# META

Research in

Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy

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# Psychopathologie, volonté et thérapie de l'esprit selon Spinoza

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**Abstract**

**Psychopathology, Will and Therapy of the Mind in Spinoza**

The pathology of the human mind, which Spinoza links to the notion of affect, plays a central role in the psychology of the Ethics, particularly through the notion of the fluctuation of the soul (*animi vocatur fluctuatio*), which we liken to that of *acrasia*, i.e., the internal conflict within the mind torn between two opposing affects. The solutions proposed by Spinoza to overcome passive affects condition the possibility of salvation that he assigns to intuitive science. This article aims first to clarify the status of the notion of affect, then the power of man to overcome his servitude, and finally the concept of beatitude. We will then examine the therapeutic approach proposed by Spinoza, as well as the insurmountable difficulties it encounters.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, psychopathology, therapy of the mind, akrasia, affect, power over affects, beatitude, nirvana, free will

## Introduction

Pierre-François Moreau a souligné les difficultés posées par le vocabulaire psychologique de Spinoza. La première de ces difficultés concerne le fait que la langue latine, lorsqu'elle décrit les réalités psychiques, est plus riche sur ce point que les langues modernes. C'est pourquoi, les textes spinozistes sont difficiles à traduire, sans courir le risque d'en affaiblir le sens véritable. La deuxième difficulté relève de l'histoire des idées : le XVIIᵉ siècle représente l'époque où les grands philosophes rationalistes construisent une nouvelle vision de l'âme humaine, qui tranche avec les conceptions traditionnelles. Spinoza, qui s'inscrit dans cette nouvelle conception a toutefois

conservé un langage traditionnel. Une troisième difficulté tient à l'évolution du système de Spinoza, dont le lexique concernant les notions psychologiques a lui-même changé, comme on peut le constater sur le fait que le terme *anima* laissera généralement la place à celui de *mens* (Moreau 2000). Précisons que ces deux notions ne sauraient être identifiées : le *Traité de l'Amendement de l'Intellect* [TIE § 84] affirme que l'imagination, en tant qu'elle se trouve rapportée au corps et à son état (*de corpore, et ejus constitutione*), fait « jouer à l'âme le rôle de patient (*anima habeat rationem patientis*) » (Spinoza 2005, 130-133)[1]. Spinoza maintenait encore, semble-t-il, un certain type d'interaction entre l'âme et le corps, alors que l'*Ethique* [III 2]*,* en utilisant principalement le terme *mens*, interdira toute interaction entre l'esprit et le corps (Spinoza 2010, 216-217 ; Korichi 1998, 31-32). Cette critique de la théorie spinoziste des affects s'inscrit dans nos travaux précédemment, dont nous citons quelques exemples dans cet article. Nous tenons à souligner que nous ne critiquons certainement pas Spinoza pour le critiquer, mais notre intention est de rendre possible, à travers cette lecture, la reconsidération de notions traditionnelles que le spinozisme s'est attaché à réfuter, notamment celle de volonté libre qui, comme nous le montrerons, reste cruciale pour la réalisation de tout projet psychothérapique.

## 1. La conception spinoziste de l'affect

Rappelons que Spinoza a distingué entre l'*affectio* et l'*affectus*, que Gilles Deleuze et Robert Misrahi ont proposé de traduire respectivement par *affection* et *affect ;* distinction qui s'est depuis généralisée (*cf.* Deleuze 1981a, 198 ; Misrahi 2000, 223). Précisons que l'affection peut se comprendre de deux manières, d'abord comme mode d'affection de la substance[2], et ensuite comme mode d'affection du corps[3]. Tout en utilisant la formule *passionis seu affectus*, l'*Ethique* [IV 6] emploie le premier terme 18 fois, et le second 170 fois (Spinoza 2010, 368-369 ; Macherey 1995, 15-16). En fait, Spinoza, à l'encontre de Descartes, distingue l'affect de la passion, puisqu'il existe aussi des affects actifs non passionnels (Beyssade 1999, 117).

La thérapie spinoziste des affects concerne le passage du contenu propre à *Ethique* IV : *De la servitude humaine, autrement dit de la force des affects* (*De servitute humana seu de affectuum viribus*), à celui d'*Ethique* V : *De la puissance de l'intellect, ou de la liberté humaine (De potentia intellectus seu de libertate humana)*. Sa méthode consiste à montrer que les affects obéissent à des lois naturelles. Précisons également que si la théorie de l'affectivité, développée par Spinoza, reprend, sur de nombreux points, le *Traité des Passions* de Descartes, ces deux auteurs se séparent notamment sur les questions du *conatus* et du libre arbitre. La notion de conatus, qui était employée par Descartes pour définir le principe d'inertie (Descartes 1973b, II, 37 ; AT, IX, 84) se trouve mentionné par Spinoza, dans ce sens cartésien, dans *Principes de la philosophie de Descartes* (1954 [I, 14], p. 202). Cependant, dans l'*Ethique*, le conatus implique une philosophie de la puissance qui vient contredire les illusions du libre arbitre (Macherey 1995, 30), que Descartes, philosophe de la volonté libre, n'aurait pas pu accepter.

Le *De affectibus* propose deux définitions de l'affect : dans la Définition III, et dans la *Définition générale des affects*, qui suit les 48 définitions d'affects spécifiques. La Définition III comprend deux parties ; la première concerne les affects définis comme « affections du corps qui augmentent ou diminuent, aident ou répriment la puissance d'agir (*corporis affectiones quibus ipsius corporis agendi potentia augetur vel minuitur, juvatur vel coercetur)* ». La seconde partie définit ensuite les affects comme les « idées de ces affections (*harum affectionum ideas)* ». Ces deux définitions restent toutefois hétérogènes, la première relève du corps, et donc de l'attribut étendue, alors que la seconde concerne les idées, et donc l'attribut pensée. Même si l'esprit et le corps sont une seule et même chose (*mens et corpus una eademque res sit*), conçue tantôt sous l'attribut de la pensée, tantôt sous celui de l'étendue, ce ne sont pas les modes qui sont identiques, puisqu'ils relèvent d'attributs différents, mais seulement leurs propriétés, qui ne doivent donc pas être confondues avec les modes eux-mêmes [*Éth.* III 2 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 216-217 ; Bennett 1984, 143). Toutefois, Spinoza a cherché à assimiler les deux usages du terme affect, au moyen

de l'expression *et simul.* Bien que cette locution adverbiale indique que le corps et l'esprit se trouvent saisis simultanément (Jaquet 2015, 132), elle remplit en fait deux fonctions distinctes. D'une part, elle a un rôle conjonctif, associant l'aspect physiologique de l'affection corporelle avec son aspect psychique. D'autre part, l'expression *et simul* assure une fonction distributive, en appliquant conjointement le statut d'affect aux affections du corps et aux idées de ces affections.

La *Définition Générale des affects* [*Eth.* III DGA] définit l'affect comme « passion de l'âme (*animi pathema*) », qui constitue une « idée confuse par laquelle l'esprit affirme une force d'exister de son corps, ou d'une partie de celui-ci, et d'une façon plus grande ou moindre qu'auparavant (*confusa idea qua mens majorem vel minorem sui corporis vel alicujus ejus partis existendi vim quam antea affirmat*) » (Spinoza 2010, 346-347). Il faut noter que cette définition est exclusivement psychique, et elle contredit ainsi l'expression *et simul,* qui laisse entendre que tout affect est à la fois psychique *et* corporel. Cependant, dans *Ethique* II [ax. III], les affects, comme l'amour (*amor*) et le désir (*cupiditas*) sont posés exclusivement comme des modes de penser (*modi cogitandi*) (Spinoza 2010, 98-101). Par contre, dans *Ethique* V [4 Cor.], l'affect est défini uniquement comme l'idée d'une affection du corps (*affectus corporis affectionis idea*) (2010, 506-507). Spinoza ne nous donne aucune indication pouvant privilégier l'une ou l'autre interprétation. Il laisse irrésolue la question de savoir si la notion d'affect concerne simultanément le corps et l'esprit, ou s'il faut parler simplement d'affects humains en général (Beyssade 1999, 116-119). Même si l'affect concerne aussi bien l'esprit que le corps [*Eth.* III 14 et III 52], Spinoza traite essentiellement des affects mentaux, et pratiquement pas des affects corporels (De Dijn 2010, 71-90).

Il semble possible d'expliquer une telle disproportion par le fait que Spinoza a développé deux conceptions distinctes de l'affect. Dans le *Court Traité* [KV II, IV, 1] (Spinoza 1925, I, 59), il faisait de la passion un produit de l'erreur due à l'opinion (*dooling van de waan*), qu'il rapportait au seul cadre cognitif (Spinoza 1954, 49-500). Mais dans *Ethique* III [déf. III], tout en rappelant que la passion constitue un affect dont nous ne

sommes pas la cause adéquate, Spinoza (2010, 212-213) précise que l'affect procède de l'esprit qui « imagine ce qui augmente ou aide la puissance d'agir de notre corps (*imaginatur, quae corporis nostri agendi potentiam augent*), aussi longtemps que le corps est affecté de modes qui augmentent ou aident sa puissance d'agir » (*cf.* ibid. 234-235). L'affect se trouve ici défini à partir du conatus et de l'imagination de l'individu, et non plus par rapport à l'idée (cf. Alquié 2003, 270-278). Spinoza opère ici un passage, sans aucune déduction préalable, d'une conception extensionnelle de l'affect, comme idée dénotant une affection corporelle, à une conception intensionnelle, connotant une puissance d'agir immanente au conatus propre à chaque individu[4].

Alors que le *Court Traité* se bornait à trier les affects, sans chercher à les connaître, *Ethique* III et IV visent à les comprendre de façon adéquate (Ramond 1988, 15-27). L'affect sera alors dit actif si nous en sommes la cause adéquate (*adaequata*) ; au contraire, il sera dit passif si nous n'en sommes que la cause partielle (*partialis*) (Spinoza 2010, 212-213) [*Eth.* III déf. II]. Spinoza résume ainsi cette bipartition : dans le premier cas « j'entends une action (*actionem intelligo*) », dans le second cas, « autrement il s'agit d'une passion (*alias passionem*) » (ibid. 212-213) [*Eth.* III déf. III]. Spinoza précise qu'« En outre, l'affect de joie rapporté simultanément à l'esprit et au corps, je l'appelle plaisir ou gaieté ; celui de la tristesse, douleur ou mélancolie. » (*Porro affectum lœtitiœ ad mentem et corpus simul relatum titillationem vel hilaritatem voco, tristitiœ autem dolorem vel melancholiam*)[5].

Le psychisme humain se trouve déterminé par trois affects primordiaux : le désir (*cupiditas*) et ses deux expressions (en fait une seule, qui s'exprime sous deux formes) : la joie (*laetitiae*), lorsque le désir se trouve augmenté par des causes extérieures. Elle marque « le passage de l'homme d'une moindre perfection à une plus grande (*Lœtitia est hominis transitio a minore ad majorem perfectionem).* La tristesse (*tristitiae*), est le « passage de l'homme d'une plus grande perfection à une moindre » (*Lœtitia est hominis transitio a minore ad majorem perfectionem*) [*Eth.* III DA II et III] (Spinoza 2010, 320-321).

Chacun de ces trois affects représente lui-même un affect primaire (*affectum primarium*) (2010, 232-233, *Eth.* III 11 sc.), et Spinoza précise qu'« Outre la joie et le désir qui sont des passions, il y a d'autres affects de joie et de désir qui se rapportent à nous en tant que nous agissons *(Præter lætitiam et cupiditatem quæ passiones sunt, alii lætitiæ et cupiditatis affectus dantur qui ad nos quatenus agimus, referuntur)* (ibid. 314-315) [*Eth.* III 58]. Spinoza a ainsi proposé un concept nouveau, non moralisant des émotions, qui n'implique plus la distinction cartésienne entre le corps et l'âme, mais seulement celle entre affects actifs et passifs, selon que nous en sommes la cause adéquate et entière, ou bien inadéquate et partielle [*Eth.* III déf. I, II, III] (Spinoza 2010, 212-213 ; Martins 2010, 110). Seule la raison peut déterminer quels affects il convient de favoriser, et lesquels il faut maîtriser. Le fait de connaître le mode d'engendrement et de fonctionnement de la passion nous permet alors de devenir actifs, en formant ainsi une idée claire et distincte de cette passion, qui cessera alors d'être une passion (*desinit esse passio*) [*Eth.* V 3] (2010, 174-176). Quoique Spinoza ne fournisse guère d'indications sur l'aspect purement corporel de l'affect, celui-ci, qu'il soit une action ou une passion, constitue une réalité posée comme étant à la fois physique et psychique, impliquant ainsi une corrélation entre le corps et l'esprit (Jaquet 2005, 230). Lorsqu'elle devient claire et distincte, cette corrélation devrait permettre une transformation des affects qui, en retour, restructureront positivement les affections du corps. En ce sens, la théorie spinoziste des affects a pu être rapprochée du behaviorisme de Burrhus Frederic Skinner qui, niant pareillement le libre arbitre, propose des formes de conditionnement instrumentales en fonction d'un déterminisme strict du comportement (Skinner 1963, 503-515 ; Hedman 1975, 325-335 ; Brenner-Golomb 2013, 168).

Spinoza précise [*Eth.* III DA] que l'affect exprime « l'état du corps lui-même ou une partie du corps, du fait que sa puissance d'agir, autrement sa force d'exister, se trouve augmentée ou diminuée, aidée ou réprimée » (*ipsum corpus vel aliqua ejus pars habet ex eo quod ipsius agendi potentia sive*

*existendi vis augetur vel minuitur, juvatur vel coercetur*) (Spinoza 2010, 346-347).

Cependant, comme l'a souligné Hodgson (1870), Spinoza n'explique nullement le lien causal entre les affects et la puissance d'agir, c'est-à-dire le conatus, ni la genèse de la joie et de la tristesse, ni comment ces affects relèvent de la perfection et de l'imperfection. Il n'explique pas non plus comment les trois affects principaux engendrent tous les affects secondaires. La raison d'une telle absence vient du fait que les affects constituent des états conscientiels empiriques, et en conséquence ils ne sauraient être déduits *a priori* de la notion de conatus (Hodgson 1870, 137). Du point de vue sémantique mentionné plus haut, les états empiriques sont d'ordre extensionnel car ils relèvent d'affections externes, alors que le conatus qui, exprime de façon toujours particulière la puissance d'agir spécifique à chaque individu, est d'ordre intensionnel. Rappelons que le conatus constitue la tendance à maximaliser l'aptitude à être affecté [*Eth.* IV 37 sc. I et IV 38] (Spinoza 2010, 414-415 et 420-421) ; et les affects ne sont que les figures que prend le conatus quand il se trouve déterminé à agir par une affection afférente (Deleuze 1981b, 131). C'est pourquoi, la puissance de chaque conatus résulte du jeu concurrentiel de l'ensemble des conatus, et son actualisation reste fonction de l'action des autres individus singuliers. En conséquence, ces conditions d'actualisation restent toujours extérieures au conatus, et il ne peut donc pas être considéré comme une puissance *per essentiam* (Schrijvers 1999, 68-69). Cela contredit ainsi la prétention, exprimée dans la Préface du *De affectibus*, à déduire la nature des affects *more geometrico* [*Eth.* III préf.] (Spinoza 2010, 210-211).

Pour Spinoza (2010, 346-3470 [*Eth.* III DGA] l'affect, ayant toujours une teneur cognitive, se trouve défini comme une idée confuse (*confusa idea*). Si sa maîtrise demande que les « actions de l'esprit suivent des seules idées adéquates » (*mentis actiones ex solis ideis adaequatis*) » (ibid. 224-225) [*Eth.* III 3 dém.], elle exige également la présence d'un affect « contraire et plus fort » (*contrarium et fortiorem*) que l'affect qu'il s'agit alors de transformer » (ibid. 368-373 ; Levy 2000, 43). Une telle transformation est rendue possible par le fait que l'idée et l'idée

de l'idée s'enchaînent selon un même ordre et une même connexion. Selon Spinoza, lorsque l'idée d'une idée confuse devient adéquate, en conséquence l'idée confuse devient elle-même aussi adéquate. En prenant conscience de nos affects, ces derniers se transforment et entraînent ainsi une réorganisation de nos affections corporelles [*Eth*. V 3 & dém. et V 10 sc.] (ibid. 506-507 et 516-517). Ainsi par exemple, si nous imaginons pouvoir provoquer de la joie chez autrui, alors l'idée que l'esprit a de lui-même (*idea sui*), comme cause de cette joie, « se contemplera (lui-même) avec joie » (*se ipsum cum lœtitia contemplabitur*) [*Eth*. III 30] (ibid. 262-263). Il précise qu'une telle idée ne se distingue de l'affect lui-même « que par le seul concept » (*nisi solo conceptu*) [*Eth*. IV 8 sc.] (ibid. 372-373). La connaissance possède donc une dimension pratique puisqu'elle produit l'idée d'un affect qui, selon le cas, augmente ou diminue (*augetur vel minuitur*) la puissance d'agir du corps dont elle est l'idée [*Eth*. III déf. III] (ibid. 212-213 ; *cf*. Levy 2000, 43-44).

Il faut souligner que, si l'idée de l'idée est bien la conscience d'avoir une idée, elle ne constitue pas pour autant la connaissance du contenu même de cette idée. La notion de conscience concerne bien la forme de l'idée (*forma ideae*), mais seulement d'une façon réflexive, par le seul fait de savoir que l'on sait, sans relation directe à l'objet d'un tel savoir [*Eth*. II 21 sc.] (ibid. 148-149). Comment alors, dans ces conditions, la maîtrise de l'affect peut-elle devenir effective ?

## 2. La question de l'acrasie

Spinoza appelle « flottement de l'âme (*animi vocatur fluctuatio*) », le conflit interne à l'esprit (*mens*), tiraillé entre deux affects opposés, mais il en situe les effets dans l'âme (*anima*) et non dans l'esprit [*Eth*. III 17 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 242-243). La désignation d'un tel flottement (*fluctuatio*), que Descartes (1973a) avait qualifié d'« irrésolution » (AT XI, 380)[6], a été traduit diversement par « ambivalence des sentiments » (Alquié 2003, 273), « vacillement de l'âme » (Yovel 1994, 174), ou bien par « confusion mentale », du fait qu'un tel flottement exprime le désarroi de ne plus savoir ce qui est aimable ou haïssable (Macherey 1995, 166). Décrivant la tension entre deux représentations contraires d'une même chose, la *fluctuatio*

peut même entraîner, dans un cas de conflit extrême, un véritable processus de désintégration (Peralta 2012, 87). Elle constitue l'équivalent psychopathologique du doute (*dubitatio*) [*Eth.* III 17 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 242-243). Cependant, pour Spinoza, le doute ne relève pas, comme chez Descartes, d'une situation volontaire de suspension du jugement, mais il exprime un conflit entre deux idées opposées (Gleizer 2017, 197). D'un point de vue affectif, la *fluctuatio* concerne le fait d'avoir « en même temps pour la même chose, l'amour et la haine (*eodem ergo tempore hoc idem amabimus et aversabimur*) » [*Eth.* III 31 dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 264-265). Spinoza mentionne le cas du jaloux, dont l'amour pour l'être aimé se transforme en double haine, d'abord pour l'être précédemment aimé, et ensuite pour le rival. Cette simultanéité des affections s'accompagne de l'idée « concomitante d'un autre auquel on porte envie (*concomitante idea alterius, cui invidetur*) »[7] [*Eth.* III 35 sc.] (ibid. 272-273). La *fluctuatio*, comme procédant « de la composition des affects (*ex compositione affectuum*) [*Eth.* III DA 48 exp.] (ibid. 344-345), peut, comme dans le cas du suicide, exprimer un conflit entre le conatus propre à chacun, avec des causes destructrices externes, qui peuvent être plus puissantes que la tendance de l'individu à persévérer dans son être [*Eth.* IV 20 sc.] (ibid. 390-391; *cf.* Cortés-Cuadra 2017, 414-415). C'est pourquoi, une telle fluctuation, qui concerne la vie affective tout entière, menace toujours de bloquer la transformation des affects passifs en affects actifs (Tosel 2008, 183).

La notion de *fluctuatio* correspond à celle d'*acrasie* (ἀκρασία) qu'Aristote mentionne (1959, 315) l'*Ethique à Nicomaque* (VII, 1, 1145a 15) ; elle reste centrale pour la psychologie spinoziste préoccupée par les conflits entre la raison et les passions (cf. Lin 2006, 395-414). Cependant, on a pu noter que, tout en s'inscrivant dans la tradition philosophique de l'acrasie[8], Spinoza s'en démarque du fait d'avoir rejeté la notion de volonté libre (Haas 2015, 27-41). Dans un sens proprement spinoziste, l'acrasie permet de comprendre la nature des rapports entre les émotions, la mémoire inconsciente et les structures imaginaires (Tosel 1996, 283). Afin d'illustrer la notion de fluctuation de l'âme, qui « cède souvent à tout genre d'appétit sensuels (*omni libidinis*

*generi*) », Spinoza se réfère à la maxime d'Ovide : « je vois le meilleur et je l'approuve, je fais le pire » (*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*) [*Eth.* IV 17 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 384-385)[9]. Il rapproche cette formule de celle de l'*Eccléciaste* : « Qui augmente sa science augmente sa douleur (*Qui auget scientiam auget dolorem*) » [*Eth.* IV 17 sc.] (ibid. 384-385). Il souligne ainsi les limites de la raison dans la maîtrise des affects.

Nous avons analysé, par ailleurs, certains traits propres à la névrose obsessionnelle (Rozenberg 1999a, 90-93), en rapport avec ce que Donald Davidson a appelé le « paradoxe de l'irrationalité ». Ce paradoxe exprime une opposition entre la faculté réflexive propre à chacun qui, étant d'ordre intensionnel, commande le désir d'accomplir une action significative, et la cause, d'ordre extensionnel, à l'origine de l'action insensée[10] (Davidson 1982, 294). La première est rationnelle, alors que la seconde ne l'est pas. Cette opposition, qui exprime une dissociation entre l'action consciemment voulue et sa réalité émotionnelle (Gilead 1999, 263), peut qualifier ce que Spinoza considérait comme étant les « causes de l'impuissance et de l'inconstance de l'homme (*humanae impotentiae, et inconstantiae causas*) » à suivre les préceptes de la raison (*rationis praecepta*) [*Eth.* IV 18 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 384-385). Néanmoins, pour Spinoza, l'affect possède toujours une dimension rationnelle, en fonction du Principe de Raison Suffisante selon lequel il est toujours possible de fournir une explication logique à chaque chose (Della Rocca 2008, 27). Mais par ailleurs, l'acrasie reste inévitable du fait que l'homme est « nécessairement toujours sujet aux passions (*hominem necessario passionibus esse semper obnoxium*) » [*Eth.* IV 4 dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 366-367). Même la connaissance intuitive reste toujours celle d'un esprit fini, et elle est donc partielle. En conséquence, l'individu qui parviendrait à accéder à cette connaissance intuitive ne pourrait en fait échapper à l'acrasie, bien que dans ce cas, elle serait moins fréquente et moins forte (Soyarslan 2014, 725-747). Ajoutons que même une telle atténuation de l'affect acrasique reste problématique. En effet, pour Spinoza, notre cognition ne peut transformer l'affect passif en affect actif qu'à la condition de faire appel à une charge

émotionnelle plus forte, comme par exemple l'amour intellectuel de Dieu que la science intuitive devrait pouvoir nous procurer. C'est alors que nous serions en mesure de rapporter les affects aux notions rationnelles, en les percevant clairement et distinctement [*Eth.* V 20 sc.] (Spinoza 2010, 528-531 ; Gilead 1999, 171-175). Bien qu'il ait envisagé, dans *Ethique* II,40, Sc. II, la possibilité d'un passage du Second au Troisième Genre de connaissance [*Eth.* II 40 sc. II] (ibid. 176-177), et qu'il ait souligné, dans *Ethique* [V 36 Sc.] que la science intuitive est le seul moyen d'atteindre la béatitude (*beatitudo*) (ibid. 548-549), un tel passage est problématique d'un point de vue épistémologique. En effet, la science intuitive diffère profondément de la science rationnelle, puisqu'elle porte sur la « connaissance des choses singulières (*rerum singularium cognitio*) », alors que la raison saisit la « connaissance universelle (*cognitione universali*) »[11] [*Eth.* V 36 sc.] (ibid. 550-551). Or, la connaissance rationnelle, concernant les classes conceptuelles, est d'ordre extensionnel, alors que la science intuitive, visant à ressaisir l'essence individuelle des choses, est d'ordre intensionnel. C'est pourquoi, le salut par la *scientia intuitiva* repose sur une perception, impossible pour l'homme, de la causalité immanente divine, qui est d'ordre intensionnel, alors que la causalité transitive, seule accessible à l'être humain, est d'ordre extensionnel. En conséquence, comme le note Jonathan Bennett, la science intuitive reste en fait un idéal proprement impossible à réaliser (Bennett 1984, 357). De plus, la connaissance *sub aeternitatis specie* ne concerne pas l'esprit humain *per se* [*Eth.* II 13] (ibid. 120-121), mais l'*amor Dei intellectualis*, qui permet d'opérer une transition du plan individuel à celui, caractérisé, par Etienne Balibar, de trans-individuel (Balibar 1997, 3-36). L'esprit, comme idée d'un corps fini, même s'il pouvait accéder à la connaissance intuitive, reste toujours l'esprit d'un être corporel. C'est pourquoi, des idées opposées peuvent alors coexister dans un esprit de type acrasique, et ce, en contradiction avec ce qu'affirme *Ethique* III, 10 : « l'idée qui exclut l'existence de notre corps ne peut se trouver dans notre esprit, mais lui est contraire (*in nostra mente dari nequit, sed eidem est contraria*) » [*Eth.* III 10] (Spinoza 2010, 230-231). L'acrasie montre ainsi que le « mentis

conatus », tout en étant posé comme « souveraine vertu » (*summaque virtus*) [*Eth.* V 25] (ibid. 536-537), peut également coïncider avec une idée qui vient alors contredire sa puissance d'agir.

### 3. Le pouvoir sur les affects

Spinoza ne semble pas avoir réussi à définir, de façon différenciée, la nature des affects qu'il analyse. La genèse des passions se trouve décrite de façon hétérogène, d'un point de vue à la fois cognitif et ontologique (Schrijvers 1999, 63-65). En effet, selon *Ethique* III 3, les passions dépendent des seules idées inadéquates (*passiones autem a solis inadaequatis pendent*) [*Eth.* III 3] (Spinoza 2010, 222-223), alors que, selon *Ethique* IV [5 dém.], l'essence de la passion ne peut s'expliquer que par le *conatus*, qui constitue l'essence de l'individu. A quoi, il faut également ajouter la prise en compte de la « puissance de la cause extérieure comparée à la nôtre (*potentia causae externae cum nostra comparata*) » [*Eth.* IV 5 dém.] (ibid. 368-369). L'explication des affects reste inadéquate lorsqu'elle s'opère au moyen de l'imagination, dont la fonction reste toutefois indispensable (Macherey 1997, 67), alors que pour devenir adéquate, l'explication doit procéder de la seule raison.

Précisons que les idées des affections du corps sont confuses (*confusae*) lorsqu'elles se trouvent rapportées seulement à l'esprit humain (*humanam mentem*), puisqu'elles enveloppent nécessairement la nature du corps ainsi que celle de ses composants, en tant qu'ils se trouvent eux-mêmes affectés par des corps extérieurs [*Eth.* II 28 & dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 156-157). D'une façon générale, le spinozisme ne peut véritablement rendre compte des affects particuliers, dans la mesure où il existe toujours une infinité d'objets affectant le corps qui produisent une infinité d'affects différenciés, restant tous largement immaîtrisables. Toute idée adéquate se trouve nécessairement liée à des idées inadéquates, et la distinction entre elles doit faire l'objet d'un travail de clarification interminable (Matheron 2011, 594-595). Ainsi, pour comprendre comment tel corps extérieur exerce sur nous telle action particulière, il faut d'abord saisir comment l'infinité des autres corps interagissent avec lui. C'est pourquoi, l'affect

résiste à thérapie purement cognitiviste, car il implique de nombreux facteurs qui ne sont pas eux-mêmes d'ordre cognitif (*cf.* Segal 2000, 1-19 ; Marshall 2008, 1-23). Dans le *Traité Politique*, Spinoza souligne que les affects ne sont pas des défauts de la nature humaine, mais qu'ils en constituent des phénomènes naturels, des propriétés (*proprietas*), comme la chaleur, le froid et le mauvais temps, qui sont des manifestations de l'atmosphère. Même si la raison pouvait véritablement maitriser les affects, ce reviendrait à rêver l'âge d'or des poètes (*seculum poetarum aureum*) que de croire qu'il est possible d'amener les masses à vivre selon le seul précepte de la raison (*rationis praescripto*) (Spinoza 2015, 90-93 ; Yovel 1985, 305-333).

