessary to preface that the performative essence of Nitsch's art acquires in the context of the present research a particular relevant value since it can be interpreted, from our standpoint, as an aesthetic concrete counterpart of the hermeneutical reflections on the notion of event (*Ereignis*). To anticipate this recognition in succinct terms: the performative value of Nitsch's artistic proposal is not limited to aesthetic attention to the spatial-temporal, bodily, and imaginative transformative dynamic of the subjective experience of the person involved in the performance, but absorbs, especially thanks to the specific symbolic, religious and esoteric references (which we will analyze in the next paragraphs) a connection to an Other dimension, one which we have defined by virtue of the notion of the sacred. All the most relevant features of modern artistic performances – such as their non-objective character, the importance of embodiment and presence, the function of space, sounds and rhythms, their mechanical non-reproducibility thanks to their contingent temporality – acquire in Nitsch's aesthetics a relevant function as they interact with the rich store of symbols which are chosen by him not by chance, but precisely because of their sacred (and thus performative) effect. This awareness deeply

[33] Roberto Tagliaferri, *Genius loci e performance rituale*, in Silvio Bolognini (ed.), *Prospettiva Ponte e Genius loci. Materiali per una ricerca*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2020, pp. 841-846: 846.

differentiates Nitsch's artworks from those put forth by several other contemporary performers who take extreme care of the deep role of performativity, but without considering its potential sacred impact.

But first, what exactly do we mean by "performative"?
In the artistic context, we define "performance" as a form of artistic expression primarily based on actions and interactions – where the dimension of the event prevails over that of the object. Academic discourse has significantly expanded this notion, applying it not only to the specific domain of performing arts, but beyond them, to social and anthropological behaviors. "Performance studies", which emerged notably through the work of Richard Schechner, emphasizes the productive potential of adopting a performance lens to interpret not only artistic practices, but also cultural phenomena in general. Performance, in this sense, is seen as a continuum of human actions through which individuals and groups express their membership in a community or culture via various forms of interaction, where behaviors are symbolically re-enacted: "All behavior consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors. Most people aren't aware that they are doing any such thing. People just 'live life.' But artistic and ritual performances are consciously marked, framed, or heightened: behaviors carefully shaped, separated from ordinary life. Art and rituals are restored restored behavior, if you will"[34].

The analytical productivity of the notion of "performative" has recently led to what is now known as the "performative turn" in academic discourse. In this context, "performativity" refers to any bodily action or practice that, through its enactment, generates meaning and reshapes the human cultural relationship with reality. The "performative" thus refers to actions whose occurrence has the power to alter reality and generate dynamic, intersubjective interactions. Emerging in the late 1980s, the "performative turn" in the humanities[35] – still vibrant today, particularly in fields such as cultural anthropology, aesthetics, gender studies, and cultural theory – "seeks to understand the generative and transformative aspects of culture on the basis of events, practices, material embodiments and media forms"[36]. The growing interest in performativity has also led scholars to draw upon ritual theory, emphasizing practices that generate and shape reality.

[34] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, 4th edition, Routledge, London-New York 2020, p. 10.
[35] This had been anticipated in previous reflections, such as John Langshaw Austin's (1911-1960) seminal *How to Do Things With Words* (in the philosophy of language) and Victor Turner's (1920-1983) studies in cultural anthropology.
[36] Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, cit., p. 73.

Studying culture primarily through the lens of performance entails a shift from a representational and textual model of cultural analysis to a theatrical and performative one. This perspective re-energizes the vocabulary and imagination of cultural studies, producing a homogenous mélange of theoretical approaches aimed at redefining orientation schemas through concepts such as staging, happening, social rituals, linguistic constructions, detours, and liminality etc. Cultural symbols, within this framework, are no longer seen as fixed carriers of meaning, but as processual forms that reveal their own dynamic genesis.

Hermann Nitsch has aroused significant interest in this theoretical context because his artistic production has a triple performative character, so to speak. Indeed, his work operates simultaneously across three performative registers that make his art particularly significant for this theoretical discourse. His *Aktionen*, for instance, express:

- Artistic Performances: being structured as live events emphasizing temporal unfolding rather than static objects;
- Cultural Performances: following Schechner's framework, Nitsch's work transcends purely artistic boundaries to explore ritual and religious domains.
- Ontological Performativity: Nitsch conceives being itself in processual, evenemential terms that reject dualistic perspectives, aligning with philosophical notions of *Ereignis* (event).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Erika Fischer-Lichte's pivotal study, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, where theatre is presented as the leading discipline of the performative turn discourse[37], repeatedly mentions Hermann Nitsch's art, analyzing the relationship between individuality and communal practices in his theatre and arguing that the desire for "immediacy" and "authenticity" in hypermediatized Western culture represents the cornerstone of his performative art[38].

[37] Bachmann-Medick synthetizes: "Confronted with the dominance of terms from textual studies, theater studies has (…) offered a repertoire of staging concepts, including performance, representation, staging, expression, perception, corporeality and mediality. As a result, the discipline has been able to further strengthen its ties to cultural and media studies, which were initiated in the 1960s by their own social-scientific turn and are now stimulating a wider conception of performativity that reaches into the spheres of cultural, organizational and technological performance" (*ivi*, p. 89).

[38] See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 68. This important source for our research should be considered outside of the domain of "Performance studies", although in dialogue with the field, due to its distinct theoretical perspective: the theory is not grounded in Anglo-Saxon discourse but rather in the European aesthetic tradition of theatre, Avantgarde aesthetics and philosophy, and is contextualized within the *Theaterwissenschaft* (theatre studies). While Schechner extends the notion of performance from the artistic field to encompass all social practices, considering them as models for human action, Fischer-Lichte confines her analysis to the artistic domain, particularly through the concept of *Aufführung* (performance, staging, representation) and with a focus on the *Aktionskunst*, which she considers foundational to constructing a genuine understanding of the performative turn.

Although the performative dimension of Nitsch's art appears pivotal in the concrete artistic technical choices displayed by the artist, the methodological orientation of our research will focus primarily on the specific mythic-symbolic content offered by Nitsch, establishing a dialogue between his sources, the religious and esoteric context expressed in the so-called "analytical leitmotifs" emerging in his actions, and the philosophical worldview emerging in his own theoretical production. While the performative turn "focuses not on the cultural contexts of meaning or the idea of 'culture as text' but on the practical dimension of the generation of cultural meanings and experiences"[39], and performance itself "eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. It vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art. In this case, understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience"[40], we still argue that in Nitsch's case, it is precisely the former domain that remains the most theoretically interesting and promising. It would be a mistake to ignore the deep hermeneutical effort undertaken by Nitsch in restoring the meaningful dimension of the myths that appear resurrected in his works and to interpret them exclusively as arbitrary epiphanies of aesthetic performative innovation. His symbols are not arbitrary formal elements, but carefully selected references that activate what we might call "sacred performativity" – performative actions that connect participants to transcendent dimensions.

Certainly, the performative aspect of Nitsch's works represents a revolutionary technical method that the artist established in order to underscore the evemenential nature of his work and to challenge conservative objective art, thereby overcoming stereotypes and engaging the public. While acknowledging performative theory's importance for understanding Nitsch's formal innovations, this research prioritizes hermeneutical analysis of his mythic-symbolic content. His deep hermeneutical effort to restore meaningful dimensions of resurrected myths cannot be reduced to aesthetic performative innovation. The performative aspect serves as a technical method that underlines the evenemential nature of his work and challenges conservative objective art, but the philosophical and existential significance of his cultural positioning exceeds what performance studies alone can illuminate.

The frustrating "experience of destabilization" which the participants in performances experience while attempting to order and rationalize the aesthetic event[41] does not contradict the gnoseological process of the experience itself, which Gadamer, as we have seen, defined as

[39] Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, cit., p. 73.
[40] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 16.
[41] Cf. *ivi*, p. 157.

the "speechless" quality of contemporary images that paradoxically speaks to the public in terms of "estrangement"[42].

Nitsch's art performances, by virtue of their intrinsic aesthetic characteristics, preserve the dramatic dimension of ritual. They retain an intrinsically strong narrative function: through gestures, ritual actions, and bodily disposition, the performance translates the sacred event of meaning that constitutes the ultimate goal of Nitsch's aesthetics. Rituals, understood here as performative practices within a religious-historical tradition that establish a transformative ontological relationship between a group of humans and divine being(s)[43], thus completely overlap with Nitsch's artistic practices.

Nitsch's art can therefore be interpreted not only in accordance with Mircea Eliade's aforementioned hypothesis that even in modernity's art the sacred is disguised and preserved through its essential resilience, but rather as intentionally reconstructed and deliberately made manifest. It is no coincidence that Nitsch has directly declared: "I don't like the word 'modern'"[44]. While his thought is clearly libertarian rather than reactionary, the worldview of rational modernity, with its accompanying values of Enlightenment, materialism, secularization, and scientism, is profoundly rejected by Nitsch, who is, in this field as well, a disciple of Friedrich Nietzsche – and therefore an advocate of a Dionysian and vitalistic aesthetic foundation.

However, in order to better understand the connection between space and holiness, it is necessary to discuss the inescapable role played by rituals. Sacred places and ritual exist in a biunivocal relationship: spaces enable proper ritual performance while ritual power establishes spatial sacredness. Sacred places allow rituals to be properly facilitated in a coherent context, but it is also the symbolic and spiritual power of the rituals that establishes the sacred quality

[42] See on that *infra*, chapter 2.2.3. Therefore, we cannot agree, at least in Nitsch's case, with Fischer-Lichte's conclusion: "Overall, the generated meaning does not facilitate the comprehension of the performance but enables an experiential range. While hermeneutic processes can partially be incorporated into this aesthetic experience they are ultimately of marginal importance for it. The performances I referred to above did not seek to be understood but experienced. They cannot be incorporated into the paradigm of hermeneutic aesthetics" (*ivi*, p. 158). The performative nature of Nitsch's art appears to us to be a strategy of the embodiment and incorporation of that process of philosophical transformation which philosophical hermeneutics theoretically situates as always culturally, linguistically and symbolically mediated.

[43] Defining the notion of "ritual" is extremely problematic. For an introduction to the discussion see: Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields, The Free Press, New York 1995; Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1967; Jan A.M. Snoek, *Defining 'Rituals'*, in Jens Kreinath et al. (eds.), *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, Brill, Leiden 2006, pp. 3-14.

[44] "Das Wort modern mag ich nicht" (Hermann Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 69). This sentence seems to evoke the famous Schiele's – artist loved by Nitsch – affirmation: "Art cannot be modern. Art is eternal" ("Kunst kann nicht modern sein. Kunst is urewig"; inscribed in the artwork *Chairs*, 1912).

of places. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a place preserved in its holiness without any ritual taking place within it. It is thus impossible to determine which of these two poles precedes the other: they essentially exist and operate within a dialectical and interrelated dimension.

Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017) demonstrates in his seminal *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*[45] that rituals and places are fundamentally interconnected. According to Smith – and differently from Eliade –, sacred and profane are situational categories of emplacement rather than substantive ones. Sacred and ritual places are spaces of performativity, power, and decision – the latter in the etymological sense that they "cut off" (Latin: *decidere*), determining differences and imposing a specific shape to reality which pertains to its intrinsic ontology. From this point of view, the role of space in the religious context increases in comparison to other more widespread interpretations: space cannot be considered a mere container, nor as a background in which religious phenomena occur; religious practices exist and express themselves exactly through – and thanks to – space, and simultaneously they play a significant part in the constitution and determination of it.

Religious space becomes symbolic through living practices – prayers, liturgies, ceremonies, and rites. As Knott, a pioneer of the "spatial turn", notes, "ritual *takes place* and *makes place* in this sense" [46].

Carla Danani identifies sacred places' dual nature: "sacred place can be understood on the one hand as a manifestation, an application of an act of faith, of a religious sense to which it gives expression and form, and the way in which the configuration takes place has relevance to the contents which that act of faith acknowledges, from which derives a certain specificity of spatial forms. In this respect, space is conditioned: in the fact and in the way of its existence and being recognized (...). On the other hand, space is also conditioning in acting as a singular way of opening up to religious experience: the shapes and the specific elements that design it tell of and refer to contents of faith, while its very existence, in its proportions, in the game of solids and voids, of heights and levels, of distribution of volumes and objects, is what can activate the ritual performance, recollection, the ability to intend a waste, to access to an 'other' experience. This is how we can speak of the spatial experience as intrinsic to religion"[47].

In this very specific sense, art performance and religious ritual share fundamental connections, particularly in their use of gestures and bodily action to create transformative experiences.

[45] University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987.
[46] Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion. A Spatial Analysis*, Equinox Publishing Ltd, London 2005, p. 43.
[47] Carla Danani, *La religione nello spazio pubblico. Prender forma di spazi: una riflessione filosofica* in «Filosofia e Teologia», 3, 2014, pp. 507-527: 522.

Following Schechner's provocation, we can hypothesize that "the earliest known performance spaces are the caves of south-west Europe where, for example at Tuc d'Audoubert, one must 'crawl through claustrophobic low passages to reach the startling footprints of ancient dancers in bare feet and the models of copulating bisons, in clay on the floor beyond'"[48].

Erika Fischer-Lichte, who explicitly refers on this point to Hermann Nitsch, shows how performative actions enable both individual transformation and community creation[49]. Thus, both from a subjective and intersubjective point of view, the participants of performances, at least in the most intense ones, can reach sensory limits and even transcend them, achieving knowledge through excess – so that bodies can enter into subtle contact with transcendence. This kind of aesthetic experience is very similar from an inner, psychological and phenomenological perspective to the experience achieved in religious and esoteric rituals, despite the obvious differences[50].
Performances, like happenings and other artistic actions, embody an expressive language based on a space-time dimension which is precisely set outside daily life (like the sacred space-time) or, sometimes, pertains to a part of daily life which is voluntarily "aestheticized" and thus distinguished from the routine time.

In this respect, Richard Schechner's "Performance studies" reveal performance's anthropological and sociological dimension – it embodies the idea that the "act" itself contains a symbolic and intersubjective role, which becomes pivotal in the construction of communities and social identities. Therefore, ritual acts can be defined as performative acts within religious contexts. Schechner distinguishes artistic performances from cultural performances (in this field also religious manifestations can be included), but their structural similarities are evident. Schechner emphasizes the importance of the concept of Event in the comprehension of performances: they are unique, unrepeatable moments in space and time, which acquires an evocative aura. However, this uniqueness is not a decontextualized act, but a dynamic

[48] Richard Schechner, *Ritual and Performance*, in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Routledge, London-New York 2002, pp. 613-647: 614.
[49] Cf. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., pp. 52-54. On the role between art, spirituality and community, see the interesting following conference proceedings: Veronica Caciolli (ed.), *Arte. Mistica. Comunità*, WIP, Bari 2021; Id. (ed.), *Arte. Mistica. Comunità. 2*, postmedia books, Torino 2024.
[50] Unlike contemporary performances, religious rituals are part of a systematic doctrinaire system; they are structurally embedded within the common tradition of a national, ethnic, or at least socio-cultural community, and contribute to unifying different generations. It is noteworthy that Nitsch's explicit use of religious and esoteric symbols appears to contextualize his artistic performances in a peculiar way into a traditional and doctrinal framework as well, one in which the sacred aesthetic space could generate a new structured form of religious experience (and knowledge).

experience which allows for recalling knowledge that has been forgotten, restoring a specific behavior which may have been hidden, distorted, removed, and which is restored and represented in the form of drama or rite. The concept of "restored behavior" proposed by Schechner describes the moment in the performative process in which meaning emerges "through 'reliving' the original experience (…), and is given an appropriate aesthetic form", which "then becomes a piece of communicable wisdom"[51] in a process of tradition, transmission, and cultural dialogue. But this deals not only with "restoring" previous behaviors (an issue broadly emphasized in the "memory studies"), but also with elaborating new ones: "The performance transforms itself. (…) the rules may 'frame' the performance, but the 'flow' of action and interaction within that frame may conduce to hitherto unprecedented insights and even generate new symbols and meanings, which may be incorporated into subsequent performances"[52]. Indeed, as Catherine Bell argues, "since the real world is rarely experienced as a coherently ordered totality, the microcosm constructed on stage purports to provide the experience of a mock-totality, an interpretative appropriation of some greater if elusive totality"[53].

One could therefore trace a very strict connection between art and religion thanks to the ritual performative dimension. Victor Turner (1920-1983) comparatively underlines that "religion, like art, lives in so far as it is performed, i.e., in so far as its rituals are 'going concerns'. If you wish to spay or geld religion, first remove its rituals, its generative and regenerative processes. For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning. In ritual one lives through events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings, relives semiogenetic events, the deeds and words of prophets and saints, or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics"[54].

The train of thought leads us to the following equation: if performances create ritual places, and ritual places possess a sacred dimension, then performance spaces can manifest sacredness. However, this requires two main conditions: direct participant involvement and meaningful symbolic content.
Indeed, we should ask: could the connection between performance spaces and sacred places be recognized in all different kinds of artistic performances?

[51] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, PAJ Publications, New York 1982, p. 18.
[52] *Ivi*, p. 79.
[53] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 160.
[54] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, cit., p. 86.

The answer to this question should be negative, due to the the two aforementioned conditions: first, the encounter with the sacred is a very concrete experience that requires the direct involvement of humans in the ritual to achieve it, and not all artistic performances are practiced and experienced by the public, which sometimes remains merely an external observer – and sometimes not even of the living performance, but rather of a recorded or photographed version of it[55]. Second, and most importantly, not only the bodily and perceptive dimension but also the content of the performative events – i.e. the semantics of the gestures, the meaning transmitted, the symbolic orientation – is fundamental to evoking the numinous. Otherwise, every performed practice could acquire symbolic and religious meaning, leading to a problematic form of epistemological reductionism according to which every transformative human action – the transformative quality being essential to rituals and distinguishing them from ceremonies – should be interpreted as religious, even if conceived with explicitly profane functions. Indeed, Nitsch's case study will help demonstrate the hermeneutical relevance of the contents proposed in performance in enabling it to evoke a sacred experience. The performative gesture, decontextualized from any symbolic, metaphysical, and religious meanings, can hardly generate sacred experiences. As Wijnia argues, "Art's set-apart status, embodying a liminal zone, does not automatically imply that every individual regards every work of art as sacred. Such a valuation eventually depends on the discursive framework in which the art is presented and the framework from which people relate to artworks, as well as the perceived experience of the work and the consequential attributed meanings"[56].

The similarities between religious and artistic performative actions thus concern the process and experience, but not (not always, at least) the content and the subsequent knowledge: "Despite the similarities, there are no universal themes, narratives, or archetypes of

[55] Nitsch's abolition of the proscenium stage in the context of the OMT is particularly interesting – all viewers somehow enter into the extended continuous space of the performance, becoming protagonists of the play. The intensification of perception characterizing the OMT is intended to embrace all those present, who are divided into three groups: the audience, the active actors/protagonists, and the passive actors/protagonists (who, mostly naked, are subjected to the ritual actions of the active actors). Nitsch's conviction that everyone – onlookers included – should feel as genuine participants of the performance stands in opposition to conventional theatre, where the distinction between actors and public is clear. In developing this specific idea, Nitsch aligned himself not with Wagner, who remained anchored to a more conservative conception of theatre, but rather with Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), who aspired through his "Theatre of Cruelty" to establish direct communication between the spectator and the spectacle (on this, cf. Frank Gessner, *Underworlds. The Drawings as Plans for concrete Architecture* (2011), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 686-689: 686). In Nitsch's theatrical actions, the only consistent difference between participants depends on the fact that actors' actions are executed with choreographic precision, thanks to rehearsal and to Nitsch's *Partituren*, whereas public actions depend on the spontaneity of the public itself. "As the Action progresses – Schmied argues – the distinction between actors and non-actors is blurred, and by the end, all those present have become active participants" (Wieland Schmied, *A Subterranean Cosmos. Reflections on Hermann Nitsch's Orgien Mysterien Theater and his architectural visions* (1991), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 676-685: 682).

[56] Wijnia, *Resonating Sacralities*, cit., p. 51.

performance. But there are universal ethological and neurological processes shaping the formal qualities of performances; these processes yield unique experiences to those making performances and to those participating in them. The similarity of the ritual process to the training-workshop-rehearsal process is evidence of the close and indeed indissoluble links between ritual, aesthetic, and social performances"[57]. Visual language and performative language thus need to find a balance and complementarity to evoke the desired emotive experience.

Nitsch, we could argue, sees performance beyond *Erlebnis* – aesthetic experiences produce deeper world comprehension, thus being endowed with a hermeneutic function: extreme aesthetic experiences intoxicate life but subsequently elicit a richer comprehension of the world, expressing a gnoseological function. This function is made possible precisely by the artistic role which Nitsch, even in his most radical performative actions, attributes to artistic form. Forms, especially symbolic forms, constitute the core of his interpretation of arts, despite the influence of Art Informel and abstraction on his work. Form, indeed, is not necessarily figurative: it is that essential shape through which the artist condenses his expression, even if largely divorced from appearances. Form encompasses all those models and figures in which *Lebensform*, the "form of life", is condensed, those which contribute to the artistic intensification – or enhancement – of life in its sacred meaning[58].
Nitsch indeed states: "ever since its very beginnings, art primarily involved an aesthetic compression of our environment to effectively be art (aesthetic), meaning that impressions were arranged according to certain meanings. the artist arranged a combination of sensory impressions and opened up the doors to an expanded and idealized reality"[59]. Knowledge of this "expanded and idealized" reality is meaningful knowledge, which encompasses the path of humans interested in searching for their existential truth.

Nitsch's sacred vision culminates in his "Theater of Orgies and Mysteries" (*Orgien Mysterien Theater*). This is his most relevant sacred representation, where a sacred place is built through performative artistic rituality and the religious and esoteric symbols expressed in the theatrical performance. However, the path which led him to configure this artistic celebration, which will be at the core of our analysis, is a long artistic, intellectual, and existential journey, whose

[57] Schechner, *Ritual and Performance*, cit., p. 645.
[58] Cf. Alberto Giacomelli, *Art, Life and Form. On Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Existence*, in «Studi di estetica», a. XLIV, IV serie, 1/2021, pp. 155-181.
[59] Hermann Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), in Id., *Atlas*, ed. by Emanuele de Donno, Italo Tomassoni and Giuseppe Morra, Viaindustriae publishing, Foligno 2017, pp. 70-91: 71.

previous steps briefly need to be summarized, not only in order to offer a necessary contextualization of Hermann Nitsch's artistic biography, but because already in the earlier works, it is possible to recognize some hints of the fundamental relationship between art and the sacred in postmodern context, along with the desire to stimulate, including through extremely provocatory ways, Western culture towards such.

Nitsch firstly developed his ritual-space connection through so-called Viennese Actionism (*Wiener Aktionismus*), a short-lived art movement (1960s-1970s) that Nitsch joined together with Otto Muehl (1925-2013), Günter Brus (1938-2024), Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940-1969), and Heinz Cibulka, who for decades supported Nitsch's works as a passive actor and as a photographer of the actions, rising as the "prototype" of the artistic performative body, simultaneously subject and object of art[60].

The *Wiener Aktionismus* can be considered Austria's most significant and controversial contribution to the development of 20th-century Avantgarde art. Its main tenet, despite the inner pluralism of its not at all homogenous movement[61], was the overcoming of the immediate association between art and objects, contributing to the radicalization of the already early 20th-century aestheticization of life (the futuristic motto of *Arte Vita*)[62]. Bodies, objects, substances (often uncanny) were adopted to subtract sectors of experience from a status of insignificance, anticipating the international success of Body Art in the 1970s. "This includes dealing with all body processes, including socially marginalised ones such as urination, defecation, sexuality, or birth, but also addressing homosexuality or transgender as well as the question of what effect a differently built body has on the perception of the world"[63]. In this trajectory, the sources of inspiration that the Austrian painting tradition drew upon, albeit radically revised and modernized, manifested an interest in making conscious the connections between bodily,

[60] Cf. Hermann Nitsch, *heinz cibulka as passive actor* (1975), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 146-148 (in Hannah Stegmayer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. Das Orgien Mysterien Theater. Fotos früher Aktionen*, Kunstverein Rosenheim, Rosenheim 2004, pp. 9-13).

[61] The cooperation of Viennese actionists never led them to form an official public group. There is no official signed Manifesto representing the intentions of all the involve artists, and also in a 1965 publication Günter Brus generally speaks about a "Wiener Aktionsgruppe" (cf. Eva Badura-Triska and Hubert Klocker, *Der Wiener Aktionismus und sein Kontext. Einleitung und thematischer Überblick*, in Id. (eds.), *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, Mumok, Wien 2012, pp. 9-11: 11).

[62] Nitsch seems to refer to it when it affirms: "Life itself is art" ("Leben selbst ist die Kunst" [in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 57]). The vitalism which lets Nitsch thinking at the possibility of manifesting in his art life in itself – "through the o.m. theater life itself is staged" (Hermann Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), in Id., *Atlas*, cit., pp. 46-50: p. 50), and through life, which coincides with being, being itself, in a direct and not mediated form, is probably the point which mostly separated Gadamer's hermeneutical theory from Nitsch's one, even though they are extremely akin under many other respects.

[63] Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Der Wiener Aktionismus und sein Kontext*, cit., p. 11.

sensitive, and psychological spheres – such as Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Richard Gerstl (1883-1908), Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) and Egon Schiele (1890-1918).

A direct confrontation with the concrete "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*) was pursued through recourse to performative art, which was consonant with the contemporary artistic languages of American "happening", the "Fluxus" movement, the Nouveaux Réalistes, and also the works of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), albeit with a more radical and existential insistence on the psychoanalytical discovery of the depth of human impulses. The *Aktionen* appeared to them as an extension of their first attempts at abstract and Art Informel painting: for Nitsch, action painting prefigures the red abreaction model of the Orgien Mysterien Theater; "with Gunter Brus, his own body as an instrument of experience and expression has played a central pivotal role from the very beginning. For Otto Muehl, on the other hand, the material – in the sense that encompasses the human body and understood as matter par excellence – is the starting point of his action, based on the conviction of the necessity and creative power of destruction, understood under the concept of *Totalrevolution* as a layer of social transformation. Finally, Rudolf Schwarzkogler's approach is characterized by the desire for the purest possible experiences"[64].

Otto Muehl's engagement with the material – understood as raw "existence" – shows an interest which is common throughout Wiener Aktionismus, in the residual, the outsider, the taboo: the beauty of art is understood as a wound, injuring the common, superficial awareness of reality and expanding the sphere of what can be lived and experienced. Social norms, restrictions, and prejudices are annihilated through the uncanny power of art. The confrontation with social norms and institutions is even more clearly developed in the second half of the 1960s, to the point that Wiener Aktionismus seems to artistically anticipate some of the subsequent '68 movement's vindications. Among the objects of polemic – considering that every form of cultural mediation should undergo criticism in this context – are rationalism and scientific materialism. Thus, a world of magic and enchantment opens up, based on the unconscious territories discovered by psychoanalysis[65], but also on esoteric and magical revival. The alienated and fragmented man of modernity needs to be healed through the therapeutic power of art[66].

[64] See Eva Badura-Triska, *Die Erweiterung der Malerei. Vom Tafelbild zur Aktion*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., pp. 31-95: 31.

[65] Cf. Kerstin Barnick-Braun, *Wiener Aktionismus und Psychoanalyse – Freud, Jung, Reich*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., pp. 67-68.

[66] See Rosemarie Brucher, *Abreaktion, Katharsis, Heilung. Wirkungsästhetische Konzepte im Wiener Aktionismus*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., p. 36.

Nitsch first met Schwarkzogler and Cibulka, with whom he frequently spent time after attending graphic school. Later, in artistic circles, he met Mühl and Brus. Together with Mühl, he organized several artistic performances, including his first action, which took place in 1962 in Mühl's studio. In the same location, they staged *Fest des psycho-physischen Naturalismus* (1963), an event so provocative that it led to police intervention and the brief detention of Nitsch, Brus, and Bauer. Despite differing approaches to performance – Nitsch's being theatrical and large-scale, and Brus' being brief and intense, with short and concentrated actions – the two became close friends. Nitsch noted that their dialogue was highly productive in shaping and advancing their respective aesthetic visions[67].

Nitsch fully embraced "actionist" theory and practice, which had already begun to emerge in the 60s through "Fluxus" – an international network of artists engaged in anti-artistic, interdisciplinary efforts to develop new forms of performative and intermedial art. Fluxus exerted a significant influence on Wiener Aktionismus as well[68]. Nitsch valued the essential and somehow "archaic" dimension of the happening over its socio-political contestation: that is, he focused on the idea of attending to "special" extraordinary events – pursued not for utilitarian or teleological purposes, but purely for the sake of beauty and the "event" itself. For him, the artistic "action" or "happening" represented a means of reconnecting with a more primal and vital dimension of life – one that modernity, with its complex web of norms, conventions, and rules, had repressed and concealed[69]. In this context, according to Nitsch, authentic and revolutionary art becomes "the whetting, intensification, sensitization of our senses, expanding our scope for lived experiences, challenging us to feel and notice sensations more strongly – it brings us to lead a more intensive, deeper, and more real existence"[70].
What is particularly innovative in "action art" – a term Nitsch uses to describe "happenings" or "performances" – is its integration into the domain of life itself. These actions do not represent anything; rather, in them, "life is elevated to a more intense state. aesthetic density (…) intensifies, accelerates, and enhances the process of life"[71]. From this perspective, Actionism appears to propose specific techniques inspired by the Avantgarde utopia of unifying art and life[72]. According to Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), such work qualifies as "avant-garde lifelike

[67] See Hermann Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit. Aufgezeichnet von Danielle Spera*, Leykam, Graz 2019, p. 104.
[68] Nitsch claims a temporal dominance of Wiener Aktionismus over USA Body Art. Cf. Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 112.
[69] See Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., pp. 90-91.
[70] *Ivi*, p. 70.
[71] *Ivi*, p. 71.
[72] A topic which is at the core of Futurism, that is also a significant ideal reference for Nitsch, especially regarding the refusal of mimetic art, the enhancement and acceleration of life, the revolutionary, vitalistic and synesthetic

art"[73], aligning with the hermeneutical understanding of art as a domain in which reality – through images, symbols, and gestures – is ontologically enriched, offering a variation of the primordial manifestations of Being.

Nitsch explains: "pain and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive. pain is part of it, but so is beauty. birth carries elements of crucifixion as well as resurrection. many of my actions are like births. i only work with images of great intensity. i want to celebrate existence. most people don't even know that they are alive. they live like animals, they live like in a dream, they are not present. with the help of art, the aesthetic experience, i can achieve a deep effect, and so i try to celebrate life, not on the surface"[74].

Nitsch explicitly links his actions to the sacred, framing ritual not as doctrinal, but as oriented toward a sacred dimension. These rituals and cultic forms are not confined to the content of any single religious tradition; instead, they share transreligious functions, intensifying lived experience and offering access to a deeper understanding that goes beyond the descriptive truth upheld by Western rationalistic logocentrism[75].

This philosophical conception is one that Nitsch developed over time through his engagement with a wide range of sources. His personal library, as described by Rudi Fuchs after a visit to Nitsch's, provides valuable insight into his intellectual influences. Fuchs, "trying to form a mental picture of Nitsch's mind", lists the most prominent authors in the collection: figure from the Viennese Modern Age (Klimt, Schiele, Otto Wagner); Viennese Actionism (Brus, Schwarzkogler, Muehl, Rainer, Roth); literary contemporaries (Konrad Bayer, H.C. Artmann, Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener); the beloved old masters (Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh); German classics (Goethe, Hölderlin, Kleist, Novalis, Schopenhauer); "the slightly mad" (Benn, Rimbaud, Trakl, Pound, George, Holz, Hoffmannstahl, Joseph Roth, Musil, Nietzsche, Artaud); Greek tragedians; and key composers (Wagner, Mahler, Bruckner)[76].

It is possible to notice a common thread running through these sources: the confluence of Avantgarde artistic extremism with a quest for the sacred or spiritual. Nitsch pursued this path through his actions, forging a vital link between his philosophy and artistic practice. For him,

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attitude. Cf. on that *ivi*, pp. 84-85.

[73] Cf. Allan Kaprow*, The Real Experiment* (1983), in Id., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by Jeff Kelley, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1993, pp. 201-218.

[74] "schmerz und ästhetik schliessen sich nicht aus. schmerz gehört dazu, aber auch schönheit. die geburt trägt elemente der kreuzigung wie auch der auferstehung. viele meiner aktionen sind wie geburten. ich arbeite nur mit bildern von grosser intensität. ich möchte damit die existenz feiern. die meisten menschen wissen nicht einmal, dass sie leben. sie leben wie tiere, sie leben wie im traum, sie sind nicht vorhanden. mit hilfe der kunst, der ästhetischen erfahrung, kann ich eine tiefe wirkung erzielen, und so versuche ich, das leben zu feiern, nicht an der oberfläche" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 138).

[75] See Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir, *Subversive Esotericism and Aesthetic Radicalism. The Myths and Rituals of Viennese Actionism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2024.

[76] See Fuchs, *Prinzendorf* (1983), cit., pp. 915-916.

philosophy is not abstract theory, but *praktische Daseinstechnik* – a technique of existence, a way of navigating the complexity of human life with intensity and commitment.
Ultimately, the truth revealed through rituals and cults serves to highlight limitations of the logocentric conception of truth. Rather than a fixed and definable ontology – a truth that simply "is" – this foundational dimension of existence "gives itself", "takes place", and thus "happens" within liturgical and ritual performance, aspiring to a more complex, dynamic, and polyvalent disclosure of the *Grund*. In this way, the evenemential theory that underpins both Gadamer's hermeneutics and Nitsch's understanding of contemporary performative art finds a powerful synthesis.

In the late 1950s, Nitsch had also encountered Art Informel, the pictorial movement (1940s-1950s) which includes various European abstract nonfigurative tendencies that represented the European counterpart to American abstract expressionism, about which he also became passionate (with particular interest in Jackson Pollock [1912-1956] and Willem de Koonig [1904-1997]). The term "Art Informel" was adopted by the French critic Michel Tapié (1909-1987) in his 1952 *Un Art Autre*, to describe highly informal, often gestural, procedures.
Among these abstract tendencies, we can find the Tachisme from which Nitsch developed his passion for the colors as fundamental vectors of his art conception.
These new artistic experiments were brought to Austria in the 50s by two young artists, Arnulf Rainer[77] and Maria Lassnig (1919-2014), who had visited Paris and been influenced by the new Informal wave.
Nitsch's perspective on artistic form reveals his commitment, complementary to the interest in happenings and artistic actions, to overcoming every classical descriptive approach, favoring attention to the process, which is understood as the fundamental truth of real being. He notes: "after the second world war, a kind of painting emerged that did not seek to depict anything, that did not want to reproduce anything that already exists in nature, but instead concrete processes played out within the structure of the painting on the canvas itself. they themselves or their effects were put on display; color was understood not as tone color but as concrete substance, as past or fluid that was smeared or poured. the results were determined by the gesture and motor activity of arm and hand movements; (…) the process of making concrete processes and their effects visible challenged the producer as well as the viewer to perceive

[77] Although Rainer was not a member of Wiener Aktionismus, he was a crucial influence on the aesthetics and poetics of the movement – his *Übermalungen* (Overpaintings) were based on the violent obliteration and alteration of already existing images, and his interest in the physical process of painting as an act of aggression and transformation deeply resonates with Nitsch's approach. See on that Piero Tomassoni, *Aktion-Kino: Part One. Wiener Aktionismus and Austrian Cinema*, in *Yes & No Kino+Film Austria: Opus One*, 2004, pp. 106-107: 107.

intensely with the senses, employing a new effect of many objects and processes that can be useful for form"[78].

This characterizes Nitsch's view of abstract action painting as non-mimetic creation that enhances sensory experience. Its ultimate aim is "an extension of conscious. art informel drew on form and made us aware of the perceptual values that emerge only on the threshold of consciousness. only thanks to art informel did the human element mature to consciously accept one aspect of the sensory that previously had been registered only subliminally but that was awakened by way of association, by dream, memory, literature and myth"[79]. It is a dramatic process of awakening, extremely similar to the one emerging from the *Aktionen*: Informel art becomes in Nitsch's understanding the painting equivalent of the sensory process of his theatre, producing specific forms of painting actions (*Malaktionen*).

Art awakens consciousness to reality's hidden dimension, bringing about awareness of unconscious elements hitherto hidden in the abyss of our mind and archaic memories[80]. The event of art is the acquisition of form, of presence, seized by this hidden section of reality, which takes place in the energetic atmosphere evoked in the triangle between the action's space, the artistic performance, and its ritual dimension. It is, to quote a Neoplatonic concept adopted by Gadamer, a *Parusia*, an artistic epiphany which can manifest in the concrete reality thanks to its sensitive forms, the footprint of the ideal – which, without the image, would have otherwise remained disguised. This is a kind of metaphysical approach to painting, one which the art critic Wieland Schmied (1929-2014) also recognized as pivotal in Hermann Nitsch's art, stating that painting was understood by Nitsch as the first act of foundation of his aesthetics: every single act of painting presents in itself, offering to the public, the whole drama of humanity, the psychological and cosmogonic history of its development[81].

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[78] Hermann Nitsch, *action painting* (1964), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 450-451: 450 ("nach dem 2. weltkrieg enstand eine malerei, welche nichts darstellen wollte, die nichts in der natur bereits vorhandenes reproduzieren wollte, sondern innerhalb des bildgefüges auf der leinwand selbst spielten sich konkrete vorgänge ab, welche selbst, oder deren auswirkungen, zur schau gestellt wurden. die farbe wurde nicht als farbklang, sondern als konkrete substanz begriffen, als paste oder flüssigkeit, die verschmiert oder verschüttet wurde. es entstanden resultate, bedingt durch geste und motorik von armen und händen (…). das zur anschauung bringen konkreter vorgänge und deren auswirkungen forderten hersteller als auch betrachter zu einem sinnlich intensive empfinden auf, wobei man eine neue, für die form verwertbare wirkung benützt, welche viele objekte und vorgänge ausüben" [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, p. 576]).

[79] *Ibidem* ("eine bewusstseinserweiterung (…). durch die informelle kunst wurden jene empfindungswerte für die form verwendet und bewusst gemacht, die eben erst an der schwelle der bewusstheit stehen. erst durch das informelle ist das menschliche reif geworden, einen teil des sinnlichen bewusst aufzunehmen, welches früher nur unterschwellig registriert wurde sich über den assoziationsweg, durch traum, erinnierung, dichtung und mythos wachrufen liess" [*ivi*, pp. 576-577]).

[80] The Abstract Expressionist interest in the unconscious psychological conditions operating in the artistic creation (which reconnects with Surrealist and Dadaist insights) is also considered by Nitsch to be a sign of the contemporary artistic interest in establishing a fertile relationship between inner and external reality. Cf. Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions 1971*, cit., p. 88.

[81] Cf. Wieland Schmied, *Paintings between Spontaneity and Calculation. The Role of Painting in the Work of*

If we follow the theoretical legacy concerning the relation between performance and ritual as previously discussed, it is possible to argue that the complete identification between ritual and performance already foreshadowed in Nitsch's actions ultimately appears in its wholeness only in Orgien Mysterien Theater (OMT), where the already developed performative *Aktionen*, with their capacity to stress the ontological density of human ritual actions and the dialogical and qualitative nature of spaces, merge with traditional religious archetypes and religious symbolism. In this context, the rite coincides with an aesthetic sublimation of the displayed and performed excess[82].

Nevertheless, we have tried to show that already in Nitsch's *Aktionen* and *Malaktionen*, it is possible to foresee some relevant features which will be fundamental to his development of the explicitly ritual and liturgic dimension of OMT. After all, as Nitsch himself briefly argues by way of the connection between the two: "my action painting is the visual grammar of my action theater applied to a picture plane"[83].

Red color symbolism emerges as central to Nitsch's painting actions and later OMT productions. The inspiration came from the centrality of this color in the coeval Art Informel, but also from the Austrian artist Markus Prachensky (1932-2011), famous for his red artworks, and Arnulf Rainer, whose aesthetics were often oriented towards a red palette.

The red color mostly represents, in Nitsch's perspective, the intensification of life, functioning as both a symbolic bridge between immanence and transcendence, and as a performative catalyst for achieving ecstatic, transformative experiences that reconnect participants with primal spiritual dimensions. Nitsch argues: "the color of aggression, of death, of excess, is simultaneously the color of the most intensive life. blood is life juice. the deepness of death carries the seed of rebirth in itself"[84].

Because of this symbolic power, the spilling, squirting, and splattering of fluids in the drama

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Hermann Nitsch (2007), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 458-465 (Wieland Schmied, *Bilder zwischen Spontaneität und Kalkül. Die Rolle der Malerei im Werk von Hermman Nitsch*, in MZM Museumszentrum Mistelbach and Wolfgang Denk (eds.), *Museum Hermann Nitsch*, Museumszentrum Mistelbach/Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern 2007, pp. 204-233).

[82] See Arnulf Rohsmann, *Hermann Nitsch. Der transformierte Exzeß*, in *Hermann Nitsch. O.M. Theater*, mit Beiträgen von Arnulf Rohsmann, Giuseppe Zigaina und Hanno Millesi, Kärtner Landesgalerie, Klagenfurt 1994, pp. 5-10: 8-9.

[83] Nitsch, *action painting* (1964), cit., p. 451 ("meine aktionsmalerei ist die visuelle grammatik meines aktionstheaters auf einer bildfläche" [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, p. 578]).

[84] Hermann Nitsch, *the development of my painting* (1979-91), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 474 ("die farbe der aggression, des todes, des exzess ist gleichzeitig auch die farbe intensivsten Lebens. blut ist lebenssaft. die tiefe des todes trägt den keim der wiedergeburt in sich" [Hermann Nitsch, *die entwicklung meiner malerei*, in Id., *die farblehre des o.m.theaters*, ed. by Carl Aigner, Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten-Salzburg 2007, pp. 75-76: 75]).

began to be accompanied by the pouring of red paint on vertical and horizontal surfaces, understood "as a kind of litany, with the events of the play in my theater articulating themselves in displays of action painting"[85]. Nitsch employs red tonalities, typically contrasted against white patterns, to create a symbolic atmosphere that unifies the violence of immanence (materiality, corpses, biology) with the freedom of transcendence (spirit, impersonality). This chromatic opposition enables what the author terms "aesthetic rituals" that facilitate the liberation of instinctive energies through a Dionysian ecstatic power.

Beyond its symbolic meaning, the power of red is manifested in Nitsch's work through its performative dimension and perceptual effects on participants. The color functions concretely within theatrical performance, creating that "immanent transcendence" where material phenomena become meaningful through direct sensory experience. Thus, red spaces and surfaces don't merely represent the aesthetic experience, but actively constitute it.

Furthermore, drawing on Michel Pastoureau's historical analysis of red[86], we can position Nitsch's use of this color within Western symbolic traditions, particularly pre-modern religious contexts. Red appears as a divine signifier across monotheistic and pre-Christian traditions, representing the final alchemical phase (*rubedo*), resurrection (phoenix symbolism), and most significantly, sacrificial blood in Christian tradition – a perfect symbol of sacrifice.

"Red is the color that registers most intensely, for it is the color of life and death at the same time"[87]. Red is the color of Christ's sacrifice, but also of human blood, and thus the color of birth and death, love and hate. Towards all these contraries and polarities, Nitsch expresses his mystic love[88], where "the blood of the God is the wine of metaphysics"[89]. A confirmation of this meaning comes from the fact that among the earliest poured red abstract paintings we can count the series of the *Kreuzwegstation* (*Station of the Cross*; 1960-62): red color here evokes the crucifixion of Christ, with a direct conceptual association which the dynamic performative dimension of Orgien Mysterien Theater will make an experienceable dynamic.

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[85] Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 44 ("als litaneihaftes, durch schaumalen sich äusserndes spielgeschehen innerhalb meines theaters" [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung (1957-1962)*, cit., p. 20]).

[86] See Michel Pastoureau, *Red. The History of a Color*, trad. by Jody Gladding, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2017.

[87] Otmar Rychlik, *Painting Actionism. Interview with Hermann Nitsch* (1987), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 454-458: 457 ("Nicht umsonst ist Rot die intensivste Farbe, die ich kenne, ist Rot die Farbe, die am intensivsten zur Registration reizt, weil sie die Farbe des Lebens und Todes gleichzeitig ist" [*Malaktionismus. Ein Gespräch zwischen Hermann Nitsch und Otmar Rychlik*, in *Hermann Nitsch. 20th Malaktion Wiener Secession* (1987), REMAprint, Wien 1987, pp. 5-14: 11]). It is also necessary to acknowledge that Nitsch also studied the rational use of colors (and color scales in particular) and their association to create harmonical and dissonance effect, fitting into the relevant German tradition of the studies on color proceeding through Goethe, Steiner, Kandinsky. Cf. Nitsch, *die farblehre des o.m.theaters*, cit.

[88] "I want to incorporate me into all" ("Ich will mir alles einverleiben" [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 11]).

[89] "Das Blut des Gottes ist der Wein der Metaphysik" (*ivi*, p. 17).

Red, firstly used in a very dark tone, becomes progressively clearer and more accompanied by the use of other colors, considered instruments to heighten further the shock communicated to the public and enhance the emotional feeling toward the bright principle of light (which, as taught by several religious and esoteric traditions, is reachable only after having crossed the dark regions).

Nitsch's performative rituality thus seeks to enable a mysticism of being – what he even terms a "super-mysticism" (*Übermystik*)[90] – as an ecstatic affirmation of vitality. This practice generates new aesthetic forms that aim to reconnect postmodern individuals with the Origin, conceived as a paradoxical unfounded foundation that transcends any dualistic metaphysical framework.

3.1.3 The Ritual and Liturgic Space of OMT: Nitsch's Answer to the Post-secular Age

In archival terms, Nitsch consistently distinguished between the Painting Actions (*Malaktionen*), taking place from 18.11.1960 (Technical Museum, Wien) and the Performative Actions (*Aktionen*) which commenced with the first action on 19.12.1962 (Otto Mühl's apartment in Wien). Between the 60s and 2021, a total of 159 actions and 96 painting actions were performed[91].

The Orgien Mysterien Theater (OMT) is formally included within the catalogue of *Aktionen*. However, this distinction was developed primarily for practical purposes: conceptually, the notion of OMT preceded the concrete actions and was initially also realized through the gestural act of pouring and throwing color in the manner of "action paintings". In this sense, the OMT synthesized both artistic directions from the outset.

As Frank Gassner convincingly argues: "First of all one should never tire of emphasizing that Hermann Nitsch's oeuvre focuses on just one work: the Orgien Mysterien Theater. His entire oeuvre is like a building constructed over decades, stone by stone. In that time, he has followed the design logic of the religious and sexual, both of which have a natural inclination to repetition"[92]. The most mature version of this artistic masterpiece includes the 24-Hour Play

[90] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, p. 356.

[91] A complete list of actions and painting actions is available on the Nitsch Foundation website: https://www.nitsch.org/action_type/action/; https://www.nitsch.org/action_type/painting/

[92] Frank Gassner, *Work for the Stage* (2014), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 786-789: 786. Nitsch talks about the continuous character of his artistic production, comparing himself on this point to Goethe, Wagner, and Monet: "What I manage is a youth work. I already had the basic outline of my work as a twenty, twenty-one-year-old. I have learnt all my life on it, it has grown like a tree" ("Was ich verwalte ist ein Jugendwerk. Die Grundzüge meiner Arbeit hatte ich als Zwanzig-

(*24-Stunden-Spiel*, 50th Action) of 1975, the *Three-Day-Play* (*Drei-Tages-Spiel*, 80th Action) of 1984, and the culminating work, the ambitious *Six-Day-Play* (*Sechs-Tages-Spiel*, 100th Action) of 1998.

Pure painting actions – those not integrated as phases within the *Aktionen* – therefore became increasingly rare after the 1960s, especially as Nitsch's focus shifted almost entirely to the development of the OMT. This hiatus lasted until the 1990s, with a more consistent revival in the early 2000s, likely driven by a renewed public and critical interest. From an historical and art-critical perspective, Nitsch's painting action began to be appreciated as autonomous artworks. These paintings often required large-scale formats (typically two-by-three meters) to fulfill their performative and celebratory nature.

Yet, already in the 1980s, Nitsch had begun to reconsider the significance of painting within his practice. It gained a more autonomous and central role even within his *Aktionen*. A pivotal moment occurred in 1987 with the *Malaktion* in the main hall (*Hauptsaal*) of the Wiener Secession. There, alongside poured paintings arranged on the floor and ritual objects displayed in vitrines, a room-filling panorama was created – demonstrating that painting was not an auxiliary element, but rather an integral component of the synesthetic and multimedia structure of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater*[93].

Painting held a significant ritual function within Nitsch's actions. He regarded it as a kind of "litany", an initiatory gesture, a meditative formula in the sense of the orgiastic happening of a dramatic excess. This opening act invited participants to take part in the liturgy by pouring paint onto prepared white surfaces, inducing a quasi-mystical state. "The painting," Nitsch wrote, "should open our senses to a deeper and more intense sensual regimentation"[94].

However, his spontaneous passion for the practice of painting in itself, understood as a useless but beautiful action which expresses the flow of life, never left Nitsch. He recalls that, upon arriving at the conviction that action painting's role was completely absorbed by OMT, he understood the power embedded in the pure act of painting – which he thus began to perform

Einundzwanzigjähriger schon. Mein ganzes Leben habe ich dazugelernt, es ist gewachsen wie ein Baum" [Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 59]).

[93] Nitsch even theorized a complex system of smell and taste associations: every mythical image is aesthetically and sensorily associated with a specific codified set of smells and tastes, which play a "mechanical" role in evoking certain symbolic experiences. See on that Hermann Nitsch, *motifs of taste and smell*, in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 64-75 (Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., pp. 341-368).

[94] Rychlik, *Painting Actionism. Interview with Hermann Nitsch* (1987), cit., p. 456 ("Die Malerei soll unser Empfinden zu tiefer und intensivers sinnlicher Registrierung öffnen" [*Malaktionismus. Ein Gespräch zwischen Hermann Nitsch und Otmar Rychlik*, cit., p. 9]).

again[95]. This relation with painting and colors is also often connotated through a radical symbolic-religious perspective. He describes the emergence of color in the universe in cosmological terms, as a process of emanation: from the dark night of the origin, a state of nothingness, of the "not being there of everything"[96], a light that suddenly erupted in primeval explosions, bringing forth galaxies, stars, the sun, and eventually the full spectrum of visible color in nature. The dialectic between light and darkness therefore coincides with the dialectic between life and death, in the process of eternal becoming. It is a metaphysics of colors, so to speak. As Nitsch explains: "my actions are a departure to color, to the deep secret of color. colors, torn from the hearts and innards of slaughtered animals. meat becomes the flesh of the flowers. anger and splitting atoms produce color. a tremendous power and anger about creation makes everything glow, bringing color to its birth, bringing things to their appearance, to their colored, breathing vitality, and alongside colors, back materials of flowers. not until all of these, the galaxies, the solar systems, the countless suns and expanses have woken to frenzies of light and color, does the highest form of the living, the luminous figure of the redeemer in a white robe, the reawakened, sunlit, radiant countenance of the laughing resurrected savior (isenheimer altar) reveal itself. his face is bathed by the light of all the suns of our cosmos, the starry heavens behind him"[97].

Nitsch started conceptually working on the *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* in 1956. In the beginning, he imagined it as a "poetry of words", with a style "influenced by Trakl, German Expressionism, French Symbolism, Stefan George, Joyce and Surrealism", but also inspired by the "intense, sensual language" he "saw realized in dramas by Kleist and in Greek tragedy".

[95] "I know that Painting Actions and the Actions of the O.M. Theater need each other. I always have come back to the 'well-tempered clavier' of the painting in order to realize my theater in a much better and more intense way" (*ivi*, p. 457 ["Heute weiß ich, daß Malaktionen und die Aktionen des O.M. Theaters sich gegenseitig brauchen. Ich muß immer wieder in das 'wohltemperierte Klavier' der Malerei greifen, um mein Theater noch besser und intensive realisieren zu können"; *ivi*, p. 12]).

[96] Hermann Nitsch, *color as a core concern of painting* (1979-91), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 476-479: 476 ("das nicht das sein von allem" [Hermann Nitsch, *farbe als innerste angelegenheit der malerei*, in Id., *die farblehre des o.m.theaters*, cit., pp. 77-81: 77]).

[97] Hermann Nitsch, *color theory* (1979-91), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 475-476: 476 ("meine aktionen sind ein aufbrechen zur farbe, zum tiefen geheimnis der farbe. die farben warden herausgerissen aus den herzen und eingeweiden der geschlachtenen tiere. fleisch wird zu blumenfleisch. die farbe wird hergestellt durch die wut und das licht der kernspaltungen, eine ungeheure kraft und schöpfungswut bringt alles zum leuchten, die farbe zu ihrer geburt, die die dinge zu ihrer erscheinung, zu ihrer farbigen, atmenden lebendigkeit bringt. neben den farben entstehen die rückstoffe der blumen, die süsse des blütenstaubes. erst wenn sie alle, die galaxien, die sonnensysteme, die unzähligen sonnen und weiten, zum licht- und farbrausch erwacht sind, zeigt sich die höchste form des lebendigen, die lichtgestalt des erlösers des weissen gewand, das nochmals zum licht erwachte, sonnenstrahlende antlitz des lachenden, auferstandenen erlösers (isenheimer altar). vom licht aller sonnen unseres kosmos ist sein gesicht umflutet, dahinter der gestirnte Himmel" ([Hermann Nitsch, *farblehre*, in Id., *die farblehre des o.m.theaters*, cit., pp. 8-10: 10]).

Among his early sources of inspiration were also Thomas Mann (1875-1955) and Gottfried Benn (1886-1956), both of whom had a significant influence on his emerging aesthetic sensibility[98].

However, by around 1958, Nitsch came to realize that his project required a "break with verbal expression". He sought to transcend any merely reproductive or representational approach to art, ultimately deciding to conceive the OMT entirely in terms of performance. Words, he felt, were no longer sufficient to convey the depth of meaning he aimed to explore. It was through his engagement with the "same sensuousness of the substance within informal painting"[99] that Nitsch arrived at the core of his future masterpiece, where all his previous interests – Western theatre, performance art, and action painting – converge in a unified artistic vision.

Nitsch's cultural interest in Western theatre, which had been central to his artistic sensibility since his youth, was further deepened and developed in the same period. For Nitsch, theatre represents an artistic enactment of cosmogony – an aesthetics of creation. As he described it: the "tragic progression of creation itself. the birth and death of suns, solar systems, galaxies and cosmoses is the fundamental dramatic process; the process of becoming a world, which takes place in infinity and eternity, is the drama as such, the theatrical procedure as such"[100].

Therefore, Nitsch's approach to performativity was always conceived through the lens of theatrical language. Theatre was not simply juxtaposed with the actions, nor were the actions secondary to theatricality. Rather, the actions themselves always contained an intrinsic dramatic structure, which, as we will see, is precisely the Dionysian core of Nitsch's aesthetics. The simultaneity of theatrical sensibility and the aesthetics of action painting, as the two foundational elements of the OMT, reveals the deep, internal coherence and unity of Nitsch's artistic vision.

Nitsch soon began to operate simultaneously on multiple levels: the concrete execution of performative actions; the development of preparatory materials (including theoretical texts, manifestos, drawings, sketches, prints, instructional and operative documents for actors, and

[98] "Gottfried Benn has taught me to fully grasp the language of the meat" ("Gottfried Benn hat mich gelehrt, voll ins Fleisch der Sprache zu greifen" [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 16]).

[99] Rychlik, *Painting Actionism. Interview with Hermann Nitsch (1987)*, cit., p. 454 ("Die gleiche Substanzsinnlichkeit […] in der informellen Malerei" [*Malaktionismus. Ein Gespräch zwischen Hermann Nitsch und Otmar Rychlik*, cit., p. 5]).

[100] "theater = in letzter konsequenz der dramatische, TRAGISCHE ablauf der SCHÖPFUNG SELBST. das werden und vergehen von SONNEN, sonnensystemen, galaxien und kosmen ist der grundsätzliche, dramatische prozess, der sich in unendlichkeit und ewigkeit ereignende weltwerdungsprozess ist das drama an sich, ist der theatralische vorgang an sich" (Hermann Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, Residenz Verlag, Salzburg-Wien 1995, p. 324).

musical scores); and the documentation of the performances (through photographs, audio and video recordings, later compiled into videos, catalogues and action books). Indeed, Nitsch "intended to radically transform modes of production, multiplication, the display of the work to the audience; mainly Nitsch wanted to expand the media to integrate the making of art with several 'performative documents' related to the dimension of real time". This intermedial approach ultimately revealed that "in the art process the action is more decisive than the results"[101], aligning with Hans-Georg Gadamer's view that aesthetic truth resides in the process of experience itself, which takes place within the truth disclosure which characterizes human encounter with art, rather than being confined to a finished artwork.

Similarly, Art Informel emphasized that the pictorial act unfolds in time, revealing a dramaturgical dimension inherent in all artistic creation. In this respect, the action theater developed by Nitsch had already moved beyond the conventional stage. As Nitsch recalled: "there was no longer a stage, i was facing reality. it was a matter of staging real events – but all the same i found the path back to the picture enticing. i could demonstrate the simplest action of my theater, namely the pouring of fluids onto vertical and horizontal surfaces. the spraying of fluids onto surfaces (above all vertical ones) became a basic ritual of all my actions"[102].

The Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries thus synthesizes Nitsch's performative actions and painting actions, enriched by his deep study of theater (ancient Greek tradition, under the influence of Nietzsche, but also William Shakespeare [1564-1616], Richard Wagner [1813-1883] and Antonin Artaud [1896-1948])[103]. It was somehow an attempt to synthesize the tragic Dionysian principle that is constitutive of Western theatre – and on which Nitsch, through the mediation of Nietzsche, deeply elaborates – with the body rituals recognized as the main sacred tenet of artistic performances, where the focus on the intrinsic value of body – another

[101] *Introduction*, in Nitsch, *Atlas*, cit., pp. 37-38: 37.

[102] Hermann Nitsch, *the painting actions* (1960-63), in Id., *Atlas*, cit., p. 53.

[103] Because of this influence, the actions between 1957 and 1962 still involved spoken language, coherently with theatrical expressive art (cf. Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., pp. 39-40 [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., pp. 17-18). Subsequently, descriptions were substituted by actions or objects able to convey sensations: the precise written direction of the events substituted the booklet. Nitsch explains: "the memory of sensory perceptions, activated by language, was not enough. the need for real perceptions and feelings pervaded language, yet language hindered intense sensual feeling. Overpowered by a Dionysian urge, suppressed sensuality was activated. Language no longer worked for me, it was merely a relic, a symbol (…). I wanted to get to reality, to break through to actual experience, in order to develop a form of art that would exclusively involve the aesthetic arrangement of what is directly experienced"
(*ivi*, p. 43 ["die erinnerung an sinnliche empfindung, welche durch die sprache aktiviert wurde, war zu wenig. das bedürfnis nach tatsächlichem empfinden stiess durch die sprache hindurch, die sprache verhinderte sinnnliches, intensives empfinden. die wurde von einem andrang des dionysischen überrumpelt, verdrängte sinnlichkeit wurde aktiviert. ich konnte an der sprache kein genügen mehr finden, sie war nur meh rein relikt, symbol (…). ich wollte zur wirklichkeit, zum wirklich erlebten durchdringen, um eine kunst zu entwickeln, die nur mehr ästhetisches arrangement von direct erlebbarem ist"; *ivi*, pp. 18-19]).

Nietzschean topic, by the way – expresses the sacredness of the world of life (only bodies, according to Nitsch, allow the human to encounter transcendence, which is thus structurally immanent – as hermeneutics points out). Nitsch explains: "the original point of departure was the drama, the drama that links up with the myth. the mythical formula of death and resurrection, the constructive, formative force of destruction as an essential element of incessantly spreading life is represented by the impact of the dramatic catastrophe. the drama makes visible the innermost, essential life, peers into the abyss that shows a fearful reality and force of nature that, transcending life and death, is unable to be grasped in rational terms"[104].

Nitsch drew inspiration from classical sources, notably the poetry of Georg Trakl (1887-1914)[105] and Richard Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Work of Art), to develop a comprehensive ritualistic art form. Wagner had sought to revolutionize the very concept of art by reintegrating its various domains – poetry, dance, painting, sculpture and music – into a unified whole. This ambition was mirrored in Nitsch's own project: to create a ritual or feast that affirms life in its wholeness and intensity through a synesthetic experience. Furthermore, to develop an art capable of intensifying, accelerating, and enhancing the process of life[106].
Nitsch positioned himself within a broader artistic tradition that had long reinterpreted Wagner's legacy. With the evolution of artistic disciplines – such as architecture, dance, and music – and shifting cultural paradigms, the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* gradually transcended the bounds of theater and entered the realm of everyday life. This transformation relocated aesthetic expression from the proscenium stage to immersive, participatory forms of interaction, fundamentally altering the viewer's role. In this expanded framework, "life itself becomes an artwork, becomes aesthetically heightened, the form advances life into a celebration"[107].
Yet, Nitsch sought to move beyond even Wagner's vision. First, he identified a crucial limitation in Wagner's operas: the audience was treated as passive spectators rather than active

[104] Hermann Nitsch, *the tendency toward the gesamtkunstwerk* (1983), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 16 ("ursprünglich wurde ausgegangen von drama, von dem sich mit dem mythos verbindenden drama. die mythische formel von tod und auferstehung, die aufbauende, formende kraft der zerstörung als wesentliches element der unaufhörlich sich ausbreitenden lebendigkeit stellt sich dar durch die wucht der dramatischen katastrophe. das drama macht die innerste, essenzielle lebendigkeit erst anschaubar, es wird in den abgrund geschaut, der eine rational nicht zu fassende, schaudern machende wirklichkeit und naturkraft zeigt, die über leben und tod hinausgeht" [Hermann Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater in prinzendorf*, in *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Verlag Sauerländer Zürich 1983, p. 440]).
[105] "I was eighteen or nineteen years old, and Trakl has almost narcotized me" ("Ich war etwa achtzehn oder neunzehn Jahre alt, und Trakl hat mich nahezu narkotisiert" [Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 47]).
[106] See Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., p. 71.
[107] Nitsch, *the tendency toward the gesamtkunstwerk* (1983), cit., p. 16 ("das leben selbst wird zum kunstwerk, wird ästhetisch überhöht, die form treibt das leben zum fest" [Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater in prinzendorf*, cit., p. 440]).

participants. Second, he questioned the temporal boundaries of theatrical experience. As Nitsch explains: "i asked myself why the duration of a plays should not exceed the five hours set by wagner. i considered writing a play that would take days to perform. hence i drafted a drama that would last for six days, analogous to the story of creation in the old testament[108]. i attempted writing a drama that would present the entire history of humanity (the story of creation). though i did not want to present its external history, with its wars, power struggles and regicides; rather, for me, the development of our psyche and consciousness was the actual historical or dramatic process"[109]. This vision culminated in the *6-Tage-Spiel* (*Six-Day-Play*), the most ambitious and refined realization of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, performed on August 3-9, 1998. It stands as a radical "dissolution of Apollonian order into Dionysian delirium" [110], representing the ultimate enactment of Nitsch's ritual aesthetics.

Nitsch has offered in his various texts and manifestos several descriptions of the actions happening in the OMT, characterized by specific rituals involving specific actions with colors, paints, and biological matter: slaughtered animal carcasses (especially lambs and cows), raw meats, wine, water, oil, milk, urine, excrement, blood, fruits, grapes, strawberries, eggs, and others. The smell of burning incense is the purifying feature of the impressively disgusting overall smell of dead matter.

One of the most clear and impressive descriptions of an OMT action is the following: "raw flesh is torn apart, slaughtered sheep, cattle, animal cadavers are opened, disemboweled, blood-slime moist, wet intestines are ripped out, extracted, body-warm, steaming-damp guts spill from the gaping carcasses and drop to the ground (…) full-bodied, over-ripe, over-sweet and juicy grapes are trampled upon, jumped upon. the naked foot feels and touches the wetness of the grape-sugar juice and the slime of the over-sweet, sugar-saturated, crushed flesh of the fruit.

[108] But also analogous to the six movements of a symphony (cf. Adrian Daub, *Synaesthesia and Gesamtkunstwerk in the Music of Hermann Nitsch*, in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 752-767: 753).

[109] Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 39 ("ich fragte mich, warum das von richard wagner gesetzte mass von 5 stunden spieldauer nicht überschritten warden könnte. ich trug mich mit dem gedanken, ein drama zu schreiben, dessen aufführungsdauer tage beanspruchen sollte. es entstand der entwurf zu einem drama, dessen ablauf 6 tage benötigt, dies in analogie zur alttestamentarischen schöpfungsgeschichte. ich versuchte ein drama zu schreiben, welches die gesamte menschheitsgeschichte (die schöpfungsgeschichte) darlegen sollte. nicht die äusserliche geschichte mit ihren kriegen, machtkämpfen und königsmorden wollte ich zeigen, sondern die entwicklung unserer psyche, unseres bewusstseins erkannte ich als das eigentlichen, geschichtlichen bzw. dramatischen prozess" [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., p. 13]).

[110] The expression is applied by Simon Morrison to Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), but it is also meaningful for describing Nitsch's aesthetics (see Simon Morrison, *Skryabin and the Impossible*, in «Journal of the American Musicological Society», 51, 2, 1998, pp. 283-330: 289), also considering that the musician, deeply influenced by the theosophist Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891) was a relevant source for Nitsch's music (see Vincenzo Trione, *L'opera interminabile. Arte e XXI secolo*, Einaudi, Verona 2019, 398-400).

mash ready for fermentation is everywhere. (…) blood sprays onto whitewashed walls. blood sprays warm, hot, and lukewarm onto white bed linen, painful, voluptuous activation of our five senses makes us aware of intoxication, racing the excessive reality of creation"[111]. Blood emerges as a fundamental symbol: its massive presence in all the religious traditions, in literature and art from all over the world expresses, according to Nitsch, a sort of universal archetype[112]. As Trione explains, highlighting the rich phenomenology of blood in Nitsch's aesthetics: "We are faced with a substance that is impure when it is the result of an accident or an act of aggression, while it appears pure when it is the result of a sacrifice. When it flows from freshly sacrificed victims, blood is fluid and vermilion; when it dries, it loses its clarity, forms scabs and plaques, and becomes cloudy, dark and opaque. It can cleanse and, at the same time, soil. It can drive men to fury, madness and death, but it can also appease them"[113].
Blood traces the radical and symbolic continuity of Greek tragedy and Catholic mass, synthetizing, as we will later analyze, the continuity between Dionysus and Christ. In its pulsation, blood symbolizes the dynamic process of life, it is indeed the sap of life and, convergently, also the sap of its complementary dimension, death[114].

This artistic and sacred process integrates preformed traditional symbols and images, derived from religious, mythic, and esoteric traditions, with new revolutionary performative gestures, creating place through the gestures, actions, and rites of the performers, which constantly re-write and re-narrate the point of departure of the images.
Nitsch's performative OMT space is characterized by several layers, which, in our opinion, can be summated according to four main characteristics: it is a theatrical space, connected with the artistic tradition of opera and drama, with consistent references to Greek tragedy and Wagner's operas; it is an acted space, because it is a relational, intersubjective, and dramatic (in the Greek sense of *drama*, action) space; it is an immersive space, where the viewers are immersed in the actions and there is a continuity between its specific space and the "daily", "natural" space surrounding it – no backdrop is admitted; it is a paradoxically and provocatively Catholic space, because of the explicit reference to Christian symbols, especially, as we will later consider, in

[111] Nitsch, *the tendency toward the gesamtkunstwerk* (1983), cit., p. 16.
[112] On the role of blood in contemporary art, see the comprehensive work by Francesca Alfano Miglietti (FAM), *Rosso vivo. Mutazione, Trasfigurazione e sangue nell'Arte Contemporanea*, Electa, Milano 1999.
[113] Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit., p. 385.
[114] Cf. Hermann Nitsch, *blood text on the painting action of the 6-day-play of the orgien mysterien theater* (1998), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 469-471 (Hermann Nitsch, *bluttext zur malaktion im sechstagespiel des orgien mysterien theaters* (1998), in Otmar Rychlik (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. Das Sechstagespiel*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 2003, pp. 38-40).

its baroque and "universal" (thus καθολικός) aspiration[115]. Therefore, the OMT exemplifies how performative, sensory, and symbolic practices can convert all different kinds of spaces into emotionally and culturally charged places.