Dans le *Court Traité* [*KV*, II, XX, § 4 n.], Spinoza a montré que le sentiment humain permet d'associer l'idée réflexive aux affections corporelles. Le fait que les hommes sentent (*menschen gevoelen*) permet alors d'accéder à l'idée réflexive (*idea reflexiva*) de leurs sensations (Spinoza 1925, I, 97 ; 1954, 79; Rice 1990, 211). Le sentiment rendrait ainsi possible le cheminement vers la conscience de soi. L'*Ethique* présentera une méthode de dépassement du *cogito* cartésien vers, ce qu'on a pu qualifier de « je sens donc je suis » des affections, mais où l'affect doit être directement rapporté à la raison elle-même (Malinowski-Charles 2004, 127). Cependant, chez Descartes (*Méditation Troisième*) l'idée était d'abord un « ouvrage de l'esprit » (AT, IX, 32), alors que Spinoza ne distingue plus entre l'acte de penser et le sujet de cet acte. En effet, la « pensée humaine actuelle » (*actuale mentis humanæ*) n'est rien d'autre que « l'idée d'une certaine chose existant en acte » (*idea rei alicujus singularis actu existentis*) [*Eth.* II 11] (Spinoza 2010, 118-119; Aquila 1978, 274; Taylor 1937, 148). Du fait que l'esprit humain ne soit qu'une idée, et qu'il ne produise donc aucune activité conceptuelle proprement dite, on a pu rapprocher la théorie spinoziste du psychisme, basée sur une négation du libre arbitre, de la perspective bouddhiste prônant une absence d'ego. En ce sens, la dernière partie de l'*Ethique*, qui traite de la béatitude (*beatitudo*) [*Eth.* V 42] (Spinoza 2010, 558-559), devrait permettre de mener à un état qu'on a pu qualifier de « *nirvana* », dans lequel l'homme

pourrait alors accéder à une conscience cognitive de la substance unique (Wienpahl 1972, 64-94 ; Silva 2012, 233).

Notons que la définition de la béatitude, qui « n'est pas la récompense de la vertu, mais la vertu même (*non est virtutis praemium, sed ipsa virtus*) » [*Eth.* V 42] (Spinoza 2010, 558-559), constitue une transposition spéculative de la maxime pragmatique du texte traditionnel juif : *Pirqey 'Avot*, que Spinoza connaissait : la « récompense (ou le salaire) de l'accomplissement d'un commandement est le commandement (lui-même) (*sakar miçwah miçwah*) ». Cependant, Spinoza qui ne définit pas le contraire de la béatitude, ne peut trouver aucun équivalent de la suite de la maxime : « le salaire de la transgression est la transgression (elle-même) (*sakar 'avyrah 'avyrah*) »[12], dans la mesure où la notion de transgression d'une quelconque loi morale n'a aucune place dans le spinozisme.

## 4. La thérapie de l'esprit selon Spinoza

Spinoza rapporte, dans le *Traité de l'Amendement de l'Intellect* [TIE §7] qu'il s'était vu dans « un péril suprême (*summo versari periculo*) », et il s'est alors efforcé à concevoir un remède (*remedium*), qu'il a trouvé dans l'entreprise philosophique elle-même (Spinoza 2005a, 22-23). Il cherchait ainsi [TIE §16] « une manière de soigner l'intellect (*modus medendi intellectus*) », afin de le « purger (*expurgandi*) », et pouvoir ainsi comprendre les choses sans erreur[13] (ibid. 32-33; Jaquet 2005, 179). Notons que Spinoza utilise ici une terminologie renvoyant à la thérapeutique cathartique aristotélicienne qui, toutefois, visait à purger, non pas l'intellect, mais l'énergie émotionnelle de l'âme (Aristote, *Poétique* 1449b). Alors que Descartes (dans *Les passions de l'âme*) attribuait au corps seul « tout ce qui peut être remarqué en nous qui répugne à notre raison » (Descartes 1973a, I, 47 ; AT XI, 365), pour Spinoza la passion procède uniquement, et de façon nécessaire, d'une idée inadéquate Spinoza [Eth. III 3] (Spinoza 2010, 222-223). Les conséquences d'un affect se produisent d'une manière identique à celle qui suit nécessairement de la nature du triangle dont les angles sont égaux à deux droits [*Eth.* IV 47 sc.] (ibid. 448-449). C'est pourquoi, un affect passif peut être transformé en une action,

lorsque nous comprenons ses causes d'engendrement. En formant une idée claire et distincte d'un affect passif, celui-ci devrait alors se transformer en affect actif, car il n'existe pas « d'affection du corps (*nulla est corporis affectio*) dont nous ne puissions former quelque concept clair et distinct » [*Eth.* V 4] (ibid. 506-505). En ce sens, le spinozisme a pu être qualifié de psychothérapie spirituelle (Grossman 2014, 14).

Cependant, notre « pouvoir d'ordonner et d'enchaîner les affections du corps suivant un ordre valable pour l'intellect (*potestatem habemus ordinandi et concatenandi affectiones corporis secundum ordinem ad intellectum*) » [*Eth.* V 10 dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 516-517), présuppose une intentionnalité de l'esprit, nécessaire pour initier toute réorganisation des affects. Or, une telle intentionnalité, se trouve niée par Spinoza, car elle implique l'intervention d'une volonté libre que le spinozisme refuse. C'est certainement la raison pour laquelle il a omis de la liste des remèdes d'*Ethique* V, 20, sc., la connaissance nécessaire des choses et des affects, alors qu'*Ethique* V, 6 précisait que la puissance de l'esprit sur les affects (*in affectus potentiam*) dépend du fait qu'il comprenne « toutes les choses comme nécessaires (*res omnes, ut necessarias*) » [*Eth.* V 6] (ibid. 510-511). Spinoza semble ainsi avoir pris conscience du fait que la connaissance pouvant permettre la maîtrise des affects implique la volonté libre, qui doit préalablement *décider* de connaître, pour pouvoir ainsi modifier les affects, même si cette connaissance porte sur des mécanismes naturels nécessaires[14].

Selon Spinoza, celui qui imagine « quelqu'un affecté de haine, sera par là même affecté de haine (*eo ipso etiam odio afficietur*) » [*Eth.* III 40 dém.] (ibid. 278-279), et il ajoute que la haine « peut être effacée par l'amour en retour (*amore contra deleri potest*) » [*Eth.* III 43] (ibid. 284-285). Selon Augusto Guzzo, nous sommes ici confrontés à une contradiction entre l'engendrement, purement réactionnel et quasi-mécanique de la haine, et la notion de *potest*, qui introduit subrepticement la force de l'amour, capable d'effacer cette haine. Guzzo ajoute que l'effacement de la haine présuppose l'intervention d'une volonté libre, que connote précisément la notion de *potest*. En effet, pour pouvoir se libérer d'une attitude ou d'un comportement

négatif, il faut déjà être libre de le faire (Guzzo 1924, 291; Haberman 2011, 116-117). Spinoza précise que ce qui rend possible un tel changement concerne le fait d'imaginer qu'autrui se trouve « affecté d'amour (*amore erga se affectum*) envers lui », et c'est « en tant qu'il imagine cela (*quatenus hoc imaginatur)* ». Toutefois, c'est en faisant intervenir le terme *quatenus* que Spinoza explique qu'un individu imaginant ne pas haïr autrui, et donc de ne pas l'affecter de tristesse, peut alors effacer « de l'âme la haine (*et odium ex anima delebit*) » [*Eth.* III 43 dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 284-285). Le terme *quatenus*, dont nous avons précisé par ailleurs les modalités de fonctionnement (Rozenberg 2023a, 204), permet à Spinoza de suturer, sans aucune déduction préalable, deux ordres foncièrement hétérogènes . Il s'agit d'une part, du déterminisme de la haine, et d'autre part de la volonté (terme que Spinoza n'utilise pas ici, mais dont la notion, selon Guzzo, se trouve présupposée pour la cohérence de l'argumentation), permettant de transformer la haine en amour, puis ressentir alors la joie liée à une telle transformation. Cependant, le déterminisme est causal et donc d'ordre extensionnel, alors que la volonté, impliquée subrepticement dans le changement de la haine en amour, reste individuelle et elle est d'ordre intensionnel. Dans les étapes de ce processus de transformation, le terme *quatenus* constitue ainsi le tenant lieu de la décision volontaire, qui seule reste capable d'initier l'inversion de l'affect négatif en affect positif.

## 5. Les problèmes posés par la psychothérapie spinoziste

Selon Spinoza, les idées vraies ne peuvent changer les affects du seul fait de leur vérité, mais seulement si on considère la connaissance vraie comme étant elle-même un affect (*ut affectus consideraur*) [*Eth.* IV 14] (Spinoza 2010, 378-379). Il pose ainsi une corrélation entre ce qui augmente ou diminue la puissance d'agir de notre corps (*corporis nostri agendi potentiam*), et ce qui augmente ou diminue la puissance de penser de notre esprit (*nostrae cogitandi potentiam*) [*Eth.* III 11] (ibid. 230-231 ; Wartofsky 1979, 249). Si la connaissance en tant que telle ne suffit pas à réprimer (*coercere*) les affects, elle

peut cependant contribuer à la réduction de leur intensité, à condition de se présenter elle-même comme un affect « contraire et plus fort (*contrarium et fortiorem*) » que l'affect à réprimer. L'affect est « une idée par laquelle l'esprit affirme une force d'exister de son corps plus grande ou moindre qu'auparavant (*affectus est idea qua mens majorem vel minorem sui corporis existendi vim quam antea affirmat*) ». Lorsque l'esprit subit un affect quelconque, le corps se trouve également affecté, et sa puissance d'agir est alors accrue ou réduite (*qua ejus agendi potentia augetur vel minuitur*), en fonction de la nature de cet affect [*Eth.* IV 7 & dém., IV 14 dém.] (Spinoza 2010, 368-369, 380-381).

Soulignons que Spinoza, qui emploie dans l'*Ethique,* 63 fois la notion d'*agendi potentia*, ne l'a toutefois jamais définie (Schrijvers 1999, 64). Il n'a pas non plus défini la notion de puissance (*potentia*) en général (Ramond 1999, 101). Il a toutefois distingué entre *potentia* et *potestas*; notant que lorsque qu'un individu décide de réaliser une chose qui relève de son droit, un tel « pouvoir (*potestas*) doit être défini non par la seule puissance de l'agent (*agentis potentia*), mais également par les aptitudes du patient », sur lequel porte un tel pouvoir [*TP* IV 4] (Spinoza 2015, 130-131). La notion de *potentia* désigne la capacité de rendre une action effective, alors que celle de *potestas* se rapporte à l'autorité étatique qui régularise l'action. La première notion devient elle-même limitée lorsqu'elle se trouve transférée à la seconde (Barbone and Rice 2000, 16-17)[15].

Même si en théorie, la raison devrait pouvoir maîtriser les affects, elle reste toutefois impuissante par rapport à eux, du fait que les affects possèdent toujours une cause accidentelle (*per accidens*) [*Eth.* III 50] (Spinoza 2010, 292-293). Comme nous l'avons rappelé, la maîtrise des affects présuppose des affects contraires et plus forts, dans la mesure où l'affect est une idée affirmant la force d'exister du corps [*Eth.* IV 14 dém.] (ibid. 380-381). Cependant, une telle force se trouve déterminée par le jeu concurrentiel des conatus, et elle dépend ainsi toujours des aléas de l'environnement. L'individu ne saurait alors contrôler, de façon purement rationnelle et

exhaustive, l'infinité des causes qui le déterminent de façon extérieure.

De plus, en considérant les affects comme des modifications de l'esprit, Spinoza les a alors réduits à leur seule composante cognitive, bien qu'il les ait préalablement définis comme « affections du corps » (*corporis affectiones*) [*Eth.* III déf. III] (ibid. 212-213). Il a, de ce fait, négligé leur teneur proprement émotionnelle qui procède du dynamisme corporel, qu'il convient toujours de prendre en compte afin de pouvoir maîtriser les affects (Segal 2000, 2-3)[16]. Notons que, d'un point de vue sémantique, les propriétés communes destinées à connaître adéquatement les affects sont universelles et donc d'ordre extensionnel, alors que le caractère émotionnel et corporel de l'affect reste toujours singulier, et d'ordre intensionnel (Rozenberg 2023a, 35-42). Une telle hétérogénéité s'oppose au passage d'un ordre à l'autre, et elle rend alors problématique la transformation thérapeutique de l'affect passif en affect actif. En effet, cette transformation doit combiner la dimension cognitive de l'affect, relevant de l'attribut pensée, avec son aspect corporel, dérivant de l'attribut étendue. Cette exigence va à l'encontre de la distinction psycho-physique posée par *Ethique* III 2, et selon laquelle : « Le corps ne peut déterminer l'esprit à penser, ni l'esprit déterminer le corps au mouvement ni au repos » (*Nec corpus mentem ad cogitandum nec mens corpus ad motum neque ad quietem*) [*Eth.* III 2] (Spinoza 2010, 216-217). C'est pourquoi, Spinoza a fini par reconnaître qu'en l'absence d'une connaissance parfaite de nos affects, « le mieux donc que nous puissions faire (*optimum igitur, quod efficere possumus*), est de concevoir une droite règle de vie, autrement dit des principes assurés de conduite bien définis (*rectam vivendi rationem seu certa vitae dogmata concipere*) » [*Eth.* V 10 sc.] (ibid. 516-517). Ces principes, imprimés dans notre mémoire, et se trouvant utilisés de façon régulière, doivent permettre d'imprégner l'imagination et ainsi faciliter leur application au comportement humain. Cependant, Spinoza ne précise nullement quelles sont ces règles pratiques susceptibles de modifier réellement nos habitudes, ni le fait, comme l'a montré l'analyse de Guzzo que nous avons mentionnée précédemment, qu'elles présupposent toujours une

décision volontaire et préalable à leur réalisation. En ce sens, la possibilité même d'instituer de telles règles contredit le fait que, pour l'auteur de l'*Ethique* [II, 11-13] et contrairement à celui des *Méditations Métaphysiques* (II), l'homme n'est jamais maître de ses pensées, puisqu'elles sont toujours déterminées de façon nécessaire, sans qu'aucune volonté de les maîtriser ne puisse intervenir (Descartes AT, IX, 22 ; Spinoza 2010*,* 119-121).

Selon Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, la thérapie spinoziste, qu'elle qualifie d'"ironique", renvoie en fait au *Paradoxe du Ménon*, décrivant l'impossibilité de commencer à s'enquérir d'un sujet qu'on ignore, si l'on ne possède pas déjà les critères nécessaires à identifier ce que l'on recherche (*Ménon* 80d; Ebrey 2014; Oksenberg Rorty 2000, 262-263). En effet, dans *Ethique* V, 3, Dém., Spinoza affirme que si nous formons une idée claire et distincte d'un affect, ce dernier « cessera d'être une passion (*desinet esse passio*) », il ne subsistera entre cette idée et l'affect lui-même qu'une « distinction de raison (*ratione distinguetur*) ». Il renvoie alors à *Ethique* II [21 Sc.], posant que « l'esprit et le corps sont un seul individu (*mentem et corpus, unum et idem esse individuum*) », conçus sous des attributs différents. De même, lorsque quelqu'un sait quelque chose, il sait « en même temps qu'il sait qu'il sait (*simul scit, se scire, quod scit*) » [*Eth.* V 3 dém., II 21 sc. et II 43] (ibid. 506-507, 148-149 et 178-179). Spinoza présente ainsi le rapport de l'idée à l'idée de l'idée comme étant identique au rapport de l'idée claire et distincte à l'affect auquel elle se rapporte (Gueroult 1974, 366-367). Cependant, Jules Vuillemin a montré que l'expression « je sais que je sais », que le Scolie d'*Ethique* II 21 emploie à la troisième personne du singulier, est totalement in-associative. Il est donc impossible d'identifier la proposition : « je pense (que je pense que je pense *p*) à celle : « je pense que je pense (que je pense *p*) (ce deuxième membre n'a pas de sens) (Vuillemin 1962, 298-299). Cela rend ainsi problématique l'usage thérapeutique du modèle réflexif exprimant le rapport du sujet à lui-même. De plus, toute démarche thérapeutique implique une réassociation représentative non pathologique. Nous avons montré, par ailleurs, qu'une cure psychothérapique vise à instaurer une structure de groupe, dont l'un des réquisits est la relation

d'associativité. En effet, la cure met en œuvre au moins l'association de 3 représentations, $x * y * z$, qui appartiennent à l'ensemble $R$ des représentations psychiques du sujet. Dans un état pathologique, ces représentations se trouvent associées de la façon suivante : $x * (y * z)$, où l'élément pathogène $z$ appartient à la structure psychique du sujet. La cure doit alors aboutir à une réassociation optimale : $(x * y) * z$, mettant ainsi à distance l'élément pathogène $z$ (Rozenberg 1999, 27-30). Comme l'a noté J. Vuillemin, l'opération d'associativité caractérise la notion de liberté (Vuillemin 1962, 299), c'est-à-dire de distanciation vis-à-vis du déterminisme naturel, afin de permettre une autre forme d'association, non rivée à un tel déterminisme. Or, en refusant la notion de libre arbitre, et restant ainsi confiné dans le pur déterminisme naturel, le spinozisme rend impossible la relation d'associativité, qui reste la condition *sine qua non* de toute cure psychothérapeutique.

Nous avons montré d'abord l'importance de la psychologie pour le projet de l'*Ethique*, qui part de la servitude des affects, en proposant une approche épistémologique capable de les surmonter. Ensuite, nous avons cherché à préciser la notion d'affect, en analysant la question de l'acrasie. Enfin, nous avons pris soin d'analyser les grandes lignes de la démarche thérapeutique proposée par Spinoza, en soulignant un certain nombre de difficultés qui restent dirimantes pour son projet thérapeutique. En conséquence, nous avons interrogé la pertinence de la question du salut et de la notion de béatitude qui lui reste consubstantielle, et que Spinoza identifie à la vertu elle-même. Nous avons alors proposé un modèle structural, impliquant les notions de volonté et de liberté, que Spinoza ne pouvait pas accepter, mais qui restent les conditions *sine qua non* de tout projet thérapeutique effectif.

**NOTES**

[1] Concernant les œuvres de Spinoza, nous nous référons également à l'édition de Carl Gebhardt, *Baruch de Spinoza Opera*, Heidelberg, Universitäts-buchhandlung (Spinoza 1925).
[2] Voir *Ethique* I 1, où le terme « affectio » se trouvé défini comme « prior est natura suis affectionibus » (Spinoza 2010, 18-19).

[3] Voir, dans *Ethique* [II 13], la démonstration mentionnant l'expression : « ideae affectionum corporis » (Spinoza 2010, 120-121).

[4] Sur les problémes épistémologiques que pose le passage, constamment opéré par Spinoza, de l'usage extensionnel à l'usage intensionnel, voir Rozenberg (2023a, 35-42).

[5] Nous retenons ici la traduction de R. Misrahi qui nous semble plus exacte que celle de B. Pautrat (Spinoza 2005, 209) [*Eth*. III 11 sc.].

[6] Descartes (1973, 553) mentionne la situation d'acrasie dans sa *Lettre au P. Mesland* du 9 février 1645.

[7] Sur la notion de jalousie, chez Spinoza et chez Freud, voir Sévérac (2012, 153-166).

[8] J. Tricot traduit le terme *akrasia* par « incontinence » ou « intempérance ».

[9] Voir aussi *Lettre 58* à Schuller (Spinoza 1925 [G. IV], 266; 1954, 1252). Voir Ovide, *Métamorphoses* VII, 20.

[10] Sur la notion d'*acrasie* chez Aristote et Davidson, voir Engel (1984, 11-20).

[11] Sur la distinction entre le second et le troisième genre de connaissance, *cf.* Carr (1978, 241-252). Sur la question de savoir si la distinction entre ces deux genres de connaissance concerne seulement leur forme ou également leur contenu (*cf.* Soyarslan 2016, 27-54).

[12] *Pirqey'Avot*, IV, 2. Le Maharal de Prague explique que l'accomplissement d'un commandement entraîne le désir d'accomplir un commandement supplémentaire, alors que la transgression provoque le désir de transgresser à nouveau. *Derek Hayym*, IV, 2.

[13] Sur la contribution de Spinoza à la psychothérapie, voir la thèse de Lima *(*2012, 239, en portuguais). Sur les rapports de Spinoza à la psychanalyse, voir notamment Vaysse (1999, 45-112) et Martins & Sévérac (2021).

[14] Sur le refus spinoziste de la volonté libre, voir Rozenberg (2023b, 57-81).

[15] Montag (2001, 1999) précise que la *potestas* est une notion légale et formelle, alors que celle de *potentia* exprime la force actualisée.

[16] Selon Beyssade (1990, 183), dans son traitement des affects, la raison ne se limite pas à sa fonction cognitive, car seule une force affective peut surmonter un affect. Elle doit donc se présenter elle-même comme un affect.


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mots abrégés pour : Préface [préf.], Définition [déf.], Axiome [ax.], Scolie [sc.], Appendice [ap.], Démonstration [dém.], Corolaire [cor.], Explication [exp.], Lemme [lem.], Postulat [post.], Définition générale des affects [DGA], Définition des affects [DA] avec le numéral correspondant. On utilise aussi TP (*Traité politique*), TIE (*Traité de l'Amendement de l'Intellect*), KV (*Court Traité*), AT (Adam et Tannery, pour l'édition des *Œuvres* de Descartes) suivis du numéral pour le lieu.

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# Dal puro giudizio al "risuonare dei concetti" Gadamer lettore dell'estetica kantiana

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## Abstract
### From Pure Judgment to the "Resonance of Concepts": Gadamer as a Reader of Kantian Aesthetics

This paper aims to challenge the widespread assumption that Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy stands in strong opposition to Kantian aesthetics and to show and describe how Gadamer's theory of art has repeatedly engaged with Kant in the very process of defining itself. First (§1), I reconstruct the argument of the opening section of *Truth and Method*, showing that Gadamer's critique of Kant is not simply one-sided. I then examine (§2) how Gadamer develops insights from the *Critique of Judgment* in his later essay *Intuition and Vividness*. By engaging with Kant's notions of genius and aesthetic idea, Gadamer outlines a theory of art as an experience of truth, thereby revising the opposition drawn in *Truth and Method* between an aesthetics of form (Kant) and one of content (Hegel). Finally (§3), I argue that this rethinking of Kantian aesthetics significantly affects Gadamer's own theory of art. In his interpretation of Celan's poetry, Gadamer explicitly claims continuity with Kantian aesthetics. In this sense, I show how Kantian influences shape central notions in Gadamer's aesthetics and, contrary to the judgment of *Truth and Method*, contribute to enriching his conception of the experience of art as an experience of truth.

**Keywords:** Gadamerian philosophy, hermeneutical aesthetics, Kantian aesthetics, artistic Erfahrung, aesthetic ideas, interpretation

## Introduzione

Sebbene la prima delle due sezioni che compongono la parte iniziale del capolavoro filosofico gadameriano, *Verità e metodo*[1], sia interamente dedicata ad un esame della *Critica della capacità di giudizio*, il rapporto tra Gadamer e l'estetica kantiana rimane un tema relativamente poco studiato. Ciò è

forse comprensibile dal momento che Gadamer rintraccia all'interno del pensiero kantiano l'origine del principale problema della tradizione estetica (che d'ora in avanti verrà indicato come "il problema di Kant"): il mancato riconoscimento del valore veritativo dell'esperienza artistica. Così facendo, l'argomento gadameriano sembra respingere *in toto* la teoria estetica di Kant. A questo si aggiunge il fatto che, opponendosi all'estetica kantiana, l'argomento di *Verità e metodo* sembrerebbe affiancarsi al pensiero hegeliano. Infatti, a Hegel Gadamer riconosce il merito di aver trovato una soluzione al "problema di Kant" tramite la caratterizzazione dell'esperienza artistica come *Erfahrung*, esperienza veritativa[2]. Ed è proprio la continuità con la filosofia di Hegel (che Gadamer, *in primis*, rivendica a più riprese) il tema su cui si è concentrata maggiormente la critica gadameriana.

Una lettura polarizzante che contrapponga il "valore di Hegel" alle "colpe di Kant" rischierebbe però di non considerare adeguatamente né quelli che sono indicati, in *Verità e metodo*, come spunti pregevoli dell'estetica kantiana; né i limiti che Gadamer rintraccia nella teoria hegeliana dell'arte e, nello specifico, la cosiddetta «seduzione idealistica [*idealistische Verführung*]» (*GW₈*, 124 / *AB*, 35-36; *GW₁*, 105 / *VM*, 223): quel pensiero che egli riconduce principalmente ad Hegel e secondo il quale il contenuto significativo con cui l'arte ci parla può essere tolto e superato in una forma di sapere superiore (come quella concettuale). In questo senso, Hegel avrebbe, sì, mostrato la possibilità di una soluzione al "problema di Kant"; ma, d'altra parte, avrebbe pure subordinato, dal punto di vista del sistema, l'arte alla filosofia, finendo per perdere la specificità della verità dell'esperienza artistica[3].

Con il presente contributo si intende dunque (§1) ricostruire l'argomento della sezione iniziale di *Verità e metodo*, mostrando sia come la critica che Gadamer rivolge a Kant non sia unilaterale, sia come la soluzione hegeliana al "problema di Kant" si sviluppi proprio a partire dal pensiero kantiano. Successivamente, si vorrà considerare (§2) come Gadamer stesso tenti di sviluppare alcuni spunti del testo della terza *Critica* in un suo lavoro successivo a *Verità e metodo*, dal titolo *Intuizione e perspicuità*[4]; in questa sede, infatti, tramite il

riferimento alle nozioni kantiane di genio e di idea estetica, Gadamer arriva a delineare una teoria dell'arte come *Erfahrung* e, per di più, a caratterizzare l'esperienza artistica di contro alle pretese della cosiddetta "seduzione idealistica". Infine, si mostrerà (§3) che un tale ripensamento dell'estetica kantiana finisce per influenzare la stessa teoria gadameriana dell'arte e per concorrere alla definizione della nozione centrale di "interpretazione [*Interpretation*]"[5].

## 1. L'estetica kantiana in *Verità e metodo*

In *Verità e metodo*, l'intento primario di Gadamer è di distaccarsi dal modello della conoscenza scientifica, indagando il più ampio fenomeno del comprendere e, correlativamente, la possibilità di verità extrametodiche. È dunque significativo che la principale opera gadameriana si apra con una teoria dell'arte e nello specifico con la "messa in chiaro del problema della verità in base all'esperienza dell'arte": è tramite quest'ultima che Gadamer può definire un primo modello extrametodico di verità e cominciare a delineare il fenomeno della comprensione. In altri termini, la tesi principale di Gadamer è che l'esperienza artistica gode di un proprio statuto di verità irriducibile al paradigma di evidenza scientifica e, più radicalmente, che proprio in tale esperienza la limitatezza di questo stesso paradigma si manifesta.

Al contrario, secondo Gadamer, il presupposto fondamentale della fondazione dell'estetica kantiana consiste nella preminenza del paradigma di verità scientifico-concettuale e nella restrizione della conoscenza al solo modello delle scienze naturali[6]. In questo senso, Kant avrebbe sottratto alla tradizione umanistica una serie di nozioni cariche di un valore morale e sociopolitico (i concetti di *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, gusto e giudizio) e, constatandone l'irriducibilità a verità scientifiche, li avrebbe ricondotti ad un principio a priori della soggettività. Secondo Gadamer, Kant sarebbe arrivato così «a negare al gusto ogni significato conoscitivo. [...] In esso non si conosce nulla degli oggetti che vengono giudicati come belli, ma si afferma solo che ad essi corrisponde a priori nel soggetto un sentimento di piacere» (*GW₁*, 49 / *VM*, 111). In altri termini, dati i presupposti, per Gadamer l'estetica kantiana si sviluppa

necessariamente come una teoria soggettivista, per cui nel giudicare del bello non si ottiene nessuna conoscenza dell'oggetto (che viene piuttosto ridotto all'occasione del libero gioco di immaginazione e intelletto), ma anzi il soggetto giudicante esperisce unicamente il rapporto favorevole delle proprie facoltà e il sentimento di piacere che ne deriva.

A ciò, si affianca l'accusa di formalismo estetico[7]. Il kantiano "puro giudizio di gusto" — il quale non è legato né a un concetto dell'oggetto né ad un interesse pratico o morale, o anche sensibile, per l'esistenza dell'oggetto — trova per Gadamer il proprio correlato nell'ideale della "bellezza libera", in cui il libero gioco delle facoltà non è vincolato da alcuna determinazione finale o concettuale. Di conseguenza, dice Gadamer, quella della "bellezza libera" risulta essere una «dottrina estremamente fatale per la comprensione dell'arte» (*GW₁*, 50 / *VM*, 113): così, "l'autentica bellezza" sembra venire limitata al caso del bello di natura e — in campo artistico — a quella dell'ornamento, in cui manca una qualsiasi determinazione finalistica.