All these levels – contrary to various other conceptions of performativity, and resonating with Gadamer's critique of subjectivism – highlight that the true agency within performance does not reside in the human subject. Such a perspective, still bound to a humanistic framework, could be aptly critiqued through Heidegger's well-known thesis expressed in his seminal "Letter on Humanism", which challenges the anthropocentric basis of traditional metaphysics. Instead, the performative act in Nitsch's work is grounded in the relational dynamic that unfolds during the performance itself – what Heidegger terms the Event (*Ereignis*)[116]. The agency emerges from the interplay of all participating elements and their situatedness within the event's inner multiplicity and structure.

In this respect, borrowing Gadamer's terminology, Nitsch's performative space can be understood as a *Spielraum* (literally: a play-space), in which the artistic *Spiel* is both enacted by the actors and simultaneously enacts itself. The play is not simply executed but unfolds according to an intrinsic logic, creating the structural conditions that involve and transcend the performers[117].

This interpretative paradigm suggests that the sacred artistic performance serves as a paradigmatic case for understanding the ontological nature of space. As previously noted, all forms of relationality and communication, as we have already seen, unfold within a spatial determination, and sacred performances, in particular, reveal this condition in a heightened, emblematic way.

In the context of the OMT, the *Spielraum* becomes a theatrical space where the microcosm of the performed events surges as the symbol of the macrocosm essence, which Nitsch, as we shall see in the next chapter, describes in his theory on being (*das sein*). As being coincides with life, in its dynamic of death and resurrection, creation and destruction, the performative representation of life coincides with being itself.

[115] We have broadly developed the aesthetic analysis of these four levels in the essay *Espacio rojo, espacio Sagrado. El arte extático de Hermann Nitsch* [forthcoming].
[116] Cf. Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 50.
[117] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.2.2.

Hermann Nitsch dedicated substantial reflection to the architectural dimension of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (OMT), emphasizing that space is not merely a neutral container for action but an active participant in the performative event. Indeed, to evoke the relational and qualitative nature shared by spaces and places – imbued with symbolic significance and affective change –, specific architectural patterns must be chosen deliberately. While many of Nitsch's actions took place in contingent, improvised locations, these environments nonetheless contributed to his spatial aesthetics through their integration into the ritualistic and symbolic structure of the performances.

However, Nitsch soon recognized the necessity of establishing a dedicated site – a kind of "temple" – for the most complete realization of his actions. This vision materialized in the Prinzendorf Castle, his manor house situated in the wine region of Lower Austria. Often referred to as "Nitsch's Bayreuth", this location served as the sacred and theatrical epicenter of the OMT. Purchased in 1971 with his wife Beate, the castle previously belonged to the monks of Klosterneuburg, near Vienna[118]. A trace of this history echoes in the presence of the old chapel of the castle, another sign of continuity between the liturgical European Christian tradition and Nitsch's radical syncretic reinterpretation of Catholic mass, which Nitsch himself recognized as a relevant source of inspiration for his own aesthetics: "i still experienced the old catholic church services, the sacred secret language was latin. the priest still performed a mystery away from the audience. (...) without practising christianity as a believer, i was fascinated by the sensual irradiation and, above all, the aura of association that surrounded these objects, devices, with a weight of meaning. they radiated the magic, the aura of the sacred, the sacred cult act, the mystery. in every sincere cult practice, one senses the search for contact with identity with the whole. the supposed contact with the sacred, with transcendence, satisfies the longing to feel secure in something as whole as possible"[119].

[118] Cf. Rudi Fuchs, *Prinzendorf (1983)*, in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 912-919: 915.

[119] "ich erlebte noch die alten katholischen gottesdienste, die sakrale geheimsprache war latein. der priester vollzog noch ein mysterium abgewandt vom publikum. (...) ohne das christentum gläubig zu praktizieren, faszinierte mich die sinnliche ausstrablung und vor allem die assoziationsaura, die diese objekte, geräte, mit bedeutungsschwere umgab. sie strahlten die magie, die aura des heiligen, der heiligen kulthandlung, des mysteriums aus. bei jeder ehrlichen kultausübung spürt man die kontaktsuche nach der identität mit dem ganzen. die vermeintliche berührung mit dem heiligen, mit der transzendenz, befriedigt die sehnsucht, sich in einem möglichst ganzen geborgen zu fühlen" (Hermann Nitsch, *mein verhältnis zum christentum* (1989), in Id., *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater. Manifeste, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, Residenz Verlag Salzburg-Wien 1990, pp. 141-157: 144, 148). Nitsch also declared: "I love (…) the pomp and pageanty of Catholic vestments" ("Ich liebe […] den Pomp und Prunk katholischer Messgewänder" [in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 69]. See also, with similar reflections: Id., *the last supper* (2000), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 703.

Nitsch's Art-Religion (*Kunstreligion*)[120] does not abolish Christian mass, but somehow complements it with carnal, sensual, and erotic elements which the monotheistic ritual has dismissed or abstractly symbolized.
Furthermore, Christian liturgy is also fundamental because it contributes to producing a mystical and cathartic experience. The adoption of sacred music – such as polyphonic masses – is also a fundamental layer of the identification between OMT and Christian ritual. Likewise, the complex use of music is lived and practiced with the same attitude in the ritual actions: hence, we can define them as "sonorous actions" (*Klangaktionen*)[121]. Here, Dionysus, the patron god of music *par excellence*, finds his triumphant ritual.

As articulated in the manifesto *On the architecture of the O.M. Theater* (1969), Prinzendorf an der Zaya – along with its yard, stables, and gardens, and the surrounding fields and vineyard – was designated as the ideal site for Nitsch's performances[122]. Through the layering of memory, symbolic density, and ritual repetition, Prinzendorf became the sacred place par excellence of Nitsch's creative universe. As the artist explains, "the new theater has broken through all boundaries, there is no longer a theater building, no stage, no stage sets, no actors, no rows of seats (…). performatively consummating the world, being, is turned into an event, a theater event". This place has a sacred shape: it is "a temple", more specifically "a grail temple"[123].
Central to this vision are the imagined subterranean corridors, which Nitsch envisioned in numerous evocative sketches as labyrinthine, self-enclosed rooms – what he called the "artistic heart" of the castle.[124]. "the uteral darkness of subterranean passageways" symbolizes the nothingness, or primordial darkness, which Nitsch, as we will see in the next chapter,

[120] A Wagnerian concept, which suggests the potential sacral function of art in an historical time characterized by the decline of religion. Cf. Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln-London 1994. According to Wagner, art can substitute religion, saving the essence of the latter – in a quasi-inversion of the famous Hegelian diagnosis. The artist can preserve religion through a new work with myth – and that is exactly what Wagner attempts in reworking Nordic and Christian myths, and what Nitsch tries to gain with his performative project of Dionysian-Christian *Neue Mythologie* – refusing the ascetic path of the Schopenhauer-Wagner theoretical line. Nitsch explicitly addresses this challenge: "With my work, I would like to contribute to overcoming Christianity. I believe that a kind of new myth will develop, which is already being expressed in many ways" ("Ich möchte mit meiner Arbeit dazu beitragen, das Christentum zu überwinden. Ich glaube, dass sich eine Art neuer Mythos entwickeln wird, der sich ja vielfach schon ausdrückt" [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 72]).
[121] Cf. Leopoldo Siano, *Tra rumore primordiale e armonia delle sfere: la musica di Hermann Nitsch (Lezioni napoletane)*, Edizioni Morra, Napoli 2018, p. 125.
[122] In Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 675.
[123] "the fundamental sacralising tendency of my work, countering secularising, has never grown weary with creating a temple for all the holy actions of my theater. even if these instances in their deepest profane isness have found their metaphysical reality, absolved from ritual and cult" (Hermann Nitsch, *the architecture of the orgien mysterien theater* (2010), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 674-675: 674).
[124] "Künstliches Herz" – in a 1972 booklet (now in Nitsch, *Atlas*, cit., p. 126).

understands as the original cosmogonic and ontological dimension. This theatrical descent echoes ancient initiation rites, enabling a return to the origins of being. The journey from darkness back into light becomes a dual cosmological and psychological process – a ritual of renewal that reflects Nitsch's philosophy of vitalist intensification.[125]

Combining indoor and outdoor settings (some of them concretely realized, such as the wine cellars, others only imagined as mythical utopian visions[126]), the OMT serves as a liminal zone, where artistic, human, and natural agencies intertwine.

During the *Six-Day-Play*, which we had the opportunity to experience directly during the performances of the fourth, fifth, and sixth days at Pentecost, June 7–9, 2025, the spatial logic of Prinzendorf revealed itself as a choreography of "regulated absolute freedom". Participants – whether performers, assistants, or members of the public – are free to move throughout the castle, even entering the unfolding scenes. Yet, this freedom is subtly regulated by the aesthetic and ritual structure of the OMT itself. A shared reverence for the unfolding action induces participants to intuitively limit their own interference, reinforcing the integrity of the performance and contributing to the realization of Nitsch's aesthetic vision.

Within this performative ecology, the castle's small Catholic chapel acquires special significance. The chapel was transformed by Nitsch into a syncretic site of sacred-contemporary rituality. It houses several objects resonant with his artistic vocabulary: photographs of Nitsch's actions, ritual garments worn by the artist, and a blood-splattered poured painting that forms the dramatic background to an impressive giant Catholic crucifix. As Nitsch reflects, "the chapel of the castle is, on the one hand, a space of stillness. (…) the suffering god, who took upon himself all the guilt of the world in order – much like buddha – to follow the 'temporal' world, opens, through his promise and intent, a world of salvation in transcendence. He proclaims redemption and eternal life in transcendence"[127].

The chapel thus becomes a condensed metaphor of Nitsch's *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a sacred chamber where liturgical tradition, contemporary actionism, and metaphysical speculation converge, offering a contemplative counterpart to the ecstatic excess of the OMT.

Another smaller yet distinctive space through which Nitsch concretely articulated his aesthetic vision is the so-called "Asolo room". In 1973, invited by the Italian gallery owner and art dealer

[125] Nitsch, *the architecture of the orgien mysterien theater* (2010), cit., p. 674.

[126] The editorial project "The Architecture of the Orgien Mysterien Theater" (1984-1991) is a collection of more than 3000 sheets plus the artist's exemplars as well as sample prints offering a storytelling of this underneath world.

[127] Nitsch's quotation is taken from the flyer distributed at the 160. action "the 6-day-play" 2nd version (Prinzendorf castle and surrounding, June, 7-9, 2025).

Francesco Conz (1935-2010) to his native town of Asolo, Nitsch realized a site-specific action that embodied the symbolic and spatial essence of his OMT. At the heart of this action – meticulously documented in the detailed scripts[128] – was the construction of a small room conceived as a small chapel. This intimate installation was designed to serve as a microcosm of Nitsch's broader artistic project: a sacred environment drawing directly from Catholic liturgical architecture and ritual. The room, complete with a functioning altar, assembled Catholic symbols and gestures borrowed from the Mass and juxtaposed with a large canvas saturated in red paint and animal blood – an early and powerful manifestation of Nitsch's fusion of sacred ritual and visceral materiality. In a text attached to the score, the room is described as "a sacred space in which Nitsch wanted to present, or at least quote, everything that was part of the Orgien Mysterien Theater at this time. (…) Between the past and the future, this room is permanently in the now"[129].

Although the original installation was dismantled in 1980, it was subsequently reassembled and shown in several exhibitions in different countries, becoming one of the most widely recognized and transportable examples of Nitsch's OMT. The art of the Austrian demiurge is firmly situated within the subtle relationship between the universal archetypical aspirations of OMT and Nitsch's attempt to respect the specificities of the *Genius loci* that shaped the site-specific action[130].

This relational play acquires a sacred dimension especially thanks to the involved symbolism, which refers to different leading characters belonging to several Western religious and esoteric traditions (although minor, references to Asian philosophy and Eastern traditions are sometimes mentioned by Nitsch, but they do not appear in the visual imaginary of the OMT).

The focus of our research will be explicitly directed, in the following sections, to the interpretation of these figures, in order to better understand Nitsch's philosophical worldview and the role attributed to the OMT as a possible concrete existential answer to the religious crisis characterizing our contemporary age.

Therefore, the methodology of our research will be particularly focused on the *Entstehungsgeschichte* of this specific kind of artwork more than on the aesthetic analysis of the formal and technical characteristic of its performative dimension.

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[128] Hermann Nitsch, *Asolo. II. Fest*, Edizioni Morra, Napoli 1983.

[129] Frank Gassner, *The Asolo Room* (2011), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 408-409: 409.

[130] This attitude, governed by Nitsch's refined sensibility for staging and dramaturgical composition, is particularly evident in the aesthetic strategies he employed for impressive theatrical settings, most notably in the deconsecrated, fresco-adorned Minoritenkirche in Stein and der Donau, used for a powerful performance in April 1994.

In this perspective, the sacrality of Nitsch's idea of ritual place primarily is derived from the content's reference to the mythical-symbolic dimension that is performed, rather than merely illustrated, to create effects of participatory immersion and greater direct emotional impact.

The OMT incorporates key mythological figures as well as sequences of religious ritual events, which Nitsch designates as "analytical leitmotifs" (*analytische leitmotiven*) – but also refers to them as "mythical" or "dramatic" leitmotifs. This terminology, clearly indebted to Wagner's musical theory, denotes fixed sequences of mythic-symbolic imagery that are synesthetically evoked within the OMT. Some leitmotifs assume a more prominent role, emerging as dynamic visual iconographies, while others remain conceptually embedded within the performative and narrative structure of the artistic event. Not all motifs appear in every *Aktion*, but the overall sequence forms the most comprehensive framework of the mythical festival – which the *Six-Day-Play* wholly incorporates.
Nitsch has offered various descriptions of the leitmotifs in various theoretical texts, the most seminal of which appears in the 1962 manifesto *Die Blutorgel* (*The Blood Organ*), co-authored with Adolf Frohner (1934-2007), Otto Muehl, and the psychoanalyst Josef Dvorak, who would later become known for his studies on Satanism. In this manifesto, Nitsch articulates the theoretical foundations of the OMT alongside Muehl's self-ironic text *Der M-Apparat*, Frohner's *Mein Trick-Track*, and Dvorak's *Blutorgelei als Daseinsgestaltung*. The "blood organ" serves as a cosmogonic metaphor – a symbolic medium of OMT – conjuring the organ as an instrument of existential and sensual connection to life. Just as the organ produces sound, the painter generates abstract blood paintings: both the flow of music and the flow of blood become symbols of the vital flux of existence.
The analytical leitmotifs are:

1. basic excess (breakthrough of urges and instincts, endpoint of abreaction, reaching the situation of tearing apart, the tearing apart of the lamb). the layered actions of the o.m. theater penetrate basic excess.
2. totem meals (tearing apart of totem animals)
3. animal sacrifice in general (animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifice)
4. ritual castration
5. blinding of oedipus (symbol of castration)
6. attis, agdistis
7. isis and osiris

8. adonis's mutilation by the boar
9. killing of orpheus
10. orgiastic activities and sacrifice of Dionysus, his tearing apart
11. crucifixion
12. mount of olives
13. transubstantiation, last supper (this is my body, this is my blood)[131]

The Blood Organ project promoted the event which would take place on June 4, 1962 in Perinetgasse, with the music accompaniment of the componist Anestis Logothetis (1921-1994). Adolf Frohner and Otto Muehl worked on sculptures which grow into each other over the course of the work process. Hermann Nitsch created in this action (his 7th *Malaktion*) a nine-metre-long *Schüttbild* with red paint, brush and sponge on a previously white surface.

As explained by Eva Badura-Triska, Nitsch "takes motifs for the abreaction experiences from the existing religions and myths, all of which he confronts with equal analytical interest in a 'phenomenologically value-free' manner, and which he sees as a fund from which he can create"[132]. This seemingly quasi-scientific approach, wherein motifs are abstracted from their original theological or mythological contexts and reintegrated into the sensory experiences of the performance, is nevertheless rooted in a fundamental cultural assumption: that these very motifs – and not others – possess a unique capacity to evoke a profound ontological connection with being itself.
Although Nitsch does not explicitly formulate this conclusion, it can be inferred that traditional religions and esoteric currents have historically gravitated toward similar symbolic constellations not by coincidence, but because they intuitively recognized their performative potency – specifically, their ability to enable the transcendence of the individual ego and facilitate contact with the primordial Origin. Nitsch's symbolic syncretism is thus not merely

[131] In Hermann Nitsch, *Die Blutorgel* (1962), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 163-165: 165. The English translation is taken from Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 42 (Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., p. 20) – where the order of the list is inverted (from the transubstantiation to the basic excess). A more synthetic and a bit different version of the sequence is offered in Hermann Nitsch, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater 2. Theoretische Schriften, Partiturentwurf des 6 Tagespieles*, Naples/Reggio Emilia/München 1976, p. 54. In the version of the motifs proposed at the *Six-Day-Play*, the "mount of olives" motif is substituted by the "ritual regicide" (see Hermann Nitsch, *tentative draft for the overall concept of the 6-day-play planned for prinzendorf from august 3d through august* 9th, 1998 (1997), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 150-157 [Hermann Nitsch, *vorläufige, unverbindliche gesamtkonzeption für das vom 3. bis 9. august 1998 in prinzendorf geplante sechstagespiel* (1997), in Rychlik (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. Das Sechstagespiel*, cit., pp. 30-37]).
[132] Eva Badura-Triska, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater von Hermann Nitsch*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker (eds.), *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., pp. 33-34: 33.

eclectic but intentional: it harnesses the energetic and archetypal power embedded in these mythic images, which, he argues, lie deeply rooted in the Western collective unconscious.
This perspective is deeply indebted to the psychoanalytic theory of Carl Gustav Jung, whose concept of the "collective unconscious" – understood as a repository of archetypal *Leitprinzipien* essential for structuring human perception and meaning – was highly influential on Nitsch[133]. Within this framework, the performative activation of symbolic imagery becomes a means of reconnecting with these deep structures of human consciousness. It also reflects Nitsch's broader conviction that the post-secular age demands a synthetic reevaluation of religious symbolism: an effort to reconfigure spiritual experience through communal artistic practice, thereby contributing to the emergence of a new symbolic and spiritual paradigm.

Furthermore, all these symbolic figures play a dramaturgic function: they are removed from their specific religious fate or theological narration to stand as suprapersonal principles. These figures are clearly the final step in a long spiritual inspiration process which can be recognized in Nitsch's very early drawings from his period at the Vienna graphic arts school, the *Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt* (1953-1958). Here we can recognize a significant presence of Christian religious symbols – the crucifixion of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Last Supper – treated with an Expressionist style and inspired by the favorite artists of Nitsch's youth (Titian, Rembrandt, El Greco, Rubens, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Kokoschka, Schiele, Klimt)[134]. According to Otmar Rychlik, "at the age of fifteen, Nitsch already wanted to dedicate his art to the religious and become a church painter. He wanted to tie in with the great achievements of the Renaissance and the Baroque, to realize himself again as a designer of the Bible, the greatest content that existed for him at that time. It was the dream of a magnificent, expressive, monumental painting that would fill our churches, a shattering painting that could make faith comprehensible again and overcome the earthly in favor of a rebirth that takes place in transcendence"[135]. This dream would guide Nitsch in his own life, transfigured after his confrontation with contemporary philosophy – first of all, the problem of nihilism – and rebuilt in favor of the whole realization of a spiritual ritual for the "post-secular age".

[133] See Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 22.
[134] Cf. Hermann Nitsch, *Das früheste Werk 1955 – 1960*, ed. by Otmar Rychlik and Christian Gargerle, Sonderzahl, Wien 1986. In this period, the teaching of the sculptor Karl Nieschlag (1909-1975), who was a conservative Anthroposophist, with a deep knowledge of Eastern philosophies, was very relevant for Nitsch (see *ivi*, p. 7; cf. also Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., pp. 38-40).
[135] Otmar Rychlik, *Vorwort*, in Nitsch, *Das früheste Werk 1955 – 1960*, cit., pp. 5-10: 9.

A detailed analysis of all the leitmotifs could bring the interpreter to discover in Nitsch's artistic project the cultural deposit of several branches of Western religious and esoteric knowledge. These essentially pertain to three main traditions: an archetypal universal and generically primordial ritual dimension, assumed under psychoanalytical influence (leitm. 2, 3, 4); the Greek polytheistic tradition of myths (leitm. 5, 6, 8, 9) and mysteries (7, 9, 10); Christian religion (leitm. 11, 12, 13). What is even more interesting is that several of these mythic-symbolic episodes and narrations intersect with the mentioned traditions. For example, animal sacrifice (leitm. 2) is also practiced in Dionysian rites – of which the tearing apart of Dionysus Zagreus is a symbol (leitm. 10) – and prefigures the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (leitm. 12). The killing of Orpheus (leitm. 9) symbolically coincides with the other thematized assassinations, where death coincides with cosmic rebirth: Osiris (leitm. 7), Adonis (leitm. 8), Orpheus (leitm. 9), Dionysus (leitm. 10), and Christ (leitm. 12).

Decontextualizing these motifs from their specific religious traditions, Nitsch seems to have chosen them as carriers of meaningful layers and symbolical schemes which need to be recontextualized in a new hermeneutical horizon: a syncretic one, from which a *Kunstreligion* could effectively arise. Therefore, compared to the recognition of the specific mythical traditions, it is much more important to consider the symbolic and archetypal core of the different leitmotifs and their association in Nitsch's artwork. In this perspective, we argue that it is possible to identify three main thematic traces in Nitsch's sequence:

- the original, primordial basic excess, connected to abreaction (*Abreaktion*) (leitm. 1);
- the sacrifice – of sexual organs, sight, life – identified with the experience of suffering and death (leitm. 2-11);
- the mystical ecstatic union with being (leitm. 10, 13).

The following sections of this dissertation are devoted to the discussion of these mythic-symbolic areas, which represent the core of Nitsch's worldview.

What is important to clarify at this stage is that Nitsch's imagination operates through a rich and original cross-cultural and cross-philosophical negotiation of symbols, establishing the performative sacred space through a dynamic interplay and dialectic between artificial structures and the surrounding natural environment, which is consistently integrated as a vital component of the stage.

The sensual intensity of the rituals, recurring in a polar dynamic of identity and difference across all cultures, serves to evoke the sacred. According to Nitsch – who argues for the fundamental unity underlying all spiritual phenomena and symbolic imagery – "there is no great difference between sacrificing an animal or a human being, between ripping the heart out of a

youth while still alive, tearing the body of dionysus apart, blinding oedipus, or martyring jesus christ; a structure shines through that unmistakably emphasizes blood, the meaning of blood. (…) it concerns an interest in our very substance, in the essence of our fluid substance, which is related to life as much as it is to death, which simultaneously is reconstruction, destruction, and disintegration. it is simultaneously genesis and demise, simultaneously growth and decay, wounding and healing, analytical penetration into the essence, according to the essence of the truth of becoming, of creativity, of occurrence"[136].

In this context, the aesthetic ritual follows the paths of the sacred without hesitating in embracing the ancient cults and reinvigorating them, especially in their disturbing and violent carnal dimension, which are the most efficient in creating a disruptive experience through which man can temporarily abandon his social and moral responsibility to discover his own abyss.

The problem of ritual and cult thus acquires a renewed centrality in Nitsch's perspective.

Walter F. Otto asserts that the age of cult "lies far behind us, and it is really not surprising that it is precisely its language which has become more alien to us than all the others"[137]. Gadamer sought to bridge this cultural and experiential distance – this "otherness" – through a phenomenological approach to religion, specifically by studying the rituals and practices of ancient Greek religion as described by participants in those cults. From these studies, Gadamer identified a deep connection between cultic experience, ecstatic and epiphanic states, and the origins of theatre[138].

As Lammi summarizes, the "transformed state of being" described by ancient believers "represents a mood of the sacred that is an elevation beyond mere mood and transcends personal identity. In this state, the divine may be said actually to descend upon the cultic group 'like a bodily appearance', as Gadamer puts it. To a lesser or greater degree, depending on variable

[136] Nitsch, *blood text on the painting action of the 6-day-play of the orgien mysterien theater* (1998), cit., p. 470 ("zwischen dem tieropfer, jenen menschenopfern, bei denen knabe bei lebendigem leib das herz herausgerissen wird, dem zerrissenen dionysos, dem geblendeten ödipus und dem gemarterten jesus Christus scheint kein so grosser unterschied zu sein, eine struktur offenbart sich, die unmissverständlich das blut herauskehrt. eine bedeutung des blutes. […] es handelt sich um das interesse für unsere eigentlich substanz, für das wesen unserer fliessenden substanz, die sich auf das leben genauso wie auf den tod bezieht, die Aufbau, zerstörung und auflösung gleichzeitig ist. werden und vergehen, verletzen und heilen gleichzeitig. analytisches eindringen in das wesentliche, im sinn der wahrheit des werdens des schöpferischen sich ereignens seinem wesen nach" [Nitsch, *bluttext zur malaktion im sechstagespiel des orgien mysterien theaters* (1998), cit., p. 39]).

[137] Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, trans. and with an introduction by Robert P. Palmer, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-London 1965, p. 19.

[138] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The festive character of theater*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. by Nicholas Walker and ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 57-65 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters* (1954), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1993, pp. 296-304).This essay was originally published in a *Festschrift* for Walter F. Otto.

factors such as individual receptiveness and level of initiation into the 'mystery', each member of the group 'feels', so to speak, this epiphany. The altered temporality of 'festive celebration' is a phenomenological datum that Gadamer approaches by way of play and the experience of the theatre. Gadamer's phenomenology of play shows that human beings can achieve an ecstatic temporality that absorbs the self. This altered temporal constitution of play is carried into the eponymous play of the theatre, in which the actors create a world that in its very playfulness reproduces truths of the lifeworld in a state of higher intensity, which the audience both experiences and helps to enable. The synergy of actors and audience focused on enactment of the work of art creates the magic of the stage. This 'magic' is not supernatural but rather an imitation or mimesis of real life, which is no mere 'imitation' but the lifeworld divinized. This is even or especially true in context of pain and horror, tragedy being the original accomplishment of the theatre that emerged from the festival of Dionysus, whose orgiastic cult, Gadamer points out, involved its participants in religious community more than any other"[139]. This description perfectly expresses the aesthetic and ecstatic experience with Nitsch's leitmotifs, which by no coincidence connect religious symbolism with ancient cults and theatre. The presence of the divine and the presence of beauty overlaps in the phenomenological experience of access to the festive atmosphere.

From this perspective, the symbol of the lamb is particularly fertile. In Nitsch's aesthetics, the sacrificed lamb – an image explicitly influenced by the poetry of Georg Trakl, as Nitsch himself acknowledged[140] – serves as a naturalistic precursor to the theological figure of the *Agnus Dei*. It is the symbol that reconnects the primordial human impulse toward animal sacrifice (leitm. 2, 3) with the theological sublimation of this spiritual and existential tendency within Christian religion.

This animal first appears in a pivotal role in Nitsch's second action (8.3.1963, Galerie Josef Dvorak, Vienna), marking a critical moment in his artistic practice through the adoption of the animal body. The symbolic weight of the lamb intensifies in subsequent actions. During the already mentioned Festival of Psychophysical Naturalism (3d Action, 28.6.1963), Nitsch acquires a lamb carcass, along with blood and offal from a Viennese slaughterhouse. Expanding the painterly surface into three-dimensional, ritual space, he affixes the lamb to a wall in a cruciform position, head facing downward, against a white cloth. Below, he arranges intestines

[139] Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, Continuum, London-New York 2008, p. 91.
[140] See Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 54.

on a white-covered table and pours blood and hot water over them. He later lies on a bed, covering himself with blood and entrails, embodying the theatrical totality of sacrificial ritual. Nitsch simultaneously continues work on a *Schüttbild* (pouring picture), now for the first time using blood in place of paint. His encounter with the slaughterhouse environment reveals to him the chromatic and tragic intensity of the animal body – an epiphanic aesthetic moment that shapes his understanding of beauty as intrinsically tied to mortality and pathos.

In the 4th Action (22.11.1963) and even more clearly in the 5th Action (3.3.1964), the lamb is exposed as crucified: the analogy with Christ is completed. An even clearer visual identification will be offered in the 1987 drawing *Lamm und Gekreuzigter*, where the crucified human anatomically displayed figure is associated with a lamb.

The theoretical frameworks for these actions had already been introduced in *The Blood Organ* (1962), where the tearing apart of the lamb was recognized as a central element of the OMT[141]. This was further clarified in the 1964 manifesto *The lamb* (*das lamm*), which is entirely devoted to exploring the symbolic role of the animal within Nitsch's performances. Here, Nitsch argues that the trajectory of performative art aims towards the direct expression of life, striving for a mystical identification with its essential flow, governed by symbols embedded in the collective unconscious. In this symbolic cosmology, the lamb becomes the emblem of bodily sacrifice, representing the "negative" or destructive aspect of life's eternal rhythm: death not as negation, but as an energetic contribution to the continual process of creation and renewal.

"In the O.M. theatre", Nitsch writes "the butchering of the lamb is a symbolic act for the fundamental excess experience (the ecstatic endpoint of the abreaction orgy). The sensually real sadomasochistic situation of the laceration is identical with an extreme instinct breakthrough"[142].

The "abreaction orgy" is the psychological and symbolic articulation of the first leitmotif and the fundamental existential mechanism underpinning Nitsch's OMT. The notion of abreaction originates in psychoanalysis, particularly in Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) early cathartic method for treating hysterical symptoms[143]. According to Freud, abreaction refers to an emotional release that brings a previously repressed or unconscious traumatic memory into

[141] Cf. Nitsch, *Die Blutorgel* (1962), cit., p. 163.

[142] "Die lammerzerfleischung ist im O.M. theater durchgeführte symbolhandlung für das urexzeßerlebnis (ekstatischer endpunkt der abreaktionsorgiastik). Die sinnlich reale sadomasochistische situation der zerfleischung ist identisch mit einem extremen triebdurchbruch" (Hermann Nitsch, *Manifest das lamm* (1964), in Karrer, (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 167).

[143] Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 24 volls., ed. by James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. II: *Studies on Hysteria* (with Josef Breuer), The Hogart Press, London 1955.

conscious awareness, offering temporary therapeutic relief. While Freud initially emphasized the curative potential of emotional discharge – he later came to see it as insufficient for resolving, proposing instead a more gradual process of exploring repressed memories and emotions – what he termed "working through" (*Durcharbeitung*)[144].

Nitsch, however, draws inspiration from Freud's early conception of abreaction, seeking to elicit it in his performances through radically sensual, non-verbal, and non-conceptual experiences. Whereas Freud believed the compulsion to repeat trauma could be alleviated through verbal association and conscious recognition, Nitsch rejects the linguistic realm altogether. His aesthetic strategy intensifies the sensory encounter with repressed psychic material, channeling it through symbolic actions that reference primordial excess and its cosmological power[145].

In this context, abreaction becomes a form of catharsis – an emotional discharge endowed with an intrinsic liberating function – which Nitsch also recognizes in Aristotles' (384-322 b.C.) theory of tragedy[146]. Yet, following Nietzsche's legacy[147], Nitsch reinterprets this function. For him, abreaction does not entail moral purification or a release *from* the instincts, but rather a liberation *with* the instincts. This process is artistically rendered through tragic pathos, and culminates in conscious confrontation with repression. "the point", Nitsch argues, "is to enable a synthetically consciously guided abreaction that disintegrates repression, makes people aware of it and eliminates it permanently. (…) it must be possible for humans, each according to their means, to experience themselves fully and completely. (…) when a breakthrough of the instincts actually occurs it becomes an art event"[148].

The drama of the OMT represents the aesthetic of the psychological and spiritual confrontation with repressed instincts: "our repressed energies", Nitsch continues, "connect up with perception of specific processes and objects. they flow out, realize themselves through

[144] See Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, repeating and working-through (further recommendations on the technique of psycho-analysis)* (1914), in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, cit., vol. XII, 1958, pp. 145-156.

[145] See on that: Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, pp. 559-560; Id., *wiener vorlesungen*, ed. by Michael Hüttler, in «Maske und Kothurn. Internationale Beiträge zur Theater-, Film-, und Medienwissenschaft», y. 51, vol. 2-3, Böhlau Verlag, p. 14.

[146] Mentioned in Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, p. 560 as a fundamental component of Greek *dramenfestspiel* (dramatic festival).

[147] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner, Penguin, London 1993, pp. 107-108 (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in Id., *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 1, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1988, pp. 9-156: 142-143).

[148] Hermann Nitsch, *revelation through the analytic dramatic methods of the orgien mysterien theater* (1960-76), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 34-36: 34.

conscious registration, and create form, let form develop"[149]. Even the desire to kill – thematized among the leitmotifs – is considered an expression of human "predatory" nature.

In theorizing the "experience of abreaction" (*Abreaktionerlebnis*), Nitsch both appropriates and extends Freud's theory. For him, this experience primarily constitutes a violent release of repressed civilizational energies – especially those related to violence, sexuality, and death – which unveils the sadomasochistic "basic excess" (*Grundexzess*) that underlies the ontology of existence. Drawing on Freud's dualistic concepts of *Eros* and *Thanatos* – the fundamental principles of reality – as well as the esoteric traditions that regard opposites as complementary within the unity of being, Nitsch frames this excess as constitutive element of the unfounded ground of reality[150], which coincides with overall life, and which is pervaded by complementary tendencies of life intensification and life destruction. The experience of the *Grundexzess* facilitates the recognition of the essential unity of all beings – the *mysterium coniunctionis*. By working through destructive impulses, by confronting the "power of the negative", the artist guides the spectators into the "dark side" of reality. This descent – whether alchemical (*nigredo*), mystical (*noche obscura del alma*)[151], or mythological (*katabasis*, or *descensus ad inferos*) – is essential for spiritual rebirth, the discovery of the philosopher's stone, and the attainment of divine union.

This inner mystical experience is materially and spatially shaped within the OMT through performances staged in the wine cellars of Prinzendorf. These subterranean spaces function as symbolic wombs or underworlds hosting violent, sacrificial actions. The eventual turning on of lights and the upward movement of the performers out of the cellar signifies symbolic rebirth. In this structure, the myths of Orpheus, Dionysus, and Christ coalesce into a unified dramaturgical arc.

Thus, sadomasochistic impulse is not interpreted as unnatural or pathological, but as a psychological grounded instinct aligned with the energetic structure of reality. This cosmological-psychological model allows Nitsch to interpret all the mythical leitmotifs as symbolic phases within a broader process of evolution – from the release of "basic excess" to its spiritual sublimation through the symbol of transubstantiation. In this final stage, the tragic and passionate dynamics of life are understood to carry spiritual significance and are

[149] *Ibidem*.

[150] Nitsch explicitly speaks, in quasi-Heideggerian terms, of the "unfounded ground of being" ("grundlose grund des seins"), which is the "cause, origin, and permanent emergence" ("seine ursache, sein ursprung, sein permanentes entstehen") of being itself (Nitsch., *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 41; cf. also *ivi*, p. 57).

[151] An image of St. John of the Cross (*Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. by E. Allison Peers, Radford 2008).

transformed into aesthetic form, "aesthetically becoming clearly visible and conscious"[152], demonstrating that repressed energies are the very source of inner transformation and growth.

Nitsch furthermore merges psychoanalytic and cosmogonic references with an anthropological view, according to which human identity is composed of multiple psychological layers – akin to geological strata – that, if removed, can lead us back to the Origin.
Freud, in this context, holds significant value for artists because he reveals the deep interconnection between the unconscious and consciousness. However, Nitsch departs from Freud's framework by rejecting its positivist and reductionist assumptions. Instead, he envisions consciousness and the unconscious not as hierarchically ordered, but as parallel dimensions whose points of intersection are found in myths and artistic creation[153].
Similarly, his theatre aims to represent the entire geological strata of human psychological development which happened in its long history. Here, myths and religions are culturally exposed and compared and, by becoming dramatic leitmotifs, they show the succession of different phases within the development of human civilizations.

The symbols of the OMT archetypically express this process, merging with the dripping and pouring of color in action painting: bodies interact with the matter beyond any rationalist or logocentric framework, transmuting the impulse toward destruction into a creative force. Individual action thus becomes an allusion to the cosmic process. Each actor, in this sense, embodies the eternally playing child evoked by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*[154].

In this context, the experience of sacrifice functions as the most efficient catalyst for psychological abreaction: the release of repressed energy is evoked across nearly all the leitmotifs, each of which is theatrically dramatized in its most intense and emphatic form within the *Six-Day-Play*. In this monumental performance, the thirteen leitmotifs are presented along a dual temporal axis: a cyclical one, where multiple motifs are enacted each day; and a linear one, which charts a progression toward transubstantiation and rebirth – culminating in the eschatological day of resurrection that symbolically absorbs all preceding cosmic suffering. This labyrinthic temporal structure can also be interpreted in metaphysical terms as another

[152] Nitsch, *The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 34.
[153] See Hermann Nitsch, *freud and art* (2006), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 76-78.
[154] Cf. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, cit., p. 81 (Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, cit., p. 110).

attempt by Nitsch to mediate between divergent religious conceptions of time: the cyclical, pagan understanding, and the linear temporality characteristic of monotheistic traditions.

The topic of sacrifice clearly appears in the blinding of Oedipus, one of the most significant archetypal figures in Nitsch's OMT, functioning as a central expression of his conception of sacrifice. Abstracted from Sophoclean narrative specificity, Nitsch's blind Oedipus embodies ritual castration and existential sacrifice through the iconography of self-inflicted blindness, a ritualistic renunciation of sight in favor of heightened mystical perception. This sacrificial act transcends individual psychology to assume cosmological dimensions, as Oedipus becomes syncretized with Christ and Dionysus in what Nitsch terms the "guiltless dionysus oidipus christus"[155] trinity. Nitsch's understanding of sacrifice[156] operates outside moral structures: there is no anthropomorphic deity to appease, no original sin to expiate. In Oedipus, there is also the enactment of the abreaction connected to the *Grundexzess*: the blind hero's suffering becomes paradigmatic of the cosmic creative principle, where apparent destruction enables regenerative transformation. Through ritual blindfolding and blood imagery in his *Aktionen*, Nitsch materializes Oedipus' sacrifice as an embodied encounter with the "abysmally gruesome" truth of nature, challenging audiences to confront the violent foundations of being drawing participants into Dionysian unity with primordial forces. "the catastrophe of the drama announces destruction as the BEGINNING in the suffering, beaten, destroyed human being. the big bang as the beginning of our creation. an explosion, an apparent destruction signifies the beginning of our creation. the suffering, emaciated oidipus carries the stars, the universe in his chest. the history of the universe is traced through the immeasurable suffering of oidipus"[157].
The tragic hero emerges as both victim and redeemer, carrying within his suffering the creative potential that transforms destruction into cosmogonic renewal. Oedipus thus functions not merely as mythological reference, but as ritual living symbol of the tragic-creative nexus that defines Nitsch's sacred aesthetics.

Moreover, "rituals," as Schechner explains in general terms, "integrate music, dance and theatre. They use colourful and evocative masks and costumes. The processions,

[155] "die heilig tragische bewältigung ist vorerst angelegenheit der schuldlosen dionysos oidipus christus" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, p. 888).
[156] On the topic of sacrifice, see Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit., pp. 383-385.
[157] "durch die katastrophe des drama kündigt sich im leidenden, geschlagenen, vernichteten menschen die zerstörung als BEGINN an. der urknall als beginn unserer schöpfung. eine explosion, eine scheinbare zerstörung bedeutet den beginn unserer schöpfung. der leidende gemartete oidipus trägt die sterne, das weltall in seiner brust. die geschichte des weltalls wird durch das masslose leiden des oidipus nachvollzogen" (*ivi*, p. 889).

circumambulations, singing, dancing, storytelling, food- sharing, fire-burning, incensing, drumming, and bell-ringing along with the body heat and active participation of the crowd create an overwhelming synesthetic environment and experience. At the same time, rituals embody values that instruct and mobilize participants. These embodied values are rhythmic and cognitive, spatial and conceptual, sensuous and ideological. In terms of brain function, ritual excites both the right and left hemispheres of the cerebral cortex, releasing pleasure-giving endorphins into the blood. People are more than 'susceptible' to rituals of all kinds religious, political, sportive, aesthetic; they need the kind of satisfaction only ritual performances can provide, a powerful kind of total theatre"[158]. Is this not a precise description of the actions taking place in Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*?

The fragmented, gassy, chaotic postmodern space is thus converted into a renewed topology, where the sacred manifests itself within the aesthetic experience. The performance as Event becomes indeed Nitsch's attempt to answer to the challenges of the post-secular age.

This theoretical perspective is not at all hidden or concealed. There are multiple, explicit declarations concerning the sacred nature of OMT in Nitsch's theoretical production: "in the plays of the orgien mysterien theater i planned to make the participants spray vast surfaces with paint, as if celebrating a solemn ritual, a liturgical rite"[159]; "form can substitute for the traditional means of cult, liturgy, ritual, prayer, and religious contemplation, and can improve in the sense of heightened consciousness"[160]; "art is priesthood. practicing art is practicing a cult, a ritual. theater becomes a liturgy, a (substitute) church service, a religious festival. high mass. 'sacramental magic' (…) theories by stefan george are adopted. art as cult"[161]; "The O.M. theater project aims to realize a monastic way of life, whereby the monastic is meant as the most intimate concentration on life"[162]; "it was a matter-of-course for me that art was something similar to religion, and the performance of art corresponded to a ritual. (…) I saw similar

[158] Schechner, *Ritual and Performance*, cit., pp. 632-633.
[159] Nitsch, *the painting actions* (1960-63), cit., p. 53.
[160] Hermann Nitsch, *the tasks of the orgien mysterien theater* (1960-76), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 29-30.
[161] Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 45 ("kunst ist prierstum. kunstausübung ist kultausübung, ritual. theater wird zur liturgie, zum gottesdients[ersatz], zum religiösen festspiel. Hochamt. 'sakramentauber' […] theorien von Stefan George warden übernommen. kunst als kult" [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., p. 22]).
[162] "Das O.M. Theaterprojekt möchte eine mönchische Lebensform verwirklichen, wobei das Mönchische gemeint ist als innigste Konzentration auf das Leben" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 69).

thoughts being pursued by Stefan George and Gustav Klimt[163]. Even they understood their art as priesthood"[164]; "for me art is a kind of religion"[165].
Eventually, Nitsch's artistic conception seems to contain more "traces of transcendence" – like a famous art exhibition on sacred art was titled[166] – than an all-absorbing religious vindication.

Nitsch appears to be fully aware of the cultural and existential challenges that characterize the post-secular age. As he affirms: "with traditional religions outworn and no longer in tune with the attitudes of our present-day consciousness, art, having achieved self-awareness and understanding of its essence, and cleansed of all ballast, constitutes a new possibility of functioning as a cult in relation to being". For Nitsch, the religious dimension of art is rooted in a fundamental, non-anthropomorphic essential being (*das Sein*) – the Origin, the cosmic foundation –, most powerfully accessed through Dionysian symbolism. This *Sein* may be reached through an art that "replaces traditional cult forms without losing sight of their meaning and purpose, the essence of the cult, contact to the whole of existence"[167].
This "active mysticism" embedded in Nitsch's performative art is precisely grounded in an understanding of religion shaped by the notion of the sacred. Religion, in Nitsch's perspective, is nor primarily a system of belief, but rather a system of techniques, an *orthopraxy* more than an *orthodoxy*, aimed at evoking the conditions by which humans may transcend their merely material condition, a condition enshrined as a normative value by modern secular anthropology. This transformation – variously conceptualized in traditional religions and esotericisms as ascesis, mysticism, *deificatio*, or *theosis* – refers to the possibility of concretely becoming divine. Nitsch understands this as the ultimate goal of an artistic-religious path, in which performance, ritual, and liturgy become the specific means of achieving a renewed relation with the *Grund* – here conceived as the primordial being which permeates everything – because it is everything – and precedes all rational distinctions and logocentric reductions.

[163] Following their example, Nitsch became used to wearing a simple white habit-like smock during his actions (which then was often incorporated in the relics of OMT, creating the symbolical connection between the active role of the artist and the ecstatic excess artistically experimented).
[164] Rychlik, *Painting Actionism. Interview with Hermann Nitsch* (1987), cit., p. 455 ("Bei meinen frühesten Auseinandersetzungen war es für mich selbstverständlich, daß Kunst etwas der Religion Änliches ist und Kunstausübung einem Ritual entspricht, so wie ich Theater überhaupt ins Rituelle ausweiten wollte und will. Änliche Gedanken sah ich bei Stephan George und Gustav Klimt verwirklicht. Auch sie begriffen ihre Rolle als Priestertum" [*Malaktionismus. Ein Gespräch zwischen Hermann Nitsch und Otmar Rychlik*, cit., p. 6]).
[165] "Für mich ist die kunst eine art religion" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 138).
[166] Eine Ausstellung zum 90. Deutschen Katholikentag Martin-Gropius-Bau, 7.4. – 24.6.1990. Cf. Wieland Schmied and Jürgen Schilling (eds.), *Gegenwart Ewigkeit. Spuren des Transzendenten in der Kunst unserer Zeit*, Edition Cantz, Stuttgart 1990.
[167] Nitsch, *the tasks of the orgien mysterien theater* (1960-76), cit., p. 29.

3.2 Ritual Bodies: Corporeal Images of Immanent Transcendence

3.2.1 The Roots of Nitsch's Carnality: The Early Actions

This chapter examines Hermann Nitsch's radical reconceptualization of the body as a site of spiritual encounter through a comprehensive analysis of his performative actions and theoretical writings.

The methodology employed here traces the evolution of Nitsch's thought from his earliest solo actions in the 1960s to the mature liturgical structures of the Orgien Mysterien Theater, investigating how corporeal experience functions as both the medium and the message of his post-secular spirituality. Through close examination of specific performances, this analysis demonstrates how Nitsch systematically develops a conception of "immanent transcendence" – a paradoxical unity of matter and spirit that challenges traditional metaphysical dualism. The appropriation and transformation of Christian liturgical symbolism plays a fundamental theoretical role in recognizing the body as a "beautiful" gateway to transcendence.

Indeed, a key perspective that emerges in reflections on the post-secular age is the potential spiritual role of the body and fleshliness. In fact, if a philosophical position critically moves against classical metaphysics, seeking to recompose the unity of the world's polarities, then overcoming the traditional opposition between matter and spirit is also required. In Nitsch's case, this finds theoretical grounding in a mystical understanding of Being, which we will analyze more deeply in connection to the Dionysian principle. His perspective clearly moves beyond the reductionist risks of both dogmatic materialism and disembodied spiritualism, aiming instead to combine matter and spirit in a paradoxical and ecstatic theorization of their inner coincidence.

A pivotal aim of Nitsch's actions is therefore the concrete demonstration of the spiritual value of bodies – not only human, but also animal, vegetal, and even apparently inanimate cosmic elements, such as stars and galaxies. In Nitsch's pantheistic view, all of these participate in the divine essence of the cosmos, where life unifies human and non-human perspectives: "i believe that the universe is my true body"[168]. This spiritual dimension cannot be explained through univocal reference to an ontologically superior or metaphysically transcendent Being located in an abstract "elsewhere". Rather, it affirms that everything that exists possesses its own meaning and wholeness. Yet, these are not limited to the contingent singular identity of

[168] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 46.

individual beings, but instead reflect their "excess", i.e., their intrinsic drive to transcend themselves. Singularity always gains meaning within a relational horizon of other singularities. This transcendence is grounded in the relational quality of all beings, which are interwoven and interconnected. In this holistic view, every being reflects aspects of other beings, all linked through a shared ground of mystical unity, which Nitsch defines as *das sein*. On this basis – and with resonances of esoteric wisdom – Nitsch affirms: "my body is the whole of creation"[169]. Each particular being contains the universal, and vice versa, because each being possesses the essential quality of cosmic life.

Transcendence thus coincides with immanence: to "transcend" indeed means that a being is not only itself, but is also connected with what lies beyond it – the chain of the whole *kosmos*. At the same time, the meaning of transcendence is fully embodied in concrete beings, not dispersed across other dimensions. "Transcendence and immanence – I make every effort to overcome this separation"[170], Nitsch states, succinctly defining at once his philosophical and artistic intention. Transcendence is not opposed to immanence; rather, it describes a fundamental mode by which being manifests – as immanence itself[171].

Recalling Gadamer's interpretation of the symbol as *parusia*, we may argue that Nitsch's worldview is radically symbolical: the imprint of cosmic unity manifests in concrete reality through its sensory forms. Bodies, due to their intense sensory qualities, are particularly powerful vehicles through which the artist evokes this ontological and spiritual unity. Nitsch sees in the body a privileged site where ontological structures can become conscious and directly experienced through the senses. According to him, life is perceived more fully by bodies than by minds because, sensory and sensual experience possesses a unique intensity with significant gnoseological function[172].

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[169] Nitsch, *the architecture of the orgien mysterien theater* (2010), cit., p. 674.

[170] "Transzendenz und Immanenz ich bemühe mich sehr, diese Trennung aufzuheben" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 45). Furthermore: "there is *no* longer *a* separation between immanence and transcendence" ("es gibt keine trennung mehr zwischen immanenza und transendenz" [Nitsch, *da sein*, cit., vol. III, p. 668]).

[171] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, pp. 502-503.

[172] The cooperation of mind and body – or, more theoretically expressed, of intellect and senses – in the comprehension of the world is a hallmark of hermeneutical thought. However, it must be acknowledged that Nitsch's distinctive emphasis on the body's capacity to perceive reality directly and without mediation is not fully compatible with Gadamer's conviction that every act of knowledge is structurally mediated. From a certain perspective, our hermeneutic effort to decipher Nitsch's symbolic references and to restructure his impulsive interpretation of the world of myths, symbols and the sacred could be seen as a hermeneutical integration and systematization of Nitsch's extreme and immediatist position. Nevertheless, this interpretation finds its roots in Nitsch's own theoretical reflections – for instance, when he surprisingly asserts: "sensuality is not the opposite of intellect. on the contrary, our consciousness takes note of it and often does so in the most sensitive, intensive, and delicate ways. the division between the intellect and the corporeal (flesh) is a legacy of religions that propagate acetic denial of worldly things and platonism" (Nitsch, *blood text on the painting action of the 6-day-play of the orgien mysterien theater* (1998), cit., p. 470 ["sinnlichkeit steht nicht in contrast zum geistigen. im gegenteil, es

As Schmied explains, referring to the relationship between bodies and the performative ritual space: "According to Nitsch, the designs of the macrocosm and the microcosm, the shapes of the organic and inorganic world, must be brought into harmony (…); their unity becomes manifest. This is what Nitsch strives to do: to show that there are connections, analogies, correspondences, relationships and perhaps even areas of identity between, on the one hand, the anatomical shape governing the functioning of human body, and on the other, the design of architectural situations in which man can develop his natural potential to the full"[173].

The fundamental artistic role of bodies was discovered by Nitsch during his early actions, in cooperation and confrontation with other members of Wiener Aktionismus. Their assumption of the centrality of the body as the ultimate section of reality which needs to be aesthetically thematized in order to restore the relationship between art and the world of life was already discussed in the previous chapter. However, it is relevant to point out that these radical performances were not limited to a merely direct exposition of random actions; they were carefully studied and regulated to achieve aesthetic and intellectual constructive results. The symbolic syntax followed by the members of Wiener Aktionismus immediately impacts the senses, but soon requires a cultural and intellectual decoding activity to activate the inner transformation evoked as the fundamental aim of the actions themselves.

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wird durch das bewustsein registriert und dies oft in den sensibelsten, intensivsten und feinnervigsten formen, die trennung zwischen geist und körper (fleisch) ist ein erbe der asketischen weltfluchtreligionen und des platonismus"; Nitsch, *bluttext zur malaktion im sechstagespiel des orgien mysterien theaters* (1998), cit., p. 40]).

[173] Schmied, *A Subterranean Cosmos*, cit., p. 683. This labyrinthic fascination leads Nitsch to imagine and sketch several visionary architectural spaces, holistically composed of human organs, as a kind of reunification of a communal *macroanthopos* and the individual bodies moving within him (cf. *ivi*, p. 684). Nitsch lyrically elaborates on this aesthetic project: "Organic forms flow repeatedly into my architectural drawings. The whole, all stages of the development of the natural phenomena man, shall flow symbolically into this pullulating architecture. For this reason, the outline of intestines, kidney and liver shapes, human and vegetable organ forms are repeated. The manneristic expansion of my theatre project makes it conceivable that my happenings could take place with an architecture of, not only single organs, but of the whole human body transformed into rooms. The application of what are primarily drawn abstract organ shapes, led to my actually making architectural designs which imitate whole bodies or take them as their point of reference" (Hermann Nitsch, *The Aesthetics of the Drawings* (1987), in Id., *Die Architektur des Orgien Mysterien Theaters/The Architecture of the O.M. Theatre*, vol. I, Verlag Fred Jahn, München 1987, pp. 26-27 ["in diesem sinn fliessen immer wieder organische formen in meine architekturzeichnungen ein. das ganze, alle entwicklungsstadien des naturereignisses mensch, soll zeichenhaft in diese wuchernde architektur einfliessen. deshalb immer wieder strukturen von gedärmen, nieren- und leberformen, menschlichen und pflanzichen organformen. die manieristiche ausweitung meines theaterprojektes macht es vorstellbar, dass meine aktionen sich in einer architektur erreignen, durch die nicht nur einzelne organe, sondern der ganze menschliche körper zu räumen umgebildet werden. das vorerst eher abstrakt organformationen verwendende zeichnen führt dazu, dass ich nun tatsächlich architektonische gebilde entwerfe, die gegenständlich ganze körper nachbilden oder darauf bezug nehmen"; Hermann Nitsch, *die ästhetik der zeichnungen*, in Id., *Die Architektur des Orgien Mysterien Theaters/The Architecture of the O.M. Theatre*, cit., pp. 10-11]). This aesthetics finds its peak in the concept drama *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem* (*The Fall of Jerusalem*), where Nitsch describes hundreds of ritualistic actions to be staged in 1087 rooms of a mythical subterranean realm. The score is accompanied by an extensive map of the underground system of tunnels and chambers drawn in the shape of organs without a body, where the sado-masochistic acts take place. See the first edition of the text: Hermann Nitsch, *die eroberung von jerusalem*, Edizioni Morra, Napoli 1975.

Nitsch's early actions, in which several images, symbols, and motifs of OMT are already evident, demonstrate a progressive comprehension of the spiritual function and essence of bodies. His very first action, lasting 30 minutes, consisted of the crucifixion and bespattering of the artists' body in Otto Muehl's apartment in Vienna (19.12.1962). It anticipates the crucifixion of actors' bodies in the OMT: the body is exposed in a state of tension and danger, the punishment symbolically injures the body, which enters into contact with suffering, the power of negativity, and through this process prepares itself for rebirth – the rebirth of nature, where every being, once dead, does not disappear, but metamorphically becomes another. Christ's rebirth spiritually symbolizes that death, conceived solely as a nihilistic end (or as a transition to "nothing"), is a nightmare which mankind can fight and overcome through the evolution of consciousness.

The use of the body is pivotal here: it is not a conceptual bizarre addition to Nitsch's philosophical theory – as often happens in pure conceptual art where bodily actions illustrate abstract concepts or reflections – but is the core through which the artwork truly happens. The body is simultaneously the subject experiencing the aesthetic (and ecstatic) event and the object of art contemplated by the viewer. Subject and object are shown together; matter and spirit occur together. This idea was also artistically explored by Nitsch in paintings and drawings, such as the 1983 silkscreens entitled *The Last Supper* (*Das letzte Abendmahl*), where the Evangelical episode is represented with anatomically dissected Apostles and Christ as a producer of subtle metaphysical energy radiating throughout the scene and interrelating with the Apostles' bodies. The unity of spiritual event and bodily engagement is thus clearly thematized.

In this non-hierarchical ontology, where all beings are understood in the symbolic interplay between immanence and transcendence, animals' bodies soon appear. Nitsch even defines his theoretical position an "animal body philosophy"[174].

In the second action (8.3.1963, Galerie Josef Dvorak in Vienna) appears the already thematized figure of the lamb, positioned at the center of the room, with the walls entirely painted red. In this way, the topic of the sacrifice, associated in Christian symbolism with Christ represented as the lamb, is evoked[175]. Here the sacrificed lamb is not anthropomorphized: it remains an

[174] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 50.

[175] A similar and coeval aesthetic attempt to thematize the cycle of life, the transience of becoming, and the animal sacrifice has been offered by the Austrian artist Lois Weinberger (1947-2020) in the artwork *Flypaper* (*Fliegenfänger*, 1976): a cross is represented through a flypaper littered with small corpses of houseflies. This *memento mori* is, however, more directed to a conceptual irony than to the liturgical and ritual scope of Nitsch.

animal, whose carnal sacrifice provides life – as nourishment – for human beings. This symbolism allows us to interpret the figure, recurrent in Nitsch's early actions, as a kind of "reversed symbolism": the powerful theological association with Christ has led humans to forget the primeval concrete sacrifice of the lamb itself. By demythologizing the association, Nitsch seems to establish a new mythology: animal sacrifice as the original, primeval archaic practice that religion spiritualizes in allegorical form. Art can return to this primordial experience, revealing its actual inner sacred dimension.

Several of Nitsch's actions also concentrate on sexual organs – another carnal bodily domain which has long been hidden or censored in the history of art. Echoing Gustav Courbet's (1819-1877) famous painting *L'Origine du monde* (1886), Nitsch exposes male – and later also female – sexual organs. Although the provocative and spectacular aspect of these artworks cannot be denied, Nitsch's intention is not limited to a superficial artistic incorporation of sexuality as such, as provocation. It arises from a profound psychological analysis – drawing on Freud and Jung – of human unconscious life. Again, Nitsch's lens is not limited to an individual psychological description: he seeks to reveal the Dionysian magmatic and fundamental forces that rule Being itself.

Sexuality thus becomes a domain that exhibits the intensity of life and its polemic dynamic between pleasure and suffering, individuality and communality, consciousness and unconsciousness, beauty and horror. For example, the "penis washing" of the 8th action (22.1.1965), with the contrast between the symbolic purification of the male sexual organ and its dark Dionysian coloration, as well as the bandaging of the artist's penis in the 11st action (30.6.1965), with the symbolic care of the wounded organ, illustrate the metamorphic interplay of opposite and complementary at the core of reality. Intense emotions, ranging from pleasure to suffering, are thus evoked and sublimated through abreaction (*Abreaktion*). The aesthetic and symbolic choices thus aim at Nitsch's overall goal: the establishment of a communal form of *Kunstreligion* capable of allowing contemporary humanity to aesthetically perceive that sacred transcendence which is ontologically a form of mystical immanence.

Is there any better definition of Nitsch than as "a mystic of the flesh"[176]?

[176] Schmied, *A Subterranean Cosmos*, cit., p. 679. The philosophical pregnancy of flesh is confirmed by the insertion of the dictionary definition of *Fleisch* (and of the ancient corresponding Greek word, σάρξ) in the scores of the *Sechstagesspiel*. Cf. Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater. die partituren aller aufgeführten aktionen*, cit., vol. VI, 1998, p. 54. Indeed, according to the artist, "*the flesh thinks*" ("*das fleisch denkt*" [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 269]).

3.2.2 The Liturgy of the Body: A Christian Happening

The carnal symbolism evident in the earliest actions of the Orgien Mysterien Theater appears both aesthetically reinforced and more systematically elaborated within its later, more structured and mature forms. Its ritual dimension – which we previously discussed in relation to the notion of space – is also based on what we have defined as a "Catholic space": references to Christian symbolism, expressed through a Catholic aesthetics, permeate the performances. Symbols such as the lamb, cross, altars, religious garments and ornaments, organ music, the Gregorian chant, the host monstrance, and wine envelop the participants in a dense spiritual atmosphere, where bodily experience also acquires a relevant aesthetic and symbolic role. Thus, the images and themes of the first performances are reframed within the overall ritual and liturgical dimension of the OMT, wherein, from a certain point of view, the body emerges as the true protagonist of the entire action.

Although, as we have already seen, Nitsch shows a deep interest in several religious traditions, and his perspective expresses a fascination with the most diverse religious and esoteric paths, Christian symbolism is particularly relevant, due to the identification of the final resurrection experience – the ultimate phase of the OMT – with the rebirth of Christ. This centrality clearly depends also on biographical reasons, due to the cultural context in which Nitsch's biography is embedded: Catholic Austria, a conservative cultural, social, and moral paradigm, in which the young Nitsch felt uncomfortable, but which also offered a rich variety of artistic and religious inspirations.

If Nitsch's post-secular aesthetics cannot be placed within a specific religious doctrine – and even less in a specific church – his reference to Christian spirituality resonates much more with Catholic aesthetics and doctrine more than the Protestant or Evangelical ones. And this depends not only, again, on biographical reasons, but also on theoretical ones. Catholic tradition has indeed more radically stressed the Christian topics and images which appear as the most interesting and fertile in Nitsch's perspective: the transubstantiation, the carnal dimension (which for example Protestant theology tends to more radically and ascetically despise), iconophile aesthetics, the counter-reform Baroque art. However, due to the non-dogmatic approach of Nitsch's art, this is not as much of a relevant distinction, and we will use both adjectives – Christian and Catholic – to describe his symbolism, choosing one when it is more properly adapted for a given context.

According to Gerald Stieg, in Nitsch's OMT, "the synesthetic form of the celebration of Mass and the processions are entirely Catholic: magical incantations, music, images, what is 'shown' (the 'monstrance', the chalice, the regalia) in the most valuable material (gold, precious stones, embroidery), incense, candles and, last but not least, flowers of all kinds are aimed at all the senses, so that the cult represents a synesthetic ritual. What is decisively Catholic, however, is the mystery of the Eucharist: the magical transformation of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, which is not symbolic but real, i.e., enabling the consumption of the god"[177]. Actionism thus completely coincides with liturgy, as Nitsch frequently stated in a concise manner.

Nitsch's exploration of Christianity, as we have already introduced, focuses not on its doctrinal tradition, but rather on its mystical component, its symbols, liturgies, and rituals. He regards Christianity as a rich repository of references to transcendence, which could be revitalized in the artistic practice, creating a form of *Kunstreligion* aimed at promoting a "sacred celebration of life and Being"[178]. Christian liturgy itself is understood outside any social reference as a "mystery play", to quote Odo Casel's (1886-1948) theological formulation[179] – not a religious representation, rather a sacred happening, a liturgic performance.

An emblematic example of this reinterpretation is offered in the 1998 *Sechstagespiel*. The second day began with an apparently blasphemous image – the transformation of the phallus into the monstrance – which should, however, be interpreted "as variations on the Grail myth. Parsifal is aligned with Adam, Christ, Prometheus and Oedipus. It accomplishes the 'transformation of the phallus into the monstrance into the grail'[180]. 'Grail = phallus' is one of Nitsch's formulas for what, following C.G. Jung's research on alchemy, he defines as 'mysterium coniunctionis'. Put simply, it is a mystical coincidentia oppositorum, a coincidence of opposites"[181]. The monstrance is void – this symbolic choice seems to refer to a spiritualization of the body of Christ: the transubstantiation happens everywhere in the OMT, it regards not only the host, but all the bodies of the participants.

[177] Gerald Stieg, *Der österreichische Katholik Hermann Nitsch*, in Albert Meier, Alessandro Costazza and Gérard Laudin (eds.), *Kunstreligion. Diversifizierung des Konzepts um 2000*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2004, pp. 191-202: 195.
[178] "Sakrale Feier des Lebens und des Seins" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 56).
[179] See Odo Casel, *Die Liturgie als Mysterienfeier*, Herder & Co, Freiburg im Breisgau 1922.
[180] See Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, trans. by Andrea Dykes, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998.
[181] Stieg, *Der österreichische Katholik Hermann Nitsch*, cit., p. 201. Nitsch's interest in the symbol of Grail, read in the dialogue with Wagner and Jung, is connected to the Parsifal legend, on whose stage Nitsch variously worked on, although the project still remained unrealized (cf. Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 819).

In Nitsch's creative and syncretic vocabulary, the Grail also coincides with the Tao, with Being, with God[182] – the many names by which various cultures and traditions designate the ungrounded ground, the horizon that makes the appearance of all beings possible. It is no coincidence – as Nitsch argues – that Grail legends spread around Europe in the same period when, in the East, Zen Buddhism obtained more relevance: both forms of spiritualities deal with an immanent form of transcendence, a light, a luminous power which hints to the "*sacred* experience of the here and now"[183], to "resurrection, rebirth into life, into existence, into a full affirmation of life and thus of being"[184]. Drawing on Taoism and Christian mysticism, Nitsch proposes an identification of Being and Nothingness, where the Void and Infinite Space merge with Nirvana.

The spiritual illumination which Christianity proposes as an existential journey – irradiating from the liturgical celebration of the mass – is interpreted by different religious traditions in different ways, yet ultimately converging, according to Nitsch, towards the same mystical, alchemical[185] recognition: the identity of the inner Self with the cosmic reality, often conceived in a quasi-Neoplatonic or Plotinian language as the One, or, in Eastern terms, as the void. Zen's *satori*, as well as the Christian mystical concept of "detachment" (*Abgeschiedenheit*, according to Meister Eckhart, an author often cited by Nitsch[186]) promote an awareness that "everything is as it should be" in the *hic et nunc*. In this sense, Nitsch's engagement with Christian symbolism and liturgy leads not to a dogmatic adherence to traditional religion, but rather to a deep involvement with the Catholic tradition's orientation toward the centrality of liturgical

[182] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, pp. 402-404.

[183] "das heilige erlebnis das hier und jetzt" (Nitsch, cit., *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 317). In fact, "the grail connected the earthly with the supernatural. it had a feeding, nourishing, power-bringing function. it kept the sick alive, gave strength for battle, against death, also strengthened the power of the earthly living. the effect of transcendence was also registered through the grail by a surge of life, being, the conscious recognition of being became essential, one could even speak of dionysian elements, which the appearance of the grail symbol brought with it" ("der gral verband irdisches mit überirdischem. er hatte speisende, nährende, kraftbringende funktion. er hielt kranke am leben, gab kraft für kampf, gegen den tod, stärkte auch die kraft des irdisch lebendigen. auch durch den gral wurde die wirkung der transzendenz durch eine lebensaufwallung registriert, das sein, das bewusste erkennen des seins wurde wesentlich, ja man könnte sogar von dionysischen elementen sprechen, die das auftauchen des graalsymbols mit sich brachte" [*ivi*, p. 316]).

[184] "auferstehung, wiedergeburt ins leben, ins dasein, in eine vollbejahung des lebens und damit des seins" (*ivi*, p. 317).

[185] On the role of alchemy in Nitsch, see his *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., p. 78, where this occult discipline is claimed to be not a "prescientific search for god", rather "the confrontation with the exceptional, the enigmatic, the mysterious", a simultaneously material and spiritual work with "the spectra of association" and "the virtually algebraic task of working with symbolic configurations". The whole use of materials and substances within OMT retains an alchemic value: objects are mainly considered through analogical symbolism and thanks to their capacity to move senses.