Dunque, come teoria soggettivista e formalista, Gadamer ritiene che l'estetica kantiana contenga, *in nuce*, gli spunti teorici che successivamente verranno sviluppati dalla tradizione romantica (l'effettivo obiettivo polemico gadameriano)[8]: la separazione dell'esperienza dell'arte, intesa come bella apparenza, da qualsiasi nesso con una conoscenza di verità e la riduzione dell'estetico alla sfera del mero vissuto soggettivo o, in termini gadameriani, dell'*Erlebnis*[9]. Parallelamente a questa, però, Gadamer individua un'altra tradizione che oppone all'esperienza vissuta dell'*Erlebnis* il modello di una esperienza veritativa e processuale, l'*Erfahrung*. Nel pensiero hegeliano, infatti, l'arte non è un'apparenza chiusa nell'ambito del soggettivo, ma piuttosto possiede un proprio valore storico e veritativo: l'arte, in Hegel, è rappresentazione della storicità dell'uomo e *Weltanschauung*[10], ovvero essa «porta l'uomo di fronte a se stesso» (*GW₁*, 54 / *VM*, 121). Eppure, secondo Gadamer, anche la teoria hegeliana – come la tradizione romantica – si sviluppa attingendo al testo della terza *Critica* e, nello specifico, a quegli spunti contenutistici che rivelerebbero "gli [autentici] pensieri di Kant

[*kantische(n) Gedanken*]" (*GW₁*, 53 / *VM*, 119; trad. modificata), e i quali, dice Gadamer, sembrerebbero già puntare nella direzione di una teoria della verità dell'arte e della concezione hegeliana di *Erfahrung*. In *Verità e metodo*, il riferimento principale è alla nozione kantiana di "bellezza ideale"[11]. Ideale è, nella terza *Critica*, «la rappresentazione di un ente singolo in quanto adeguato ad un'idea» (Kant 1977: 54; trad. it. 1995: 225), ovvero ad un concetto razionale. È dunque ideale quella bellezza fissata mediante un concetto di finalità oggettiva. Di conseguenza, nota Gadamer, tale nozione contraddice esplicitamente l'estetica formalista segnalandoci che per porre l'esperienza dell'arte nel suo orizzonte adeguato è necessario superare la purezza formale del giudizio e riconoscere un legame essenziale tra l'opera e un'idea che in essa trova espressione[12]. In altri termini, è proprio «con questa dottrina dell'ideale della bellezza e, più avanti, con le idee estetiche e la bellezza come simbolo della moralità, [che] viene preparato il luogo teorico per la determinazione dell'essenza dell'arte» (*GW₁*, 53 / *VM*, 119).

Hegel, secondo Gadamer, avrebbe quindi sviluppato con successo gli spunti contenutistici dell'estetica di Kant superando la prospettiva del gusto e la preminenza del bello di natura nella direzione dell'arte come «manifestazione della spiritualità» (*GW₁*, 55 / *VM*, 123). D'altro canto, come si è anticipato, subendo il fascino della cosiddetta "seduzione idealistica", «l'idealismo speculativo […] implicava necessariamente la soppressione [*die Aufhebung*] dell'arte nella filosofia» (*GW₁*, 105 / *VM*, 223). Nel richiamarsi alla lezione di Hegel, Gadamer si propone quindi, da una parte, di accogliere la concezione dell'arte hegeliana e dell'esperienza artistica come *Erfahrung*, opponendosi alla tradizione soggettivista; dall'altra, sottolinea la necessità di «tener fermo il punto di vista del finito» (*ibidem*)[13], proprio per non ricadere nell'errore di Hegel. Ed è quindi a partire da questi propositi che Gadamer delinea, nella seconda sezione della prima parte di *Verità e metodo*, un'ontologia dell'opera d'arte.

## 2. Intuizione e perspicuità

Come si sarà notato, l'analisi contenuta nella prima sezione di *Verità e metodo*, per quanto dettagliata, rimane sostanzialmente ambigua. Infatti, seppur "gli autentici pensieri di Kant" vengano rivelati dalle nozioni di bellezza ideale e di idea estetica, essi né sono contestualizzati rispetto all'unità della terza *Critica* né vengono tematizzati specificamente. In definitiva, sembra che, di per sé, questi sussistano solo in base al riferimento alla teoria che li avrebbe sviluppati e superati in una filosofia della verità dell'arte: quella di Hegel. Insomma, «la colpa di Kant risiederebbe nel non essere ancora Hegel» (Romagnoli 2023: 34)[14], e i suoi meriti nell'aver parzialmente anticipato la filosofia hegeliana. Di conseguenza, il confronto con l'estetica kantiana in *Verità e metodo* appare quantomeno incompleto in quanto non fornisce (a) una spiegazione effettiva del rapporto tra gli "errori" di Kant da una parte e il suo "più autentico pensiero" dall'altra, e correlativamente (b) una tematizzazione degli spunti contenutistici della terza *Critica* che sia interna alla stessa teoria di Kant, e che non sconfini nella filosofia hegeliana. A nostro parere, *Intuizione e perspicuità* provvede a entrambe queste mancanze.

Innanzitutto, l'argomento di *Intuizione e perspicuità* nelle sue prime battute riconduce il presupposto kantiano che concerne la preminenza del modello della verità scientifico-concettuale alle definizioni di concetto e intuizione per come vengono stabilite all'origine della filosofia critica. Infatti, con la *Critica della ragion pura*, sostiene Gadamer, Kant avrebbe introdotto «un concetto di "intuizione" formato secondo il modello strutturale della percezione sensibile […] che quindi sembrava implicare una contrapposizione al pensiero concettuale nel segno di una reciproca esclusione» (*GW₈*, 191/ *SE*, 25). Ciò avrebbe comportato, secondo Gadamer, lo svuotamento della portata veritativa dell'intuizione, stabilendo definitivamente la preminenza del paradigma di una verità concettuale. È da notare però che questa considerazione traccia, all'interno della terza *Critica*, una separazione netta tra l'*Analitica del bello* (escluso il §17) e la teoria kantiana dell'arte. Infatti, sostiene Gadamer, fintanto che

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l'argomentazione kantiana si situa nel solco della definizione reciproca di concetto e intuizione, l'estetica di Kant risente necessariamente della preminenza della verità concettuale e, quindi, produce quelle stesse astrazioni che erano state evidenziate nella prima sezione di *Verità e metodo*. D'altra parte, però, è vero anche il contrario: tale considerazione preliminare riapre la terza *Critica* a delle letture produttive proprio laddove Kant, a detta di Gadamer, sarebbe riuscito a discostarsi dall'opposizione di intuizione e concetto – ovvero, laddove viene teorizzata la nozione di "bellezza ideale" e l'arte viene fondata trascendentalmente nella figura del "genio come facoltà di esibizione delle idee estetiche". Questi due erano esattamente, in *Verità e metodo*, gli spunti contenutistici che secondo Gadamer rivelavano al di là dell'estetica soggettivista "gli autentici pensieri di Kant".

Di conseguenza, tale considerazione spiega (1) l'ambiguità del testo kantiano e, inoltre, rappresenta un notevole passo in avanti rispetto alla ricostruzione di *Verità e metodo*: affinché si possa trattare la tematica dell'arte non si dovrà attingere ai contributi concettuali contenuti nell'*Analitica del bello* (che si riferiscono unicamente al bello naturale o ornamentale), ma piuttosto bisognerà rifarsi unicamente alla teoria kantiana dell'arte e alla sua fondazione nella figura del genio come "facoltà delle idee estetiche". È così dunque che, secondo Gadamer, si potrà poi (2) «sviluppare ulteriormente il contributo filosofico di Kant e liberare la sua visione dai ceppi dell'opposizione tra intuizione e concetto» (*GW₈*, 196-197 / *SE*, 31-32), e quindi (diversamente da quel che accadeva in *Verità e metodo*) considerare la teoria kantiana dell'arte indipendentemente dagli esiti dannosi verso cui la portò la tradizione romantica e dai fruttuosi sviluppi hegeliani.

## 2.1. L'intuizione come processo formante

All'inizio della prima *Critica*, l'intuizione [*Anschauung*] viene caratterizzata a livello epistemologico come quel modo della conoscenza che si riferisce immediatamente ai suoi oggetti attraverso la sensibilità[15]. Proprio questa caratterizzazione, secondo Gadamer, stabilisce quell'opposizione tra intuizione e concetto che invece l'argomento di *Intuizione e perspicuità* si

propone di superare. La nozione di intuizione dovrà essere quindi ripensata *al di là* di una reciproca esclusione con la conoscenza concettuale e, positivamente, nella direzione di un'integrazione tra i due. In questo senso, Gadamer finalmente esplicita quello che egli considera l'autentico intento della fondazione dell'estetica kantiana: «slegare l'arte dalla subordinazione alla conoscenza concettuale senza recidere, al contempo, il suo significativo riferimento al concettualizzare» (*GW₈*, 196 / *SE*, 31). In altri termini, per Gadamer è la consapevolezza dell'impossibilità di comprendere l'esperienza dell'arte a partire da una contrapposizione astratta tra conoscenza concettuale e intuizione che avrebbe portato Kant a tentare uno sviluppo contenutistico della propria teoria estetica; e dunque proprio a Kant bisogna rifarsi se si vuole produrre un'integrazione tra intuizione e conoscenza concettuale.

Nello specifico, Gadamer richiama due caratteri dell'immaginazione per come viene presentata nella terza *Critica*: la sua libertà dalle costrizioni del concetto e, parallelamente, la funzione produttiva del genio come «facoltà della rappresentazione delle idee estetiche [*das Vermögen der Darstellung ästhetischer Ideen*]» (Kant 1977: 55; trad. it. 1995: 227)[16]. Riguardo ciò è utile richiamare brevemente il senso kantiano di "rappresentazione [*Darstellung*]": essa consiste generalmente nell'esibizione sensibile-intuitiva, per via *schematica*, di un concetto; ciononostante, dal momento che le idee della ragione [*Vernunftbegriffe*] non ammettono una rappresentazione "diretta" ma solo quella analogica, Kant escogita un nuovo modo di *Darstellung* – la *simbolica*. Di conseguenza, l'opera del genio così definito si caratterizza come quella creazione che esibisce indirettamente (ovvero attraverso le idee estetiche) le idee della ragione[17]. Correlativamente, dice Gadamer, di fronte all'opera del genio così intesa l'intuizione viene a caratterizzarsi come un processo discorsivo teso a "formare [*bilden*]", nella direzione indicata da un'idea estetica, un'intuizione adeguata, un «qualcosa che […] ci si deve formare [*was man […] sich zu bilden hat*]» (*GW₈*, 193 / *SE*, 28-29). In altri termini, l'esperienza artistica si caratterizza non in base

all'immediatezza della datità sensibile, ma come quel processo intuitivo-immaginativo sempre *in fieri* che tenta di formare un'intuizione unitaria, una "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione", in grado di restituire (indirettamente) la complessità dell'idea che l'opera esibisce.

## 2.2. Oltre Kant: la nozione di perspicuità

A questo punto dell'argomentazione, Gadamer ritiene di aver portato a pieno sviluppo quelli che erano stati definiti, in *Verità e metodo*, "gli autentici pensieri di Kant". D'altra parte, però, un vero e proprio superamento della posizione kantiana appare necessario proprio per la mancanza, all'interno della terza *Critica*, di una base teorica abbastanza solida da fondare l'esperienza dell'arte nella sua valenza veritativa; di fatto, come dice Gadamer, «partendo da presupposti kantiani è difficile riconoscere il carattere conoscitivo dell'arte» (*GW₈*, 192 / SE, 27), risolvere lo stesso "problema di Kant". Dunque, se è vero che fino a questo punto l'argomentazione di *Intuizione e perspicuità* si è mossa nel solco della lettera kantiana — sviluppando quegli spunti che si situano al di là della definizione reciproca di intuizione e concetto e che quindi indicano la possibilità di un superamento della preminenza del paradigma di verità scientifico-concettuale —, nel momento in cui invece Gadamer introduce la nozione di "perspicuità" [*Anschaulichkeit*] per rivalutare positivamente a livello conoscitivo la teoria kantiana dell'arte, egli sembra piuttosto tentare un passo oltre Kant.

Il concetto di perspicuità, che Gadamer accosta a quello più prettamente kantiano di intuizione [*Anschauung*], sta a indicare la stessa teoria dell'arte come "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione", ma considerata non tanto dal punto di vista dell'intuizione soggettiva quanto da quello dell'opera d'arte. Il termine "perspicuo" [*anschaulich*], dice Gadamer, «si riferisce ad una particolare qualità del descrivere e del narrare, una qualità per cui uno vede per così dire "davanti a sé" qualcosa che non ha davvero visto ma che gli è stato soltanto narrato» (*GW₈*, 190 / SE, 24). Questo tipo di esperienza (che secondo Gadamer è la comune esperienza di ogni lettore) è determinata, da una parte, (i) dal testo della descrizione, il

quale — per quanto dettagliato possa essere — manca di una precisione esatta e fonda varie possibilità immaginative; dall'altra (ii), dall'intuizione del lettore che, guidata dalla stessa descrizione ed eccedendola, attualizza una di queste possibilità in una "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione". In altri termini, l'opera d'arte perspicua delinea (i) un'aspettativa di senso, indicando una possibilità immaginativa indeterminata, e (ii) instrada lo spettatore nel flusso di intuizioni interne che determinano il sorgere di una rappresentazione, la quale dunque costituisce il "riempimento" di tale aspettativa di senso[18]. La perspicuità è dunque quella caratteristica dell'opera d'arte per cui essa ci invita e predispone ad intuirla e ad apportare un nostro contributo alla sua realizzazione attraverso una partecipazione attiva nella forma di una rappresentazione immaginativa[19].

Ora, dato che l'opera d'arte perspicua in quanto tale si dà come idea estetica (intesa ora da Gadamer come "anticipazione di un senso indeterminato") e occasiona un processo intuitivo nello spettatore, essa è *vera* dal momento che predispone nel fruitore quella stessa "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione" che la realizza. In altre parole, l'opera d'arte perspicua è vera perché attraverso l'intuizione dello spettatore essa effettivamente si auto-rappresenta. Infatti, così il fenomeno artistico si caratterizza dinamicamente come il processo in cui opera e spettatore cooperano alla costruzione di un "mondo" che solo attraverso l'aspettativa di senso delineata dalla prima e l'attualizzazione nell'intuizione del secondo si rende perspicuo, autonomo e sussistente. Nelle parole di Gadamer, caratterizzare la forma artistica come ciò attraverso cui "il mondo" (*die Welt*)[20] "si fenomenizza" (diventa *anschaulich*), ci porta a considerare l'arte come *Weltanschauung*, come «intuizione perspicua del non-intuibile e come ridescrizione di un intero ambito di referenza» (*SE*, 13)[21]. In questo modo, egli sembra sia riferirsi all'immaginazione kantiana nel suo tendere «a qualcosa che si trova al di là del limite dell'esperienza» (Kant 1977: 193; trad. it. 1995: 445) sia radicalizzare questa caratteristica evidenziando la forza destabilizzante dell'opera d'arte perspicua e la sua attitudine a mettere in questione l'esistente.

Quest'ultimo punto si può chiarire richiamando la definizione di intuizione come processo formante. Come si è detto, di fronte all'opera d'arte perspicua, attraverso il «flusso delle intuizioni interne» (*GW₈*, 200 / *SE*, 35), l'immaginazione tenta di sintetizzare in un'intuizione "adeguata" i molti pensieri occasionati dall'idea estetica, senza però potersi avvalere della determinatezza del concetto; questo lavorìo infinto, destinato al fallimento, determina essenzialmente secondo Gadamer un qualche dispiacere[22]. L'opera quindi ci impone di indugiare presso di sé in vista di una comprensione che ci viene ripetutamente negata e, di conseguenza, ci parla. Infatti, a questa dinamica apparentemente formale si collega inevitabilmente un elemento contenutistico: nel momento in cui, di fronte all'opera, falliamo e proviamo del dispiacere, secondo Gadamer facciamo esperienza della nostra propria finitezza. In altre parole, nell'esperienza che se ne fa e tramite cui l'opera d'arte autentica si realizza, vengono a manifestazione sia il mondo, sia il nostro determinato modo di "essere nel mondo". È in questo preciso senso che, per Gadamer, l'esperienza artistica si qualifica come *Erfahrung*.

### 2.3. Kant o Hegel?

Prima di congedare l'argomento di *Intuizione e perspicuità* è necessario considerare brevemente le conclusioni a cui si è arrivati. Come si è tentato di mostrare, l'argomentazione di *Intuizione e perspicuità* si compone di due momenti non sempre facilmente distinguibili: il preliminare lavoro di riformulazione della nozione kantiana di intuizione, per cui si arriva a definire l'arte del genio come "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione", e l'introduzione del concetto gadameriano di perspicuità (il quale poggia proprio su questo lavoro preliminare) con la conseguente caratterizzazione dell'esperienza artistica come veritativa. Ora, ci sembra che a questi due momenti si possano accostare, come in parallelo, i due problemi che erano già stati individuati in *Verità e metodo* e con i quali la teoria gadameriana dell'arte deve necessariamente confrontarsi: il "problema di Kant" e la "seduzione idealistica". Come si ricorderà, in *Verità e metodo* si riconosceva ad Hegel il merito di aver trovato una soluzione al "problema di Kant"

tramite la caratterizzazione dell'esperienza artistica come *Erfahrung*. Invece, l'unica resistenza da opporre alla "seduzione idealistica" era costituita dalla necessità di "tener fermo il punto di vista del finito".

In *Intuizione e perspicuità*, seppur la proposta gadameriana non sembri cambiare sostanzialmente, le cose si svolgono in maniera differente. In questa sede, Gadamer parte dalla concezione kantiana dell'arte come "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione" e se ne appropria[23], facendola valere contro la stessa "seduzione idealistica". Infatti, si è visto come, lavorando sui concetti kantiani di intuizione e immaginazione, l'argomento gadameriano arrivi a considerare l'idea estetica come l'anticipazione di un senso indeterminato a cui l'opera d'arte perspicua rinvia, e grazie al quale essa si configura come un fondo inesauribile di pensieri. In questo senso, la verità dell'esperienza artistica non può venire superata o tolta nella forma della conoscenza concettuale.

In altri termini, attraverso la riformulazione del concetto di intuizione come processo discorsivo e formante Gadamer pone le basi per un'integrazione tra la forma dell'esperienza artistica (il dispiacere che segue qualsiasi tentativo di cogliere, in un'unica intuizione, un'opera come "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione") e il suo contenuto significativo (il nostro "essere-nel-mondo" che nell'*Erfahrung* artistica viene a manifestazione). Un'integrazione che, è doveroso aggiungere, — seppur costituisca già in *Verità e metodo* uno degli assunti centrali della proposta gadameriana — per quanto riguarda il confronto con la tradizione estetica è sempre stata misconosciuta a favore di un'opposizione tra estetica kantiana e filosofia hegeliana. È quinid significativo che la determinazione di *Weltanschauung*, la quale in *Verità e metodo* era riservata unicamente all'estetica hegeliana e che denota, in modo esemplare, il valore veritativo dell'arte, in *Intuizione e perspicuità* venga legata saldamente alla figura di Kant. Gadamer, insomma, sembra ora rifiutare il falso problema di «una scelta di campo nel vecchio conflitto tra un'estetica della forma e un'estetica del contenuto — un'opzione a favore di Hegel contro Kant» (*GW₈*, 203 / *SE*, 38) e piuttosto tentare un avvicinamento delle due prospettive[24].

### 3. Come *il concetto fatto risuonare*[25]

Per affrontare gli ulteriori sviluppi del rapporto tra Gadamer e l'estetica kantiana, è necessario fare una breve considerazione filologica. Il titolo di questo paragrafo non è che la traduzione, per quanto libera, di una precisa espressione a cui Gadamer ricorre reiteratamente all'interno della propria opera e che egli riconduce a Kant. Tale espressione risulta particolarmente rilevante dal momento che, nel commento gadameriano all'opera di Celan, viene ad identificare uno specifico paradigma di esperienza artistica. In tedesco, la formulazione centrale di questa citazione – che Gadamer rielabora in vari contesti e che, però, di per sé non compare all'interno del corpus kantiano – recita: "Unnennbaren […] in Anschlag gebrachte Begriff". Il termine "Unnennbaren" è una forma sostantivata dell'aggettivo "unnennbar", il quale si può tradurre con "indicibile". "Begriff" significa "concetto", ed effettivamente è un termine kantiano. Infine, la formula "in Anschlag bringen" di per sé rimanda a "esibire", "mostrare", "rendere manifesto", ma viene letta da Gadamer come "mettere in risonanza", "far risuonare". In definitiva quindi, Gadamer legge questa formula come «una bella espressione di Kant che deriva dal linguaggio musicale del XVIII secolo» (*GW₈*, 112 / *AB*, 23), e la riferisce al fenomeno per cui, di fronte all'opera d'arte particolare, i concetti formano una specie di cassa di risonanza che articola la forza dell'immaginazione e, così, "vengono fatti risuonare".

La prima occorrenza di tale citazione, che manca però del termine "Unnennbaren", è in *Verità e metodo*[26], dove viene impiegata per caratterizzare la nozione di "bellezza aderente" e, in senso ampio, la teoria kantiana dell'arte: essa sta a significare, essenzialmente, che nel giudicare della bellezza aderente si tiene conto di un concetto della cosa. In questo senso, la formula "in Anschlag gebrachte Begriff" trova una corrispondenza all'interno della terza *Critica*[27]. Inoltre, in *Verità e metodo*, a questa occorrenza segue una considerazione da parte di Gadamer: il concetto kantiano di bellezza aderente «non vale solo [nel caso] della poesia, ma di tutte le arti rappresentative» (*GW₁*, 50 / *VM*, 113). Ora, nel considerare la nozione di bellezza aderente (in cui la rappresentazione

rimanda al concetto della perfezione del rappresentato), generalmente ci si rifà in prima battuta al fenomeno delle arti figurative[28] piuttosto che a quello della poesia; Gadamer, invece, sembra pensare primariamente al caso dell'arte poetica e alla musicalità del verso. In questo senso, già nel 1960 la formula "in Anschlag bringen" viene apparentemente letta come un'espressione musicale per cui, nella bellezza aderente e, specialmente, nella poesia, i concetti non sono meramente esibiti, ma vengono "messi in risonanza".

Il termine "Unnennbaren", invece, compare solo nei testi successivi a *Verità e metodo*. All'interno della terza *Critica*, espressioni come "unnennbar" ricorrono soprattutto nei paragrafi 48 e 49[29], in cui Kant esamina la fondazione dell'arte nella figura del genio come facoltà di esibizione delle idee estetiche. Questi paragrafi, come si è visto, sono il riferimento essenziale dell'argomentazione di *Intuizione e perspicuità*[30]. A nostro parere, negli anni successivi al 1960, Gadamer riconsidera da vicino i passi "più promettenti" della terza *Critica* – rivelanti "l'autentico pensiero di Kant". Così, egli arriva, da una parte, ad elaborare una nuova lettura dell'estetica kantiana che, nel 1980, culminerà in *Intuizione e perspicuità*; dall'altra, ad aggiungere un termine come "unnennbar" alla formula che designa la teoria kantiana dell'arte, consolidando la propria interpretazione di "in Anschlag" come espressione musicale.

Come si tenterà di mostrare, il recupero del termine "Unnennabaren" permette a Gadamer di qualificare la suddetta espressione come paradigma formale dell'esperienza poetica e, in senso lato, artistica. Questo per due ragioni:

a) termini come "unnennbar" ("indicibile") esplicitano un assunto generale della teoria gadameriana, per cui l'opera d'arte (specialmente l'opera d'arte contemporanea) respinge la possibilità di venir compresa attraverso un significato univoco e dunque oppone una resistenza all'*appeal* della "seduzione idealistica"[31];

b) la lettura della formula "in Anschlag" come espressione musicale racchiude un ripensamento — analogo a quello sviluppato in *Intuizione e perspicuità* — del rapporto tra

intuizione (o immaginazione) e concetto come rapporto di integrazione.

In questo senso, l'occorrenza di maggiore interesse dell'espressione esaminata si trova in una breve critica all'interpretazione di Peter Szondi di due poesie di Paul Celan (1972). Questo contributo è poi confluito nella postfazione dell'opera *Chi sono io, chi sei tu?* (1986), il commento gadameriano alla raccolta di poesie *Atemkristall*, dello stesso Celan. In questo frangente, Gadamer descrive il lavoro interpretativo del lettore come qualcosa di estremamente difficoltoso, ma, parallelamente, potenzialmente accessibile a chiunque. Se è vero che, da una parte, la parola poetica ricusa l'univocità del senso — e quindi le pretese della "seduzione idealistica" — e si caratterizza per la sua sostanziale ambiguità, dall'altra essa pretende una comprensione da parte del lettore. In questo senso, dice Gadamer, «la poesia offre […] la possibilità a ciascun lettore di aderire a ciò che viene evocato dall'atto linguistico come se si trattasse di un'offerta […]. Soltanto questo è comprendere una poesia» (*GW₉*, 433 / *PC*, 88). Comprendere una poesia significa dunque accoglierne l'offerta e, in sostanza, interpretarla correttamente.

Riguardo l'annosa questione circa la giustezza dell'interpretazione, Gadamer in *Chi sono io, chi sei tu?* afferma che «un'interpretazione è esatta solo quando alla fine è in grado di scomparire completamente perché è entrata a formare una nuova esperienza della poesia stessa» (*GW₉*, 451 / *PC*, 117). Ciò significa che un'interpretazione "giusta" deve poter ambire ad essere una rappresentazione [*Darstellung*] dell'opera e, quindi, deve contribuire all'auto-realizzazione della poesia. In effetti, già in *Intuizione e perspicuità* si era visto come l'intuizione soggettiva, in quanto "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione", contribuisse all'auto-realizzazione dell'opera perspicua: nella misura in cui tale intuizione è suggerita dal testo e attualizza una delle possibilità immaginative da esso evocate, questa si situa nel solco stesso della "forma" dell'opera e non ne è che una *Darstellung*. Ciò significa, nei termini di Gadamer (e, in parte, di Kant), che l'interpretazione «non può attuarsi pienamente se l'orecchio interiore non "ascolta" ogni parola del testo interpretato e, *riflettendo ed eseguendo il movimento linguistico*

*della poesia*, se non viene recepito anche quanto di nuovo emerge tra le molte "cose indicibili [*Unnennbaren*]" che il pensiero interpretante aggiunge e che il "concetto fatto risuonare [*in Anschlag gebrachte Begriff*]" vorrebbe cogliere» (*GW₉*, 443 / *PC*, 100, corsivi nostri). Di conseguenza, dice Gadamer, (a) non esiste un'interpretazione definitiva in grado di esaurire, nella forma del concetto, la parola poetica e le "molte cose indicibili" che essa occasiona in quanto perspicua. Piuttosto, continua il testo gadameriano, la "parola interpretante" che risponde all'appello poetico e lo porta ad auto-realizzarsi è come il "libero gioco" kantiano: l'interpretazione non è né vincolata dalla preminenza del concetto, né legata ad una scelta a piacere e alla sola soggettività[32] — ma nell'interpretare, nel produrre una rappresentazione dell'opera, (b) l'immaginazione (o intuizione) accoglie l'offerta della parola poetica e si amplifica nella "cassa di risonanza dei concetti", facendoli risuonare. In questo senso, Gadamer caratterizza (a) l'interpretazione opponendosi alla "seduzione idealistica" e, parallelamente, (b) instaura un rapporto di integrazione tra intuizione e concetto grazie al recupero della nozione kantiana di "libero gioco".

Inoltre, come si è già mostrato in riferimento a *Intuizione e perspicuità*, questi due elementi sono l'uno il correlato dell'altro. Dal momento che la nozione di interpretazione viene ripensata al di là della definizione oppositiva tra intuizione e concetto tramite il riferimento al libero gioco kantiano, essa si caratterizza come "processo formante" sempre *in fieri*: la comprensione dell'opera non arriva mai a consolidarsi in una *Darstellung* definitiva come in un risultato e, proprio in questo senso, essa si oppone alle pretese della seduzione idealistica. Per di più, come si è detto parlando dell'opera perspicua, proprio con questo "libero gioco" tra l'interpretazione soggettiva e il testo poetico che la alimenta e ne legittima la pretesa a valere come "giusta", l'opera d'arte si auto-realizza e l'esperienza artistica si caratterizza come *Erfahrung*. Tutto ciò appare dunque come un'applicazione di quello che poi, nel 1980, sarà il contributo di *Intuizione e perspicuità*: il tentativo, da parte di Gadamer, di sviluppare gli spunti kantiani che si situano al di fuori del campo di influenza

della definizione reciproca di intuizione e concetto, e, correlativamente, l'avvicinamento di determinati elementi dell'estetica di Kant alla propria teoria dell'arte.

## 4. Conclusioni

Come si è tentato di mostrare, gli effettivi termini di confronto della teoria gadameriana dell'arte non sono tanto Kant o Hegel, quanto il "problema di Kant" da una parte e la "seduzione idealistica" dall'altra. Da questo punto di vista, se è vero che in *Verità e metodo* viene rimproverato all'estetica kantiana il misconoscimento del valore di verità dell'esperienza artistica, è anche vero, d'altra parte, che la terza *Critica* getta le basi della stessa soluzione del "problema di Kant". Infatti, gli spunti contenutistici dell'estetica di Kant, i cosiddetti "autentici pensieri", offrono sia la possibilità ad Hegel di formulare la propria teoria dell'*Erfahrung* dell'arte, sia a Gadamer, in *Intuizione e perspicuità*, di «sviluppare ulteriormente il contributo filosofico di Kant e liberare la sua visione dai ceppi dell'opposizione tra intuizione e concetto» (*GW₈*, 196-197 / *SE*, 31-32). Più radicalmente, a partire dalla riformulazione della nozione kantiana di intuizione e dalla caratterizzazione dell'opera d'arte perspicua come auto-realizzantesi nella "rappresentazione dell'immaginazione", si arriva, con Gadamer, a definire l'esperienza artistica nei suoi tratti veritativi e come un'esperienza insuperabile nella forma della conoscenza concettuale. In *Intuizione e perspicuità*, insomma, Gadamer affronta, partendo dal testo kantiano e servendosi di determinati elementi concettuali della terza *Critica* (ovvero, delle nozioni di genio e di idea estetica), sia il "problema di Kant" che quello della "seduzione idealistica". Inoltre, si è mostrato anche come queste considerazioni influenzino effettivamente la teoria gadameriana dell'arte e, nello specifico, come Gadamer ricorra alla nozione di libero gioco e, reiteratamente, alla formula "Unnenbaren […] in Anschlag gebrachte Begriff" per definire, attraverso quindi un esplicito riferimento all'opera di Kant, il proprio paradigma interpretativo.