[186] For example, in Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 35 and vol. III, pp. 718-19, where Nitsch collects several quotations of the mystic, arguing the radical unity of God and Being ("*gott und sein sind dasselbe*") and of the Self and God. Nitsch also mentions in this context the famous book of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (Harper & Brothers, New York 1957), a chapter of whom is devoted to a comparison between Meister Eckhart and Buddhism (*ivi*, p. 718).

experience as an even transformative, carnal, and mystical event. In this respect, Nitsch's sensitivity aligns with broader trends within contemporary Christian post-secular thought: a movement beyond rationalism, logocentrism, classical metaphysics, and ontological dualism, towards a holistic and mystical orientation[187]. In the theoretical context of Radical Orthodoxy, for example, liturgy is particularly valued, coherently with the "incarnational account of the revelation of transcendence, coupled with a participatory ontology"[188]. As explained, within a different theoretical context, by Jean-Luc Marion: "The liturgy proposes to demonstrate a visible spectacle, which summons and possibly fills vision, but also the senses of hearing, touch, and even taste. It accomplishes an entire possible aesthetic and perhaps thus appears to be a complete spectacle, more than opera, which moreover is its mimic and, by the *oratio*, results from it (…). The attitude of my gaze before the liturgy determines my general attitude before the crossing of the visible by invisible"[189]. Aesthetic performative experience and sacred liturgical experience seems to converge if oriented towards a real knowledge of the embodied/incarnated truth – the immanent transcendence.

A central concern in Nitsch's adoption of Catholic symbolism is the enhancement – and in some ways the democratization – of the experience of *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ), evoked for all the performance participants through the symbolism of bread and wine. Every participant to Nitsch's actions symbolically experiences the death of the sacrificial "victim", almost becoming Christ.

This is developed in a cosmic perspective that transcends traditional Western Christian theology and is combined with the original myth (*Urmythos*) of Dionysus[190] – which could be brought into dialogue, on a theoretical level, with the cosmological elaboration of Christian doctrine

[187] "Christianity: the last living religion that I experienced as a child and that allowed me to enter the realm of the mythical" ("Christentum: die letzte lebendige Religion, die ich als Kind erfuhr und die mir noch den Einstieg ermöglichte in den Bereich des Mythischen" [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 20]).

[188] James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy. Mapping a Post-secular Theology*, foreword by John Milbank, Baker Academic-Paternoster Press, 2004 [ebook].

[189] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. by James K.A. Smith, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, pp. 64-65

[190] Nitsch often refers to the "subterranean relation" between Christ and Dionysus (cf. Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 86): "The Crucified appears as a pictorial variant for the dismembered Dionysus. The biblical saying 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' is just a mutated version of the bloody Heraclean tearing and devouring of the Dionysian god" (Karl Müller, *Hermann Nitsch in Rauris*, in Stefan Neuhaus and Johann Holzner (eds.), *Literatur als Skandal. Fälle – Funktionen – Folgen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2007, pp. 642-657). See on this relationship *infra*, chapter 3.3.3.

proposed by several other 20th-century authors, such as Mircea Eliade[191] and Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010)[192], which significantly differs from the catechism "for the masses".
Despite theoretical differences, these perspectives share the insight that the Christological mystery is not merely an historical or anthropological event, but a theological process encompassing the destiny of the cosmos: mystical empathy with natural rhythms, resonances with pre-Christian paganism, and a non-anthropocentric, cosmotheandric[193] view of reality are proposed in contrast to the modern rational interpretation of religion – which is paradoxically common to both rationalist theology and rationalist atheism. In fact, what mostly fascinates Nitsch in Christianity is the focus on three great mysteries: "love, resurrection, and transubstantiation"[194], as they all promote a mystical, unitive, and communal worldview, which Nitsch emphasizes in rejection of the dualistic thought structures still present in some forms of Christianity.

Nitsch's mystical interest in the *present moment* – the fullness of the *hic et nunc*, where eternity becomes accessible and concrete for human experience – reflects, from a temporal perspective, this paradigm. As Panikkar asserts, "time is the other face of what has come to be called eternity, so time and eternity form what could be called *tempiternity.* Eternity does not come *after* time – nor does it exist *before*. Man's life on earth is not simply *a pilgrimage toward God, reincarnation, or nothingness,* but rather constitutes a *rhythm* in which every moment is inhabited by its other eternal face"[195]. Nitsch's reflection on the moment (*der Augenblick*) profoundly resonates with this vision: "deeply lived experience in the present is not governed at all by compulsive repetition, but by the cosmic desire for recurrence, being pregnant with recurrence, and the eternal state of intoxication which characterize the unfathomable and intensively lived moment. the intensively lived moment permanently desires to break out the confines of orders, out of temporally determined orders, into becoming. the deeply lived moment is true to its endlessness, its structure is profoundly extensive, pulsating with eternity

[191] See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, ed. by Ruth Nanda Anshen, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Harper & Row, New York-Evanston 1963
[192] See Raimon Panikkar, *El Crist Còsmic: un aspecte negligit del catolicisme modern*, in «Serra d'Or"», 340, 1988, pp. 32-33.
[193] See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience. Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. by Scott Eastham, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1993.
[194] "für mich kennt die christliche religion 3 grosse mysterien: die liebe, die auferstehung, und die transubstantiation" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 45)
[195] Raimon Panikkar, *Tempiternity: the tempiternal character of reality*, in *Raimon Panikkar. Official site*, https://www.raimon-panikkar.org/italiano/gloss-tempiternita.html

and infinity. it is the opposite of hardly noticeable brevity, it wants eternity (…) – the ecstatic joy of an instant"[196].
Nitsch's understanding of Christ's symbolism, the macrocosmic dimension, and temporality thus appears close to Panikkar's vision. Equally Christian is Nitsch's idea – also present in several of Anselm Kiefer's paintings – that the human body serves a cosmic symbol[197].

This philosophical orientation is intertwined with a fascination with Christian folklore, wherein elements of "cosmogonic Christianity" emerge, presenting a Christianity where nature, understood as divine creation, is sanctified and celebrated. Nitsch vividly describes: "in summer all flowers blossom most luxuriantly, and, in particular, the full, white, strong-scented roses. the fresh flowers are carried to the altars of the church so that they and the sanctuaries may be decorated with rapturous abandon. altars are put up outdoors. corpus christi processions advance through the fields. a monstrance bearing the body of the lord is carried through the meadows. the first villages begin to hold their parish fairs"[198]. This atmosphere is particularly emphasized in the many actions organized for Pentecost (*Pfingsten*) celebrations, when the Easter time finishes and, according to Christian religion, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles is celebrated.
The myths and symbols evoked in Nitsch's performances are thus intended to provide a bodily and sensorial entry to the profound intellectual and mystical positions that Christian spirituality has otherwise defined in theological terms.

Nitsch's "reformed" or "heterodox" understanding of Christianity is brought into dialogue with the already mentioned theme of the Grail along with a central sexual dimension in his early actions. Beyond Christian asceticism and sexual repression, Nitsch identifies the symbolic possibility of a union between masculine and feminine polarities in a ritual encounter. The symbolism of erotic union as spiritual rebirth is foundational in Western esotericism – for example, the figure of the androgyne, symbolizing the *coincidentia oppositorum*, or "reunion

[196] "das tief erlebte jetzt unterliegt keinem wiederholungszwang, sondern einem kosmischen wollen nach wiederkehr, dieser wunsch nach wiederkehr, dieses schwangerischen nach wiederkehr, diese ewigkeitstrunkheit zeichnet den abgründig und intensive erlebten augenblick aus. der intensiv erlebte augenblick will permanent den ausbruch aus den ordnungen, aus den zeitlich bestimmten ordnungen in das warden. der tief erlebte augenblick ist seiner unaufhörlichkeit true, er ist tief weitläufig angelegt, durchpulst ewigkeit und unendlichkeit. er ist das gegenteil von kaum registrierbarer kürze, er will ewigkeit (…) – die ekstatische Glück des augenblicks" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 19).
[197] See on that Timothy Verdon, *Il catechismo della carne. Corporeità e arte cristiana*, Cantagalli, Siena 2009, pp. 20-22.
[198] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 47.

of opposites, the totalisation of fragments"[199]. This symbol remains alive in lesser-known Christian trajectories: in the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*), the union of man and woman celebrates the mystery of divine unity – a mystery that the official religion often rejected by reducing sexuality to sin, particularly through the doctrine of original sin, which stands in stark contrast to Nitsch's interpretation of life and nature[200]. This specific erotic dimension of the *mysterium coniunctionis* is given powerful visual form in the OMT. Male and female actors are frequently "crucified" in symmetrical configurations; the simultaneous exposure of sexual organs hints at metaphysical balance, and in some actions, actors are even arranged in symmetrical-crossed forms that depict the harmonious unity of sexual opposites. From an esoteric perspective, such holy unions embody and activate the male and female principles, and their momentary physical union becomes a meaningful reproduction of divine union beyond time and space.

Furthermore, heterodox and outlawed sects such as the Beghards, the "Brothers of the Free Spirit", and the Slavic Orthodox Khlysty shared a different attitude towards sexuality, viewing it as a magical and energetic force, capable of triggering initiation and inner transformation[201]. Likewise, the Christian mystical tradition includes doctrines of the hermaphrodite, evident in thinkers like John Scotus Eriugena, Jakob Böhme, and Franz von Baader (1765-1841)[202]. These represent an alternative Christian path, one which Nitsch follows with his personal Dionysian interpretation.

This aesthetical treatment of the relationship between sexuality and Christian esotericism appears in many of Nitsch's works, including the action entitled *Maria Empfängnis* (Munich, 1969). "In this non-public performance, which lasted many hours, Nitsch replaced the previously dominant motif of a crucified lamb carcass with that of a female body, thereby transforming the animal sacrifice into a cultic human sacrifice. The linking of male and female bodies – or rather their orgiastic union in either a stylized suggestion or an actual act of love – with the basic excess of the frenzied mangling of bloody intestines is to be interpreted as an

[199] Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne. Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol*, trans. by J.M. Cohen, Sheed and Ward, New York 1965, p. 122. Analyzing in different traditions and even fields the manifold presence of this archetype, Eliade argues – with reflections that also apply to Nitsch: "The fact that these archaic themes and motifs still survive in folklore and continually arise in the worlds of dream and imagination proves that the mistery of totality forms an integral part of the human drama" (*ivi*, p. 123).

[200] See the chapter "Christianity and Sexuality", in Julius Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love. The Metaphysics of Sex*, Inner Traditions, Rochester 1991, pp. 177-181.

[201] Cf. *ibidem*. On the mysterious foolish spirituality of Khlysti see also Francesco Dimitri, *Comunismo magico. Leggende, miti e visioni ultraterrene del socialismo reale*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2004, pp. 48-49.

[202] See the chapter "The Doctrine of the Hermaphrodite in Christian Mysticism", in Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love*, cit., pp. 210-215.

attempt at a profoundly emancipatory gesture and a deconstruction of culturally established psychophysical regulations and repressions"[203]. Referring to the Virgin's conception, this performance engages Catholic theological symbolism while steering the OMT into a sexual-ecstatic intensification, with implicit nods to *magia sexualis*[204].

Although Nitsch's art cannot be identified strictly with the Catholic sacred artistic tradition due to its non-confessional and non-dogmatic character – and given that his philosophy borders on pantheism and that he has professed agnosticism[205] – it nonetheless shares deep visual, thematic, and symbolic connections with Christianity. This affinity was notably acknowledged when one of Nitsch's works was exhibited inside the Evangelical-Lutheran Christus- und Garnison church in Wilhelmshaven as part of the exposition *Gott sehen* (03.12.2025-12.02.2006). Curator Daniel Spanke interpreted the event as a potential fruitful dialogue between Christian faith and the post-secular spirituality evoked by Nitsch's artworks. Indeed, Spanke explains, Nitsch's *Schüttbild* – the one exposed in the exhibition – "is not necessarily a church painting, but it experiences an intensification in the space of the church, just as the church space experiences a dramatic intensification. Due to its ambiguity, in this context it is a constant challenge to the faith practiced here and at the same time makes the innermost mystery of Christianity visible in a new way: the spilling of the paint is as necessary for the appearance and success of this work of art as, on a completely different scale, the failure of Christ on the cross for the redemption of mankind"[206].

Christian cult objects are particularly present in Nitsch's artworks. He declares: "i am not an observant christian or fixated on the roman catholic practice of faith and ritual, nor am i interested in blasphemy an disparaging the christian religion. cult objects of all religions (of all peoples in all epochs) fascinate me. if faith or religion has power, one can feel it in the cult objects"[207]. Nitsch recognizes that there is a crisis of Christian sacred art in the post-secular

[203] Hubert Klocker, *Die Aktionen von Brus, Muehl, Nitsch und Schwarzkogler ab Mitte der 1960er-Jahre*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., pp. 190-220: 199-203.
[204] See on that Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis. Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, University of California Press, California 2006.
[205] "I cannot answer whether I am an atheist or whether I believe in the dear God" ("Ob ich Atheist bin oder ob ich an den lieben Gott glaube, kann ich nicht beantworten" [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 14]). But surely God is for Nitsch not a form or illusion or alienation, rather a symbol – in the philosophical sense of Romantic tradition, which we have variously considered: eventually God is "the symbol of human, universal, cosmic realization" ("das Symbol menschlicher, allweiter, kosmischer Verwirklichung" [*ivi*, p. 39]).
[206] Daniel Spanke, *Relikt versus Reliquie. Zum Bild in der Kunst Hermann Nitschs*, in Id. (ed.), *Gott sehen. Risiko und Chancen religiöser Bilder*, Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, Wilhelmshaven 2006, pp. 66-73: 70.
[207] Hermann Nitsch, *about the use of cult objects* (1995), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 62-63: 62 ("weder bin ich ausübender christ und auf die glaubens- und

age: traditional religious art has lost its ability to convey the sacred in human experience; likewise, classical theology and metaphysics also fail at the same goal. Instead, the sensory power of sacred aesthetics – its sensual festiveness – is manifested in ritual objects and transmitted by specific rituals engaging all senses, becoming for Nitsch a seminal *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Participating in Christian mass means, for Nitsch, experiencing the sacred in its concrete liturgical revelation[208].

Similarly, the Italian Catholic intellectual Ernesto Balducci (1922-1992) saw in Nitsch's art a return to the primal sacred: Balducci argues that Nitsch's art brings the viewer to the original source of language, to that elementary dimension which precedes the domain of meanings and its interrelations, and which offers to man a mystical, transcendental gaze that begins in the body and reaches towards transcendence, the "elsewhere". Balducci recognizes in this process the disclosure of the connection between that Principle which we have defined as the "unfounded foundation", and which Nitsch has defined both as *das sein* and *das nichts*, and the forms emanating from it, which always refer to that original, protean, multifaceted dimension. Balducci explains: "Nothing is not only, negatively, non-being, it is the negation of being determined in view of its transcendence, which in Nitsch is affirmed as an aura, as a halo pregnant with meanings that are intuited but remain sealed around narrative fragments whose sense is reduced to non-sense, whose apparent realism is instead absolutely unreal. Reality is elsewhere, Nitsch seems to be telling us, which, while our eye stops on the crude materiality of the signs painted on the canvas, discloses in us the other eye, the one of which the mystics of the East speak, the transcendental eye, which sees the whole. The physical confrontation thus becomes metaphysical experience"[209].

Transubstantiation – wherein bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (*corpus Christi*) – is the most significant sacred mystery enacted in the mass. The Eucharist thus plays a significant role in Nitsch's OMT, because it is understood as the most vital and transformative ritual, illustrating how sacredness can infuse matter itself, even transforming materiality into the divine – or better, overcoming the dualistic dross still present in the classical theological

kultausübung des römisch-katholischen fixiert, noch geht es mir um blasphemien und herabsetzung der christlichen religion. mich faszinieren kultgegenstände aller religionen [aller völker und aller zeiten]. hat der jeweilige glaube, die jeweilige religion kraft, so spürt man dies an den kultgegenständen" [Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., p. 39]).

[208] A theme that Nitsch recalls perceiving as the core of his attraction to Christian spirituality since a young age, and which he still defines as the fundamental topic of his artistic exploration. See Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 22.

[209] Ernesto Balducci*, L'occhio trascendentale*, in Danilo Eccher (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. Galleria Civica Contemporanea (Trento, 23 novembre 1991-19 gennaio 1992)*, Mazzotta, Milano 1991, pp. 19-21: 21.

interpretation of transubstantiation, letting this materiality be perceived in its own divine face. It is precisely in this light that, in our opinion, that Nitsch draws in his mythical leitmotifs of the Eucharist as the extensive ritual in which all the other already mentioned mythical leitmotifs (ritual regicide, castration, totem animal meal, the blinding of Oedipus, the tearing apart of Dionysus, etc.) are included[210]. The Biblical episode of the Last Supper becomes, in this context, a foundational myth read in a comparative and syncretistic way: "starting out from the truth of the cross – Nitsch writes –, i have always seen a link to greek tragedy. christ is the hero who fails but who succeeds in redemption, undergoing resurrection, the blood sacrifice of his death on the cross is transfigured and sublimated in the bloodless repetition of his sacrifice through the celebration of mass. his flesh and his blood become the food which gives eternal life to all of us. his sacrifice must be celebrated during the eucharist in order to take up the path of the sublimation of all sacrifices"[211].

Nitsch interprets the Eucharist as a "communal meal", a communitarian mystical act that seeks "accomplishes total communion". Here, he writes, "we want to recognize each other, be within one another, be in the other, in all things. (…) we want to incorporate the external world"[212]. All other sacrifices and ritual meals are sublimated in this Christian emblematic symbol, which Nitsch calls "one of the most profound mysteries ever created by any religion". The holy mass, by uniting spirit and matter, "visualizes and creates in a dramatic and compressed manner the transcendent, cosmic overcoming of the world"[213].

Furthermore, the topic of transubstantiation – the theological core of Eucharist – is also documented in Nitsch's poured paintings, for example in *Brot und Wein* (1960), where a red-saturated canvas shows a small white impressionistic host in the middle. The host is accompanied by inscriptions, also written in red, referring to the liturgical depiction of Christ's sacrifice. The Christogram IHS, the first three letters of the name "Jesus" in Greek, is also visible. This is another tribute which Nitsch offers to Chistian iconography.

The monstrance also appears in OMT – especially in the sixth day of the *Sechstagesspiel*, the "day of resurrection" – carried by a woman and a man facing each other in a flower-filled, luminous setting.

This theological truth of faith is, furthermore, a real transformative inner function which, in Nitsch's perspective, needs to be updated through new ritual forms due to the crisis of the

[210] Cf. Nitsch, *motifs of taste and smell*, cit. (Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., pp. 341-368).
[211] Nitsch, *the last supper* (2000), cit., p. 703.
[212] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 47.
[213] Nitsch, *the last supper* (2000), cit., p. 703.

institutional church (already diagnosed by Nietzsche, who, as we will see, plays such an important role for the elaboration of his worldview).

Thus, in Nitsch's cosmological perspective, the blood and corpses presented to OMT participants are not of allegorical value: they do not represent specific theological doctrines; instead, they are sacred in themselves. "the radical act of besmirching, dirtying, staining has a shock sensualizing effect on an imposed sublimated cult whose language has lost contact with the original sensual divinely carnal realities i was intended to express"[214]. And again: "with the celebration of the eucharist during mass, the dramatic event of the catholic service transcends all normal dramatic staging, and we can recognize connecting threads through the action performance and action theater entirety. (…) transubstantiation is not a staged occurrence but actually takes place. bread and wine are literally transformed into christ's flesh and blood"[215].

This is not mere spectacle, but an existential transformation: through the Eucharist, participants may access the divine, overcome human condition, and transfigure their temporal being into eternal being. This wonder mirrors the fundamental miracle that "something is"– that existence itself is[216]. Indeed, that the world exists is the greatest miracle. It is "extra-ordinary" that instead of there being nothing, there is something. Human beings mostly tend to forget – or at least not to focus on – this impressive event, just as science seems uninterested in it, instead limiting itself to the analytic treatment of the relationships between specific beings. Nitsch's art and philosophy is thus a method to recall this knowledge and intensify this basic and apparently "obvious" feeling, the feeling of being.

Thus, transubstantiation is not just one among many themes in Nitsch's ritual work, but rather becomes the emblematic symbol of his evenemential aesthetics. In the incarnate *logos*, Nitsch sees a theological correlate to his metaphysical idea of the transition between spirit and matter, the overcoming of the separation of universe in two parts[217]. Conversely, transubstantiation refers to the opposite and complementary movement: the bread and wine become the body and spirit of Christ, matter becomes a gateway to transcendence. Transubstantiation thus acquires

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[214] Nitsch, *about the use of cult objects* (1995), cit., p. 63 ("der radikale akt der besudelung, beschmierung, befleckung bewirkt schockartige versinnlichung eines hinaufsubliemierten kultes, dessen sprache den kontakt veloren hat zu den ursprünglichen sinnlichen gottfleischichen gegebenheiten, die sie ausdrücken sollte" [Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., p. 41]).

[215] Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., p. 74.

[216] This idea is at the origin of Western philosophy – both Plato (in *Theaetetus*) and Aristoteles (in *Metaphysics*) argue that "wonder" (τὸ θαυμάζειν) is the foundational experience of philosophical quest. A recent variation of this view has been proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, with an affirmation which resonates with Nitsch's perspective: "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, London-New York 2002, 6.44, p. 88 ["Nicht *wie* die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern *daß* sie ist"; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1969, 6.44, p. 114). Nitsch mentions Wittgenstein's quotation in *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 31.

[217] On the problematic dualism between matter and spirit, see Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, pp. 666-667.

both a transformative and performative ritual function: the arrival point is the spiritual rebirth of the participants in the ritual. "the festival of the o.m. theater", Nitsch affirms, "is a resurrection play"[218]. As such, we can consider it as the ultimate evolution of medieval sacred theatre, an expressive form based on the ritual liturgy and on the Sacred Scriptures, which in themselves contain dramatic structures which were easily theatrically reproduced through symbolic actions and objects, such as vestments, altars, pantomimes, particularly focusing on the heart of Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Christ[219]. This is also a major interest for Nitsch.

Furthermore, the participants' bodies likewise become spiritual, much like how Christian theology views the human body as *capax Dei*, capable of receiving the divine dignity which once irradiated in the corporeal word thanks to the mystery of incarnation[220].

Nitsch's liturgy of the body thereby acquires a rich Christian-Catholic dimension, expressed through multiple layers of imagery rooted in the dialectic of Christ's death and resurrection on one hand, and the Eucharis as ritual as its ritual re-enactment on the other hand.

A final Christian symbol aesthetically reinterpreted by Nitsch is the notion of "relic". Relics in his work refer to the objects – canvases, painting vests, garments, liturgical clothes, even installations – used during the performance, modified by it, usually thanks to action painting or through contact with organic materials, and which are then extracted as evidence of the artistic event. These artifacts are thus fundamentally works of art at our disposal, in terms of concrete objects, when we refer to Nitsch's production[221].

These artifacts function as the "bodies" of the performance – no longer living, but iconic, they save the cultural and spiritual memory of the actions, serving as cultural deposits and storages. The term is not adopted by chance: just as the Christian relics preserve the spiritual aura of the saint's body laid to rest, Nitsch's relics preserve and manifest the aesthetic aura of the OMT liturgy.

As Spanke explains, "a relic (…) bears witness to the material truth of the story told by the saint. Episodic relics (...) form a special class of relics. The cloth soaked in the blood of Jesus Christ also belongs to this category, albeit the most venerable, as it is a relic of the Lord and is thus at the centre of the Christian faith"[222]. Relics, then, are not mimetic copies of reality; they

[218] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 59.
[219] See Verdon, *Il catechismo della carne*, cit., pp. 93-97.
[220] Cf. on that *ivi*, p. 13
[221] Apart from these, we can refer to the photographs of the performances, the lithographs (often reproducing installations), and the "poured paintings", made from 1960 on in the more classic abstract paintings' style.
[222] Spanke, *Relikt versus Reliquie*, cit., p. 66.

present the sacred[223] – they bridge the visible and invisible, marking, so to speak, the divine and giving it concreteness within history, making it phenomenally perceivable. In this sense, there is a strict ontological connection between the ontological structure of relics and that of icons and symbolic images.

The relic installations in Nitsch's exhibition – and even in his museal projects – serve to crystallize, much like photographic frames, the religious patterns that most interest the artist. They reveal the "grammar", or syntax, of Nitsch's worldview: painted colorful canvases, as well as smocks and cassocks (the vibrant Catholic ones), often marked by the bodies involved in the actions; Nitsch's own painting shirts; the stretchers that carried bodies during the OMT, transformed into altars; surgical instruments; pieces of sugar; and piles of papers and tissues (symbols of freshness, chastity, purity, balancing the liberated Dionysian). The Apollonian reflections that emerge here represent, ultimately, a "testimony in the sense of the Gospel: a return to detachment, and, as it were, self-reflection. The Relics of the Orgien Mysterien Theater represent a perspective of reflection on the sacred, on the bloodstained sacrifice they emerged from"[224]. Their emotional power aligns with the selection of the most striking and emotive moments of the living action, which were later reworked and refined for aesthetics purposes. These artifacts also serve as a legacy for future generations who might only access Nitsch's aesthetics through them – a deliberate sensitivity that remains secondary to Nitsch's focus on the living euphoria of the moment, where the eternal present is mystically and ecstatically experienced.

The cultural and iconographic sources of Nitsch's depiction of Christianity are derived not only from the distant past – especially his study of the traditional Catholic mass and its Baroque aesthetics –, but also from the 19th-century sacred musical genre of "Passions"[225]. Both Passions and the OMT can indeed be understood as Dionysian revivals[226]. Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) and Johan Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) expressed through music a spiritual atmosphere closely akin to Nitsch's, particularly focused on Christ's death and resurrection as symbols of the tragic

[223] Just as the artistic actions are not at all connected in order to mimic, but rather to be a direct expression of life.
[224] Lorenzo Mango, *Relics* (2014), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 403-405: 405.
[225] Although it seems that Nitsch never mentions it, the formal similarities with the Medieval genre of "sacred parody" (*parodia sacra*) are relevant, due to the common grotesque and obscene elements. See on this Medieval genre Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984. However, the parodic or comic dimension of this artistic form is quite distant from the ritual symbolic approach embraced by Nitsch.
[226] On the role of "Passions" in Nitsch's music theory, see Siano, *Tra rumore primordiale e armonia delle sfere*, cit., pp. 54-55.

immersion into the life-death dichotomy. German culture was already receptive to a revival of the Dionysian spirit, which later theorists such as Nietzsche and Walter Otto explicitly addressed. Nietzsche himself recognized the connection between Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), and Wagner, interpreting it as a sublimation of German spiritual acknowledgment of the Dionysian roots of great European culture[227]. Nitsch's OMT is centered precisely on a Dionysian interpretation of Christ's passion, as we will explore further in the next chapter.

3.2.3 The Body as a "Beautiful" Gateway to Transcendence: The Religious Challenge

The celebration of bodies and flesh culminates in the orgiastic realization pursued in the OMT. Here, the body becomes the Christ-Dionysian dispositive through which dualism – which Nitsch, following Nietzsche, attributes to Platonism and a certain dualistic theological tradition within Christianity[228] – is radically rejected. Instead, spirit is "nothing other than the highest event of the flesh brought about by abstraction"[229]. Life, in all its declinations from birth to death and beyond, is affirmed without reservation: a radical *Lebensbejahung* (affirmation of life) in Nietzschean terms, "a highest state of affirmation of existence is conceived from which the highest degree of pain cannot be excluded: the *tragic-Dionysian* state"[230], because "if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event – and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed"[231].

The ritual movement of bodies, shaped by Nitsch's *Partituren* (scores), is not chaotic but follows a secret grammar and order – a *Körpergrammatik*[232], a specific symbolic syntax, where actions, movements, and rites are orchestrated to achieve an aesthetically persuasive meaning. Bodies hermeneutically translate the power of symbols into reality.

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[227] See Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, cit., p. 94 (Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, cit., p. 127). Nitsch has written in 2013, as a funeral request: "during the funeral i would like the last movement of the 7th symphony of Beethoven to be played by a symphonic orchestra. dionysian music of the exuberant life shall accompany the eternal way of becoming" (Hermann Nitsch, *I want to be buried with the dogs* (2013), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 938).

[228] Cf. Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 36.

[229] "Geist: nicht anders als durch die Abstraktion bewirktes höchstes Ereignis des Fleisches" (*ibidem*).

[230] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York 1968, p. 453 ("Es wird ein höchster Zustand von Bejahung des Daseins konzipiert, aus dem auch der höchste Schmerz nicht abgerechnet werden kann: der tragisch-dionysische Zustand" [Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte*, with a postface by Alfred Baeumler, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Leipzig 1930, p. 578).

[231] *Ivi*, pp. 532-533 ("Und wenn nu ein einziges Mal unsre Seele wie eine Saite vor Glück gezittert und getönt hat, so waren alle Ewigkeiten nötig, um dies Eine Geschehen zu bedingen – und alle Ewigkeit war in diesem einzigen Augenblick unseres Jasagens gutgeheißen, erlöst, gerechtfertigt und bejaht" [*ivi*, p. 675]).

[232] Cf. Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 112.

Body is indeed considered by Nitsch in a materialistic sense, but not in an analytical, reductionist, or mechanistic interpretation. His paradoxical view – where the already mentioned "immanent transcendent" perspective resurfaces – is closer to a phenomenological approach, as it focuses on the concrete, visible, and performative being of the body, considered as *Dasein* rather than a mere sum of mechanical parts. For Nitsch, the body is a "lived-body" (*Leib*), the "phenomenal body" (*phänomenaler Leib*), rather than simply a "corporeal body" (*Körper*). Humans, indeed, *have* bodies and simultaneously *are* bodies: bodies are simultaneously agents acting in the artistic scene and objects perceived within it. Nitsch is thus aligned with Hans-Georg Gadamer's critique of the "violent estrangement from ourselves"[233] that has been produced by the objectifying gaze of modern science and medicine and is based on "modern instrumental reason"[234]. The reduction of human bodies to data, measures, and numbers echoes the modern effort to objectify the natural world, a tendency already denounced by Martin Heidegger in *The Age of the World Picture*[235].

Within the hermeneutical tradition, this subjectivist, abstract representation of the world of life – the counterpart to objectifying naturalism –, is challenged by an integrated hermeneutical view of the original relationship between subject and object. This relationship is not only foundational in epistemology, but pervades all human action, which necessarily involves an act of comprehension. Concentrating on the body, this approach aligns with Kevin Aho's succinct summary: "My body is, in short, a dynamic physical, social, and cultural place, a site of meaning. The epistemological account of the theoretical subject set over and against objects is itself derivative and dependent on a more primordial phenomenon, namely, the involved practical knowledge of our own bodies (…). traditional epistemology tends to regard the body in terms of a quantifiable object (or *Körper*) and fails to see how such a view is actually parasitic on the practical 'know-how' of the lived-body, we can now begin to examine the *way of being* of the hermeneutic subject"[236].

In Heideggerian terms, *Dasein*'s "bodily nature" (*Leiblichkeit*) is not a physical object present-at-hand, but rather a carrier of existence, the mode in which humans exist in the world into

[233] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification*, in Id., *The Enigma of Health. The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. by Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1996, pp. 70-82: 70 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Leiberfahrung und Objektivierbarkeit*, in *Festschrift aus Anlaß der Verleihung des Dr. Margit Egnér-Preises*, Dr. Margit Engner Foundation, n.p. 1986, pp. 33-43: 33).
[234] *Ivi*, p. 82 (*ivi*, p. 43).
[235] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.2.1.
[236] Kevin Aho, *A Hermeneutics of the Body and Place in Health and Illness*, in Bruce B. Janz (ed.), *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, Springer, Cham 2017, pp. 115-125: 117-118.

which they have been "thrown": "we do not 'have' a body; rather we 'are' bodily"[237]. As Aho insightfully describes, we are not "encapsulated minds"[238], but embodied agents. "Being-in-the-world dissolves the 'inner/outer' distinction altogether. I comprehend the meaning of things not by examining the content of my mind but by affectively grasping the whole horizon or field I am involved in"[239]. The body is not a mere natural entity, but the horizon through which humans interpret both internal and external realities and make sense of them.

Further insights into this embedded subjectivity come from Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of performativity, which resonates with the hermeneutical approach to this topic. According to her, the space of performance is crucial in revealing the essential characteristics of human bodies. Performers undergo simultaneously a process of "embodiment" (*Verkörperung*), "by emphasizing the bodily being-in-the-world of humans, embodiment creates the possibility for the body to function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscriptions"[240], and a process of "presence" (*Präsenz*): "the 'magic' of presence (…) lies in the performer's particular ability to generate energy so that it can be sensed by the spectators as it circulates in space and affects, even tinges, them. This energy constitutes the force emanating from the performer. Insofar as it animates the spectators to generate energy themselves, they will perceive the actor as a source of power. This unexpected energy flow thus transforms actor and spectator alike"[241].
Manifesting as an embodied mind, the performer reconquers the body and transforms it into symbol and spirit. This is the repeatedly evoked immanent transcendence concretely manifested in Nitsch's living body. "In this sense, an aesthetics of the performative is to be regarded as an aesthetics of presence (…), rather than of presence effects, and as the aesthetics of "appearing" (…), rather than of appearance"[242]. This presence is realized through the process of emotional disclosure documented by the OMT actors, who experience an impulse-driven discharge of energy. This discharge requires a subsequent cultural and symbolic framework to be understood, signified, and eventually communicated.

[237] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1-2: *The Will to Power as Art. The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins, San Francisco 1991, p. 99 ("Wir 'haben' nicht einen Leib, sondern wir 'sind' leiblich" [Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6.1, ed. by Brigitte Schillbach, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 99]).
[238] Aho, *A Hermeneutics of the Body and Place in Health and Illness*, cit., p 120.
[239] *Ivi*, p. 121.
[240] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 89.
[241] *Ivi*, p. 98.
[242] *Ivi*, p. 101.

In this sense, bodies acquire a seductive, fascinating, and paradoxically beautiful quality. Although many actions manifest disturbing, uncanny, or even repulsive elements, Nitsch insists on the profound sensual beauty of his ritual performances. This beauty is not the classical ideal of proportion, symmetry, or harmony; rather, it arises from the tragic dimension of existence, revealing an essential mode of Being itself[243].

While Nitsch's explanation of beauty remains theoretically ambiguous, often overlapping with notions of aesthetic pleasure, sublimity, and life's intensification, it aligns closely with Gadamer's evenemential understanding of beauty: beauty is not something static, but something that happens. Through extreme artistic actions, beauty manifests as an intensification of life. By radiating the power of the Origin through artistic forms, beauty imbues reality with new nuances. From this perspective, Nitsch's sensitivity resonates with Gadamer's idea that artistic epiphanies do not diminish what is real or true; rather, they actualize it by revealing otherwise hidden aspects. Art, therefore, should be seen as the exhibition of reality itself in its complex, stratified, and pluralistic truth.

The "metaphysics of radiance" mentioned in the hermeneutical comprehension of beauty perfectly captures the dynamic of revealing and concealing that characterizes being in Nitsch's quasi-Heideggerian perspective. This dynamic appears in the OMT as a progressive concentration on segments of reality that already "are", but which the artistic performance highlights temporarily before shifting focus to another being. This chiaroscuro interplay of light and shadow within artistic performance mirrors a similar ontological process, one that defines the interplay between the manifestation and concealment of beings.

Nitsch's passion for an uncanny, *unheimlich* beauty – especially evident in human bodies and animal corpses – is recognized by the artist as a significant leitmotif in European art history. Indeed, "artists with their instinctive analytical attitude towards every aesthetic phenomenon beyond good or evil, are fascinated by the world of the slimy, fleshy, and wet. artists are fascinated by the challenge to our sensuality. they discover 'beautiful things' behind the disgust barrier. i am thinking of the artists of the renaissance who risked their own lives to dissect corpses, of rembrandt, who painted several anatomies and slaughtered oxen, indeed, how the netherlanders in general repeatedly portrayed disemboweled animals, fresh, damp fleshy gleaming fish, and sea creatures in their vivid still life paintings. i am also thinking of delacroix, who went to the slaughterhouse in the mornings to study the rich colors of the events that

[243] Cf. Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 91.

happened there. we can find further interest in slaughtered animals and entrails right up to lovis corinth, oskar kokoschka, chaim soutine, francis bacon, and the surrealists"[244].

Nitsch's emphasis on bodies and matter as gateways to immanent transcendence is a cornerstone of his project: the establishment of art as a new *Kunstreligion*. According to Nitsch, art, originating in cult, mythology, and religion, now rediscovers itself as existential mysticism. He states: "art, that originated in cult, mythologies, and religion, discovers its own self, pure form; form is related to existence, it becomes existential mysticism and through this, has recently taken on a self-engendered ritual religious function. it is becoming a cult itself, is returning to the cult. form reveals to us its innermost essence as cult in relation to being. (…) art no longer serves the religion, the cult, but operates as cult itself. the practice of art has itself become a religious practice without myth, a world liberating itself from symbolic metaphorical mythical religions becomes religious in relation to basic creative preconditions, to being, and has the comprehension of being as the only contact to the all-embracing of the eternal being"[245]. This affirmation, which efficiently synthesized the theoretical trajectory we have followed, also contains the problematic claim – seemingly at odds with earlier discussions – that the actions performed in Nitsch's rituals can be liberated from religious symbols and myths: every action means only what it is, without reference to higher meanings or dimensions. Every action should be understood in its pure happening, free from cultural or allegorical mediation. Erika Fischer-Lichte insightfully highlights this component of Nitsch's aesthetics: "When I perceive the actor's body as a unique body; when I observe the specific redness and taste the peculiar sweetness of the blood sprayed on the lamb's carcass, the actors, and spectators in Nitsch's actions; when I feel the intestines under my feet in their particular consistency and elasticity, I am perceiving all these phenomena as something. I do not respond to an unspecific stimulus, I perceive something as something. The things signify what they are or as what they appear. To perceive something as something means to perceive it as meaningful. Materiality, signifier, and signified coincide in the case of self-referentiality. Materiality does not act as a signifier to which this or that signified can be attributed. Rather, materiality itself has to be seen as the signified already given in the materiality perceived by the subject. To use a tautology, the thing's materiality adopts the meaning of its materiality, that is, of its phenomenal being. What the object is perceived as is what it signifies"[246].

[244] Hermann Nitsch, *about carnivorousness* (1995), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 49-53: 50.
[245] Nitsch, *the tasks of the orgien mysterien theater* (1960-76), cit., p. 30.
[246] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 141.

This generates an apparent contradiction, as scholars such as Bührmann and Remmert argue: Nitsch's actions seem to imitate religious experiences, but they lack the capacity to establish an authentic, genuine religious discourse. They contend that "Nitsch's actions ultimately turn out to be surrogates of religious practices, which aim for the 'experience' of the 'primal excess,' that in turn could allegedly only be experienced in the ancient Greek religion and could not be comprehended discursively. Nitsch's actions aim for this experience, however, without wanting to bind themselves to the conceptual fundaments of religions in general. The religious guise of the actions, therefore, is mere window-dressing, with which the O.M. Theatre nevertheless cannot dispense"[247].

Furthermore, Nitsch's own remarks about the relevant difference between religious cults and his artistic creation "underscore the findings above that Nitsch views rituals as formalized and repetitive sequences of actions which, although they appear in religious guise, can forego a dependency on religious convictions (and therefore are also not limited to the religious sphere). Understood in this way, rituals are defined not by their origins but instead by their repetitive structure, whose sole effect it is to intensify perception"[248].

In our view, however, the "demythologization" project advocated by Nitsch here – as in other similar passages – reveals an internal contradiction within his cultural and spiritual project. As we observed in the first section of the chapter, it makes little sense to claim that all images and contents are inherently artistic from an "actionist" perspective, because this would render everything art. The radical choices made by the artists in selecting figures and symbols capable of communicating meaning and enabling transformation in both viewers and actors demonstrate the practical function of this theoretical claim. Nitsch appears to be fully aware of this. His careful study and use of religious symbolism testifies to his faith in the transformative power of religious and esoteric symbols.

This conceptual move resembles Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane: potentially, everything could be sacred, but across historical civilizations worldwide, certain images have shown the capacity to embody "hierophanies" more effectively, acquiring a deep sacred character that manifests within a concrete, global cultural impact. Although the mystery of the "irrational" (or "imaginative"[249]) embodiment of hierophany remains, we must accept an

[247] Mario Bührmann and Heiner Remmert, *Hermann Nitsch and the theory of the "Orgies Mysteries Theatre"*, in Thomas Crombez and Barbara Gronau (eds.), *Ritual and the Avant-garde*, «Documenta», XXVIII, 1, 2010, pp. 59-70: 63.

[248] *Ivi*, p. 65.

[249] This is the faculty of the "creative imagination" which in Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition allows to develop the view of the eternal and immutable forms – which in Nitsch is deprived of any intellectual dimension, coinciding with an extended sensory experience, capable of rendering the invisible visible. On creative imagination, see Douglas Hedley*, Living Forms of the Imagination*, T & T Clark, London-New York 2008.

ontological inner connection between certain visible phenomena and beings and particular symbolic and metaphysical values. Nitsch explicitly affirms that "a symbol is superior to language, expressing something that can no longer be articulated in words. creation of symbols utilizes intensive sensual impressions or substances that leave a deep imprint on our senses. associations are linked to substances that impact our senses and feelings in a profound way"[250]. The knowledge of symbols, understood here as a kind of "spiritual materialism"[251], constitutes a wisdom science offering essential insights on this topic – and Nitsch seems perfectly aware of this potential.

To resolve these contradictions, one might argue that Nitsch's discourse seeks to differentiate his art especially from what, in Gadamerian terms, we have defined as allegory. According to Nitsch, visible and material phenomena, such as bodies, contain their inner, abyssal truth that does not require allegorical embellishment to be understood, and we should liberate ourselves from such allegory by shedding the cultural sediments that block direct experience. This position should be connected with the already treated discussion of symbols as functions capable of revealing the immanent transcendence of Being, and furthermore, with Nitsch's deep passion for the mythic-symbolic dimension and his obsessive artistic adoption of it.

Nitsch's frequent references to "*Entmythologisierung*" (demythologization) and "*Enttabuisierung*" (detabooing)[252] are not modern rationalist attempts at disenchantment, but rather efforts to strip symbols from dogmatic sediments, allowing their primordial radiance to emerge anew. He aims to liberate symbols from dogmatic sclerosis and substantialization. In Nitsch's worldview, symbols *act* in evemenential terms rather than as fixed, static archetypes. They are performative entities: by manifesting themselves, they enable the sacred dimensions of being to momentarily and powerfully reappear within the profane space. This is also why Nitsch wishes for the public to perceive his actions simply as the sum of the actions happening, without referential interpretation.

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[250] Nitsch, *blood text on the painting action of the 6-day-play of the orgien mysterien theater* (1998), cit., p. 471 ("ein symbol ist der sprache überlegen. es drückt etwas aus, das mit sprache nicht mehr zu sagen ist. sinnlich intensive eindrücke bzw. substanzen, die sich sinnlich intensive registrieren lassen, warden für die symbolbildung genützt. assoziationen ketten sicht an sinnlich intensive empfindbare substanzen" [Nitsch, *bluttext zur malaktion im sechstagespiel des orgien mysterien theaters* (1998), cit., p. 40]).

[251] "if being is not only contrasted with nothing, but is even recognised as a component of being, then ultimately the spirit would have to be recognised as a structuring fact that serves the body, the flesh, the becoming of creation, the being, comparable to the form. a comparison with the emptiness of eastern asia arises, here the emptiness is also equated with the form" (wenn sein dem nichts nicht nur gegenübergestellt wird, sondern sogar als bestandteil des seins erkannt wird, so gäbe es dann doch letzlich den geist als eine strukturierungstatsache anzuerkennen, die dem leib, dem fleisch, dem werden der schöpfung, dem sein dient, der form vergleichbar. ein vergleich mit der leere der ostasien ergibt sich, hier wird auch die leere mit der form gleichgesetzt [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, pp. 668-669]).

[252] See, for example, Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 265 and Id., *das sein*, cit., vol. I, pp. 136-138.

In this respect, Fischer-Lichte rightly argues that symbols in performances follow specific processes that are distinct from referential or semiotic references: "The symbol is conceived so as to deny a subjective participation in the act of generating meaning because the symbol has already absorbed its meaning into its 'interior.' The symbol invokes its intrinsic meaning. Even if the symbol is created by subjects – as is the case with artistic symbols – its subjectivity nonetheless tends to become erased. It eliminates itself in the act of creating the symbol and disappears. (…) Even the symbol created by a subject receives and reveals its meaning in the same way as things did in the stage when meanings were awarded to them by God in paradise before the beginning of history: materiality, signifier, and signified coincide"[253]. Precisely through this symbolic apparatus, Fischer-Lichte argues, and in resonance with the already mentioned theories on the re-sacralization of the world, the "reenchantment of the world" is achieved as a final transformation in participants' perception of reality: art is overcome, and a deep connection between art and life is aesthetically established[254].

Returning to hermeneutical definitions, Nitsch's images are neither allegories nor signs, but rather symbolic images: they express the "particular" that they are, but by expressing it they gain a "universal", symbolic value. As already seen regarding the figure of the lamb, Nitsch does not want the cultural heritage inherent in it to crush the evenemential impact of the symbols when they are put into action into performance in their direct epiphanic form: "A symbol is something that cannot be expressed in language alone; on the contrary, to a certain extent, a symbol cannot be expressed in language at all. A symbol is usually something that is borrowed from the sensual perception of art. A symbol always contains a secret, something undecipherable. It is a misconception that a picture can only be deciphered through its iconography, only through its content, because a picture is not a crossword puzzle"[255].

[253] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 144.
[254] See *ivi*, pp. 181-207. "Even if the aesthetics of the performative enables us to experience the reenchantment of the world through emphasizing self-referentiality and relinquishing our efforts to only think rationally, it should not be understood as a counter-Enlightenment tendency. Instead, the aesthetics of the performative marks the limits of the Enlightenment by undermining Enlightenment reliance on binary oppositions to describe the world, and by enabling people to appear as embodied minds. Thus, the aesthetics of the performative reveals itself as a 'new' Enlightenment. It does not call upon all human beings to govern over nature – neither their own nor that surrounding them – but instead encourages them to enter into a new relationship with themselves and the world" (*ivi*, p. 207).
[255] "Es gibt sogar in der Literaturgeschichte einen Stil, den man Symbolismus nennt, dabei ist ein Symbol etwas, das man nicht nur sprachlich ausdrücken kann; im Gegenteil, man kann ein Symbol bis zu einem gewissen Grad sprachlich überhaupt nicht ausdrücken. Ein Symbol ist meistens irgendetwas, das aus der sinnlichen Anschauung der Kunst entlehnt wird. Ein Symbol trägt immer ein Geheimnis, etwas Untentschlüsselbares in sich. Es ist ein Missverständnis, dass man ein Bild nur über die Ikonografie, nur über das Inhaltliche entschlüsseln kann, weil ein Bild kein Kreuzworträtsel ist" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., pp. 265-266).

Eventually, symbolic images, thanks to their religious contents, are able to irradiate the *aletheic* meaning of Being. Images should not be reified or idolized; rather, it is the artist's responsibility to let them shine in their own power – which is precisely the numinous, sacred power that our ancestors recognized in them, conferring to them a religious meaning and a ritual function. Nitsch clearly explains this: "And so, for me, true symbolism is about letting the symbols work, but it is not about deciphering the symbols; because if we are dealing with effective symbols – not with the overloading of objects with some arbitrary meaning pulled by the hair – and with a symbolic language of the same kind, nothing can be deciphered at all"[256]. Symbols work thanks to the almost magical principle of "associations"[257], a principle which, as thought by magical tradition, works not by obscure, irrational, and unpredictable connections, but through the fundamental *vincula* and energetic determinations operating at the essential, ontological core of reality[258].

Even in his *essay in the history of actions*, Nitsch states that a fundamental step of modern art consists in "breaking away from myth and cult"[259], but these affirmations could be coherently interpreted only in the sense of escaping from the dogmatism of certain religious subordination, because traditional myths and cults appear as an active part of Nitsch's practices. "for me", Nitsch clarifies, "it was about turning archetypes into dramatic leitmotifs, and replacing myths and gods with other myths and gods according to humanity's respective stages of development"[260]. Therefore, a peculiar and pluralistic form of *Kunstreligion* is to be evoked, artistically enhanced, and promoted, where every man can find, with respect to his spiritual level and orientation, his own specific mythology. But, still, this can take on the form of religion – and not merely an aesthetic interest – insofar as Nitsch speaks of his project as "the near establishment of a new religion through the sermon on being"[261].

In this perspective, even our hermeneutical attempt is doomed to fail if we wish for a whole, total conceptual explanation of Nitsch's art: our cultural mission is, in the more modest

[256] "Und daher ist für mich der echte Symbolismus ein Wirkenlassen der Symbole, aber es ist nicht dazu angetan, die Symbole zu entschlüsseln; denn wenn es sich um wirkliche Symbole - nicht um das an den Haaren herbeigezogene Überfrachten von Gegenständen mit irgendeiner beliebigen Bedeutung - und um eine ebensolche Symbolsprache handelt, kann man gar nichts entschlüsseln" (*ivi*, p. 266).
[257] Cf. *ivi*, p. 267.
[258] On magic, see Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (eds.), *Defining Magic. A Reader*, Routledge, Durham 2013.
[259] Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., p. 71.
[260] Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 39 ("archetypen wurden zu dramatischen leitmotiven, die ablösung von mythen und göttern durch wieder andere mythen und göttern der jeweiligen entwicklungsstufe der menschen entsprechend, beschäftigte mich" [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., p. 14]).
[261] *Ivi*, p. 45 ("nahezu gründung einere neuen religion […] durch die seinspredigt" [*ivi*, p. 22]).

perspective accepted by Gadamer himself, to creatively interact with the several layers of meanings inscribed in the artwork, letting them emerge, resonate, re-create, and relate to each other, producing new interpretative keys to face the challenges of our post-secular age. If the historical path of images in Western modernity can be understood (among other ways) as a transition from the sacred image of the churches (icon-*Ikone*) to the profane artwork hosted in museums (*Kunstwerk*)[262], Nitsch's overall project aims to reverse this process by evoking sacred images as they are performed in non-traditional religious places. The hermeneutical attempt we are pursuing should recognize this intention and allow it to irradiate as an artistic inspirational layer.

[262] Cf. Daniel Spanke, *Urbild oder Original. Zwei Bildparadigmen – sakrales Bild und Kunstwerk – in der europäischen Kultur*, in Id. (ed.), *Gott sehen*, cit., pp. 19-23.

3.3 The Dionysian: Meeting the Coming God

3.3.1 The Dionysian – Path to Reach the Being

Nitsch's aesthetic creativity is grounded in a complex and multifaceted philosophical ontology. In the previous sections of this research, we have introduced several components of his philosophical framework. These elements, unveiled step by step, were necessary to clarify various thematic concerns. A more direct analysis of this position is now required to fully grasp the theoretical foundation upon which Nitsch developed the fundamentally numinous character of the OMT: Dionysus, the god presiding over Nitsch's ecstatic art.
This chapter analyzes Nitsch's interpretation of Dionysus, considering the theoretical lens provided by the artist, the philosophical and mythological sources that inform his vision, and the artistic manifestations of this paradigm. Particular attention will be given to the relationship between Christ and Dionysus.

Nitsch's worldview is disseminated in a rhizomatic manner across his prolific output of treatises, manifestos, essays, and interviews. Due to its intrinsically dynamic and demiurgic essence – a hymn to eternal becoming – his philosophy is often articulated through heterogeneous expressions, each representing different but simultaneously valid perspectives on the pluralistic structure of reality.
However, it is possible to identify certain fundamental ontological patterns that emerge as the pillars of Nitsch's theoretical elaboration.
At the hearth of this ontology lies the concept of being – *das sein* –, which denotes totality or full reality. *das sein* – written in lowercase in accordance with Nitsch's Avantgarde style (and also reflecting his non-hierarchical worldview), encompasses everything and is found everywhere, without distinctions. It represents the ontological horizon from which all things arise, and thus includes all beings – even opposites and contradictions.
If everything participates in being, then a central quality of being is its expressibility through multiple aspects, all of which are human approximations of its ultimately ineffable essence.
Although Nitsch never systematizes this view explicitly, his ontology appears to be based on an unfounded or pre-reflective principle, echoing elements of hermeneutic philosophy[263]. This

[263] It is not by chance that Nitsch considers Heidegger's *Seinstheorie* a milestone in the exploration of the complexity of being, with its broad conceptual reach and intimate relationship with *das nichts* (the nothing). Despite acknowledging Heidegger as a difficult and highly abstract thinker – and a frequent source of misunderstandings, especially when compared to the more accessible Nietzsche, whom Nitsch deeply admired – the artist found Heidegger's works to be profoundly stimulating. He once declared: "i have hardly studied any

approach permits the articulation of being in diverse interpretive forms, without reducing it to a single, fixed meaning. It establishes a theoretical relationship between being "in itself" and the conceptual, imaginative, and narrative figures we adopt to approach it – the figures of mediation, as treated by Gadamer. Moreover, if we consider myth as a dynamic instance which gives form to human knowledge and sets ideas "in motion", we can recognize its ontological connection to the Origin – but, as we have already thematized, not in a metaphysical and hierarchical sense. Rather, it functions as an immemorial condition, the very horizon of possibility for thought itself. From this perspective, the specific mythical narratives proposed by Nitsch appear as determinations of a hypothetical original event, which can be imagined as wholly undetermined, devoid of specific content, but first and foremost as a performing, dynamic, and energetic force. Participation in being is thus not a static, substantialist determination, given once and for all, but an event of the disclosure of truth – primarily, the truth of an inner awareness.

In this sense, being coincides in Nitsch's theory with many of the foundational principles elaborated in both Western and Eastern philosophies and mystical-esoteric currents: *das sein* can be expressed through various "auxiliary terms" (*hilfsbegriffe*) that bear a synonymous or analogical relationship with being[264]. Among them are: god (*gott*), understood mystically as an impersonal, invisible divine force that "can be mystically experienced as the absolute being"[265]; cosmos, universe, all (*kosmos = weltall = all*), i.e., the totality of what is, the spatial and material unfolding of atemporal eternity – in a pantheistic view in which god is not a person, but inhabits everything, since god coincides with being, and all that is exists within being[266]; nature (*natur*), conceived as totality, encompassing both visible and invisible domains, "natural" and artificial entities alike, "from the elementary forces of nature that initially determine the cosmos to all forms of life"[267], in the Greek sense of *physis* as creative force – aligned, via Heidegger, with the domain of truth as *aletheia*[268], and further enriched by Romantic notions of metamorphosis[269]; nothing or void (*nichts*, *leere*), understood as the

other philosopher as much as heidegger" ("ich habe kaum einen philosophen so studiert wie heidegger" [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, p. 751]). However, due to the absence in Nitsch's philosophy of a confrontation with Heidegger's essential notions of *Abgrund* and *Bodenlose*, we can speak, in our opinion, of an "unfulfilled encounter". Hans-Georg Gadamer, as far as we know, does not appear at all in Nitsch's theoretical production.

[264] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 666-678.

[265] "gott kann mystisch erfahren werden als das absolute rein" (*ivi*, p. 669).

[266] Cf. *ivi*, p. 675. Cf. also Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, pp. 502-503.

[267] "von den elementaren, vorerst den kosmos bestimmenden naturkräften bis zu allen lebensformen" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, p. 674).

[268] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.2.1.

[269] Cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, introduction by Gordon L. Miller, The MIT Press, Cambridge-London 2009 (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären*,

complementary "negative" aspect of being[270], the shadow of its radiant and bursting light, the empty space in which what-is appears, thus a space of infinite possibilities, clearly distinguished from nihilism, as elaborated in various philosophical traditions, especially in Eastern systems[271]; tao, the Taoist principle, the natural way or flow of the universe that guarantees balance and order in reality; becoming (*werden*), the flux of being – a path without teleology –, the permanent transformation[272] that constitutes the dynamic structure of being itself[273]; will (*wille*), generically understood as a fundamental human drive, interpreted in a syncretic and cosmological – rather than subjectively voluntaristic – manner, drawing on Schopenhauer, Freud, Nietzsche, and Jung[274].

The list of thinkers and sources cited by Nitsch to justify his *Seinstheorie* is remarkable, even staggering. In the section *on the historical-philosophical reception of being*, contained in the third volume of his massive trilogy *das sein*[275], Nitsch argues that it is possible to discern a theoretical *fil rouge* within the universal history of thought, wherein traces of the *Seinstheorie* emerge across diverse traditions. This "philosophical school" includes, among more than twenty figures: Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Plato, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas, Giordano Bruno, Angelus Silesius, Baruch Spinoza, Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Schelling, Nietzsche, Jaspers, and Heidegger. Furthermore, additional authors frequently mentioned in his ontological writings include Lao-Tse[276], Plotinus, Augustine, and others.

Ettingersche Buchhandlung, Gotha 1790).

[270] They are necessary complementary: "if being is not eternal, there is nothing, the non-being. *if there were not being, there would be nothing for all eternity*. IT WOULD BE NOTHING IN ALL ETERNITY" (ist das sein nicht ewig, steht dem gegenüber das nichts, das nicht sein. *wäre da sein nicht, wäre das nichts in aller ewigkeit*. ES WÄRE NICHTS IN ALLER EWIGKEIT [Nitsch, *das sein*, cit. vol. I, p. 148]).

[271] Indeed, *sein* occurs (*sich ereignen*) in cycle: something is and then becomes nothing, so that it remains a void (*leere*); but the void *is* however something, and this being is still the same *sein* – although under some aspects different. Also in this sense, being and void are two aspects of the same. Cf. *ivi*, pp. 79-80. Nitsch has found confirmation of his philosophical perspective on *das nichts* in the monumental Ludger Lütkehaus, *Nichts. Abschied vom Sein. Ende der Angst*, Haffmans Verlag, Zürich 1999, as declared in Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 142.

[272] *Ivi*, pp. 57-58, 153-155.

[273] "dass das sein die struktur des werdens in sich trägt" (*ivi*, p. 228).

[274] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit. vol. III, p. 677.

[275] *Ivi*, pp. 698-757.

[276] Nitsch has undertaken an extensive reinterpretation of Lao Tse's *Tao Te Ching*, establishing a creative dialogue between his own philosophy of being (*seinsphilosophie*) and this foundational text of Eastern wisdom (in *ivi*, pp. 760-807). Although his *seinstheorie* is primarily grounded in Western philosophical traditions – largely due to the conceptual challenges of identifying ontological categories within Eastern thought – Nitsch frequently references Eastern spirituality, particularly in relation to mystical approaches to life and spiritual development. He notably invokes the figure of Buddha (Nitsch, *das sein*, vol. I, p. 33) and asserts that being coincides with spiritual states such as *nirvana* and *satori*. However, he qualifies this convergence by emphasizing that these states are part of being merely because "they are there," that is, they exist within being. For Nitsch, such forms of asceticism are ultimately inadequate for capturing the full, expansive meaning of being. Despite this critique, Zen Buddhism remains a significant influence on his artistic vision (cf. Nitsch's interview with Jonas Mekas, in «Village Voice»,

Drawing on these sources, Nitsch attempts to give a provisional form and definition to the Principle: it is eternal[277] and yet always in movement; it simultaneously coincides with being, nothing, and void. Yet, all definitions lead to the same apophatic conclusion: "being is how it is". If the "I" coincides, from a metaphysical point of view, with being, then everything that exists is ultimately an emanation of this original being-nothingness-void-One.
Thus, Nitsch's attempt to approach being seems to be suspended between an instinctually iconophilic and creatively hermeneutic tension that generates a rich, even bombastic and hyperbolic description of the Principle, and, on the other hand, a gesture of apophatic silence that recognizes the impossibility of effectively conceptualizing it[278].

Scholars may rightly argue that Nitsch is occasionally unfaithful to the specific theoretical articulations of his sources – often forcing or ignoring the original functions of the cited quotations within their respective. His interpretations can indeed appear forceful and decontextualized. However, this criticism loses weight once we understand that Nitsch's (ab)use of diverse Western and Eastern thinkers is deliberate: it aims to demonstrate that heterogenous systems of thought are simultaneously valid because they all pivot around the

vol. XIII, nr. 21, 7 March 1968, now in Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., pp. 136-138) – especially its emphasis on spiritualization and "abstraction", which Nitsch sees as liberating traditional religions from superstition and folkloric residues (cf. Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 353). Nevertheless, Nitsch's philosophical position remains decisively Western, marked by a persistent skepticism toward the more ascetic and disembodied forms of Eastern spirituality. This suspicion is arguably rooted in Nietzsche's critique of Buddhism, which he considered a nihilistic and life-denying doctrine (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 7, 98 [Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in Id., *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 1, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1988, pp. 245-412: 252, 380]). In alignment with this life-affirming stance, and in contrast to the Buddhist view of life as mere *samsara*, Nitsch unambiguously declares: "My work means a reversal of Buddha's teaching" ("Meine Arbeit meint eine Umkehrung der Lehre Buddhas" [in Koch, (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 19]).

[277] "the act of creation knows no beginning. it is always occurring, has always been occurring, occurs every moment through us, through everything possessed of being and life, and does so in all eternity and all infinity". At the core of this perspective stands the "marriage of nothingness and eternity" (Hermann Nitsch, *penetrating to the basic excess/primal excess* (1995), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 31-33: 32 ("der schöpfungsakt kennt keinen begin. er ereignet sich immer, hat sich immer ereignet, ereignet sic him jedem augenblick durch uns, durch alles seiende und lebendige hindurch, und dies in der endlosigkeit von ewigkeit und unendlichkeit. der grundexzess ist tod und geburt gleichzeitig" [Hermann Nitsch, *durchdringen zum grundexzess/urexzess* (1995), in Rychlik (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. Das Sechstagespiel*, cit., pp. 24-27: 25]). The eternity of being is simultaneously considered as *Ewigkeit-Unendlichkeit* (everlastingness) and *Zeitlosigkeit* (eternity outside of time): the former, according to Nitsch, cannot be perceived, but it is the more reasonable interpretation of the perpetual becoming; the latter is perceived in the *hic et nunc* though the mystical experiences, which reveals the possibility of interrupting the flux of life in the eternal moment. Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 79.

[278] Not by chance the *Sechstagesspiel* score includes an entire page devoted to "negative (apophatic) theology", underlying the unknowability of God (Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater. die partituren aller aufgeführten aktionen*, cit., vol. VI, 1998, p. 325; we have discovered that the page printed by Nitsch within the score and without mentioning the source comes from Kurt Ruh, *Die mystische Gotteslehre des Dionysius Areopagita*, Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenchaften, München 1987, pp. 26-27 – an interesting hint to his readings).

thought of being – the domain where pluralism is not only tolerated, but intrinsic, where the sacredness of all things and the common ground of differences are affirmed. This theoretical pluralism aligns with the ontological perspectivism that Nitsch sees as fundamental to reality. He expresses this clearly: "i accept the definitions of the great philosophers whose systems have a degree of logical consistency – but only within their systems. the whole system explodes at the seams, however, if we attempt to make use of the 'objective and scientific' interpretations of other philosophers"[279]. His *seinstheorie* thus appears as a meta-philosophy – a theoretical-ontological model in which different systems are simultaneously admitted as co-possibilities.

This paradoxical mode of reasoning, in which the philosophical thinking exceeds his own procedures and turns toward a mystical horizon, is the epistemologically consistent consequence of Nitsch's ontological perspectivism. If, for Heidegger, language is "das Haus des Seins", Nitsch extends this claim by asserting that "everything dwells in the house of being"[280].
In line with – yet even more radically than – hermeneutic considerations regarding the "unfounded" nature of the foundational principle (conceived as the Origin or the One), Nitsch attempts to define this apophatic principle in order not to renounce, in purely mystical way, the effort of approaching it. The never-ending spiritual path, according to Nitsch, can lead to "the bottomlessness and groundlessness" described by Chinese tradition as the Tao: the wave of becoming that appears as being and life precisely within the bottomlessness and groundlessness of the void. This void is not a lifeless, inert space but a creative and fertile soil, as acknowledged by many of Nitsch's sources, ranging from Heidegger[281] to Eastern wisdom.

The ontological horizon depicted here is always in movement. But why – we might ask – did the cosmic Unity, the eternal One outside of time, not remain static, in self-contemplation? For Nitsch, the beginning of being*s* – whose justification lies only in being itself – coincides with a primordial release of energies that inaugurates becoming, announcing it as the innermost nature of being. The origin of time is symbolically connected to the Big Bang (*urknall*), the cosmic

[279] "ich akzeptiere die definitionen der grossen philosophen, die in ihrem system eine gewisse schlüssigkeit haben, aber auch nur in ihrem system. wird nun versucht, die begriffsdarlegungen der anderen philosophen für ein "objektives wissenschaftliches' philosophieren immer wieder zu verwenden, so geht die ganze systematik aus dem leim" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, pp. 14-15).
[280] "Alles wohnt im Haus des Seins" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 94).
[281] See Hermann Nitsch, *about cosmology* (1995), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 56-58 (Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., pp. 70-75).

genesis that for Nitsch is inseparable from the basic excess (*urexess*) – two energetic principles intrinsic to the world of life.

From this phase onward, the universe embarks on its evolutionary trajectory, dramatized in the mythic leitmotifs of the OMT. Yet, Nitsch also proposes a specific cosmological narrative[282]: in the eternal universe, populated by giant, mysterious black holes whose collisions trigger universal collapses, an extraordinary event occurred – a colossal explosion that gave birth to the time in which we now live. In this universe of perpetual rising and collapsing processes, which show the living and pulsating essence of the cosmos, our world arose from such a collapse, which triggered the Big Bang. While this paradigm carries a degree of scientific plausibility, Nitsch affirms, without irony, that it is a myth. Myth, as Gadamer argues, remains a profound mode of reality's representation. Thus, even the most conceptually complex structures of contemporary science remain embedded in cultural and mythological frameworks. If ancient cosmologies no longer suffice, and scientific culture is producing new models, art may help forge a new mythology – and hence the OMT can provide artistic substance and form to these rational cosmologies[283].

From a methodological standpoint, it is important to specify that Nitsch's *seinstheorie* is situated within a theoretical horizon often associated with "metaphysics". In this regard, Nitsch does not align with Heidegger's critique of ontotheology. Nevertheless, he firmly rejects classic dualistic metaphysics, advancing instead the previously discussed notion of "immanent transcendence". For Nitsch, metaphysics concerns "everything that is" – that is, the entirety of being, situated between immanence and transcendence, the visible and the invisible. While transcendence surpasses the immanent, visible realm of phenomena, it does not stand outside of being itself. Consequently, from an ontological perspective, there is no substantive division between immanence and transcendence[284].

This expanded notion of metaphysics – which includes, alongside ontology, also the sciences, as they study the ways in which being manifests[285] – resonates with recent reinterpretations proposed by the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari. Critiquing superficial dismissals of

[282] Cf. *ibidem* (*ibidem*).

[283] An artistic representation of this cosmogonic process was also attempted by Nitsch in a lyrical text devoted to color theory. Here the scientific description of the proceeding from the black hole to our galaxy, rich of different beings, through the big bang, is described with a fascinating storytelling, based on the symbolic dialectic of darkness and light. The richness of colors we can perceive symbolical sends back to the entire process of emanation, connecting the viewer to the "uterine night of nothingness" from which everything comes. The text we've introduced is Nitsch, *color theory* (1979-91), cit. (Nitsch, *die farblehre des o.m.theaters*, cit.).

[284] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 120.

[285] Cf. *ivi*, p. 194.

metaphysical tradition and rejecting the Heideggerian interpretation, Cacciari argues that Western metaphysics was originally conceived as a method for investigating the unity of reality. Coherent metaphysical positions, according to him, do not necessarily posit an abstract or otherworldly realm. Rather, they seek to understand the relational structure and inner connectivity of phenomena and entities within being. In this light, a genuine metaphysics must be, fundamentally, a "concrete metaphysics"[286].

But how is this being known and experienced? For Nitsch, following the collapse of traditional explanatory paradigms and grand narratives, we must begin from the only certainty remaining: ourselves, our subjectivity, that is, the irreducible fact of our being here and now, embodied, conscious, and perceptually engaged with the world. This self-awareness becomes the gateway to a broader understanding of being. The first access to reality, Nitsch insists, is our own existence, endowed with the capacity to experience the external world. However, this emphasis on subjectivity should not be mistaken for a form of subjectivism or idealism. Rather, it constitutes an augmented realism, a "crystal-clear diamond realism"[287]: "environmental phenomena determine my dasein (…) the possible reality of others reveals itself at very least in the reality of the phenomena that represents them, which clearly influences my actions. The being that encompasses us includes the totality of its possibilities. (…) if i proceed rigorously from 'i am', from the subject, there is as such no completely discernible being outside my being, my 'i am'. through a radical act of force, i am able to see environmental phenomena as components of my being"[288]. To delve deeper into the "I" is thus to encounter becoming, nature, and the richness of extended being. In this movement, self and void are unified under the universal concept of *sein*. Nitsch theorizes a dual and reciprocal process, at once intellectual

[286] Cf. Massimo Cacciari, *Metafisica concreta*, Adelphi, Milano 2023. Furthermore, Cacciari's search for the Principle (*Arché*) leads to a theoretical position that appears closely aligned with the perspective emerging from our dialogue between Gadamer and Nitsch on the "unfounded foundation" of the Principle. As Cacciari explains: "That which determines possibility in general, not only the possibility of the relation, but of the giving of its very parts, is itself not determinable except as that *bottom* where every *foundation* gets out. Our *lógos* has to do with relations and connections, but it exceeds its own capacity to define the relation of their totality to the Principle. Dianoetically, we can only arrive at understanding that the *ultimate idea*, the one which in itself sums up all the others, their keystone, can only be the idea of the Principle which enables the Relation as such or the very possibility that it subsists among beings. Yet, this idea must remain necessarily unpredictable" (*ivi*, p. 20). Additionally, Cacciari's reflections on the necessity – within a mystical framework that seeks to avoid the substantialist hypostatization of the Principle – to grasp its unfounded essence, without arriving at definitive explanation, is especially provocative. For Cacciari, such a mysticism must conceive of the Principle as an absolute In-difference, in which contradictions are not resolved into a unifying One, but are rather co-possibilities within it, is stimulating for a philosophical inquiry of the theoretical opportunities and risks within Nitsch's philosophy within it (cf. Massimo Cacciari, *Prefazione*, in Marco Vannini, *Mistica e Filosofia*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2007, pp. 7-13). This "sub-dialogue" between Nitsch and Cacciari, however, must be left for future exploration.

[287] "glasklar-diamantenen realismus" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 121).

[288] Cf. *ivi*, p. 27.

and existential, that moves from the ego to nature and ultimately to god (= being), and back again from transcendent god to the inner *selbst*, which discovers its ontological identity with the divine through its being.

This is the mystical path proposed by Nitsch in both his thought and his art: to uncover, through performative action and aesthetic form, the richness of being. In this framework, being is fundamentally an action, an event: the act of being knowing itself (in human experience, through the "I"). Each individual being becomes, so to speak, an "organ" through which the living totality – being, the cosmos – achieves self-recognition. This recognition is not merely conceptual, but also affective: it is through the senses that being comes to feel itself and, in doing so, to experience joy and realization. As Nitsch writes: "the whole being seeks this deep penetrating experience of happiness, through which i become aware of being in the happiness of its awakening, of its being here itself, comes to its essence"[289].

Although Nitsch's path to being begins with the subjective dimension, he also draws inspiration from Asian culture, where the "I" is less ontologically fixed and more mystical than in Western thought. According to Nitsch, "Asian people do not have the strong attachment to the subject that we have. The Asian is more involved in the creative event of the whole"[290]. But this is also what really interests Nitsch: he is not concerned with the Cartesian subject, a product of modern rationalism, but with the All, of which human beings are essential relational components, even symbols, of totality. From this esoteric viewpoint, the cosmos itself is a living cosmos[291]. The "I", then, must be mystically transfigured into a refined "self": "it is not the overcoming of the subject ego that is essential, but its transfiguration"[292]; "the path of the ego to the self is not a cancellation of the ego, but its increase to a cosmic organ of the all-encompassing consciousness of being"[293].

This process of transfigured identification can even overcome the existential fear of death[294]. Death, rather than an absolute end, becomes the transformation of parts within the whole: every death is simultaneously a rebirth, the reemergence of being in a different form. Nitsch's philosophy thus reflects a radical symbolic perspective: each part is a symbol of the whole, which transcends them while remaining immanently present in each. The whole is more than

[289] "das gesamte sein sucht diese tiefe durchgreifende glückserfahrung, durch welches ich das sein im glück seines erwachens, seines hierseins selbst bewusst wird, zu seinem wesen kommt" (*ivi*, p. 74).
[290] "Der asiatische Mensch hat nicht diese starke Bindung an das Subjekt, wie wir sie haben. Der Asiate ist mehr eingebunden in dem schöpferischen Ereignis des Ganzen" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 13).
[291] Cf. *ivi*, p. 68.
[292] "nicht die überwindung des subjekts ich ist das wesentliche, sondern seine verklärung" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 199).
[293] "der weg des ich zum selbst ist keine annullierung des ich, sondern seine steigerung zu einem kosmischen organ des allumfassenden seinsbewustseins" (*ivi*, p. 212).
[294] Cf. Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 102.

the sum of its parts, yet intimately expressed through them. As he concludes, "reality is the most abysmal thing which exists"[295].

The OMT is intended as an aesthetic celebration of *das sein* in all its relational complexity and fullness. This ritual celebration is not an intellectual operation, but a sensual-spiritual experience: a direct, mystical encounter with the ultimate, abyssal nature of reality. It marks the ecstatic recognition, under the patronage of Dionysus, of our complete ontological identity with being: "Each of us was already all or will be becoming all"[296].
Within the OMT, nothing is excluded from or added to *das sein*: everything is integrally included, since its very being merits a place within the cosmological artistic demiurgic process. The artwork is not an idle addition to life, but a vital instrument: it selects, through images and symbols, intensified regions of experience to demonstrate that everything that exists is meaningful. Life and death, sexuality and mysticism, body and spirit coexist in this cosmic, pantheistic festival.

The Dionysian path, for Nitsch, leads toward the groundless ground, or unfounded foundation, which his companion Josef Dvorak, in the 1962 *Blutorgel* manifesto, identified with "reality" (*die Wirklichkeit*), that "is broader than our 'forms'" and "overtakes our ideal"[297]. This reality operates within the complex dynamic of phenomena, including the obscure and invisible forces of the cosmos, beyond all abstract order. It is evoked through what Dvorak called the "the tension-filled cry of existence, the cry of the 'real' universe, of the concrete, of being as actus"[298]. Nitsch frequently designated this foundational concept as the *Abgrund* – the abyssal Origin accessible through the cathartic experience of abreaction.

3.3.2 Dionysian: An Aesthetic Interpretation of the God of Tragedy

Dionysus is one of the most pervasive figures in Nitsch's texts. It is both striking and curious that the Greek god never appears – at least not as a recognizable, visual character – in the OMT. This absence, however, is only apparent: Dionysus is in fact omnipresent, though "invisible",

[295] "Die Wirklichkeit ist das Abgründigste, was es gibt" (*ivi*, p. 117).
[296] "Jeder von uns war schon alles oder wird alles sein" (*ivi*, p. 11).
[297] "Die Wirklichkeit ist größer als unsere 'Gestaltungen', die Wirklichkeit überholt unsere Ideale" (Josef Dvorak, *Der Schrei der Kunst*, in *Die Blutorgel*, 1962, now in Badura-Triska and Klocker (eds.), *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., p. 48).
[298] "Der spannungsgeladene schrei der Existenz gegenüber, der Schrei des 'wirklichen' Alls, des Konkreten, des Seins als actus" (*ibidem*).

precisely because he is the god who most closely coincides with being itself. Like *sein*, he is everywhere, coinciding with everything. Furthermore, Dionysus is evoked through a network of symbolic elements referencing his myth, cult, and ritual: he is present in the vineyards, in the consumed wine, in the vital blood, even in the slaughtered animals, which are symbols of his own dismemberment as Dionysus Zagreus.

Within the OMT, Dionysus gains force through a process that immerses the practitioner into the essence of reality, conceived as becoming, transformation, and metamorphosis. Nitsch proposes an aesthetics of ecstasy and excess in the etymological sense of *excedere*: a stepping outside of ordinary phenomenal life into a deeper, still material, yet more intense level of reality. For Nitsch, the "experience of excess" coincides with the "dissolution of all notions of morality (beyond good and evil)", where "murders and victims are unified" thanks to the sacrificial act of the performance. "the aggression, the lust to kill of the murderer and the fear of death of the victim, blend into one another, are experienced simultaneously by those undergoing the basic excess experience. victim and voluptuous lust, crucifix and resurrection, birth and death, reproductive lust and death, nothingness and being – all are the same, a stream of voluptuousness resolving all antitheses courses though those experiencing ecstasy"[299].

In the Dionysian state, "vegetative/animal energies gain supremacy over the individual and force it into a more subconscious plane, in which feeling does not distinguish any more between torment and joy, only a single intoxicated excitement is felt (even if it branches into sado-masochistic forms of experience)"[300]. This state – at once psychological, ontological, and aesthetic – is that intensity of life itself, which precisely takes place in the event of beauty within the artistic action. "The abundance of the life force becomes effectively overtaxed, inaccessible means of the human organs of registration, which attempt to comprehend the overstrong need for joy, torment and the will to extend sado-masochistically the registration of joy arises. The endpoint of the Dionysian lies in paradox, in the contradictory, in the freeing of sado-masochistic instinctive needs"[301].

[299] Nitsch, *penetrating to the basic excess/primal excess* (1995), cit., p. 32 ("das erlebnis des exzesses = (auflösung aller moralischen vorstellungen [jenseits von gut und böse]). mörder und opfer sind eines. die aggression, die tötungswollust des mörders und die todesangst des opfers vermischen sich, warden von dem die ekstase des grundexzesserlebnisses erfahrenden gleichzeitig erlebt. opfer und wollust, kreuz und auferstehung, geburt und tod, zeugungswollust und tod, nichts und sein sind dasselbe, ein alle gegensätze auflösender wolluststrom durchdringt die ekstatisch erlebenden" [Nitsch, *durchdringen zum grundexzess/urexzess* (1995), cit., p. 26]).
[300] Hermann Nitsch, *Orgien Mysterien Theater / Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, März Verlag, Darmstadt 1969, p. 101.
[301] *Ivi*, p. 102.

In the OMT, Dionysus' epiphany occurs over a long and continuous temporal frame. This is particularly evident in the *Six-Day-Play*, where the apparently endless happening allows participants to transcend the profane time of modern bourgeois routine and enter the sacred time of liturgy – a festive temporality in which all oppositions are suspended. The offering of wine to all participants and the outdoor setting – where much of the action unfolds – reinforce this liminal process. Artistic symbols of Dionysian cults and rites manifest the paradoxical tension of sado-masochistic excess through aesthetical forms. Thus, Dionysus becomes the embodiment of "abreaction" (*Abreaktion*): Dionysus thus embodies the sadomasochistic impulse in its duality of joy and sufferance.

The Dionysian path to direct experience of being is mystical – but only in the bodily, material sense that Nitsch foregrounds. It is a mysticism of the flesh, wherein the world is not transcended but intensified, lived to its utmost depth – a mysticism of becoming, of the event, of ecstatic identification with being itself in its simultaneously material and spiritual essence.

In this context, sacrifice is inseparably linked to the power of the sacred, which often, in many traditions, required the adoption of ritual sacrifice to be evoked and encountered. This is a structure deeply embedded in the ontology of the sacred. As Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1916-1973) explains in his *Dictionary of symbols*: "The central idea of cosmogonies is that of 'the primordial sacrifice'. Inverting the concept, we can deduce that there is no creation without sacrifice. To sacrifice what is esteemed is to sacrifice oneself, and the spiritual energy thereby acquired is proportional to the importance of what is lost. All forms of suffering can be sacrificial, if fully and wholeheartedly sought and accepted. The physical and negative signs – of mutilation, chastisement, self-abasement and severe penalties or tribulations – are all symbolic of the obverse tendencies in the spiritual order"[302].
Nitsch's aesthetics seems to refer to this deep connection between the "sacred" and "sacrifice", which can be demonstrated also thanks to etymological explanations. the Latin term *sacer* derives from the Proto-Indo-European root **sak*-. Its meaning is still uncertain, but it is probably connected to – or at least was more recently combined with – the sense of "sanctifying", "consecrating" (in Latin *sacrare*), but also "being full of divine". **sak*- is also the root of *sacrificium*. This suggests a conception of the sacred not as something separate from the world, but as what is wholly bound to the divine – it expresses the idea of sanctifying in

[302] Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of symbols*, trans. by Jack Sage, Routledge, London 1971, p. 276.

terms of "adhering to" the numinous, sanctified through proximity to the suprasensible, and set apart from hostile profanation (cf. the German *heilig*)[303].

Yet, for Nitsch, "sacrifice" is stripped of any specific dogmatic, theological, or redemptive function. In his performances, there is no anthropomorphic God to be prayed to, or whose favors should be asked for. Instead, the ritual act serves to reveal the presence and power of matter, long repressed by puritanical modern civilization. Nitsch explains: "my ecstatic actions with flesh, blood, and intestines were carried out for reasons of a conscious-making abreaction delving into the depths of our psyche. the intention was to bring repressed matter to the outside, to make it conscious. the old sacrificial rites interested me solely on account of their abreactive character. the proceedings were largely defined by the instinctive search for sensually intense experience"[304].

Here, sacrifice is not moralized. There is no original sin to be atoned for. Rather, it is psychoanalytically understood as a Nietzschean critique of metaphysical dualism between immanent life and transcendent truth: "psychoanalysis alone throws light on the psychology of sacrifice, a humankind that, from the very beginnings, had suffered from what it repressed, introduced violent sado-masochistic abreaction impulses into the performance of the sacrificial procedures and into the basic readiness to be sacrificed and to make sacrifices. overly high ethical demands from the existence-devaluing religions with faith in the life to come produce, in conjunction with un-lived life, repression of the basic vitality, the compressed energies forced from the consciousness produce feelings of guilt, aggression, often sadomasochistic in nature. the repressed life drives christ onto the cross, drafts the myth of the passion and death on the cross of christ"[305].

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[303] On the etymological discussion on "sacred" see: Giacomo Devoto, *Origini indoeuropee*, Sansoni, Firenze 1962, *passim*; Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, foreword by Giorgio Agamben, trans. by Elizabeth Palmer, Hau Books, Chicago 2016, *passim*; Claudia Santi, *Alle radici del sacro. Lessico e formule di Roma antica*, Bulzoni, Roma 2004, pp. 17-58. On the ambivalence of the sacred in relation to *mana*, see Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed, Sheed & Ward, London-New York 1958, pp. 19-26.

[304] Hermann Nitsch, *about sacrifice* (1995), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 55 ("von anfang an wurden meine ekstatischen aktionen mit fleisch, blut und gedärmen aus gründen einer in die tiefe unserer psyche lotenden bewusstmachenden abreaction vollzogen. verdrängtes sollte nach aussen gelangen und bewusst gemacht warden. an den alten opfern interessierte mich nur ihr abreaktionschrakter, die instinctive suche nach sinnlich intensive erlebnissen bestimmte die opfervorgänge zu einem wesentlichen teil" [Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters. Zweiter Versuch*, cit., p. 81]).

[305] "lediglich die psychoanalyse wirft licht in die opferpsychologie, eine von den anfängen an verdrängungen leidende menscheit brachte gewaltige sadomasochistiche abreaktionsimpulse in die durchführung der opfervorgänge und in die grundsätzliche opferhaltung und -bereitschaft. zu hohe ethische forderungen der daseinsentwertenden jenseitsgläubigen religionen und nicht gelebtes leben erzeugen verdrängungen der grundvitalität, die aus dem bewusstsein gedrängten komprimierten energien erzeugen schuldgefühl, aggression, oft sadomasochistischer prägung. das verdrängte leben treibt christus an kreuz, entwirft den mythos von passion und kreuzestod christi, dem alle nachfolgen sollen" (*ibidem* [*ibidem*]).

Repressed life, suppressed by moral principles of asceticism, calls forth a compensatory discharge of the repressed energies, which are allowed to erupt within the sacrificial rite. The sado-masochistic experience allows for the renewed appraisal of the cosmogonic excess – the primal Dionysian impulse.

This "intensified life" becomes the "ecstatic arousal" evoked in the OMT. By exposing spectators to disturbing images or exhilarating images and materials, the performances awaken a latent awareness of humanity's original cosmological unity with being itself. Aesthetically, this existential condition is emphasized through the abandonment of traditional theatrical language, the dialogical stream between characters. Instead, Nitsch evokes a primordial language of syllables and guttural cries: raw vocalizations that express the "sound" of the unconscious. Nitsch explains: "Language had to give way to the torn flesh of the god-human-animal. (…) linguistic structuring generated analytical leitmotifs, showing that the need for a situation of excess is reflected in many myths"[306]. Here, Dionysus emerges as Bromios – the "noisemaker", the "roarer". As lyrically explained by the historian of religions Walter Otto: "The pandemonium in which Dionysus himself and his divine entourage make their entry – that pandemonium which the human horde, struck by his spirit, unleashes – is a genuine symbol of religious ecstasy. With the horror which is at the same time bewitchment, with the ecstasy which is like paralysis, overpowering all natural and habitual sense perceptions, The Dreadful suddenly springs into being. And, at its greatest intensity, it is as if the insane din were in reality the profoundest of silences"[307].

Nitsch's aesthetic appropriation of Dionysus is fundamentally shaped by Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. From Nietzsche, Nitsch draws not only a theoretical framework for understanding existence, but also a religiously inflected ontology. Nietzsche's vision of Dionysus as the god of tragic wisdom, ecstatic fusion, and unmediated life resonates with Nitsch's own attempt to reintegrate art and ritual, life and death, body and spirit. The impact of Nietzsche's thought on Nitsch's art was already evident in early critiques – Alfred Schmeller's (1920-1990) description of Nitsch's art in 1961 as "Nietzsche squeezed out of the

[306] Nitsch, *the verbal poetry II* (1982), cit., p. 42 ("die vertrümmerte sprache musste dem zerrissenen fleisch des gottmenschtieres weichen. […] noch die sprachliche gestaltung liess das analytische leitmotiv entstehen, welches zeigt, dass sich in vielen mythen das bedürfnis nach der exzesssituation abbildet" [Nitsch, *vorwort zur ersten wortdichtung* (1957-1962), cit., pp. 17-18]).
[307] Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, trans. and with an introduction by Robert P. Palmer, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-London 1965, p. 92.

paint tube"[308] captures this connection vividly. Nitsch himself acknowledges Nietzsche not merely as a philosopher, but as a prophet: "Nietzsche was a founder of a religion, a prophet of a definitely new worldview"[309]. Furthermore: "Nietzsche's unreserved life affirmation has prepared the new philosophy of being"[310].

From Nietzsche's interpretation, Nitsch inherits a Dionysian metaphysics centered on the ecstatic, contradictory nature of existence. Indeed, according to Nitsch, Dionysus is the god of being – in his dynamic dimension of becoming. It bears underscoring that his interpretation of the Greek god is not at all philological, but instead is aimed at expressing the religious archetype of his own philosophical *seinstheorie*. From this perspective, his position seems often to move towards a sort of "Dionysian monism": Dionysus is another name for being – indeed "he has the most important attributes of being"[311] –, and therefore he could appear as the unique, real, and truthful god. The dualism inscribed in the figure of Dionysus – life at this peak and excess, but also the state of existence of torment, destruction, death (the telluric side of Dionysus, Zagreus) – reveals him to be the God of the *mysterium coniunctionis*: "The god is just as much the image of destruction as he is the image of the constructive, procreative and phallic (…). He represents the living out of joy to the extent of suffering in joy"[312]. This vision of Dionysus as a figure of mystical unity draws directly on Nietzsche's formulation of the Dionysian rapture in tragedy, where the individual is annihilated in favor of collective ecstasy and metaphysical unity. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes: "Now, with the gospel of world harmony, each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and at one with his neighbour, but *one* with him, as if the veil of Maya had been rent and now hung in rags before the mysterious primal Oneness. Singing and dancing, man expresses himself as a member of a higher community: he has forgotten how to walk and talk, and is about to fly dancing into the heavens. His gestures express enchantment. Just as the animals now speak, and the earth yields up milk and honey, he now gives voice to supernatural sounds: he feels like a god, he himself now walks about enraptured and elated as he saw the gods walk in dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art"[313]. Nitsch radicalizes this insight, making the epiphanic unity of the

[308] Quoted in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 462.
[309] "Nietzsche war ein Religionsstifter, ein Prophet einer unbedingt neuen Weltanschauung" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 61).
[310] "nietzsches rückhaltlose lebensbejahung hat die neue seinsphilosophie vorbereitet" (Nitch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 157).
[311] "die wichtigsten attributes des seins" (*ibidem*).
[312] Nitsch, *Orgien Mysterien Theater / Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, cit., pp. 103-104.
[313] Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, cit., pp. 17-18 (Jetzt, bei dem Evangelium der Weltenharmonie, fühlt sich Jeder mit seinem Nächsten nicht nur vereinigt, versöhnt, verschmolzen, sondern eins, als ob der Schleier der Maja zerrissen wäre und nur noch in Fetzen vor dem geheimnissvollen Ur-Einen herumflattere. Singend und tanzend äussert sich der Mensch als Mitglied einer höheren Gemeinsamkeit: er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt und ist auf dem Wege, tanzend in die Lüfte emporzufliegen. Aus seinen Gebärden spricht die Verzauberung. Wie

Dionysian experience not just the subject of his art, but its form and method: the participant is not merely a spectator, but becomes a medium of divine manifestation, "a work of art" themselves.

Yet, the Nietzschean influence on Nitsch also encompasses the necessary complementarity of Dionysus and Apollo, the god who emerges to integrate the Dionysian mystical monism. For Nietzsche, Apollo is the *principium individuationis*, "the beautiful illusion of the dream worlds"[314], the formal principle which makes possible the existence of any artistic attempt. With Apollo, the spiritualization of the naturalistic, orgiastic dimension of Dionysus is accomplished. The OMT, like tragedy in Nietzsche's conception, aims to exhibit the dynamic and never-resolved harmonical *polemos* between the two principles.

In classical tragedy, Dionysus manifests through the chorus's music and dance, while Apollo is voiced through the actors' dialogues. In OMT, the absence of verbal language brings the Dionysian principle more strongly to the fore. Yet, the meticulous formal dimension of Nitsch's *Partituren* clearly evokes the Apollonian. In OMT, the birth of tragedy "from the spirit of the music" is not only thematized, but is aesthetically amplified – though the Apollonian is by no means excluded[315]. Nitsch affirms this explicitly: "apollon seeks dionysos, dionysos seeks apollon. the dionysian needs the apollonian registration. apollon needs the dionysian driving force"[316].

Apollo, for Nietzsche, represents the principle of the "Great Style": the ordering of chaos by the force of will, the anti-nihilist dispositive that gives noble form to the will to life[317]. In Nitsch as well – as his obsessive attention to the specific structures and shapes of his performances shows – it is possible to recognize an "aesthetics of the form"[318]: form is the aesthetic principle which connects subject and object, revealing the deep ontology of being to the perceiving subject. Form, eventually, "is the emerging event of being. the form is deeper than (intellectual)

jetzt die Thiere reden, und die Erde Milch und Honig giebt, so tönt auch aus ihm etwas Uebernatürliches: als Gott fühlt er sich, er selbst wandelt jetzt so verzüdkt und erhoben, wie er die Götter im Traume wandeln sah. Der Mensch ist nicht mehr Künstler, er ist Kunstwerk geworden" [Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, cit., pp. 29-30]).

[314] *Ivi*, p. 15 ("Der schöne Schein der Traumwelten" [*ivi*, p. 26]).

[315] See also Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit., pp. 393-394.

[316] "apollon sucht dionysos, dionysos sucht apollon. das dionysische braucht die apollonische registration. apollon braucht die dionysische antriebskraft" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 110).

[317] Cf. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, cit. (Nietzsche, *Der wille zur Macht*, cit.).

[318] As testified by several affirmations: "The authentic message, which art can bring to men is form. Art is form" ("Die eigentliche Botschaft, die die Kunst den Menschen bringen kann, ist Form. Kunst ist Form"); "What is decisive is the form, the form is what specifically art has to offer, it is its own language" ("Entscheidend ist die Form, die Form ist das Spezifische, das Kunst zu bieten hat, sie bedeutet ihre eigentliche Sprache") [Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 32]).

thinking, deeper perhaps than the sciences (...). the form reveals structures, on which (track) being will still occur"[319].

Nitsch's primary attention to the Dionysian is essentially grounded in his conviction that the dynamic balance between both principles – whose tension is the secret of their greatness – is currently unbalanced in favor of the reification, sclerotization, and dogmatization of forms and structures. According to Nitsch, it is time to enrich the Apollonian-formal deposit of traditional symbols, power structures, and socio-political relations with more Dionysian creative energy[320]. But from a theoretical point of view, both principles maintain their greatness and dignity.

From a deeper perspective, Nitsch argues that the dualism between Dionysus and Apollo is also only one model of thought which does not perfectly fit with the reality of being – which always transcends any logocentric description – and which therefore needs to be overcome. The two principles can be fruitfully considered only if they are understood not as opposites, but as different descriptions of the same cosmic unity: "as the brightness of the conscious, of existence and of fulfilled instinctuality down to the ramifications of the finest sublimation brought about by nature. the most sensitive heightening of lust is not in contradiction to the apollonian clarity of consciousness"[321]. In this perspective, an Apollonian mysticism is also possible – as it is, according to Nitsch, visible in the clarity of forms of Zen Buddhism: here, "the experiencer awakens radiant in his being"[322].

A Nietzschean-religious foundation of the god Dionysus, understood as the manifestation of a specific ontology, has also been proposed by Walter Friedrich Otto – an author whom Nitsch knows, though rarely mentions – whose studies deeply resonate, in our opinion, with Nitsch's approach. One intuits a sense of kinship: not only because Walter F. Otto is a figure in tune with Gadamerian hermeneutics on a philosophical-religious level, but also because the interpretation he provides of Dionysus, integrating Nietzsche's position, seems to be aesthetically realized in Nitsch's performance theatre.

Indeed, Otto's monograph on Dionysus integrates Nietzsche's phenomenology of the god with several philological and historic-religious references to his myth and cult in ancient Greece:

[319] "die form ist das sich entwerfende ereignis sein. die form ist tiefer als das (intellektuelle) denken, tiefer vielleicht als die wissenschaften (...). die form offenbart strukturen, auf welchem (geleisen) das sein sich noch ereignen wird" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, p. 395).

[320] While, for example, the tragic experience of the Third Reich can be read as an ecstatic explosion of Dionysian energy deprived of any Apollonian limit and associated with fanatic ideological instances – a catastrophic collective psychosis. Cf. on that Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 289.

[321] "als von der natur volkommen bewirkte helligkeit des bewussten, des daseins und erfültter triebhaftigkeit bis in die verästelung feinnervigster sublimierung. sensibelste steigerung der wollust steht nicht im widerspruch zur apollinischen klarheit des bewustseins" (*ivi*, p. 291).

[322] "der erlebende erwacht strahlend im sein" (*ibidem*).

Dionysus is "the mad god", the furious wine protector, companion of the spirit of the dead, the god of multiplicity and contradictions. He is also connected to vegetative nature, not merely in a biological way, but rather as the bearer of the creative and truthful dynamic power of *physis*. Furthermore, Otto establishes a theory of the sacred appearance of the god: rejecting any reductionist and positivist interpretation, he argues that the Greeks discovered the god through a concrete perception of his real presence, a numinous power which was able to "force" the people to carnally perceive the divine. In this sense, Walter F. Otto's defense of the objective character of the divine even surpasses Rudolf Otto's position, which he considered excessively focused on the subjective experience of the sacred. W.F. Otto thus argues: "That which confronts mankind in epiphanies is not a reality which is completely unrecognizable and imperceptible, affecting only the soul which turns its back on the world, but the world itself as a divine form, as a plenitude of divine configurations"[323].

The myth and cult represent the narration and the ritual which testify to and re-present this original event, giving form to the informal and contradictory god, the god of undetermination. Cult, indeed, is "one of the great languages with which mankind speaks to the Almighty, speaking to Him for no other reason than that it must"[324]. It "bears witness to the manifestation of godhead. At the center of all religion stands the appearance of God. That He has come, that He is present-this gives meaning and life to all of religion's primal forms. With this we have arrived at a primary occurrence which can no longer be understood as a product of man's thought, his constructs of knowledge, his everyday life, but rather as a prerequisite for them"[325]. This aesthetic and ontological value of the cult is precisely what reemerges in Nitsch's comprehension of the liturgical dimension of Actionism. Between ritual and art, nevertheless, there is a strict relationship, which Otto also recognizes, stressing that the artistic language belongs to the same "province" of cultus: they both testify the encounter with the divine, the supernatural[326].

Just as the Maenads, "the women who participate in the cult become, through the primal force of divine revelation, accessories to a holy occurrence which the myth was to express in word"[327], the participants in the OMT likewise act as modern bearers of the Dionysian power, as an anthropological form of mediation, so to speak, of the divine epiphany.

Otto recognizes that in the Greek perception Dionysus was precisely that multifaceted god of pleasure and suffering, death and rebirth, whom we find celebrated in Nitsch's theatre:

[323] Otto, *Dionysus*, cit., p. 18
[324] *Ibidem*.
[325] *Ivi*, p. 27.
[326] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 26-27.
[327] *Ivi*, p. 54.

"Dionysus was the god of the most blessed ecstasy and the most enraptured love. But he was also the persecuted god, the suffering and dying god, and all whom he loved, all who attended him, had to share his tragic fate"[328].

The tragic dimension of Dionysus, documented by both Otto and Nietzsche, is fundamental to Nitsch's theatrical and performative understanding of this numinous ecstatic archetype: "the god of intoxication, of exuberance, of the ecstasy of rending, of a new order, of change, the god of tragic, of tragedy, fills our hearts. the god knows that theater, drama, actually means the process of creation in its entirety. he knows that the course of creation is intimately connected with the tragic, with the resistance that confronts and is imposed upon every act of creative development and can lead to tragic failure. in more fundamental terms: that which seems tragic to us is the permanent flowing of everything that occurs, is the flowing into the transformation of death. the incessant stream that renders everything permanent, mutating occurrence is the surviving that takes place eternally in the zone of infinity. the god of the exploding and separating galaxy, of the creation that is tearing and expanding as it carries out its existing, ultimately signifies the acceptance of the tragic, and its overcoming by the festival"[329].
This tragic Dionysian experience – seen by both Nietzsche and Otto as the original core of Greek tragedy – is embraced by Nitsch in his OMT on the basis of a philosophical awareness: that the becoming-essence of being inevitably imposes suffering and pain, yet this suffering and pain must be accepted as a fundamental and inescapable aspect of existence. More lyrically: "the tragic is failing, is perishing, being taken back. the tragic is the perpetual transformation into death". And further: "intensive living is the fulfilment of the tragic replete with closeness to death and, at the same time, intense living is the glory of overcoming death"[330].

As Brigitte Marschall has explained, the relationship between theatre, religion, and rite lies at the core of Greek theatre itself. Thus, the Dionysian theatre appears to Nitsch as a natural

[328] *Ivi*, p. 49.
[329] Nitsch, *the tendency toward the gesamtkunstwerk* (1983), cit., p. 16 ("der gott des rausches, des überschwanges, der zerreißungsekstase, der zerstörung, des aufbaues, der auferstehung, der neuordnung, der veränderung, der gott des tragischen, der tragödie erfüllt unsere herzen. der gott weiß, daß theater, drama eigentlich das ereignis der gesamten schöpfung bedeutet. er weiß, daß der schöpfungablauf innigst mit dem tragischen verbunden ist, mit dem widerstand, welcher jeder schöpferischen entfaltung gegenübersteht und auferlegt ist, welcher zum tragischen scheitern führen kann. grundsätzlicher gedacht: das uns tragisch scheinende ist permanentes fließen alles sich ereignenden, ist fließen in die verwandlung des todes. jener innerwährende strom der alles zu ständigem, sich verwandelndem ereignis bringt, ist das bleibende, das sich ewig im raum der unendlichkeit vollzieht. letzlich meint der gott der auseinanderfliehenden milchstraßen, der sich im vollzug ihres existierens zerreißenden, expandierenden schöpfung die annahme des tragischen und seine überwindung durch das fest" [Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater in prinzendorf*, cit., p. 440]). On tragic, see also Id., *das sein*, cit., vol. I, pp. 109-115.
[330] Nitsch, *declarations and descriptions regarding the orgien mysterien theater project* (1978), cit., p. 49.

forerunner of his own artistic conception: "Located at the interface between religion, politics and art, ancient Greek theatre has its roots in the country's numerous religious cults, which varied from city to city and deity to deity. The rites practiced at the cultic festivals – a sequence of acts intended to regulate the relationship between humans and gods and usually associated with a sacrificial cult – ensured the cohesion of human society, establishing orders that structured private and public life as well as the relationship between humans and the universe"[331]. Nitsch reverses the historical process that led from the original orgiastic Dionysian theatre to the more rational and discursive form of Euripides' drama, where violent actions are described, but not actually enacted. Instead, he transcends the power of creative imagination in order to intensify the event of life itself: by slaughtering animal bodies and spilling blood and organic substances, he symbolically seeks to recover the primordial unity between action and meaning[332].

This theatrical dimension is evident, among other elements, in Nitsch's OMT *Partituren* – the preparatory written scores in which all the artistic actions are described and regulated in ritual terms – and sets his work apart from other performance movements, such as Fluxus, Happening, and Body Art. In Nitsch's practice, everything is determined in advance: the actors' rehearsals, marked by a pedantic attention to synchronizing artistic actions and music, clearly testify to this[333]. For this reason, it is not contradictory, as some have claimed, that the content of chaos and excess in Nitsch's poetics is paired with the highly structured nature of the *Partituren*[334]. On the contrary, it fits perfectly within the tragic Dionysian line celebrated by Nietzsche: Dionysus requires Apollo in order to be sublimated – indeed, in Otto's words, the already dual nature of Dionysus reaches a higher harmony through Apollo[335].

[331] Brigitte Marschall, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater und die europäische Theatergeschichte*, in Badura-Triska and Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus. Kunst und Aufbruch im Wien der 1960er-Jahre*, cit., pp. 34-35: 34.
[332] Cf. *Il paesaggio del sangue. Hermann Nitsch. Dialogo fra Demetrio Paparoni, Michelangelo Castello ed Elio Cappuccio*, in *Hermann Nitsch*, Studio d'arte Cannaviello, Milano 1991.
[333] Although, as Hanno Millesi argues: "The inordinate length of the Actions of the Orgien Mysterien Theater makes it almost impossible to rehearse everything in advance, and even if this were possible it would mean that the Action would gradually become a routine for the participants. The idea, rather, is to impart the basic ideas to the actors (…) before they take part in the Action so that they can then perform more or less autonomously. (…) An artistic manifestation, such as the *6-Day-Play* of the Orgien Mysterien Theater is not just staged for curious onlookers or those with a fleeting interest in spectacular shows. Indeed, it requires an intense preoccupation that includes all forms of participation" (Hanno Millesi, *Participating in the Play* (1999), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 410-415: 410-411).
[334] See Rohsmann, *Hermann Nitsch. Der transformierte Exzeß*, cit., p. 7.
[335] "Apollo with Dionysus, the intoxicated leader of the choral dance of the terrestrial sphere-that would give the total world dimension. In this union the Dionysiac earthly duality would be elevated into a new and higher duality, the eternal contrast between a restless, whirling life and a still far-seeing spirit" (Otto, *Dionysus*, cit., p. 208).

The tragic theatrical aesthetics embodied by Dionysus in the OMT transcends Western theatrical tradition and takes on the authentic dimension of a festival. The identification of the multifaceted OMT with a festival (a party, a celebration of life) is not only grounded in Nitsch's theoretical premises, as already discussed, but is also concretely manifest in the ludic dimension perceived by attending the *Six-Day-Play*.

Indeed, the iconic and bloody artistic actions occur only at specific, carefully determined moments, but the continuity of the artistic play is sustained by the constant music – an obsessive flux evoking the Origin, that dense moment where past, present, and future converge – and, furthermore, by the emotional and intersubjective engagement of the participants, who remain "artistically" and "ritually" open and involved until the end. This is precisely the festival connotation of the OMT: the essential and playful participation of the spectator in the event. This aesthetic notion has also been identified by Gadamer as a defining feature of tragedy. In *Truth and Method*, he presents tragedy as an example of the unity of the artwork, which appears as a world in itself, a game with its own rules[336].

Nitsch's ambition, in this sense, is to collapse the world of art within the world of life, abolishing the "aesthetic differentiation" already criticized by Gadamer's philosophy.

In tragedy, the spectator aesthetically perceives the relationship between his individual, limited singularity and the power of fate – shaped and crystallized within the temporal unity that defines the artistic experience. "The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present. The real emphasis of the tragic phenomenon lies ultimately on what is presented and recognized, and to participate in it is not a matter of choice"[337]. This striking presence of recognition, through which the spectator sees their own world mirrored in the tragedy that addresses them, is the Dionysian aesthetic effect, which in Nitsch takes on a strong mystical resonance.

The tragic festival, characterized by the essence of play in the Gadamerian sense[338], is structurally defined by communality. As Trione shrewdly argues, in Nitsch's OMT "executioners and victims are not opposed to each other: they tend to overlap and merge. (...) Together, they perform rituals. They share principles. Sometimes, they exchange roles. (...)

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[336] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum, London-New York 2004, pp. 125-129 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1, 6. Auflage, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1990, pp. 133-138).

[337] *Ivi*, p. 128 ("Der Zuschauer verhält sich nicht in der Distanz des ästhetischen Bewußtseins, dass die Kunst der Darstellung genießt, sondern in der Kommunion des Dabeiseins. Das eigentliche Schwergewicht des tragischen Phänomens liegt am Ende in dem, was sich da darstellt und erkannt wird und woran teilzuhaben offenbar nicht beliebig ist" [*ivi*, p. 137]).

[338] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.2.3.

They are temporary aesthetic *communitates*, secretly close to the libertarian and anarchist communities that emerged in the 1960s. Outwardly free, but carefully designed by the artist-director. Far from caging the participants, these communities respect their individuality: they exist only for a short period of time and are destined to dissolve at the end of the actions"[339].
A tragic destiny is shared by everyone participating in the festival, experiencing a "full" time – a sacred time, we might say – lifted out of the ordinary flux of becoming, because it bears witness to a deeper becoming, one grounded in rhythm and recurrence[340]. For this reason, too, the festival reveals its inner cultic dimension. As Gadamer also states: "Here the manifestation of God is an absolute presence in which the remembrance of the past and the present moment coincide in an instantaneous unity"[341]. This god, in Nitsch's OMT, is Dionysus.

Moreover, Dionysus is the god of the Event (*Ereignis*): it is through him, as the dynamic power of *physis*, that beings appear within the circle of the visible. Myth particularly emphasizes his nature as "the god who comes"[342]: his unexpected disappearing and reappearing symbolize the ontology of being itself. Dionysus is also the god of the mask – not only because of his theatrical essence, but because life always appears "masked", in a dialectic of veiling and unveiling. Martin Heidegger has extensively explored this, arguing that Dionysus "is the one in being the other; that is, in being, he at the same time is not and in not being, he is. Being, however, for the Greeks means 'presence' – παρουσία. In presencing, this demigod is absent, and in absencing he is present. The symbol of the one who is absent in presencing and present in absencing is the mask. The mask is the distinctive symbol of Dionysus – that is, understood metaphysically in a Greek way: the originary relatedness to one another of being and non-being (presence and absence)"[343]. Heidegger, who held a deep appreciation for Walter Otto's

[339] Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit., p. 393.
[340] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful. Art as play, symbol, and festival*, in Id., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. by Nicholas Walker and ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 3-53: 39-47 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität der Schönen. Kunst al Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (1974), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 8, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1993, pp. 94-142: 130-136). Gadamer recognizes, similarly as Nitsch, a continuity between Greek tragedy, Gregorian chants, and Bach's "Passion" (cf. *ivi*, p. 50 [*ivi*, p. 140]). Cf., for an extensive thematization of festival in Gadamer, *infra*, chapter 2.2.2.
[341] See Gadamer, *The festive character of theater*, cit., p. 59 ("Der erscheinende Gott ist die absolute Gegenwart, in der Erinnerung und Gegenwart zu einer einheitlichen Augenblicklichkeit zusammengehen" [Gadamer, *Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters* (1954), cit., p. 298]).
[342] Cf. Otto, *Dionysus*, cit., pp. 79-85.
[343] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine"*, trans. by William McNeill and Julia Ireland, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2014, p. 173 ("Er ist das Eine, indem er das Andere ist, d. h. er ist, indem er ist, zugleich nicht; indem er nicht ist, ist er. Sein aber heißt für die Griechen 'Anwesenheit' – παρουσία. Anwesend west dieser Halbgott ab, und abwesend west er an. Das Sinnbild des anwesenden Abwesenden und des abwesenden Anwesenden ist die Maske. Diese ist ein ausgezeichnetes Symbol des Dionysos, d. h. metaphysisch-griechisch verstanden: der ursprünglichen Bezogenheit von Sein und Nichtsein (Anwesenheit und Abwesenheit) aufeinander" [Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 39: *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien"*

Dionysus[344], interprets the god of wine as the divine bearer of contradiction, even of the contradiction between presence and absence. He is also the god of the "trace", of that which exists between presence and absence[345].
In this sense, too, Dionysus is *the* god of OMT, which is an artistic happening, an event in the full ontological sense: "The O.M. Theater is an attempt to transform a philosophical edifice into practical, realized philosophy, into metaphysics in action, into a more intimate life"[346]. This "*in sich ereignende Metaphysik*" is precisely that alternative, non-substantialist, and non-dualist approach to ontology that we have identified as central to the philosophical hermeneutics of both Heidegger and Gadamer.

The transformation evoked by Nitsch's artwork is thus always conceived as a communal one. This intersubjectivity appears as an aesthetic attempt to reverse the collective *nostos* toward the Origin – not locating it in the past, but in the future. From this perspective, the Origin is not an archaic past to be replicated, but rather that insistent *adveniens* time that a new form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* can realize – responding also to Gadamer's call for a new, contemporary theatre equipped to face modern challenges. As the German philosopher notes: "The genuine experience of the enduring festive character of the theater seems (…) to lie in the immediate communal experience of what we are and how things stand with us in the vital interchange between player and onlooker. As Rilke says, 'Above, beyond us, the angel plays'"[347].

3.3.3 Dionysus and/as Christ – The Myth of Death and Resurrection

Hermann Nitsch's oeuvre is fundamentally rooted in the overlapping symbolic, religious, and mythical structures of Greek paganism and Christianity. At the heart of this convergence are Dionysus and Christ, figures whose myths follow parallel trajectories of death and resurrection. Nitsch does not merely juxtapose these mythological and religious traditions; rather, he interprets them as a complementary expression of the same ontological truth. For Nitsch, the

und "Der Rhein", ed. by Susanne Ziegler, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 189-190]).
[344] Cf. *ivi*, p. 173 (*ivi*, p. 190).
[345] Cf. *ivi*, p. 172 (*ivi*, pp. 188-189).
[346] "Das O.M. Theater ist der Versuch, ein philosophisches Gebäude in praktische, in vollzogene Philosophie, in sich ereignende Metaphysik, in innigeres Leben umzusetzen" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 80).
[347] Gadamer, *The festive character of theater*, cit., p. 65 ("Daß wir hier als Gemeinschaft die Unmittelbarkeit dessen, was wir sind und was es mit uns ist, im strömenden Austausch zwischen Spieler und Zuschauer vollziehen, scheint mir eine echte Erfahrung der bleibenden Festlichkeit des Theaters. Ober uns hinüber spielt dann der Engel. (Rilke)" [Gadamer, *Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters* (1954), cit., p. 304]).

world is a single metaphysical unity, and the symbolic languages of Dionysus and Christ are two paths toward its disclosure.

In the OMT, this syncretic view is rendered visually and ritually: blindfolded actors embodying both Oedipus and Christ, the dismembered carcasses upon the bodies of the blind crucified actors referencing Dionysus' *sparagmos*, and Christian liturgical symbols like the monstrance interacting with blooming, reanimated bodies. Nitsch's theoretical writings underscore this vision even more explicitly, arriving at a metaphysical identification of Christ and Dionysus as dual facets of the same cosmic process.

Nitsch diverges from Nietzsche's anti-Christian stance[348] not by opposing it directly, but by re-selecting his sources and reorienting the thematic associations[349]. In this way, Nitsch recognizes a strict connection between the symbolism of Dionysus and Christ: both are divine figures who suffer, die, and resurrect; both are wounded and lacerated in order to offer spiritual renewal. Pain, self-sacrifice, and blood – often symbolized by wine – are essential to both myths. The vine, sacred to Dionysus, becomes the Eucharistic vine; grapes and vines adorn the mosaics of several Christian churches and monasteries, creating a seemingly Bacchic, but deeply Christian, iconographic program. For Nitsch, a red line can be traced from Greek myth to Christian religion. In particular, Christian mass has inherited the exemplary spiritual and educational function of myth and tragedy: "the mythical occurrence, death on the cross, the eucharistic sacrifice of love, and resurrection are staged as event and become a drama. the myth presents

[348] Lately speaking of his *The birth of tragedy*, Nietzsche argues: "with this questionable book, my instinct, an affirmative instinct for life, turned *against* morality and invented a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life, purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What should I call it? As a philologist and man of letters, I baptized it, not without a degree of licence – for who knows the true name of the Antichrist? – with the name of a Greek god: I called it the Dionysiac" (Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, cit., p. 9 ["*Gegen* die Moral also kehrte sich damals, mit diesem fragwürdigen Buche, mein Instinkt, als ein fürsprechender Instinkt des Lebens, und erfand sich eine grundsätzliche Gegenlehre und Gegenwerthung des Lebens, eine rein artistische, eine *antichristliche* . Wie sie nennen? Als Philologe und Mensch der Worte taufte ich sie, nicht ohne einige Freiheit – den wer wüsste den rechten Namen des Antichrist? – auf den Namen eines griechischen Gottes: ich hiess sie die dionysische"; Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, cit., p. 19]).

[349] Whether Nietzsche takes in consideration Christianity mainly as theological metaphysical dualism (Platonic line), rationalist way of thinking (Socratic legacy), and ascetic anti-vitalist and plebeian moralism (Jewish-Pauline root), Nitsch concentrates more on the cosmogonical and mystical dimension of Christianity, releasing it from the accusations which his "Nietzschean" position should admit. Numerous are, by the way, the critical expressions towards Christian orthodoxy doctrine, especially because Nitsch refuses, according to his ontological monism, "the dualist myth of christianity", which opposes matter and spirit, immanence and transcendence, earth and sky, bad and evil, causing "bad psycho-hygienic conditions" and "the divided nature of European people" (Nitsch, *revelation through the analytic dramatic methods of the orgien mysterien theater (1960-76)*, cit., p. 34. The aim of OMT can be thus interpreted, from this hermeneutical angle, as an attempt to restore a unitarian Christocentric view, re-establishing the unity between man and the divine: "the arousal created by the creation process of the o.m. theater brings about a balancing psycho-hygienic acting out that makes people conscious. the emotions are loosened from constriction, the development of humankind is rolled back. (…) it becomes clear what immensurable possibilities of experience are hidden inside us, and which elude us by being subject to repression and becoming dark, unconscious lust" (*ivi*, p. 35).

itself as a drama of the celebration of mass. the Greek tragedy has been blended into Christian worship". In this continuity, Christ becomes an evolution of Dionysus, and the Eucharist a ritual call to identify with the tragic hero: "through the eucharist and communion, christ evolves into the imitation of christ, summoning us to identify with christ, the tragic hero"[350].

This attribution of a heroic tragic dimension to Christ[351] is probably derived from Wagner's work, especially from *Parsifal*, whose inspiration from the medieval Grail tradition also innervates Nitsch's aesthetics, especially in the scenes of the OMT where actors use swords or monstrance (associated with Grail topics), as well as in the wounded bodies of actors (a memory of Amfortas' wound). We can also recognize that a long-running Western iconographic tradition representing Christ as a solar and regal hero has certainly contributed to nourishing Nitsch's imaginary. Indeed, among Nitsch's most beloved paintings, often published in his books and even included as inspirational iconographic elements within the OMT scores, we can mention Matthias Grunewald's (1470-1528) *Resurrection* – the right panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-1516) – in which Christ emerges from the tomb and ascends into Heaven bathed in light that transfigures him in a mystical iconography. This aesthetics is also visible in the *Schüttbilder*, where Christian religious symbolism is associated with yellow, bright, and luminous tones[352], or in the collages where the image of *Christus patiens* is surrounded by a colorful background[353], symbolizing the promise of resurrection, the joyful fate that is the counterpart of the suffering experienced in life.

Furthermore, both Dionysus and Christ are characterized by an inner dualism: they incorporate opposite principles which, once unified, express the complexity of being as a whole. We have already seen that Dionysus contains within himself sufferance and joy, death and resurrection, violence and love. Walter F. Otto has described this duality perfectly: "His duality has manifested itself to us in the antitheses of ecstasy and horror, infinite vitality and savage destruction; in the pandemonium in which deathly silence is inherent; in the immediate presence which is at the same time absolute remoteness. All of his gifts and attendant phenomena give evidence of the sheer madness of his dual essence: prophecy, music, and finally wine, the flamelike herald of the god, which has in it both bliss and brutality. At the height of ecstasy all

[350] Nitsch, *essay on the history of actions* (1971), cit., p. 74.
[351] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 161.
[352] See, for example, Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., p. 653.
[353] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 866-867.

of these paradoxes suddenly unmask themselves and reveal their names to be Life and Death"[354].

Hence, Nitsch syncretically affirms that Dionysus "brings in himself shiva, the destroyer, and vishnu, the preserver"[355]. The same can be recognized in Christ: his story also tells us about suffering and happiness, spiritual rigor and fraternal joy, ascetic path and bodily enjoyment, and ultimately, death and resurrection.

The role of the abreaction is also a common feature which Nitsch attributes to both figures: in the case of Christ, it is linked to the image of the crucified lamb as the "primal excess": "the turning of the sudden lustful experience (abreaction) into the sado-masochistic, the destructive"[356]. Here, life turns into its opposite: violence, destruction, until death. "intensive sensual desires", with their Dionysian origin, "arise that find satisfaction in destruction (…), in provoking pain and torment. during the rending of the lamb, the human is reduced (or elevated) to the rending of both the animal and the human substance of life, to the rending of raw flesh"[357]. This state is considered outside of any moralistic perspective as the manifestation of the amorphous forces of nature, considered as energetic vectors, numinous powers (the Latins would have said: *potestates*). "Sacred is fertility, the lust of orgasm, sacred is pain"[358]. But this "Christian" violence that affects the lamb is, as already seen, also present in the violent myth of Dionysus: the god promotes the *sparagmos* practices, but he is also dismembered and killed by the Titans. Here, in myth, the violent impulse appears even more emblematically.

The dismembered body of the lamb, understood as a natural, microcosmic representation of the universe, is the symbol of the primeval sacrifice, which comparative religious studies have shown to be narrated in all Western and Eastern religious traditions[359].

Destruction paradoxically guides the initiate to a superior awareness: man – in the artistic context, the performer – overcomes the subjective, egotistical principle of identity and identifies with being as a whole, re-animated through the sacrifice. The extreme character of the natural primeval forces renders humanity incapable of finding satisfaction in this dynamic and

[354] Otto, *Dionysus*, cit., p. 121.

[355] "dionysos trägt in sich shiva, den zerstörer, und Vishnu, den erhalter" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 158).

[356] Nitsch, *penetrating to the basic excess/primal excess* (1995), cit., p. 31 ("das umbiegen des jähen lusterlebnes [abreaktion] ins sadomasochistische, ins destruktive" [Nitsch, *durchdringen zum grundexzess/urexzess (1995)*, cit., p. 24]).

[357] *Ibidem* ("intensive sinnliche begierden", "die in der destruction (…) ihre befriedigung finden. das menschliche reduziert sich [oder steigert sich] während der lammzerfleischung zur ZERREISSUNG DER ANIMALISCHEN SOWIE MENSCHLICHEN lebenssubstanz, zur ZERREISSUNG von rohem fleisch" [*ibidem*]).

[358] "Heilig ist die Fruchtbarkeit, die Wollust des Orgasmus, heilig ist der Schmerz" (Nitsch, in Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund*, cit., p. 42).

[359] For example, Prajapati, the Hindu god who in early Vedic text appears as the creator of the universe through his act of self-sacrifice, that brought the world into being.

transformative desiring will: but the "the failure of satisfaction is the great stimulance [*sic*] of life"[360].

Indeed, without suffering, destruction, and dissatisfaction, being would be quiet, flat, eternally static. It is precisely thanks to the un-lust forces that life is stimulated and the will to power (in Nietzschean terms) is strengthened. Becoming is therefore the ontological bridge which allows being to take place, to occur as dynamic. This Heraclitean and Nietzschean view of being as becoming makes it understandable how death and resurrection are considered an essential part of this life process. This theoretical approach also explains Nitsch's fascination with the topic of sacrifice and his comprehension of the power inscribed in the theological role of Jesus Christ: by resurrecting and defeating death, Christ has emblematized and spiritually sublimized the fundamental process of life itself. In this perspective, Nitsch's interpretation does not read Christ's mystery of faith as an anti-natural miraculous event, but rather as the disclosure of the deep and hidden constitution of life itself. Christ is unique because of the narrative and religious power of the events of his life, but in reality, he shows an experience that all humans could live. It is the discovery of the already thematized groundless principle, which Nitsch defines as "the pairing of nothing and infinity (eternity) + sacred surge of being and life, invoked by the light of the cheerful seasons. the incessantness of the vineyards, of the sweet and swollen over-ripe grapes, on the solar worlds in myriad alien galaxies"[361].

Christ's passion can be further interpreted as the photographic "negative" of the Dionysian orgy[362]: both stories are defined by a strict relationship with instincts, emotions, and extreme bodily experience. As Siano explains: "In the orgy, the protagonist is Dionysus, the joy of living; sensual pleasure takes over, is taken to the extreme, to such an exaggerated degree that it causes pain; this painful component becomes fully apparent when Dionysus Zagreus is slaughtered – only to be resurrected: it is the rebirth of nature in spring (Easter). In the Passion, on the other hand, the removed energies initially turn *against* life. Christ and Dionysus are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. They are two parallel developments, but there is a difference of sign: while the Dionysian orgy has to do with sadism, the Christ passion concerns masochism. In the OMT these two moments, almost interchangeable, may even be

[360] Nitsch, *penetrating to the basic excess/primal excess* (1995), cit., p. 31 ("DIE UNBEGFRIEDIGUNG IST DIE GROSSE STIMULANZ DES LEBENS" [Nitsch, *durchdringen zum grundexzess/urexzess* (1995), cit., p. 25]).
[361] *Ibidem* ("der bodenlose grund ist nichts und unendlichkeit [ewigkeit] gepaart + heilige seins- und lebensaufwallung, angerufen vom lichte der frohen Jahreszeiten. die unaufhörlichkeit der weinberge, der quellenden, süssen überreifen trauben, auf den sonnenwelten in myriaden fremder galaxien" [*ibidem*]).
[362] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. I, p. 157.

simultaneous"[363]. In fact, the Dionysian wave testifies to human pleasure derived from inflicting pain (sadism), while Christ's sacrifice represents the gratification from being abused (masochism), which in the OMT is also connected to iconographies pertaining to the exposure of sexual organs with actions involving blood and organs poured onto them.

The joyful, cherished, and agapic spiritual core of the two gods is also overall complementary. As Nitsch lyrically explains: "the phenomenon of the dionysian contains the preliminary stage of christian brotherly love as an important factor in the bacchanalian intoxication. the narcotically numbing orgiastic intoxication has something communicative disintegrating the personality. the individual is placed in the general fellowship that already exists just before the sublimation of the instincts to altruistic christian brotherly love, which we can also understand as intoxicating. (…) the first christian meetings were festivals of love, agapes. the fascinating thing was the intoxicating quality of the altruist idea of love. love was seen as a state; it was important to be in the state of love, in the emotional condition of being in the state of love. the christ of the cross is the represses excessive dionysus, whereas the resurrected christ tends toward apollo, the god of light. counterposing the dionysian and the apollonian makes it possible to illustrate a development of human beings. the tendency toward orgiastic dionysian behavior becomes transformed into apollonian taming and spiritualization of the libidinous"[364]. Apollonian sublimation is additionally anticipated by the symbolic Christian act of washing feet, which opened the fourth day of the 2025 *Six-Day-Play*: an actress meticulously washed the feet of the other performers, preparing a purified atmosphere to let the bloody actions begin. This intersection and overlapping of Dionysian and Christian motifs also visibly appears in the very structure of OMT. Within the *Six-Day-Play*, in particular, the day explicitly devoted to Dionysus is the third, but the Greek god appears disguised in all the actions, and particularly reemerges in the syncretic structure of the fifth day mass, where orgiastic and ecstatic atmospheres are broadly manifest.

In Nitsch's thought, this syncretic vision of Dionysian and Christian symbolism finds a broader speculative echo in the philosophy of Andrea Emo (1901-1983), an Italian thinker whose reflections – while never directly cited by Nitsch – resonate deeply with the implications of the OMT. Emo, who represents a relevant explicit source of inspiration for Anselm Kiefer, proposed that the Nietzschean declaration of the "death of God" is not a radical break from

[363] Siano, *Tra rumore primordiale e armonia delle sfere*, cit., p. 54. On Dionysus Zagreus myth and its variants, see Otto, *Dionysus*, cit., pp. 105, 107, 131, 191-192.
[364] Hermann Nitsch, *about the dionysian phenomenon* (1960-76), in Id., *Atlas*, cit., pp. 98-99: 99.

Christianity, but, paradoxically, its full realization. "God is dead" is not merely a modernist lament, but the theological truth already stated in the Gospel: Christ-God is dead on the cross. God is pure negativity, he is nothing, and Christ has eventually revealed this theological truth. "Man, in Emo's Christianity, is saved by identifying himself with the negative God and, by virtue of self-negation, knows a perpetual resurrection. One is saved by renouncing salvation. Such tragic Christianity is, in fact, a return to agrarian cults. *Physis*, with its cycles, is the marvellous and tragic 'face' of God"[365]. This connection of opposite polarities within a monist One, where Christ-Dionysus reveals that the death of God discloses the creative and undetermined power of nothing, seems extremely similar to Nitsch's perspective. The believer, according to Emo, should mystically renounce everything – and with the approach to nothingness he can feel the euphoric aporia of life. This tragic view offers the Dionysian comprehension of the unity of contraries[366], integrally resonating Nitsch's perspective, as the following words show: "Why does Dionysism assume the crucifixion of the individual, of Dionysus, of Christ? Because being a will of life it is also a will of death.... One cannot will life, without wanting essence, that is, tragedy, indivisible death... Hence the twofold will, the two lines of the Dionysian will, which wills life and death at the same time"[367]. And, convergently, "Christianity is the original religion… of life, death and rebirth"[368]. Emo's effort consists precisely in the intuition of the Resurrection not "beyond" or "after" the Cross, but *in* the Cross itself[369] – just like the triumphant depiction of Christ in some of Nitsch's above-mentioned artworks.

Nitsch's proximity to Christian discourse – albeit in the specific and heterodox perspective to which we have hinted throughout this chapter – needs therefore to be openly reaffirmed against the various misinterpretations and misunderstandings which have characterized the reception of his artistic project, often represented in the international public discourse – as well as in the Austrian context – as anti-Christian, Satanic, and blasphemous[370]. Against this interpretation

[365] Giovanni Sessa, *Andrea Emo, Nietzsche e la meraviglia del nulla. Un'esegesi dissonante del filosofo di Röcken*, in Giuseppe D'Acunto e Rodolfo Sideri (eds.), *Per Nietzsche. Interpretazioni italiane*, la Valle del Tempo, Napoli 2024, pp. 267-287: 277. Cf. also Id., *La meraviglia del nulla. Vita e filosofia di Andrea Emo*, Bietti, Milano 2014, pp. 111-138.
[366] Cf. Andrea Emo, *Il monoteismo democratico. Religione, politica e filosofia nei quaderni del 1953*, ed. by Laura Sanò, with a preface by Massimo Donà, Mondadori, Milano 2003, p. 28.
[367] *Ibidem*.
[368] *Ivi*, p. 82.
[369] Cf. Massimo Cacciari, *Prefazione*, in Andrea Emo, *Quaderni di metafisica 1927-1981*, ed. by Massimo Donà and Romano Gasparotti, Bompiani, Milano 2006, pp. V-XI: IX.
[370] Nitsch has never tried to hide the harsh criticism emerged in media and several collections of articles have been published by himself approved to testify his cultural reception. See, among them: Hermann Nitsch, *das orgien mysterien theater IM SPIEGL DER PRESSE 1960-1988. DAS ROTE TUCH. der mensch das unappetitlichste vieh. NITSCH*, ed. by Gerhard Jaschke, Wien 1998; *Immer Wieder Nitsch. Stimmen zum Sechs-Tage-Spiel*, ed. by

stands, emblematically, the following declaration by Nitsch: "I keep saying that it would be a misunderstanding to believe that I am a taboo-breaker. I would rather show how taboos arise and shine behind the taboos"[371]. Indeed, as the Literaturwissenchaftler Gerhard Jaschke (1949-2025) pointedly remarks, "the hostile, ignorant attitude of the broad majority of the population towards Nitsch's oeuvre must seem unthinkable to anybody who examines his work more closely"[372]. Furthermore, as Bührmann and Remmert have explained: "The attitude of the O.M. Theatre toward Christianity is at least as much affirmative as it is subversive. Its strategy is first to raise the value of Christianity in its current cultural meaning in order then to accuse it of a 'reality deficit,' which the O.M. Theatre is supposed to remedy"[373].

The controversy nourished by the Catholic press[374] and the Church proscriptions against him should not, however, be rejected as superficial or banal forms of incomprehension, but instead, as we will try to do, be deeply meditated upon and considered in their implicit theoretical consequences.

One relevant case among them, from the 1980's, is the episcopal prohibition on participating in the *Six-Day-Play*. Moreover, Bishop Egon Kapellari strongly opposed the awarding of the State Prize for the Visual Arts to Nitsch, asserting the blasphemous and pornographic nature of his works[375]. More fiercely still, Bishop Andreas Laun claimed that Nitsch's symbolism revived racist Nazi theories of blood and soil, despite Nitsch's constant antifascist stance[376].

Very hurt by such accusations, Nitsch never directly replied to them. Paradoxically, he turned to even more often criticize the modernist and progressist world that has been much more empathetic toward his works. If "the conservatives didn't understand me anyway", he declared, "the avantgarde was very rationalist"[377], i.e., too rationalist for Nitsch's anti-modernist

Gerhard Jaschke, verlag des o.m. theaters, Prinzendorf an der Zaya 2008.

[371] "Ich sage immer wieder, es wäre ein missverständnis zu glauben, dass ich ein Tabu-brecher bin. Ich möchte eher zeigen, wie Tabus entstehen und hinter die Tabus scheinen" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 274).

[372] Gerhard Jaschke, *Security in a Possible Whole* (1985), in Karrer (ed.), *Hermann Nitsch. The Gesamtkunstwerk of the Orgien Mysterien Theater*, cit., pp. 130-135: 130.

[373] Bührmann and Remmert, *Hermann Nitsch and the theory of the "Orgies Mysteries Theatre"*, cit., p. 66.

[374] However, it is necessary to point out that even harsher attacks came, on one hand from the conservative right-wing public opinion, on the other hand from animalist associations. Furthermore, the idea that Nitsch's work challenges human dignity has also been discussed in secular and "moderate" circles, for example by Gillo Dorfles in *Dal significato alle scelte*, Einaudi, Torino 1973.

[375] See also Kapellari's criticism of Nitsch's "orgiastic cult" and his "inhuman, destructive art", which "abuses and marks religious symbolism" (*Abgrenzung Gegen Mißbrauch religiöser Symbolik notwendig*, in «Kathpress», 8 July 1998, p. 15, now in *Immer Wieder Nitsch*, cit., p. 55). Even though later, as narrated by Kapellari himself, his opinion on Nitsch significantly changed. See on that *Katholische Kirche würdigt Hermann Nitsch*, in «religion.orf.at», 20 April 2022 (https://religion.orf.at/stories/3212651/).

[376] The information synthetized in this paragraph mostly comes from Müller, *Hermann Nitsch in Rauris*, cit.

[377] Rychlik, *Painting Actionism. Interview with Hermann Nitsch*, cit., p. 455 ("Die Konservativen verstanden mich

approach, derived from his aspiration not to be confused with a sort of provocative "countercultural" civil intellectual. His anti-modernism did not emerge from reactionary ideological stances, but rather from mystical, libertarian, and spiritual premises. Nitsch dreamed of a world governed by love and intoxication, not by control and reason – the utopian ideal of the primordial agapic Dionysian and proto-Christian communities guided his dream.
Some commentators have also underlined the controversial component connected to this antimodern dimension. Karl Müller writes: "Bishop Egon Kapellari had spoken of the 'distinction of spirits' when it comes to the spirit of Catholics and that of Nitsch. But how deep does this distinction go? Shouldn't it be more of a 'fraternal quarrel'? Because Nitsch regards 'leftists' and 'liberals' as the other spirits, as his main critics and opponents. In them he sees the rationalists, who are absolutely alien to him, the 'narrow-minded (...) merchant philosophers', an allegedly 'disgusting crawling together of the sensually untalented', who, as he claims, fought against the 'ecstasy of life' and thus against his work. In this context, Nitsch suddenly turns out to be an ideological anachronism of the anti-Enlightenment ideas of the 19th and early 20th-century in his regressive glorification of myths, in his negation of civilization, drunk on life and sensuality and in principle"[378].

In the end, the union of Christ and Dionysus in Nitsch's aesthetics shows the already mentioned philosophical presupposition of the convergent unity of all religious, mystical and mythic-symbolic orientations towards the One. As different branches of the same living tree, religious traditions and imaginaries offer different paths to the same existential journey. They all move towards being, expressing symbolical representations of the fundamental, abstract, and more direct philosophy of being[379]. Such is the intuition that Nitsch declared to have gained when he was young, later enriched and culturally deepened: "I have always had a penchant for comparative religious science. I was interested in finding out structures and similarities. In doing so, I realized that almost all religions mean the same thing"[380].
That "thing" lyrically emerges in Nitsch's depiction of his daily experience in Austrian vineyards. Here, the *Genius loci* speaks to him loudly, with the paradoxical and multifaceted loud voice of Dionysus: "i walk along the paths of the vineyards, the setting sun gilds the green

sowieso nicht und die Avantgarde wahr sehr rational ausgerichtet" [*Malaktionismus. Ein Gespräch zwischen Hermann Nitsch und Otmar Rychlik*, cit., p. 6].
[378] Müller, *Hermann Nitsch in Rauris*, cit.
[379] Cf. Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. II, pp. 346-347, 357, 396.
[380] "Ich hatte immer schon einen Hang zu vergleichenden Religionswissenschaften. Es hat mich interessiert, Strukturen und Ähnlichkeiten herauszufinden. Dabei habe ich festgestellt, dass die Religionen fast alle das Gleiche meinen" (Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit*, cit., p. 42).

of the meadows, the deciduous forests, the orchards and the green of the vineyards, the paths into the valley. from the wine cellars, whose doors are open, smells of spilt wine. the red and brightly glowing disc (sphere) of the sun stands endlessly above the vineyards forming the horizon. the world moving in and around itself stands in the *now* of intuition. the world is in our being and through our being, just as it is. we are deeply immersed in it and see everything as it is. transcendence does not hide it, it reveals itself through everything that is. the sun sets. it becomes quiet, no wind"[381].