In definitiva, sembra che il rapporto tra la teoria gadameriana dell'arte e il pensiero di Kant non si possa

facilmente ridurre alle prime pagine di *Verità e metodo*. Piuttosto, questo dialogo si evolve e conduce ad uno sviluppo reciproco che, da una parte, avvicina l'estetica di Kant ai temi propri di una teoria dell'arte come *Erfahrung*, e, dall'altra, permette a Gadamer di acquisire nuovi strumenti concettuali in vista di una migliore comprensione dei fenomeni artistici contemporanei.

**NOTES**

[1] Nel testo si utilizzeranno le seguenti sigle per indicare le opere di Gadamer: GW per l'edizione di riferimento tedesca: Gadamer*, Gesammelte Werke*; VM = *Verità e metodo* (2000), tr. Vattimo, *Wahreit und methode* (*GW₁*); AB = *L'attualità del bello* (1988), tr. Dottori – Bottani (*GW₈, GW₉*); SE = *Scritti di estetica* (2022), tr. Bonanni – Marino – Romagnoli (*GW₈, GW₉*); PC = *Chi sono io, chi sei tu? Su Paul Celan* (1989), tr. Camera, *Wer bin ich? Wer bist du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celan Gedichtfolge «Atemkristall»* (*GW₉*).
[2] Cfr. *GW₁*, 352-368 / *VM*, 715-747. Il concetto di *Erfahrung* e il concetto di *Erlebnis* ("esperienza vissuta") ad esso contrapposto sono due elementi-chiave della critica mossa da Heidegger al soggettivismo estetico (cfr. Heidegger 1985: 89-107). Questi concetti vengono ripresi da Gadamer e sistematizzati nella prima parte di *Verità e metodo* (cfr. Di Cesare 2007: 143-147; Dutt 1995).
[3] Proprio la "seduzione idealistica" «era la convinzione di Hegel, che lo portò al tema della morte dell'arte, dell'arte come qualcosa di passato» (*GW₈*, 124 / *AB*, 35; inoltre, cfr. *GW₈*, 207 / *SE*, 44). Gadamer affronterà a più riprese la celebre tesi hegeliana circa il "carattere passato dell'arte", dandone una interpretazione esplicita nel breve saggio *Fine dell'arte? Dalla tesi di Hegel sul "carattere-passato" dell'arte all'anti-arte di oggi* (cfr. *GW₈*, 206-220 / *SE*, 41-56; *GW₈*, 221-231, non ancora tradotto in italiano). Riguardo a questa interpretazione si vedano le analisi di Romagnoli (2016, 2023: 50-57). Riguardo alla tesi hegeliana e le sue interpretazioni, si veda Siani (2024a).
[4] Cfr. *GW₈*,189-205 / *SE*, 23-41.
[5] In questo senso, non si intenderà dunque offrire una disamina critica della lettura di Gadamer, mettendola a confronto con interpretazioni più rigorose e specialistiche del testo della terza *Critica* o con l'autentico pensiero kantiano. Piuttosto, si vorrà mostrare e descrivere come la teoria gadameriana dell'arte si sia di volta in volta, più o meno esplicitamente, misurata con la figura di Kant nel tentativo di definirsi.
[6] Cfr. *GW₁*, 65, 89 / *VM*, 143, 191.
[7] La categoria di formalismo viene generalmente utilizzata per designare le teorie che concepiscono l'esperienza estetica in base alla struttura o "forma" dell'esperienza stessa (e, nel caso di Kant, del giudizio che la determina) e non secondo il contenuto significativo che ne emerge; viceversa, le teorie che individuano un valore di verità o il sorgere di una determinata forma di

sapere all'interno dell'esperienza estetica cadono sotto la categoria di contenutismo estetico. A proposito, si veda Vattimo (1985: 118-129).

[8] Cfr. *GW₁*, 87-106 / *VM*, 187-225. Inoltre, riguardo al rapporto tra Gadamer e la tradizione romantica, si veda Gjesdal (2009).

[9] Il concetto di *Erlebnis*, che Gadamer riconduce alla sistematizzazione neokantiana e all'opera di Dilthey, è, così come il concetto di *Erfahrung*, un elemento chiave della critica al soggettivismo estetico di Heidegger. D'altra parte, in Gadamer la nozione di *Erlebnis* subisce una radicale sistematizzazione e, inoltre, viene connotata in chiave gnoseologica relativamente alla problematica della "coscienza storica", affrontata nella seconda parte di *Verità e metodo*.

[10] Riguardo il termine *Weltanschauung*, Gadamer in *Verità e metodo* afferma – erroneamente – che esso appare per la prima volta nella *Fenomenologia dello spirito*. Infatti, in *Intuizione e perspicuità* (cfr. *infra*, §2) Gadamer rintraccia, all'interno della discussione kantiana circa il tema del sublime matematico, un'eccezionale (e forse prima in assoluto) occorrenza del termine *Weltanschauung* (*GW₈*, 195, n. 1 / *SE*, 30, n. 6; Kant, 1977: 92). Inoltre, nell'opera del 1960 si legge anche che questa nozione assume il suo autentico significato solo nell'*Estetica* di Hegel, in cui «il contenuto di verità che si trova in ogni esperienza d'arte viene magistralmente riconosciuto e messo in rapporto con la coscienza storica. L'estetica diventa così una storia delle *Weltanschauungen*, cioè una storia della verità come essa si rivela nello specchio dell'arte» (*GW₁*, 103 / *VM*, 219).

[11] Cfr. Kant, 1977: §17. A proposito, si veda Siani (2007: 144-166); inoltre, la nozione di "ideale" (chiaramente di derivazione kantiana) come unità di soggetto e oggetto è un elemento chiave della filosofia hegeliana dell'arte (cfr. Siani, 2024b).

[12] «Proprio in questa tesi appare chiaro quanto poco un'estetica formalistica (un'estetica dell'arabesco) corrisponda alle idee di Kant» (*GW₁*, 53 / *VM*, 119). È proprio rispetto a questa concezione contenutistica — la quale, secondo Gadamer, rivelerebbe le autentiche intenzioni della fondazione kantiana dell'estetico — che una lettura polarizzante e unilaterale della prima parte di *Verità e metodo* dimostra la propria inadeguatezza.

[13] È esplicita, qui, l'influenza del ciclo di lezioni heideggeriane del 1921/22 riguardo ad una "ermeneutica della fatticità" (cfr. Heidegger 1988), a cui Gadamer partecipò da studente. È anche da notare, però, che nel trattare la lezione hegeliana come polo opposto al soggettivismo estetico, Gadamer si allontana da Heidegger che, ricostruendo una "storia della metafisica", aveva visto nella tesi hegeliana della fine dell'arte il "compimento della tradizione estetica" (cfr. Heidegger 1985).

[14] Su questo punto, si trova anche l'accordo di Figal (2010) e di Gjesdal (2009: 9-47). Riguardo alla critica mossa da Hegel nei confronti dell'estetica kantiana, si veda Siani (2024b).

[15] Cfr. Kant 1974: 49. Riguardo questa definizione e la complessa questione circa il rapporto tra intuizione e concetto in Kant, si veda Ferrarin (2022: 109-202), con ampia bibliografia.

[16] Qua, traducendo il termine kantiano *Darstellung* (normalmente reso con "esibizione") si è optato per una traduzione uniforme, in continuità con la

nozione gadameriana. Il termine *Darstellung* (che Vattimo in *Verità e metodo* traduce con "rappresentazione") è infatti una parola-chiave dell'estetica gadameriana presentata in *Verità e metodo* la cui centralità rimarrà pressoché invariata negli scritti successivi al 1960 (cfr. Grondin, 2025; Figal 2022, Nielsen 2023, Di Cesare 2007: 78-80, Romagnoli 2023: 101-109).

[17] Cfr. Kant 1977: 192-193; Traduzione it. 1995: 443-445. A proposito della nozione di idea estetica si vedano Siani (2007: 141-162) e Tomasi (2021). Invece, riguardo al ruolo dell'immaginazione all'interno dell'estetica di Kant, Pareyson (1968: 139-149) e Filieri (2021).

[18] Cfr. *GW₈*, 21 / *AB*, 84. Tale "riempimento", nei termini di Gadamer, è come «un inquieto fiume di immagini, [che l'opera d'arte perspicua è in grado di evocare e] che accompagna la comprensione [dell'opera stessa] senza fermarsi in nessuna intuizione che possa arrivare a consolidarsi come in un risultato» (*GW₈*, 194-195 / *SE*, 29; *GW₈*, 115-118 / *AB*, 26-29).

[19] È chiaro che l'introduzione di tale concetto comporta un passo oltre Kant e, nello specifico, un passaggio da quello che potremmo indicare come "il punto di vista del genio" (ovvero la fondazione soggettiva dell'arte nell'immaginazione creatrice dell'artista) al "punto di vista dell'opera". Questo passaggio viene però giustificato da Gadamer attraverso la caratterizzazione kantiana del genio come «l'esprimere e rendere universalmente comunicabile […] il gioco dell'immaginazione» (Kant 1977: 198; Traduzione it. 1995: 453; cfr. Tomasi, 2021: 22-27). In altri termini, dice Gadamer, dal momento che entrambe si configurano come un libero gioco, la caratterizzazione dell'arte come produzione del genio non può essere separata dalla congenialità di colui che recepisce l'opera. Di conseguenza, «ciò che Kant ha descritto a partire dal lato soggettivo, come prestazione della facoltà estetica di giudizio oppure come genio e spirito, si può formulare dall'altro lato come l'intuire il mondo [*das Anschauen von Welt*] che giunge a presentazione in ogni opera d'arte» (*GW₈*, 198 / *SE*, 33).

[20] Per quanto riguarda la nozione di *Welt* nel contesto di una teoria ermeneutica dell'arte, si veda Vattimo (1985: 103-114).

[21] Cfr. *GW₈*, 70-79 / *AB*, 159-169.

[22] Rispetto a questo punto, Gadamer stabilisce un'analogia con la nozione kantiana di sublime matematico (cfr. *GW₈*, 200 / *SE*, 35).

[23] Cfr. Tate, 2009 n. 31. Inoltre, dello stesso avviso sembra essere Gjesdal (2009: 11, 31-32).

[24] Riguardo alla possibilità di tale avvicinamento, si veda Bertram (2014).

[25] Cfr. *GW₁*, 50 / *VM*, 113; *GW₉*, 443 / *PC*, 100; *GW₈*, 112, 203-205 / *AB*, 23 e *SE*, 39-41.

[26] Cfr. *GW₁*, 50 / *VM*, 113. In questa occorrenza dell'espressione, Gadamer non segnala l'origine kantiana ma si limita a mettere tra virgolette la citazione. Nella traduzione di Vattimo, il possibile riferimento a Kant e il potenziale significato "musicale" della suddetta formula si perdono totalmente.

[27] Kant 1977: 188; Traduzione it. 1995: 436 (corsivi nostri): «so wird in der Beurteilung der *Kunstschönheit* zugleich *die Vollkommenheit des Dinges in Anschlag gebracht werden müssen*». In questo passo la bellezza artistica viene legata alla nozione kantiana di bellezza aderente, la quale presuppone un

concetto di ciò che l'oggetto deve essere e la perfezione dell'oggetto [*Vollkommenheit des Gegenstandes*] in base ad esso (cfr. Kant 1977: 48).

[28] Anche gli esempi di Kant suggeriscono un'associazione tra bellezza aderente e arti figurative (cfr. Kant 1977: 50; Traduzione it. 1995: 219).

[29] Cfr. Kant 1977: 197-198; Traduzione it. 1995: 450-452.

[30] In questo senso, inoltre, si noti che il testo di *Intuizione e perspicuità* si chiude con tre occorrenze della suddetta citazione (cfr. *GW₈*, 203, 205 / *SE*, 39, 41).

[31] Qui, non si vuole confondere "indicibile" con "inesprimibile". È chiaro che, per Gadamer, seppur l'opera d'arte occasioni molte "cose indicibili" ("Unnennbaren"), essa esprime *qualcosa*, una verità, per cui l'esperienza artistica si configura come *Erfahrung*. In altri termini, ci sembra che "indicibile" significhi "inesprimibile nella lingua dei concetti", ovvero attraverso le scienze metodiche e la filosofia, e non "inesprimibile".

[32] Questo è un punto molto importante della teoria gadameriana, per cui essa si distanzia da qualsiasi "nichilismo interpretativo" o esito soggettivistico (a cui l'ermeneutica filosofica è stata spesso – erroneamente – ricondotta). Infatti, dice Gadamer, dal momento che l'interpretazione segue il movimento dell'opera con cui gioca o, in termini kantiani, che nell'interpretare l'immaginazione si conforma alla legalità propria dell'intelletto, «non si tratta di una varietà di interpretazioni, ma di possibili modi di essere propri dell'opera stessa, la quale, in un certo senso, interpreta se stessa nella varietà dei suoi aspetti» (*GW₁*, 123 / *VM*, 259).

Inoltre, si ricordi che in *Verità e metodo* (cfr. *GW₁*, 113-116 / *VM*, 239-245) Gadamer aveva caratterizzato la propria nozione di *gioco* [*Spiel*] in opposizione al libero gioco kantiano in quanto meramente soggettivistico. In questo senso, sembra si possa rilevare uno scarto tra la lettura gadameriana contenuta in *Verità e metodo* e quella presente in *Chi sono io, chi sei tu?*, in cui Gadamer integra la nozione kantiana all'interno della propria teoria dell'arte.

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# Marc Richir and the transitional area of sublime

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to elaborate the notion of the transitional area of sublime. To accomplish this task, I will first draw on the works of Marc Richir, in which he correlates the concept of the transitional area with the experience of sublime, albeit without insisting on their possible conjunction. Therefore, my task would be to prove how the relation between the transitional area and the experience of the sublime can be considered a consequence of Richir's developing thought. Richir has drawn on Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, concerning the former's theory of sublime, while the transitional area is a concept borrowed from Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytical framework. To demonstrate how the transitional area of the sublime functions, I will provide an account of what Richir calls the phenomenon of celebration. I will argue that, for Richir, the celebration resonates with Winnicott's transitional area, which can represent a hybrid zone where imagination fuses perpetually with the world and the world appears as a coherent dream, this being rendered possible by the experience of the sublime. Finally, I will retrace Richir's steps back to the theories of Kant, Winnicott and Merleau-Ponty, to show how these authors influenced his conception of the transitional area of sublime.

**Keywords:** sublime, dream, reality, celebration, phenomenology.

## Introduction

Despite the recent body of literature concerning Marc Richir's work which is rapidly increasing (Forestier 2015; Fazakas 2016; Fazakas 2019; Fazakas & Gozé 2020; Furtună 2016; Bodea 2018; Flock 2021; Ekweariri 2021a; Ekweariri 2021b; Prášek 2021; Schnell 2021; Chu 2023; Senatore 2024), the relation between Richir's appraisal of Winnicott's

transitional area and his appropriation of the Kantian sublime has not been thematized as such. Marc Richir has analyzed the concepts of transitional area and the sublime several times, although he did not explore extensively the possible, and fruitful conjunction between these two notions. In this paper, I will attempt to provide an account of the transitional area of sublime, by advancing a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of celebration, as it is found in Richir's thematization from *The Sublime in Politics*. Instead of focusing on Richir's contribution to historiography and socio-political theory, I will rather be emphasizing the phenomenon of celebration as an exemplification of what could be termed the "transitional area of sublime". To strengthen my claim, I will retrace the conceptions of the philosophical forerunners of Richir's theory of the collective sublime, namely the authors who have influenced him the most. Therefore, this paper will be divided into several chapters, including a short analysis of the Kantian sublime, followed by a comparison between Winnicott's notion of the transitional area and Merleau-Ponty's oneirism of wakefulness, an analysis of the exchange of gazes, which will lead finally towards Richir's perspective on the phenomenon of celebration, in which the transitional area of the sublime will be addressed the most. The thesis asserting the existence of the transitional area of sublime in Richir's corpus, even before he discovered the theories of Winnicott, will be proved alongside this paper. Each chapter will be ended by Richir's view on that certain subject, i.e. the sublime, oneirism etc.

This paper also investigates what makes us feel human, i.e. one of the elements specific to human nature, that is, the experience of sublime. Concerning the definition of the transitional area of sublime, it could be designated as a hybrid realm, in which imagination and reality constantly fuse together, bringing forth the most wonderful contents of experience. This happens thanks to the experience of the sublime insofar as this undergoing reveals the transitional area as not a mere passive interchange between inner and outer, but rather, as involving the elements of surprise, awe and amazement. Ultimately, the transitional area of sublime is a realm of delight and enjoyment, which could be compared to the

life of the infant and even to the pleasure felt in regarding a play at the theatre. Nonetheless, although the feeling of sublime might consist in anguish or even fear (Kant 2007, 90), in this paper, I will inquire into the fortunate encounter with this phenomenon. Richir's claim is even more striking, because he states that the phenomenon of celebration is rendered possible by a sort of bracketing of the human being's symbolical landmarks, which allows the phenomenological dimension to become operative. This bracketing also entails an ethical feature, referring to the possibility of dwelling together in the world in a harmonious manner.

Regarding the methodological considerations of my paper, it must be stated that it is a comparative study, in which I draw on phenomenological and psychoanalytical resources to describe the phenomenon that I want to unveil. I proceed now to demarcate the boundaries of my paper, regarding the notions which will be used. The theories of Kant, Winnicott and Merleau-Ponty are all present in the works of Marc Richir, depending on his period of inquiry into different regions of phenomenology. For example, the Kantian thematization of the sublime is an omnipresent motif in Richir's work, starting with *Phenomenology and Symbolic Institution.* From there onwards, the notion of the sublime will receive different meanings in the works of Marc Richir, depending on the perspective he wants to employ to describe human nature. Therefore, in the very first pages in which he addresses the issue of the sublime, Richir comments upon Kant's *Third Critique,* while in his later work, he advances the notion of the "moment" of sublime to render the infant's relation to his/her mother. Richir will discover Donald Winnicott's works after the 2000's, and from there onwards the theories of the British psychoanalyst will become of great interest to Richir, because of the conjunction between the latter's account of the archaic phenomenological field[1], and the former's empirical research on child-rearing. Inspired by the Husserlian theories of aesthetic experience (Husserl 2005, 616), Richir will employ Winnicott's concepts of the transitional object and transitional phenomena, providing a phenomenological reading of them. From Merleau-Ponty, Richir will borrow the notion of the flesh of the world, but also the

latter's notion of *phantasia* might be considered a sort of response to the former's notion of the oneirism of wakefulness[2].

## 1. The Kantian sublime

Before providing a brief account of Kant's theory of the sublime, we ought to recall his notion of schematism from the *First Critique*. There, Kant suggested that the transcendental function of imagination is to mediate between sensibility and understanding in producing schemas. (Kant 1996, 214) Thus, schemas were the product of transcendental imagination. If in the *First Critique,* the transcendental imagination operated the process of schematization using categories (the pure concepts of understanding), in the *Third Critique* imagination does not appeal to such concepts, but rather, it schematizes freely. This would be the Kantian distinction between determinate judgements (in which the imagination schematizes with a concept), and reflective judgements (in which the imagination schematizes without a predetermined concept). This distinction will be of great use to us even when we are going to venture into Winnicott's account of the transitional area. As Fazakas has already proved, Winnicott's playing without pregiven rules resembles Kant's schematism without predetermined concepts. (Fazakas 2019, 73)

Advancing towards the Kantian notion of sublime, the author suggests that it, the sublime is to be found in an object devoid of form, its main attribute being that of limitlessness[3]. The pleasure which the sublime arises is an indirect one, because it represents a momentary check to our vital forces, followed by an even more powerful discharge[4]. This would be a serios matter in the exercise of imagination. (Kant 2007, 75-76) The feeling of sublime might be triggered by chaos, or by the wildest and most irregular disorders and desolations that nature can provide. The key notions used by Kant are magnitude and power, and these will provide the distinction between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. (Kant 2007, 77) I am going to briefly sketch the two types of experience, to show how this distinction persisted even in the works of Marc Richir, most notably, in his account of celebration.

The mathematically sublime is the name given to something which is absolutely great. This designates the sublime to be something absolutely great without another object of possible comparison. (Kant 2007, 78) Interestingly, Kant notices that concerning the experience of sublime, we do not have any interest whatsoever in the real existence of the object, rather, the greatness of it is able to convey to us a universally communicable delight. (Kant 2007, 80) This already points towards a sort of "spontaneous aesthetic bracketing", as Richir suggested in his later works. (Richir 2015, 83)

> Nature can be sublime, because its phenomena convey the idea of infinity, which is to be sought only in the mind of the judging subject. This statement might seem at first perplexing, but Kant explains that even when we contemplate the pyramids of ice or the dark tempestuous ocean, the mind abandons itself to the imagination and to reason. (Kant 2007, 86-87)

The most important element in Kant's theory of sublime, and even in his analysis of aesthetic phenomena, is the relation to morality[5]. We are thereby informed that the feeling of our inability to attain an idea that is a law for us is called respect. Therefore, the violence done by the sublime to our imagination awakens in us the moral feeling of respect. Kant correlates further the relation between the feeling of sublime with the respect for our own vocation as human beings. (Kant 2007, 88) This thesis will prove to be pivotal when I am going to discuss Richir's phenomenon of celebration, because likewise Kant, Richir is attempting to lay out the basic tenets of the relation between aesthetic feelings and morality, using his distinction between the symbolic and the phenomenological registers. The idea of a relation between aesthetics and ethics is further advanced in Kant's anthropology, in which he directly links the feeling of sublime with respect. (Kant 2006, 140-141)

On the other hand, regarding the dynamically sublime, Kant commences by defining might as a power that enables us to cope with great hindrances. (Kant 2007, 90) Another key aspect which is present both in Kant's work and in Richir's is the feature of the feeling of sublime, which renders a sort of awakening of the moral feeling and even humanity's call, thanks to the safety felt when encountering the sublime.

Drawing on Husserl's theory of the transcendental soil (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 117), Richir would insist too that, from a phenomenological standpoint, the earth does not actually move. (Richir 2006, 284) Moreover, recalling Richir's theory of the positive and negative moments of sublime, and comparing it with recent thematizations[6], we ought to consider the earth to be the *sine qua non* of a fruitful encounter with the sublime. Otherwise, if the earth shakes or even trembles when experiencing the sublime, this might even result in trauma, as Richir insists. (Richir 2004, 329) Furthermore, the moral feeling and the aesthetic experience and interrelated. On the one hand, moral feeling is the presupposition of this type of pleasure, and on the other, the sublime awakens the feeling of respect towards the idea of humanity in us. (Kant 2007, 95) As we have stated above, this interrelation between morality and the sublime will be most evident when analyzing Richir's notion of celebration, because the collective sublime becomes an opportune moment when human beings can gather around in a sort of universal fraternization.

We finally receive a concise definition of the sublime, which sums up all the aspects that Kant has been thematizing until now. We are informed that the sublime determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas. (Kant 2007, 98) Bearing this analysis in mind, we can now move towards the second section of our paper, which presents the effects of the sublime on the subject, namely the possibility of the pleasurable interaction between what is subjectively conceived and what is objectively perceived, between imagination and reality, inner and outer, and so forth. Nonetheless, before moving onwards, Richir's appraisal of the Kantian sublime should be emphasized once again. Richir advances a phenomenological theory of sublime in which Kant's notion is sought to provide the soil for the process of humanization (Richir 2015). Therefore, Richir will be discussing the notions of the "moment" of sublime, the sublime instants and affections, to designate this overload of affectivity which awakens the human being to his or her own humanity, but also to the humanity of others. (Richir 2008, 84-85) The "moment" of sublime becomes the very first

manifestation of the humanity of the human being, understood as the possibility of an ethical relation with the other.

## 2. Oneirism and the transitional area

The theme of oneirism seems to have been a long-time preoccupation of Merleau-Ponty's works, and so we can find scattered remarks about this phenomenon in the corpus of literature pertaining to his thought. Nevertheless, the French phenomenological author has never given a full-fledged account of this concept, hence we are left just with his dissipated remarks on the subject, out of which we aim to draw the bigger picture.

For example, in his lectures held at Sorbonne on child psychology, Merleau-Ponty states that the infant does not live in the bipolar world of the adult, but rather he/she inhabits a hybrid zone of oneiric ambiguity. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a, 181-182) This claim already resonates with Winnicott's overall thematization of the child's life, and we will explain why this is so in the following subchapters. Merleau-Ponty's claim ought to be investigated in detail, appealing to other remarks concerning the phenomenon of oneirism.

This oneiric ambiguity designates the state in which imagination and reality are not autonomous in relation to one another, but rather there exists a perpetual intertwining and overlapping between these two regions of existence. Moreover, the ambiguous character of the oneirism also consists in the way it applies to our waking life, thereby the expression "oneirism of wakefulness". Conversely, and following Merleau-Ponty's account, one could also insist on a quasi-perceptual character of dreams, this being termed by the French phenomenologist "the mythical". (Merleau-Ponty 2010b, 147) Therefore, by virtue of his perspective on the oneiric ambiguity of our lives, Merleau-Ponty somehow aims to rethink Bergson's notion of the "attention to life", in which there were two poles of attention, the one of reality and shared world, and the one pertaining to dreams and unconsciousness. The key notions that Bergson used were those of intensity and tension, to show how our level of attention towards life was directly proportional

to the tension of duration felt by the subject. (Bergson 1919, 226)

Returning to Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible,* he regards the child as projecting his dreams onto external reality, (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 11-12) coloring it subjectively, and even idiosyncratically. We can already presuppose that by virtue of his notion of chiasm[7], introduced in the fourth chapter of the book, Merleau-Ponty was already aware of the perceptual interchange between what is subjective and what is objective, namely between what is conceived and what is perceived. The theories of Merleau-Ponty and those of Winnicott seem once again strikingly similar, because both asserted that the world never consists of mere imaginary content or sheer perceived reality, but rather, the world is a result of the interaction between these two regions of existence. Only by virtue of the overlapping between the two poles of reality, the subjective and the objective, do we arrive at a world worthy of inhabiting.

In another of his texts concerning oneirism, the French phenomenologist introduces the issue of alterity. There, he writes that others are present to us in the way dreams and myths appear. This once again points to the inherent oneiric dimension of our existence, which in this case can be applied to the relations with others. Furthermore, the cleavage between the real and the imaginary should be once again questioned accordingly. (Merleau-Ponty 1970, 48) The cleavage implied in this equation does never become a full-fledge reality, because the two regions of existence, the imaginary and the shared world cannot become autonomous to each other. Drawing inspiration from Merleau-Ponty ontology of the imaginary, Dufourcq (2015, 47) even coined the term "imaginareal", to describe the state of perpetual fusion between different "finite provinces of meaning", as they were described, for example, by Alfred Schutz. (Schutz 1962, 207) But what does this discussion add to Richir's notion of celebration? As we are going to suggest, the transitional area of sublime is the prototype of this "imaginareal" realm, which is conditioned and rendered possible precisely by the overload of affectivity provided by the sublime.

Comparing once again the statements referring to the oneiric or mythical relation to the other with the discussion concerning Winnicott's psychoanalytical theory, the British psychoanalyst noticed that play and playing as such strengthen interhuman and social relationships. Nonetheless, he did not thematize the oneiric element of our relations with others as such, but rather, this feature of our everyday existence was only implicit in Winnicott's framework. Even though Winnicott inquired in the reciprocal relation of mother and infant (Winnicott 1989, 251), he focused on the infant's experience of things and objects, as subjectively conceived, and not that much on the child's, so to say, oneiric relationship with others. He nevertheless stated that dreams contribute to our waking lives and external reality provides material or data for our dreams, albeit he did not dwell on this thought further. Marc Richir himself emphasized the function played by the notion of *phantasia* in establishing what he has called transcendental interfacticity (Richir 1992, 49) and transcendental intersubjectivity. Moreover, the *phantasia* involved in the exchange of gazes provides the passage from transcendental interfacticity to transcendental intersubjectivity, because it marks the very first operations played by the sublime in the life of the infant. (Richir 2015, 244) In other words, this passage represents the movement from mere coexistence to interhuman interactions.

In the very first chapter of his book entitled *Playing and Reality,* Winnicott introduces the notion of transitional area to describe the phases of through which the infant passes in the case of his/her development. Therefore, we are informed about the concepts of transitional object and transitional phenomenon as designating the intermediate area of experience between the thumb and the teddy bear, between oral erotism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, and nonetheless between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness. (Winnicott 2009, 2) This passage ought to be commented on further, because in it one can already find the leading threads of Winnicott's theory of human nature. This discussion is necessary, because only

thanks to it can we reach the genetic presupposition of our discussion concerning the transitional area of sublime, namely the exchange of gazes.

The first phase of transitional phenomena, i.e. that from the thumb to the teddy bear represents the infant's neediness for attachment, thus he/she will project his/her feelings onto a teddy bear, for example, to feel the real and whole presence of the other, in this case, the mother. The transitional object becomes henceforth a substitute for the maternal presence. The second phase of transition seems to indicate the same movement. Winnicott even implicitly attempts to describe the steps which the infant has to follow in order that he/she arrives at an authentic and affectionate relationship with his/her mother, and so Winnicott insists on the passage from erotism to the true object-relationship, which in psychoanalytical terms, designates the relation between two whole human beings[8].