There is only the meaningful silence of being.

[381] "ich gehe über die wege der weingärten, die untergehende sonne vergoldet das grün der wiesen, der laubwälder, der obstgärten und das grün des weinlauber, die wege ins tal. aus den weinkellern, deren türen offen sind, riecht verschütteter wein. die rot und hell heiss glühende scheibe (kugel) der sonne steht unendlich lange über den den horizont bildenden weingärten. die resend sich in sich und um sich bewegende welt steht im *jetzt* der anschauung. die welt ist in unserem sein und durch unser sein, so wie sie ist. wir sind im sein tief versunken und sehen alles so wie es ist. die transzendenz versteckt sie nicht, sie offenbart sich durch alles was ist. die sonne geht unter. es wird ruhig, kein wind" (Nitsch, *das sein*, cit., vol. III, pp. 672-673).

4. Anselm Kiefer: Among Ruins and New Beginnings

> "Prayer and art are passionate acts of will. One wants to transcend and enhance the will's normal possibilities. Art like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness, seeking for some touch of grace which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts" (Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, introduction by Francine Prose, trans. by Goronway Ress, New Directions, New York 2012, p. 61)

Among the 20th-century artists who sought to listen to the same depths of the "silence of being" which, as we have seen, Nitsch explored, we can include Joseph Beuys. The German painter, sculpture, and performer is one of the most original and charismatic figures of contemporary art whose practices engage spiritual challenges and rituals, particularly influenced by Anthroposophy and shamanism.

Beuys can be seen as a symbolic mediator of the relationship that, unfortunately, never developed between Hermann Nitsch and Anselm Kiefer. Although the two artists were almost exact contemporaries, they appear to have never encountered each other's work directly. Nitsch, however, recognized in Beuys a common mythic-symbolic interest. While their meetings did not lead to concrete collaboration – as Nitsch had hoped[1] – they maintained a cordial friendship. In 1995, Nitsch still affirmed in a laudatory tone: "Myth itself spoke through [Joseph] Beuys. His art was as if it had always been there"[2]. He also evoked the Dionysian atmosphere he cherished, remarking: "The art of Beuys is like pure natural wine"[3].

Joseph Beuys was, by Kiefer's own admission, the most influential of his teachers. From Beuys, the artist from Donaueschingen acquired fundamental professional and artistic skills that enabled him to attain mastery of his discipline at an early stage[4]. Kiefer became Beuys' pupil at Düsseldorf, after earlier studies under Peter Dreher (1932-2020) in Freiburg. Although it is technically inaccurate to describe Kiefer as Beuys's student – since he never formally studied under him at the Kunstakademie between 1970 and 1972 – their personal encounters nevertheless became a fundamental source of inspiration.

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[1] See Hermann Nitsch, *Leben und Arbeit. Aufgezeichnet von Danielle Spera*, Leykam, Graz 2019, p. 122.

[2] "Aus [Joseph] Beuys sprach der Mythos selbst. Seine Kunst war, als ob sie immer schon da gewesen wäre" (in Wolfgang Koch (ed.), *Blut in den Mund. Hermann Nitsch am Wort. Von A bis Z*, Wieser Verlag, Klagenfurt/Celovec 2008, p. 72).

[3] "Die Kunst von Beuys ist wie naturreiner Wein" (*ivi*, p. 113).

[4] Cf. Anselm Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, trans. by Tess Lewis, Seagull Books, London-New York-Calcutta 2019, p. 10 (Anselm Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter. Anselm Kiefer im Gespräch mit Klaus Dermutz*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2024, pp. 19-20).

What Kiefer absorbed most decisively from Beuys was the hermeneutical conviction that art is not limited to formal aesthetics, but is primarily concerned with concepts, ideals, and cultural proposals – an orientation explicitly opposed to *l'art pour l'art* or *ars gratia artis*. Thematically, and similarly to Nitsch, Kiefer admired Beuys's broad vision in which history, mythology, religion, and art were woven into an original paradigm. Both artists also shared a spiritual worldview, though Kiefer himself emphasized that Beuys – being Catholic and Marxist – maintained faith in an eschatological horizon that Kiefer himself consistently rejected. Instead, Kiefer has always preferred a cyclical and eternalist conception of temporality[5]. Thus, while both artists engaged with organic material, cosmological imagery, and the anthropological dimension of art, Kiefer's vision is marked not by utopian or progressive impulses but by a pervasive, melancholic contemplation[6]. As Michael Auping succinctly observed: "If Beuys was the shaman, Kiefer would be the Gnostic, the questioner of all received knowledge"[7].

4.1 *Grenzenloses Licht*: Perspectives on the Sacred and Religions in Kiefer's Aesthetics

4.1.1 Listening to the Sacred: The Artist as Lithomancer

Kiefer's artistic education thus provides a first indication of his own philosophical and spiritual trajectory – one that can be read, as we will argue in this section, as an attempt to engage artistically with the theoretical and practical dilemmas of the post-secular age. His work is animated by the search for a new worldview in which myths, symbols, and mystical traditions are culturally re-evaluated and actively integrated into comprehensive hermeneutics. This hermeneutics seeks to offer an alternative to disenchantment and nihilism by proposing symbolic forms of meaning. It is this guiding *leitmotif* that allows us to contextualize Kiefer's diverse and heterogeneous sources of inspiration as complementary – or sometimes competing – territories of inquiry.

[5] Cf. Anselm Kiefer, *Con la Storia dentro la pelle*, interview by Roberto Andreotti e Federico De Melis, in *Alias*, supplement of «Manifesto», 12 June 2004, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, trans. by Roberta Zuppet, il Saggiatore, Milano 2022, pp. 123-137: 133.

[6] On the diversity of their shared political engagement with German history determined by this philosophical difference, see Hannah Abdullah, *Kiefer and Beuys: Cathexis and Cartharsis*, in *Heroic Symbols 1969 by Anselm Kiefer*, Tate Research Publication, 2016, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/kiefer-and-beuys.

[7] Michael Auping, *Introduction*, in *Anselm Kiefer. Heaven and Earth*, organized by Michael Auping, Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth, 2004, pp. 27-50: 31.

The genealogy of Kiefer's interest in religious, mythic, symbolic, mystical, and esoteric themes can be traced back to his own biography and education. Existential questions, rooted in the traumatic experience of the Second World War – an event he did not live through directly, having been born in 1945, but which shaped his childhood in a devastated Germany – were combined with the Catholic atmosphere of his family and early education. Taken together, these questions and experiences marked his first cultural orientations.

German Romantic literature and philosophy were among Kiefer's first, earliest passions. Romanticism offered an "alternative" approach to modernity, one that suggested to the young artist the possibility of integrating rationalist Western culture with a constellation of themes: imagination, symbolism, transcendence, nature, and emotion. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), with his cosmic-natural spirituality, became a key visual model for Kiefer's first major project, the artistic series *Heroic Symbols* (*Heroische Sinnbilder*, 1969), which comprise the photos of the action entitled *Occupations* (*Besetzungen*): artist's books (1969), early oil paintings (1969-1970), gouache on photographs (2008-2010), and photographs on lead (2008-2011)[8]. Presented for his degree show at the Karlsruhe Academy of Fine Arts, under the supervision of Peter Dreher, the series depicted Kiefer himself dressed in military attire and giving the Nazi salute before European monuments and landscapes. This politically charged performance, documented in photographs, functioned as a kind of ironic *Grand Tour* through Italy, France, Switzerland, and the Rhine region. The project's central idea was to reactivate symbolic imagery exploited by German National Socialism, reclaiming German identity for alternative ideological roots. The work's political critique was inseparable from its acknowledgement of the controversial and ambiguous connections between German high culture and the condemned ideology. As Matthew Rampley has suggested: "In his choice of such a provocative set of images (…) Kiefer is indicating the embeddedness of Nazi culture in Romanticism, an embeddedness which also accounts for its seductive fascination"[9]. Kiefer himself declared in lapidary fashion: "My biography is the biography of Germany"[10].

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[8] See Christian Weikop, *Heroic Symbols Paintings: Lost and Found*', in *Heroic Symbols 1969 by Anselm Kiefer*, Tate Research Publication, 2016, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/paintings-lost-and-found.

[9] Matthew Rampley, *In Search of Cultural History: Anselm Kiefer and the Ambivalence of Modernism*, in «Oxford Art Journal», vol. 23, nr. 1, 2000, pp. 73-96: 83. These images, once published in 1975 in the German magazine «Interfunktionen», provoked a major scandal. The title *Occupations* "carries a potential double meaning, simultaneously referring to the Nazis' ambition to control all of European culture and later the world, and the fact that the misguided vision and atrocities of the Nazi party would occupy the conscience of generations of postwar Germans" (Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 33). On Kiefer's series see also Luca Viglialoro, "Exponierten Gesten. Zu Anselm Kiefers *Besetzungen* und *Heroische Sinnbildern*", in Id., *Kiefer. Kunst als Prozess*, Passagen Verlag, Wien 2024, pp. 19-42.

[10] "Meine Biografie ist die Biografie Deutschlands" (*Anselm Kiefer wird 75: Am Rand der erkennbaren Wirklichkeit*, in «Monopol. Magazin für Kunst und Leben», 8 March 2020, https://www.monopol-magazin.de/anselm-kiefer-wird-75-am-rand-der-erkennbaren-wirklichkeit).

From this historical confrontation, Kiefer turned toward myth: first as political and ideological motifs in totalitarian rhetoric, then as universal symbols that are fundamental to human self-identity and the collective unconscious. Once again, Romanticism served as the hinge between these dimensions, embodying in German history both a cultural and spiritual source of creativity and a contradictory matrix of political ideology.

Despite rejecting the Romantic cult of "genius" – with arguments which resonate with Gadamer's hermeneutical critique – Kiefer has consistently regarded himself as an heir of German Romanticism. He describes the movement in terms that could equally serve as a portrait of his own artistic ethos: Romanticism is seen as characterized by the "desire to take an interest in the cosmos, to incorporate nature into the human world, to contemplate the stars, the sea, the fields but also the other and oneself (…). The Romantics wanted the ontological infinitude of being in the circumscribed body of the work of art"[11].
This tension between the infinite and the finite animates Kiefer's art and is embodied in the concept of form (*Gestalt*). Following the Romantic tradition, Kiefer considers the latter fundamental to the construction of an artistic paradigm[12] and insists on its opposition to the purely conceptualist tendencies that dominate much of contemporary art.

Kiefer's romantic impulse toward the ineffable and the infinite also nurtured his passion for literature – especially poetry – which for him has often been more decisive than philosophy or theology. Literary sources do not merely inspire his thought, but become materially present in his art: in projects and exhibitions dedicated to writers, in the countless quotations inscribed on canvas, and in the poetic atmosphere that pervades his imagery. His favorite authors include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – above all *Faust*, which Kiefer saw as a profound meditation on the modern human condition –, Adalbert Stifter (1805-1868), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)[13], Paul Valéry (1871-1945), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)[14], Robert Musil (1880-1942),

[11] Anselm Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, trans. by Deborah Borca, Feltrinelli, Milano 2018, p. 153.
[12] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 142-143.
[13] From whom Kiefer learned the sacral meaningfulness of the words, material signs in which the spiritual dimension is "corporally" embedded. Cf. Kiefer's interpretation of Rimbaud's poem *Marine* in *ivi*, pp. 43-61.
[14] Kiefer's exhibition *Wer jetzt kein Haus hat* (2022) presented works inspired by Rilke's poems dedicated to the autumn season. The paintings on view feature dark, silhouetted trees and falling leaves in rich autumn browns fading into winter greys, reflecting both the painter's and the poet's fascination with transience, decay, and the passage of time.

Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922)[15], Paul Celan (1920-1970)[16], Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973)[17], Emil Cioran (1911-1995), Jean Genet (1910-1986)[18], Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961)[19], James Joyce (1882-1941)[20], and Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990).

For Kiefer, however, it is not only individual authors who matter, but the poetic function of literature itself: its power to orient existence in its amphibious connection between earth and sky. He once described poems in strikingly metaphysical terms: "Poems are like buoys in the open sea for me. I swim from one to another, and without them, I am lost in the water. Poems are anchor points in the infinite expanse where something from interstellar dust gathers: a little matter in the abyss of antimatter"[21]. This orienting role of poetry parallels the function of myths and symbols in Kiefer's aesthetics, which also serve as guiding structures, often in dialogue with literary sources of the aesthetic imagination.

Philosophy, too, nourished Kiefer's reflections on myth and religion, though again primarily within the framework of German modern culture. As with history and poetry, Kiefer approached philosophy in a dialectical relationship between universal existential questions and the specific tensions of German identity. This engagement culminated in the series *The Ways*

[15] Kiefer created a massive series titled *Für Chlebnikov*, consisting of approximately 30 large-scale paintings, installed inside pavilion, with a model of a ship at the center, incorporating the poet's ideas as a naval battle. Kiefer visualized this idea with apocalyptic seascapes, ship imagery, cosmic numerology, and inscriptions echoing the founder poet of Russian Futurism, who pursued formulae of absurd precision in attempts to control the movement of history. See the catalogue: Anselm Kiefer, *Für Chlebnikov*, ed. by Honey Luard, White Cube, London 2005.

[16] Paul Celan is probably the most significant literary reference in Kiefer's art, due to the simultaneous presence, in Celan's figure, of an Avantgarde, philosophically sensitive poetry and themes related to Jewishness and German history. Particularly relevant is the 2021 exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris entitled *Pour Paul Celan* (cf. Anselm Kiefer, *Pour Paul Celan*, Réunion des musées nationaux – Grand Palais, Paris 2021). On the relationship between Kiefer and Celan, see Andrea Lauterwein, *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan. Myth, Mourning and Memory*, Thames & Hudson, London 2007; Eric Kligerman, "Re-Figuring Celan in the Paintings of Anselm Kiefer", in Id., *Sites of the Uncanny. Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2007, pp. 187-232.

[17] "There is no one with whom I have such direct contact as with Ingeborg Bachmann". See on that Axel Hecht and Alfred Nemeczeck, *Bei Anselm Kiefer in Atelier*, in «Art: Das Kunstmagazin», n. 1, January 1990, pp. 30-48. Cf. also Noga Stiassny, *Anselm Kiefer / Ingeborg Bachmann: Visual Translation of Poetic Figuration*, working paper 145, European Forum at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2015.

[18] Jenet's *The Thief's Journal* represents for Kiefer a clear expression of the transgressions and intersections between art and life. In Jenet's perspective, the poet is a prophet, embodies a legend, and manifests a profound consciousness and the complexity of life – an outlook from which Kiefer drew significant inspiration. Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 63-89. Cf. also Vincenzo Trione, *Prologo celeste. Nell'atelier di Anselm Kiefer*, Einaudi, Torino 2023, pp. 205-206. To the French novelist, Kiefer devoted the artists' book *For Jean Genet* (*Für Jean Jenet*, 1969).

[19] Regarding Céline and the war-related topics in his literary production, Kiefer created a large-scale installation *For Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Voyage Au Bout De La Nuit* (2017), presented at Copenhagen Contemporary and inspired by the French writer's masterpiece.

[20] To James Joyce, Kiefer devoted the 2023 exhibition *Finnegans Wake*, hosted at White Cube (London) and inspired by the Irish writer's chef d'oeuvre. From Joyce's rhythmic and circular literary movements, Kiefer assembled a dynamic and enigmatic reflection on the processes governing reality.

[21] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 49.

of World Wisdom (*Wege der Weltweisheit*, 1976-1977), where figures such as Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Jung are portrayed as spectral presences in the German tradition. The series[22] visually testifies to Kiefer's preoccupation with the ideological compromises of the German intelligentsia under the Nazi regime. His concern, however, is not moralistic condemnation but hermeneutical confrontation: an effort, as a German, to understand the ideological fascination that bound his people, in order to reclaim and purify pre-Nazi traditions, as well as to liberate them from a certain censorship inaugurated in the post-Second World War culture. To reappropriate German cultural tradition, recognizing its limits and responsibility, thus represents for Kiefer the opportunity to re-read it as a significant theoretical and existential perspective. As Daniel Arasse observed: "What is at stake in the work of commemoration that occupied Kiefer from 1969 to the early 1990s can be summarized in the following question: how can anyone be a (German) artist since the elements of the German artistic and cultural identity were irremediably compromised by their ability to satisfy and serve the Third Reich itself?"[23].

Yet, Kiefer's engagement with German philosophy – especially Heidegger, who remained his most important philosophical interlocutor – extends well beyond the historical-political sphere. It is equally bound to the theoretical challenges modernity poses for humanity and the aesthetic questions to which only philosophy, together with myth and symbol, can offer orientation.

The tension between history and myth in Kiefer's art became a central topic of debate from his participation in the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980 – a decisive moment in his career. Together with Georg Baselitz, Kiefer represented the Federal Republic of Germany, exhibiting works that provoked sharp controversy[24]. Critics accused him of cultural nationalism, even of Fascist sympathies, because of his heavy visual use of Germanic imagery, his ambiguous thematization

[22] On the same topic, see also the earlier *Heroes of the German Spirit* (*Deutschlands Geisteshelden*, 1973) and *The German Line of Spiritual Salvation* (*Deutsche Heilslinie*, 1975). The former depicts a studio covered with a list of thirteen names who are all artists, poets and musicians, with the exception of Frederick Barbarossa (1122-1190) and Mathilde of Magdeburg (1212-1283), the Medieval mystics – the others are: Richard Wagner, Beuys, Caspar Davide Friedrich, Robert Musil, the painter Hans Thoma (1839-1924), the lyric poet Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), the Austrian novelists Joseph Weinheber (1892-1945) and Adalbert Stifter (1865-1868), the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), the Austrian writer Nikolas Lenau (1802-1850) and the German writer Theodor Storm (1817-1888). In the latter, the recurrent motifs of sky and earth also emerge: Hegel's tradition is here visually connected to the symbol of the rainbow, instead Nietzsche's thought to the earth – probably a reference to the Nietzschean notion of "Faith in the Earth". Illustrious protagonists of German cultural tradition are also represented in *Varus* (1976) and in *The Paths of World Wisdom: Hermann's Battle* (*Wege der Weltweisheit: die Hermannsschlacht* – in various versions, among them: 1977-1978, 1982-1993).

[23] Daniel Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, Thames & Hudson, London 2001, p. 140.

[24] Kiefer's participation is documented in the monographic catalogue *Anselm Kiefer. Verbrennnen, Verholzen, Versenken, Versanden*, preface by Klaus Gallwitz, with a commentary by R.H. Fuchs, Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Deutscher Pavillon, Stuttgart 1980.

of German identity, and his "anti-modern", neo-Expressionist style – he was labeled a kind of "new Fauve"[25]. Nevertheless, as Daniel Arasse later recognized, Kiefer's disturbing provocations were not apologias, but acts of mourning.[26].

Up to 1980, German history and identity were the central concerns of Kiefer's art[27]. But soon after, he broadened his horizons through a syncretic exploration of new mythological and religious sources[28], creating an ambitious transcultural and transhistorical program. Echoing Goethe's ideal of *Weltliteratur* in its attempt to reconcile the particular and the universal, in Kiefer, according to Arasse, "German history and culture were integrated into a larger corpus that accommodated the Old Testament (*Aaron*, 1980), Babylonian mythology (*Gilgamesh*, 1980), the poetic Edda (*Yggdrasil*, 1980), Greek mythology (*Icarus – Brandenburg Sand*, 1981), alchemy (*Athanor*, 1983-84), Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah (*Emanation*, 1984-1985), Egyptian religion (*Osiris and Isis*, 1985-87) and many other reference points"[29]. This expansion was not linear but concentric: works overlapped, themes were reworked, and ideas reverberated across projects, in a syncretic paradigm where "this thematic expansion is not so much linear as it is concentric, with the reprises and reworkings, overlaps and sidesteps between one work or theme and another"[30]. Overall, as evoked by Peter Handke in his lyrical style, Kiefer's "prehistoric" and "primordial" painting moves from the Germanic myth to a global, still rarefied and not yet definitive narrative – a myth which that cannot be fully grasped[31].

The result was what Vincenzo Trione has described as an "a-systematic polyphony"[32]: a cosmic worldview where epiphanic presences form a web of symbolic images structuring human perception and offering alternative configurations of reality.

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[25] Cf. Lisa Saltzmann, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 108-110. American commentators have dismissed such criticism as inappropriate, bizarre and censorious (see for example Peter Schjedahl, *Our Kiefer*, in «Art in America», nr. 3, March 1998, pp. 116-127).

[26] Cf. Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 41, 118-161.

[27] On Kiefer's capacity to address historical topics, restoring the connection between art and history (through the reunion of *pictura* and *poiesis*), which modernism had previously disrupted, see Emanuele Coccia, *Les épis de la Histoire*, in *Anselm Kiefer. Pour Paul Celan*, Catalogue of the exhibition (Grand Palais, Paris, 2020), Flammarion, 2021.

[28] An extremely precise analysis of the academic and critical literature on Anselm Kiefer – although somewhat outdated, as it stops with the 2000s – has been carried out by Harriet Häußler in *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste. Der Künstler als Suchender zwischen Mythos und Mystik*, 3d edition, J.B. Metzler, Berlin 2024, pp. 1-13. The author underscores how the majority of studies on Kiefer have concentrated on historical and political aspects, while largely neglecting the religious, mythological, and philosophical dimensions.

[29] Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 121.

[30] *Ivi*, p. 122.

[31] See Peter Handke, *Anselm Kiefer oder Die andere Höhle Platons*, in «Die Zeit», 9 September 1999, https://www.zeit.de/1999/37/199937.kiefer_.xml.

[32] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 113.

Kiefer's reading of poets and philosophers does not aim to reproduce a unified philosophical system – indeed, the thinkers he engages are often mutually opposed – but rather to provide multiple pathways toward understanding the ultimate enigmas of reality, through a pluralistic approach which resonates with Nitsch's religious perspective. In his early "philosophical paintings," these figures appear as spectral presences in a procession, reflecting Kiefer's view that diverse approaches can illuminate the hidden structures of existence. A persistent question remains: in the postmodern age, can these sources still serve as guiding cultural and spiritual references, or are they themselves subject to skepticism and deconstructive uncertainty?

This engagement fostered one of Kiefer's central philosophical claims: a critique of the epistemological arrogance of (certain branches of) modern science. The reductionist ambition to comprehend reality in totality is countered in his work by a pluralistic, contingent, and fragile aesthetic. His hermeneutical perspective, aligned with Gadamer, seeks to defend the mysterious core of reality, which, in Kiefer's view, is an eternal, infinite process of becoming (*das Werden*) that human reason can approach only partially, never fully grasping it, much less possess it.

Kiefer has described his work as an attempt to explore what he does not know, engaging in a processual approach that never reaches closure, since each revelation of meaning reveals further layers.[33] This openness to the infinite underpins the structure of his oeuvre, often likened to a labyrinth: a network of intersections, reworkings, analogies, archetypes, and constellations.[34] Arasse terms this process a "continuous morphogenesis"[35]: from his earliest to most recent works, Kiefer's art evolves though rewritings and recreations, not as a subjective act of personal will, but as a participation in a spontaneous, cosmic mutation of forms.
According to Trione, Kiefer "celebrates his own power in performance. And he recognizes the destination not in the *ergon* – the finished object – but in *énergeia*, in the act of doing, in the practice that has its own destiny within it. (...) The painting as *Gestaltung*: form not resolved, but in the making. (…). Intermittence of the heart. Expression that does not want to become technique. A path in progress, never resolved"[36]. Kiefer's works, therefore, do not resist the flow of time, but reveal its creative, revelatory power. Literature, philosophy and mythic-

[33] Cf. *Anselm Kiefer è uno dei più grandi artisti del mondo: "La battaglia nella mia testa"*, interview by Carlo Antonelli, in «la Repubblica», 6 December 2023 (https://d.repubblica.it/culture/arte/2023/12/06/news/anselm_kiefer_e_uno_dei_piu_grandi_artisti_del_mondo_la_battaglia_nella_mia_testa-424345450/).
[34] On the "labyrinth" in Kiefer,'s oeuvre, see the homonymous chapter in Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 17-24. See also Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 34.
[35] Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 21.
[36] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 307.

religious wisdom function as convergent techniques for capturing and ordering sparks of meaning that emerge, often metaphysically emanating, from the unfathomable depths of reality.

Science, when practiced under rigidly ideological lenses, is a potential danger, promoting reductive rationalism though a fundamentalist approach[37]. Yet, Kiefer acknowledges its value when approached imaginatively: science can inspire artistic creation by modeling possible configurations of the world. He aligns this with a hermeneutical perspective that sees mythology and science as complementary approaches to the same inquiry, remarking that "science serves mythology by illustrating it"[38].

In this perspective, for example, the scientific concept of the Big Bang can illustrate the experience of death: they are both, according to Kiefer, two moments of "strong concentration", with "the transition to the disintegration of atoms. It's as concentrated in a black hole. Your entire life is so compressed into one second that it disperses in an explosion, it expands. The atoms then go everywhere"[39]. Kiefer's practice emerges precisely in this fertile interplay between modern reason and myth[40].

His atelier in Barjac, France, functions metaphorically like CERN in Geneva[41]: a site of explorations of origins, an ultimate foundation recognized as ultimately unfounded. For Kiefer, the world never appears in its fullness; ontologically, it is always an illusion.

However, this is not to posit other, "true", "otherworldly" realities; rather, each layer of illusion hints at deeper, more structured illusions, each revealing further complexity. Beyond every veil, there is still a veil. It is an illusion in the sense that no image or concept is capable of expressing the real, definitive meaning of a real phenomenon, whose ontological excess can structurally never be subsumed. Following Nietzsche, often via Heidegger, Kiefer argues that "art proves

[37] See Jean Josipovici, *La scienza oscurantista*, Iduna, Milano 2019.

[38] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 52.

[39] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 47 ("starke Konentration", " Der Übergang in die Auflösung der Atome. Das ist so konzentriert wie in einem schwarzen Loch. Das ganze Leben ist in einer Sekunde so konzentriert, dass es sich in einer Explosion auflöst, entfaltet. Die Atome gehen dann überallhin" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 54-55]).

[40] "In my work, these are always blending with each other. Some knowledge helps illuminate mythological experience and some knowledge is gained through a mythological experience" (*ivi*, p. 134 ["Das geht bei mir ständig ineinander über. Manche Erkenntnis hilft, die mythologische Erfahrung zu erhellen, und manche Erkenntnis entsteht durch eine mythologische Erfahrung"; *ivi*, p. 139]).

[41] This is an image coined by Kiefer himself in *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 20.

itself as the most genuinely existing of all being, as the fundamental event in the totality of being"[42], extending reality beyond abstract faiths[43].

Through this extension of knowledge, Kiefer cultivates the development of an intuitive "type", an epistemological anthropology which is alternative to the dominant modernist paradigm. He invites viewers to abandon the sharp instruments of reductionist reason and regain a symbolic perspective attuned to cosmic rhythms. Reality becomes a flow of energy: states of being are represented and known through myths, symbols, and archetypes. These signs and correspondences – visible and invisible – allow a poetic and magical hermeneutics to structure human understanding.

Art, religion, and mysticism support this epistemological pathway. Empirical perception, science, and reason capture only one facet of reality; symbolic and mystical forms teach resistance, the art of "soldiering on in the face of meaningless"[44], and cultivate an awareness that transcends immediacy. As taught in a certain proto-nihilistic Romantic tradition and later by Nietzsche, art can generate "better", more meaningful illusions, helping humans navigate historical suffering while fostering an appetite for life. The artistic illusion forms a more concrete, efficient, and creative "illusion", working as a means of organizing reality as something more meaningful and existentially graspable. For Kiefer, in fact, our knowledge is constantly in a state of already-not-yet, which is due to the fact that the becoming of reality (*das Werden*) does not present itself as a boundless object of investigation[45]. Similarly to Nitsch's philosophy of being, also Kiefer's thought stresses the transformation of reality, but never leading to a mere relativism. Beyond the illusion of the illusion, there is an invisible shimmering which glances of the Origin.

Kiefer has stated: "Art should allow us to look beyond things, the visible should simply be the support of the invisible, the emanation of the divine mystery"[46]. Kiefer's artworks express, in his own words, the artist's "attempt to actualize the mystery that connects our world to the afterlife. A search for the inexpressible reality"[47].

[42] Cf. Anselm Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, trans. by Tess Lewis, Seagull Books, Calcutta 2015, p. 80 ("die kunst jedoch seiender ist, dann erweist sich die kunst als das seiendste im seienden, als das grundgeschehen innerhalb des seienden im ganzen" [Anselm Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2011, p. 90]).
[43] Cf. *ivi*, p. 89 (*ivi*, p. 99).
[44] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 248 ("Der Widerstand besteht für mich darin, dass wir in der Sinnlosigkeit weitermachen" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 247]).
[45] See on that Viglialoro, *Kiefer. Kunst als Prozess*, cit., p. 60.
[46] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 30.
[47] *Ivi*, p. 122.

For Kiefer, myth, symbol, and religious imagery express in perceivable forms "primordial experiences"[48] that precede history, bridging the numinous – as theorized by Rudolf Otto –, human cognition, and intersubjective communication. Myth, therefore, is not external to reality; it is its core[49]. The critique of escapism which several intellectuals have leveled against Kiefer[50] as underlying the phantasmatic and oneiric dimension of his art is convincing only for someone who stands for an extremely rationalist and dualist position. The oneiric and symbolic dimensions of his art do not signify chaos, but reflect the co-implication of beings and the logic of apparent contradictions. Myths provide epistemological tools, giving form to the invisible and preserving the enigma of reality's ground.

Myths are indeed stories endowed with constancy, but they are open to variations, as underlined by Hans Blumenberg in his *Work on Myth*. They help men to give order and form to reality: they are strategies of understanding through the act of attributing names to the "nameless" (*Namenloses*), that part of reality with which one is not acquainted[51]. But complementary to Blumenberg's vision of myth as a rational (*vernünftig*) instrument of fear control and world orientation, Kiefer also sees myth as a dispositive aimed at defending the mysterious and enigmatic vision of the ground of reality, which remains unattainable in its complexity and wholeness, and which the mythical narrative, due to its internal fertile ambiguity and contradiction (the mythic-symbolic capacity of "expressing the coincidence of opposites", beyond the principle of non-contradiction), always preserves[52].

Moreover, Kiefer conceives the artist as a medium, a listener to the unfolding of reality, whose role is to prepare, mediate and aesthetically "translate" the revelation of meaning rather than impose subjective will[53]. In this sense, he rejects the Romantic notion of genius, aligning with Gadamer in privileging participation over creation *ex nihilo*: the artist "is no longer a genius", but rather "a being who listens, even to what may appear incomprehensible to him. He is the one who exposes himself, the one who distrusts everything, who ruins himself and knows that

[48] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 101 ("Urerfahrungen" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 106]).

[49] "Es gibt keine Flucht in den Mythos. Der Mythos ist ja gegenwärtig" (*Anselm. Das Rauschen der Zeit*, 2023, by Wim Wenders).

[50] See, for example, Lizbeth Marano, *Anselm Kiefer: Culture as Hero*, in «Portfolio», vol. 5, nr. 3, May-June 1983, pp. 100-105.

[51] See Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace, The MIT Press, Cambridge-London 1985, pp. 34-35 (Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 4th edition, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986, pp. 40-41).

[52] On the protection of the enigma from a hermeneutic mythic-symbolic perspective, see Luca Siniscalco, *Il movimento dell'immagine, da Hans-Georg Gadamer a Paul Klee*, in «Elephant & Castle», nr. 31, 2023: Movimento II. Genealogie, matrici, filiazioni, 2023, pp. 134-146.

[53] Under this perspective, Kiefer, art performs a mythical form and function also because it is characterized by a strong narrative and communicative trajectory – in the sense of the *Erzählen* theorized by Gadamer (cf. *infra*, chapter 2.3.2).

he is lost without ever really being so"[54]. Trione describes Kiefer's artist as "prophet, oracle and messenger, with the gift of foresight. According to Kiefer, artists should never be integrated with their times. Nor should they adhere to the urgencies of the present or indulge in direct action. And they should not invent possible universes either. On the contrary (...) they should try to intuit different contexts, bringing distant dimensions into contact with each other. A bit like bats, which fly in the dark, in the gaps, and intuit the light"[55]. The artist's disclosure of truth comes precisely through detachment from the immediate, political, or stylistic imperatives of the era. The artist is not an "artivist"[56], but instead "nonpolitical" in the sense of Thomas Mann[57], and is thus one who stands against the "paradigm of contemporary art"[58].

The ultimate goal of art, in this perspective, is anti-realism: not mere mimesis, but the revelation of hidden structures. Art, similarly to hermeneutical practice, "reveals the underlying patterns of unpredictable events; and manifests, in that changing flow, unnoticed correspondences, hidden links, networks of connections. It is a knowledge that cannot be reduced to any other, it must be freed from all obedience, dependence or functionality. (...) it must manifest a radical apostasy from history, without being translated into statements. Never cease to seek the not-yet-represented. Let itself be guided by the mysterious aggregation of signs and materials"[59].
In the contemporary age as well, art is capable not only of criticizing and deconstructing, but also narrating archetypical human and cosmic experiences, constructing a meaningful framework for existence. As Donna Tart notes: "The stories we tell and retell and transmit to one another are tents under which to gather, banners to follow into battle, indestructible ropes connecting the dead and the living, and the interweaving of these vast plots across centuries and cultures binds us strongly to one another and to history, guiding us through the generations. But perhaps, more accurately, stories are the canvas for sails we hoist to catch a breath of the divine"[60].

[54] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 120.
[55] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 49.
[56] Cf. Vincenzo Trione, *Artivismo. Arte, politica, impegno*, Einaudi, Torino 2022.
[57] See Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, introduction by Mark Lilla, trans. by Walter D. Morris, New York Review Books, New York 2021 (Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, in Id., *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe. Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher*, Band 13., S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 2009).
[58] Cf. Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structures d'une révolution artistique*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 2014.
[59] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 53.
[60] Donna Tartt*, La potenza delle storie, tra filo e grazia, tessuto e mistero*, in Papa Francesco, *La tessitura del mondo*, ed. by Andrea Monda, Libreria Editrice Vaticana-Salani, Italy 2022 [ebook].

Kiefer's art resonates fully with this conception. Religions, mystical, and esoteric languages offer similar tools to overcome the prescriptions of both our common sense (*sensus communis*) and our rational-empirical driven faculties to reach a more articulated understanding of reality: they expand human imagination and construct symbolic systems capable of overcoming purely logocentric constraints. Kiefer's interest is not in dogma or soteriology, but in the ontological and epistemological potency of religious symbols. He explains: "It's about connecting with an older knowledge and trying to discover continuities in why we search for heaven"[61].
Through myths, symbols, and esoteric imagery, the art of Kiefer, this "night watchman of late modernity"[62], participates in the post-secular project of reconstructing cultural meaning, offering alternative foundations to counter nihilistic tendencies in contemporary society.

Kiefer's mythic-symbolic engagement has been often applied by art critics as a hermeneutical lens to grasp not only his artwork, but also his personal artistic identity. Vincenzo Trione likens him to Hephaestus, the divine craftsman, due to his demiurgic activity[63], and to Prometheus[64], the rebellious titan challenging the Olympian gods, symbols of *Nomos* (the Law), with his *hybris*. Yet, these comparisons risk overemphasizing the willful or Faustian dimension of the artist. Kiefer's practice is as much receptive as it is creative: he listens to the autonomous emergence of meaning within the artwork. A more precise symbolic reference is, in our opinion, the giant Antaeus, whom Kiefer cites as emblematic of the regenerative connection with the earth[65]. Antaeus draws strength from Gaia, the Earth, his divine mother; his defeat by Heracles, during his Twelve Labors, when lifted from the ground symbolizes the loss of grounding. For Kiefer, Antaeus embodies fidelity to the earth (in Nietzsche's mythic-symbolic perspective)[66], mythopoetic resistance to nihilistic disenchanted modernity, and the recovery of archetypal vitality. To side with Antaeus is to embrace a rebellious stance: fidelity to the earth does not mean attachment to crude matter or to a quantifiable, biological reading of nature, nor does it mean falling into superficial naturalistic ideologies. Rather, it entails delving into the *Abgrund*, recalling the primordial and archetypal powers that alone can provide grounding and

[61] Michael Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, in *Anselm Kiefer. Heaven and Earth*, cit., pp. 165-176: 166.
[62] Vincenzo Trione, *L'opera interminabile. Arte e XXI secolo*, Einaudi, Verona 2019, p. 40.
[63] See the chapter "Efesto" in Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., pp. 99-255.
[64] See *ivi*, pp. 72-75. On the symbolic and philosophical role of the myth of Prometheus see Karl Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*, trans. by Ralph Mannheim, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991.
[65] See Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 170-171 (Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 182-183).
[66] Cf. Luca Siniscalco, *"Fedeltà alla terra". Il* Genius loci *della Erdgeschichte*, in Silvio Bolognini (ed.), *Prospettiva Ponte e Genius loci. Materiali per una ricerca*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2020, pp. 799-816.

equilibrium in the face of the destructive energies unleashed by modern technology[67]. Kiefer's art seems to us to embody this cultural and spiritual program. As Peter Handke argues, if Kiefer is titanic, it is in the sense of conquering not the heavens, but the earth[68].

Kiefer's poetics seeks simultaneity: being *with* and *in* the universe, acknowledging constraints yet aspiring to total resonance. Decisions are inevitably partial and painful[69], producing nostalgia for the unrealized potential. "A decision is always a brutal thing. It means that the moment comes when you undertake something and give up everything else. As an experience, it is less rewarding than trying to do everything at once, but it is often necessary when you want to give visual form to something"[70]. Only the wisdom of religious, mystical, and symbolic traditions offers reconciliation. In this sense, Kiefer aspires to the figure of the "lithomancer", as described by Ioan Petru Culianu: a diviner whose knowledge emerges from intuitions and synchronicities, rather than rational or deterministic methods[71]. In the post-secular age, the artist is called to rediscover this role, anticipating new hermeneutical frameworks where insights can flourish.

4.1.2 Kiefer's Religious and Mystical Sources of Inspiration: A Kaleidoscope

Anselm Kiefer's engagement with religion began with his Catholic upbringing: he learned to pray in Latin and developed a curious interest in Christian religion from an early age[72]. He explored it more deeply during his law studies at university, balancing his academic career with personal religious inquiry, particularly through the work of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), a devout Catholic whose philosophy of law addressed complex topics, such as the theological dimension of politics and the challenges of secularization. As Kiefer explained, "I was interested in people

[67] As proposed as a cultural program by the journal «Antaios» (1959-1971), directed by Ernst Jünger and Mircea Eliade. On that, see Hans Thomas Hakl, *«L'effetto, pur non esteso, è stato profondo come quello di una sonda». Breve storia della rivista "Antaios", curata da Mircea Eliade ed Ernst Jünger (1959-1971)* in Francesco Zambon (ed.), *Cenacoli. Circoli e gruppi letterari, artistici e spirituali*, Edizioni Medusa, Milano 2007, pp. 247-270. See also Luca Siniscalco, *Ernst Jünger: Un'ontologia delle forme mitiche*, in Hans Thomas Hakl (ed.), *Octagon. La ricerca della totalità*, vol. III, scientia nova Verlag, Gaggenau 2017, pp. 193-211.
[68] See Handke, *Anselm Kiefer oder Die andere Höhle Platons*.
[69] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. by Alastair Hannay, Penguin, London 1992.
[70] Anselm Kiefer, *Quell'incerto lucore che cade dalle stelle*, interview by Bernard Comment, in «Art Press», nr. 216, September 1998, pp. 19-27, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 61-70: 69.
[71] See Ioan Petru Culianu, *L'inquirente dimezzato*, in Horia Corneliu Cicortaș, Roberta Moretti, and Andrea Scarabelli, (eds.), *Antarès*, nr. 18 – *Ioan Petru Culianu. Argonauta della Quarta Dimensione*, Bietti, Milano 2021, pp. 192-194: 194.
[72] Cf. Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 166.

like Schmitt because they got caught between the power of government and the power of God"[73].

In 1966, Kiefer visited La Tourette monastery in Éveux, France, where he stayed for three weeks as a guest of the Dominican monks. Designed by Le Corbusier and consecrated in 1960, La Tourette exemplifies the original brutalist architecture. For the young Kiefer, however, it was primarily a place of peace and reflection, a spiritual environment for self-exploration. He later recalled: "It was an inspiring building in the sense that a very simple material, a modern material, could be used to create a spiritual place. Great religions and great buildings are part of the sediment of time; like pieces of sand. Le Corbusier used the sand to construct a spiritual space. I discovered the spirituality of concrete – using earth to mold a symbol, a symbol of the imaginative and the spiritual world. He tried to make heaven on earth – the ancient paradox"[74]. This experience profoundly shaped both Kiefer's spiritual and aesthetic education.

Kiefer subsequently abandoned law studies and enrolled at the University of Freiburg, where he studied under the painter Peter Dreher. His artistic aim became the symbolic creation of "heaven on earth" – interpreting heaven as a form of inner wisdom. Following these principles, he produced his first significant artwork among those he chose not to destroy: *The Heavens* (*Die Himmel*, 1969), an artist's book of sixteen pages. As noted by Auping, this work marked the beginning of Kiefer's career by contemplating the notion of Paradise[75]. The book resembles a child's scrapbook, with small images of skies and clouds cut from magazines and pasted onto the pages. "His use of image fragments reflects a belief that heaven cannot be summarized into a single image or place, but is better symbolized by a series of glimpses, each convincing and unconvincing from different viewpoints"[76]. The inclusion of Albert Speer's (1905-1981) architectural installation in the book hints at the enduring theme of the complex relationship between history and spirituality: symbolism is multifaceted and never Manichean, as beauty and light can coexist with tragedy, emphasizing that the bridge to heaven is always perilous.
The motif of heaven would continue throughout Kiefer's oeuvre, inspiring diverse reflections and attempts to articulate a spiritual path to the divine.

[73] Anselm Kiefer, cit. in Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 28.
[74] Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 168.
[75] Cf. Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 31.
[76] *Ivi*, p. 32.

Kiefer's conviction that spirituality can be preserved in a book – as in *The Heavens*, simultaneously a physical and intellectual object – reflects the principle underlying the "religions of the books". The presence of a Bible in his Croissy studio among other texts on religious topics[77] symbolically reinforces this connection to a tradition of wisdom. "Yet the Bible is only one part of the universe of myth. There are many other alphabets from a wide variety of cultures: together they form a complete alphabet"[78], Kiefer explains, signaling his pluralistic and syncretic approach to global encounters with the sacred.

Biographical evidence and Kiefer's own statements indicate that his Christian education initially played a pivotal role in shaping his spiritual sensibility. He even recounted – albeit taking it to be a psychological phenomenon – that the Virgin Mary vividly appeared to him as a Nazarene figure during childhood[79].

While Hermann Nitsch was primarily fascinated by the ritual and liturgical dimensions of Christianity, Kiefer's interest is more intellectual and theological. He is captivated by the conceptual representation of dogmatic issues: creation, theodicy (which he finds more satisfactorily addressed in Jewish mysticism than Christian theology[80]), the Holy Trinity, transubstantiation, Mary's Immaculate Conception (proclaimed as dogma in 1854 and compared by Kiefer to the myth of Danaë)[81], her perpetuate virginity, and her Assumption into heaven (defined as Marian dogmas only in 1950 by Pope Pius XII). These subjects recur in both his theoretical reflections and his artistic projects.
Kiefer interprets dogmas as strongly contrasting with *sensus communis*, expressing an irrationality difficult to reconcile with reason. "It's like Dada"[82], Kiefer boldly asserts. Yet, he emphasizes that humanity is not only rational; it also comprises passions, emotions, and imagination. In highlighting this dualism, Kiefer acknowledges the cultural power of the Church and its artistic function: creating a symbolic reality that, without such a demiurgic act, would not have been conceived by humans. Reflecting on Christian dogmas, particularly Marian ones, he observes: "There's something artistic about neither renouncing scientific knowledge, not denying it, but setting it on a different level where it is relativized. Every

[77] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 125.
[78] *Ibidem*.
[79] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., pp. 118-119 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 123-124).
[80] Cf. *ivi*, p. 5 (*ivi*, p. 15).
[81] Cf. *ivi*, p. 96 (*ivi*, p. 101).
[82] *Ivi*, p. 116 ("Das ist wie Dadaismus" [*ivi*, p. 120]).

scientific discovery is provisional, then falsified or modified over the years. To claim that Mary was the Mother of God and a virgin, without original sin is, of course, impossibly bold and it's also impossibly bold to claim that this is an eternal truth. That is placing myth above science, if you will"[83]. And Kiefer does not condemn this act: in his view, myth functions as a parallel language to art, philosophy, and science, enabling access to a genealogical process of symbols and meanings emanating from the Origin. Catholic religion offers a rich repository of imagery, functioning as a symbolic narration of reality's deeper dynamics. In this sense, religion is nothing more nor less than mythology.

As previously noted, myth holds particular significance for Kiefer: mythology is considered by him a knowledge which is more complex and complete than science, because it is not analytical, sectorial, and univocal, instead synthetic, organic, multifaceted (union of visible and invisible, form and content)[84]. Kiefer thus rejects the compartmentalized methodology of science, drawing instead on Romantic and Heideggerian legacies to apprehend the totality of the *Lebenswelt*. Art and myth combine to convey a complex background through simple images, connecting individual experience to archetypical structures and linking microcosm to macrocosm.
Kiefer does not propose a fixed theory of archetypes, recognizing the role of history, language, and becoming in the active transformation of myth – a "morphodynamic" approach, we could add with Ioan Petru Culianu's terminology, integrating morphology with historical temporality.

Kiefer's attitude toward Christianity is twofold: he is attracted to its imaginative aesthetic dimension and complex conceptual theorization, yet he remains critical of several doctrinal aspects. His principal critique targets the Church's simplification of the profound original experience of the sacred in order to facilitate dissemination, consolidate power, and assert institutional authority. In his words: "The first church in Rome was not defensive and not aggressive. It was quiet. It was spiritual in the sense of seeking a true dimension about God. It was exploring a new idea about humanity. But then there was 'iglesia triumphans', the Triumph of the Church. And then the stones were stacked up and the buildings came, and the construction

[83] *Ivi*, p. 117 ("Es ist etwas Künstlerisches, die wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis zwar nicht zu verleugnen, nicht zu verneinen, aber sie auf eine andere Ebene zu versetzen, auf der sie relativiert wird. Jede wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis ist vorläufig, wird im Laufe der Jahre falsifiziert oder modifiziert. Zu behaupten, Maria war Gottesgebärerin, war Jungfrau, ohne Erbsünde, ist natürlich unheimlich kühn, und es ist natürlich auch unheimlich kühn, zu behaupten, dass dies eine ewige Wahrheit ist. Das ist, wenn man so will, der Vorrang der Mythologie vor der Wissenschaft" [*ivi*, pp. 121-122]).
[84] See *ibidem* (*ivi*, p. 122).

of the Scholastics, Augustine, and so on. They were very successful in limiting the meaning of the mythology. There was discussion about the Trinity and its meaning. Anyone who had ideas that complicated their specific picture was eliminated. This made Christianity very rigid and not very interesting. Whenever knowledge becomes rigid it stops living"[85].

For Kiefer, this loss of imaginative creativity corresponds to a loss of artistic power. Spirituality should be an individual act of symbolic recognition and existential experience, not blind adherence or dogma. Thus, his position resonates with Nitsch's critique of rigid religious thought and underscores the need for renewed spiritual engagement in contemporary human communities. Textual, ritual words and sacred images, according to Kiefer, are dynamic instruments mediating between human pursuit of the sacred and self-revelation in symbolic forms. Their ontology aligns with Gadamer's hermeneutics: precarious yet necessary passages into sacred mystery. They function as doors – as in Kiefer's artwork *Door* (*Die Tür*, 1973) – or thresholds to the invisible.

This theoretical framework clarifies Kiefer engagement with Christian principles and dogmas, which he explores both theoretically and artistically, sometimes with fascination and devotion, other times as a heterodox theologian seeking reinterpretation. For instance, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity inspired works such as *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (*Vater, Sohn, Heiliger Geist*, 1973), depicting three chairs with flames in a wooden house, and *I Am who I Am* (*Ich bin, der ich bin*, 2008), where flames erupt from stones arranged in a triangular formation, evoking the Holy Trinity[86] and ascetic impulses[87]. Similarly, *Send Forth Your Spirit* (*Sende Deinen Geist aus*, 1971), titled after Psalm 104, represents spiritual renewal of the earth mediated through the artist's palette, quasi-"emanated" by the holy spirit in the form of a luminous dove.

In *Quaternity* (*Quaternität*, 1973), the three flames of the Trinity are accompanied by a snake labeled "Satan", referencing heterodox Gnostic interpretations in which evil is incorporated within the divine principle, which, being whole and eternal, could not have anything excluded from itself. "In that painting", Kiefer explains, "Satan is contained in the concept of the godhead. There was a theological school of thought that declared that evil was also contained in God"[88]. Here, Kiefer visualizes the *coincidentia oppositorum*: a unifying principle

[85] Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 166-167.
[86] Fire is iconographically associated in Christianity with the Spirit, as exemplified by the "tongues of fire" that appeared to Christ's disciples at the event of Pentecost (Acts 2, 1-4).
[87] Cf. Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of symbols*, trans. by Jack Sage, Routledge, London 1971, pp. 350-351.
[88] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 88 ("Auf diesem Bild ist der Satan in den Begriff Gottes eingeschlossen. Es gab eine theologische Richtung, die erklärte, das Teuflische sei in Gott auch enthalten" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 93]).

encompassing totality, consistent with Mircea Eliade's observations on Gnostic myths portraying Christ and Satan as archetypal half-brothers, or the cosmogonic role of the Devil alongside God in creation[89]. The paradoxical tension of these images – flames symbolizing spirituality (the Trinity) yet threatening to consume the depicted structure – reflects a secret European cultural transmission through folklore, Romantic literature, and heterodox authors such as Jung[90].

The already mentioned Marian dogmas also hold a central importance in Kiefer's imagination and artistic production[91]. Her Assumption in heaven exemplifies the creative power of recent dogmatic codifications. In *Regina in caelum assumpta* (1977-2008), Mary is depicted as a winged, angelic creature, with flaming wings symbolizing the Trinity, inscribed with Latin rosary passages. She appears as the Queen of Heaven, who, according to the Catholic teachings, ascended in body and soul to heaven after her death. From an iconographic point of view, it is a very unusual representation of the virgin. It is a visual rewriting where she also reveals herself as "the mother of art", patronaging the symbol of the artist's palette and giving an iconic foundation to the relationship between art and religion.

Mary recurs in numerous works, including *Maria* (1978-2008), *Ave Maria* (different versions: 2007, 2008), *Ave Maria, Mater Castissima* (2008), *Mary Went through the Wood of Thorn* (*Maria durch den Dornwald ging*, 2006) and *Mary Went through a Wood of Thorn* (*Maria durch ein Dornwald ging*, 2007)[92], and the 2017 sculpture *Ave Maria turris eburnea*.

In *Mary Went through a Wood of Thorn*, she is not visually represented, but she is implied through the title. The artwork is rendered in dark, somber tones, with very little light coming from the path in the right part of the picture. It is as if Mary already left and the earth retained the vague light of her presence. The virgin is here likened to Mother Nature, embodying the

[89] Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne. Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol*, trans. by J.M. Cohen, Sheed and Ward, New York 1965, pp. 83-88.

[90] Jung interprets quaternity as a symbol of wholeness, wherein the totality of good and evil is simultaneously incorporated. See K.T. Kadankavil, *Jungian Concept of Quaternity and the Feminine Aspect in the Trinity*, in «Journal of Dharma», vol. 5, nr. 2, 1980, pp. 199-211. The Heideggerian notion of the *Geviert* may be also inscribed within this symbolic framework.

[91] "What interests me about Mary today, aside from the biographical events, are the dogmas" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 115 ["Was mich heute, abgesehen von den biographischen Prägungen, an Maria sehr Interessiert, sind die Dogmen"; Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 120]).

[92] The title is derived from a 19th-century German Advent song dedicated to Mary. Originally a pilgrimage song, it later became associated with the Advent season. The song narrates Mary's passage through a thorny forest – symbolizing the world under the curse of sin – while carrying the infant Jesus. The miraculous blooming of roses among the thorns represents the birth of Christ and the redemption of humanity. Under this title, Kiefer also organized an exhibition comprising a cycle of roughly thirty paintings and one sculpture, begun in 1970 and completed in 2007-2008. Cf. the catalogue: Anselm Kiefer, *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg 2008.

feminine principle of nature and life. Dried plants, brambles, plaster, and clay represent the forest, once lifeless but rejuvenated though her presence – as underlined in the 2006 version of the subject though the symbol of roses. Mary expresses a "utopian potential"[93], transcending original sin and unifying with the Origin – the ultimate mystical aim.

The virgin appears to Kiefer a fundamental figure of mediation between immanence and transcendence, human and divine. Mary appears as a dynamic threshold, rising to the sky (ascension to heaven) as well as moving back to earth (reappearing to the believers). In this way, she synthesizes the idea of transition, of crossing borders, which is fundamental for Kiefer's aesthetical conception. If the ascent is represented in the already mentioned paintings, and even more explicitly in *L'Ascension* (1978-2008), the descent is visualized in other artworks, such as *Maria Descendant le 3ème jour* (1978-2008), recalling the legend according to which Mary provides a tangible sign from heaven, descending again on earth to reveal the truth of the reign, caring for the salvation of humankind[94].

Kiefer is also fascinated by Mary's threefold perpetual virginity – before, during, and after Christ's birth (*virginitas ante partum, in partu, post partum*)[95]. The *triplex virginitas Mariae* is a traditional theological expression for a paradoxical and "unnatural" condition – that of being mother without having had sexual experiences[96]. This notion asserts something paradoxical from a biological point of view – and for Kiefer, as we have seen, paradoxes are fertile ground, which expose the tension between rational and irrational, matter and spirit, history and possibility of transcending. Kiefer's canvases often stage impossible events – ashes becoming stars, lead sprouting sunflowers – so Mary's paradoxical virginity fits his exploration of the physically impossible as spiritual-existential truth, a perspective which, according to Kiefer,

[93] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 119 ("ein utopisches Potenzial" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 124]).

[94] "There are many stories about Mary. One of them says that she ascended to heaven, body and soul, and returned after three days: her descent. I made one picture about her ascent and one about her descent. Mary's return to earth is extremely interesting. There are wonderful drawings by Tiepolo in which Mary descends in the company of angels from the three highest angelic orders, the Seraphim, the Cherubim and the Thrones. These three angels accompany her on her return to the human world – this transition, this crossing of borders from above to below" (*ivi*, p. 121 ["Es gibt viele Geschichten über Maria, eine davon lautet, dass sie mit Leib und Seele in dem Himmel aufsteigt und nach drei Tagen wieder heruntersteigt: ihre Herabkunft. Ich habe ein Bild über den Aufstieg und eines über den Abstieg gemacht. Der Wiederabstieg von Maria ist sehr interessant. Es gibt wunderbare Zeichnungen von Tiepolo, auf denen Maria beim Wiederabstieg in Begleitung der drei ersten Ordnungen der Engel zu sehen ist, der Seraphim, Cherubim und der Throne. Diese drei Engel begleiten sie bei ihrem Abstieg zu den Menschen – dieser Wandel, diese Grenzwanderung von oben nach unten"; *ivi*, p. 126]).

[95] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 117-118.

[96] Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon 186. On Christmas Day*, in Id., *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, part. III – Sermons, vol. 6: *(184-229Z) on the Liturgical Seasons*, trans. and notes by O.P. Edmund Hill, New Rochelle-New York, New City Press 1993, pp. 24-26; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 28.

represents the capacity of art, by connecting to religious imagination, to reach a superior, meta-level of expressivity[97].

Kiefer further remarks: "For me, Mary is like the country I grew up in, like a country I once visited, where I once travelled. For me, it's a memory I can seek out (…). The entire cosmic process is contained in this memory"[98]. This heterodox interpretation of the Virgin is openly vindicated by Kiefer himself: "The Virgin Mary accompanied me throughout my childhood, she was very important to me while I was growing up. Here I'm thinking of the May devotions, when the altars are decorated with an enormous number of flowers. (…) Later I learnt that Marian devotion was not invented by Christians, but goes back to other cults, to that of Isis, for example"[99].

Unlike the intellectual abstraction of Gnostic or Kabbalistic doctrines, Mary is a bodily, approachable figure, providing a tangible perspective on the sacred.

The symbolic function of the Mother of Christ is closely connected to Kiefer's interest in Christian female mysticism. This is particularly evident in his series *Les Extases féminines* (2013), inspired by the homonymous book by Jean-Nöel Vuarnet (1944-1996)[100]. In his text, Vuarnet presents a gallery of female Christian mystics – from Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) to Saint Thérèse of Avila (1515-1582) – portraying them as bearers of an anti-authoritarian and anti-dogmatic ecstatic language. Scholars of religious studies have long suggested that female mysticism n Christianity often embodies a more sensual, bodily, and spontaneous form of mystical experience, less constrained by intellectual or purely contemplative structures[101]. Vuarnet emphasizes that the journey of *excessus mentis* culminates in the mystical union with the divine[102], with saints' narratives often employing intensely sensual imagery that blurs the

[97] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 118.

[98] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 123 ("Maria ist für mich wie ein Land, in dem ich aufgewachsen bin, wie ein Land, das ich einmal besucht habe, in das ich einmal gereist bin. Es ist für mich eine Erinnerung, die ich aufsuchen kann. [...] Der gesamte kosmische Prozess ist in dieser Erinnerung enthalten" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 128]).

[99] *Ivi*, p. 115 ("Die Maria hat mich durch die gesamte Jugend begleitet, sie war sehr wichtig in der Zeit, in der ich aufgewachsen bin. Hier kommen mir die Maienandachten in den Sinn. Die Altäre sind im Mai mit sehr vielen Blumen geschmückt. [...] Später habe ich gelernt, dass die Marienverehrung nicht von den Christen erfunden wurde, sondern auf andere Kulte zurückgeht, zum Beispiel auf den der Isis" [*ivi*, pp. 119-120]).

[100] Hatier, Paris 1991.

[101] The origin of this distinction probably comes from Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West. A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. by Bertha L. Bracey & Richenda C. Payine, Wipf & Stock, Eugene 2016 (Rudolf Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik. Vergleich und Unterscheidung zur Wesensdeutung*, DOGMA Verlag, 2014). Although Otto does not explicitly address gender issues, his distinction between affective and intellectual mysticism laid the groundwork for later scholars who associated women mystics with bodily and ecstatic forms of experience, and men with intellectual and conceptual ones.

[102] See Bernard McGinn, *Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism*, in «Lo Sguardo – Rivista di Filosofia», nr. 33, 2021, II: *Estasi e Visione*, pp. 187-213.

boundaries between spiritual and bodily experience. Their narratives register not only divine intimacy, but also a kind of feminine jouissance, paradoxically religious and erotic. These accounts register not only intimacy with God but also a kind of feminine *jouissance*, paradoxically both religious and erotic. Kiefer's series mirrors this mystical intensity, depicting women in ecstatic rapture, frequently through the association of female bodies with flowers: the natural, flourishing landscape becomes fertilized by divine love, reinforcing the embodied, generative dimension of mystical experience[103].

Divine love also informs Kiefer's engagement with the figure of Christ, although Christ himself is largely absent from his iconography. For Kiefer, Christ embodies the paradox of absence and presence: through his death and resurrection, he is simultaneously immanent among humans and transcendent in heaven. Kiefer describes Christ, with a heterodox imaginative perspective, in "Protean" terms: "Jesus is one who has been broken down into individual pieces, into atoms. The dead are no longer constructed – through entropy they crumble into pieces that form again, from time to time, into another shape. Jesus is dissolved into pantheistic universality and can materialize now and then"[104]. Christ exemplifies the movement of descent (humiliation and death)[105] and ascent (resurrection) that mirrors the cosmic structure itself, an idea central to Kiefer's metaphysical exploration.

This duality of ascent and descent also shapes Kiefer's treatment of angels. In developing his *Engeltheologie*, Kiefer draws on a variety of literary and philosophical sources while recalling the traditional concept of angels (from the Greek ἄγγελος, *angelos*, "messenger") as intermediaries between earth and sky, immanence and transcendence, human and divine. In

[103] This aesthetic of female excess has consistent parallels with the feminine embodied spirituality emerging in Nitsch's figures of the OMT.

[104] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 132 ("Jesus ist ein in Einzelteile Zerfallener, ein in Atome Zerfallener. Als Toter ist man nicht mehr konstruiert, durch die Entropie zerfällt man in Einzelteile, die sich von Zeit zu Zeit wieder zu einer Gestalt formieren. Jesus wird ins Allgemeine pantheistisch aufgelöst und kann sich ab und zu materialisieren" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 137]).

[105] At this level, Kiefer perceives a parallel between Christ and Oedipus – a theme that is also central to the iconography of Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater.* "Both", Kiefer affirms, "descend to the lowest point of human existence". Yet their destinies diverge: "Jesus comes from God and he knows his father is in Heaven. (…) Jesus always sees himself in relation to something else altogether whereas Oedipus doesn't see himself in relation to anything else. That's why it's much more modern". Oedipus thus represents the human condition in the nihilistic contemporary age: "Oedipus can't actually relate to anything else – he is forsaken by everything" (*ivi*, p. 186 ["Insofern als beide zum niedersten Punkt der menschlichen Existenz hinabsteigen"; "Jesus kommt von Gott, und er weiß, sein Vater ist im Himmel. (...) Jesus bezieht sich immer auf etwas ganz anderes. Während Ödipus sich auf nichts anderes bezieht. Darum ist es viel moderner. Denn Ödipus kann sich eigentlich auf nichts beziehen. Er ist von allem verlassen"; *ivi*, p. 187]). These reflections emerge in the context of Kiefer's engagement with designing stage sets for production of Sopochles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Kiefer's work, an angel moves along ascending and descending trajectories, reflecting the same cosmic dynamics that characterize his broader artistic universe[106].

In his aesthetics, the metaphysical power of angels is restored to its sacred, shocking, and sublime dimension, far from the domesticated iconography of "putti". As Massimo Cacciari explains in the first paragraph of his seminal study on angelology: "The dimension of the Angel is ou-topic. Its place is the Landof-no-where, the mundus imaginalis, whose fourth dimensio (axis) lies beyond the sphere that delimits the axes of the visible cosmos. No one could point to the path that leads there. Only the Angel, guardian of the divine Word, icon of the *ad*-verbum, indispensable intermediary of all the prophets up to Muhammad, can undertake long journeys from the invisible No-where, from its Caelum Caeli (Heaven of Heaven), unchanging and eternal Domus (dwelling) and Civitas (city) of the Lord (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XII, 11), toward the interior temple of man, enter his darkness, and help him recover his proper Orient"[107].

This tradition resonates, for example, from an autobiographical perspective in Kiefer's work *The Painter's Guardian Angel* (*Des Malers Schutzengel*, 1975), in which the angel holds a palette that connects transcendent power with human creative agency and presents art as a sacred, unitive practice. "The transparency of the palette is symbolic: it thematizes painting as the medium of reflection and imitation of the existing world and at the same time it ascribes to painting the ability of revealing the divine, enabling the spectator to see through, beneath the apparent medial surface. The presence of the angel hints at the possibility of divine, ultimate revelation"[108].

Similarly, in *Mount of Olives* (*Ölberg*, 1978), the spiritual site of Christ's epiphanic experience – which, we remind the reader, is also a leitmotif of Nitsch's OMT – becomes a symbol for encountering the sacred, reflecting Kiefer's personal recognition: "From the window of the house in the Black Forest where I grew up as a Catholic, you could see a mountain that we called the Mount of Olives. (…) When I came to Jerusalem, it was like a recognition"[109]. "The first time I have been in Jerusalem I was touched"[110].

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[106] Cf. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of symbols*, cit., p. 10.

[107] Massimo Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, trans. by Miguel E. Vatter, State University of New York Press, New York 1994, p. 1.

[108] Lily Fürstenow-Khositashvili, *Anselm Kiefer – myth versus history*, Thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2012, https://doi.org/10.18452/16637, p. 79.

[109] "Vom Fenster des Hauses im Schwarzwald, in dem ich als Katholik aufwuchs, blickte man auf einen Berg, den wir den Ölberg nannten. (…) Als ich nach Jerusalem kam, war das wie ein Wiedererkennen" (Anselm Kiefer in Kolja Reichert, *Anselm Kiefers Maschinengewehr sorgt für Unruhe*, in «Die Welt», 1 November 2011, https://www.welt.de/kultur/article13689624/Israel-Anselm-Kiefers-Maschinengewehr-sorgt-fuer-Unruhe.html).

[110] Anselm Kiefer interviewed by Alessandra Mammì, in «L'Espresso», 6 May 2004, pp. 110-111: 111.

Yet Kiefer's angels are also subject to fall. In his major exhibition *Fallen Angels* (Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, 2024), he explores the tension between ascent and descent. Whereas the title evokes the angels cast out of heaven after rebelling against God – an event which the early medieval Scholasticism considered took place on the same day of the Creation – the implied reference extends to all of humanity and its enduring dramas. The exhibition opens with the immense painting *Fall of the Angel* (*Engelssturz*, 2022-2023), created for Palazzo Strozzi's courtyard. This artwork symbolizes the eternal struggle between Good and Evil, encouraging reflection on the complex interplay between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the material. The gold surface evokes the idea of the giant collision of the angel himself, considering that gold, from a chemical point of view, is the fruit of catastrophic collisions.

The angels depicted are neither ethereal nor decorative; they are materially grounded, crafted from lead, straw, and ash – materials that signify heaviness, fragility, and ruin[111]. In *Fall of the Angel* and *Lucifer* (*Luzifer*, 2023), another painting presented at the exhibition, Kiefer inscribes the names Lucifer and Michael (in Hebrew), connecting the beginning of creation to the end of time, evoking the *Apocalypse of John*. The spiral structure of these works suggests a temporality that unites Origin and End, reflecting sacred wisdom largely unacknowledged in contemporary society. Kiefer's angels exemplify human cosmic littleness: "Now the Angel descends into our exile; the struggle with it retains it in our passage, in our Passagenwerk – just as the struggle uproots us from every possible dwelling, lasting, trusting in a mother earth, so it prevents the Angel from returning, from spreading its great wings. Riveted to our invocation-rejection, it is suspended and confused. The Angel that was to *induce* us to the Land-of-nowhere, that was sent to us for this purpose from the nonplace of the Origin, has been slowly *seduced* by our continuous fleeing far from everything"[112].

This vision, which for Kiefer may represent a recognition of the specific quality of our time, separated from the Origin but still attracted by it, and thus searching for new symbols to approach it, is also connected to the already thematized conviction that transcendence cannot be separated from catastrophe – particularly from the trauma of history. The intertwining of transcendence and catastrophe recalls Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*, inspired by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*[113]. Kiefer's angels, like Benjamin's, witness destruction while propelled

[111] Cf. Anselm Kiefer, *Fallen Angels*, ed. by Arturo Galansino, Marsilio, Venezia 2004.
[112] Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, cit., p. 15.
[113] Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in Id., *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. and with an introduction by Hanna Arendt, preface by Leon Wieseltier, trans. by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 2007, pp. 253-264: 257-258 (Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Band 19: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ed. by Gérard Raulet, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, pp. 19-20). Kiefer mentions

forward, unable to intervene, suspended between past devastation and uncertain futures. Benjamin's perspective contrasts with traditional salvific interpretations of angels: history is cyclical, tragic, and unrelenting. Kiefer applies this notion to artistic practice itself, which undergoes constant destruction and reconstruction. Cacciari observes: "the New Angel of Benjamin is the last figure of the tradition (…) in which the Angel ends up inextricably implicated in *all* the dimensions of our saying, of our possible sayings. And this is why it appears to have an increasing affinity with their *catastrophes*, turned toward them, *entwined* in them. *Angel* it remains, all the same. Even if it flashes always new in the instant, the Angel is the form of the giving of itself"[114].

This dialogue is particularly evident in Kiefer's series *The Angel of History* (*Engel der Geschichte*, 1989). One work juxtaposes an architectural space opening to the sky – a door to heaven – with a heavy airplane below, symbolizing history and material constraint. The duality underscores Kiefer's central theme: angels embody both the potential for transcendence and the weight of earthly limitation. Such are the twofold possibilities of angelology.

Airplanes are often associated in Kiefer's works with the topic of angels: they both fly, but the airplanes are made heavier by the material constraints, which is particularly evident in their military use, while the angels always retain a spontaneous and invisible connection to the domain of spirituality.

Eventually, Kiefer's angels appear not as powerful messengers of divine grace, but as embodiments of history's weight and the possibility of transformation. They aestheticize the paradox of flight bound by lead, light emerging from catastrophe, and the sacred entangled by ruin.

Despite Kiefer's emotional and intellectual involvement with Christianity, several doctrinal elements prevent him from wholly adhering to it, confirming the already mentioned twofold approach: his fascination with the Christian creative imaginative and symbolic stock, on the one hand, challenging monotonic rationalism, and his rejection of the most anti-intuitive and inexplicable principles, on the other hand. Among them, we should mention dogmas, and especially their rigid assumptions, which can lead to authoritarian and repressive patterns. Kiefer also denies providential eschatology (and the connected faith in the eternal life after

Benjamin's image in *Talmudiques (prima parte)*, interview by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, in *France Culture* (radio programme *Talmudiques*), 6 March 2016, now in *ivi*, pp. 172-185: 177.

[114] Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, cit., p. 48.

death)[115] and the theological dimension of sin[116] – all elements, by the way, which Nitsch's cosmogonical comprehension of Christianity also seems to reject.

Kiefer's understanding of the positive role of Christianity also seems to reject the prioritization of faith, which is instead considered as an act of irrational trust in something uncertain and, above all, not experimented by the subject. Rather, Kiefer valorizes the content of wisdom and knowledge embedded in the personal, direct, and relational knowledge of the divine, in a perspective where *gnosis* (knowledge) prevails in terms of authenticity and existential meaning over faith or trust (*pistis*)[117] – a perspective endowed with Gnostic resonances.

In his diaries[118], Kiefer expresses fascination with Gnostic Christianity, particularly the Ophites, a mysterious sect that revered the snake (*ophis*, in ancient Greek)[119] as a revealer of salvific knowledge – similarly to another group of Gnostics, the "Naassenes" (*nahas* means in Hebrew "snake")[120].

This symbolic figure guides humans from the illusory phenomenal world, itself a product of cosmic accident within the *Pleroma*, toward liberation through ascent across cosmic eons. This

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[115] "If there were such a thing as paradise, we wouldn't exist. Our life is life only because it's transitory, because it's the last chance and therefore so precious. (…) We exist only because life will end one day" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 254 ("Wenn es das Paradies gäbe, gäbe es uns nicht. Denn unser Leben ist ja nur das Leben, weil es vergänglich, weil es die letzte Gelegenheit und deshalb so kostbar ist. [...] Denn wir sind nur, weil das Leben einmal aufhören wird" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 253]).

[116] "Sin has no meaning for me. Sin is the reason I reject the Catholic Church. The threat of sin the threat of damnation, the threat of Hell and gnashing of teeth was predominant for me as a child. (…) For me 'sin' is a difficult word, because it immediately implies guilt" (*ivi*, p. 124 ["Die Sünde hat für mich keinen Sinn. Die Sünde ist der Grund, warum ich die katholische Kirche ablehne. Das Drohen mit der Sünde, das Drohen mit der Verdammnis, das Drohen mit der Hölle und dem Zähneknirschen war bei mir als Kind vorherrschend (...) Sünde ist für mich ein sehr schwieriges Wort, weil es sofort Schuld impliziert"; *ivi*, p. 129]).

[117] Cf. *ibidem* (*ibidem*). This conception is further confirmed by the fact that Kiefer entertains the hypothesis that the apostle Judas Iscariot could be regarded as a theologically redemptive figure – even a saint – since his infamous betrayal ultimately enabled the final redemption. This theory, attested in the apocryphal *Gospel of Judas*, persisted within the Gnostic tradition and has continued to resonate into the modern age, including in literature (the theme appears, for instance, in Giuseppe Berto, *La gloria*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2017). Portraying Judas as Jesus's favored disciple, the gospel records how Jesus imparted to him esoteric knowledge withheld from the other apostles; this revelation concerns both the nature of the cosmos and the transcendent God. See, on this topic, Gaye Strathearn, *The Gnostic Context of the Gospel of Judas*, in «BYU Studies Quarterly», vol. 45, issue 2, art. 5. On the presence of Gnostic influences – especially those derived from the Christian Gnostic philosophy of Valentinus (100-180 A.D.), to whom Kiefer devoted an artwork – in Kiefer's art, see Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., pp. 174, 178-197. Häußler, in particular, argues: "Just as the spark collector collects the individual divine sparks and returns them to God, the artist creates a formed work of art from formless matter, which has a de-individualised, supra-personal character" (*ivi*, p. 190).

[118] See Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 16-17 (Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998*-1999, cit., p. 23).

[119] The snake is one of Kiefe's favored images – a symbol of transformation, resurrection, and ambiguity (embodying both evil and free will) – and appears frequently in relation to different religious traditions. Examples include: the satanic serpent of *Quaternity* (1973); Níðhöggr gnawing at the roots of the World Ash in *Yggdrasil* or *Midgard* (1980-1985); the serpent as an attribute of the kabbalistic figure of Lilith; and the symbol of the Ouroboros in the series *Astral Serpent* (*Astral Schlange*, 1980-1985). Cf. on that Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 198-199. See also Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., pp. 69, 244-245 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 75-76, 244).

[120] See Birger A. Pearson, "Ophites", in Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2006, pp. 895-898.

Gnostic vision, emphasizing liberation from material constraint and access to higher knowledge, resonates strongly with Kiefer's overarching mystical and symbolic concerns and aligns closely with Jewish mystical traditions[121], which will be explored in the following chapter.

Due to the conviction that German history must be interpreted as the fertile outcome of a historical dialogue between Jewish and Germanic traditions, Kiefer deeply engaged with traditional pagan German mythology. This mythic-symbolic sphere is approached as an act of political responsibility: namely, to purify a tradition that, in his view, had been ideologically betrayed by its rhetorical and propagandistic exploitation under the Nazi regime, and to restore it to new life. According to Kiefer, myths cannot be abolished or concealed – since they are durable, resilient, if not eternal – but must be critically reinterpreted. The only way to escape their ideological perversion is to disclose the structural pluralism, complexity, and perspectivism inscribed in the ontology of myth itself[122]. This act of purification may even resemble the mystical act of *tiqqun*, a cosmic reparation or reintegration thematized in Jewish tradition, which, for Kiefer, constitutes half of German culture and must be harmonized with the Nordic-Germanic element in order to recover a profound and comprehensive cultural identity.

It is from this perspective that one can understand why Kiefer draws attention to German motifs where myth, culture, and political history are most closely intertwined: the Nibelungen legend, which in its medieval and Wagnerian version became a reference point for German militarism; the imagery of trees and forest, central to German naturalistic-patriotic identity; and the figure of Wagner himself, as the bearer of an aesthetic aimed at mythological refoundation.

Political awareness is thus fundamental to Kiefer's art, which cannot be interpreted outside of 20th-century German history, as has been convincingly argued by Huyssen[123]. At the same time, however, Kiefer's engagement with mythology should not be reduced to the deconstruction of

[121] Cf. Ioan Petru Couliano, *Out of this World. Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, foreword by Lawrence E. Sullivan, Shambala, Boston & London 1991, especially pp. 174-180, 189-204.

[122] See Anselm Kiefer, *Dalla caduta nasce il canto*, interview by Marianna Hanstein and Lothar Schmidt-Mühlisch, in «Die Welt», nr. 2, 2 March 1992, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 51-60: 53; Id., *Talmudiques (seconda parte)*, interview by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, in *France Culture* (radio programme *Talmudiques*), 13 March 2016, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 186-197: 193.

[123] Andreas Huyssen, *Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth*, in «October», Spring 1989, vol. 48, pp. 25-45. Kiefer's interpretation of historical themes and his engagement with the age of Nazism has been extensively examined in Sabine Schütz, *Anselm Kiefer – Geschichte als Material. Arbeiten 1969–1983*, DuMont, Köln 1999, a rigorous and rich monography whose limitation lies in the tendency to standardize Kiefer's aesthetics solely around this subject, thereby offering only a partial image of his broader artistic production. On the theme of historicity in Kiefer, see also the dissertation of Christina Fenne, *Anselm Kiefer – Historienmalerei nach Auschwitz*, Diss. Witten/Herdecke 1999.

its political instrumentalization. Within his search for new forms of spirituality in the post-secular age, German mythology emerges as a complementary and viable source of wisdom. Beyond political appropriation, it is not superstition that Kiefer finds in it, but a grand philosophical *epos*, which on certain existential questions even appears – "paradoxically" – to converge with Jewish mysticism.

In this sense we concur with Donald Kuspit, who has argued that "Kiefer's art is a compromise: he is reluctant to give up the German sense of power, but he knows that German power has to take new form. (…) by alluding to the dubious glories of the past reality of German power, Kiefer's art presents a complex fantasy of its possible future. He transforms the symbols of a faded yet still-resonant national and military power into symbols of potential spiritual power"[124]. Yet contrary to Kuspit's subsequent interpretation, this power is not primarily conceived as a despotic "will to power" grounded in a latent psychological impulse of self-affirmation. Rather, it is understood as contemplation of and identification with a meta-historical cosmic force, beyond political, moral, juridical, or cultural boundaries. What is truly powerful, for Kiefer, is not human greed but the Origin, the Beginning (which coincides with the End), the generative energy of nature, the unveiling of symbolic meanings, analogies, and resemblances. The artist seeks to connect his aesthetic imagination to this vital cosmos, which, in this case, resonates deeply – though not exclusively – with German mythology.

Within this perspective, the philosophical meaning of certain Kiefer's mythologically inspired works becomes clearer. Among them is *Yggdrasil* (1991), an artistic representation of the cosmic tree described by the historian of religions Mircea Eliade as the "Cosmic Tree *par excellence*. Its roots go to the very heart of the earth, where hell and the kingdom of the giants are to be found. Near it is the miraculous fountain of Mimir ('meditation', 'memory'), where Odhin left one eye as a pledge, and where he constantly returns to refresh and enrich his wisdom. The fountain of Urd is also to be found near Yggdrasil; there the gods hold daily council and deliver justice. The Norns water the giant tree with the water of this fountain to revive its youth and vigor. Heidrun, the goat, an eagle, a stag and a squirrel dwell in the branches of Yggdrasil; the viper Nidhoggr is at its roots, and constantly tries to destroy it. Every day the eagle gives battle to the viper (a cosmological motif often found in other civilizations as well). When the universe trembles to its foundations in the cataclysm predicted by the Völuspa, and which will put an end to the world to inaugurate a new, paradisal, era, Yggdrasil will be severely shaken, but not brought down. This apocalyptic conflagration, announced by the prophetess,

[124] Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 229-230.

will not result in the complete disintegration of the cosmos"[125]. Kiefer's interest in Yggdrasil, though not explicitly declared, may be related to the archetypical significance of this myth, tied to cosmic vitality and to the primordial struggle between light and darkness[126].

In Kiefer's canvas, an abstract silver figure descends from the sky – a shape often used by the artists to represent the process of metaphysical emanation, especially in his paintings within the Jewish cycle. In this sense, the work seems to propose a unitive, interreligious function: the overlapping and reunion of two vital branches of German identity.

Another important artwork which documents Kiefer's interest in this tradition is *Ragnarök* (1989), an artist's book of double-page almost abstract images documenting the apocalyptic battle in Norse mythology in which the gods fight the giants before the world's fiery destruction – a kind of *apokatastasis* – and its subsequent renewal. The notion of a conflagration at the end of time – *Ragnarök* in Norse myth, Judgement Day in Christian tradition, where "the fire is there to bring out their essence: to burn away everything superfluous from one's spiritual essence"[127] – profoundly fascinates Kiefer.

The artwork foregrounds the names of the three Norns, Urð, Skuld, and Verðandi, whose arrival ended the golden age of the gods and introduced measured time. Their role corresponds to that of the Roman Parcae, Greek Moirai. These also appear – though never represented visually, only named – in other of Kiefer's works, such as *Urd, Werdandi, Skuld* (1983), where they are inscribed in a Nazi architectural project of Wilhelm Kreis (1887-1995), thereby symbolically bounding the tragedy of German recent history with its mythic heritage.

German mythological tradition is further refracted through Kiefer's engagement with Richard Wagner's narrative and mythological reinterpretations[128]. Wagner, already mentioned as a central reference for Hermann Nitsch's OMT, also played a significant role in Kiefer's education, despite the latter's rejection of the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which he considered "totalitarian"[129]. Wagner is perceived as an emblematic representative of *deutsche Kultur*, embodying a cultural liminality where two opposing tendencies overlap: on the one

[125] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed, Sheed & Ward, London-New York 1958, pp. 276-277.
[126] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 277-278.
[127] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 97 ("Und dann ist das Feuer auch dazu da, um die Essenz hervorzubringen: die geistige Essenz von allem herauszubrennen" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 102]).
[128] See Jean-Michel Nectoux, *«Le dieu Richard Wagner irradiant un sacre». Réflexions sur la notion d'art wagnérien*, in *Richard Wagner. Visions d'artistes. D'Auguste Renoir À Anselm Kiefer*, Musées d'art et d'histoire/Somogy éditions d'art, Genève-Paris 2005, pp. 14-27: 23-25.
[129] See Kiefer, *È un errore pensare che resti qualcosa*, cit., p. 90. Cf. also Anselm Kiefer, *I sette palazzi celesti, 2004-2015. Conversazione con Germano Celant*, in Id., *Palazzi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 162-171: 170.

hand, a mythopoetic and spiritually profound interpretation of Nordic mythology; on the other, its ideological and modernized distortion. In his "purifying" project, Kiefer turns to the former Wagner: the great demiurgic interpreter of a European mythic-symbolic tradition which fascinated him and which, freed from chauvinistic and reactionary interpretations, could serve as a repository of values for contemporary humanity.

This creative hermeneutics takes shape particularly in Kiefer's emphasis on temporality and its unfolding, tragic dimension. From Wagner he inherits a sensitivity to the dissolution of chronological time, and an aesthetic that proposes a world where music has neither beginning nor end but unfolds in non-linear, spiraliform, and multidimensional perspectives. In such a world, the hero moves along different trajectories, but nothing is predetermined. For this reason, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Lohengrin* are among Kiefer's preferred operas. This labyrinthine structure of time – already evident in Nitsch's Wagnerian interpretation – is the only adequate form for grasping the enigma of reality. Federico Vercellone has emphasized the apocalyptic dimension of Kiefer's images: not in an eschatological sense, but in the etymological sense of *apokalypsis*, as symbols of revelation, disclosure of truth[130]. Such apocalyptic images do not inspire terror or despair but rather the fulfillment of being's self-expression and development. Works such as *Ragnarök* exemplify this interest.

In *Siegfried forgets Brunhild* (*Siegfried vergißt Brunhilde*, 1975), snow functions as a veil that covers the landscape, altering its shape and creating a somber, mourning atmosphere. The melancholic title, referencing an episode from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, is reinforced by the *Stimmung* that emerges in the aesthetic experience of the canvas. Kiefer invokes a motif related to the suffering and death of the protagonists, evoking the tragic as a fundamental human existential condition. Brunhilde's fate is represented as a timeless symbol of universal suffering, recurrent in tragic myths.

Several artworks are inspired by Wagner's couple. Among them are: the several works entitled *Siegfried's Difficult Way to Brunhilde* (1977 onwards), which depicts railway tracks traversing a natural landscape, evoking – as in *Iron Path* (*Eisen-Steig*, 1986) – the paths to concentration camps and the Holocaust; *Brünhilde Sleeps* (*Brünhilde schläft*, 1980), where the Valkyrie is portrayed in the magical sleep induced by Wotan, modeled on the French actress Catherine Deneuve in François Truffaut's film *Mississippi Mermaid*, based on a photograph Kiefer took in a cinema in 1969, producing a unique reactivation of myth; and *Brünhilde Grane* (1990),

[130] Cf. Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, cit., pp. 13-26. See also Luca Siniscalco, *Postmodern Apocalypses and Mythologies of the End*, in «Informazione Filosofica», nr. 6, *Tradizione e Innovazione*, 2022, pp. 37-56.

depicting Brünhilde's immolation and evoking fire as a symbol of spirituality and transcendence.

The triptych *Parsifal I, II, III* (1973) is also significant: within a wooden architectural structure resembling the artist's studio, it presents symbols such as the crib, the spear, and the sword, while the hero himself remains absent, invisible. Kiefer enters in the system of cultural and mythic resonances echoed by Wagner himself, offering a personal "variation" of Parsifal archetype and bringing back the viewer to Middle Age Europe[131]. Numerous other works similarly explore mythic and tragic themes.

Another, though less prominent, polytheist tradition that Kiefer explores is that of Ancient Egypt, where his interest focuses on specific deities, particularly Isis, Osiris, Uraeus, and Ra.

Isis and Osiris (*Isis und Osiris*, 1985-1987) is an immense painting depicting an ancient Egyptian tomb (a mastaba, precursor to the pyramid), incorporating a circuit board, copper wires, and porcelain shards. The myth referenced in the title recounts a story of death and resurrection, which has fascinated esotericists for centuries, partly due to its connections with the Mysteries of Isis[132]. Osiris – god of fertility, life, vegetation, and the afterlife – was murdered by his brother Set, god of deserts, storms, disorder, and violence; his body was cut into pieces, scattered in the Nil, symbolizing the destructive power inherent in the loss of unity, whether spiritual or existential.

Trione observes: "Through myths, men express something urgent to themselves: in the outline of a figure, reorganizing the chaos of fears, memories and dreams. Think, above all, of figures that allude to fragmentation and rebirth: such as Osiris, the Egyptian god killed and dismembered by his brother, and resurrected by his wife-sister Isis, who recovered the pieces of his body scattered everywhere"[133].

Kiefer translates this myth into his painting through the formal practice of fragmenting the integrity of the image into an abstraction, breaking the natural order and reducing shapes to repetitive, abstract elements. The narrative concludes with Osiris reassembled by his sister-wife Isis, representing regeneration – a process achievable only through the power of art and myth,

[131] See on that Cordula Meier, *Anselm Kiefer – Die Rückkehr des Mythos in der Kunst. Eine kunstwissenschaftliche Betrachtung*, Verlag Die Blaue Eule, Essen 2013, pp. 63-68.

[132] See Antoine Faivre, "Egyptomany", in Hanegraaff (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, cit., pp. 328-330. Cf. also Jan Assmann, *Jehova-Isis: The Mysteries of Egypt and the Quest for Natural Religion in the Age of Enlightenment*, in Irene A. Bierman (ed.), *Egypt and the Fabrication of European Identity*, UCLA Near Est Center, Los Angeles 1995, pp. 35-83.

[133] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 126.

although expressed, in contemporary age, by a technical device: the circuit board, with his capacity to assemble and unify what is scattered[134].

Uraeus, a cobra symbolizing the goddess Wadjet, represents royal authority and divine power associated with the pharaoh. Kiefer dedicated a sculpture to this snake god, installed in 2018 at Rockefeller Center in New York: a massive winged book suspended twenty-five feet above the ground, with a serpent coiled around a supporting column and colossal books scattered at its base. Kiefer explains: "Uraeus is the symbol of the reunified Egypt. There was Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, and they had two different gods: Lower Egypt had Wadjet, a god represented by a cobra, and Upper Egypt was represented by a vulture. (In my case it's an eagle, but a vulture is even bigger and more impressive.) And when these two Egypts were unified, in about 3000 before Jesus Christ, the god was represented by a combination of a snake and a bird"[135]. The installation also evokes Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, and Nietzsche's animals of the prophet in *Zarathustra*[136].
This sculpture exemplifies Kiefer's strategy of mythic rewriting: he superimposes universal symbolic layers – here the snake, the eagle, and the books – assigning them a specific mythic connotation, in this case Ancient Egyptian, while using them to explore philosophical and existential questions. Similarly, in *Ra* (2018), a sculpture installed on a small hill at his La Ribaute studio, the Egyptian sun god is depicted as a headless figure with eagle wings and a snake at its base. This figure resembles Uraeus, suggesting that Kiefer's engagement with Egyptian mythology – and potentially other religious traditions – serves to create a cosmogony in which new figures, combining snake, eagle, and book, guide viewers on a renewed spiritual journey.

When considered alongside other mythologies, the Egyptian material can be complemented by Greek myths[137] – such as Medea, Jason and the Argonauts, Icarus, Atlantis, and a phenomenology of ancient feminine figures whose intellectual questioning has been seen as

[134] Cf. Meier, *Anselm Kiefer – Die Rückkehr des Mythos in der Kunst*, cit., pp. 158-159.
[135] Anselm Kiefer, *Uraeus. Interview by Richard Calvocorresi*, in «Gagosian», 2018 (https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2019/02/11/interview-anselm-kiefer-uraeus/). Cf. also Nicholas Baume (ed.), *Anselm Kiefer: Uraeus,* Larry Gagosian Gallery, New York 2019.
[136] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, London 2003 (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathusta I-IV*, in Id., *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 4, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1988).
[137] A detailed study of Kiefer's focus on Greek-Roman myth has been developed in the chapter "Der Zug der Argonauten: ein griechisch-römischer Mythos" in Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., pp. 111-171.

unruly[138] – and Roman traditions, like *Sol Invictus*, the unconquered sun venerated in the late Roman Empire, under the emperor Heliogabalus, often linked to sunflowers and the cyclical decline of time[139]. Kiefer appears to employ these myths primarily as narrative frameworks to discuss ethical, existential, and political questions – freedom, victimhood, and the relationship between power and free will – while metaphysical implications are less central than in his other religious inspirations. Nonetheless, these myths underscore his artistic metamorphosis, mythopoeia, and dialogue between premodern and postmodern imaginaries[140].

Turning to Eastern religious and metaphysical sources, yoga emerges as a key influence after 1995[141]. In self-portraits from 1995-1996, Kiefer depicts himself in the Hatha Yoga posture called *śavāsana*, the corpse posture, a yoga practice contemplating death and transcendence, symbolically incorporating the experience of passing away in the ritual practice[142]. This motif recurs in works such as *Sunflowers* (1996), *Sol Invictus* (2007), *Stars*, *Man under a Pyramid* (1996), *The Orders of the Night* (*Die Orden der Nacht*, 1996), *The Renowned Orders of the Night* (*Die berühmten Orden der Nacht*, 1997), *The Starred Heaven Above Me, the Moral Law Within Me* (*Der gestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir*, 1997), and others. After confronting the madness of Nazism in 1969-1970, Kiefer sought to internalize death and resurrection[143], using his body to achieve union with "cosmic intelligence", as he explained to Klaus Dermutz: "The naked man, who's no longer wearing anything, who no longer has any characteristics, who's no longer a person, who's no longer playing any role, who is disintegrating into the earth and is a part of the reigning metabolism. (…) In that state, one is

[138] Thematized in the cycle of sculptures *Women of Antiquity* (*Die Frauen der Antike*, 2002). See on that Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 299-318 (Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 320-336).
[139] The unconquered sun, like the dried sunflowers, will eventually decline, as does everything in the passage of time. The cult of the sun-god, symbolized by a dead sunflower, represents the temporary and transient nature of life, akin to vegetation on earth, in accordance with the cyclical laws of nature.
[140] For example, "the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece is given a significance comparable to the Kabbalistic concept of the quest for the vision of the divine (Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 168).
[141] Apart from that, Kiefer also appears to be interested in Buddhism, although it is never explicitly thematized in his art and is rather approached as a philosophical interest – another horizon shared with Nitsch. According to Kiefer, Buddhism is particularly compelling because it is more comprehensive than Christianity: it does not focus solely on the suffering of the cross, but on the entirety of being. Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 129 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 134). He states: "I don't have a deeper knowledge of Buddhism but I believe that some of what I think is compatible with Buddhism" (*ivi*, p. 130 ["Ich habe keine tiefen Erkenntnisse, was den Buddhismus angeht, aber ich glaube, dass manches von dem, was ich denke, mit dem Buddhismus zusammengeht"; *ivi*, p. 135]) Buddhist philosophy has influenced him particularly regarding the notion of the impermanence of things (*ivi*, p. 141 [*ivi*, p. 145]).
[142] "On the level of the highest Indian spirituality, the cemetery, corpses, and skeletons were revalorized and incorporated into an ascetic-mystical symbolism; to meditate seated on a corpse, to wear a skull, etc., now represented spiritual exercises" (Mircea Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1970, pp. 300-301).
[143] Cf. Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 259; Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 47 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 55).

no longer looking out. Everything is internalized. There is only an interior that becomes exterior"[144].

Kiefer's imagery reflects a desire for cosmic reunification with the divine, akin to Eliade's notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*[145], resolving the primordial "nostalgia for the origins", or "nostalgia for Paradise"[146]. Yoga tradition facilitates this union, transforming chaos into cosmos, as Eliade explains: "In withdrawing from profane human life, the yogin finds another that is deeper and truer (because 'in rhythm') – the very life of the cosmos. Indeed, one can speak of the first yogic stages as an effort toward the 'cosmicization' of man. To transform the chaos of biomental life into a cosmos – one divines this ambition in all the psychophysiological techniques of Yoga, from *āsana* to *ekāgratā*. (…) a number of yogic and tantric practices are explained by the intention to homologize the body and life of man with the celestial bodies and the cosmic rhythms, first of all with the sun and moon (…) Final liberation cannot be obtained without experience of a preliminary stage of 'cosmicization'; one cannot pass directly from chaos to freedom. The intermediate phase is the 'cosmos' – that is, realization of rhythm on all the planes of biomental life"[147].

Arasse convincingly argues that Kiefer's interest in yoga should not be surprising, as it must be contextualized within his broader quest for the sacred. For Kiefer, yoga represents a new spirituality aimed at transcending the human condition by attaining pure Being, detaching oneself from the cosmic illusion of worldly objectivity – a need central to his worldview. The overcoming of historical necessity and the pursuit of existential freedom are part of the same trajectory[148]. It may therefore be hypothesized that (also) this symbolism suggests that "Kiefer was carrying out a ritual, through which the building of a new dwelling (…) is intended to restore the fullness of a present time lacking any trace of history"[149].

Yoga has been not only a symbolic inspiration – a way to reframe meditation and the conjunction of man and nature – but also a personal practice. Although Kiefer remains extremely reserved on this subject, it is known that he practices yoga and breathing exercises,

[144] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 16 ("Der nackte Mensch, der nichts mehr anhat, der kleine Eigenschaften mehr hat, der keine Person mehr ist, der keine Rolle mehr spielt, der sich in die Erde auflöst und am überall herrschenden Metabolismus teilhat. [...] In diesem Zustand sieht man nicht mehr nach draußen. Alles ist verinnerlicht. Es gibt nur noch ein Innen, das zum Außen wird" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 25]).

[145] See John Valk, *The Concept of the Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Thought of Mircea Eliade*, in «Religious Studies», vol. 28, no. 1, 1992, pp. 31-41.

[146] See Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, cit., pp. 382-385.

[147] Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, cit., p. 97.

[148] Cfr. Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 259-262.

[149] *Ivi*, p. 262.

as he has declared in an interview[150]. His notebooks confirm this, containing references to yoga exercises – with particular emphasis on breathing – associated with a sense of "dissolution through expansion," a process of constructing a living space that is simultaneously appropriation and transfiguration, paralleling what his artistic practice achieves in other contexts[151]. This process is one of cosmicization, realized through the progressive annihilation of the ego and the recognition of a higher spiritual self, coinciding with a paradoxical, intimate Other. Eliade succinctly explains this phenomenon: "'Cosmicization' continues the same process – that of recasting man in new, gigantic dimensions, of guaranteeing him macranthropic experiences. But this macranthropos can himself have but a temporary existence. For the final goal will not be attained until the yogin has succeeded in 'withdrawing' to his own center and completely dissociating himself from the cosmos, thus becoming impervious to experiences, unconditioned, and autonomous. This final 'withdrawal' is equivalent to a rupture of plane, to an act of real transcendence. *Samādhi*, with all its tantric equivalents, is by its very nature a paradoxical state, for it is empty and at the same time fills being and thought to repletion"[152].

Through the abysmal experience and symbolism of yoga, Kiefer discovers this empty space, a wholly void space which "contains everything"[153] – a paradoxical "full emptiness"[154] to which he attributes both spiritual and artistic potentiality. Kiefer explicitly compares it to Heidegger's notion of *Lichtung* (clearing)[155]: the empty space that is simultaneously full of being, akin to the tomb of Christ, which is empty yet serves as a proof of resurrection[156]. Empty space may be evoked through meditation, whether Christian prayers or Eastern mantras.

For Kiefer, empty space is also the preliminary condition for any appearance, for any event of meaning. In this sense, the man lost in nihilism can recognize the void of meaning he experiences precisely as the empty space "left by the disappearance of the gods who protected us"[157]. The void is linked to the concept of *Nichts*, insofar as "nothing as nothing is completely unimaginable for us"[158]. On this topic, Kiefer also cites Laozi: "The fact that something is there

[150] Cf. Anselm Kiefer, *È un errore pensare che resti qualcosa. Non resta nulla*, interview by Gerhard Mack, in «Die Weltwoche», 1st November 2001, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 84-92: 86-87.
[151] Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 47 ("auflösung durch ausdehnung" [Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 54]). Cf. also *ivi*, p. 44 (*ivi*, p. 51).
[152] Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, cit., p. 98.
[153] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 19 ("Die ist nicht leer, in ihr ist alles enthalten" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 29]).
[154] *Ivi*, p. 127 ("eine volle Leere" [*ivi*, p. 132]).
[155] Cf. *ivi*, p. 111 (*ivi*, p. 115).
[156] Cf. *ivi*, p. 132 (*ivi*, p. 137).
[157] Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 60 ("zurückgelassen durch die flucht der uns schonenden götter" [Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 68]).
[158] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 150 ("Das Nichts als Nichts ist für uns völlig unvorstellbar" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 153]).

means gain. But it is its absence that makes it usable" ("*Dass etwas da ist, bedeutet Gewinn. Aber das Nicht macht ihn nutzbar*"[159]).

Thus, the void is a negative space – desacralized and demythologized – which, precisely because of its emptiness, becomes capable of hosting new connections, new relationships, new events. It is a creative and fertile emptiness, reminiscent of Nitsch's void.

This meditation on and through the empty space also functions as a technical method in Kiefer's artistic practice. He describes his method as follows: "First I make something specific, I paint a mountain or a river. Then I try to close my eyes, metaphorically as well, and, as Novalis says, to make it secretive. With that expression, to make secretive, I mean both to create a vast space with it and to see the extremely vast space inside me. The targeted object, initially very detailed and concentrated, becomes a wide-open space with time and with sustained work"[160].

Ultimately, the aim of art is to fill the void – or perhaps, to allow it to breathe, to manifest, to appear as visible. These are the two convergent possibilities of creation.

A further symbolic source of inspiration, situated between East and West, which Kiefer considers is alchemy[161]. This complex esoteric orientation appears in his work not as a historically systematized doctrine, but rather as an image of the processual and transformative dimension of art. Kiefer's insight follows a long tradition of interaction and overlapping between Western art and the so-called *ars regia*, which, as demonstrated in the seminal reconstruction by Maurizio Calvesi, has often been intertwined with artistic practice due to a shared conceptual "grammar" pertaining to demiurgic activity, material transformation and combination, and transformative imagination.[162] According to Amei Wallach, alchemical and Kabbalistic research even constitutes the very core of Kiefer's artistic vision[163]. His aim is to create inner symbolic connections within a contemporary world that often appears chaotic, isolated, and disconnected.

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[159] In «la Lettura – Il Corriere della Sera», Sunday 11 August 2019, pp. 35-37, now in Kiefer, *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 235-240: 238.

[160] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 241 ("Ich stelle zunächst etwas Bestimmtes her, male einen Berg oder einen Fluss. Danach versuche ich, die Augen zu schließen, auch im übertragenen Sinne, und diesen Gegenstand, um mit Novalis zu sprechen, zu vergeheimnissen. Mit dem Wort vergeheimnissen meine ich gleichzeitig, einen weiten Raum zu sehen. Das zunächst detaillierte konzentrierte, zielgerichtete Objekt wird mit der Zeit und in der Weiterarbeit zum weiten Raum" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 241]).

[161] In the vast literature on this theme, we mention the classics: Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible. The Origins and Structure of Alchemy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978; Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy. Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, trans. by William Stoddart, Fons Vitae, Louisville (USA) 1997; Carl Gustav Jung, *The Collected Works*, ed. by Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, vol. 12: *Psychology and Alchemy* and vol. 13: *Alchemical Studies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1968-1970.

[162] Cf. Maurizio Calvesi, *Arte e alchimia*, Giunti, Firenze 1986.

[163] Cf. Amei Wallach, *Der Mystiker, der (noch) nichts in seinem Land gilt: Der Maler Anselm Kiefer*, in «Esquire», nr. 9, 1988, pp. 92-97.

Kiefer's interest in alchemy moves, in our view, from a merely metaphorical and analogical adoption to a genuine symbolic-alchemic practice, particularly through the concrete use – following alchemical prescriptions – of two fundamental materials: lead and fire. These are not simply metaphors, but chemical substances bearing a specific symbolic potential.

Several of Kiefer's canvases and installations are characterized by the incorporation of lead, which in alchemy figures as the material that is to be transmuted into gold – the goal of the "philosopher's stone." As Titus Burckhardt explains: "The miraculousness of this process, effecting a 'leap' which, according to the alchemists, nature by herself can only accomplish in an unforeseeably long time highlights the difference between corporal possibilities and those of the soul. (…) Lead represents the chaotic, 'heavy', ad sick condition of metal or of the inward man, while gold – 'congealed light' and 'earthy' sun – expresses the perfection of both metallic and human existence"[164].

This alchemical symbolism is connected in Kiefer's work to explicit references to the Gnostic tradition, where lead functions as a metaphor for the material condition, being opaque and heavy due to the subtraction of the divine soul[165]. This is also related to the Roman pantheon through the figure of Saturn, often invoked by Kiefer as the god of lead and as a symbolic force shaping our own era, which he interprets as the *Saturnzeit* (also the title of several artworks). In Roman religion, Saturn was the god of abundance, agriculture, and time – both generative and destructive – whose reign was imagined as a Golden Age of prosperity and peace. From the late Middle Ages onward, however, Hermetic and alchemical traditions, mediated through astrology, syncretized Saturn with the Greek Kronos, and came to associate him with melancholy[166]. It is in this tradition that Kiefer situates his interpretation: our epoch as a "Saturnian age", characterized by melancholy, sadness, depression, and complaint – a prevailing *Stimmung* that resonates with the emotional register of nihilism. The mythic-symbolic constellation studied by Kiefer also functions as a means of resisting this condition.

The second essential material in Kiefer's alchemical vision, as already noted, is fire. Fire is not only a frequent subject in his work – often compared to spirit and soul – but also a medium and technique. Kiefer frequently burns the surfaces of his canvases, painting directly on the ashen remains. "I can't imagine creating anything without fire"[167], he once declared. From a

[164] Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 24

[165] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 130.

[166] Cf. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston-London-Chicago 2019. On the relationship between alchemy and astrology (which, as we have seen, are strictly connected in Kiefer's own interest) see also Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, cit., pp. 76-91.

[167] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 94 ("Ohne Feuer kann ich mir überhaupt nicht vorstellen, irgendetwas herzustellen" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 100]).

philosophical point of view, his constellation of references to fire suggests a Heraclitean sensitivity. Fire is understood as the primordial element, the *arché*, not primarily for chemical reasons, but for its symbolic dynamism: it consumes and extinguishes itself in cyclical rhythms, dances with cosmic breaths, and embodies their inner dialectical harmony[168].
A comparison – and indeed an identity – emerges between the process of artistic creation and the alchemical furnace, a connection made explicit in paintings devoted to alchemical themes such as *Athanor* (2007), structured into three sections that evoke the canonical alchemical phases (lead–*Nigredo*, silver–*Albedo*, red-gold–*Rubedo*), and *Alkahest* (2011), named after the universal solvent of alchemy. Against this background, it is neither surprising nor rhetorical but rather precise and rigorous that Kiefer has often been called an "alchemist"[169].

He has also been compared to a wizard, accelerating natural processes of transformation by guiding them through his will[170]. At the same time, his role evokes that of a shaman, "who when they were meditating would sit in a tree in order to suspend themselves between heaven and earth"[171]. The energy emanating from the artist reconnects human beings with the natural, celestial, and terrestrial realms, as symbolized by the branch growing from the artist's chest in *Man Lying with Branch* (*Liegender Mann Mit Zweig*, 1971).
This unifying function of the artist is perhaps Kiefer's most profound and relevant dimension. As Germano Celant has argued in a detailed study, Kiefer's aesthetics[172] proposes a symbolic reintegration of the fragmented condition of the modern world, counterbalancing the nihilistic loss of spiritual principles. This loss is not only spiritual, but also bodily and aesthetic: the erosion of a concrete and material perception of the invisible, the dissolution of lived experience of a hidden yet real dimension of existence, embodied also in a spiritual body. This body can be understood phenomenologically, as part of the *Lebenswelt*, as Hermann Nitsch described it, but one neglected by the hyper-rationalist tendencies of conceptualist art. Through the

[168] But the symbol of fire is also associated with devastation: Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. *ivi*, p. 76 [*ivi*, p. 82]) as well as with Nazi ideology – the metaphysics of the sun, the symbolism of the solstice, torch parades, and the idea of purification through fire (cf. *ivi*, pp. 93-94 [*ivi*, pp. 98-99]).
[169] Jack Flam, *The Alchemist*, in «New York Review of Books», 39, 13 February 1992, pp. 31-36.
[170] See Anselm Kiefer, *„Nachts fahre ich mit dem Fahrrad von Bild zu Bild". Ein 'Werkstattgespräch mit Anselm Kiefer über seine Arbeit und seine Weltsicht von Christian Kämmerling und Peter Pursche*, in «Süddeutsche Zeitung», 16 November 1990 (now in «Engramma», vol. 20, October 2002, https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2519#versione_tedesca).
[171] Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 171.
[172] Cf. Germano Celant, *Il destino dell'Arte: Anselm Kiefer*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Catalogue of the exhibition Himmel-Erde (Museo Correr, Venezia, 1997), Edizioni Charta, Milano 1997, pp. 13-19. See also Waltraud Forelli, *Alcune domande a Germano Celant su Anselm Kiefer*, in Kiefer, *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 9-18 and Antonella Soldaini, *Alcune domande ad Anselm Kiefer su Germano Celant*, in *ivi*, pp. 19-25.

symbolism of the body, Kiefer restores history, connecting his personal identity to archetypal and mythical genealogies, where the future appears rooted in the past.

A recurrent alchemical theme in Kiefer's imagination is the belief that every plant has its counterpart in a star – a theory originating with Robert Fludd, the early 17th-century English philosopher and esotericist, to whom Kiefer increasingly refers from 1996 onwards[173]. Each star, Kiefer adds, also corresponds to a human being. This theory, he argues, anticipates the "connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm, towards which Einstein always strived"[174]. His artist's book *The Secret Life of Plants* (1997) embodies this vision: its thirteen pages draw on the symbolic forms of sunflowers, whose seeds resemble constellations, each black point like a star against the light sky. The title refers to Peter Tompkins and Cristopher Bird's 1973 book on plant sentience and their cellular connection to cosmic mysteries – a 20th-century echo of Fludd's hermetic assertion.

A second version of *The Secret Life of Plants* (2001) takes the form of a massive lead book, whose dark pages are inscribed with NASA star-identification numbers, linked by lines into arrangements suggesting a hidden order that eludes logical explanation. Kiefer's passion for the heavens led Vincenzo Trione to describe him as a "cardiac slave of the stars"[175], quoting Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935)[176] – a cardiac sensitivity already observed in Nitsch's *Magnum Opus*.

More broadly, Kiefer is deeply convinced of the interconnection of all beings, the structural interrelatedness of the world: "Man's history is connected to the cosmos, just as his sustenance comes from the cosmos, from meteorites that collided with the earth. Our atoms are closely connected to or even mixed together with atoms of the sun, the earth and other planets"[177]. In participating in this cosmic dance and uncovering these connections, humans can experience profound joy. In the words of the esotericist Jean Josipovici (1914-1922), "one does not live

[173] On a more detailed analysis of the role of Fludd in Kiefer's aesthetics, see Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 262-268.

[174] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 7 ("Die Verbindung zwischen Makro- und Mikrokosmos, die Albert Einstein immer angestrebt hat" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 17]).

[175] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 3.

[176] Fernando Pessoa, *The Tobacco Shop*, in Id., *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. by Richard Zenith, Grove Press, New York 2022, p. 1862.

[177] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 15 ("Die Geschichte des Menschen ist mit dem Kosmos verknüpft, so wie auch seine Nahrung aus dem Kosmos kommt. Einige Substanzen und Mineralien kommen aus dem Kosmos, von Meteoriten, die auf der Erde eingeschlagen sind. Unsere Atome sind eng mit dem Atomen der Sonne, der Erde und der anderen Planeten verknüpft oder sogar vermischt" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 25]).

one's life: *one is life*, with all its extreme possibilities. Beyond the reach of the temporal and the transitory, it takes on the value of eternity"[178].

Ancient humanity's ritual surrender to mystery and the sacred must be artistically recreated. Artworks, as Arasse suggested, can be considered artistic "talismans"[179], enabling the viewer to experience an ecstatic connection with the cosmos. These symbolic images, as Hans-Georg Gadamer described, are hermeneutical events of meaning.

Referring to Fludd's hermeticism, Kiefer adopts this position as a way of overcoming the contemporary opposition between science and wisdom, recovering the Renaissance unity of knowledge as a countermodel[180]. As Trione explains: "Recovering the lessons of those scholars who had intertwined Hermes Trismegistus, Neoplatonism and the New Testament, Kiefer interprets an active materiality. With bodily gestures, in his works he takes straw, sand and lead, which he transcends, rising towards a mystical dimension"[181].

In *Heaven-Earth* (*Himmel-Erde*, 1974) – a title recalling Heidegger – the macrocosmos is inscribed within the painter's palette: earth and sky are connected by a vertical line, a spiritual pillar, an *axis mundi*, articulated through the notion of *malen*, painting. Kiefer seems to affirm that the mythopoetic act of painting can restore the unity between earth and sky, or at least support humans in their ascent from the terrestrial to the celestial, creating a threshold between the two. *Himmel-Erde* was also the title of the major exhibition at the Museo Correr in Venice (15 June-9 November 1997).

In this framework, the human being plays a crucial mediating role: "Man is the membrane, the semipermeable membrane between the micro- and the macrocosm"[182]. Anthropocentrism, however, must be rejected[183]. Humanity is conceived as soul – not hypostatized, but as the subtle membrane that permits transition between heaven and earth, and vice versa.

This view is connected to an anti-subjectivist and "diffusionist" conception of knowledge: "Intelligence is not connected to any specific place. It's not only in our heads – it's general. It's in every gene particle, in each and every cell. There's an intelligence field that knows what is

[178] Jean Josipovici, *Iniziazione alla felicità. La via della trasformazione*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 1999, p. 127.
[179] See Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 271.
[180] See on that Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. by Margaret Cook, with a foreword by Mircea Eliade, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1987.
[181] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 197.
[182] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 39 ("Der Mensch ist die Haut, die semipermeable Haut zwischen Mikro- und Makrokosmos" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 47]).
[183] Cf. *ivi*, p. 168 (*ivi*, p. 171).

happening everywhere"[184]. This epistemology of interrelation has an ontological counterpart, grounded in a holistic worldview. Kiefer articulates it as follows: "I do have the sense that I've existed for a long time, not as the person sitting here and speaking with you but as a certain intelligence contained in the constellation of my molecules, receptors and synapses that is part of a much larger intelligence, a world intelligence, a cosmic intelligence. Every single cell contains a DNA and I believe it's connected to a general intelligence. I can't picture myself separate from it"[185].

For Kiefer, this worldview represents a symbolic countermovement to the nihilism promoted by modern subjectivity, which proved incapable of grounding itself solely through itself and thus reduced the meaning of the individual to its atomized identity. Kiefer's notion of subjectivity is therefore not that of a Promethean, rationally driven agency, but of a vital configuration that acts and operates only insofar as it is acted upon and operated within: the subject is not absolute and autonomous, but embedded in the rhythms of cosmic life. It is even enacted by archetypes: myths and symbols are not merely cultural references, but rather they constitute the very form, shape, and structure of our vital connection to the world. The anthropology emerging from Kiefer's art thus aligns with the hermeneutical conviction that human existence is always shaped and determined by the relational networks in which it flows – a conviction mirrored in Heidegger's notions of *Geviert* and *Gelassenheit*, and in Nitsch's ecstatic idea of perpetual becoming and overcoming. As Germano Celant insightfully remarked about Kiefer, the real artist "denies himself in the sense of himself, dies in favor of an unknown and indefinable charge, and aspires to establish a proper connection with forms and their origins. He wants to succumb to their primacy and allows himself to be broken and overwhelmed, not for a trivial or general reason, ideological or sociological, anonymous or impersonal, but only for one exceptional reason: the survival of language in art"[186].

The bond connecting Kiefer with the cosmos – this "comprehensive matrix"[187] – is simultaneously material and spiritual, a form of what Nitsch called "transcendent immanence"[188]. Through these theoretical notions, which in Kiefer's art become images and

[184] *Ivi*, p. 123 ("Die Intelligenz ist nichts, was an einen Ort gebunden ist. Sie ist nicht nur in unseren Köpfen, sie ist allgemein. Sie ist in jedem Gen-Partikel, in jeder Zelle. Es gibt ein Feld von Intelligenz, das weiß, was überall geschieht" [*ivi*, p. 128]).

[185] *Ivi*, p. 170 ("Ich habe von mir jedoch schon die Vorstellung, dass es mich schon länger gab, nicht als Person, wie ich hier sitze und mit Ihnen spreche, sondern dass das, was in mir in der Konstellation meiner Moleküle, Rezeptoren, Synapsen wirkt, eine bestimmte Intelligenz ist, die Teil einer viel größeren Intelligenz ist, einer Weltintelligenz, einer kosmischen Intelligenz. Jede einzelne Zelle enthält die DNS, und sie ist, so glaube ich, verbunden mit einer allgemeinen Intelligenz. Ich kann mich davon nicht getrennt sehen" [*ivi*, p. 173]).

[186] Celant, *Il destino dell'Arte: Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 13.

[187] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 170 ("umfassenderen Matrix" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 173]).

[188] Trione speaks of an "immanent metaphysics" (*Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 212).

symbols, the artist responds to the epochal necessity of re-establishing a renewed relationship between humanity and the cosmos, a demand emphasized in much contemporary discourse[189]. Kiefer's symbolic mythopoesis is in this context his essential methodology – simultaneously the form and function of his art – and contributes to creating what Vercellone aptly termed an "ecology of image"[190]: an ecosystem in which artistic images generate a living mythic-symbolic environment capable of expressing meaning and self-recognition, as opposed to the "blind archetype" of modernity[191].

The numerous religious and mystical references already introduced – which, when taken together, constitute the syncretic source of Kiefer's engagement with the sacred in his contemporary artistic practice – must be contextualized within his personally declared spiritual sensitivity. This sensitivity openly refers to a generic form of animism: a spirituality centered on the conviction that all beings possess a spiritual yet immanent essence, and that all things are living, animated, and endowed with agency, thus akin to human personhood.

Kiefer has never hidden this sensibility, which is admittedly inconsistent, from a theological standpoint, with other religious sources of inspiration. Yet, as a spontaneous existential form of engagement with the invisible, it may be regarded as the spiritual horizon within which other specific historical traditions become embedded. He defines this view – according to which spirit inhabits matter – "a type of animism, rather than pantheism. Pantheism is limited to a specific historical period, while animism is a *Stammesreligion*, a 'religion of origins'"[192]. Furthermore, he remarks: "It's simply very limited to think that only what is animate is alive. Stones are also alive"[193].

Nature is thus considered by Kiefer as a living organism, a matter infused with spiritual powers – aligning his perspective with the Greek metaphysical tradition already noted in resonance with Nitsch's work. This idea of a living nature, emerging in several of Kiefer's artistic images, is lyrically articulated in his diaries. Among the most striking literary attempts, one passage sacralizes dying flowers as cosmic offerings to the perpetual transformation of things: "For a

[189] See, among the others: Edgar Morin, *Seven complex lessons in education for the future*, trans. by Nidra Poller, Unesco Publishing, Paris 1999; Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle. Outline of an Ecosophy*, ed. by David Rothenberg, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008.

[190] Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, cit., p. 84.

[191] See Federico Vercellone, *Abitare l'archetipo. I nuovi simboli di Anselm Kiefer*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2022, pp. 47-61.

[192] Kiefer, *Con la Storia dentro la pelle*, cit., p. 133. This statement is open to debate. Firstly, *Stammesreligion* is a concept used to define "ethnic" or "tribal" religions, which are historically specific and often characterized by significant internal differences, whereas pantheism seems to function as a category applicable in interreligious terms.

[193] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 139 ("Es ist einfach limitiert, wenn man denkt, nur was lebt, lebt. Ein Stein lebt auch" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 144]).

plant, blossoming is so intense, it dies from it. the plant incarnates itself as fully as possible, actually even beyond the possible, so that it's consumed in the effort. thus the image of ashes and before that the exhibitionism, already even a hint of self-destruction in the release of the flower's perfume, consider the store of dried roses in the attic. in general, people like flowers very much (…) there's a reason. we feel a bond with the dying flowers because we have the sense that they're dying for us (…) you buy a bouquet and place this spectacle (offering) on the table. it becomes an altar, a sacrificial altar"[194].

This "morphological reason" enables the overcoming of modern instrumental and scientific rationality, symbolized for Kiefer by the guillotine – the violent "universal application of an abstract law that ensures an ordered and orderly society", inaugurated by the Enlightenment's transfer of the sacred from transcendence to political ideology[195].

In this sense, Kiefer's spontaneous proximity to animism may be situated within a broader process of cultural rethinking of the values and philosophical pillars of modern Western civilization. This rethinking, as thematized by several intellectuals, has increasingly sought dialogue with animistic traditions, as exemplified in Bruno Latour's (1947-2022) philosophy and in the contemporary debate on "new animism"[196].

In an interview with Klaus Dermutz, Kiefer stated that, regarding the medieval problem of universals, he would have sided with the realists rather than the nominalists: in his view, "essence resides in matter", and the artistic task consists in "an opening of matter, an exposing of matter"[197]. In the same interview, he placed his vision within a phenomenological lineage, beginning with Husserl's theory, which sought to apprehend reality as "it is"[198]. Elsewhere, in

[194] Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 19 ("für die pflanze ist der blütenstands so intensiv, daß sie daran zugrunde geht. sie inkarniert sich hier so weit als möglich, eigentlich noch weiter als möglich, so daß sie sich daran verbrennt. deswegen das bild der asche, vorher der exhibitionismus, und schon die ahnung der selbstauflösung beim ausströmen des duftes. sehe die lager der getrockneten rosen im gewölbe. blumen hat man im allgemeinen sehr gern. [...] das hat einen grund. man fühlt sich den sterbenden blüten verbunden, weil man fühlt, daß sie für einen sterben. […] man kauft einen blumenstrauß und stellt sich dieses schauspiel (opfer) auf den tisch. es wird zum altar, zum opferaltar" [Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 25]).

[195] *Ivi*, p. 134 ("universale geltung eines abstrakten gesetzes, das eine regelmäßige und regelmäße gesellschaftsordnug garantiert" [*ivi*, p. 145]). On the relationship between mythological violence and Enlightenment see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002 (Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 5: *Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940–1950*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1987). Their theory on myth has been productively adopted to analyze Kiefer's art by Cordula Meier in the chapters "Mythos als Aufklärung" and "Aufklärung als Mythologie" in *Anselm Kiefer – Die Rückkehr des Mythos in der Kunst*, cit., pp. 29-36.

[196] See Tiddy Smith (ed.), *Animism and Philosophy of Religion*, Palgrave, Cham 2023, in particular Tiddy Smith, *Introduction* (*ivi*, pp. 1-22: 5-10.), Mikel Burley, *New Animism as Cultural Critique?* (*ivi*, pp. 123-152).

[197] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 138 ("Nach meiner Erkenntnis steckt das Wesen in der Materie"; "Ein Die-Materie-Öffnen, ein Entkleiden der Materie" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 143]).

[198] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 198-199 (*ivi*, p. 199).

explicit opposition to idealism, resonating with Gadamer's and Nitsch's position, Kiefer clarifies: "Contrary to idealism (...) which, following Plato's model, affirms that ideas come first and matter second, and that ideas form matter, I subscribe to the opposite theory, namely that the mind is matter and must be extracted, brought out"[199]. Thus, for Kiefer, spirit inhabits matter[200]. His fascination extends to artistic attempts such as those of Cézanne and Rimbaud, who sought to contemplate the ruptures of reality in their raw appearance[201].
Kiefer positions this ontological realism – what Massimo Cacciari has described as "concrete metaphysics"[202] – against abstract idealism. Yet, this must be balanced with his perspectivist affirmations already considered. Indeed, Kiefer's philosophy may be interpreted as a visual example of "imaginative hermeneutics": a reshaping of the forms of the sacred through the dialogue between the artist's personal creative and spiritual experience and the great traditional symbols, with the aim of constructing a new symbolic platform for deciphering the enigmas of reality and countering the modern crisis of imagination.

This platform rests upon a radical pluralism, rooted in the conviction that the experience of the sacred can never be definitively fixed or normatively determined, but only followed in its spontaneous movements as it progressively inscribes itself into diverse contexts, fields, and objects. "No object, in fact, is repulsive enough, abject enough, repellent enough, no abyss is deep enough not to be transgressed, made secret or sacred"[203].
Everything can host a hierophany, and the artist's task is to care for it and reveal it to the public, which is another form of engagement in the rediscovery of the marvelous and surprising dimension of the world.

The sacred thus appears as a fragile event, to be reconstructed through artistic languages capable of bearing religious values and perspectives – yet also approached with irony and skepticism, which, in our view, have prevented Kiefer from fully advancing towards re-enchantment. His exploration of the sacred unfolds along a fascinating but fragile line, where faith is constantly counterbalanced by critical thought, and the lived encounter with sacred forms alongside suspicion towards political power, ideology, and the irrationality of history.

[199] Anselm Kiefer, *Non lasciarsi divorare dalla chiesa*, interview by Henri-François Debailleux, in «Liberation», 10 October 2000, now in Id., *Paesaggi celesti. Interviste*, cit., pp. 71-73: 73. See also Vincenzo Trione, *Kiefer l'apocalittico: l'arte deve volersi male*, in «La Lettura – Il Corriere della Sera», 9 September 2012.
[200] Cf. Kiefer, *Con la Storia dentro la pelle*, cit., p. 134.
[201] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 208.
[202] Cf. *infra*, chapter 3.3.1 (in particular, note 286).
[203] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 63.

Another twofold dimension of Kiefer's understanding of the sacred is its simultaneous embodiment of wonder and shock. This *unheimlich* dimension, another nuance of Rudolf Otto's theorization[204], constitutes a red thread running through the hermeneutics of the sacred in Gadamer, Nitsch, and Kiefer alike. In Kiefer's words: "The experience of the shock disrupts one's previous perceptions and raises the level of attention drastically. And I believe a shock is always also the memory of something you don't remember in your head but in your cells, something you remember at a profound level"[205].

At the same time, the sacred is also an experience of wonder in the classical philosophical sense already analyzed with reference to Nitsch[206]: an impulse, catalyzed by the contemplation of art, to recognize the freedom of the universe and the richness of its forms[207] – in other words, the beauty of the dynamic cosmic order.

Underlying this philosophical model is a mysterious, unspeakable, unfounded principle. As Auping observes: "Inscribed on a number of Kiefer's paintings and installations are the words *Am Anfang*. In the Beginning. Combining materials and images of his time with words that carry echoes from an ancient past, Kiefer attempts to take us back to the beginning of religion, when the desire and means of transcendence were still a matter of debate, when the relationship between heaven and earth was still being constructed. In this belief, he creates his own phenomenology of religion, one that contains the impurities and ambiguities of the lead he continues to employ in his work. (…) Light has been a crucial symbol in European religious art, early on as an emblem of God's grace passing down to earth and later as a symbol pf psychological awareness, connoting personal enlightenment. Kiefer's leaden light seems to bypass both of these traditions, creating an unsettling twilight in which the spiritual, psychological, and historical seem to collide without resolution. Even when he is not using lead, Kiefer's landscapes are always overcast, as if caught in an infinite winter, suggesting either the aftermath of a cataclysm on the prelude to one, creating a space that carries the weight of history within a reach for transcendence"[208].

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[204] Otto speaks of the dimension of "*ungeheuer*" (uncanny). See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1952, pp. 39-41 (Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, C.H. Bech, München 1987, pp. 53-55).

[205] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 58 ("Die Erfahrung des Schocks sprengt die bisherige Wahrnehmung auf und erhöht die Aufmerksamkeit in drastischem Maße. Und ich glaube, ein Schock ist immer auch eine Erinnerung an etwas, was man nicht mit dem Kopf erinnert, sondern mit den Zellen, was man ganz tief erinnert" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 65]). On this image see also Mauro Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, Postmedia Books, 2024, p. 89.

[206] See *infra*, chapter 3.2.2 (in particular, note 216).

[207] Cf. Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 212-213 (Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., pp. 228-230).

[208] Auping, *Introduction*, cit., pp. 49-50.

This model may be better understood if situated within the cosmic emanative conception at the heart of the Neoplatonic tradition – a tradition to which both Gadamer and Nitsch have variously turned – which resonates with numerous traditional cosmologies. The idea that multiplicity derives from unity, and that this unity is not diminished by multiplicity but rather generates it through gradual outpourings, appears foundational here[209].

As Häußler explains, "Kiefer adopts this term from mystical literature: he uses it to describe leaden forms that show clear traces of their creation process. Kiefer allows the heated, liquid lead to cool as it flows across the floor, creating the irregular contours typical of his emanations. Monumental lead emanations hang from the ceiling in the room in front of the *Himmelspalast* space"[210].

Although Kiefer does not explicitly theorize emanation, the concept – encountered particularly in the context of Jewish Kabbalah – plays a significant visual role in his work, appearing in several canvases, such as *Emanation* (*Ausgiessung*, 1984-1985) and *Emanation* (*Ausgiessung*, 1984-1986). In the latter, Kiefer depicts a sort of "grey" eruption of lead, an abstract cloud representing the metaphysical notion of emanation: the demiurgic formation of the world as a series of radiations from the primordial One.

This emanative structure may thus be hypothesized as the most coherent theoretical framework through which we can discern a unifying dimension in Kiefer's otherwise irregular explorations of the sacred, carried out with curiosity across different mythic-symbolic and religious configurations. While Kiefer clearly "felt" the authenticity of the sacred, he was never entirely able – or perhaps willing – to arrive at a definitive philosophical system. Instead, his oeuvre embodies a fragmentary but profoundly significant search for transcendence through the interplay of matter, myth, and imagination.

[209] Cf. P.K. Mukhopadhyaya, *Reflections on Emanationism as a Philosophical Theme in the Context of Neoplatonism*, in Paulos Mar Gregorios (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, New York 2002, pp. 97-106.

[210] Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 78.

4.2. A Jewish Anamnesis: Kiefer's Kabbalistic Art

4.2.1 Jewish Symbolism: Kiefer's Transcreation of a Mystical Journey

The richest reservoir of religious-symbolic imagery in Kiefer's art is, as already mentioned, connected to Judaism[211], particularly in its mystical expression through Kabbalah.
In this chapter, we aim to sketch a preliminary response to Avraham Shapira's provocative claim: "Kiefer's creative interpretation of idioms, symbols and personalities from the universe of Judaism, as well as his use thereof as titles of his exhibitions (…) will require, when the time comes, serious research"[212]. Our goal is to approach this task with the seriousness it deserves by analyzing this tradition, highlighting its role within Kiefer's aesthetics, and focusing especially on its artistic transformation. For Kiefer, Kabbalah emerges as a spiritual source that deeply informs his philosophical evaluation of the faculty of imagination. Its vision of cosmic structures appears to him as a vital human attempt to relate to the sacred mystery of existence – without falling into rigid metaphysical systems – while at the same time stressing the hermeneutical dimension at the core of Kabbalistic interpretative practice.

Kiefer's deep interest in Kabbalah began with his 1984 trip to Jerusalem, where he held a solo exhibition at the Israel Museum. The journey was a revelatory encounter with Kabbalah, which would accompany his work for decades. It proved significant not only on a cultural level, but also on a personal and intimate one. Kiefer recalls, for example, his walk on the Mount of Olives as a moving, almost homecoming experience. In German culture, he explains[213], this symbolic place was well known, probably in connection with the imagery of wild forest landscapes. In Jerusalem, Kiefer also encountered the writings of Gershom Scholem, the founder of the modern academic study of Kabbalah and author of the seminal *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941)[214], whom the Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel described as "a theoretical mystic"[215].
This intense experience led Kiefer to create several works on "historical" subjects from the Old Testament, conceived as a trajectory complementary to his German-focused oeuvre: *Departure*

[211] The first author to suggest the importance of Jewish spirituality and mysticism in Kiefer's worldview was Gudrun Inboden, in *Exodus aus der historischen Zeit*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Galerie Paul Maenz, Köln 1986, pp. 5-20.
[212] Avraham Shapira, *"Flowers of the Ashes": Feeling of Guilt and Seeds of Hope*, in Anselm Kiefer, *Shevirath Ha-Kelim (Breaking of the Vessels)*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv 2011, pp. 176-166: 175.
[213] Cf. Kiefer, *Talmudiques (prima parte)*, cit., p. 177.
[214] See the latest edition, with a new foreword by Robert Alter, Shocken Books, New York 1995.
[215] Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1988, p. 12.

from Egypt (1984), *The Red Sea* (1984-1985), *Aaron* (1984-1985), and *Jerusalem* (1986). As Daniel Arasse observes: "The most striking characteristic of these big canvases is their structural similarity with the 'German' and 'Germanic' landscapes painted since the mid-1970s: the high horizon, the ploughed, desolate earth, other materials fixed to the surface"[216].

Particularly significant is *Jerusalem* (1986), a dense symbolic work: a non-figurative, abstract canvas with a pair of skis attached to the surface. The skis suggest upward and forward movement which, as we have seen, symbolize Kiefer's conception of reality as dynamic and non-linear. "An altogether mesmerizing work, the painting seems to have gone through many states of life and suffering, not unlike the city of Jerusalem itself. What remains is a scarred terrain, composed of encrusted, burned, and barren sections. Large remnants of lead are ripped and splattered across the surface"[217]. In this way, the work conveys Kiefer's sensations of loss, ruin, and abandonment, echoing Jerusalem as the archetypal sacred city – and as a kind of topology that Europe has lost in the age of secularization.

A similar aesthetical composition is found in *Cain and Abel* (*Kain und Abel*, 2011), which references the Biblical story of the first murder. The canvas depicts black furrows in the earth, crossed perpendicularly by two iron skis with lead strips. One ski points upward and bears the name "Abel", while the other points downward, inscribed with "Kain". Together, they form a triangular structure ascending from earth to heaven, toward a mountain peak encircled by an iron ring around its top, perhaps symbolizing *Keter* ("Crown"), the first *Sefirah*. By situating this primordial act of violence in a mountain landscape, Kiefer decontextualizes the Biblical event and reinterprets it for a European audience. The murder itself is thus framed in the archetypical dialectic of ascent and descent, of earth and sky.

Kiefer's interest in Jewish spirituality had, however, deeper roots. It was shaped both by his historical-political reflections – as a German artist confronting the burden of the German–Jewish relationship – and by his literary fascination with Paul Celan, one of his favorite poets. First encountered in high school, especially through *Todesfuge*[218], Celan's work has remained a constant reference for Kiefer's, culminating in the exhibition *Anselm Kiefer Pour Paul Celan* (2021-2022) at the monumental Grand Palais Éphémère in Paris[219]. Preparing for this show,

[216] Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 204.
[217] Mark Rosenthal, *Vision of a New World: 1980 to 1987*, in Id. (ed.), *Anselm Kiefer*, Art Institute of Chicago – Philadelphia Museum of Art, Chicago-Philadelphia 1987 pp. 106-154: 143.
[218] On the artistic transcreation of Celan's poetry in Kiefer's work, see Luca Siniscalco, *Tradurre versi in immagini. Le risonanze di Todesfuge (Paul Celan) nell'arte di Anselm Kiefer*, in Raul Calzoni, Giancarlo Covella, Helena Como, Maria Maffei (eds.), *TransCreAzioni – L'atto creativo nei processi traduttivi*, Mimesis, Milano 2025, pp. 173-188.
[219] Cf. *Anselm Kiefer. Pour Paul Celan*, cit.

Kiefer wrote in his diary: Paul Celan "never leaves me". His words, often fragmented, live in an almost ritualistic form in Kiefer's work. Driven by the German artist's inner need to transfer the poet's language onto his canvases, they appear as spatialized sign in what Trione lyrically described as "an almost cosmic conjunction. As if nature and history were merging for a few moments. Or as when mud mixes with the sea"[220].

Celan's poetry, inseparably linked to Holocaust memory, has haunted Kiefer's work for more than 25 years, shaping everything from the titles of exhibitions to the incorporation of symbolic materials such as sand, straw, hair, and ashes. Among Celan's many themes, Kiefer was also fascinated by the fragile traces of his Jewish ancestry, appearing in poetry as signs of an unattainable Origin. Celan himself had an extensive knowledge of Kabbalah, often identified as a main source of his "linguistic mysticism"[221]. Although rarely explicit in his poems, such references may have resonated with Kiefer, preparing him to later embrace Jewish mysticism through Scholem's writings.

Unlike other German intellectuals, Kiefer's engagement with Jewishness is primarily spiritual and religious. While the Shoah remains for him a tragic event that must be studied historically, culturally, and psychologically – as a shaping force on the German worldview – he insists it is not his central focus: "I didn't want to become a Holocaust specialist", he once unambiguously declared[222]. His attraction to Jewish culture should thus not be reduced to the ethical or historical concern with Jewish persecution[223]. Although reflecting a spiritual quest and an existential need to "reassemble" both his personal identity and German identity as a whole, overcoming the self-amputation of German *Kultur* under the Nazi regime, at the same time Kiefer values the imaginative and spiritual richness of Jewish mysticism as a paradigm in its own right, independently of German history. Its non-dualistic, non-substantialist, and

[220] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 232.

[221] See Shira Wolosky, *Paul Celan's Linguistic Mysticism*, in «Studies in 20th Century Literature», vol. 10, issue 2, article 4, 1986, https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1181; Bruce Ross, *A Poetics of Absence: Kabbalist Allegory in the Poetry of Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, and David Meltzer*, in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Allegory Revisited. Analecta Husserliana*, vol. 41, 1994, pp. 241-265; Federico Dal Bo, *Qabbalah e traduzione. Un saggio su Paul Celan*, Orthotes, Napoli-Salerno 2019.

[222] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 43 ("Ich wollte kein Holocaust-Spezialist werden" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 51]).

[223] Thus, in our opinion, the following considerations offered by Donald Kuspit regarding Kiefer's 2002 New York exhibition appear to be imprecise: "Kiefer's new works are supposed to be about the Kabbalah, but I think they show his ongoing preoccupation with the Holocaust – indeed, his obsession with the Jews Nazi Germany sacrificed to ensure victory as well as rid the world of degeneracy (…). The Kabbalah is an excuse to dwell on violence and loss – and Kiefer's works reek of violent loss. They are more descendental than transcendental. The stairway in the lower part of *Sefifroth* (2002) seems to descend rather than ascend (…). There is no hope in Kiefer's works, only inevitability" (Donald Kuspit, *The Spirit of Gray*, in «Artnet», http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/kuspit/kuspit12-19-02.asp).

emanationist worldview speaks directly to the new philosophical and spiritual needs of the post-secular age, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. This potential is independent from the historical tragedy and is rooted in the specific tradition of Kabbalah, an expression of wisdom which, in Kiefer's perspective, is worthy to be deepened in the contemporary age by all "seekers", even outside Jewish community.