Next, the primary creativity and the dialectics between introjection and projection will prove to be crucial elements for our inquiry, because they provide the firm ground onto which the transitional area of sublime can be established. We will see further how this process unfolds, when we are going to analyze a specific transitional phase described by Winnicott, namely the mirror role of the mother's face. For now, it ought to be emphasized that primary creativity or creative apperception makes life worth living, because it allows us to see the world in a creative fashion. (Winnicott 2009, 87) This is due to the dialectical exchange between introjection and projection, which permits the human being to live in the third area of experience, i.e. in the transitional area. The Finnish phenomenologist Joona Taipale even emphasized how we come to live in a world worthy of inhabiting, by suggesting that the subjective and idiosyncratically elements of our life are projected onto external reality, making a mere house, for example, inhabitable. Hence the house becomes a home, i.e. a place for creative and artistic activity too. (Taipale 2021a, 34) This statement resonates and even becomes analogous to Richir's description of the phenomenon of celebration.

Perhaps the transitional phase onto which Winnicott emphasized the least is the one concerning the passage from

unawareness of indebtedness to the acknowledgment of it. This represents certainly one of the first steps the infant has to follow into his/her ethical life, and in this manner the process of humanization is also addressed. Therefore, by indebtedness Winnicott alludes to how the infant will soon start to acknowledge everything the mother does for him/her by virtue of her ordinary devotion and care. This recognition does not imply a struggle, as in Hegel's sense, since it represents the infant's capacity to become aware of the mother's love, and in this way, to love her back.

Now that we have delineated all the basic presuppositions of Winnicott's notion of the transitional area, which as we have insisted, are very rich and useful to our inquiry, we ought to dwell more on the chapters from his book in which he discusses "the place where we live". These chapters explicitly address the transitional area, in a similar vein to Richir's approach of the phenomenon of celebration. Therefore, we are going to analyze the two chapters dedicated to the transitional area from *Playing and Reality,* where the transitional area is also designated as a potential space. Next, a short discussion will be brought forward concerning the exchange of gazes between mother and infant. This will be our starting point in demonstrating how the sublime starts to be operative in the life of the infant. The exchange of gazes might even be described as the genetic presupposition of the experience of sublime. Marc Richir even calls this constitutive feature of our experience the operative "moment" of sublime. All these discussions are crucial for our thematization of the transitional area of sublime, because by virtue of them we can retrace Richir's steps back to Winnicott's theory, comparing the thematizations of the two authors and advancing further our own proposal. Moreover, we attempt to prove that the two authors had similar thoughts concerning what makes life worth living and enjoying. In the case of Marc Richir's discussion of the phenomenon of celebration, we will also notice how close he came towards Winnicott's theory, at a moment when he did not know his work yet. As we will attempt to demonstrate, what Richir adds to the notion of the transitional area is the sublime

feature, that could refer to awe, surprise and wonder, elements seemingly lacking from Winnicott framework[9].

In his papers on the place of cultural activity, Winnicott states that throughout his career as a psychoanalyst, he struggled to identify the actual location of play. He quickly came to observe that play does not happen simply inside the human being's mind, nor merely outside of him/her, in the playground for example, but rather, it takes place in the *in-between.* (Winnicott 2009, 129) Returning to his notion of transitional object, Winnicott emphasizes the role played by the symbolic object or transitional object, which can be located in space and time. Therefore, he argues for the dwelling of the transitional object in the *in-between* space between mother and infant. This statement demands further explanation. The transitional object is an object "in transition" because it represents the passage from the mother as experienced purely subjectively, to the mother perceived objectively. Moreover, it also represents the union of both mother and infant, by somehow facilitating their state of separation. (Winnicott 2009, 130) The British psychoanalyst returns once again to his main idea concerning the transitional area, and he acknowledges that it designates what life is actually all about. (Winnicott 2009, 133)

Winnicott makes another very interesting claim when he relates the dialectics of cultural experience, namely the interplay between originality and acceptance of the tradition, to the to-and-fro play between the initial states of separateness and union between mother and infant. (Winnicott 2009, 134) Drawing some concluding lines, Winnicott recapitulates his main theses on the transitional area. Henceforth, he suggests that the place of cultural experience is located in the potential space (the transitional area) between the individual and the environment. Moreover, the use of this space depends mostly on the early life experiences which the individual had with his/her mother. Creativity results out of the interplay between the object as subjectively perceived and objectively conceived, this tension between the two poles being of utmost importance. The potential space can be set up only thanks to a feeling of confidence towards the mother, or more generally, towards the

other. This short observation concerning trust will prove to be pivotal when we are going to analyze Richir's phenomenon of celebration, wherein every participant at the event befriends the others in a sort of universal fraternization. Once again, for the British psychoanalyst, everything that pertains to the external shared reality is first and foremost invested with subjective imaginative contents by the infant, this giving a certain coloring to the environment, making it an inhabitable and joyful one. Play becomes the direct continuation of the transitional area, which in this chapter has been called the potential space. (Winnicott 2009, 136)

In a complementary text, entitled "The place where we live", Winnicott develops further his ideas concerning the relation between the transitional area and cultural experience. The British psychoanalyst asks once again the same question as in the previous chapter, namely where exactly are we when playing, celebrating, enjoying a piece of music, or a theatrical performance? The dichotomy between inside and outside does not suffice in Winnicott's view, so he introduces an intermediate zone, which represents also an intertwining and overlapping of the internal and the external. (Winnicott 2009, 142)

For Winnicott, playing leads naturally to cultural experience, thus the early experiences of the infant, such as creative gestures towards the mother will be directly related to experiences such as enjoyment and beauty in adult life. (Winnicott 2009, 143) The different experiences of play and of cultural activity vary from individual to individual due to the early interactions between the infant and the environment. Henceforth, Winnicott introduces the notion of potential space. (Winnicott 2009, 144) For example, if vocal interactions were preponderant between mother and infant in the case of the latter's early life experiences, then the child might even develop musical capabilities, such as singing. Here the musicality of babbling seems to be a strikingly meaningful example. When the infant starts trusting his/her mother, the transitional area becomes one of infinite separation, but nonetheless, this separation can be filled creatively with playing, which will become in time an area of cultural enjoyment. (Winnicott 2009, 146) Playing and cultural activity take place in time and space,

uniting or linking together the past, the present, and the future. (Winnicott 2009, 147)

Winnicott insisted very much on the continuity between the early life experiences of the infant and the later adult life, in which cultural activity would flourish. But we could ask ourselves how is this connection possible? Or we could ask, more exactly, what is the key element from our early childhood that ensures the later enjoyment of the transitional area of sublime? What we are exactly asking is what is the constitutive element, the condition which functions constantly, and renders possible the experience of delight in the world of culture and art? Up until now, we have analyzed the basic tenets of what Winnicott has called the transitional area, but we ought to advance towards Richir's thematization of the phenomenon of celebration. Our claim is that the missing link, or the key element which marks the passage from the early life experiences of the infant to the enjoyment of cultural activity later in life is exactly the operative "moment" of sublime. This notion was first introduced by Marc Richir throughout his several readings of Winnicott's empirical work on child psychoanalysis. Before providing an account of the phenomenon of celebration, in which the transitional area of sublime manifests itself most explicitly, we ought to dwell more on one of Winnicott's chapters from *Playing and Reality,* which tackles the issue of the mirror-role of the mother's face. We are analyzing this chapter too, because it will represent great inspiration for Richir's notion of the exchange of gazes between mother and infant. In the case of this exchange, we first encounter the "moment" of sublime, namely our guiding thread from now on to the end of our paper. For the time being, we ought to insist more on Richir's assessment of Winnicott's work concerning the transitional area. The Belgian phenomenologist holds the transitional area to represent the original spatiality of the human being, also functioning like a *choratic* space, a receptacle which holds us, and it has held us, before the institution of the first "absolute here". (Richir 2006, 268) Once again, Richir correlates the mother's lap with the earth that does not move, because he considers the lap to be a prototype of this nonmoving earth. The lap (the primitive earth that does

not move) is to be considered both in its phenomenological function as well as in its symbolic one. Therefore, it would not only represent the infant's actual feeling of safety, i.e. the fact of being held, but also, the symbolic security that helps him/her to cope with the sublime, resulting in a fortunate encounter with it.

## 3. The exchange of gazes

Winnicott commences the presentation of his theory by mentioning Lacan's mirror-stage. (Lacan 2006, 75) The former contests the primordiality of the latter's mirror theory for the development of the self. Instead of describing the mirror as the first object in which the infant recognizes himself/herself, Winnicott suggests that the mother's face plays this peculiar role. (Winnicott 2009, 149) Furthermore, Winnicott asserts, in a puzzling manner, that what the baby sees when regarding the mother's visage is actually himself/herself. (Winnicott 2009, 151) The theory of the British psychoanalyst partly resonates with phenomenological thematizations, such as those of Merleau-Ponty. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139) Moreover, Hegel (2004, 111) and Deleuze (2001, 97) could be recalled as well, alongside the thesis regarding the fundamental narcissism of vision. This fundamental narcissism designates the phenomenon wherein every time we look at something or someone, we somehow see ourselves too. (Merleau-Ponty 1968)

Winnicott's entire theory of the mirror-role of the mother's face must be connected with his approach of creative apperception, namely how the infant conceives of reality subjectively. Therefore, in Winnicott's words, when the infant sees himself or herself regarding the mother's visage, the mother will reflect the child's self back by virtue of her expression. This phenomenon is rendered possible by the state the mother finds herself in, which was termed by Winnicott the primary maternal preoccupation. (Winnicott 1958, 300) By reflecting the infant's self, the mother will give him/her back something which actually belongs to him/her. This process is always menaced by a possibility, i.e. the case when the mother's expression seems not to be responsive enough. If this happens, then the infant will not see herself/himself, but rather the

mother's face. Winnicott explains that if this happens, the mother's face will not be a mirror anymore. As he suggests, perception will take the place of apperception, and what could have been a significant two-way exchange between self and world does not occur anymore. (Winnicott 2009, 151)

As we had previously explained, the world of the infant is to be considered under the heading of what Joona Taipale called an illusion-model (Taipale 2021b, 202). The illusion-model signifies that at first perception and apperception, namely the subjective and the objective, are in a state of fusion, out of which disillusionment coming from the mother's part might occur[10]. In the event of being seen, Winnicott postulates a process wherein apperception is linked to perception. As Winnicott asserts, we look and we are seen, so we exist. We can now afford to look and to see the world creatively, whereas what I apperceive, I also perceive. (Winnicott 2009, 154) Joona Taipale has already emphasized the way in which social mirrors function, alongside the importance of being seen (Taipale 2016, 15). Now we should advance towards Richir's thematization of the exchange of gazes between mother and infant, to prove how exactly the sublime becomes operative.

As we have suggested before, Richir himself draws heavily on Winnicott's theory of the mirror-role of the mother face, at the same time providing a novel account of this phenomenon, which also includes the feature of the sublime. Summarizing Richir's scattered remarks on the exchange of gazes, it could be argued that the forerunner of the experience of the beautiful and the sublime, as in Kant's sense, is exactly the sublime felt in the exchange of gazes (Prášek 2021, 66). We could wonder for example why Richir did not discuss, at that moment, how the mother mirrors the infant's babbling, as in mother-infant vocalization. We could also wonder why he does not expand upon the phenomenon of touching and being touched in the case of these early interactions. (Richir 2010, 36) The answer is to be found in the case of the pivotal role played by the exchange of gazes, namely the possibility of fixing the infant's gaze by virtue of the mother's one. Thanks to this process, two absolute "here" are instituted, the infant's and the mother's one. This would be the peculiar function of the

exchange of gazes[11]. But what about the sublime, which was invoked earlier? Richir employs different expressions to highlight the function played by the sublime in the case of these exchanges, thus he mentions the "moment" of sublime, the instant of sublime and the sublime affections[12]. (Richir 2008, 84-85) All of these components are present in the infant's experience of sublime, which should be conceived in two distinct yet highly interconnected moments, these being already somehow present in Kant's theory. First, there is the so-called "systole" of this experience, namely what Richir calls the hyper-condensation of affectivity, which is followed by the "diastole", in the guise of the excess of affectivity. Nevertheless, Richir is very attentive when he describes the expression of the mother's visage, and its role in providing a certain atmosphere for the infant. This process usually happens after what Winnicott has called the first theoretical feed, more precisely, the moment when the infant is held by the mother, and he/she has his/her needs fulfilled. From there on, the very first interactions might take place, including of course touching and being touched, babbling and vocalizing back, and the exchange of gazes, which from the standpoint of phenomenology, is paramount. Without engaging into a detailed discussion of what Richir conceived as "perceptual" *phantasia,* the peculiarity of the exchange of gazes resides exactly in that it involves the "perceptual" *phantasia,* considering of course the meaning that Richir attaches to it. Shortly put, the exchange of gazes involves the presence of empathy, but it is also related to what Richir designated under the title of "transcendental interfacticity". (Richir 2008, 83) Now that we have briefly analyzed the genetic presupposition of the experiences of beauty and sublime (as in Kant's sense), we are ready to investigate the phenomenon of celebration, and to outline the notion at stake, i.e. the transitional area of sublime. To accomplish this activity, we need to retrace Richir's steps back to his work *The Sublime in Politics,* and analyze the first chapter of it, which might seem rather poetic, but nonetheless full of very important remarks concerning what it means to be human, and to enjoy inhabiting the world together with other human beings.

## 4. The phenomenon of celebration

As we have indicated before, Richir's poetic attempt to describe the phenomenon of celebration echoes the efforts of certain historians or historiographers, such as Michelet and Quinet, to describe the atmosphere felt by the people of France after the Revolution of 1789. This chapter of Richir's work could be thematized in conjunction with his later reading of Winnicott's transitional area and the issue of sublime, yet this task will not be undertaken in the present paper. Instead of the comparative analysis between Richir's early and late conception of the transitional area, we will limit ourselves to an in-depth description of the phenomenon of celebration as it is found in *The Sublime in Politics*. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of celebration is of utmost importance for illustrating how the transitional area of sublime unfurls. Eugen Fink's account of play and celebration has the merit of somehow anticipating Richir's thematization (Fink 2016, 216), while the theory of the Belgian phenomenologist includes multiple notions which were not present in Fink's perspective. For example, Fink admits that celebration is a manifestation of the intermingling between imagination and reality, while the element of the sublime is not present in his conception.

Richir commences by arguing that due to the celebrations following the events of the French revolution, people reengaged in a sort of dream-like state with nature, similar to Merleau-Ponty's oneirism of wakefulness. This spontaneity reminded them of their being-in-the-world as necessarily being-with-one-another. The community of people appears like a sort of dream, without any temporal or spatial landmarks. (Richir 1991, 14-15) Here Richir recalls Husserl's wording that our waking world seems to resemble a coherent dream. (Husserl 1970, 17)

These dream-like or oneiric encounters, to recall Merleau-Ponty's thematization, of people with each other, the fraternity of man with man, is a way of inhabiting the world together harmoniously. This specific phenomenon is called by Richir "the sublime in politics". The human being becomes an incarnated symbol, representing the harmonious co-existence of everydayness, the world and the human community.

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Nevertheless, this joyful encounter is always menaced in a latent manner by the negative side of this phenomenon, i.e. by terror[13]. (Richir 1991, 16) Richir echoes Kant's theory of the sublime, wherein it was argued that the sublime consisted of both a sort of attraction and a repulsion. Moreover, the sublime awakens the feeling of respect, but somehow negatively, through a sort of fear. We will shortly notice how the key element permitting this celebration to unfold is exactly the earth that does not move, namely what we have designated, following Richir, under the heading of the feeling of symbolic security.

By virtue of this possibility of inhabiting the world together, which appears in the eyes of the people as a sort of dream, they find again their being-in-the-world. What is peculiar about this process is that our being-in-the-world is found anew through this dream-like celebration, while for Heidegger, for example, dream and sleep existed outside of human historicity. (Heidegger 2001, 229-230) Nevertheless, this dream-like celebration seems more real than reality itself, as Richir argues. (Richir 1991, 17)

The next feature introduced by Richir in the equation of the phenomenon of celebration is the landscape. Already in his 1988 book entitled *Phenomenology and Symbolic Institution,* he stressed the relation between the experience of the sublime, as it is presented in Kant's *Third Critique,* and the notion of the "transcendental landscape". (Richir 1988, 353) In the case of the phenomenon of celebration, the landscape does not involve this transcendental function, but rather, it becomes a landscape of the world. Shortly put, in the case of celebration, the world becomes a landscape of the world. (Richir 1991, 18) Richir considers that at the core of the celebration lays a profound silence, which might even represent the origin of speech. The silence of the celebration might also be connected to what Richir has called indetermination or even the loss of the symbolic features of the human being, implied in the celebration. Even though human beings might have never experienced this sort of celebration, which follows a historical event, there is a certain familiarity with the world, thereby the world becomes something very familiar to us, because of the

way the landscape of the world appears. The landscape of the world summons a sort of "transcendental reminiscence" (Richir 1987, 186-187), connecting the feelings aroused by the celebration with a sort of immemorial familiarity with the world insofar as we are speaking of a humanized world. This virtual loss of all the symbolic features of the human being is made possible by a sort of phenomenological bracketing, as the Belgian phenomenologist asserts. (Richir 1991, 19) This immemorial familiarity with the world, which is found in celebration, and the transcendental reminiscence of the sublime felt thereof could represent the trace played by the "moment" of sublime in the early mother-infant interactions. Thereby, this would be the operative feature of the "moment" of sublime[14], to connect the very early experiences with the joy felt later. (Richir 2010, 73)

This fraternity of people with each other is made possible by the "moment" of sublime opened by the experience of the starry sky, as Kant described it at the end of the *Second Critique.* (Kant 2002, 203) Therefore, the human being's terrestrial sojourn becomes unlimited because the earth is discovered alongside its horizon. This means that the earth, in the case of celebration, is not to be envisaged as the object of geography, but rather as the indefinite opening place of the landscape of the world. Furthermore, the phenomenon of celebration appears like an innocent dream, because people are attuned to the feeling of the sublime by virtue of this immemorial familiarity, which renders possible the fraternization. (Richir 1991, 20)

Moreover, nature, the earth and the world become synonymous terms. The ephemeral incarnation taking place in the event of the celebration is analogous to what Merleau-Ponty described as the flesh of the world. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 248) Ataraxy and serenity are the key terms used by Richir, hence they denote a successful encounter with the sublime. Nonetheless, he also discusses the other possible side of this situation, namely the eruption of forces of destruction and anxiety[15]. (Richir 1991, 21)

Regarding the issue of unconsciousness, a key aspect of the phenomenon of celebration, Richir suggests that in the case

of this happening, the unconscious state refers precisely to the impossibility of demarcating imagination from reality and vice versa. As in Winnicott's transitional area, there is no clear-cut landmark between what pertains to reality, and what is furnished by imagination. This atmosphere is in Richir's description a sort of surreal aspect of our existence in the world. (Richir 1991, 22)

Mirroring his definition of phenomenological schematism, with which we have started our paper, Richir argues for the structure of celebration as an "improvisation without concepts". Likewise in the case of the *Third Critique,* wherein imagination was schematizing freely, no predeterminate concepts intervene in the process of schematization as such. As Fazakas has proved, even Winnicott's notion of playing without preestablished rules can be subsumed under the category of schematism without pregiven concepts. (Fazakas 2019, 73) Richir emphasizes once again the dream-like feature of celebration, namely the fact that within it, imagination and reality cannot be distinguished from one another. Moreover, concerning the spatial characteristics of this phenomenon, the earth (which does not move), seems to encounter the sky, the latter embracing the former. (Richir 1991, 25)

The experience of sublime, as it is encountered when contemplating the starry sky, involves a sort of phenomenological bracketing, wherein the symbolic landmarks of the human being are suspended. The paradox of this experience consists exactly in the way in which the starry sky, likewise the earth, brings people together. (Richir 1991, 26-27) Therefore, the sky gives us the law in the Kantian sense of the term, which designates freedom. (Richir 1991, 29) The way the earth and the sky interact in the case of the celebration is of utmost importance, because their intertwining represents the ethical position of the subject, as Richir notices. The Belgian phenomenologist even addresses the question of the tension between earth and sky in establishing a landscape of the world. (Richir 1991, 31) Therefore, this tension played between earth and sky evokes the sublime further, primarily under the guise of the landscape of the world.

Summing up our discussion so far, the collective sublime is the direct consequence of a historical event, which leaves a sort of trace of it in the guise of an atmosphere, depending upon the result of that specific historical event. Marc Richir has analyzed rather poetically the fortunate outcome of a historical event for example, while he could as well had interrogated the other side of the event, which could have consisted in terror. In the case of the sublime event, the transitional area is the key structure that renders possible the tension between the seemingly contrasting elements, for example, between dream and world, imagination and reality, and earth and sky. Thus, the transitional area of sublime represents a sort of atmosphere wherein imagination and reality merge together, by virtue of the sublime, hence providing the most wonderful contents of our experience, i.e. the experience of the landscape of the world. Once again, we have investigated the fortunate outcome of the encounter with the sublime, whereas there exists a perpetual tension between the two poles of affectivity involved in this sort of experience. This swing consists precisely in how enjoyment might be menaced by anxiety, and how fear might transform itself in an instant into delight.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper attempted to prove that Richir's thoughts on the transitional area of sublime were already present when preparing the work *The Sublime in Politics.* From the very early analysis of Kantian schematism and phenomenological schematism (Richir 1983, 111-112), Marc Richir brought forth an original attempt to envisage the role played by imagination in the overall economy of the human being. We consider *The Sublime in Politics* to be a pivotal example of Richir's developing thinking, starting from the early works on Kant and Husserl and following his rethinking of the notion of *phantasia.* Next, this paper provided a historical background to Richir's notion of the transitional area of sublime, evoking different authors who were sources of inspiration for Richir, such as Kant, Winnicott and Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, by proposing the concept of the transitional area of sublime we have attempted to open the space for further research, which

might concern itself to the experience of the early life of the infant, or even with the delight felt in regarding certain artistic or cultural activities. The transitional area of sublime becomes the atmosphere in which the infant's life develops, alongside certain experiences, such as surprise, awe and wonder, provided that he or she has always a presence in which he or she can trust, i.e. the mother. The phenomenon of celebration reminded us once more what it means to be a human, ethically speaking. By virtue of the sublime triggered by the historical event, people come to see each other as what they are and not what they seem to be, thus fraternizing together, in a sort of collective dream. This would be exactly the peculiar function that the phenomenological bracketing of the symbolic landmarks would play. Further research might also point towards a psychopathology of the transitional area, this being rendered possible by the perpetual swing of affectivity which is involved in the experience of the sublime.

**NOTES**

[1] The archaic phenomenological field designates primarily the experience of the world in the case of the infant, which is governed by fantasy (*phantasia,* as Richir puts it). (Richir 2010)

[2] It must be stated that Merleau-Ponty himself has drawn heavily on the Husserlian notion of phantasy, without naming it as such. Although, Richir's notion of "perceptive" *phantasia* seem to indicate toward the same purpose of inquiry as Merleau-Ponty's oneirism of wakefulness.

[3] In the middle period of his work, for example in Richir (1992), he even advances the relation between the phenomenological sublime and the phenomenological apeiron.

[4] In his later work, Richir will use the notions of systole and diastole, which he borrowed from Henri Maldiney, to describe the two critical instants of the experience of sublime.

[5] As we are going to see, the phenomenon of celebration involves an ethical position towards the others, thus building up an authentic community of individuals.

[6] See for example, Fazakas and Gozé (2020).

[7] Even though Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of chiasm to describe the interaction between the "subjective body" and the "objective body", the term can also be applied to the interrelation between imagination and reality.

[8] This would once again mark the passage from transcendental interfacticity to transcendental intersubjectivity, in Richir words, namely the movement

from drive to presence, or from mere coexistence to interaction. (Richir 2015, 240)

[9] Although the sublime seems to be lacking from Winnicott's overall theory of human nature, he nonetheless alludes to the possibility that the infant might even surprise himself or herself in playing, for example, in the case of the Squiggle game. (Winnicott 2009, 68)

[10] As Winnicott has insisted several times, the paramount role of the mother, besides holding and handling the infant, would be that of disillusionment.

[11] The exchange of gazes becomes thus one of the very first manifestations of spatiality.

[12] Richir differentiates between moment and instant of sublime. Therefore, if the first pertains to the immemorial past of the infant, and cannot be pinpointed as such, the latter refers more precisely to the instantaneous occurring of an event, as for example, in Plato's Parmenides.

[13] Following our argument, the transitional area always involves the sublime, both in the case of the exchange of gazes, and in the phenomenon of celebration, hence the menace of counterbalancing affectivity to its opposite is always at stake. Thus, the transitional area of sublime involves the risk that affectivity such as joy might transform itself into fear, and vice-versa.

[14] By the operative "moment" of sublime, Richir alluded to this sort of excess of affectivity as being somehow omnipresent throughout the life of the human being. Thus, the sublime accompanies all our emotions, by virtue of its complex structure involving both joy and fear. (Richir 2010).

[15] As we have seen, in the case of Kant's aesthetics, the sublime can trigger either joy or fear, depending on whether the subject finds himself in a state of symbolic security or not. (Kant 2007, 99) .

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# Theodor W. Adorno on the Aesthetic Truth and Untruth of Fashion

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## Abstract

This article is focused on Theodor W. Adorno's critical interpretation of the truth and untruth of fashion, as it emerges from his influential *Aesthetic Theory*, in relation to some fundamental categories of his thought that can be derived from his most important writings, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (co-authored with Max Horkheimer), *Minima Moralia, Prisms*, and *Negative Dialectics*. Although Adorno cannot be said to be a systematic theorist of fashion, nonetheless some paragraphs of his unfinished and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* clearly testify his interest in this topic. However, little attention has been paid yet to Adorno's philosophical account of fashion, which was clearly influenced by the general approach of his critical theory of society. It is important to take into consideration this aspect of Adorno's aesthetic thinking to understand his views of the relation between fashion, art, and the culture industry. Moreover, an analysis of fashion as a site of intersection between Adorno's aesthetics and his rejection of the culture industry, and a reconstruction of Adorno's critical theory of fashion from his brief writings on the subject, is also useful to prompt a re-evaluation of other aspects of Adorno's thought, including his unique conception of truth as dialectically interwoven with its opposite (namely, untruth).

**Keywords:** Theodor W. Adorno, aesthetics, critical theory, culture industry, fashion.

## 1. Fashion, Critical theory, Culture industry

The present contribution is focused on the aesthetics of fashion in relation to Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy and, in particular, his conception of truth (inscribed in the general context of his critical theory of society) as dialectically interwoven with its opposite, namely untruth. It is my goal in

this article to reconstruct an Adornian critical perspective on fashion through a dialectical reading of fragmented passages on this theme in his *Aesthetic Theory* and other writings. I will present an analysis of fashion as a site of intersection between Adorno's critical aesthetics and his rejection of the culture industry, and show how this can also prompt a re-evaluation of other aspects of Adorno's thought (including his conception of the dialectical relation between truth and untruth).

At first sight the readers might perhaps consider this connection between fashion and Adorno's thinking as a strange and problematic one. Indeed, references to fashion are not particularly frequent in Adorno's writings and, differently from Simmel, Benjamin, Fink, Barthes, Bourdieu or Lipovetsky, Adorno cannot be said to be a systematic theorist of fashion. This fact, in itself, is *not* particularly surprising, because it is well known that, at a general level, "[t]he question of fashion is not a fashionable one among intellectuals" (Lipovetsky 1994, 3), especially in the field of philosophy.[1]

Beside this, it must be noted that, on some of the occasions in which Adorno referred to the very notion of fashion, his use of this term was explicitly critical, for instance in those cases in which Adorno aimed to criticize a certain phenomenon precisely by defining it a mere "fashion." A clear example can be seen in the title of Adorno's last essay on jazz, "Perennial Fashion – Jazz" from 1953.[2] Here, indeed, the concept of fashion is somehow understood by Adorno more as a general dynamic within culture than as a specific field of cultural practice, and in this sense, it is intentionally used by him to immediately clarify his critical stance against jazz as a musical genre. As Adorno polemically observes:

> For almost fifty years the productions of jazz have remained as ephemeral as seasonal styles (*so ephemer, als währte es eine Saison*). Jazz is a form of manneristic interpretation. As with fashions what is important is show, not the thing itself (*geht es um Aufmachung und nicht um die Sache*); instead of jazz itself being composed, "light" music, the most dismal products of the popular-song industry, is dressed up. […] Considered as a whole, the perennial sameness (*Immergleichheit*) of jazz consists not in a basic organization of the material within which the imagination can roam freely and without inhibition, as within an articulate language, but rather in the utilization of certain well-defined tricks, formulas and clichés: to the

exclusion of everything else. It is as though one were to cling convulsively to the "latest thing" (*Reiz des en vogue*) and deny the image of a particular year by refusing to tear off the page of the calendar. Fashion enthrones itself as something lasting (*als Bleibendes*) and thus sacrifices the dignity of fashion, its transience. […] Jazz sets up schemes of social behaviour to which people must in any case conform. Jazz enables them to practise those forms of behaviour, and they love it all the more for making the inescapable easier to bear. Jazz reproduces its own mass-basis, without thereby reducing the guilt of those who produce it. The eternity of fashion is a vicious circle (Adorno 1997, 121-2, 126).

It is also important to note that fashion notoriously belongs to the wide domain of the culture industry: indeed, it is considered today as one of the most powerful and most influential cultural and creative industries of our time, and we frequently speak of fashion precisely in terms of "fashion industry" or also "fashion system" (see Barthes 1990, 226-93). As is well known, however, for Adorno the domain of the culture industry is basically the realm of sameness[3] and the perennial repetition of the identical: i.e., the repetition of standardized and pseudo-individualized products, aimed to be passively consumed by the viewers and the listeners in a distracted mode of perception. According to Adorno's critical analysis, the processes of the culture industry definitely favor the transformation of culture into a sort of "social cement" (Adorno 2009a, 315-9) that is ideologically functional to the consolidation of the "social context which induces blindness" that he and Horkheimer famously called the "administered world" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 33, XI-XII). So, according to Adorno, the culture industry plays a relevant role in the definition, organization and consolidation of today's "total society" (Adorno 1997, 33), which is based for him on the triumph of alienation, commodification and reification.[4]

On this basis, as I said before, the readers could reasonably expect that, for Adorno, also fashion – like popular music and other aesthetic practices belonging to the culture industry – simply and one-sidedly falls into the realm of phenomena that are immediately part of contemporary society, understood as "a whole that is not the true but the untrue, the absolute opposite of justice." (Adorno 1993, 31) However, although fashion, as part of the culture industry and the

administered society, is surely affected for Adorno by a strong component of untruth, it is also interesting to note that sometimes his views on this topic are more mediated, articulated and nuanced than it may seem at first sight. So, quite unexpectedly, in a few intriguing passages of Adorno's writings, it is possible to find what we may call a defense of fashion's aesthetic *truth*, although always understood as dialectically interwoven with its own *untruth*.

## 2. Fashion, Transience, Appearance

Apropos of what we may call the particular truth of fashion (although for Adorno, as I said, in the midst of its general untruth, as part of the untruth of the culture industry as a whole), a brief but stimulating hint can be found in a passage of the aforementioned essay "Perennial Fashion – Jazz." Here, indeed, Adorno assimilates jazz to a mere musical fashion and one of the various genres of modern "popular music" (rather than a form of "serious music" [Adorno 1976, 21-38]), and then criticizes jazz because, according to him, it tends to disguise itself. In fact, for Adorno, jazz presents itself as a modernist musical genre and eventually "enthrones itself as something lasting," thus sacrificing what he surprisingly defines "the dignity of fashion, its transience (*die Würde der Mode, die ihrer Vergänglichkeit*)" (Adorno 1997, 122). This passage from Adorno's 1953 essay on jazz thus seems to identify what we may call the essence of fashion with the element of transience; then, on this basis, it seems to legitimize fashion, arriving to speak of its dignity.

Now, the fact of identifying the very nature of fashion with transience is not something particularly new or original: namely, it is not something that we can only find in Adorno's aforementioned observations. Indeed, the association of the concept itself of fashion with transience is quite common in the field of fashion studies, including philosophical researches on fashion. Some classical authors in this field, like Lipovetsky, have famously thematized and stressed the strict relation between fashion and the transient, the contingent, the ephemeral and the "enchantment of appearances" (Lipovetsky 1994, 15-87). Beside such classical readings in fashion theory,[5]

if we look at more recent philosophical contributions on fashion it is possible to cite, apropos of this topic, Lars Svendsen's claim that "[t]he nature of fashion is to be transient" (Svendsen 2006, 31).[6] Following Elena Esposito's philosophical and sociological investigation of fashion, we can add that fashion is intrinsically characterized by the element of transitoriness and contingency, or more precisely by the "fascination of contingency" (Esposito 2017).[7] Giovanni Matteucci, for his part, has stressed the dimension of ephemerality that essentially characterizes fashion as a unique aesthetic practice (see Matteucci 2017a).[8]

Anyway, for the delimited and specific purposes of the present contribution (strictly focused on Adorno's aesthetics, although with potential connections with the ideas of some contemporary fashion theorists) what matters the most is that Adorno's philosophical recognition of the particular dignity of fashion, residing in the latter's emphasis on transience, can be connected to some fundamental aspects of his entire philosophy that are related to the dimensions of the transient, the contingent, the transitory and the ephemeral. Some passages of Adorno's mature theoretical masterpiece, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), are especially noteworthy and intriguing in this context. Here, indeed, Adorno famously defines negative dialectics as a form of thinking that expresses "solidarity [with] metaphysics at the time of its fall" (Adorno 2004, 408; on this concept, see Wellmer 2006). This fascinating idea can be interpreted in different ways: for example, as an expression of philosophical solidarity with the "ephemeral traces of freedom" (Adorno 2004, 274) that still persist in a world that generally tends to deny and repress freedom[9]: namely, in an unfree and untrue world, in which living a right life, for Adorno, has become almost impossible.[10]

Other passages from *Negative Dialectics* can also be cited here, in order to support and expand this discourse. For example, there are various noteworthy passages of *Negative Dialectics* which emphatically clarify the unique attitude of negative dialectics towards metaphysics: here Adorno underlines the contrast between the traditional metaphysical search for supposedly stable, necessary and eternal certainties, *on the one hand*, and negative dialectics' attempt to rescue the

significance of semblance[11] and "ephemeral life (*Leben des Ephemeren*)" (Adorno 2004, 156), and the relevance of contingent qualities that have been "dismissed as transitory and insignificant" by traditional metaphysical thinking and "ephemeral objects not yet overdetermined by intentions" (Adorno 2004, 8, 17), *on the other hand*. It is especially important, in this context, to cite a significant remark from the opening sentence of the section "Meditations on Metaphysics" at the end of *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno poignantly claims that "[w]e cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable" (Adorno 2004, 361).

With regard to this, it must be underlined that, in the case of a philosopher like Adorno, suspicious and skeptical of *every* form of thinking inclined to a hypostatization, ontologization and consequential de-historicization of the phenomena taken into examination, the aforementioned emphasis on the notions of transience and contingency does *not* mean to hypostatize these concepts as essential features of fashion in an unhistorical way. In fact, this might lead to deny the importance of the historical conditions of such an attribution and the historically variable ways in which fashion can embody the dimension of transience in different times and diverse contexts – and this would be erroneous for a philosopher, like Adorno, who puts a great emphasis on the component of historicity. Such a great emphasis on historicity and the temporal character of *all* phenomena eventually leads Adorno to theorize in his 1958 *Vorlesung* on dialectics, in contrast to *every* conception of truth "as something essentially timeless" that "remains identical to itself," an idea of truth which takes "historical determinations up into itself": namely, "the idea that truth itself possesses a temporal core, or [...] that time exists in truth" (Adorno 2017, 13-14).

Adorno's negative-dialectical thinking convincingly shows how the aforementioned dimensions of the transient, the contingent, the ephemeral and the transitory acquire a unique dialectical and, so to speak, post-metaphysical relevance in the age of the fall of traditional metaphysics. In employing vast,

complex and multilayered concepts such as "metaphysical" or "post-metaphysical," it is important to note that a fundamental role in Adorno's critical understanding of metaphysics is played by the idea that *all* the main metaphysical systems of the Western tradition have been characterized by the use of "concepts in a strong sense" and by the search for the "ultimate ground of being" (Adorno 2001, 4, 9). "All metaphysics," for Adorno, "aims at something objective (*ein Objektives*)" (Adorno 2001, 189).

In the first part of *Negative Dialectics* this idea is expressed through the fitting formula of an "ontological need" (Adorno 2004, 61-96) that has unified various metaphysical conceptions from ancient times until the twentieth century. In this context, a special role is played by what we may call the question of meaning. In fact, for Adorno, in the Western tradition the metaphysical presumption to be able to conceptually grasp "the truly existent" (Adorno 2001, 9) has been typically connected to the idea "that what is [is] meaningful (*daß das was ist ein Sinnvolles sei*)," i.e., "the assertion that what is has meaning (*die Behauptung eines Sinnes dessen was da ist*)" (Adorno 2001, 103-4). However, for Adorno, after Auschwitz "[s]uch an interpretation of meaning (*Konstruktion von Sinn*) is no longer possible," so that he famously and dramatically arrives to speak of the "impossibility of restoring meaning to existence" today (Adorno 2001, 105, 114).[12] According to Adorno, indeed, "from the postulate that life in a world without meaning cannot be endured," metaphysicians typically tend to draw the *wrong* conclusion that "a meaning must be constructed," because, after all, there must be some kind of ultimate metaphysical meaning in life: it is thus the "supposition of a meaning on the sole grounds there must be one since otherwise one could not live," namely, for Adorno, the "supposition of a meaning as a *lie*" (Adorno 2001, 105-6).

As a conclusion of this section, before proceeding with my analysis of some passages of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* that testify his critical interest in fashion, it can be interesting to connect this discourse with some recent philosophical accounts of fashion that suggest to understand the logic of fashion on the

basis of the so-called "principle of the new" (Svendsen 2006, 21-35). This principle can be defined as the inexorable law according to which something old must constantly be replaced by something new, which, in turn, will soon become old and will be unceasingly be replaced by something else, and so on. A conception like this strengthens the idea that fashion embodies in a radical, explicit and *sui generis* way the dimensions of the transient, the contingent, the ephemeral and the transitory.

Various fashion theorists have powerfully stressed the dynamical nature of fashion, based on the accentuation (and, indeed, the radicalization) of the value of appearance, transience, change and fleetingness. For example, according to Elizabeth Wilson (2003, 3), "in all societies the body is 'dressed', and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles," so that the phenomenon of *clothing*, at a general level, can be defined as a sort of universal human phenomenon. However, for Wilson, in the modern age "[w]hat is added to dress as we ourselves know it […] is *fashion*," which is "something qualitatively new and different. Fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles. Fashion, in a sense, *is* change" (Wilson 2003, 3). Following Wilson, and further developing her theses, one is tempted to suggest that what is characteristic of modern fashion – understood here at the level of its intrinsic logic – is change without a *telos*, without a fundamental ground or reason, without a final aim or purpose: namely, change only based on a pure play with transitory, contingent and ephemeral appearances. I have previously cited Giovanni Matteucci's philosophical account of fashion as the "appearance of the ephemeral" (Matteucci 2017a, 66). Following Matteucci, and further radicalizing his ideas, one is tempted to define fashion not only as the "ephemeral emergence of sense" (Matteucci 2017a, 70), but also as the final disintegration of sense as such, at least in the way in which sense has been mostly conceived in the Western metaphysical tradition.

In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* from 1935-1936, Walter Benjamin famously identified the potential and the actual significance of contemporary art (especially photography and

film) with the latter's "destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage," associated by Benjamin to what he called the "decay" or "destruction" of aura: in fact, "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art," for Benjamin, "is the latter's aura" (Benjamin 2008, 22-3). *Mutatis mutandis*, it is possible to apply a similar interpretive scheme to fashion, in relation to its "destruction" or "liquidation" of the belief in the existence of beauty ideals, standards of taste and aesthetic meanings that are supposed to be absolute, necessary and eternal: that is, non-transitory, non-contingent and not destined to quickly age and be replaced by something else in the brief timespan of a season. In my view, it is precisely in these fundamental features of fashion that it is possible to identify what we may call the *aesthetic nihilism of fashion*.[13]

## 3. Fashion, Art, Truth content

In the previous sections I have attempted to establish some connections between fashion, understood from a philosophical perspective, and Adorno's dialectical thinking, mostly focusing my attention on such writings and lecture courses as *Negative Dialectics*, *Minima Moralia*, *Hegel Three Studies*, *Prisms*, and *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*. In the third and final section of my article, although maintaining my focus on some of the dimensions that have been examined before (the transient, the ephemeral, the transitory, the contingent, etc.), I will shift my attention in a more precise way on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.[14]

In fact, although fashion *cannot* be said to be one of the main topics of Adorno's posthumous *opus magnum*, it is nonetheless possible to find two paragraphs in his *Aesthetic Theory* that offer some stimulating remarks on the dialectics between art and fashion, and their respective truth and untruth.[15] For Adorno, indeed, there is *not* a sharp and abstract opposition between the true and the untrue, but rather a complex relation of co-implication, interweavement and sometimes dialectical reversal of the former into the latter (or vice-versa). [16] In a somehow comparable way, in his *Vorlesung* on aesthetics from 27 January 1959 Adorno observes that also

in the case of the relation between fashion and art "we are generally taught [...] to simply oppose the concept of fashion to the concept of art," but on closer inspection this view risks to appear "a too primitive and too undialectical perspective" (Adorno 2009b, 277).[17]

In the first of the two paragraphs of *Aesthetic Theory* dedicated to fashion – a passage from the section "On the Differentiation of Progress," in the chapter "Toward a Theory of the Artwork" – Adorno assumes as his starting point the fundamental question concerning the "truth content of artworks, on which their rank ultimately depends": Adorno argues that the latter, on the one hand, "is historical right into its innermost cell (*bis ins Innerste geschichtlich*)," but, on the other hand, must *not* be simply understood as "related to history in such a fashion that it, and thus the rank of artworks, simply varies with time" (Adorno 2002a, 191). In fact, "such variation takes place," as Adorno explains, and "artworks of quality [...] are able to strip themselves of their outer layers in the course of history (*durch Geschichte sich zu entblättern*)"; however, in this process the truth content of artworks, i.e., what we may call their intrinsic value, "does not fall prey to historicism" (Adorno 2002a, 191). For Adorno, indeed, "[h]istory is immanent to artworks," but at the same time it is *not* "an external fate or fluctuating estimation"; rather, the truth content of art, if properly understood, "becomes historical by the objectivation of correct consciousness in the work" (Adorno 2002a, 191).

On this basis, in this paragraph of *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno investigates the delicate question concerning the definition of the "criterion of the most progressive consciousness" in the field of art: for Adorno, the latter actually consists in the "level of productive forces in the work, part of which, in the age of art's constitutive reflectedness, is the position that consciousness takes socially" (Adorno 2002a, 191). According to Adorno, as the "materialization of the most progressive consciousness, which includes the productive critique of the given aesthetic and extra-aesthetic situation," the truth content of artworks can be defined as "the unconscious writing of history (*bewußtlose Geschichts-*

*schreibung*) bound up with what has until now been repeatedly vanquished" (Adorno 2002a, 191-2).

It is precisely at this point that the question of fashion comes into play. In fact, after having emphasized the dimension of what is progressive and new in art, Adorno specifies that "what is progressive is never so obvious as the innervation of fashion would like to dictate" (Adorno 2002a, 192). Indeed, also this element, like *every* other aspect or dimension in the field of art, "has need of reflection," and ultimately the "determination of what is progressive (*Entscheidung übers Forgeschrittensein*) involves the state of theory as a whole, for the decision cannot be resolved on the basis of isolated elements" (Adorno 2002a, 192).

Now, the principle of the new, that I have previously cited apropos of fashion, has been also one of the guiding principles of the development of aesthetic modernism and avant-garde art. Reinterpreting (or, so to speak, refashioning) Arthur Rimbaud's famous aphorism, according to which "One must be absolutely modern (*Il faut être absolument moderne*)," one is tempted to say that the basic spirit of aesthetic modernism was: "Art must be absolutely new." In the specific context of the present contribution, it is noteworthy that the role of "the new (*das Neue*)," as a guiding principle of the development of twentieth century avant-garde art, was masterfully exemplified by Adorno's philosophical interpretation of the adventures of the "new music (*neue Musik*)" of Schönberg, Berg, Webern and other composers of the twentieth century (Adorno 2006; see also Adorno 2002b). With regard to this, it is interesting to note that Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project* – which Adorno held in high esteem, arriving to consider it as "*prima philosophia* in [his] own particular sense" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 83)[18] – had importantly spoken of the spectacle of a "true dialectical theater of fashion," identifying the latter in "the unique self-construction of the newest in the medium of what has been" (Benjamin 1999, 64).

In this context, the relevance conferred to "the new" might appear at first sight as something that modern fashion and avant-garde art have in common and share. However, as

has been explained by contemporary art theorists like Yves Michaud (2003), the basic project and the gradual development of twentieth century avant-garde art was generally guided by an idea of change that was aimed to disclose new revolutionary possibilities for artistic experimentation. In the field of avant-garde art the exploration of new paths could eventually lead to the creation of profound, and sometimes even abyssal, masterpieces. That was the age that Adorno emphatically called "the heroic years of modern art (*den heroischen Zeiten der neuen Kunst*)" (Adorno 2002a, 159).[19] Instead, if we turn our attention to fashion – especially taking into consideration its recent transformations from *haute couture* to *prêt-à-porter* up to the contemporary regime of *fast fashion* – one is tempted to agree with Svendsen's critical diagnosis, when he observes that fashion

> is not "more profound" than calling for change for the sake of change. […] Beauty in fashion [is] not to find an attraction in something eternal, and not at all in any functionality, but in sheer temporality. […] The insistence on originality was the mantra of the artistic avant-garde. […] It is, however, possible to claim that the cultivation of novelty by the avant-garde was fueled by the aim of creating the definitively new that could not be surpassed by anything even newer, and that as such it did not completely embrace the logic of fashion. […] Fashion would basically seem never to have been subject to this illusion and has, if anything, always foreseen that everything new will soon be surpassed by something even newer. […] A fashion object does not *in principle* need any particular qualities apart from being new. (Svendsen 2006, 27-9)

Although not exactly in these terms, a similar consideration also surfaces in the aforementioned passage of *Aesthetic Theory*. Here, indeed, after having compared fashion and art with regard to the criterion of "what is progressive," Adorno observes that "Rimbaud's *Il faut être absolument moderne*, itself modern, remains normative"; however, "because art's temporal nucleus is not its thematic actuality but its immanent organization (*ihre immanente Durchbildung*)," Rimbaud's famous statement "finds its resonance in what is in a certain sense an unconscious impulse of disgust for the musty and stagnant. The capacity (*Organ*) for sensing this," Adorno explains, "is bound up with what is anathema to cultural conservatism: fashion" (Adorno 2002a, 192). At this point,

having paid attention to the question of the *truth content of art*, and having mentioned fashion as an aesthetic phenomenon that has tight connections with modern art (although in complex and sometimes contorted ways), Adorno explicitly mentions the question of the *truth content of fashion*. In fact, Adorno observes that fashion

> has its truth as the unconscious consciousness of the temporal nucleus of art (*als bewußtloses Bewußtsein des Zeitkerns von Kunst*) […]. Great artists since Baudelaire have conspired with fashion; if they denounced it, these denunciations were given the lie by the impulses of their own work. Although art resists fashion when it seeks to level art heteronomously, it is allied with it in its instinct for the historical moment and in its aversion to provincialism and the subaltern, the refusal of which delineates the only humanly worthy concept of artistic niveau (*den einzigen menschenwürdigen Begriff künstlerischen Niveaus*) (Adorno 2002a, 192).

*On the one hand*, because of its heteronomous character and its dependency on business, fashion takes part to the affirmative lie of conformist and commodified mass culture,[20] which is emphatically defined by Adorno as the veritable "adversary [of] avant-garde art": indeed, the latter for him "serve[s] truth," unlike the products of the culture industry that merely represent "the aesthetic equivalent of power" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 101, 103). *On the other hand*, however, Adorno also recognizes that the idea of fashion – understood at a strictly aesthetic level and aside from the fact that, in reality, fashion is usually "manipulated by the culture industry" – possesses a specific truth content, which makes it possible to consider it as an ally of modern art "in its instinct for the historical moment" (Adorno 2002a, 192).

Although with different accentuations and nuances, more or less the same motifs (including this twofold evaluation of fashion as both untrue and true) also recur in the second passage of *Aesthetic Theory* dedicated to fashion, which is included in the aphoristic section of the book entitled "Paralipomena." Here, indeed, Adorno assumes as his starting point the question of the relation between autonomy and heteronomy in art and aesthetic experience. As is well known, this is one of the fundamental questions of *Aesthetic Theory* in its entirety. As Adorno observes, "[i]n the face of the obvious

dependency of fashion on the profit motive and its embeddedness in capitalist industry (*Verfilzung mit dem kapitalistischen Betrieb*) […] fashion in art is no less corruptible than the zeal of ideological art agents who transform every apology into advertisement" (Adorno 2002a, 315-6).[21] However, notwithstanding this component of dependency on profit and hence of untruth (in terms of a secret complicity with the "untrue whole" of contemporary society and its most powerful agent, the culture industry), for Adorno there is also a component of fashion that "makes it worth salvaging" (Adorno 2002a, 316). In fact, there is a sort of particular truth content in fashion, which requires to be adequately emphasized and valorized, and which consists in the fact that,

> though [fashion] hardly denies its complicity with the profit system, it is itself disdained by that system. By suspending aesthetic values such as those of inwardness, timelessness, and profundity (*Innerlichkeit, Zeitlosigkeit, Tiefe*), fashion makes it possible to recognize the degree to which the relation of art to these qualities, which are by no means above suspicion, has become a pretext. Fashion is art's permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be. For its indiscreet betrayals fashion is as hated as it is a powerful force in the system; its double character (*Doppelcharakter*) is a blatant symptom of its antinomy. Fashion cannot be separated from art as neatly as would suit bourgeois art religion. Ever since the aesthetic subject polemically distanced itself from society and its prevailing spirit, art communicates with this objective spirit, however untrue it is, through fashion. Fashion is certainly […] entirely manipulated and in no way a direct adaptation to the demands of the marketplace, even if these demands are sedimented in it and the consensus of the marketplace is still requisite for fashion to succeed. Because, however, manipulation in the age of monopoly capitalism is itself the prototype of ruling social relations of production, fashion's *octroi* itself represents a socially objective power (*ein gesellschaftlich Objektives*). If, in one of the most remarkable passages of his *Aesthetics*, Hegel defined the task of art as the appropriation of the alien (*das Fremde*), fashion – doubtful of any possibility of such spiritual reconciliation – appropriates alienation (*Entfremdung*) itself. For fashion, alienation becomes the living model of a social being-thus-and-not-otherwise, to which it surrenders as if in ecstasy. If it is not to betray itself, art must resist fashion, but it must also innervate fashion in order not to make itself blind to the world, to its own substance (*Sachgehalt*) (Adorno 2002a, 316).[22]

The truth content of fashion, according to this passage of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, paradoxically seems to reside in its extreme openness and frankness (also in comparison to modern art) in letting emerge the universal untruth of our society, in which the profit system and manipulation have now become "the prototype of ruling social relations of production," without falsely embellishing the horrible truth of the contemporary world, but rather daring to show "what is" (i.e., the existing reality), as it really is. Instead than dishonestly pretending that, in the age of the triumph of heteronomy and unfreedom, there is still something that can be *entirely* autonomous, *absolutely* free and *completely* capable to escape the power of manipulation, alienation and reification, for Adorno fashion transparently presents itself as "entirely manipulated," even arriving to "appropriate alienation itself."

For a rigorous critical theorist like Adorno, the honest confession of its *untruth* represents the particular and, so to speak, paradoxical *truth* of fashion. In comparison to other fields of contemporary culture that falsely pretend to be not complicit in, and not compromised with, the untruth of what exists, fashion vice-versa celebrates the power of appearance with its shining and scintillating sequence of "superficial changes that in reality have no other assignment than to make the object superfluous on the basis of non-essential qualities" (Svendsen 2006, 27). Nietzsche famously (and critically) defined truth as a set of "illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are" (Nietzsche 1976, 46): namely, as a group of lies that have been enhanced and embellished in order to be disguised as something else than mere lies.[23] Metaphorically speaking, we can say that, from an Adornian perspective, fashion is a liar that, differently from other liars that dishonestly proclaim to be honest, true and authentic, does *not* conceal its real nature: indeed, it lucidly and candidly presents itself as one of the harbingers of the existing world, which for Adorno is a world entirely built on lies.

This discourse plays an important role in a normative and prescriptive (rather than merely descriptive) aesthetic theory like Adorno's. In fact, what has previously emerged shows that fashion can serve as a positive warning for art, or at

least for those artworks that heroically intend to resist (to the extent that this is still possible today) to the influence of "the affirmative character of art," which, "under the dictates of the culture industry, […] has become omnipresent" (Adorno 1992, 250). From this point of view, fashion is an influential aesthetic practice of our time that, in an age of globalization[24] and of widespread aestheticization (and commodification) like ours,[25] does *not* conceal its real status of aesthetic commodity: for this reason, for Adorno fashion is functional to permanently reminding us that also art can *never* consider itself absolutely guaranteed and a priori free from the risk of being influenced by processes of manipulation, standardization and commercialization. This is a risk that today is more present than ever, in the age in which even the works of some of the most celebrated artists testify the "aesthetic dimension of commodity form" and the fact that "commodity's social performativity is necessarily carried out within an aesthetic medium" (Vitali 2024).

It is exactly for this reason that Adorno penetratingly defines fashion as "art's permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be" (Adorno 2002a, 316). On this basis, it is not surprising that Adorno, in the final passages of the paragraph on fashion in the "Paralipomena" section of *Aesthetic Theory*, makes specific reference to "[r]adically oppositional art," which is animated by the ambition to ruthlessly renounce "everything heterogeneous to it" and, "in its ruthlessness (*Rücksichtslosigkeit*)," denounces

> the fiction of a subject existing purely for-itself, the disastrous illusion of a strictly self-engaging integrity that usually functions to hide a provincial pharisaism. In the age of the growing powerlessness of subjective spirit vis-a-vis social objectivity, fashion registers the alien excess of objectivity in subjective spirit, which is painful yet all the same a corrective of the illusion that subjective spirit exists purely within itself. Against its detractors, fashion's most powerful response is that it participates in the individual impulse, which is saturated with history. (Adorno 2002a, 316)

According to Adorno, if art aims to preserve today at least a part of its autonomy in a heteronomous society (and hence a part of its truth in an untrue world), it must *not* falsely pretend to be completely safe and totally immune from the

influence of the guiding tendencies that (regrettably) determine the *Zeitgeist* of the contemporary age. At the same time, differently from fashion (that, for its part, accepts and even enthusiastically exhibits its "embeddedness in the market"), for Adorno art must *not* resign itself to merely mirror and replicate the existing world. Rather, for Adorno, artworks that still aim to be ambitiously provided with an adequate truth content must learn to stand their ground and must function as the "antithesis of empirical reality" and as the "determinate negation of the existing order of the world" (Adorno 2002a, 89).

## NOTES

[1] As observed by Lars Svendsen, "[t]raditionally, fashion is not considered a satisfactory object of study" in the field of philosophy, and although "the position has changed to a certain degree in recent years with a stream of academic publications on fashion," with a few exceptions "these have not been written by philosophers" (Svendsen 2006, 17). *On the one hand*, it must be said that since 2006 (when Svendsen published his book) the situation has changed to some extent, so that valuable philosophical contributions on fashion have meanwhile appeared. However, *on the other hand*, despite the important writings on fashion offered by some philosophers (like, for example, Pappas 2016 and Grewal 2022), it is also clear that specifically philosophical contributions on fashion are still a minority in the field of contemporary Fashion Studies. On the relation between philosophy and fashion, see also the recent book of Coccia and Michele 2024, written in the form of an open dialogue between a philosopher and a fashion designer/creative director.

[2] Adorno's overall musicological production on jazz includes the contributions *Abschied vom Jazz* (1933), *Über Jazz* (1936), *Oxforder Nachträge* (1937), *Jazz* (1942), *Zeitlose Mode. Zum Jazz* (1953) and *Replik zu einer Kritik der "Zeitlosen Mode"* (1953), and his reviews of two books by W. Hobson, *American Jazz Music*, and W. Sargeant, *Jazz, Hot and Hybrid* (1941). These writings were generally composed and published by Adorno in a range of twenty years, although some traces of his critique of jazz can be found also in his later writings, like *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962) or his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

[3] For Adorno, indeed, "the goods" produced by the culture industry are *all* characterized by an "identical character" (Adorno 1991, 40), and the latter infects "*everything* with *sameness*": "*all* mass culture […] is identical," it is "*nothing but business*," a sort of "trash […] intentionally produce[d]" by the culture industry on the basis of a perverse "cycle of manipulation and retroactive need" aimed at suppressing "*any trace* of spontaneity" in our aesthetic experience (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 94-6; emphasis added).

[4] Also thinkers with a different philosophical orientation than Adorno's, like the phenomenologist Eugen Fink (author of a short book on fashion in 1969), have clearly recognized the strict relation of modern fashion with the domain of the culture industry. According to Fink, the "fashion industry" represents indeed "a particular and particularly significant branch of the culture industry" (Fink 2023, 103). Very differently from Adorno, however, Fink believes that "[t]he culture industry, in its full breadth, encompasses all phenomena that emerge from human freedom, from the human being's finite creative power bound by corporeality." From Fink's point of view, fashion – understood as a part of the culture industry – represents "a preserve of freedom, where the individual chooses and where the customer is king," and must *not* be interpreted (as has often happened, indeed) "as a tyrannical force." In fact, the "relationship between the class of customers and that of manufacturers within the domain of fashion," for Fink, "is by no means one of manipulation and a fortiori not a situation of compulsion, not a 'dictatorship' where one can only 'choose' what others decree. The phenomenon is multifaceted and complicated" (Fink 2023, 59, 62-3, 103, 106).

[5] This article is specifically focused on Adorno's aesthetics and, in particular, on some passages of his works in which he explicitly thematizes the aesthetics of fashion in the context of his critique of the culture industry, with the attempt to also establish some comparisons with more recent studies of fashion. So, I will *not* dwell here on the classical sources of the philosophy of fashion from a historico-philosophical perspective or other similar topics. For a reconstruction and interpretation of the main phases of development of a philosophical discourse on fashion in the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Marino 2017 (in particular, 20-36).