Kabbalah – literally "tradition" – refers to the chain of transmission stemming from Moses' revelation of Torah at Sinai[224]. It can be understood as Jewish mysticism in general or as its most esoteric dimension. According to Kabbalistic belief, this mystical knowledge was once widespread in ancient Israel, shared by prophets and sages with the people. Its esoteric character emerged later, after foreign conquests made concealment necessary, to prevent misuse of the knowledge.

Kabbalah is rooted in a metaphysical interpretation of sacred scripture – above all, the *Torah*. Letters are viewed as archetypal forms of divine energy, so that the book as a whole becomes a vessel of *sefirotic* emanations mediating the demiurgic world's creation. Each letter and word carries hidden spiritual dimensions, making the act of reading or study itself a participation in divine creation. Kiefer echoes this sensibility: "The meaning is infinitely present in the sign"[225]. Aesthetically, this implies a perfect identity between form and content.

In this context, the Torah is thus seen as the blueprint of creation, and its interpretation is a daily spiritual practice. Reality itself is a vast "book" inscribed with divine intention. Mystical practice consists in reading this cosmic text through the framework of the Four Worlds, corresponding both to stages of creation and to four levels of scriptural interpretation – known collectively as "*pardes*", from their initial letters[226] – an extension of the Midrashic[227] concept that God enacted creation though the language itself. This view anticipates a philosophical-

[224] "The term *kabbalah* denotes the act of taking an obligation upon oneself. The term in this sense has the connotation of strictness and restraint. Yet *kabbalah* in its verbal form means also: to receive, to welcome, to greet" (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, introduction by Sylvia Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2005, p. 61).

[225] Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 32.

[226] See Idel, "Kabbalistic Hermeneutics", in Id., *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, cit., pp. 200-249. Cf. also Sebastiano Fusco, *The Four Levels of Meaning: Polysemic Hermeneutics of Traditional Texts*, in «Passages: Studies in Traditionalism and Traditions», vol. II, PRAV 2025, pp. 145-163.

[227] Midrash is a rabbinic form of Biblical exegesis that produced a substantial body of literature.

hermeneutical understanding of reality[228], where the Kabbalistic idea that language coincides with being[229] aligns with Gadamer's notion that nothing can exist outside of language[230].

Kabbalah is an extremely complex and evolving mystical tradition. Emerging across different centuries and cultural contexts, it offers no unified paradigm, but rather a vibrant internal debate with diverse schools and perspectives. Tracing this full complexity lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is important, however, to note that Kiefer's knowledge on Kabbalah is largely based on the writings of Gershom Scholem, who introduced him to Isaac Luria's theories, which became his principal reference point. Kiefer, who does not read Hebrew, relied on Scholem's scholarship as his primary source. He also read the *Zohar* in German translation – a wisdom text of uncertain authorship, which Scholem attributed to Moses de León (1240-1305)[231]. The *Zohar*, a *summa* of Medieval Kabbalistic theories, is one of the tradition's most important works: "The mystic allegorism is based by the Zohar on the principle that all visible things, the phenomena of nature included, have besides their exoteric reality an esoteric reality also, destined to instruct man in that which is invisible. This principle is the necessary corollary of the fundamental doctrine of the Zohar. The universe being, according to that doctrine, a gradation of emanations, it follows that the human mind may recognize in each effect the supreme mark, and thus ascend to the cause of all causes"[232].
Another foundational text is the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a treatise of mysterious origins, often attributed to Abraham and regarded as a precursor to later Kabbalistic works. It contains speculations on

[228] Harriet Häußler notes: "The book seems particularly suited to illustrating this relationship between materiality and immateriality, which, transposed to the Jewish faith, exists between the spoken and written word. Of course, the choice of the book and the script is also justified on aesthetic grounds. Letters always have an inherent graphic and artistic quality. Kiefer can also use two-dimensional writing to create a contrast to his monumental, three-dimensional sculptures and installations. This contrast is another example of Kiefer's frequent juxtaposition of paradoxical elements, similar to the recurring combination of artificial and natural materials. The aspect of contradiction also appears in Kabbalistic belief in the reference to the descent into the kingdom of heaven" (*Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 107).
[229] See Fusco, *The Four Levels of Meaning*, cit., pp. 160-163.
[230] Even Gadamer's most explicit engagement with Jewish tradition does not explicitly reach this comparison; it focuses on what he defined as Jewish contribution to European culture, namely the idea of a personal God and the promotion of a rich philosophical tradition (often in dialogue with Christian philosophy). The conversation between Christian and Jewish thinkers, according to Gadamer, peaked in modernity through mediation between religious tradition and Enlightenment rationalism, continuing until the last century with Rosenzweig and Buber. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Philosophy and the Religion of Judaism* (1961), in Id., *On Education, Poetry, and History. Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, State University of New York Press, New York 1992, pp. 155-164 (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die philosophie und die Religion des Judentums* (1961), in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1987, pp. 68-77). Gadamer's indifference to Jewish mysticism is also evident in his studies on Paul Celan (*Gadamer on Celan. "Who Am I and Who Are you?" and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Richard Heineman and Bruce Krajewski, State University of New York Press, New York 1997).
[231] Cf. Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 37.
[232] Joseph Jacobs and Isaac Broydé, "Zohar", in *JewishEncyclopedia* (https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/15278-zohar#406).

creation articulated through complex linguistic theories, associating the ten abstract *Sefirot* with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Kiefer's engagement with Kabbalah is therefore mediated and selective. While he lacked access to the original texts, his reliance on Scholem provided him with a reliable and scholarly account, sparing him the distortions that often marked modern Western adaptations of Kabbalah, particularly in modern Western Hermetic and esoteric contexts[233]. From this vantage point, we may identify in Kiefer a kind of "minimal" doctrine, an elementary framework drawn from the Kabbalistic system, which he absorbed as both iconographic and philosophical inspiration. Such a role is intrinsic to Kabbalah itself, which "opposed formalism, stimulated the imagination and feelings, and restored prayer (which had gradually become a mere external religious exercise) to the position it had occupied for centuries among the Jews as a means of transcending earthly affairs for a time and placing oneself in union with God"[234].
This "minimal" model spans the earliest emergence of Kabbalah in 13th-century Andalusia and Provence, through its rebirth in Luria's thought, and its later developments in Hasidic Judaism from the 18th-century onward. In broader terms, Kabbalah may be seen as the philosophical and cosmogonical systematization of prophetic and mystical traditions of the Biblical and Post-biblical eras – a tradition documented in the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature, with their visions of angelic realms, celestial palaces, and ascents in the heavenly chariot. These texts, in turn, deeply influenced Kiefer, most notably in *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (2004-2015).

Kiefer's artistic interest in Kabbalah is centered on its cosmological and metaphysical structure, particularly in their Lurianic form. According to this elaboration, God is characterized by two aspects: the transcendent, invisible, unknowable *Ein Sof*, and the manifest, visible, knowable. The former, which coincides with the hidden divinity, the *Deus absconditus*, literally "endless", designates the infinite principle without attributes or image. Simultaneously, the divine manifests through the ten *Sefirot* ("numbers"), fundamental emanations and attributes of God that correspond to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Arranged symbolically in the Tree of Life, the *Sefirot* mediate the divine light. Unlike the hidden *Ein Sof*, the *Sefirot* are

[233] See Boaz Huss, (ed.), *Kabbalah and Modernity. Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, Brill, Leiden 2010; Agata Paluch and Patrick Benjamin Koch (eds.), «European Journal of Jewish Studies», vol. 16, issue 1: *Kabbalah and Knowledge Transfers in Early Modernity*, 2022; Wouter J. Hanegraaf, "Jewish Influences V: Occultist Kabbalah", in Hanegraaff (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, cit., pp. 644-647.
[234] Jacobs and Broydé, "Zohar", cit.

dynamic forces; each represents both an attribute and a hypostasis of God[235]. This vision establishes a hierarchical chain of being in which every level of creation reflects traces of the divine – even the human body, analogically mapped to the *Sefirot*, in an analogical gnoseology which detains quasi-artistic traits

Kabbalah also introduces a feminine aspect of God, the *Shekhinah*, identified with the last *Sefirah* and representing divine presence in the world. Dependent on divine light and symbolized as the moon reflecting the sun, she is vulnerable to separation from her male counterpart, disrupting cosmic harmony. "She does not have light of its own, only the reflection of the sun's light. The redemption of the *shekhinah* from her exile and suffering and reuniting her with her husband is the main purpose of many kabbalistic rituals"[236]. As Scholem explains: "In the Divine realm, the state of redemption is expressed as the end of the 'exile of the *Shekhinah*', the restoration of the Divine unity throughout all areas of existence. (…) At the time of redemption there will be a continuous union of king and queen, or of the *seflrot Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*; that is to say that there will be an unceasing stream of Divine influx through all worlds, and this will bind them eternally together. The hidden secrets of the Torah will be revealed, and the Kabbalah will be the literal sense of the Torah"[237].

Some scholars – among them Scholem – trace the *Shekhinah* concept, which is absent from the Bible, to Gnostic influences[238], which envisioned an androgynous, gender-dualistic divinity, which we have also recognized as a thread in Hermann Nitsch's ecstatic aesthetics.

For Kiefer, *Shekhinah* was especially inspiring: the visible, immanent presence of the ineffable God offered a figure that could be artistically represented. His 1999 work *Shekhinah* (*Die Schechina*) depicts a standing white dress beneath the Sefirotic tree, iconographically close to his *Women of Antiquity* series, immersed among sunflowers[239].

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[235] According to Gershom Scholem (*Kabbalah*, Keter, Jerusalem 1974, p. 106), the attributes of the ten *Sefirot* can be summarized as it follows: 1. *Keter*: will, 2. *Hokhmah*: wisdom, 3. *Binah*: intelligence, 4. *Gedullah*: greatness, 5. *Gevurah*: power, 6. *Tiferet*: beauty, 7. *Nezah*: duration, 8. *Hod*: majesty, 9. *Zaddik*: justice, and finally 10. *Malkuth*: the kingdom of God.

[236] Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 46

[237] Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 335.

[238] See Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 48. On the problems connected in attributing Gnostic influence on the ancient and unitarian corpus of Jewish mystical tradition see Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, cit., pp. 30-32.

[239] Kiefer's interest in feminine symbolism in Jewish mysticism also includes Lilith (see *Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 356-361). Lilith first appeared in the Babylonian Talmud and derived from a class of Mesopotamian vicious female demons. She is depicted as a night, vampire-like creature rumored to haunt wildernesses in stormy weather. Mentioned only once in the Bible, according to rabbinical texts she is supposed to have been the first demonic wife of Adam. In Kabbalah she parallels *Shekhinah* and rules over the impure realm – she "is the one who challenges God's perfection from the very beginning" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 161 ("Lilith ist diejenige, die von Anfang an die Perfektion Gottes in Frage stellt" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 164]). In astrological teachings, Lilith is linked to the planet Saturn and serpentine imagery, which recurs in Kiefer's work. From the late 1980s, Kiefer created multiple paintings entitled *Lilith* or *Lilith's Daughter* (*Liliths Töchter*).

According to Luria, cosmic material disharmony – and thus the root of evil – arises from two cosmic events: *Tzimtzum* (the divine contraction) and *Shevirath ha-Kelim* (the shattering or breaking of the vessels). As Scholem explains: "The starting point of this theory is the idea that the very essence of *Ein-Sof* leaves no space whatsoever for creation, for it is impossible to imagine an area which is not already God, since this would constitute a limitation of His Infinity. (…) Consequently, an act of creation is possible only through 'the entry of God into Himself', that is, through an act of *zimzum*, whereby He contracts Himself and so makes it possible for something which is not Ein-Sof to exist"[240].

Through this divine withdrawal, God allows the creation of a primordial space (*tehiru*), a vacuum where independent existence becomes possible[241]. Into this space, a ray of divine light falls from the infinite being Ein-Sof, giving rise to *Adam Kadmon*, the primordial man, which corresponds to a realm of infinite divine light without vessels, with the potential to create, and in the Lurianic system stands for a realm preceding the manifestation of the Four Worlds. This model has fascinated not only theologians but also cosmologists, who have often drawn parallels between Luria's speculative cosmology and modern scientific theories such as the Big Bang[242]: Kiefer affirms in this regard: "When physicists picture the creation of the world, they say that matter emerged from a certain mass of energy. Still, compared to the energy present at the big bang, there is relatively little matter. This space, this world that was formed, can only hold a small portion of the grace, otherwise it would be too much. You can say it contains an original flaw"[243].

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[240] Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 129.

[241] This worldview, where the world is an emanation from a God who is both immanent within the universe and transcends it, could be defined as "panentheism", and represents a possible philosophical correction or implementation of the more basic attribution of a spiritual essence to all beings, as emerged in Kiefer's animism. On this deeply controversial topic, see the chapter "The Kabbalah and Pantheism" in *ivi*, pp. 144-152. Kiefer's interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah in terms of the autopoietic dimension is clearly stated: "Luria had a completely different conception of cosmogony. For Luria, unlike all the other philosophers and theologians, there was no God, no Gaia or any other being who created the world. The world created itself and God allowed it to happen, He withdraws, so the world can create itself" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 237 ("Bei Luria gibt es, anders als bei allen anderen Philosophen und Theologen, keinen Gott, keine Gaya ode ein anderes Wesen, das die Welt erschafft. Die Welt erschafft sich selbst, und Gott lässt dies zu, zieht sich zurück, damit die Welt sich schaffen kann" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 237]).

[242] On this comparison, see Sebastiano Fusco's reflections in his edition of *Sepher Yetzirah* (Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2019).

[243] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 238 ("Wenn Physiker sich die Entstehung der Welt vorstellen, sagen sie, dass aus einer bestimmten Menge an Energie einiges an Materie hervorgeht. Die Materie ist im Verhältnis zu der beim Urknall vorhandenen Energie jedoch nur gering. Dieser Raum, diese Welt, die entstanden ist, kann nur einen kleinen Teil de Gnade fassen, sonst wird es zu viel. Man kann sagen, darin ist auch ein ursprünglicher Fehler enthalten" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 237]).

For Kiefer too, this vision proved deeply compelling[244], as shown in his immense painting *Zim Zum* (1990). The layered, almost sculptural canvas evokes a luminous vortex, a spiral of light and material accretions that seems to emerge from darkness. The work can be read as a metaphorical visualization of God's act of contraction: a movement of concealment that simultaneously generates a space of possibility – a "clearing away", to use Heidegger's lexicon[245], which evinces comparing *Ein Sof*'s action to the artistic creation. The artwork also shows how much the issue of epiphany plays a central role both in Kabbalah mysticism and in Kiefer's art. Just as reality appears in the emanative process, painting's role consists in translating the unspeakable principle into symbolic visual forms. Indeed, as he argues: "The viewer cannot resolve the enigmatic character of this painting into a certain sense or in any direction. This is presumably also not intentional, since according to Kiefer's understanding, zimzum is only a symbol for a mysterious intra-divine event that has always eluded human observation. In this respect, the painting *Zim-Zum* confronts the viewer with the paradox of artistically sensualizing an esoteric yet cosmic event that has always been invisible, making it almost tactilely perceptible here and now. Only the dynamics are clear. In this painting, we can observe something happening, something is in motion, something is emerging. *Zim-Zum*. It is larger than life, aesthetically overwhelming the viewer"[246].

Later, the divine emanations multiply in potentiated form. Gradually, the divine lights flow into the void space. In order for them to be preserved and held there, they should get into vessels, which also emanate from God himself, in order to regulate and crystallize the streams. But the vessels proved unable to withstand its overwhelming force. Seven of them are shattered, and their fragments, together with scattered sparks of light, fell into the domain of evil, which appears as the active presence of the spiritual wastes which should have been contained in the vessels (the *qlippoth*). From this event, according to Lurianic teaching, arose the radical separation between the divine and phenomenal worlds, as well as the dualistic experience of good and evil. In this dramatic narrative of destruction, the ecstatic joy of creation is inseparably entwined with catastrophe and loss – a paradox that resonates deeply with Kiefer's sensibility.

[244] "I have been occupied with Isaac Luria's *tzimzum* for twenty years. It's a very abstract process, an intellectually very exciting and intensive process: the idea of withdrawal from which something originates" (*ivi*, p. 6 ["Mit Isaak Lurias *Zimzum* beschäftige ich mich seit 20 Jahren. Das ist ein sehr abstrakter Vorgang, ein intellektuell sehr anregender und intensiver Vorgang: Die Idee des Rückzugs, aus dem etwas entsteht"; *ivi*, p. 16]).

[245] In an interview Kiefer explicitly hypothesize the affinity between Kabbalah's idea of God's withdrawal and Heidegger's and Hölderlin's idea that the divine needs to make away for (cf. *Non so perché esista il mondo*, interview by Götz Adriani, in Kiefer, *Paesaggi celesti*, cit., pp. 145-149: 149).

[246] Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum. God and the Origin of the World*, trans. by Corey Twitchell, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2023, p. 332.

His art is permeated by this tension: the simultaneous presence of genesis and ruin, illumination and darkness, promise and despair.

The final stage of the Lurianic drama is *Tikkun*, the cosmic restoration. This process of reintegration seeks to mend the fractured cosmos by gathering the dispersed sparks of divine light and returning them to their primordial unity – a process which other mystical traditions, such as the Hindu and the Gnostic, have similarly theorized[247], and which can in theurgical way be solicited by the practitioners. Indeed, "according to Luria, Jewish mysticism attributes to humans the power to actively participate in the restoration of the divine image through practical rituals. The Lurianic Kabbalist can thus (independently) accelerate or slow down the process of Tikkun"[248]. The ritual practices prescribed by the tradition allows for traversing this vast space and mending the fracture that has been continuing across the ages.

Following Moshe Idel's phenomenological distinction between two principal tendencies within Kabbalah – the Theosophical-Theurgic and the Ecstatic-Unitive[249] – Kiefer's sources and sympathies seem most closely aligned with the first trajectory. Rooted in the *Zohar* and in the teachings of Luria, this current seeks to comprehend the divine through imaginative and mythic-symbolic structures, offering a metaphysical account of cosmology that binds the human microcosm to the divine macrocosm. Yet, Kiefer's documented fascination with the Hekhalot and Merkavah traditions, particularly evident in his later installation *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, suggests that his interests are not exclusively theosophical. They also reach toward the ecstatic dimension, exemplified by Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), in which the ultimate aim is not only knowledge of divine emanations, but the direct, unitive dissolution of the soul into God's abysses. In this current the soul is "dissolved into *'Eiyn Sof*, so that she can no longer be distinguished as a separate entity; she is completely obliterated in the ocean from which she emerged"[250] leaving no distinction between creature and Creator. Kiefer, as we have seen, persistently interrogates this tension between individuality and dissolution, exploring it across both Western and Eastern mystical traditions. In Idel's formulation: "We can summarize the stand of theosophical Kabbalah as a *visio rerum omnium in Deo*. On the other hand, the ecstatic Kabbalah was interested in a *visio Dei in omnibus rebus*, a tendency later shared by Hasidic

[247] A comparison between Kabbalah, Gnosticism, and Hinduism is proposed in Sanford L. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes In Ancient and Modern Thought*, Jason Aronson, Northvale (NJ) 2001.
[248] Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 77.
[249] Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, cit.
[250] *Ivi*, pp. 68-69.

mysticism: the pantheistic trends of these Jewish mystical schools were part of their emphasis on a common goal – *devekut*"[251].

It is in this sense that Kiefer's project must be understood as deeply original. Ge does not seek to illustrate a pre-existing iconography nor to reproduce Kabbalistic diagrams with scholarly accuracy. Rather, he reimagines their symbolic conditions, transforming them into visual catalysts for new epiphanies[252]. His canvases and installations function less as representations of esoteric doctrines and more as hermeneutical spaces, in which the viewer is invited to encounter anew the sacred mystery of emanation, exile, and restoration.

Harold Bloom was among the first to recognize this originality when he described Kiefer not simply as a painter or sculptor, but as a "Kabbalistic iconographer" [253] – though one whose images are entirely his own rather than drawn directly from the tradition. Bloom's remark is telling, for Kiefer's work occupies an ambiguous territory: it echoes the conceptual architecture of Kabbalah while simultaneously inventing a visual lexicon that has no precedent in Jewish mysticism. As Häußler later observed[254], although many parallels between Kiefer's works and Kabbalistic diagrams have been noted, scholarship has not yet fully addressed the precise textual or visual sources that may have informed his art, nor the degree to which he consciously incorporated them. This lacuna is revealing. For even if direct borrowings remain uncertain, what is clear is that Kiefer transforms inspiration itself into his subject.

The very mystery surrounding his sources opens a wider philosophical question: how does an artwork relate to its tradition? Kiefer's hermeneutical stance suggests that he never intended to replicate the imagery of Kabbalah with documentary fidelity. Instead, he sought to recreate the imaginative conditions under which mystical symbols are born. In this sense, his paintings and installations do not depict Kabbalah; they *perform* it. They enact a new process of emanation, translating the ineffable into material form while acknowledging that the sacred excess always escapes capture. Each canvas becomes an experiment in epiphanic re-creation, where the viewer is drawn into the same dynamic of interpretation and wonder that animates the Kabbalistic texts themselves.

Thus, Jewish mysticism presents Kiefer not only with a reservoir of symbols, but also an opportunity to reengage with one of the central aesthetic and theological dilemmas of Western culture: the problem of image. His interest in this issue can be traced back to his long-standing

[251] *Ivi*, p. 154.
[252] See on that Schulte, *Zimzum. God and the Origin of the World*, cit., p. 325.
[253] Harold Bloom, *Anselm Kiefer: Troping Without End*, in Anselm Kiefer, *Merkaba*, ed. by Ealan Wingate, Gagosian Gallery, New York 2002, pp. 25-26.
[254] Cf. Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 31.

fascination with the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries[255]. At stake in that debate was nothing less than the nature of representation itself – whether an image could be a legitimate medium of truth and sacred or whether it inevitably lapsed into idolatry. Two opposing positions crystallized. The *iconophiles* defended the anagogic and symbolic power of images, arguing that a painted form could lead the viewer toward higher realities. The *iconoclasts*, by contrast, warned that every attempt at representation risked confounding the Creator with the created, substituting the finite artifact for the infinite referent.

Kiefer has repeatedly acknowledged his own ambivalence in relation to this tension. On the one hand, he recognizes the danger of illusion inherent in the image, which may veil rather than reveal – and which reflects his more general idea of reality as the sum of "veils". Even more, as Massimo Donà explains, art "represents the greatest of illusions; it keeps us alive precisely because (...) being and not being what it is (e.g. freedom), it does not determine, it does not petrify, and therefore it does not abstract. In other words, it does not dare to separate yes from no"[256]. On the other hand, Kiefer cannot renounce painting, for it is precisely through images that he wrestles with transcendence. This ambivalence is thematized explicitly in his 1977 work *Iconoclastic Controversy (Bilderstreit)*. At its center appears the painter's palette – one of Kiefer's recurring motifs, symbol of the demiurgic act of creation itself[257] – shown under assault. The palette here becomes both the instrument of art and the target of destruction, encapsulating the historical and personal struggle over the legitimacy of figuration.

This tension, I would argue, is not merely historical but deeply personal for Kiefer. His imagination oscillates between an iconoclastic suspicion of the image and an iconophile longing for its revelatory power[258]. He frequently stages this polarity through Biblical symbolism, most notably in the figures of Aaron and Moses. For him, Aaron represents the priestly mediator, the maker of the Golden Calf, emblematic of positive theology and the human need for tangible forms. Moses, by contrast, embodies the prophetic encounter with the abyss of God, inaccessible to representation and aligned with negative theology, as prescribed by the Second Commandment ("You shall not make for yourself graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth")

[255] See Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Princeton University Press 2002.
[256] Massimo Donà, *Incomprensibile come la pietra. In vertiginosa prossimità: Andrea Emo e Anselm Kiefer*, in Anselm Kiefer, *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce*, ed. by Gabriella Belli and Janne Sirén, Marsilio/MUVE, Venezia 2022, pp. 87-106: 89.
[257] See the chapter "Palettes" in Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 98-117 and the first section of the chapter "Die Malerpalette: künstlerische Selbstreflexion" in Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 263-285.
[258] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., pp. 312-329.

[259]. Their conflict dramatizes not only a theological dilemma, but also an aesthetic one: the perpetual struggle between figuration and abstraction, between the desire to embody the divine and the recognition that it ultimately exceeds every image.

The artwork *Aaron* does not depict a figure; rather, it presents a dense forest in which the name "Aaron" is inscribed. "Kiefer suggests his identification with Aaron as the artist or image-maker whose role is to seek the grandest of visions. Yet these visions can only grasp a part of the whole, and are invariably subject to 'higher judgments'"[260].

In representing both positive and negative theologies, Aaron and Moses also embody, in artistic terms, the tension between attempting to describe the divine figuratively and the abstract refusal of idolatric forms, favoring evocation though allusions.

Navigating between these two aesthetic models – abstraction and figuration – corresponds, from a theological perspective, to two ways of approaching the divine: the *cataphatic* (affirmative) and the *apophatic* (negative). Kiefer's own approach, from a stylistic point of view, reflects a mixture of both, with abstract paintings evoking figures and figurative artworks immersed in an oneiric and diluted atmosphere, producing a paradoxical "iconophile iconoclasm": the conviction that the wisdom of images is everything, and because of that, nothing.

Furthermore, as Kiefer's work developed over the decades, abstraction partially lost its creative potency. Kiefer seeks to revitalize Abstract Expressionism by integrating symbolic figures drawn from Romantic figurative techniques and motifs[261]. As Massimo Cacciari notes in his brief but insightful essay on Kiefer, the artist's apparent iconoclasm ultimately functions as a defense of the image: a refusal of the mimetic, representational approach traditionally associated with figurative art, in favor of a deeper, ontological image. Beings are presented not as they appear, but as they truly are[262]. More than a "figurative" art, Kiefer's work can be described as "figurable": it pushes toward the ontological limits of fixed forms in order to express the invisible rhythms and emotions they emanate, giving rise to a secret, enigmatic, and protean aesthetic grammar[263]. Indeed, between forms and un-form there is a rhythmic, fundamental connection. As explained by Andrea Emo: "Poetry and art are an infinity that loves boundaries, that loves form. And form and boundaries are the horizons of infinity. Infinity loves limits, loves boundaries, because it recognizes itself in them, its intimate creatures. Who could

[259] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 167.
[260] *Anselm Kiefer. Heaven and Earth*, cit., p. 74.
[261] See Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 49.
[262] See Massimo Cacciari, *Omaggio ad Anselm Kiefer*, in *Anselm Kiefer [Catalogo della mostra Himmel-Erde, Museo Correr, Venezia, 15 giugno – 9 novembre 1997]*, cit., pp. 11-12.
[263] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 213.

create forms if not infinity? Infinity is negative identity, infinitely negative, whose actuality is difference"[264].

This paradoxical aesthetic dynamic arises from the tension between the search for meaningful, definitive images and the recognition that the primordial experience of reality is chaotic, undifferentiated, and confused. Immersed in these abysses, images are often indistinct; yet, simultaneously, an existential tension emerges between the desire to imagine and communicate an overarching truth and recognition that such a truth always exceeds our capacity to represent it fully[265].

Given that Judaism is, overall, an aniconic religious tradition[266], Kiefer's choice, as a Western artist, to engage iconographically with its central notions represents a considerable aesthetic challenge. He demonstrates a profound theoretical understanding of this complex and nuanced scenario, deeply rooted in theological debate: "The Jews never spoke of God, only ever in negative terms: Ain Soph = boundless nothingness. The emergence of the image, as I understand it, is analogous to Isaac Luria's Tsim-Tsum... the space released by Ain Soph, in which the world can unfold as something materially incomplete, provisional. In its failure (and it always fails), the image illuminates the greatness of that which it cannot achieve"[267].

Kiefer's artistic practice can thus be understood as a trans-cre-active process: a translation of the iconic resonances of Jewish mysticism into personal, nontraditional images[268]. Kiefer's artworks can be understood as a contemporary rewriting, through an innovative visual language, of the contemplative and theurgic engagement with the divine that Kabbalistic imagination historically envisioned and enacted.

Far from "imitating" and "reproducing" traditional Jewish iconographies, Kiefer seeks resonance directly with the sacred source of the experience of this tradition, filtrating such though his own perspective. As Häußler notes "the Kabbalist, like the artist, undergoes a subjective experience. The mystical vision of God is no more subject to a fixed dogma than

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[264] Andrea Emo, *In principio era l'immagine*, ed. by Massimo Donà, Romano Gasparotti and Raffaella Toffolo, Bompiani, Milano 2019, p. 122.

[265] A position which, according to Christian Gaillard, places the artistic process near Jungian psychoanalysis. Cf. Christian Gaillard, *L'arte ci precede. Da Lascaux a Anselm Kiefer*, Moretti & Vitali, Bergamo 2021, especially pp. 235-262.

[266] Cf. Karel van der Toorn (ed.), *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Peeters Pub & Booksellers, Leuven 1997.

[267] "Die Juden haben Gott nie ausgesprochen, immer nur in negativen Umschreibungen:Ain Soph = grenzenloses Nichts. Das Entstehen des Bildes, wie ich es verstehe, ist ein Analoges zum Tsim-Tsum des Isaac Luria... der vom Ain Soph freigegebene Raum, worin sich die Welt entfalten kann als ein materiell Unvollendetes, Vorläufiges. Das Bild lässt im Scheitern (und es scheitert immer) die Größe dessen aufleuchten, dass es nicht erreichen kann" (Anselm Kiefer, *Rede anläßlich der Verleihung des Ricardo-Wolf-Preises im Mai 1990 in Israel*, in Verein der Freunde des Israel-Museums in Jerusalem, *Anselm Kiefer. Mohn und Gedächtnis*, Berlin 1990, n.p.).

[268] Cf. Siniscalco, *Tradurre versi in immagini*, cit.

artistic creation. Both 'processes' find their individual expression and do not aim at objective representation. The juxtaposition of his artistic activity with the mystical concept of Genesis thus shows how strongly Kiefer's self-reference is pronounced. It also becomes clear that he pursues similar goals in his artistic work as the Kabbalist in the practice of his faith: both strive for unification. In Kiefer's case, one could even speak of an *artistic Tikkun*"[269].

For Kiefer, as for Nitsch, art offers a way to reclaim the possibility of *coincidentia oppositorum*. The most radical difference between the two artists lies in their distinct spiritual sensitivities, which also shape their divergent symbolical references. Following Idel's categorization, Nitsch might be aligned wholly with ecstatic Kabbalah, aiming at mystical union with God, whereas Kiefer, in animating the abstract metaphysical framework of Jewish mysticism through images, preserves the individual identity of the seeker even while contemplating the divine.

4.2.2 *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*: A Kabbalistic-Artistic Initiation to Labyrinthic Temporality

Kiefer's most thought-provoking artwork explicitly inspired by Jewish mysticism is *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (2004-2015), a site-specific installation created for Pirelli HangarBicocca (Milan).

The main inspiration for this project, where several Kiefer's thematic interests converge, broadly concerns Jewish mysticism, primarily under the influence of Hekhalot literature[270] and Merkabah mysticism[271], but also include references to the Kabbalistic Tree of *Sefirot* and the Lurianic notion of the "shattering of the vessels". Furthermore, a detailed analysis of this installation illuminates other examples of Kiefer's art inspired by Kabbalistic and mystical concepts, which play a significant role in his engagement with the sacred.

The installation is composed of seven towering palaces, ranging between 13 and 19 meters in height, constructed from lead and concrete. In 2015, Kiefer added five canvases to the installation, addressing themes already present in the site-specific work and emphasizing topics such as the spiritual quest for salvation – in *The German Line of Spiritual Salvation* (*Die Deutsche Heilslinie*, 2012-2013) – and the esoteric function of alchemy – in *Alchemy* (*Alchemie*, 2012).

[269] Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 101.
[270] See J. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation. Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden-Boston 2013; Giulio Busi, *Città di Luce. La mistica ebraica dei palazzi celesti*, Einaudi, Torino 2019.
[271] Cf. Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 2nd edition, Brill, Leiden 2014; see Couliano, *Out of this World*, cit., pp. 154-187.

The installation embodies the research and experimentation that Kiefer developed over nearly fifteen years in La Ribaute, his studio in Barjac, actualizing these explorations within the vast space of HangarBicocca. There, an enveloping silence and a refined use of lights create a quasi-sacral atmosphere – a space separated from the profane urban surroundings, inviting visitors to reflection and self-introspection.

The title of the artwork derives from the seven celestial palaces described in the ancient Hebrew treatise *Sefer Hekhalot* (Book of Palaces)[272], part of the Hekhalot literature. This text, dating back to the fifth-sixth century A.D., delineates the spiritual path of initiation for the soul seeking union with God[273]. It also contains a description of the Merkabah, a chariot that carries the seeker on the journey described in the vision of the Biblical prophet Ezekiel and adopted by mystics to ritualize their spiritual practice. As Idel explains, in the Hekhalot literature "the use of anomic techniques was intended to induce paranormal experiences of ascent to the realm of *Merkavah* and contemplation of the Divinity. It is worth emphasizing that this type of contemplation was not a regular response to the request of the Divine, as were the commandments, nor was God seen as the beneficiary of this kind of human activity. It was mostly a human initiative that brought the individual to undertake the perilous path of ascending to the high for the sake of attaining an extraordinary and fascinating experience"[274]. It is also typical of Jewish mystical literature itself – with several Gnostic resonances – that this path is fraught with dangers and challenges: all towers are ruled by entities, analogous to Gnostic archons, and the soul must pass through trials to overcome each of them.

All of Kiefer's palaces share a similar structural design: they are composed of five or six modules of reinforced concrete, based on the modular measure of a container (2,5x2,5 meters), which at a first glance evoke heaviness, solidity and resilience. However, a closer examination reveals them as symbols "of globalization, the transformation of capital into something liquid, into something that is no longer solid but absolutely fluid, transformable"[275]. This idea of

[272] See *Sefer Hekhalot (3 Enoch)*, in Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, cit., pp. 217-233.
[273] To this book Kiefer also devoted an impressive 2001 homonymous artwork, where an ascending vortex, perhaps symbolizing the spiritual path, is represented by an *Ouroboros* – here Gnostic and Jewish references merge in an enigmatic reflection on temporality. The steps of the concrete building depicted, numbered from 1 to 7, are inscribed within the orbit of an infinite movement, as suggested by the ∞ symbol. The abstract infinite functions as crown (*Keter*) of this eternal motion.
[274] Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, cit., p. XV.
[275] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 52 ("Der Container ist ein Sinnbild der Globalisierung, der Verwandlung von Kapital in etwas Flüssiges, in etwas nicht mehr Festes, sondern absolut Flüssiges, Metamorphisierbares" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 60]). Cf. also Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 92.

liquidity and fragility is reinforced by the inclusion of lead within and above the towers – lead wedges and lead books are incorporated, making the structures more unstable. The books represent the hermeneutic tradition of culture and thousand-year old knowledge[276]. Lead, though appearing extremely strong, is a fluid medium, requiring very little energy to melt[277]. Moreover, the arrangement of the palaces conveys fragility: they appear almost fallen, even ruinous. This initiatory path seems ultimately to leave contemporary humans, immersed in nihilism and alienation, unsaved, doomed to tragic suffering, from which myth may serve as temporary, but not definitive, *pharmakon*.

According to Auping, this series of tower-like structures represents a return for Kiefer to the early spiritual aesthetic experience of La Tourette: architecture designed to explain the path to God and heaven, here shifted from Christian to Jewish tradition[278]. For Kiefer, it is a paradoxical return to his youth, to his source of spiritual inspiration, which, as a personal "artistic *Tikkun*", is transfigured into his own original creative act. This "return" manifests in such dense spiritual creation that it led the abstract painter and critic Roberto Floreani to write: "Anselm Kiefer has created what can be considered the authentic Temple of Theosophical-Kabbalistic Art, a new Steinerian Goetheanum, an indelible and eternal monument to immanence, in the artist's creative will, and to transcendence, in the will of God, which guides and protects it"[279]. Furthermore, Mauro Zanchi, author of a seminal monograph on Kiefer's Milan installation, observes that "the towers appear as the objective correlative of an iconography pervaded by the numinous"[280].

Each palace is endowed with a specific title and thematize a particular topic[281]. We shall focus here on the Kabbalistic elements:
1) *Sefirot*: The northern side of the palace features neon signs in Kiefer's handwriting, bearing the names of the ten *Sefirot* through which God reveals himself in creation. The neon signs are arranged along three vertical axes from the top to the bottom of the tower, representing the manifestation of the divine infinite light in history, crystallized within a human technical

[276] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 53 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 61).
[277] Cf. *ivi*, p. 52 (*ivi*, p. 60).
[278] See Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 44.
[279] Roberto Floreani, *Astrazione come Resistenza*, De Piante, Milano 2021, p. 151.
[280] Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 7.
[281] For the description of the palaces, see the detailed and precise explanation provided in the official guide on the HangarBicocca website (https://web-assets-hangarbicocca.pirelli.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Installation-guide-Anselm-Kiefer.pdf).

creation. Along the central axis is the addition of Da'at, a principle theorized in various Kabbalistic schools, combining intelligence (Binah) and wisdom (Hokhmah), for a total of eleven signs.

This representation aligns with other Kiefer attempts to depict the *Sefirot*, particularly two three-shaped sculptures housed in vitrines within the *The Heavenly Palaces* series (*Die Himmelspalästen*, 1988-1991). In these, Kiefer represents the traditional iconic image of the *Sefirot* Tree, as illustrated in Renaissance treatises, including Robert Fludd's writings, which were influential for Kiefer[282]. Häußler notes: "According to Kabbalistic belief, the *Sefirot* are powers of light and energy that spread from top to bottom along these paths. Divine light flows through the vessels. In both works of art, the connecting paths are materialised by the use of pinewood sticks. He therefore does not use a material that is directly associated with the flow of energy. Instead, the artist achieves the impression of lightness and movement by leaving the entire space *around* the sticks free: in this way, light can fall into the completely transparent display case from all sides and shine through the sticks. The light itself becomes an integral part of the sculptures. The sculptures' characteristic of 'immateriality' seems to reflect the Kabbalistic idea"[283].

Through such creative technical solutions – from sticks immersed in light to neon signs – Kiefer mythopoetically enacts the spiritual experiences described in the mystical texts, reinterpreted through his own historical lens.

2) *Melancholia*: Inspired by Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) famous engraving, indicated by the polyhedron atop the tower – a replica of Dürer's enigmatic geometrical figure – this palace evokes, through symbols of lead books and stars (on strips reproducing Nasa classification), saturnine feelings highlighted by the overall installation: the loss of the Origin and the tragic quest for a new one. Melancholia evokes almost directly the feeling of nostalgia: "Unlike mourning, which tends to free us from the lost object, decreeing its erasure, the experience of nostalgia evokes ghosts and resurgences. It does not aim to resurrect the dead, but wants to make them speak and act as if they were alive"[284]. What is no longer with us continues to visit, invoking *Heimweh*, sentimentality for an origin transcending temporal past[285].

3) *Ararat*: The tower is crowned by a lead model of a ship from the Second World War, merging tragic German history with the Biblical narrative: Ararat is the mountain upon which Noah's ark rested after the primordial flood, as told in Genesis.

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[282] Cf. Häußler, *Anselm Kiefer. Die Himmelspaläste*, cit., p. 40.
[283] *Ivi*, p. 41.
[284] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 37.
[285] See also *Melancholia*, a 1990-1991 sculpture of an airplane surrounded by Dürer's polyhedron, a creative fusion of historical and mythical inspirations.

4) *Lines of a magnetic field*: The tower is encircled by strips of lead film with photographic cloud prints, evoking the contradiction between lead's light-absorbing properties and the film's function of transmitting light to generate images.

5)-6): *JH&WH*: These two towers of identical height and complementary design, feature matching top elements: the uppermost level of each ends in nine lead books and a pair of neon letters – "JH" and "WH", respectively. Read in order, the letters form "Yahweh", the unpronounceable name of "God" in Hebrew. By representing it thus, Kiefer engages with the theme of the ineffable: God transcends his own sacred name, yet art can hint at this ineffable plane, guiding the viewer along the initiatory path toward unitive wisdom – that wisdom that Jewish mysticism understands as a quest through the palaces to the vision of God. Between these towers, eleven irregularly shaped boulders of various sizes, composed of mixed materials and coated in molten lead, are scattered seemingly at random and labeled 1-11. These represent the shards of the vessels shattered during creation, according to the Lurianic Kabbalah. This theme recurs in several of Kiefer's other works, most notably *Breaking of the Vessels* (1990), a massive bookcase filled with roughly thirty lead books, evoking Jewish sacred and mystical texts. The bookcase is crowned by a semicircular pane of glass inscribed with *Ain Soph*, while metal pieces on either side display the *Sefirot* names in Latin letters. The shattered glass recalls both the Kabbalistic vessels and Kristallnacht (9-10 November 1938), connecting metaphysics and history, a subtle continuity Kiefer frequently achieves[286].

7) *Tower of the falling pictures*: The final tower represents the "tower of silence", the goal of the initiatory path where the secret of God is hidden[287]. Kiefer portrays it in despair: broken, unadorned paintings surrounded by dusty glass sheets evoke iconoclastic controversies and anti-Semitic violence. The tower also references "fallen angels"[288]. Ultimately, coherently with the sacred texts, it shows that the divine is accessible through solids and voids: "From a visual point of view, it is the contrast between bursting light and the secrecy of darkness. On an auditory level, however, the 'fullness' is represented by the deafening noise of the *hayyot*, the supernal chariot and the impetus of angelic songs, while the 'emptiness' of silence unites and transcends the earthly dimension"[289].

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[286] Ten years later, in the fall of 2000, an exhibition of six of Kiefer's monumental paintings, titled *Chevirat Ha-Kelim*, was held at the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière in Paris under the French title *Le Bris des Vases*. The explicitly referred to the Kabbalistic rupture of the vessels and once again engaged with Luria's vision of creation. See the catalogue: Anselm Kiefer, *Chevirat Ha-Kelim*, ed. by Catherine Strasser, Editions du Regard, Paris 2000. On the same theme we may also recall the 2001/2002 exhibition in Basel at Fondation Beyeler, entitled *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (see Anselm Kiefer, *die sieben HimmelsPaläste 1973–2001*, Hatje Cantz-Fondation Beyeler, Ostfildern-Ruit 2001), and the 2002 New York exhibition, titled *Merkaba* (cf. Kiefer, *Merkaba*, cit.).

[287] Cf. Busi, *Città di Luce*, cit., pp. XCIII-XCVIII.

[288] See Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 83.

[289] Busi, *Città di Luce*, cit., p. XCV.

Kiefer's iconographic configuration of the seventh palace remains mysterious and enigmatic. The artist deliberately leaves the end of the initiatory path in a paradoxical state – a reflection, in his view, of the ambiguous ontology of the world. As Floreani writes, all his towers are "towers of suffering, telling stories of uprooted peoples, jagged, characterized by an uncertain, crooked, heavy, laborious, deafening path, compensated by steel wedges that keep them in an apparently unstable balance, as the quest for elevation itself has required since the dawn of time"[290].

Kiefer had already explored the theme of the mystical journey through the heavenly palaces in his artist's book *Merkawa* (1996), which features black-and-white photographs of spaces resembling concentration camp interiors, abandoned palaces, and disused factories. These horrific sites are sublimated through reference to mystical experience, suggesting that transcendence is possible even amidst ruins. The starry sky remains reachable, glimpsed through a broken window, symbolically reinforcing the precarious nature of spiritual ascent. Yet, ultimate liberation is never guaranteed – it is the fragile outcome of an individual spiritual journey. The risks inherent in such a worldview, particularly in light of tragic events such as German history, are always present in Kiefer's mind. However, his deconstructive and occasionally cynical approach is never entirely devoid of hope. Through his persistent, almost obsessive reworking of myths, symbols, and mystical structures, Kiefer demonstrates an authentic pursuit of an iconography capable of "reenchanting" the world.
The melancholic, gloomy, and introspective atmosphere emanating from much of his oeuvre reflects the sense that this path has not yet reached its conclusion. Given Kiefer's conception of becoming and transformation, it may never achieve a definitive end. Nevertheless, the spiritual experience it evokes – especially within the framework of Jewish mysticism, with its intricate system of interpretation and orientation – offers an approach to the sacred, a connection to the divine, which manifests in infinite forms, names, and expressions, all pointing to the very same Origin.

In *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, we encounter a distinct "initiation journey"[291] in which the end is neither predetermined nor permanently attained. The goal continually recedes, shifts forward, and is progressively reconfigured. Any achieved destination alters the Origin itself, renewing

[290] Floreani, *Astrazione come Resistenza*, cit., p. 153.
[291] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 52 ("eine Initiationswanderung" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 60]).

the spiritual path. The final goal remains unknown, continuously redefined through the interaction between subject and object, humanity and universe. History does not stop, and the universe remains a living entity, neither subsumed to rational control nor to epistemic certainty. The mystical development across the Seven Palaces can be described as a series of movements involving simultaneous ascent and descent. Kiefer explicitly references Jewish mysticism in this regard: in the *Small Book of the Palaces*, the mystical journey is upward, toward the world of the throne (the Merkabah), while later the spiritual experiences were described as a "descent" toward the Merkabah[292]. Kiefer's fascination with this polarity led him to seek similar patterns in universal culture, identifying comparable processes in the Gnostic doctrine of Valentinus[293], as well as in Goethe's *Faust*: "*Steigend steigend sinke nieder*" ("Rising, rising, sink below")[294], and even Dante's dynamic movement in *The Divine Comedy*[295].

This circular movement of ascent and descent informs Kiefer's conception of temporality, which is explicitly antilinear, anti-progressive, and anti-eschatological[296]. He recognizes the dangers inherent in eschatologism – the proclamation of history's "end" or the dogmatic assertion of a higher meaning – since history, for Kiefer, is always alive, self-developing, and open to otherness. Accordingly, his palaces feature doors leading both skyward and downward, depending on the existential direction assumed by the traveler.

Like Wagner and Nitsch, Kiefer conceives temporality in labyrinthic and spherical terms, resonating with cosmic rhythms[297] within a "continuous cycle of building and destruction"[298], which, in his interpretation, defines the Jewish religious worldview, and has been largely forgotten in later Christianity. Temporality, in this perspective, is curved: it must bend and warp to avoid succumbing to the relentless forward drive of linear time, which, like Saturn devouring his sons, consumes each instant. Time should allow humanity to rediscover the Beginning and activate mechanisms of recognition and insight. As Vercellone observes, "symbols and myths hint at, or rather suggest, changing the trajectory of time, introducing us to *another* time, that

[292] See Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 23.
[293] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 130.
[294] *Ivi*, p. 131. Kiefer mentions the same image in his interview with Zanchi (*I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 85). The verse is not correctly quoted by Kiefer, as it does not literally appear in the text. Since Kiefer explicitly refers to Faust's descent into the realm of the Mothers, the cited passage probably derives from *Faust II*, Act I, Scene "Finstere Galerie" ("Dark Gallery"): "*Versinke stampfend! Stampfend steigst du wieder*" ("Sink down stamping! Stamping, you rise again"). *Steigend steigend sinke nieder* is also the title of numerous heterogenous works by Kiefer, among which stands out a 2009-2010 canvas depicting two skies moving in opposite directions, upward and downward.
[295] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 8.
[296] Cf. Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., pp. 7, 68 (Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 16, 74).
[297] Kiefer affirms that he discovered this rhythmic idea, from an artistic perspective, in Giambattista Tiepolo's (1696-1770) drawings at the Louvre (cf. *ivi*, p. 122 [*ivi*, p. 127]).
[298] *Ivi*, p. 143 ("Gibt es einen ständigen Kreislauf von Aufbauen und Zerstören" [*ivi*, p. 147]).

of a return to the origin that cleanses the irredeemable and irreversible passing of moments of their gravity"[299]. Only through recurrence and repetition does time acquire a meaning. As he further notes, "every donation of meaning has (...) from Odysseus to the present day the form of *nostos*, of returning to the self: the composition of meaning is connected to that of self-recognition, of being returned to the origin. Which implies that what begins also returns to itself"[300]. Repetition allows human communities to recognize historical continuity and stable meanings. In this worldview, "the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end"[301], within an eternal dance, which, following Heidegger's philosophy, is based on embracing human finitude – death – as a future-oriented recovery of the past[302]. As the Portuguese poet Teixeira de Pascoaes lyrically wrote, "what happened two thousand years ago is still happening today, in another space, where the past is present, the future is already past, and our soul takes shape and is an eternal hour dancing around an eternal sun"[303].

This quality of temporality manifests in the eternal present, that source of originary experiences where different temporal flows merge[304], revealing through ecstatic moments the eternity implied in becoming[305]. Kiefer's cosmic conception of time represents the culmination of his long-standing exploration of temporality in his whole research. His rejection of Western linear, teleological conception of time – understood both as divine Providence and as philosophical progress – alongside his refusal of deterministic historical fatalism, leads him to reflect, melancholically and with sorrow, on the nihilistic risk of leaving the world in a chaotic shapelessness. The mystical affirmation of the present – the *hic et nunc* as a space of freedom and conjunction between past and future – emerges as Kiefer's most fundamental achievement. This perspective aligns, to some extent, with Nitsch's understanding of temporality, despite their derivation from distinct traditions. Nitsch's view arises from Christian-Dionysian ecstatic mysticism, whereas Kiefer's arises from Jewish practices of searching for God, interpreted

[299] Vercellone, *Abitare l'archetipo*, cit., p. 53.
[300] Federico Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p. 17.
[301] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 172 ("Das Ende ist der Anfang, und der Anfang ist das Ende" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 174]).
[302] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, New York 2008, par. 68 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2: *Sein und Zeit*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977, par. 68).
[303] Texeira de Pascoaes, *Aforismi. Scelti da Mário Cesariny*, ed. by Manuele Masini, ETS, Pisa 2010, p. 45.
[304] Cf. Emilio Carlo Corriero, *Tra arte e vita*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Rosenberg & Sellier, cit., pp. 79-95: 91. On this point, scholars such as Arasse (*Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 217-221) and Trione (*Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 253; *L'opera interminabile*, cit., p. 38) have drawn a parallel between Kiefer's conception of temporality and Walter Benjamin's notion of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), where fragments of past and future appear simultaneously suspended – time at a standstill, detached from the continuum of history. On Benjamin's theory see Kia Lindroos, *Now-Time. Image-Space. Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art*, SoPhi, Jyväskylä 1998.
[305] Cf. the notion of "tempiternity" in Raimon Panikkar (*infra*, chapter 3.2.2).

outside a teleological and deterministic framework, as a utopian principle[306] offering, as Arasse explains, a "renewed hope of restoration and rejoining" in a cosmic perspective. Indeed, Kiefer "began to juxtapose kabbalistic myths and imagery with what appears to be a desire for fusion, or union, that is non-Western in origin. In this way, he seems to have opened a path that allowed him to move beyond both the melancholy of the angel of history and what has been called the 'aporia' of Jewish messianism, which believes 'the history of mankind is the history of *tikkun*, that is, the history of the failure of the *tikkun*'"[307].

Symbols, archetypes, and mythic images facilitate reconnection with the original temporal dimension. Vercellone notes that "the return avoids the terror dictated by absolute entropy, a negative implication of eschatological time, almost a terrorist limit of the late-modern imagination that continuously anticipates its own end in the most diverse forms in an apotropaic manner"[308]. Kiefer's conception of time allows him to harness the energetic dimension of temporal experience to foster spiritual growth. "It is a time that accommodates and does not alienate, that does not endlessly postpone *nostos*, subjecting the wait to endless frustration. It is not messianic time, blowing contrary to the expectations of individuals, like a hostile desert wind: it is a time in figure, that dilates in space and does not linger only in the meanders of consciousness. Saving time, in every sense, including our time, means spatializing it, translating it into figure"[309]. Archetypes, at the core of myths and symbols, perform this function: they evoke *Gestalten* capable of shaping reality and reconnecting us with its depths. Art metamorphosizes temporality, granting it renewed life within form. Vercellone observes[310] that Kiefer's art educates viewers on how to symbolize, aiming to mythically inhabit the world, to create a re-enchanted reality. Arasse similarly notes: "A wish to be absorbed into the living unity of the world, a feeling of melancholy when faced with the sight of ruins that present history as a process of inevitable decline, a sense of exile undertaken to make the failure of art into the creator's true mission: throughout these three dimensions of Kiefer's recent artistic practice, one desire seems to be at work, a desire to 're-enchant' the world – with 'enchantment'

[306] "The value-concept 'hope' has occupied a basic place in Jewish culture since its earliest harbingers and those who formulated it in Rabbinic literature. The roots of the idea embodied in this term burst through in various parts of the Bible – and not necessarily as a fully developed concept. The concept 'hope' appears in our historical literature both by itself and as one axis in a dual structure, such as 'shared memory' – 'hope for the future,' in which hope for the future draws energies from the collective historical memory. This concept likewise appears as expressing hope for mending in that structure whose axes are '*shevirah*' and '*tikkun*,' or historical disaster and restoration from them" (Shapira, *"Flowers of the Ashes": Feeling of Guilt and Seeds of Hope*, cit., p. 167).
[307] Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 228.
[308] Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, cit., p. 20.
[309] *Ivi*, pp. 111-112.
[310] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 25-26.

taken to mean both the active, living presence on earth of the sacred, and all the magic and incantation that invocation of that presence may involve, in order to make the time of the sacred and the time scheme of human history converge. Kiefer's need for art may rely on the ability of a work of art, with its own time scheme and 'unique appearance of distance, no matter how close the object may be', to give shape to his quest"[311].

Arasse further identifies three aspects of Kabbalistic, particularly Lurianic, iconography since 1990 as central to Kiefer's existential needs: the balance between myth and history in Jewish mystical representation; a poetic model for the emotions arising from Kiefer's internal creative process, akin to Kabbalah's first stage of creation; and a path to escape historical time, which for Kiefer coincides with the tragic weight of German history[312].
These points furthermore must be contextualized within Kiefer's broader effort to identify a spiritual paradigm for the post-secular human: a model synthesizing pre- or post- metaphysical frameworks, rich symbolic and holistic imageries, and a conception of reality as the "coincidence of opposites", It moves towards a rational mysticism that overcomes dualism – rationality/irrationality, immanence/transcendence – while integrating the concept of *Tikkun*[313], though without its eschatological dimension, given Kiefer's rejection of linear temporality.
Images connect inner and outer worlds, since the Whole is understood as One, where sensory and imaginative experiences converge.

Kiefer's interest in Jewish culture can thus be read as emblematic of his bipolar, contradictory attitude: the tension between mythic-symbolic re-enchantment, evoking the sacred in new forms, and the recognition of historical fragility, human weakness, and dogmatic misuse of original power. Jewish culture, situated between mystical elaboration and the tragic history of exile and persecution, exemplifies Kiefer's own internal tension.

[311] Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 296.
[312] Cf. *ivi*, p. 212.
[313] A complementary attempt from a philosophical perspective can be found in Sanford L. Drob, *Kabbalah and Postmodernism: A Dialogue*, Peter Lang, New York 2009. In this text, Drob explores the interface between Jewish mysticism and postmodern philosophy and theology, highlighting the powerful philosophical role Kabbalah can play in contemporary debate, fostering a "bilinear" or "multi-linear" model that moves beyond substantialist and systematic theology, as well as beyond Western dualistic metaphysics. Drob writes: "A major tenet of this work is that Kabbalistic theosophy, which provides a mythical account of God, the elements of creation, humanity, and the purpose of existence, anticipates, and is highly compatible with, the relativistic, perspectivist, anti-foundational sensibility of postmodernism, and further, that the Kabbalah is able to adopt and integrate precisely those postmodernist ideas (multi-culturalism, multiperspectivism, non-foundationalism, philosophical relativism, and even *atheism*) that have traditionally been thought to be antithetical to a religious or theological world-view. A major tenet of Jewish mystical thought is that God, the world, and humankind are conditioned by, and are ultimately a union of, opposite, even contradictory notions and ideas, and it therefore should come as no surprise that a *Kabbalistic theology* should itself rest upon ideas that theologians would typically exclude" (*ivi*, p. 16).

His art reflects his perception of a world marked by senselessness, absurdity, and unredeemed suffering. God appears absent, having withdrawn after creation, leaving humanity under the consequences of *Tzimtzum*. Kiefer's engagement with Jewish mysticism is thus selective: he adopts the cosmogonic framework, but not the full theological apparatus of divine providence. This choice reflects his rejection of eschatological and soteriological doctrines, and his conscious positioning within the secular, nihilistic roots of modernity – a landscape he both acknowledges and strives to navigate through art, not always succeeding. We could even imagine Kiefer bravely choosing to deeply engage with this web, self-positioning on its border, fighting with the nihilistic attitude which makes the re-enchantment an ever and ever challenging perspective.

The difficulty of the spiritual path is explicitly depicted in works such as *The Seven Palaces* (2002), where heavenly towers appear as seven cages suspended over a leaden canvas surface. Contained within are stones symbolizing the mystics' heavy souls "imprisoned" at different stages. This work, in our view, reflects the real risks inherent in spiritual pursuit, particularly in the contemporary age. Zanchi's opinion is that "man is placed on the borderline between being the earthly representative of divine Magnificence, with the soul resembling the throne of glory, and being the architect of nihilistic ruin in the contemporary era"[314]. In this sense, "the seven towers constitute a vital monument seeking to counteract the nihilism of contemporary society. Kiefer wants to demonstrate that even art can be consumed by repression, the folly of wars, and the void of nothingness; yet a seed of hope or a cell of intelligence remains, to generate anew the profound emotion of a great work of art"[315].

In Kiefer's iconography, the ruins of modernity, dominated by linear time, become fossils of a vanishing civilization through which he seeks to establish a new beginning. By recombining ancient wisdom and contemporary styles, he attempts to restore that ontological unity of words and ideas disrupted by the fall of Babel.

Referring to a Chassidic legend he cited, Kiefer aims, through an anamnestic process, to recover the infinite sacred knowledge of the Torah, which an angel caused humanity to forget before birth[316]. In this way, Kiefer employs the anamnestic function of art, central to Gadamer's ontology of art[317], within his spiritual hermeneutics.

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[314] Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 27.
[315] *Ivi*, p. 77.
[316] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 33. The image is comparable to the process of oblivion and anamnesis theorized by Plato and within Neoplatonic tradition.
[317] Cf. *infra*, chapter 2.1.1.

Although this task remains incomplete – the fragmentation, ambiguity, and enigmatic nature of his creations attest to the ongoing process[318] – Kiefer's attempt points toward a distinct cultural orientation, creatively suggesting "another postmodernism" which diverges from the deconstructionist or neo-positivistic main trends[319]. The paradoxical, controversial, and emergent beauty of Kiefer's works manifests, aesthetically, this act of memory and recollection in a mythopoetic endeavor.

[318] In fact, Kiefer "creates the illusion of revelation through art by giving his paintings the names in ancient Hebraic language. However, the discrepancy between the original immanent meaning of the Hebraic terms and their representation in writing with Latin letters and in schematic imagery, the inability to render the hidden meaning of the sacred words in art or in writing is the subject of Kiefer's artistic melancholy" (Fürstenow-Khositashvili, *Anselm Kiefer – myth versus history*, cit., p. 142).

[319] "I certainly don't consider myself postmodern! I'm always underground. I never work on the surface. I represent something that sleeps. I talk about forgotten things like Greek or Germanic mythology, because they are things that live within us" (Anselm Kiefer interviewed by Alessandra Mammì, cit., p. 111).

4.3 Forms and Functions of Art after its Ruins

4.3.1 Images, Nature, and Ruins: The Endless Process of Art

Anselm Kiefer's syncretic engagement with diverse spiritual sources – from West to East, with particular attention to Kabbalah – confirms, to recall an image proposed by Zanchi, that "Kiefer can be considered a great heir to the artists of the Western Renaissance, one of those humanists who synthesized in their works the syncretic knowledge they drew from various sources, including those from the East, from sources where the texts of Jewish and Christian Kabbalists had been linked to books on alchemy, mythology and philosophy"[320]. This image finds further resonance in Andrea Emo's attribution to the Renaissance of a profound re-discovery of the sacred nature of art: "Was the Renaissance a movement of desecration that restored the cult of beauty and form for its own sake? Art as a new sacredness; sacredness beyond the images it represents. Music as an image of time beyond time; architecture is the beyond, the sacredness of space. Art is the example of knowledge that creates the unknowable. The immanence of the world that creates transcendence"[321].
Gnostic, Kabbalist, Renaissance humanist: these are three interpretative figures drawn from different sources that help define Kiefer. Yet, as soon as one attempts to approach him, his identity immediately shifts again, in a chiaroscuro process that renders him ineffable, like the Origin he seeks.

Another perspective for grasping the connection between the forms of art and the forms of the sacred in Kiefer's aesthetics is through a closer consideration of his ontology of art. As we have already seen, Kiefer's interest in the controversy over images reflects a sustained reflection on the opposition between iconophile and iconoclast approaches. His religious engagement with this theme, treated through the hermeneutical lens of Christian theology and Biblical symbolism[322], reveals the duplicity and ambiguity inscribed in the power of images: they both approach and conceal truth. This debate – so central to defining the function of art, whether as disclosure of truth (a Romantic position) or as concealment of it – is also deepened by Kiefer through specific philosophical references. The two authors most frequently mentioned by him as sources of inspiration are Martin Heidegger and Andrea Emo. With necessary caution, one may argue that Heidegger – whose ontology of art has already been considered in the discussion

[320] Zanchi, *I sette Palazzi Celesti di Kiefer*, cit., p. 70.
[321] Emo, *In principio era l'immagine*, cit., p. 472.
[322] Cf. *infra*, chapter 4.2.1.

of Gadamer's theory – represents, in Kiefer's reception, an access point to an iconophile perspective, whereas Emo aligns more with an iconoclast. Yet, both thinkers display dimensions of reversal that complicate such categorization, confirming Kiefer's own heterogeneous vision, which is not oppositional, but structured in complementary polarities.

Heidegger's philosophy and biography serve as an inspirational, or at least resonant, pole for multiple dimensions of Kiefer's work – even those that appear distant from one another[323]. From his reflections on Heidegger's ambiguous relation to National Socialism, explored in the artist's book *Martin Heidegger* (1976) and revisited in the painting *Todtnauberg* (1980)[324], to existentialist concerns expressed in works such as the watercolor *Essence/Ex-sistenz* (*Essenz/Eksistenz*, 1975)[325], Heidegger is a recurrent source. His presence is also notable in *The Ways of World Wisdom* (*Wege der Weltweisheit*, 1976-1977) and in numerous other paintings devoted to German intellectuals, where his name appears, among others, inscribed on canvas. At times Kiefer minimized Heidegger's influence[326] – perhaps reflecting discomfort with the

[323] For an extended discussion focused on the problem of representing historical modernity, see Matthew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

[324] The title refers to the village where Heidegger's Black Forest hut was located, but also alludes to Paul Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, which recounts his fraught encounter with Heidegger. See also Kiefer's photographic series *Für Martin Heidegger: Todtnauberg* (2010-2014).

[325] Heidegger coined the term *Ek-sistenz* to rearticulate the analytic of *Dasein*, to emphasize that human being cannot be reduced to its present properties, but "stands out" (*ek-*) into the clearing of Being. Humanity is not simply one existent among others, but the one who "dwells" in the openness of Being. In his *Letter on Humanism* he writes: "What man is – or, as it is called in the traditional language of metaphysics, the 'essence' of man – lies in his ek-sistence. (…) Ek-sistence thought in terms of *ecstasis*, does not coincide with *existentia* in either form or content. In terms of content ek-sistence means standing out into the truth of Being" (Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, in Id., *The Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins, San Francisco 1993, pp. 213-265: 229-230 ["Das, was der Mensch ist, das heißt in der überlieferten Sprache der Metaphysik das 'Wesen' des Menschen, beruht in seiner Ek-sistenz. (…) Die Ek-sistenz, ekstatisch gedacht, deckt sich weder inhaltlich noch der Form nach mit der existentia. Ek-sistenz bedeutet inhaltlich Hin-aus-stehena in die Wahrheit des Seins"; Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* (1946), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 9: *Wegmarken*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann,Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1976, pp. 313-364: 325-326). Elsewhere Heidegger stresses: "Man is rather 'thrown' from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being in order that beings might appear in the light of Beings as the beings they are" (*ivi*, p. 234 ["Der Mensch ist vielmehr vom Sein selbst in die Wahrheit des Seins 'geworfen', daß er, dergestalt ek-sistierend, die Wahrheit des Seins hüte, damit im Lichte des Seins das Seiende als das Seiende, das es ist, erscheine"; *ivi*, p. 330]). The notion resurfaces in Kiefer's *Essence/Ex-sistenz* (2011), where a mountain range emerges from clouds in post-Romantic grandeur. On its peaks Kiefer fixed metal scales holding diverse materials, a symbolic echo of Heidegger's existential meditation.

[326] Commenting on his relation to Heidegger in 1987, Kiefer remarked: "I'm interested in Heidegger's ambivalence. I am not familiar with his books, but I know he was a Nazi. How is it that such a brilliant mind was taken in by the Nazis? How could Heidegger be so socially irresponsible? It is the same problem as with Céline: here is a wonderful writer who was a rotten anti-semite. How do these thinkers, who seem so intellectually right and perceptive, come to such socially stupid and commonplace positions? I have shown Heidegger's brain with a mushroomlike tumor growing out of it to make this point. I want to show the ambivalence of his thinking – the ambivalence of all thinking. Ambivalence is the central theme of all my work. There is no place so ambivalent as Germany" (Anselm Kiefer, *Interview with Donald* Kuspit (10 June 1987), in *Art Words 2. Discourse on the Early 80s*, ed. by Jeanne Siegel, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor-London, 1988, pp. 85-90: 85-86. While Kiefer here claimed unfamiliarity with Heidegger's works and reduced his interest to ambivalence, Matthew Biro (*Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, cit., pp. 6-7) has shown otherwise, noting that Kiefer's 1963

philosopher's figure – but his significance remains evident. In an interview, Kiefer admits: "I would say that I was more of a disciple of Heidegger than of Beuys, even though I never met him. But I was born thirty kilometers from where he lived"[327]. His interlocutor even hypothesized that he could be described as "the painter of Heidegger's *Dasein*"[328]. Beyond specific direct influences, resonances and shared sensibilities towards the philosophical and existential challenges of their age are striking.

What Kiefer seems to derive from Heidegger, particularly from the already discussed *The Origin of the Work of Art*, is the understanding of art's epiphanic dimension as an ontological event: art is the privileged site where the event of truth takes place. This is also the core of Gadamer's ontology of art and his reflections on beauty. Although Heidegger's position is distinguished from Gadamer's by harshly critiquing the notions of picture and representation, his emphasis on art as the topology of truth's revelation situates him within a latent iconophile perspective[329]. Since art necessarily expresses itself through images, any attribution of truth-disclosure to art cannot be conceived apart from a constructive engagement with images. Art, like truth itself, exists in a dynamic interplay of concealment and un-concealment.
This is evident in Heidegger's own use of symbolic figures to grasp the fundamental structures of reality. Kiefer's complementary adoption of Heidegger's imagery confirms their power to render the truth of Being perceptible to those in relation with the artwork. As Biro observes, "certainty and doubt about 'realistic' representation – the search for new 'true' ways of seeing as well as their constant critique and formal dismantling – this dialectic (…) rests at the heart of the cultural production of Kiefer and Heidegger as well"[330].

Among the Heideggerian images that Kiefer adopts, one must highlight the massive painting *The Fourfold* (*Das Geviert*, 1997; 2.80 m. x 7.50 m.). The architectural structure depicted in this work was likely inspired by a brickwork that Kiefer encountered during his travels in India. The building was in a constant state of construction and destruction: newly made bricks were stacked on top of it and subsequently replaced as they were sold. Plumes of smoke suggest fires burning within. Removed from its socio-historical context, this structure transforms into an allegory of ephemerality. Its stepped pyramidal form recalls the tombs of the Egyptian

student diary (written in France) already displays knowledge of Heidegger's thought, and the early works such as *Essence/Ex-sistenz* (1975) point toward a sustained engagement.
[327] Kiefer, *Con la Storia dentro la pelle*, cit., p. 133.
[328] *Ivi*, p. 134.
[329] Which we have tried to sketch and introduce in chapter 2.2.1.
[330] Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, cit., p. 3.

pharaohs, Babylonian *ziggurats*, and Meso-American *teocalli*, all remnants of ancient civilizations. In the corners of the painting, the inscriptions translate as earth (upper right), sky (upper left), divinity (lower right), and mortals (lower left), which correspond to the fundamental elements of Heidegger's concept of the *Geviert* (Fourfold). Heidegger uses this notion as a theoretical framework to describe the totality of reality – the *kosmos* or *physis* in the Greek sense[331]. The Fourfold thus emerges as a "figure" revealing the interconnection of Being, condensed into a single visual optic that captures the presence of things and the worlding of the world in which *Dasein* participates. In this ontological relation, the four are one (Fourfold) and the one (Fourfold) is four: earth, sky, gods, and mortals are united "in the single fold of the unifying fourfold"[332]. Heidegger attempts to speak of all four simultaneously, aiming to push European thought beyond "representational thinking" (*vorstellenden Denken*) by embracing the hermeneutical power of relationality.

As Jafe Arnold notes: "Hearing and interpreting the Gods, thus, is for Heidegger one of the essential, meaningful relations of the Fourfold of worlding between Divinities and Mortals, the hermeneutic inception of the inquiry into Being as a hearing and (cor)responding. Like myth, this fundamental-ontological, hermeneutic 'positioning' of the Gods is the originary, inceptual, unconcealing impetus for beholding the tiding of Being that beckons to be thought"[333]. This insight exemplifies what Arnold terms Heidegger's "mythopoetic hermeneutics in enactment". This ontology, in which enacted imagination plays a pivotal role in approaching the disclosure of Being and its radiations, resonates with Kiefer's previously noted interest in the Quaternity, but above all with his attempt to reenchant the world. The image, in Kiefer's practice, is rejected both in its mimetic approach and its potentially hegemonic function of *simulacra*, in the sense theorized by Baudrillard; instead, it is conceived as a visual translation of the inner dialogue between the artist and the world's disclosure. The *Geviert* cannot be artistically evoked by simply attempting to mimic Heidegger's theorization of its four poles – that is, by figuratively depicting them as one may expect. Rather, it requires and attentiveness to its deep capacity to allow new forms and figures to emerge. In this way, even a ruinous Eastern architectural

[331] See Luca Siniscalco, *Cosmological Creativity: An Aesthetic World Perspective*, in «antae», vol. 6, nr. 2-3, December 2019, pp. 118-132.

[332] Martin Heidegger, *The Thing*, in Id., *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, trans. by Andrew J. Mitchell, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2012, pp. 5-22: 17 ("Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen gehören, von sich her einig, in die Einfalt des einigen Gevierts zusammen" [Martin Heidegger, *Das Ding*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, ed. by Petra Jaeger, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 5-23: 18]).

[333] Jafe Arnold, *Heidegger's Ins and Outs of Plato's Cave: The Mythical Liberation of Education in Martin Heidegger's On the Essence of Truth*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Warsaw, 2023, p. 181.

structure can be dwelt[334] as a *topos* of disclosure. As Vercellone aptly argues in discussing Kiefer's *Das Geviert*, art thus expresses a "necessity of re-cosmization"[335].

In this context, Kiefer appears to interpret his role in the manner of the poet described by Heidegger in his seminal text *Wozu Dichter?*[336], as well as in his writings on Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843)[337]. According to Celant, these influences are "multifaceted in Kiefer's work", since the painter "believes in the essence and power of poetry, which creates new conditions for being"[338]. Here, poetry is understood not merely as a literary genre but as the poietic, imaginative, and demiurgic function of art, which manifests though words and images. Artistic activity unfolds within the polarity between rhythm and structured form, which, according to Kiefer, Heidegger expresses though the notion of *stiften*[339]: "The poet *stift ein Werk*, creates a work. This means that he captures something. Heidegger considers this a sublime moment, and he is right, but for me it is also sad. I feel that there is a kind of conflict when I work on something limited in my studio while life continues around me. Perhaps my habit of constantly moving paintings around, letting them evolve before returning to them several months or years later, is an attempt to react to this frustration, to give the painting a kind of life while it continues to work on its own"[340]. This statement also references Kiefer's concept of artistic collaboration with nature, which we will explore shortly.

Heidegger's profound and creative meditation on existence is thus transfigured by Kiefer in his hermeneutical conception of art as an existential engagement between humanity and the cosmos, fostering new orders of reality and expressing novel patterns for humankind – always

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[334] See on this notion Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in Id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Collins, London 2001, pp. 141-160 (Martin Heidegger, *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), in Id. *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 145-164). Kiefer shows to know this text, which is often quoted by him. See, for example *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 134-135.

[335] Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, cit., p. 63.

[336] Martin Heidegger, *Why Poets?* (1946), in Id., *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 200-241 (Martin Heidegger, *Wozu Dichter?* (1946), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5: *Holzwege*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1977, pp. 269-320).

[337] See Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, trans. by Keith Hoeller, Humanity Books, New York 2000 (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 4: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1981).

[338] Celant, *Il destino dell'Arte: Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 17.

[339] "The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, however, is the founding [*Stiftung*] of truth. 'Founding' is understood, here, in a threefold sense: as bestowing, as grounding, and as beginning. But it only becomes actual in preserving. Thus, to each mode of founding there corresponds a mode of preserving" (Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in Id., *Off the Beaten Track*, cit., pp. 1-56: 47 ["Das Wesen der Kunst ist die Dichtung. Das Wesen der Dichtung aber ist die Stiftung der Wahrheit. Das Stiften verstehen wir hier in einem dreifachen Sinne: Stiften als Schenken, Stiften als Gründen und Stiften als Anfangen. Stiftung ist aber nur in der Bewahrung wirklich. So entspricht jeder Weise des Stiftens eine solche des Bewahrens"; Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5: *Holzwege*, cit., pp. 1-74: 63]).

[340] Kiefer, *Quell'incerto lucore che cade dalle stelle*, cit., p. 64.

in dynamic and subtle tension with past and future, different temporalities that coexist in both Kiefer's worldview and Heidegger's seminal reflections on temporality, especially as proposed in *Sein und Zeit*.

An example of this considered artistic process is one of Kiefer's most radical provocations: the recognition that Osama Bin Laden (1957-2011), through the attack on the Twin Towers, produced an event capable of generating a monumental image, "near perfection", owing to its almost magical power to captivate the viewer's gaze and visually crystalize a moment[341]. Through this epochal image, a new world is established. It is certainly a world marked by destruction, violence, and despair, yet one that provokes reflection[342]. Kiefer's provocation underscores once more, beyond moral judgment, the radical symbolic power of images.

At the same time, Kiefer's recognition of a processual ontology implies that, in his view, art can never be fully comprehended. There is always a persistent level of being and meaning that exceeds the interpretative function of *logos* – a limitation that, resonant with Nitsch's aesthetics, Kiefer finds frustrating. Modern instrumental reason is insufficient to approach the untamed territories of the sacred. In this regard, both Nitsch and Kiefer attempt to cultivate and valorize other faculties: imagination, intuition, and a bodily, performative, and carnal knowledge in the case of Nitsch; and a meditative, introspective, poetic evocation in the case of Kiefer.

Kiefer's already pronounced dissatisfaction with scientific rationality is paralleled by a similar critique of philosophical logos. According to Kiefer, "the logos divides, draws a distinction between being and non-being, creating a chronology. but ultimately there is not nothingness and then being; rather, they exist simultaneously; being is the perfectly real presence of the non-being self"[343].

This attention to the foundational function of non-being – which still resonates with Nitsch's elaboration on *das Nicht* – finds in Kiefer a clear theoretical reference to the Italian philosopher Andrea Emo (1901-1983). Through Emo, Kiefer discovers a theoretically rigorous argument for the power of Nothingness, which he had already intuitively pursued in his aesthetical explorations. This idea becomes so central to Kiefer's work that he even seeks parallels in Heidegger, interpreting the notion of *das Nichts* not as the mere opposite of being, but as a complementary domain, articulated through the concept of *nichten des Nichts*[344].

[341] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 75-77.
[342] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. by Chris Turner, London-New York, Verso 2002.
[343] Anselm Kiefer and Alexander Kluge, *Dancing with Pictures. Film & Dialogues* [booklet], Suhrkamp, Berlin 2017, p. 25.
[344] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 38

For Kiefer, art can never be fully comprehended as a linear or resolvable practice. As we have seen, it is characterized by an aporetic dimension, a feature also explicitly recognized by Emo himself. From this shared ontological perspective arises Kiefer's discomfort in speaking about his own art[345] – a paradoxical tension, given his frequent discussion of his work.

Andrea Emo was particularly influential for Kiefer's 2022 exhibition at Palazzo Ducale in Venice, entitled *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (*These Writings, Once Burned, Will Finally Cast a Little Light*)[346]. The exhibition featured several immense canvases created during the pandemic lockdown, revisiting seminal aesthetics ideas previously elaborated for the 2018 Paris exhibition *Für Andrea Emo*[347], which brought together approximately twenty paintings and three sculptures conceived to engage in dialogue with the solitary Venetian thinker.

The Venice exhibition, staged in commemoration of the city's 1,600th anniversary, placed Kiefer's works in conversation with masterpieces of modern Venetian art – such as those by Tintoretto (1518-1594), Andrea Vicentino (1542-1618), and Jacopo Palma il Giovane (1544-1628) – within the elegant Sala dello Scrutinio. Its title is derived from a sentence by Emo, a late but pivotal philosophical discovery for Kiefer dating back to 2015. In that year, theologian Klaus Dermutz suggested that Kiefer read the German translation of Emo's *The Negative God*[348]. Kiefer recalls the significance of this encounter in an interview: "When I read *Il Dio negativo*, it suddenly became clear to me that the author's philosophy was almost the intellectual and spiritual superstructure of my way of doing things. For me, the true artist has always been an iconoclast committed to staging an order that is about to sink into nothingness. But I had never been able to formulate this concept with the same clarity as Emo. He invites us to reflect on some crucial questions: everything we do already contains its own negation; an image without iconoclasm is a desecrated mystery; salvation lies not in the outcome of the work, but in the work itself. I found the best definition of my way of painting in his ideas"[349].

What most fascinates Kiefer about Emo's philosophy is precisely the iconoclastic nature of art – an aesthetic counterpart to Emo's overall ontology. Emo's thought can be seen as iconoclastic

[345] Cf. *ivi*, p. 24.
[346] See Kiefer, *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce*, cit.
[347] See Anselm Kiefer, *Für Andrea Emo*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris 2018.
[348] Andrea Emo, *Il Dio negativo. Scritti teoretici (1925-1981)*, ed. by Massimo Donà and Romano Gasparotti, with a preface by Massimo Cacciari, Marsilio, Venezia 1989 (German edition: *Metamorphose des Nichts. Philosophische Fragmente 1925-1981*, ed. by Massimo Donà and Romano Gasparotti, preface by Massimo Cacciari, Spur Verlag, Zürich 1997).
[349] In Vincenzo Trione, *Kiefer ritrae il filosofo venuto dal Nulla*, in «La Lettura – Il Corriere della Sera», 18 February 2018.

regarding images, because he refuses to mythologize them, or treat them as direct gateways to absolute truth. Nevertheless, as we will see, also his interpretation of images as ephemeral metamorphic elements doomed to vanish can arise as a paradoxical appreciation of their philosophical function.

Emo postulates an original, unfounded principle that can be defined as nothingness (*nulla*). At the Beginning, there is no specific being: since each being is determined and contingent, it is something rather than something else. There is no being, and thus no-thing, only nothingness. Moreover, if we attempt to conceive an absolute Being, this Being, because nothing could exist "other" than it, would itself be determined by nothing – and therefore remain undetermined, coinciding with the nothing from which it could have been distinguished[350].

Thus, the Principle reveals itself as an abyss: an unfounded foundation that decisively challenges the substantialist, positivist objectification and reification of Being. According to Emo, the reality we perceive is the product of the self-negation of this nothingness.

Like Heidegger, Emo conceives of art as a creative dimension through which truth is revealed. Yet, to summarize a complex comparison that would require much further elaboration, whereas Heidegger identifies truth with Being (and its symbolic manifestation within the Fourfold), Emo equates it with nothingness. As Sessa explains: "The creator's production determines communion with the mystery of Nothingness"[351]. Artistic images are authentic and original not when they depict visible, determinate beings, but to the extent that they approach the ineffable ultimate negative, coinciding with the unfounded foundation itself. The destruction of images, therefore, is a necessary act that allows them to rise again, in an infinite, labyrinthine process.

Kiefer visually manifests his "Emian" legacy in the Venice exhibition, where his artworks appear to eschew any explicit political, historical, or mytho-religious references – that is, any reference to something determinate. His paintings emerge from negation itself, arising from the erasure of previous images that they partially obscure, such as those on the walls of the hall. In a sense, they are the product of the fire that destroyed the hall's entire decoration in 1577, eradicating works by Guariento di Arpo (1310-1370), Gentile Bellini (1429-1507), Alvise Vivarini (1442/1453-1503/1505), Vittore Carpaccio (1465-1521/1526), and Tiziano (1488/1490-1576), which were subsequently replaced during the 1582 restoration[352]; yet these paintings, too, are destined to perish once the exhibition ends.

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[350] Cf. Donà, *Incomprensibile come la pietra*, cit., p. 100. See also Massimo Donà, *Sulla negazione*, Bompiani, Milano 2004.

[351] Giovanni Sessa, *La meraviglia del nulla. Vita e filosofia di Andrea Emo*, Bietti, Milano 2014, p. 176.

[352] Cf. Gabriella Belli, *Frammenti di una iniziazione*, in Kiefer, *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce*, cit., pp. 35-40.

These artworks tend toward abstraction, striving to represent the ultimate, ineffable negation. Trione lyrically describes them: "Chapters of an intimately nihilistic discourse, the sculptures and paintings 'dictated' by Emo present themselves as exercises in rewriting the *ultimate thing*. Bold hypotheses for inhabiting darkness. That impossible night dear to Novalis. Nothingness, the ultimate goal. That nothingness which, far from nullifying the artist's action, makes it highly significant"[353]. Moreover, these works can be understood as allusions "to an uncertain journey from form to formlessness, from certainty to uncertainty. These are paintings based on barbaric rituals. First, Kiefer paints visions. Then he covers them partially or erases them entirely, cloaking them under streams of molten lead. He thus surrenders himself to destruction 'without anger, without despair'. But it is also an act of regeneration, allowing glimmers and epiphanies to emerge: the remains of frescoes submerged under layers of lava"[354].
Through Emo, Kiefer discovers the same "nothing" imbued with meaning that Nitsch had encountered through Eastern forms of spirituality[355].

In his essay on the philosophical affinity between Emo and Kiefer[356], Massimo Donà rightly observes that their proximity manifests not only in a shared conviction regarding the ineffable nature of art – which no definition can exhaustively capture, for once defined, it would be extinguished, negating its intrinsic dynamic indeterminacy – but also in two other fundamental theoretical dimensions. First, there is the belief in the perfect identity of construction and destruction within the artistic act: without desecration, which separates the image from the whole and annihilates the original One, no image can come into being[357]. Second, there is the understanding of art as a response to a call from the "impossible": art itself is impossible because it is never fully accomplished; it "alludes to the manifestation of that which does not want to be known; for this reason, it fears anyone who sets out to know or explain it, or to give an account of it. Yet, at the same time, it draws the most obvious; the most obvious evidence of what actually exists: (...) the individual"[358].

[353] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 325.
[354] *Ivi*, p. 328.
[355] Cf. *infra*, chapter 3.3.1.
[356] Donà, *Incomprensibile come la pietra*, cit.
[357] But "the 'separation' produced by the creative act, that is, the destruction of the wholeness (of what would in any case be a false wholeness) claimed by any reality, redeems itself by dissolving what is a pure illusion. What is dissolved is the illusion of wholeness, in the light of which everything seems destined to come together" (*ivi*, p. 93).
[358] *Ivi*, p. 104.

Emo's reflections on art, as they resonate in Kiefer's aesthetics, find a profound affinity with the aesthetic theory of another "irregular" Italian philosopher, Manlio Sgalambro (1924-2014), who understood beauty precisely as the artistic manifestation of an original absence[359]. The artistic product does not exist in itself; it functions as an infinite reference to something else, to the threshold of nothingness. Beauty is experienced, in short, only when we confront the horror of truth: it emerges in the absence of a truth capable of rendering humanity ultimately fulfilled or established. Sgalambro's philosophical approach is thus simultaneously Platonic and anti-Platonic: beauty arises in relation to truth, but not through a homology between the two notions; rather, it emerges through their opposition. It is precisely here that a paradoxical and counterintuitive beauty manifests, as an abysmal distance and enmity toward being – a perspective that markedly diverges from the Heideggerian-Gadamerian tradition.

Sgalambro observes, in a 1989 article entitled *Del bello* (*On Beauty*), later reproduced almost verbatim in a chapter of *Anatol* (1990)[360], that there exists a conflictual relationship between the work of art and beauty. When beauty manifests, it overwhelms the work and annihilates it: "First like a spark, then like a fire burning the vile body of reality. For those who feel this fire, it truly burns everything around them (...). What remains is beauty. (…) In beauty, the work of art itself goes to hell while revealing the demonic nature of that beauty, the sudden irruption as if from who knows where. The work of art that resists beauty protects itself. Works of this kind (...) remain intact. Unfortunately for them. Beauty therefore strikes down the work of art that carries it. (...) Beauty is the enemy of the work of art that would like to play with fire, resorting to beauty as a tranquil ingredient it could then easily tame, bending it to its own ends. But beauty breaks the tenuous safeguards that even expert hands have put in place and overwhelms the work that was believed to be indispensable. Beauty makes its way, and its horrible image covers and erases the work that is now its enemy. This is the transcendence of beauty"[361].

This vision of beauty – as incendiary, iconoclastic, and overpowering all nominalism and aesthetic subjectivism – produces a radical separation between being and beauty, which exists only as difference, and never as identity. Art, returning to Emo, "is the paradox that creates eternal images through iconoclasm, through the profound iconoclasm of negation"[362]. Indeed, every image, precisely because it is an original expression of the unconditional Principle of everything, that is, of the One, embodies iconoclasm in action"[363].

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[359] Cf. Luca Siniscalco, *Una bellezza brutale. Sgalambro e l'estetica della forma*, in Rita Fulco (ed.), *Il coraggio della verità. Manlio Sgalambro a cento anni dalla nascita*, Luigi Pellegrini, Cosenza 2024, pp. 125-142.
[360] Adelphi, Milano 1990, pp. 131-135.
[361] Manlio Sgalambro, *Del bello*, in «La Sicilia», 27 May 1989, p. 3.
[362] Emo, *In principio era l'immagine*, cit., p. 127.
[363] Donà, *Incomprensibile come la pietra*, cit., p. 97,

Kiefer's artworks can be productively interpreted through an iconoclastic philosophical lens, as inherited from Emo and resonating in thinkers such as Sgalambro. This framework, however, must be understood in a specifically 20th-century philosophical sense, beyond the concerns of ancient iconoclasm regarding the depth of images or the concrete occasion for forbidding them. In this regard, Kiefer's iconoclasm cannot exist without his already discussed iconophile approach. He indeed judges his own oeuvre as constantly "infinitely approaching the absolute image"[364] – an approach that is never definitive and always directed toward the terrifying realization that the absolute image is, in fact, absolute nothingness, coinciding with the totality of all possible, ever-metamorphosing forms of images. Understanding this eternal and never-ending chain of images entails, for Kiefer grasping the metamorphosing chain of myths and spiritual traditions, thereby fostering a pluralistic and open view on the multiple ways through which wisdom – as the title of his major work echoes – reveals itself.

Kiefer's artworks appear as figures pregnant with expectation: the artist evokes forms and figures emerging from the original nothing, understood as pure possibility[365]. Yet, following Emo's trajectory, "the risk (...) that words or art betray presence, that they contribute to thickening, and not simply allowing deception to be, must be avoided, in the sense that every creative act must pass into something else, without claiming to become an insurmountable object or dogma"[366].

The destruction of images for the sake of their eternal life constitutes Kiefer's paradoxical aesthetic dance: simultaneously tragic and revitalizing. His ultimate aim is the impossible realization of an intrinsically "open" and "unfinished" project. A "never-ending work", referring to Vincenzo Trione's formulation[367]. One could even imagine Kiefer's oeuvre as a single, vast, multi-leveled installation, in which all paintings, sculptures, actions, and artist's books constitute mere radiations of a greater whole. The true meaning of art lies in its metamorphosis. As Sessa observes: "*Every* work of art that is truly such paradoxically places an unknowable mystery, *nothingness*, under the bright rays of aesthetic clarity. It is precisely in this sense that art is a titanic challenge to the negative character of nothingness, in that it

[364] Anselm Kiefer, *Lectio magistralis*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Rosenberg & Sellier, cit., pp. 31-46: 34.
[365] See Alessandro Rossi, *Il "controsimbolico" in pittura*, in «Antarès», nr. 20: *DissacrArte. Avanguardia e sacro nell'arte contemporanea*, Milano 2024, pp. 132-137.
[366] Sessa, *La meraviglia del nulla*, cit., p. 150.
[367] See Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit.

arrests, in creating and giving expression, the fleetingness of time experienced in the chronological dimension alone"[368], thereby granting it a visible image.

Furthermore, art does not grow in the expected places. It plays with chaos and chance, unfolding as a dynamic and affective dance between symbols and signs, myth and history, transcendence and immanence. As Andrea Emo writes: "Works of art are the manifestation (...) of some frightening, intimate, essential disorder: the individual and cosmic; universal disorder. Who else but a work of art can be its symptom and conscience?"[369].

Artistic works are marked by an intrinsically fractured development: their rhythm is defined by the dialectic between rupture and continuity, between apocalyptic moments of revelation and the insistent duration of the curved labyrinth that shapes temporality.

The viewer carries the responsibility of giving new life to the artwork through their gaze – establishing with it a quasi-erotic relationship[370]. Beauty appears as an intersubjective event: something emerges, and the ontology of images discloses itself to our aesthetic gaze as an opportunity for form-giving. Kiefer lyrically affirms: "The problem lies in our perception, that is, in our ability to distinguish the so-called 'real' image. Brightness and darkness are not properties of the universe, but visual sensations: without our gaze on it, would the cosmos still exist?"[371].

Our eyes extract a frame from the flux of reality, offering it an interpretation. This is why art and poetry are so significant: they shape the visual dimension of reality, attributing ontology to the chaotic flow of events and contingencies. As Kiefer states: "The real world does not exist, in my opinion, except through works of art or poetry, which are categorically distinct from life"[372].

Although life possesses neither specific teleology nor univocal meaning, Kiefer can nevertheless affirm: "I endure life by creating order in a small sphere. Order is not the right term – by creating coherence with my artistic work"[373].

Art's function, then, is not to mimic the chaotic flow of becoming, but to isolate its matrices, giving it meaningful and recognizable forms that foster emotional engagement and dialogue

[368] Sessa, *La meraviglia del nulla*, cit., p. 179.
[369] Andrea Emo, *Quaderni di metafisica 1927-1981*, ed. by Massimo Donà and Romano Gasparotti, Bompiani, Milano 2006, pp. 771-772.
[370] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 30-31.
[371] *Ivi*, p. 111.
[372] *Ivi*, p. 112.
[373] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 7 ("Ich halte das Leben aus, indem ich in einem kleinen Bereich eine Ordnung herstelle. Ordnung ist nicht der richtige Begriff. Indem ich in meiner künstlerischen Tätigkeit einen Zusammenhang herstelle" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 16]).

between artist and public, and thus express life. At the same time, art must distinguish itself from life in order to create. Creation always requires an excess over the self-giving of life, a process in which life transcends its own limits, "solving," like the alchemical *alkahest*, the experience of the world and transfiguring it into beauty[374].

From this perspective, Kiefer's aesthetics resonates with the evenemential ontology theorised by Gadamer and performatively expressed in Nitsch. For Kiefer, this understanding of the artistic process rests on the recognition that images, once released by the artist, become autonomous worlds of meaning endowed with their own function. His ontology of image is grounded in the conviction that "the image is not the illustration of Platonic ideas, it represents a permanent event, like the waves that, without end, break on the shore. The finite is no longer a boundary. Through its repetition, it becomes an act"[375].

In this process emerges what Kiefer, quoting Proust, calls the "joy of the rediscovered real"[376] – a renewed grounding for a dynamic and non-nihilistic reality.

It is precisely within this framework that we can understand Kiefer's critique of artistic minimalism and conceptualism. In his view, these approaches, through an excess of abstract reason, destroy the living dimension of art, which can only occur in the concreteness of its unveiling[377].

In this respect, Kiefer rejects the simple equation of art with objects: "Art does not equal life. In the Fluxus movement, objects from daily life were taken and made into art. This process rejuvenated art, made it interesting. But it also brought on a kind of autoimmune reaction. Art suddenly became full of life. Art has irradiated life and thus runs the risk of becoming mute after a certain half-life period (…). Certain manifestations of the avant-garde cannot be repeated. You can put a urinal in a museum once, maybe even twice, but it won't work a third time"[378]. Furthermore, he insists: "Art is not an object. Art is a way of receiving. And it is full

[374] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 23.
[375] *Ivi*, p. 158.
[376] *Ivi*, p. 163.
[377] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 28-29.
[378] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 230-231 ("Kunst ist nicht gleich Leben. Während der Fluxusbewegung hat die Kunst Gegenstände aus dem Leben genommen und sie in die Kunst gebracht. Dieser Prozess hat die Kunst verjüngt, interessant gemacht. Aber dadurch kam es zu einer Art Autoimmunreaktion. Auf einmal war sehr viel Leben in der Kunst. Die Kunst hat auf das Leben ausgestrahlt, und damit befindet die Kunst sich in der Gefahr, nach einer gewissen Halbwertszeit zu verstummen. [...] Bestimmte Erscheinungsformen der Avantgarde kann man nicht mehr wiederholen. Ein Pissoir kann man einmal ins Museum stellen, ein zweites Mal vielleicht auch noch, aber ein drittes Mal geht das nicht mehr" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 230-231]). Nevertheless, Kiefer acknowledged a significant debt to Joseph Beuys (his master), Marcel Duchamp (for his attempt to unify art and reality), and Andy Warhol (for his exploration of a style based on surface). On this, see Hecht and Nemeczeck, *Bei Anselm Kiefer in Atelier*, cit. The influential role of Pollock should also be stressed (see Schjedahl, *Our Kiefer*, cit.).

of archaeological potential"[379]. Although art may first appear as an object or product, it truly takes place as a process – precisely through the negation of objecthood and product[380].
Expressionism, often posited in the second part of the 20th-century as the antithesis to conceptualism – and with which Kiefer himself has sometimes been associated – also proves unsatisfactory for him as a theoretical conception of art. The expression of emotions, feelings, and the artist's inner life is not sufficient to establish a great work of art, which also requires, beyond solipsistic introspection, the active roles of will and intellect[381].
What ultimately defines art, for Kiefer, is its capacity to manifest in a paradoxical form: "radiating life" without coinciding with life, symbolizing impossibility while fostering human existential growth.

This artistic aim is itself embedded within the transformative ontology of reality, to which it remains complementary. The image of ruins – one of the most significant motifs in Kiefer's oeuvre – must be understood within this theoretical framework. The symbol of ruins appears not only in the title of Kiefer's cycle of lectures at the Collège de France (2010-2011), *L'art survivra à ses ruines* (*Art Will Survive Its Ruins*), but also as a recurrent aesthetic feature in his paintings and installations, as already emphasized in relation to *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*. Ruins are even woven into the narrative rewriting of the artist's own biography. Kiefer's first memory, mythopoetically recounted, is the bombing of his hometown, Donaueschingen, in March 1945: "My parents stuck wax in my ears, like Odysseus did to his companions, so I wouldn't hear the bombs. The bombs were the sirens of my childhood"[382]. This vibrant sound anticipates the sensory experience of ruins: "The house next to us was completely bombed out. I never experienced this rubble as something negative. It's a state of transition, of reversal, of change. I built houses with the stones scavenged in the big cities by the so-called rubble women – who are today an almost mythological concept. The rubble was always a starting point for the construction of something new"[383]. As a child, Kiefer often played in bomb craters, which became reservoirs of water for plants – reservoirs of life[384].

[379] Kiefer, *Interview with Donald* Kuspit (10 June 1987), cit.
[380] See Donà, *Incomprensibile come la pietra*, cit., p. 91.
[381] Cf. Kiefer, *Con la Storia dentro la pelle*, cit., p. 123.
[382] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 3 ("Meine Eltern haben mir Wachs in die Ohren gesteckt – Wie Odysseus, damit er die Bomben nicht hört. Die Bomben waren die Sirenen meiner Kindheit" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 13]). Cf. also *ivi*, p. 78 (*ivi*, p. 84).
[383] *Ivi*, p. 4 ("Das Haus neben uns wurde total zerbombt. Gerade diese Trümmer empfand ich nie als etwas Negatives. Das ist ein Zustand der Transition, des Umschwungs, der Veränderung. Mit den Steinen, die in den großen Städten von den sogenannten Trümmerfrauen – heute fast schon ein mythologischer Begriff – gereinigt wurden, baute ich Häuser. Die Trümmer waren immer der Ausgangspunkt einer Konstruktion von etwas" [*ivi*, p. 13]).
[384] Cf. *ivi*, p. 31 (*ivi*, p. 40).

Ruins also serve as a reminder of the collapse of the National Socialist political project, doomed to decay and crumble. Yet, this historical and tragic destiny is only a more virulent expression of a broader cosmic condition: reality is structurally impermanent. As in Nitsch's worldview, Kiefer conceives reality as fundamentally driven by *werden* (becoming), and art, accordingly, must embody this transformative dynamic without reifying it into static form. On this theme, the influence of Caspar David Friedrich is particularly relevant – especially his images of façades punctuated by holes – which, according to Kiefer, represent "the border to infinity"[385]. This imaginary, marked by melancholic fragility yet simultaneously by dynamic openness to the future, becomes a fundamental stratum of Kiefer's artistic approach, mediating between heterogenous domains.

From another, complementary perspective, the authentic aim of art is its own "self-destruction"[386]. Every attempt to produce the definitive artwork inevitably fails, for art always moves forward to new creations. As Kiefer affirms: "Art always wants to supersede itself, to destroy itself"[387]. Each image erases the one that immediately preceded it, in an infinite process. The artist's responsibility is to preserve certain images – granting them a future – while allowing others to fade and be forgotten. Once again, the Heideggerian dynamics of revealing and concealing comes to the fore.

Thus, Kiefer "shows rubble through history, like geological strata; from Ur, Babylon, Jericho, Kish, Persepolis, Nineveh, Elephantine, Memphis, from Thebes, Miletus and Akkad, right through history to the rubble of Germany. After all, the rubble, which speaks of the end of our civilization, is also a promise of a new beginning. 'For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure' (Rainer Maria Rilke)"[388]. In a similar vein, Simmel observed that "in the decay of a building, nature, which has in the process of building never given itself over as mere material of making, shows itself in its activity, in the overcoming of the forming power of spirit"[389].

It is only through destruction, then, that something new can emerge into visibility. As Murchadha notes: "The human being dwells in the sense of haunt. She is between presence and absence. In the case of ruins they belong neither to present nor to past, but to transitoriness.

[385] *Ivi*, p. 81 ("die Grenze zur Unendlichkeit" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 87]).
[386] Cf. Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 36-37.
[387] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 92 ("weil die Kunst sich immer selbst aufheben will, sich immer selbst zerstören will" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 97]).
[388] Freda Uziyel, *Will, Feelings, and Intellect: The three elements of a masterpiece*, in Kiefer, *Shevirath Ha-Kelim (Breaking of the Vessels)*, cit., pp. 150-140: 141.
[389] Felix Ó Murchadha, *Being as Ruination: Heidegger, Simmel, and the Phenomenology of Ruins*, in «Philosophy Today», SPEP Supplement, 2002, pp. 10-18: 11.

They indicate that which does not itself appear namely the passing of time. Such passing cannot be reduced to simple succession, but rather is the movement of withdrawal itself, an absence which allows something to come to presence. What Heidegger calls the destiny of being is ruination – decay – itself"[390].

For Kiefer, too, "rubble is the future. Because everything that is will pass. There's a wonderful chapter in Isaiah with the verse: 'Over your cities grass will grow'"[391]. In the aesthetic experience of simultaneity, the glorious past and the destroyed future are revealed together.

Kiefer's aesthetics thus advances toward a collaboration between the artist and nature, which, through the lens of Heideggerian philosophy, coincides with the original and unfounded encounter with the evenemential disclosure of being. For Kiefer, nature appears as "a collegial assistant"[392] of man. The artist does not, in an anthropocentric fashion, engage with nature under an ecological framework that would conceptually assign to it a "humanistic" value. Rather, he seeks to apprehend nature directly as endowed with a significant degree of agency, involving it as a true co-creator. This becomes evident in Kiefer's practice of exposing paintings and installations to the uncontrollable forces of wild nature and weather – in other words, to *chance* – allowing external elements to intervene in the artwork beyond his control. The artist retains only a "selective" function, isolating and retrieving the work once it has reached a moment of aesthetic resonance or effectiveness. Yet even this act of conservation is provisional: the work remains open to new modifications and integrations, never finalized.

In some cases, artworks are not merely exposed but buried: a symbolic entombment offered to Mother Earth, a ritual sacrifice through which works, conceived as seeds, might germinate into fertile plants, capable of proliferating across the world. Kiefer also subjects his paintings to electrolytic baths: ionizing the material so that it oscillates between positive and negative states. This process causes the painting to alter its color and continue evolving over time. Rather than seeking resolution in dialectical synthesis, Kiefer embraces what he calls "polar painting" – a painting with and through polarities.

From this perspective, ruins function not only as a recurring theme but also as an artistic methodology grounded in nature and becoming. Beauty is not to be found in the polished or

[390] *Ivi*, pp. 15-16.

[391] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 4 ("Trümmer sind an sich Zukunft. Weil alles, was ist, vergeht. Es gibt dieses wunderbares Kapitel bei Jesaja, in dem es heißt: 'Über euren Stadt wird Gras wachsen'" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 13-14]).

[392] *Ivi*, p. 198 ("eine kollegiale Hilfe" [*ivi*, p. 198]).

perfect, but in the imperfect, the harsh, the decomposing. As Kiefer affirms: "Everything disintegrates. A thing's true essence is revealed in decomposition"[393].

Nature, however, is not conceived here as a harmonious, serene dimension to be aesthetically imitated or reproduced. In Kiefer's vision, it often appears as a wounded, ruined nature – a nature marked by human devastation, in perpetual conflict, in a state of *polemos*. It is a locus of friction, where unexpected experiences and perceptions emerge – not only predictable appearances but also the miraculous and transcendent.

In this sense, Kiefer's aesthetics of ruin transfigures the German Romantic *Naturphilosophie* – a tradition with which he was intimately familiar – into a contemplative yet corrosive Anthropocene gaze into the abysses of reality. As Viglialoro argues: "In Kiefer's work, art transcends the imperative of completeness and works against it, forming its becoming. An end, then, that never ceases to be a radically autonomous (new) beginning"[394].

Within this ruinous aesthetics, the artist comes into contact with the past, with traditions, and ultimately with death. As in Nitsch's perspective, Kiefer's art underscores the profound interrelation between life and death as two modalities of the same cosmic unfolding. Human dwelling on earth is always bound to the domain of the underground. The more the past inhabits a place, the more it can acquire a sacred projection into the future. As Robert Pogue Harrison emphasized in his seminal research on the dominion of the dead, the debt of the living toward the dead is not merely rhetorical but an "ontological" fact: it is thanks to them that we exist as we are, for they continue to live in memories, artifacts, and rituals. Through the care of others – *Sorge*, in Heidegger's terms – the dead experience a posthumous life, still capable of shaping the present and the future. Their agency does not end with biological life. "The dead depend on the living to preserve their authority, heed their concerns, and keep them going in their afterlives. In return, they help us to know ourselves, give form to our lives, organize our social relations, and restrain our destructive impulses. They provide us with the counsel needed to maintain the institutional order, of which they remain the authors, and prevent it from degenerating into a bestial barbarism. The dead are our guardians. We give them a future so that they may give us a past. We help them live on so that they may help us go forward"[395].

This dialogue between the living and the dead is also the modality through which Kiefer interprets his relationship with artistic, philosophical, and religious traditions. They are ruins of

[393] *Ivi*, p. 139 ("es löst sich immer alles auf. In der Auflösung zeigt sich das eigentliche Wesen" [*ivi*, p. 144]).
[394] Viglialoro, *Kiefer. Kunst als Prozess*, cit., p. 64.
[395] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of The Dead*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2003, p. 158.

a concluded past, figures of crisis, remnants of forgotten experiences. Yet, through their apocalyptic power of unveiling, they contain within themselves the premise of the future: the keys to occurrences, the archetypal matrices of all possible future recombination.

It is not by chance that Kiefer privileges materials that visually transform – lead[396], straw (which "represents the effervescence of the transformation": at first rigid, then soft, and finally a decomposing element on the ground), sand, clay, hair, fire, and ashes[397]. These elements evoke a material, concrete atmosphere. They express a primordial fascination with the deep natural substratum, that domain at the core of our being, linking us to the most elementary universe.

Kiefer's engagement with nature and ruins finds its most complete expression in his Barjac studio, which plays a role comparable to Prinzendorf in Nitsch's cosmological construction. This space is conceived as quasi-sacred: set apart from the contemporary urban environment, it represents the fulfillment of Kiefer's dream of establishing an atelier capable of sustaining his permanent, never-ending creation.

La Ribaute in Barjac is the culmination of a biographical trajectory that led Kiefer to repeatedly move from one studio to another. His earlier ateliers were all located in Germany: in the Odenwald region, at Walldürn-Hornbach in a former school building (1971-1982); in Buchen, an industrial hangar (1982-1993); and in Höpfingen, a disused brick factory (1988-1992)[398].

In the early 1990s, Kiefer relocated to Barjac, where he designed and built a vast complex named La Ribaute, the epicenter of his creative work from 1992 to 2007, now transformed into a visitable museum. He later acquired an additional studio in Croissy-Beaubourg, on the

[396] "Lead itself is metamorphosis. The alchemists saw it that way too. Lead is the raw material of gold and all the processes that they use" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 54 ("Das Blei ist an sich die Metamorphose. Das wurde auch bei den Alchemisten so gesehen. Blei ist der Grundstoff zu Gold und all der Prozesse, die dabei stattfinden" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 61]). "Through this physical experience of lead, I accessed a spiritual level. I was able to determine that my fascination with lead is not an aesthetic fascination but a mythological, historical one" (*ivi*, p. 232 ["Aufgrund der sinnlichen Erfahrung von Blei bin ich auf die geistige Ebene gekommen. Ich habe feststellen können, dass meine Faszination für Blei nicht eine ästhetische, sondern eine mythologische, eine geschichtliche ist"; *ivi*, p. 232]). Notably, during the renovation of Köln Cathedral, Kiefer acquired lead from the old roof to use in his works – a transfiguration of ecclesiastical matter towards a new spiritual usage. See also Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, cit., pp. 230-255.

[397] "Ash is a wonderful medium. (…) When the bits of ash fall, they're like atomic particles that capture light. Ash fell constantly, a slight trickle that was always illuminated. You couldn't tell if the sparks of light were being gathered, were rising or falling. It's a Gnostic idea that sparks of light are caught in the earth and must be freed at the end of the world" (Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit. p. 8 ("Die Asche ist ein wunderbares Medium [...]. Wenn die Aschepartikel herunterkommen, sind sie wie Atomteilchen, die das Licht einfangen. Andauernd fiel Asche herab, ein schmales Rinnsal, das immer beleuchtet war. Man wusste nicht, ob die Lichtfunken gesammelt werden, nach oben steigen oder von oben kommen. Es ist ein Gedanke der Gnosis, dass die Lichtfunken in der Erde gefangen sind und man sie am Ende der Welt befreien muss" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., p. 17]). Ashes are also symbolically tied to Dionysian rituals and to the Christian Ash Wednesday (cf. Kiefer, *„Nachts fahre ich mit dem Fahrrad von Bild zu Bild"*, cit.).

[398] Cf. Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer. Studios*, Thames & Hudson, London 2012.

outskirts of Paris, a giant space whose two main pavilions are named after characters from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the hero Enkidu and Gilgamesh's divine mother, Ninsun.

What distinguishes La Ribaute from Kiefer's other ateliers is the extraordinary creativity through which he has reshaped the site, fostering a permanent dialogue between artworks, exhibition spaces, and nature. The site now extends across forty hectares, comprising more than ninety installations, all interconnected by a labyrinthine network of passages. Kiefer quite literally built the place: not only the atelier but also the surrounding environment, planting trees, erecting pavilions, constructing streets and fences, and carving kilometers of underground tunnels. These tunnels evoke the atmospheres of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), one of Kiefer's beloved books[399].

The creation of underground crypts recalls Nitsch's umbilical spaces in Prinzendorf. For both artists, these subterranean realms symbolize the mythological descent into the abyss, the necessary passage toward light. Kiefer has even been known to bury his paintings, symbolically bringing them closer to nothingness – an underground proximity to death that prepares them for eventual rebirth, a natural miracle, the splendor of nothingness[400].

In Kiefer's vision, these underground spaces establish a dynamic interplay with the towering structures that rise skyward, titanic gestures toward transcendence. The Heideggerian polarities of earth and sky thus acquire a tangible architectural form in Barjac.

La Ribaute appears as a landscape animated by elemental, primordial forces. Here, Kiefer assumes the role of sub-creator, a demiurge – a role made especially vivid in Wim Wenders' film *Anselm. Das Rauschen der Zeit* (2023). The site even contains an amphitheater, constructed from repurposed shipping containers filled with cavities. Liquid concrete was poured over them to create a five-level, three-sided structure approximately fifteen meters high. Kiefer himself has described it as "a temple of absence, shrouded in an atmosphere of anguish. A metaphysical cathedral"[401]. Auping's aptly called it "Kiefer's eccentric 'Dome of Heaven'"[402] – a mystical sanctuary, we might add.

This cathedral of absence, filled with artworks, becomes, as Kiefer hoped, one vast and articulated work in itself. As Trione lyrically observes: "In a compositional system that seems to mimic the dynamics of still life, where each element becomes an archaeological find – lost, isolated, suspended, immobilized, caught in a prolonged, limitless wait, arrested in absolute solitude, as if by magic, until it becomes a source of wonder. While retaining their

[399] Cf. Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., pp. 21-22.
[400] See Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., pp. 39-40.
[401] *Ivi*, p. 20.
[402] Auping, *Introduction*, cit., p. 43.

recognizability, in Barjac, enveloped in impalpable layers of air, these fragments come together in ways that contradict our expectations and liberate our thoughts from the shackles of reason, bringing forth a disturbing beauty and unleashing implied mental and visual associations"[403].
Visitors to Barjac thus enter a "cronoshelter"[404]: removed from the mechanical time of accelerated modern life, they encounter a temporality in which the eternal present is offered for experience.

La Ribaute, too, is a place inhabited by ruins. Yet despite them – or perhaps thanks to them –, art not only survives, but flourishes. It survives even its own ruins. Between the tragic and solemn contemplation of life that characterizes Kiefer's philosophical outlook and his ironic neo-Romantic attempt to "take distance" from it – so as not to overestimate anything by contextualizing and relativizing – Kiefer's creativity finds itself continually stimulated and renewed. As he declares: "I always see comedy in tragedy. Every valid tragedy is comical, extremely comical. It's like Sisyphus' laughter: when the boulder rolls down again, Sisyphus laughs. I see the absurdity and I can laugh about it"[405].
Kiefer's response to ruins as symbols of decadence does not involve a direct confrontation with nihilism, but rather what might be called a "strategy of reversal": a postmodernism of another kind, in which images from tradition are resurrected through artistic transformation. This process recalls Aby Warburg's notion of *Nachleben der Antike* – the "afterlife of antiquity" – the survival and revival of cultural images that reemerge within artworks, manifesting their vital power in ever-new morphological processes[406].
Fragmentation – the shattering of unity into pieces, so characteristic of 20th-century modernist and postmodernist art – is embraced by Kiefer as a methodology of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction: a rhizomatic structure, a contradictory and multidimensional web in which inside and outside collapse into one another.
His very mode of painting is structurally hermeneutical: "Paint in order to understand and understand in order to paint. With every new subject I take on, with every experience I work through, there is at first no discourse. Understanding comes only in the process of painting. But

[403] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 34.
[404] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 35-36.
[405] Kiefer, *Dalla caduta nasce il canto*, cit., p. 59. The sense of the abyss resonates with a radical irony, as classically articulated in the philosophical tradition of radical pessimism associated with authors such as Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), Emile M. Cioran (1911-1995), and Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989).
[406] See Claudia Cieri Via, *Aby Warburg and the Afterlife of Antiquity: Morphology and History*, in «Ikon. Journal of Iconographic Studies», vol. 13, 2020, pp. 9-18.

then the point of view that is gained alters in turn the process of painting. This procedure, this circular reasoning, can be applied to the production of each painting"[407].

While acknowledging the unstable and fragmented nature of reality, Kiefer distances himself from any form of "weak thought." He does not surrender the attempt to listen to the Origin, challenging it through the most diverse approaches. Despite the tragic, iconoclastic perspective he adopts, he cannot but affirm: "Only in art I have faith; without it I'm lost"[408]. This rests on the multidimensional character of art: "Art is entelechy; it derives from the perfect union between the material and the spiritual"[409].

Ruins, then, become a dense symbolic material, a paradoxical symbol of symbol, functional for the creation of new images – just as many historical architectures have been constructed precisely upon the ruins of earlier buildings – and for the transcendence of these images themselves. In this sense – and not unlike Nitsch's perspective, though with a less ritualistic pathos and a more individual focus – for Kiefer as well art assumes functions traditionally attributed to religious, mystical, and esoteric domains. As Cordula Meie observes, commenting on our contemporary age: "The arts are called upon to fill a vacuum, a loss of meaning. In such times, myth can be taken up and processed by artists as a collective narrative, as collective knowledge of the significance of all phenomena, in order to create 'access to the world' (*Weltzugänge*)"[410].

4.3.2 A Hermeneutical Coda: An Aesthetics of Sacred Images

The path we have followed – complex, labyrinthic, and profoundly "circular" in a hermeneutical sense – ultimately reveals the centrality of the mythic-symbolic dimension as the key to understanding the form and function of that strand of contemporary art, which, in Kiefer's view, responds to the epochal challenges of the post-secular age. Not only the religious, mythic and esoteric references examined so far point in this direction, but so does Kiefer's very way of simultaneously practicing and understanding art seem to be grounded in the desire to reencounter Origin, conceived as that sacred and tremendous mystery which exceeds the conventional frameworks of contemporary artistic discourse.

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[407] Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, cit., p. 12 ("Malen, um zu erkennen, und erkennen, um zu malen. Bei jedem neuen Thema, das ich angehe, bei jedem Erlebnis, das ich verarbeite, gibt es zunächst keinen Diskurs. Die Erkenntnis stellt sich erst im Verlauf des Malens ein. Dann aber verändert der gewonnene Standpunkt wiederum das Malen. Diesen Vorgang, diesen Zirkelschluss, kann man selbst auf die Produktion jedes einzelnen Bildes anwenden" [Kiefer, *Die Kunst geht knapp nicht unter*, cit., pp. 21-22]).

[408] Anselm Kiefer, *L'arte sopravviverà alle sue rovine*, cit., p. 20.

[409] *Ivi*, p. 21.

[410] Meier, *Anselm Kiefer – Die Rückkehr des Mythos in der Kunst*, cit., p. 24.

It is, in our opinion, fundamental to reaffirm the creative and demiurgic trajectory of Kiefer's art that is too often reduced by critics to a purely postmodern deconstructive gesture, the expression of a relativistic "weak thought" inspired by dissolution and undecidability. Among such interpretations, John David Ebert's reading is particularly emblematic as a sophisticated and stimulating account, but one that also raises certain difficulties. Ebert is correct to note that "La Ribaute is a veritable Foucauldian heterotopia, a space of otherness in which we are witness to the collapse of the West's entire plane of organization, once organized arborescently into linear tiers and strata erected all the way to the heavens". He is equally right in observing that "in the post-metaphysical age, this plane of organization, like the Old Testament Tower of Babel, has collapsed, stratum on top of stratum, into a vast plane of consistency littered with destratified forms and crushed signifiers"[411]. This captures the corrosive dimension of Kiefer's alchemical aesthetics of ruins, which often involves acts of "profanation" of episodes drawn from the histories of art, literature, and religion with which he engages[412].

Yet, thanks to the constant appeal to religious, mythic and symbolic registers, those "crushed signifiers" do not remain silent debris: they open instead onto dense imaginative and cosmological constructions. Following Emo's philosophy, as we have seen, Kiefer valorizes the collapse as a force of simultaneous destruction and creation. Here, contrary to Ebert's suspicion, the construction of cosmologies – the very feature that Ebert himself associates with metaphysical artists – remains central to Kiefer's project, albeit revised and rethought beyond the limits of metaphysical substantialism. For Ebert, Kiefer's work remains ultimately a fascinating ruinous testimony to decadence; in our interpretation, however, it functions as a symbolic reconstruction, a creative response to the exhaustion of meaning.

Ebert is right to stress that, "in an age of semiotic overload when all the signifiers have been torn free from the previous apparatuses that once captured and bound them into ordered systems of meaning (…) the precise problem now for the artist who finds himself on the *outside* of Everything is to find and construct new apparatuses that will capture and collect the signifiers, assigning them new places of fixity and meaning"[413]. Kiefer, we suggest, explicitly assumes this task: to move beyond contemporary simulacra, beyond the corroded and endlessly recycled images of the "society of the spectacle", and to transmute them into new and trustworthy symbols. As Susanetti explains, "understanding the network of symbols would mean aligning oneself with the forces expressed in these connections. Things would then cease to be mere

[411] John David Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, Amazon, 2013, p. 117.
[412] See Trione, *L'opera interminabile*, cit., p. 27.
[413] Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, p. 67.

objects, silent and unrelated to one another, and would blossom as refractions of a profound harmony, as beautiful pieces of the relationships in which the life of the whole draws itself"[414]. In this sense, Kiefer's artistic practice resonates with Ebert's own broader claim that "the artist is vitally necessary (…) to create new apparatuses of capture that trap and code these signifiers into systems of patterned order and meaning. (…) The psychological effects of such overload are not hard to figure out: paranoia, public violence, spree killings, drugs and cognitive disorientation. Indeed, far from being superfluous, the artist is *essential* to the health and functioning of *any* and *every* society"[415].

But Kiefer is not merely a poet of ruins, a chronicler of the past's disintegration, or a navigator of the apocalyptic waves of civilization. He is also a demiurge, a creative reconstructor, the initiator of a non-metaphysical, non-substantialist, yet profoundly vital and meaningful aesthetics – an aesthetics in which the sacred is evoked and, almost magically, conjugated with the material.

When Kiefer declares that he is neither a symbolist nor an allegorist and that he seeks to express the things themselves[416], he echoes a philosophical stance also recognized in Nitsch's approach to symbolism: the conviction that visible and material phenomena already contain within themselves an abyssal truth which requires no allegorical embellishment to be revealed. What obscures this truth, rather, are the cultural sediment and didactic overlays that prevent direct experience. The artist's task, for Kiefer, is thus to reject didascalic or dualistic symbolism – what Gadamer would classify as mere "signs" – and instead strip away dogmatic accretions so that the primordial radiance of the symbol may emerge anew. In this sense, the symbol acts in evenemential terms, as a sudden disclosure of being.

Such an approach restores to art that dimension of "aura" which, while most famously thematized by Walter Benjamin[417], finds an interpretation perhaps even closer to Kiefer's sensibility in the work of the Italian philosopher Elémire Zolla (1926-2002)[418]. For Zolla, aura

[414] Davide Susanetti, *Vertigine della soglia. Ferite, passaggi, metamorfosi*, Edizioni Tlon, Roma 2025, pp. 38-39.
[415] Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, cit., pp. 67-68. This cultural oblivion of sacred images – the main aesthetic feature of the secular age – occurs within a Cartesian dualist framework, akin to the Heideggerian "Age of the World Picture": "As Derrida has pointed out (…), the transcendental signifieds disappeared during the time of Modernity, leaving behind an absent ontological center to which signifiers no longer referred" (*ivi*, p. 69).
[416] See Kiefer, *„Nachts fahre ich mit dem Fahrrad von Bild zu Bild"*, cit.
[417] See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Id., *Illuminations*. *Essays and Reflections*, preface by Leon Wieseltier, ed. and with an introduction by Hanna Arendt, preface by Leon Wieseltier, trans. by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 2007, pp. 217-251 (Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Band 16: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner, Simon Broll and Jessica Nitsche, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2012).
[418] Cf. Elémire Zolla, *Aure. I luoghi e i riti*, Marsilio, Venezia 1995.

is not simply an aesthetic quality but a subtle ontological emanation: a breeze, a lightness radiating from every true being – including works of art. To perceive aura requires a non-idolatrous gaze: one capable of recognizing the invisible within the visible, attuned to a multidimensional and, in the original Greek sense, *daimonic* presence. In this perspective, the auratic image differs radically from the idolatrous one: it does not imprison the gaze within its form, but instead exceeds itself, unveiling its own ecstatic quality – its power to draw attention back to the foundation, leaving behind the trace of eternity.

Therefore, Kiefer's fascination with ruins is not a thanatophile cult of a decadent past, but rather a preparation for the reseeding of that heritage. We thus diverge from Ebert's claim that "the texts that once built Western civilization are no longer (…) grand transcendental signifieds functioning as orienting constellations in the night sky of the Western imagination, but rather burned, shriveled, ragged and ashy forms that look as though they had survived an apocalypse, and are about as useful"[419]. On the contrary, these remnants constitute precisely the pillars upon which Kiefe constructs his own personal "art of the future after all"[420] – an original endeavor, in the sense of being firmly "anchored to the Origin", and a deliberate response to the contemporary crisis of meaning.

Ebert's insight is particularly compelling in recognizing that this artistic endeavor – not only Kiefer's, but that of any artist working in the age of nihilism and post-secularization – is inherently risky. The primary danger lies in the symbolic artistic perspective remaining strictly individual, incapable of evoking a communal experience of beauty or the sacred; it risks becoming a solipsistic, oneiric exercise, reflecting only the artist's subjective vision. As previously discussed, the traditional communal and religious basis for ritualizing experiences of the sacred has already undergone a profound crisis in postmodern societies. New religious or symbolic frameworks emerge to respond to this lack of shared experience, and the artistic symbolic encounter exists in tension between two poles: the need for a cosmogonical coherence that can be shared by members of a community (a "semiosphere", in Ebert's lexicon, a "social imaginary" in Charles Taylor's theory[421]) – even if a temporary or artistic one – and the possibility of remaining isolated, confined to a purely intimate experience.

[419] Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, cit., p. 116.
[420] *Ivi*, p. 118.
[421] "The way that we collectively imagine, even pretheoretically, our social life" (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2007, p. 146). "What I am calling the social imaginary extends beyond the immediate background understanding that makes sense of our particular practices. (...) This wider grasp has no clear limits. That's the very nature of what contemporary philosophers have described as the 'background.' It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit

As Ebert observes, "what does it mean for this or that object to *signify*? It means that it has been given a function to perform by an artist, one that the population of a given society may take and accept as a whole (…) or may not. And if not, we arrive at the situation today, in which artists can no longer construct semiospheres for the society as a whole, but must instead create private microspheres for their ever smaller, and more remote, cults of the elite, those who, as in the various Mystery cults that flourished in the ruins of the Hellenistic Age, must be initiated into its private mysteries. Nowadays, the artist is closer in function to the priest of a private mystery cult into which one must be initiated, for art no longer functions in a way that builds up an entire World for an entire population"[422].

Kiefer's "private semiosphere" elaborated through his personal and profound engagement with literature, philosophy, and especially religious and esoteric traditions, aspires to function as an expressive ritual platform. Its aim is the re-enchantment and re-mythologization of the world: a space where Western and Eastern, ancient and contemporary imaginaries converge; where analogies and resemblances – the vital syntax of phenomena – are recognized as central to understanding reality. Through these connections, Kiefer suggests, the individual can step back from themselves, freeing their identities from pre-given assumptions and recognizing themselves in the void[423]. Emptiness, in this sense, becomes fullness.

Such a communal symbolic world allows for an escape from the "marketplace of identities" that dominates the contemporary hysteric production of capitalist simulacra – reified archetypes –[424] and from the violent confrontations between heterogenous perspectives that have abandoned hermeneutical dialogue in favor of ideological struggle and the Promethean will to power[425]. As Vercellone notes: "Kiefer is fully aware that to refer today to the image as archetype, or the archetype in image, is to insinuate oneself into a panorama and poetics of late-modern ruins that have interrupted, and at the same time evoke, the relationship with the original"[426]. Nevertheless, Kiefer acts pragmatically within this interstice, promoting tendencies that orient towards an encounter with the Origin, cultivating symbolic potentials in the ambiguity of contemporary images (in a Gadamerian hermeneutical sense), and resisting the reduction of art to mere signs. To pursue reality through images, for Kiefer, is to recognize the end of one world and anticipate the rise of another. In this sense, his work does more than

doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary and not a theory" (Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham 2004, p. 25).

[422] Ebert, *Art After Metaphysics*, cit., p. 84.

[423] See Kiefer, *Notebooks. Volume. 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 204 (Kiefer, *Notizbücher. Band 1: 1998-1999*, cit., p. 218).

[424] Cf. Vercellone, *Simboli della fine*, cit., pp. 27-36.

[425] Cf. *ivi*, pp. 40-45.

[426] *Ivi*, p. 138.

produce *mythology* – a refined intellectual discourse on myth – it enacts *myth* itself. The post-romantic irony directed at the tragedy and miseries of human, ruinous history – shaped by the poetic sensibilities of Bachmann and Celan – is balanced by a joy and wonder toward life's luminous dimension, embodied in the golden images of *albedo*, such as the sunflowers inspired by Van Gogh[427]. Within these images lie the seeds of a communal mythical perspective, poised to emerge once more.

Myth, in Kiefer's perspective, helps reconfigure the relationship between truth and illusion: it facilitates the understanding that no discourse, narration, no word can fully express the abysmal truth, yet it simultaneously requires discourses, narrations, and words as tools to approach it. As Susanetti lyrically observes, "nothing can be taken literally, and every word and every image is merely a tool for dismantling and reconfiguring. It is a means of overcoming in which what must be read are the letters that are not written. What is blank between the black ink that traces them"[428]. Kiefer's images vibrate with this dynamic, abyssal energy, teaching viewers the importance of achieving an aesthetic and ecstatic experience in which the sacred is revealed through the interplay between what the images disclose and what they conceal.

As Andrea Emo writes: "The style of a work of art is the very action of a spirit that has freed itself from obstacles, from reality, from facts, from the world; it is the very image of the positivity of a negation, of the activity of an accepted passivity. Therefore, a work of art must be read like a sacred text, religiously, as a divine manifestation. (…) Every work of art is a new birth"[429].

The myth evoked by Kiefer is not rigid, dogmatic, static, or reified. Rather, it is a living myth, capable of taking risks and opening onto unpredictable and surprising horizons, even subverting and overturning the dialectical logos beyond the confines of daily rationality[430]. For Kiefer, "the spiritual realm is a spiral going up and down. So the spiritual realm is moving and twisting. This is important to the way I organize my pictures. I work with the concept that nothing is fixed in place and that symbols move in all directions. They change hierarchies depending on the context"[431].

The mythological stratifications accumulated over centuries – through both oral and written traditions – correspond to Kiefer's artistic stratifications in his paintings and installations. They

[427] On Van Gogh's influence on Kiefer see the catalogue *Kiefer/Van Gogh*, ed. by Simon Schama, Royal Academy Publications, Wales 2025. See also Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., pp. 242-244.
[428] Susanetti, *Vertigine della soglia*, cit., p. 113.
[429] Emo, *In principio era l'immagine*, cit., pp. 69-70.
[430] Cf. Susanetti, *Vertigine della soglia*, cit., p. 42.
[431] Auping, *Heaven Is an Idea: An Interview with Anselm Kiefer*, cit., p. 172.

generate an osmotic relationship between human temporality (both of the artist and the audience) and cosmic, natural temporality. This connection occurs within the artistic event itself, where the medium symbolizes and makes accessible this existential process. The artistic approach is thus aimed at "awakening raw elements. Redeeming the destiny of darkness. Overthrowing the impure in the pure. Transforming the abyss into saving power. Reflecting the nefarious in the divine and the demon in the angel. Immersing oneself in the chthonic moods, to rediscover the light"[432].

Contrary to the passive postmodern, disenchanted perspective – which assumes that desires for renewal, rebirth, and reconciliation no longer belong to historical mankind[433] – Kiefer asserts that such aspirations remain essential. His irony serves to deconstruct the misuse of myth – for instance, its political instrumentalization or metaphysical ossification – but never to negate the existential and epistemological value that he openly attributes to it. Kiefer's mythic-symbolic hermeneutics, therefore, completes the deconstructive process with an ontological reconstruction.

The ultimate measure of this endeavor's success will be its ability, over time, to establish a community of investigators of the abysses of reality through the symbolic apparatus provided by the artist. Even if small, this group could cultivate, in the post-secular age, a renewed sodality of analogists: those who, as Roberto Calasso (1941–2021) lyrically describes, "relied on the pure power of words, on their ability to turn anyone's heart towards a new East. It was impossible to disappoint them because they expected nothing from the world. They were satisfied only by their investigation, which never ended"[434]. Kiefer is one of these analogists. In fact, he is aware that "art is an attempt to reach the centre of truth". But "this centre is impossible to touch: one can only approach it"[435].

At this point, the imaginative power of art and the demiurgic function of mythic-symbolic hermeneutics converge, offering the *animal symbolicum* a beautiful space in which to dwell and a narrative through which to articulate its worldly experience. Irony, postmodern sensibilities, and subjective self-reference remain present as distinctive hallmarks of Kiefer's creative practice. Yet, rather than dissolving meaning, they serve his effort to hold together solipsism and communality, deconstruction and reconstruction, in the search for an artistic language

[432] Trione, *Prologo celeste*, cit., p. 198.
[433] As argued by Huyssen in *Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth*, cit. (in particular p. 45: "Painting crashes, redemption through painting is no longer possible, mythic vision itself is fundamentally contaminated, polluted, violated by history").
[434] Roberto Calasso, *L'innominabile attuale*, Adelphi, Milano 2017, p. 64.
[435] In Vincenzo Trione, *Bentornato Reno, sei il mio mito*, in «La Lettura – Il Corriere della Sera», 7 September 2014.

capable of navigating the ruins of traditional forms of art and religion and of overcoming the "malaises of immanence" diagnosed by Charles Taylor – namely, a diffuse dissatisfaction that arises when one's world system proves too narrow, excluding any notions of transcendence and ritualized meaning[436].

[436] "I have distinguished three forms which the malaise of immanence may take: (1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary. Now I have been calling these 'malaises of immanence', because everyone recognizes that they come onto our horizon, or onto our agenda, with the eclipse of transcendence. But it doesn't follow that the only cure for them is a return to transcendence. The dissatisfaction they give rise to can send people back to seek some relation to the transcendent, but it is also felt by those who for one reason or another cannot countenance such a return, or only in forms which are very far from traditional established religion. They too seek solutions, or ways of filling the lack, but within immanence; and thus the gamut of new positions multiplies" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., pp. 309-310).

Conclusion

> "The models remain; they survive the blaze of fire and death. Guessing at this survival under their seal puts us in a good mood; it reconciles us with the rapacious passage of time. […] Succession becomes return. If the tree of knowledge spreads with ever finer branches and is enriched with the most varied multiplicity, renewed and repeated recognition leads us back to its roots" (Ernst Jünger, *Das spanische Mondhorn*, in Id., *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 15: *Essays VII – Fassungen II*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2015)

The dialogue between Gadamer, Nitsch, and Kiefer enables us to highlight several key philosophical plexuses, to foster an ongoing, non-definitive reflection on the ways in which the encounter between humanity and the sacred can be achieved though artistic experience and philosophically articulated within the post-secular age.

The collapse of modern ideals, and the unripe fruits of subsequent paradigms, have opened chaotic and protean scenarios, where archaic and futuristic elements intertwine. Symbols and archetypes resurface, alongside references to the transfiguring and sacred value of art. The collapse of the principle of reality, the crisis of metaphysical dualism, the rejection of philosophical realism, and the perspectivism of recent decades have created a pluralism of views in which hypermodern stances coexist with renewed attention to the sacred and the traditional. While many artistic forms radicalize the modernist impulse in materialistic, subjectivist or conceptualistic directions, others – such as Kiefer and Nitsch – move toward the divine, broadly conceived.

Viewed in this light, their works reveal the potential to express original pathways – original in the sense of linked to the dynamic *Origin* (*Ursprung*) that all the authors we have considered, and already Walter Benjamin's philosophical imagination, evoke. Despite profound iconographic and formal differences, Nitsch's and Kiefer's perspectives converge in significant ways, while also diverging in their understanding of art's sacred function. Nitsch adopts a communal, ritualistic perspective: a *Kunstreligion* that re-enchants the world through the senses and body, evoking an immanent and carnal transcendence. Kiefer, by contrast, develops a more meditative and individual path: his artworks function as resonant poles that expand imagination and synthetic creativity, stimulating a cultural critique of the rationalistic world of ends and utilities, and inviting the shaping of an inner spiritual pantheon.

Bringing these aspects to light required a hermeneutical approach. The artists' theories, cultural inspirations, and philosophical engagements were brought into dialogue with the epiphanic

visibility of their works, and read as artistic transcriptions of the primordial encounter with the *tremendum* at the core of reality, which is also the original source of philosophical thought.

In conclusion, art today still appears as a possible source of transformative and spiritual experience. It reveals that force which un-determines the reductive determination of principle, reminding us of the free and dynamic character of life. Both Nitsch and Kiefer make visible the relation between the infinite plurality of beings and the unity of the Principle as Being – Nothingness, letting emerge an ideal of life as relation, where "everything is (in) everything" – the *homoeomeric* dimension of the Origin.

Nitsch's and Kiefer's art, together with the work of several other artists such as Ernst Fuchs (1930-2015), Arnulf Rainer, Anish Kapoor, and Wolfgang Laib – on whom future research under a hermeneutic-symbolic perspective may be fruitfully advanced – seek to shape new "social imaginaries" in Charles Taylor's sense. These imaginaries do not reverse disenchantment in a reactionary way, but rethink it through fertile paradoxes: "transcendent immanence," "symbolic reason," "morphological intelligence," and "mythic-symbolic hermeneutics". All converge upon an aporetic path, where life is relation among different levels of reality, understanding is open-ended dialogue between horizons, and knowledge is interaction with the *logos physikós*[1]: beyond abstract universalism, each fragment of being reveals the continuous action of the Origin. In this adventure of thought, artworks remain luminous signposts.

[1] Cf. Giovanni Sessa, *L'eco della Germania segreta. "Si fa di nuovo primavera"*, preface by Romano Gasparotti, introduction by Marino Freschi, Oaks, Sesto San Giovanni 2021.

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