[6] According to Svendsen, in modern fashion "[t]here is a central insistence on radical innovation, a constant hunt for originality. Fashion is only fashion insofar as it is capable of moving forwards. Fashion moves in cycles, where a cycle is the space of time from when a fashion is introduced to when it is replaced by a new one, and the principle of fashion is to make the cycle – the space of time – as short as possible, so as to create the maximum number of successive fashions. The ideal fashion, seen in this way, would only last a moment before it was replaced by a new one" (Svendsen 2006, 31).

[7] This strong emphasis on the dimension of transience and contingency is also one of the reasons why fashion has been defined by some fashion theorists as intrinsically ironic: i.e., as "modernist irony" (Wilson 2003, 15).

[8] For Matteucci, if fashion represents "a veritable and indeed complicated challenge for philosophy," it is precisely because fashion is "the place of the ephemeral, the illusory, the cyclical, the metamorphic, and the multifarious: that is, it is precisely the place of what Western philosophy has always demonized but has also become predominant in the global culture of our time. […] [Fashion] outlines an experience of the ephemeral that almost leaves no trace and shies away from museums because, rather than defining standards, it represents a temporary, cyclical, 'trendy' articulation of taste. Disinterested in acquiring a determinate form, fashion finds its fulfillment in something that takes shape in the performance of the event that exhausts it. It is therefore as *practice* of beauty that fashion coincides with the ephemeral emergence of

sense" (Matteucci 2017a,  52, 70). According to Matteucci, this is one of the reasons why "the theoretical interest raised by fashion in recent times can be described as a sort of 'return of the repressed.' […] [A] subtle self-ironic capacity constitutionally belongs to fashion, when the latter, by elevating the ephemeral to something worthy of worship, reveals itself as a 'double-edged' phenomenon" (Matteucci 2017a,  52, 65).

[9] On the same topic, see also the following passage: "The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different 'Woe speaks: Go.' Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice. […] The *telos* of [a different] organization of society would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering. By now, this negation in the interest of all can be realized only in a solidarity that is transparent to itself and all the living" (Adorno 2004,  203-4).

[10] One of the most striking aphorisms in Adorno's *Minima moralia* famously reads: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly (*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*)" (Adorno 2005,  39). Many years later, in his 1963 *Vorlesung* on the problems of moral philosophy, Adorno affirmed to have discovered a similar position on the "wrong life" in Nietzsche (Adorno 1996,  1) – in particular, in some observations that can be found in *Human, All Too Human*, where we read: "Every belief in the value and dignity of life rests on false thinking […]. The great majority endure life without complaining overmuch; they *believe* in the value of existence, but they do so precisely because each of them exists for himself alone, refusing to step out of himself […]: everything outside themselves they notice not at all or at most as a dim shadow. Thus for the ordinary, everyday man the value of life rests solely on the fact that he regards himself more highly than he does the world. […] [M]ankind has as a whole *no* goal, and the individual man when he regards its total course cannot derive from it any support or comfort, but must be reduced to despair. […]. The whole of human life is sunk deeply in untruth" (Nietzsche 1996,  29-30).

[11] In one of the few passages of *Negative Dialectics* in which Adorno explicitly mentions aesthetics, he precisely speaks of "the incomparable metaphysical relevance of the rescue of semblance, the object of esthetics" (Adorno 2004, 393).

[12] In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno dramatically claims that "[e]ven prior to Auschwitz it was an affirmative lie, given historical experience, to ascribe any positive meaning to existence" (Adorno 2002a, 152).

[13] Also these remarks can be connected with Svenden's philosophical interpretation of fashion that identifies the very principle of fashion in "the New" and observes: "In order to be able to talk of 'fashion' it is not sufficient for a change to take place on rare occasions. It only becomes a fashion when this change is sought for its own sake […] without any reason apparent other than the change itself. […] There is in fashion a vital trait of modernity: the abolition of traditions. […] But there also lies in fashion an element that modernity would not have wished to acknowledge. Fashion is irrational. It consists of change for the sake of change, whereas the self-image of modernity consisted in there being a change that led towards increasingly rational self-determination" (Svendsen 2006,  22-4).

[14] For a general assessment of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and its legacy today, see the essays collected in Gandesha, Hartle and Marino 2021.

[15] To my knowledge, the first interpreter who paid a specific and systematic attention to the few paragraphs on fashion in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is Giovanni Matteucci (2012, 97-100).

[16] The question concerning truth and, in particular, the dialectical relation between *truth* and *untruth* (and also what we may call the truth of the untrue) represents one of the most complex questions of Adorno's thinking in its entirety. On Adorno's dialectical conception of truth, see Schweppenhäuser 2003 and Zuidervaart 2024 (in particular, 1-17, 129-140). On the relation between truth and untruth in Adorno's thinking (also in connection to his critique of mass culture), see Marino 2019 and Marino 2021.

[17] This *Vorlesung* belongs to Adorno's lecture course on aesthetics from the winter semester 1958-59 at the University of Frankfurt, later published in the context of his *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Together with other seminars, conferences and lectures on aesthetics held by Adorno in the 1950s and 1960s, also his lecture course from 1958-59 can be considered one of the occasions in which Adorno had the opportunity to publicly present some preparatory materials that he would later use for his unfinished and posthumously published masterpiece, namely his *Aesthetic Theory*. In the specific case of the relation between Adorno's *Vorlesungen* from 1958-59 and his *Aesthetic Theory* (appeared in 1970, one year after Adorno's untimely death), this is particularly clear apropos of his original treatment of the question concerning natural beauty (see Adorno 2002a, 61-78 and Adorno 2009b, 56-71. On this topic, see Villani 2019 and 2021). A complete list of Adorno's teaching activities, including all his seminars and lecture courses on aesthetics, is available in Müller-Doohm 2003, 944-50.

[18] Adorno emphatically defines Benjamin's *Arcades* project as "*prima philosophia* in [Benjamin's] own particular sense" in his letter to Benjamin from 20 May 1935 (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 83). Already in his letter to Benjamin from 6 November 1934 Adorno had ambitiously claimed that Benjamin's "work on the Arcades" had to be regarded "as part of [their] destined contribution to *prima philosophia*," also adding that there was nothing he desired "more than to see [Benjamin] finally capable, after all the long and painful hesitations involved, of bringing this work to a conclusion which does justice to the momentous subject matter" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 53). A different but similar expression was also used by Adorno in his letter to Benjamin from 6 September 1936, where he referred to Benjamin's "*ultima philosophia*, the Arcades project" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 147).

[19] The metaphor of "heroism" is also used by Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, with specific reference to avant-garde movements such as cubism and expressionism (Adorno 2002a, 155, 293).

[20] On the critical relation between art and "affirmative culture" (or also what Adorno calls "the affirmative power of society" and "the affirmative, ideological totality"), see Adorno 2002a, 2, 40, 48, 93, 106, 110, 113, 140-1, 160, 249, 252, 319.

[21] In a parenthetical remark within this passage Adorno also observes that "in the art market, which finances painters but overtly or covertly demands in

exchange that they furnish whatever style of work the market expects of them," the capitalist industry "extends into so-called artistic fashions and directly undermines autonomy" (Adorno 2002a, 315).

[22] In a subsequent passage from the same paragraph of *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno also adds another interesting element to this discourse on art and fashion, namely the "erotic element." In fact, according to Adorno, this element is one of the main causes that have provoked the "disdain of fashion," but it is also an element "in which fashion reminds art of what it never fully succeeded in sublimating. Through fashion," Adorno explains, "art sleeps with what it must renounce and from this draws the strength that otherwise must atrophy under the renunciation on which art is predicated. If art, as semblance, is the clothing of an invisible body, fashion is clothing as the absolute. As such, they stand in accord with each other (*Kunst, als Schein, ist Kleid eines unsichtbaren Körpers. So ist Mode Kleid als Absolutes. Darin verstehen sich beide*)" (Adorno 2002a, 316-7).

[23] As is well known, the entire passage from Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* defines truth as "[a] mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (Nietzsche 1976, 46-7).

[24] On Adorno as "a critical philosopher of globalization," with a specific focus on his aesthetic theory, his conception of fashion and, in particular, the central role played by his notion of shudder, see Matteucci 2017b.

[25] On this topic, see for example Lipovetsky and Serroy 2016; Gandesha and Hartle 2017.

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# Axel Honneth and the theory of recognition

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## Abstract

This article presents a critical reinterpretation of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, arguing that his tripartite model—love, law, social esteem—provides the moral grammar indispensable for diagnosing contemporary social conflicts. By systematically reconstructing Honneth's synthesis of Hegel, Mead, and Winnicott, we demonstrate how struggles against disrespect—rooted in the denial of recognition—are not mere ethical protests, but the main engine of social transformation. This framework uniquely reveals why demands for identity, rights, and dignity (from feminist movements to postcolonial struggles) fundamentally challenge institutionalized patterns of misrecognition, rather than merely material interests. Consequently, we propose that Honneth's theory offers critical theory an essential normative paradigm: it shifts the analysis from economic exploitation to the moral injuries underlying systemic injustice, allowing for a more comprehensive critique of social pathologies. The article thus positions recognition as a vital conceptual tool for understanding and legitimizing emancipatory struggles in pluralistic democracies, where demands for visibility and validation drive progressive change.

**Keywords:** recognition, Honneth, Mead, Hegel, critical theory

## Introduction

Today, it is of the utmost importance for Western democratic traditions to elucidate the historical origins and evolution of those concepts that have been fundamental to our

social and political coexistence. To pursue this great intellectual task, the idea of recognition deserves a retrospective look, for in recent decades it has become an essential element of the way we understand the political and cultural reality that surrounds us. Thus, it is present in demands as diverse as equal rights among members of a community, unconditional recognition of the specificities of the other, or the valuing of cultural minorities through a politics of recognition.

Various studies of classical and contemporary social philosophy have been conducted on the problem of social recognition. Today, the struggle for recognition, which is both identitarian and political, attracts the attention of numerous theoretical strands of the social sciences. Cultural studies, multiculturalism, modern theories of communication, gender studies, various perspectives on collective action, and political theory are some examples of how the process of intersubjective recognition and the conflicts that occur around it constitute one of the essential vectors of the complexity that contemporary societies manifest.

Axel Honneth, in an attempt to renew critical theory, has gone the furthest in deepening and updating Hegel's original idea. This is the idea of recognition (*Anerkennung*), a central concept in the tradition of German idealism, first thematised by Fichte (2000) in his work *Foundations of Natural Right* (*Grundlage des Naturrechts*). It was later taken up by Hegel (2018) in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geiste)* in the famous passage on the dialectic of master and slave. In both theories this concept refers to the need for the self to be recognised by others and to be confirmed as a free and active subject. For both Fichte and Hegel this is the essential condition of self-consciousness, understood as the way in which the self enters into relation with itself.

The present paper consists of an analysis of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition from its different perspectives-sociological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical-in which the processes of social change, social conflict, and social identity are explained with reference to the normative claims structurally inscribed in relations of mutual recognition. Honneth, starting

from the Hegelian concept of recognition, with input from Mead and Winnicott, shows us that the engine of social movements and struggles is the struggle for recognition and not for self-preservation, as modern social philosophy maintains. The author makes an extensive and original contribution to the renewal of critical theory in philosophy, political science and sociology (Fontes, 2019). We aim to show the journey and reformulations that recognition theory has had since its initial genesis and that it continues to inspire research in the social sciences.

Our research uses the qualitative method in its documental analysis strand. The methodology used to analyse different documents is based on a critical hermeneutics. It is essentially an analysis of a formal, analytical and conceptual nature. Thereafter, the theories and categories of the various authors are presented from an interpretation and critically evaluated.

## 1. Historical and conceptual journey of recognition

Although in recent years the theoretical and empirical construction on social recognition has expanded, the essential content of what we call 'recognition' has been little explored since Hegel's conception. Honneth (2002, 505-506), in addressing the concept of recognition, agrees with Ikäheimo (2002) and Laitinen (2002) on four premises: first, that the original mode of recognition corresponds to the central meaning of the German language, the affirmation of positive properties of the other person or group; second, recognition is an attitude, because only through behaviour corresponding to the word or intention does the credibility that is normatively important for the recognised subject originate; third, acts of recognition are a distinct phenomenon in the social world, with an autonomous intention directed positively towards another person or group and not the result of another action with another meaning or secondary intention; and finally, the fourth premise that the three authors share is the conviction that recognition is a fundamental attitude with three different accents, representing a generic concept that unfolds in the sphere of love, legal respect and social valuation, in a Hegelian perspective.

Regarding the semantics of the word recognition, it covers different meanings in different languages. In the different European languages, the concept of recognition not only includes the simple cognitive identification, for example by accepting a fact, but also assumes a more important meaning by characterizing the "normative situation associated with awarding a social status" (Honneth 2002, 505). Later, Honneth in an interview with Lysaker and Jacobsen (2010) clarifies the two senses that the term "Anerkennung" has in the German language, although neither assumes the strong sense of identification like "recognition" in the English language or "reconnaissance" in the French language. On the one hand, it is used in German without normative implications when one affirms a fact already given, for example: when we acknowledge the fact of death. Which means that we must - epistemologically or cognitively – acknowledge something that is difficult to acknowledge. On the other hand, the notion of recognition is used in another sense in the German language, and here English and Latin languages coincide, in the normative sense, referring to an affirmative attitude towards another person in which we feel obliged to follow certain norms. This sense of recognition implies a normative attitude towards the other person in which I am obliged to treat the other in a specific way, which includes a moral starting point towards the other. And this is where Honneth (2002) situates himself, understanding "recognition as a behavioural reaction in which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities that we have learned to perceive, to the extent to which we are integrated into the second nature of our lifeworld" (513).

Exploring the semantic richness of the word recognition, which, in addition to meaning the perception of the familiarity of something or someone, means verification, confirmation and often appreciation, we will develop and deepen the Hegelian theory of recognition developed by Axel Honneth.

## 2. Hegel and intersubjectivity

The proposal of Hegelian philosophy, contrary to the philosophical paradigm of his time, which finds its exponent in Kant, is based on the abandonment of the atomistic perspective

of society, which starts from an unreal, particular and isolated individual to subsequently discover the community as something external and heteronomous. For Hegel, the philosophical theory of society should not start from the realization of the actions of isolated subjects, but from the moral bonds in whose fabric the subjects always move together. Thus, as Honneth (1995, 12-15) summarizes, reversing the atomistic premise, Hegelian philosophy finds its presupposition in an intersubjective conception of society.

Starting from this intersubjective premise of society, Hegel will reinterpret Hobbes' paradigm of the original struggle of all against all, where the interest of individual self-preservation is evidenced, and propose that the motor of conflicts within society becomes the deficient recognition of the identity of some individuals. Thus, social conflicts no longer function solely from the particular interests of some individuals or groups, but are an ethical event, because they try to change a precarious pattern of recognition for another, broader one, in which new forms of human individuality may find the possibility of full realization (Honneth, 1995, 17).

In the analysis of Miguel Giusti (2004, 82), Hegel tried throughout his work to understand the moral sense that can enclose the voluntary violation of a social norm, trying to explain this conduct within the dynamics of recognition. Because, from this perspective, the crime acquires the sense of a protest against the experience of frustration derived from a normative expectation not fulfilled. It results from this that the solution to the problem of crime cannot simply be punishment, because this does not recognize motivation or moral legitimization, but rather the satisfaction of frustrated recognition.

For Hegel, in a synthetic way, what motivates an act of transgression of a social norm is the perception, by an individual or by a group, of the insufficient recognition of their individuality in the society in which they live. For the author, it is through these destructive acts - which primarily deny a condition of right - that the formation of new ethical configurations becomes possible. Since the act of transgression reveals the situation of fragility in which the disrespected

individual finds himself and, consequently, of his dependence in relation to the community, since it is only by appealing to it that the disrespected subject will be able to reaffirm his offended individuality, not recognized by the aggressor. Thus, as Honneth (1995, 17) argues, it is not a contract between men that will put an end to the precarious situation of a struggle for survival of all against all, but, conversely, it is through struggle as a moral means that we can transition from an underdeveloped state of ethicity to a more mature level of ethical relation. Hegel's reinterpretation of Hobbes' model introduces a "new version of the conception of social struggle, according to which practical conflict between subjects can be understood as an ethical moment in a movement occurring within a collective social life" (Honneth 1995, 17).

For Hegel, negative acts of deprivation of freedom, in addition to destroying the social structures of elementary recognition, can also contribute to the creation of new ethically mature relations of recognition, a prerequisite for building a community of free citizens. Thus, for Honneth (1995, 20-24), conflict would be that which would prepare individuals for the recognition of their mutual dependence. In this way, social conflicts, where natural ethicality is broken, enable individuals to be ready to recognise each other as fully individuated persons, but also dependent on each other.

## 3. Theory of recognition

In reconstructing the foundations of current critical theory on the basis of Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict* (1995), it can be seen that, with respect to the theory of society, there is a fundamental assumption that the core spheres of societies are institutionalizations of specific forms of recognition that are anchored in distinct principles of reciprocal recognition. A social reality understood in this way should be analysed by means of a normative and substantial theory of society on the basis of the Hegelian hypothesis of a *struggle for recognition* (Honneth, 1995, 1), whose fundamental concepts should be adequate to these expectations. For this reason, Honneth finds in the category of recognition a key concept from the perspective of

social ontology. Thus, outlining the idea of a critical theory of society in which the processes of social change should be explained with reference to the normative claims structurally inscribed in the relation of reciprocal recognition.

Honneth takes up the concept of recognition from the young Hegel with the aim of using it systematically as a key for the moral reading of the history of political claims, that is, in his words, as a "moral grammar of social conflicts" (Honneth, 1995, subtitle of the book). The end sought there is twofold, as Giusti (2007, 6) reminds us: on the one hand, the need to offer a more convincing explanation of the moral motivation that animates civic and cultural manifestations and, on the other hand, the need to correct the excessive formalism of the Habermasian universalist position to which he feels indebted.

Honneth (1995) attempts to understand Hegel's doctrine of recognition in the sense of a theory of the necessary condition of human socialization. The author intends to construct from the normative presuppositions of the recognition relation the reference point of the explanation of the processes of historical and empirical transformation of society, resulting from this a greater concern in the sociological underpinning of the Hegelian theory of recognition. Honneth (1995, 69-70) first investigates Hegel's hypothesis that the various sequential stages of recognition can stand up to empirical considerations, whether it is possible to attribute to the corresponding forms of mutual recognition parallel experiences of social disrespect, and finally tries to find historical and sociological confirmations for the idealization that these forms of social disrespect are indeed the cause of social conflicts. For such an undertaking it will be necessary to expose the moral logic of social conflicts, since the idea of social struggle outlined by the young Hegel did not go beyond the speculative horizon of an idealist theory, which would not be so significant without the historical-materialist turn of his successors.

For Honneth, it was George Herbert Mead who developed in the most consistent way the idea that individuals construct their identity in the experience of an intersubjective recognition. Through Mead, one has access to "the most suitable means for reconstructing the intersubjectivist intuitions of the

Young Hegel within a postmetaphysical framework" (Honneth, 1995, 71). The central issue of the theoretical construction of both that essentially interests Honneth is that both Mead and the young Hegel aspire to explain the moral evolution of society through the struggle for recognition. For Honneth (1995, 143), the fundamental thesis shared by Hegel and Mead is that the struggle for recognition constitutes the moral force within the reality of human social life that propels it towards development and progress. In this way, moral experiences of contempt for the dignity of the subject would be at the origin of social movements of resistance and protest. In this sense, for Honneth, historical progress towards autonomy and freedom requires a social theory in which the Hegelian concept of the "struggle for recognition" can be corrected by Mead's social psychology and by a psychoanalytically oriented anthropology, as we shall see later. In the construction of this paper it is important at this point to elaborate on the central ideas of Mead's social psychology, to be developed in the following paragraphs, in their influence on Honneth's interpretative framework.

Mead (1934) by becoming interested in psychology submits to the epistemological test its object: how can psychology access its specific object, the psychic? By taking up the fundamental pragmatist idea of Charles Peirce through John Dewey, according to which it is exactly the situations of problematization of actions that are taken advantage of by the individual subject in his cognitive operations, Mead obtains for psychology the access to its object, insofar as an individual becomes aware of his subjectivity, since, under the pressure of a practical problem that he intends to solve, he is obliged to creatively re-elaborate his interpretations of reality. Mead (1934, 144-151) designs his methodological framework according to this functionalist principle, that psychology may have an internal conception of the mechanisms enabling an awareness of subjectivity, from the perspective that actors adopt in the ever-threatening interaction with their partners. For this task, a problem arises: how can a subject achieve awareness of the social significance of his actions? Mead explains, that a subject can only acquire knowledge about the

intersubjective meaning of his actions when he is able to trigger in himself the same reaction that his behavior caused as a stimulus in his opponent. For only vocal expression, unlike other non-vocal forms of understanding, can influence the agent in the same way as it does the defiant. From this conclusion, Mead (1934, 149) draws the conditions for the manifestation of human self-consciousness through the expansion of the consciousness of meanings, since there is always a mutual relationship of the individual with the community in which he lives. For Honneth (1995), in this process of individual experience, through "the ability to call up in oneself the meaning that one´s action has for others also opens up the possibility for one to view oneself as a social object of the actions of one´s partner to interaction" (74).

Thus, by responding to himself, and through the process of verbalization, just like the one he interacts with, the subject positions himself eccentrically in relation to himself, obtaining an image of himself, which enables the awareness of his identity. Hence Mead (1934, 122) distinguishes the *Me* from the *I* as two faces of the same *Self,* which constitute personality in the way it is revealed in social experience. The *Self* is essentially a dynamic social process of these two distinct faces. While the *Me* "reflects the other's image of me, only preserves my momentary activity as something already past- from the 'I', which represents the unregimented source of all my current actions", as Honneth (1995, 74) points out. The *I* precedes the individual's awareness of himself, as it also comments on the practical manifestations consciously preserved in the *Me*. Thus, between the *I* and the *Me* there is a relationship similar to that between partners in a dialogue. The *I* for Mead can never exist as an object in consciousness, but rather as the dialogical character of internal experience. Honneth takes up the concept of the *Me*, to which collective experiences can be referred, which Mead uses in characterizing the result of the originary self-relation, making it

> clear that individuals can only become conscious of themselves in the object-position. For the self that one catches sight of in reacting to oneself is always what one's interaction partner sees as his or her partner to interaction perceived, and never the current agent of one's own behavioural expressions. (Honneth, 1995, 74)

Honneth (1995), based on Mead's contribution, formulates an intersubjective conception of human self-consciousness: "a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective" (75). For Honneth, this thesis represents the first stage in the naturalistic grounding of Hegel's theory of recognition, in which "Mead inverts the relationship between the ego and the social world and asserts the primacy of the perception of the other to the development of self-consciousness" (75).

According to Honneth (1995, 76), Hegel's theoretical potential of the Jena period, goes further than Mead's application, since to the concept of recognition is of interest less in the cognitive relation of interaction, through which self-consciousness is attained, than in the forms of practical confirmation through which the subject acquires a normative understanding of himself as a particular kind of person. The essential interest is revealed in the attempt to understand the intersubjective conditions of the subject's practical self-relationship with his fellow human beings.

Mead (1934, 144-145), presenting the concept of *Me* as the cognitive representation that the subject receives of himself, from the moment he perceives himself from the perspective of a second person, gives a new development to social psychology, by extending his analysis of reactive behaviour to the normative principles of action, by including in the analysis of interaction the consideration of moral norms. Now, for Honneth (1995, 77), it is from this fundamental idea that Mead supports the explanation of human identity formation in his later work. Starting from the development of the child, in which the practical framework of the subject's self-image tends to expand with the addition of interaction partners, we can extract the basic process of the socialization of the human being as a whole. Conceptual mediation, from the narrowest to the broadest, is given for Mead (1934, 106-111) through the concept of the "generalized other". Just as the child, in the playful phase, acquires the capacity to guide its behaviour by rules which it obtained from the synthesis of the perspectives of all those around it, socialization in general takes place in the

internalisation of behavioural norms, arising from the expectations of all the members of society. The subject thus acquires the capacity to participate in the normative interactions of his environment and, by adopting as his own the social norms of action of the "generalized other", develops the identity of a subject accepted in his community. In this process of socialization, operated in the intersubjective relationship, Honneth (1995, 78) stresses the importance of using the concept of recognition. Honneth's proposal, coinciding with Mead's, goes in the direction of mutual recognition, since the subject by recognizing others through the internalization of their normative attitudes can find himself recognized as a member of his social context of interaction. This recognition as a member of society shapes the concept of dignity, through which the subject can feel secure in the social value of his identity. To characterize the awareness of his value, the concept of "self-respect" emerges, referring to "the positive attitude towards oneself that one is capable of taking if one is recognized by the members of one's community as being a particular kind of person" (Honneth, 1995, 79), the degree of self-respect depending on the extent to which the subject finds confirmation for his properties or abilities, in addition to the "rights" that are attributed to the members of the community. The latter represent for Mead "a solid, though only very general, basis for self-respect" (79).

From Mead's theoretical evolutionary process, a second stage emerges, for Honneth, in Hegel's model of recognition: the generic conception of law, in the concept of the "generalized other" in an in-depth way, because "recognizing one another as legal persons means that both subjects control their own action by integrating into it the community's will, as that is embodied in the intersubjectively recognized norms of their society" (Honneth, 1995, 80). However, this stage of recognition theory fails to express in a positive way one's individual differences, that which distinguishes one from interaction partners. Mead goes beyond Hegel's frame of reference by including the creative potential of the *I* in the process of identity formation, the practical spontaneity that marks our action in everyday life. By contrast, the *Me* aggregates the norms of the community that

the subject seeks to amplify in order to grant social expression to the impulsiveness and creativity of his or her *I* (Honneth, 1995, 80-81). This internal dialectic between *I* and *Me*, outlines the general principles of conflict, in the moral development of individuals and societies and potentiates new forms of social recognition. We must speak of the originality of the *I*, in a continuous process of identity construction, while the common will imposes itself on individual action, it is through the *Me* that the subject is forced "to fight, in the interest of one's 'I', for new forms of social recognition" (Honneth, 1995, 82). It is from this dialectic that personal identity is allowed to be preserved in the form of personal recognition. Since the impulsiveness of the *I* and the normative idealization that accompanies it in its social practice cannot be contained when defending its ambitions in a spontaneous way, the subject is left with no alternative but to continuously seek the agreement of the community, which, in the established recognition relationship, grants it further rights of freedom (Honneth, 1995, 83).

For Honneth (1995, 83-84) this thesis of Mead includes a concept of social development capable of providing the Hegelian idea of "struggle for recognition" with a social psychology underpinning. Mead establishes between the ongoing action of the *self* and social life a systematic, interdependent link, in which individual normative claims drive social development to a constant adaptation to the progressive process of individuation. Both Hegel and Mead understand the moral development of societies as a gradual process of broadening their recognized legal content, in which, historically, in a continuous struggle for recognition, subjects attempt to extend the scope of their intersubjectively established rights, thereby increasing the level of their personal autonomy. However, unlike Hegel, Mead enables us to explain the motivational underpinnings of the process of social development, since, "the forces that propel the 'movement of recognition' each time anew represent the uncontrollable levels of the 'I', which can only express themselves freely and without coercion if they meet with the approval of the 'generalized other'" (Honneth, 1995, 84-85).

Despite Mead's significant contribution to the systematization of recognition theory, Honneth (1995) finds limitations in the application of his concept of a social legal relation, since "Mead does not sufficiently distinguish between the universalization of social norms and the expansion of individual freedom" (86). Similarly, Mead did not provide answers to the questions posed by the process of individual self-realization.

> The ethical concept of the 'generalized other' that Mead would have arrived at, had he considered the idealizing anticipation of subjects who know themselves to be unrecognized, serves the same purpose as Hegel's conception of ethical life. It identifies a relationship of mutual recognition in which every individual can know himself or herself to be confirmed as a person who is distinct from all others in virtue of his or her particular traits and abilities. (Honneth, 1995, 88)

In this way, Mead had difficulties to realize that the realization of the *Self*, in the process of the acquisition of personal autonomy, necessitates the anticipation of an ideal other than the "generalized other". What form reciprocal recognition should take, when it does not focus on the guarantee of rights, but on the confirmation of the individual specificities of each one, is a question that was not included in Mead's reflections.

The solution that Mead presents, in a post-traditional response to the Hegelian problem of ethicity, "involves linking self-realization to engaging in socially useful work" (Honneth, 1995, 88). The recognition that is given to a subject in the system of the social division of labour, by demonstrating competence in his or her function, will be enough for him or her to understand the awareness of his or her uniqueness. The individual, therefore, will only be able to fully respect himself if, within the framework of the functions of the system of the division of labour, he can identify his positive contribution to the reproduction of the community. However, according to Honneth (1995, 89-91), Mead did not clarify some difficulties of his proposal. The idea that individuals in the experience of socially useful work can achieve recognition of their particular characteristics fails first of all for the reason that the evaluation of the regulated functions of the division of labour is itself dependent on the definition of the overarching goals of a

community. Thus, the functional division of labour cannot be regarded as a neutral value system that establishes the rules by which individuals can verify their specific contributions with some objectivity, since the evaluation of socially useful labour contributions is regulated by the intersubjectively shared values that constitute a society's unique way of life, or its common concept of the good life.

Despite the limitations of Mead's proposal, it has the advantage of enunciating some of the difficulties of the theoretical framework of the young Hegel. As seen, both Hegel and Mead give great relevance to the idea of a 'struggle for recognition', in which subjects as biographically individuated persons seek intersubjective recognition. While Mead proposes the system of the division of labour for this form of recognition, the young Hegel presents the idea of solidarity relations. Solidarity will be the synthesis of two modes of recognition, since it shares with "law" the cognitive perspective of universal equal treatment and with "love" the perspective of emotional attachment and solicitude. "Ethicity" for the young Hegel would be, as Honneth (1995, 91) elucidates,

> the type of social relationship that arises when love has been refined, under the cognitive impress of the law, into universal solidarity among members of a community. Since everyone who has this attitude can respect the other in his or her individual particularity, it is in this attitude that the most advanced form of mutual recognition is realized.

But in relation to Mead's proposal, the formal Hegelian concept of ethicity lacks any indication of the reasons that should lead individuals to be in solidarity with one another. Without reference to an orientation towards common values and goals, as Mead proposed in his conception of the functional division of labour, the concept of solidarity still needs a nexus that is the motivating foundation of experience (Honneth 1995, 91).

By recreating the German conceptual tradition of recognition theory and with the building blocks of Mead's social psychology, Honneth (1995) underpins his theory from the fundamental principle that

the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. (92)

From this premise, the author supposes an element of social dynamics, both individual and group, which normatively compels us to a gradual widening of reciprocal recognition relations in order to give social expression to the ever-renewed claims of our subjectivity. In this way, the process of subjective autonomation of the individual is simultaneously linked to the widening of the relations and contents of recognition. On the level of social struggles, it is through morally motivated collective action and the widening of the forms of mutual recognition that the normative modifications of our societies are realized.

From the tripartite model of social recognition that Hegel and Mead outlined, although they did not develop it, Honneth will develop the typology of the forms of recognition, as well as the equivalent forms of disrespect that make it impossible for subjects to access recognition. Honneth's typology (1995, 94) will link back to the typology of forms of recognition in that forms of disrespect will be distinguished according to which level of a person's intersubjectively acquired relation-to-self they injure or even destroy.

Honneth (1995, 94-95), like Hegel and Mead, distinguishes different forms of social integration according to whether this takes place through emotional attachments, the granting of rights or a common value orientation and matches these forms of interaction with three spheres of recognition or three types of recognition relations: Love, Law and Social Esteem, with the last two representing a moral framework of social conflict.

These spheres create the social conditions under which human subjects can arrive at a positive attitude towards themselves, through the cumulative acquisition of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem give rise to the autonomous individual.

### 3.1. Dimensions of recognition - sphere of love

The sphere of love includes all primary relationships, whether they are between parents and children, between lovers or friends that constitute strong sentimental connections between people. In the sphere of love, emotional and affective dedication develops as a mode of recognition, where the primary relations of love and friendship assume themselves as forms of recognition. In relation to personality, we situate ourselves at the level of the nature of need and affections. Individuals develop self-confidence as a form of practical self-relationship. In emotional dedication we see the uniqueness of the other recognized. The sphere of love represents the first level of reciprocal recognition, since in its development "subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures" (Honneth 1995, 95). Thus, both subjects in a love relationship perceive themselves as united in their mutual dependence. Their needs and affections are obtained through confirmation that they are satisfied or reciprocated. Thus, "recognition itself must possess the character of affective approval or encouragement" (95). According to Honneth, the explanation of the passage of this topic to the context of investigation of a particular science is presented in Hegel's formulation, in which love could be understood as "being oneself in another" (Hegel, 2018, cited by Honneth, 1995, 96). Through this definition we can see that primary affective relationships depend on a precarious balance between autonomy and attachment, which is established from early childhood.

In order to support this Hegelian idea, Honneth (1995) investigates the tradition of psychoanalysis and its various theoretical clashes, from Freud to the theory of the object relationship developed by Donald Winnicott, where he finds an explanation "especially well-suited to rendering love intelligible as the interactive relationship that forms the basis for a particular pattern of reciprocal recognition" (96). If Freud had defined psychic development on the basis of the evolution of libidinal impulses, in which relationships with others were a function of these impulses, with Winnicott, on observing insurmountable difficulties in the Oedipal paradigm, a

revolutionary research process begins which leads to "*a change in paradigms in psychoanalysis*" (Loparic, 2002, 1). Winnicott (1965; 1982) does not agree, as until then, that in the research of psychoanalysis the baby is separated from its mother in the first months of life, considering it as an object of independent research, given its great dependence on maternal care. As he himself states: "I find that it is here, in the absolute dependence on maternal provision of that special quality by which the mother meets or fails to meet the earliest functioning of the female element, that we may seek the foundation for the experience of being" (Winnicott, 1982, 84). To this condition at the beginning of the individual's life, Winnicott (1982, 130) calls "fusion", when referring to "a theoretical stage prior to separation of the not-me from the me", while also using the word "fusion" whenever "there is a return to it from a state of separation" (130). From here, Winnicott undertakes a whole practical work in the relationship with his patients in an attempt to understand

> how are we to conceive of the interactional process by which 'mother' and child are able to detach themselves from a state of undifferentiated oneness in such a way that, in the end, hey learn to accept and love each other as independent persons? (Honneth, 1995, 98)

Honneth, in pursuing his analysis of Winnicott's theory, prefers to call symbiosis this original state of the human being in which two beings are absolutely dependent on each other, as they are unable to draw individual boundaries in relation to the other. Honneth recovers Winnicott's (1982, 139) fundamental "idea of individual dependence, dependence being at first near-absolute and changing gradually and in an ordered way to relative dependence and towards independence". For the mother, this impulse towards autonomy takes place when she can again widen the field of her social attention and gradually return to her everyday life, leaving the child alone with herself for longer and longer periods of time. By experiencing the mother's absence as something that is not subject to the control of her omnipotence, the child becomes aware of her dependence, thus abandoning the stage of absolute dependence. From this new stage of interaction that Winnicott (1982, 139) calls

"relative dependence", the fundamental steps in the development of the capacity of attachment are taken.

## 3.2. Dimensions of recognition - sphere of law

The specific form of reciprocity of legal recognition, unlike that of affective recognition, was only able to form in a process of historical development. With the establishment of the modern legal relationship family relations were altered, challenged by the principle of equality, suffered profound tensions. Only with the constitution of universal fundamental rights could the form of self-respect assume the character it expresses today, where moral imputability assumes the basis of a person's respect. This theme of legal recognition can hardly be overemphasized. It signifies for Honneth a kind of internal split that occurred within the category of honour in the passage to modern society, ending up constituting a duality that takes the form of two parallel and competing sources of recognition: the legal one, based on legal-formal equality, and the *status* or social appreciation one, linked to the valorization of professional work. In the first sense, the hierarchical notion of honour is democratized; in the second, it is "mediocritized" insofar as it depends on the individual's contribution as a "working citizen".

A significant part of the sphere of social valuation that was secured by principles of honour graded by orders has shifted to the level of universal validity in the concept of human dignity (Honneth 1995, 125).

For Amy Gutmann (1994) the full public recognition of equality requires two forms of respect: one in relation to the uniqueness of individuals' identities regardless of gender, race or ethnicity and a second, in relation to activities, practices and ways of looking at the world which may be particularly valued by, or associated with, members of minority groups. "Recognition of every individual's uniqueness and humanity lies at the core of liberal democracy, understood as a way of political and personal life" (Gutmann, 1994, 9).

The development potential of the sphere of cognitive respect is verified in the generalization and materialization of legal recognition relations, according to the conceptualization of

Honneth (1995). In the sphere of law the recognition of individual autonomy develops, enabling the empowerment of the person for certain actions. Cognitive disrespect translates into deprivation of rights and social exclusion.

While in social valuation it is important to understand how the system of references for the evaluation of the characteristic properties of a person is formed, in legal recognition it becomes central to understand "how to define this constitutive quality of persons" (Honneth 1995, 113).

It seems pertinent to relate this discourse to Taylor's (1994) analysis of the development of the modern notion of identity, since the politics of egalitarian recognition implies two distinct realities: a politics of universalism, through the principle of equal dignity for all citizens, and a politics of difference, although on a universalist basis. For Taylor (1994, 57-58),

> all people should be recognized for their unique identities. Here, however, recognition has another meaning. For the politics of equal dignity, what is established is universal equality, an identical basket of rights and immunities; for the politics of difference, recognition is required of the unique identity of this or that individual or group, the uniqueness of each.

For this author, the *struggle for* recognition will only find a satisfactory outcome through a system of recognition among equals. Taylor summons Hegel in finding such a system in a society with a common goal, where there is a "'we' that is an 'I', and an 'I' that is a 'we'" (Hegel, 2018, 108 quoted by Taylor, 1994, 50).

However, Taylor warns of some dangers, since "by implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same. In this form, the demand for equal recognition is unacceptable" (Taylor, 1994, 71). Pointing out as a solution, that something must go beyond the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for equal value recognition, that goes beyond the closing in of ethnocentric criteria. As other cultures exist and the need to live together, both within a society and on a world scale, is seen as more important, Taylor (1994, 72-73) points out that what should exist is the presupposition of equal

value, in a position which we assume when we dedicate ourselves to the study of the other. What the presupposition requires of us is not peremptory and false value judgements, but a willingness to open ourselves to the comparative study of cultures of the kind that compels us to shift our horizons in the resulting fusions. Above all, it requires us to admit that we fall far short of that ultimate horizon that might make evident the relative value of different cultures.

### 3.3. Dimensions of recognition – sphere of social valuation

In the third sphere of the relations of recognition, that of social valorisation, self-valorisation develops as a form of practical self-relationship of the subjects. Individuals, as a result of an increasing individualisation of our societies, can no longer attribute the respect they enjoy socially for their performances to a collective, but will have to return this responsibility to themselves (Honneth 1995, 128). The experience of social valorisation involves performing performances or possessing capabilities that are recognised by other members of society as valuable. In modern societies solidarity is linked to the assumption of symmetrical valorization of social relations between individualized and autonomous subjects. Symmetrical valorization "means to view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis" (Honneth 1995, 129). These relationships are constituted as solidary to the extent that they go beyond passive tolerance towards the other and promote affective involvement in the particularity of the other, since by promoting the development of the distinct properties and capacities of the other it will be possible to achieve common goals. A clarification should be drawn from Honneth's theory (1995, 129): the symmetrical relationship does not mean reciprocal valuing in equal measure, but rather the challenge that any subject has the opportunity to experience himself as valuable to society through his capacities and properties. Only then, following Honneth's reasoning, under the notion of solidarity can social relations access a horizon in

which individual competition for social valuation can be free from experiences of disrespect.

As the spheres of recognition are but circles of a theoretical scheme that applies to the study of the social, these are not watertight and the intersubjective relations of individuals are often paradoxical and conflicting between the various modes of recognition (Honneth 1995).

## 3.4. Theory of recognition - model of social conflict

After analyzing the dimensions of recognition, it is important to analyze the model of social conflict. Honneth (1995, 160-170) differs from all utilitarian explanatory models, in that the proposed concept of social struggle suggests the conception according to which the motives for social reaction and revolt are formed within the framework of moral experiences, which result from the infringement of deeply rooted expectations of recognition. These expectations are linked in the psyche to the conditions of the constitution of personal identity, so that they retain the social standards of recognition under which a subject can know himself respected in his sociocultural return as a being at once autonomous and individualized; if these normative expectations are disappointed by society, this triggers precisely the kind of moral experience that is expressed in the feeling of disrespect. A feeling that through the ability to articulate it in a framework of intersubjective interpretation, which proves it as typical of an entire group is that it can trigger a social movement, depending on a collective semantics.

Honneth (1995, 165-166) presents two models of conflict: the utilitarian model which has as its object of analysis the competition for scarce goods, part of collective interests, in which groups want to increase their power to dispose of certain possibilities of reproduction; and the model of the theory of recognition which has as its object of analysis the struggle for the intersubjective conditions of personal integrity, according to a logic of the formation of moral reaction. Beginning with collective feelings of injustice, it attributes social struggles to the moral experiences that groups have in the face of the denial

of legal or social recognition. The model based on the theory of recognition complements the utilitarian model.

The investigation of social struggles is linked by principle to the assumption of an analysis of the moral consensus which, within a nexus of social cooperation, unofficially regulates how rights and duties are distributed between dominators and dominated. (Honneth, 1995, 167)

Honneth starts from the central thesis that social confrontations take place according to the model of a struggle for recognition. Which implies: not conceiving the conflict model only as an explanatory framework for the emergence of social struggles, but also as an interpretative framework for a process of moral formation. "Even just the reference back to the logic of the expansion of recognition relationships allows for the systematic classification of what would otherwise remain an uncomprehended occurrence" (Honneth, 1995, 168). Honneth advocates a radical widening of the perspective under which historical processes are to be considered. According to the same author (1995, 168) feelings of injustice and experiences of disrespect, through which the explanation of social struggles can begin, are no longer seen solely as motives for action, but should also be studied in such a way as to show the moral role they play in each case in the unfolding of relations of recognition. As a result, moral sentiments are no longer seen merely as the emotive component of social conflicts, but are included in the overall interpretative framework that describes the process of moral formation through which the normative potential of reciprocal recognition has developed over a sequence of social struggles.

The aim of this interpretative framework of Honneth (1995, 170) is to "to describe the idealized path along which these struggles have been able to unleash the normative potential of modern law and of esteem" which "lets an objective-intentional context emerge, in which historical processes no longer appear as mere events but rather as stages in a conflictual process of formation, leading to a gradual expansion of relationships of recognition."

## 4. Recognition, knowledge and reification

From Honneth's (2008, 71) historical-theoretical research highlights the consequence, and to some extent the presupposition, that "in the relationship of the human being with his world, recognizing (*Anerkennen*) always precedes knowing (*Erkennen), so that* by *reification* we must understand a violation against this order of precedence." Spontaneous, somewhat unconscious and irrational recognition, what the author calls a "pre-cognitive realization of the act of assuming a certain stance" (Honneth, 2008, 73), which leads to accepting the other's perspective after previously recognizing in him a familiar intentionality, is presented as a presupposition of human interaction. This action is neither rational nor does it configure "any awareness of motives" (73). This attitude for Honneth is not normatively oriented, although it does lead us towards some form of position-taking, which is by no means predetermined. The non-epistemic character of this elementary form of recognition is emphasized, so that the author adds to the previously differentiated spheres of recognition a stage of recognition, which appears as a kind of transcendental condition: the spontaneous, non-rational recognition of the other as a neighbour represents a necessary presupposition in order to be able to appropriate moral values, in the light of which we recognize that other in a determined, normative way (Honneth, 2008, 73).

In the absence of the experience of closeness and/or similarity to the other, we could not endow the relationship with moral values ordering our actions. Thus, in the first place, elementary recognition is necessary, "we need to take part (*Anteilnehmen*) of the other existentially, before we can learn to be guided by norms of recognition" (Honneth, 2008, 73) that bind us to certain ways of acting. In the process of their socialization, individuals learn to internalize the culture-specific recognition norms of their respective cultures; in this way they enrich step by step that elementary representation of the other, which is available to them from an early age by habit, with those specific values that are embodied in the principles of recognition prevailing within their society (Honneth, 2008, 74).

What normative principles are presupposed in relation to the human being when claiming that he always refers to others in a "recognizing" (*anerkennend*) way? The answer to this question constitutes a central concern in Honneth's reflection as he contributes to a theory of human intersubjectivity. Honneth attempts to guide sociological analysis in the study of normative claims to recognition.

In his article "Invisibility: On The Epistemology Of 'Recognition'", Honneth (2003) presents invisibility as the negation of the notion of recognition. The concept and the beginning of the discussion are inspired by Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man* (1952) and are based on the experience of a black character who suffers a process of "invisibilization" by white society.

Using a metaphorical idea, Honneth shows that invisibility is an active process, in which contempt is evidenced: a behaviour concerning a person as if he were not and which, for him, becomes very real. Visibility, on the contrary, means recognizing the relevant characteristics of a person. In this way, Honneth presents individual identifiability as the first form of knowledge. This stage is already considered a social act, since the affected individual knows of his or her invisibility by the lack of specific reactions on the part of the other or others. Besides, the lack of expressive acts of visibility may also be perceived by the other people present. Therefore, one can speak of a social invisibility, which leads Honneth to a differentiation between "knowing" and "recognizing": "knowing" is then the non-public identification of an individual, while "recognizing" refers to appreciation as a public act.

In an analogous way to Daniel Stern's contributions about infants, Honneth states that also for adults there are signs that openly show whether they have been socially approved. As proof one can consider precisely that feeling which is produced in situations in which a person is denied this approval. All expressions of approval are interpreted as a sign, in a symbolically abbreviated form, of a whole series of dispositions that refer to a set of performances that can be legitimately expected in future interactions, such as being treated with respect. Following the argument of *Struggle for*

*Recognition*, Honneth (1995) adds to the elementary form of recognition through love the ideas of respect and solidarity, which place people in distinct constellations with different performances that can be legitimately expected. All of them go beyond the mere affirmation of the existence of the other, that is, of what is meant by "knowing", since they show a motivational disposition towards the other that supposes a restriction of one's own egocentric perspective and with which we grant the other a moral authority over us in interaction. Social invisibility then appears as the denial of social recognition.

## 5. Final considerations

Thus, in summary form, Honneth presents a concept of social struggle that emphasizes the ethical dimension of injustice, proposing new parameters for Critical Theory. His proposal consists of analyzing the concrete patterns of disrespect that lead individuals to social struggles for recognition, in which there is a continuous broadening of the perceptions that individuals have of their unique attributes.

In the words of Honneth (2005, 113), "human subjects are visible for another subject to the degree in which he is able to identify them, according to the character of the relationship, as persons with clearly defined properties", i.e., when our social interaction partners recognize our singularities and qualities. The author proposes a theoretical conception capable of corresponding to the challenges inherent in situations of oppression in society, resorting to the concept of social invisibility. According to Honneth (2005, 112), "Cultural history offers numerous examples of situations in which the dominant expresses their social superiority by not perceiving those they dominate". A subject can attest to his visibility only if he forces his social interaction partner to recognize the properties and singularities that form his identity.

Thus, for Honneth, experiences of disrespect constitute the moral basis of the struggle for recognition of individuals, going beyond certain institutionalized standards. We can point to the feminist movement and those of colonized peoples as historical examples, which demonstrate that this moral

substratum is capable of considering the totality of forms of social injustice, resulting from the depreciation of certain standards of social esteem. For Honneth, it is only through a normative paradigm that goes beyond historical contingencies that the broad scale of human suffering can be examined and provide the moral foundation necessary to renew critical theory. The formal conception of ethical life developed by Honneth has as its political implication the need to give feelings of moral disrespect a normative potential, which makes it possible to evaluate the legitimacy of a social order. Since the situation of moral vulnerability is related to the expectations of a group, such claims, when articulated, enhance the expansion of intersubjective processes of recognition, giving rise to new capacities of moral self-reference, through which subjects may conceive themselves in a renewed way.

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# Hermeneutic Keys for Reading Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark by Mary Wollstonecraft

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## Abstract

This article offers a hermeneutic reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, drawing extensively on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative identity. It moves beyond classifying the text as either pure recollection or fiction, arguing instead that it constitutes a profound process of narrative refiguration. This process continuously negotiates the tension between a fixed, sameness-based identity (*idem*) and a dynamic, self-making identity (*ipse*), thereby revealing the intricate interplay between the personal and the cultural in self-formation. The analysis situates Wollstonecraft's journey within the dialectic of selfhood and otherness, demonstrating how her encounters with unfamiliar landscapes, languages, and social customs become essential occasions for hermeneutic self-understanding. The paper pays special attention to Ricoeur's notions of attestation and distanciation (the productive gap between experience and telling), while also considering the reader's role as a constitutive moment in the work's truth-claims. Ultimately, it argues that by intertwining raw personal testimony with a performative self-presentation, Wollstonecraft transforms the epistolary form into a unique space of introspection and a projection toward future possibilities, offering a seminal exploration of the conditions under which the self is narrated, recognized, and transformed.

**Keywords:** narrative, hermeneutics, self-understanding, writting, travelogue, letters

## Introduction

This article aims to systematize Paul Ricoeur's philosophical theory of narrative identity in order to construct a theoretical framework that not only justifies but also enriches the interpretation of a particular work in which the author's identity is deeply interwoven. Our objective is not to engage with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self for the sake of advancing a philosophical reflection on his thought, but rather to place this reflection in the service of interpreting a historical text that resists clear generic classification. We refer to Mary Wollstonecraft's final work published during her lifetime: *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,*[1] released in 1796.

As we will explore in detail, this is a text that demands interpretation. It features the author herself as the central figure, recounting a journey she actually undertook during a particularly intense and introspective period of her life—one marked by the acceleration of her psychological complexity. Undoubtedly, this narrative enacts a dual movement of revealing and concealing the identity of its author and narrator, offering a privileged occasion to witness the narrative strategies through which Wollstonecraft shapes her sense of self.

To carry out such a reading, we begin by establishing the Ricoeurian perspective that will provide us with the necessary philosophical tools. At the end of *Time and Narrative III* (1988), Ricoeur introduces the question of narrative identity, understood as the *locus* where the two types of narrative explored in that work —fiction and historical writing— converge. He writes:

> the fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Here 'identity' is taken in the sense of a practical category. (246)

However, he does not pursue a deep philosophical inquiry into the specific problems of identity as applied to persons or communities in that volume. Although the notion of ipseity is mentioned, it is only in *Oneself as Another* (1992) that we find a fully developed dialectic that will underpin Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology. This dialectic will later be revisited

in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) and *The Course of Recognition* (2005), especially in relation to the continuities and tensions between the personal and collective spheres.

Accordingly, this article unfolds in two parts. First, we will delve into Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, with particular emphasis on the concept of identity and its epistemological claim, namely, attestation. Second, we will contextualize Wollstonecraft's *Letters* within the biographical moment of its production, and then trace the narrative threads of her identity using Ricoeur's theory as our guide.

## 1. Narrative Identity and Attestation in Paul Ricoeur

The question 'Who am I?' has traditionally preoccupied philosophy, particularly from Descartes to Nietzsche, and through thinkers such as Locke, Hume, Davidson, and Parfit in the twentieth century, accumulating perplexities and aporias. Ricoeur introduces a crucial distinction that allows him to shift the focus of the analysis and breathe new life into the problem of identity. His interest in reclaiming the work and epistemology of history—by distinguishing it from fiction—leads him to formulate a point of articulation between these two kinds of narrative: the space of personal and collective experience, the locus of individual or communal identification.

Departing from the substantialist theses of traditional anthropology and metaphysics, Ricoeur argues that we do not have direct access to a self that we could grasp by describing an invariant core of traits. Rather, identity is attained through the mediation of narrative. In his well-known critique of the Cartesian cogito, Ricoeur questions the move Descartes makes to avoid solipsism—namely, shifting from the affirmation of existence to an inquiry into what the self is. Ricoeur proposes, instead, that the more appropriate question is not 'what am I?' but 'who am I?'—a question that resists definitive answers and unfolds only through the ongoing narrative of a life.

This narrative, necessary to mediate between cosmic time—anchored in the weight of the calendar—and the imaginative time capable of producing unlimited variations, is not mere fiction. Although it employs literary strategies characteristic of fictional narrative, the plot is mimetic: it

imitates and refigures real human action. Not without risk —
since we remain within the paradigm of suspicion— narrative
identity, Ricoeur claims, 'must be the unified style of subjective
transformations governed by the objective transformations that
obey the rule for the completeness, totality, and unity of the
plot' (2016, 234-5).

For Ricoeur, there is a correlative relationship between
identity and the discordant concordance of the narrative to
which it belongs. Narratology has gradually revealed this link
by demonstrating the reciprocity between plot and character, as
well as the instabilities that threaten this balance. Literature,
in Ricoeur's view, serves as evidence for his philosophical
proposal. Thus, the relation between narrative and identity is
not rigid but rather dynamic, characterized by shifting degrees
of correspondence.

The identity of the character in the narrative plot offers
an opportunity for the refiguration of the reader's selfhood in
the act of reading. This transfer from a referential to a
refigurative framework —adopting the paradigm of reading to
address the problem of personal identity— marks a turning
point in hermeneutic philosophy. The real subject appropriates
the meanings embodied in a fictional character and, through
identification, imaginatively experiments with the possibilities
of their own self. This is why Ricoeur attributes such
importance to cultural signs, among which literature is
emblematic. Narrative intelligence, developed through
engagement with such signs, is a necessary condition for a
creative and rich appropriation of the meanings that constitute
our symbolic environment. Engaging with a text means
confronting the world it unfolds and appropriating its meanings
in such a way that reading not only refigures the sense of the
text but also allows for a deeper self-understanding through the
refiguration of the self by narrative.

Consequently, narrative identity —according to the
model of the plot that mediates between permanence and
change— constitutes itself over time through the dynamic
configuration of a story that defines the identity of a character.
In this sense, we narrate ourselves under the regime of the *Er-
Erzählung* —we construct a story about ourselves and, through

that story, we come to understand ourselves. In other words, we associate the anecdotal mutability of life with the configuration of a story, thus creating a text in which we read ourselves and open the possibility of self-understanding. This does not presuppose a subject, since Ricoeur resists essentialist and substantialist ontologies; understanding is configurative, and imagination is productive of the self.

At this point, we can fully grasp the axial distinction Ricoeur proposes to address the problem of the self in terms of identity. In the expression 'oneself', the issue of identity is contained in the word 'self', which must be understood in a complex way, articulating two distinct meanings of identity: *idem* and *ipse*, that is, sameness and selfhood. This distinction between the two main uses of the concept of identity provides the conceptual framework of Ricoeur's analysis. On one hand, *idem* refers to extreme similarity, such as when we say two objects are identical; its opposite is difference. Personal identity, however, does not follow this logic, because extreme similarity implies an immutable core of selfhood, which remains inaccessible. On the other hand, *ipse* refers to what is proper to oneself, and its dialectical counterpart is the other; hence the title *Oneself as Another*.

Narrative personal identity, as conceived in the hermeneutics of the self, allows us to register the constancy of change within a framework of persistence that yields identity in terms of continuity. As Romano describes:

> Selfhood consists in a kind of self-maintaining (*maintien de soi-même*) despite all the empirical changes that affect one's 'character', a 'constancy' that does not rest on the persistence of an identity. Selfhood is not a substance-like type of permanence, but a 'mode of being' which is to be understood on the model of a promise (…) This is why selfhood does not belong to truth in a theoretical sense, but to truth understood in an *existential* sense, to the confidence of which we render ourselves worthy, to *trustworthiness*. (2016, 46)

This does not mean rejecting elements of *idem*, which Ricoeur associates with character, but rather proposing a model that captures the complexity of the dialectic between what endures and what changes—a dynamic that expands the polysemy of existence. 'Ricoeur's entire philosophical enterprise hinges on the condition that the referential framework needs to

be replaced by a refigurative one. To put it simply, by "refiguration" Ricoeur means the refiguration of lived life through narratives' (Lénárt-Cheng 2016, 359). Since the opposition between being and non-being no longer serves as a criterion, the subject is not lost in the narrative; instead, the narrative reveals the nakedness of the question 'Who am I?'

This nakedness, in a way, undermines the traditional opposition between truth and falsehood in relation to identity. Attestation, rather than truth, is the original epistemological status that Ricoeur attributes to the hermeneutics of the self. Attestation is the assurance and confidence each person has in existing in the mode of selfhood|ipseity; as such, it does not admit a purely epistemic dispute. Yet attestation is not certainty, but a non-doxastic belief. Ricoeur draws on the French language to underscore this distinction. *Croyance* refers to belief or opinion expressed in propositions like 'I believe that…,' whereas *créance* refers to trust or credit, expressed in propositions like 'I believe in…' or 'I have faith in…' Consequently, the epistemological mode of selfhood is testimony.

What does it mean, then, to 'attest selfhood'? It means to affirm the ascription of psychic predicates to both oneself and others; the capacity to initiate something in the world; the responsibility for our own actions; the need for discourse to be interpreted; the illocutionary force of language. Ultimately, we attest to the capacity of language to speak being, and to our own capacity as capable, productive beings. Unlike the sciences, which seek verifiable truths, attestation coordinates the phenomenology of 'I can' with the semantics of action through the assurance and trust that arise from our pre-understanding of practical engagement in a workable world. The 'I can' can only be attested (Ricoeur 1991c, 391).

Thus, attestation has a double direction: toward events—i.e., actions carried out by an agent that affect the world—and toward the very existence of the capable human being, who simultaneously attests to themselves by narrating these events. In this self-designation, Ricoeur locates the ontological space of capability. By attesting to the self in and through the attestation of events|actions that we cause or

endure, the metaphysical space is opened to think a philosophical anthropology of the capable human being, as Ricoeur conceives it. This involves an original fragmentation that does not point to a being—as one might think in Platonic or Aristotelian terms—but to an excess, to a background that is both potential and actual: that which is, and has the power to be.

Attestation demands an act of trust and credit that cannot be refuted, because nothing can close its crisis of confidence. Where there is attestation, suspicion is also possible; we can only halt doubt by finding a testimony that appears more reliable—at least provisionally. But attestation is even more particular, for it is not merely epistemological.

In Ricoeur's philosophical trajectory, particularly in his 1990 work, the semantics of analytic philosophy gives him the confidence that the transition from analysis to ontology does not require abandoning the ground of language:

> Attestation, for me, constitutes the epistemic modality of the ontological vehemence that, I believe, continues to inhabit the semantics of analytic philosophy. It designates non-doxastic belief, security without verifiable certainty, the confidence that human acting is indeed the case. (Ricoeur 1991c, 396)

Attestation thus represents the modality by which phenomenology points toward ontology. Ricoeur proposes thinking ontology in terms of the mode of being of what appears, taking as attested that events happen and that we are a self. Yet this attestation is not a simplification of epistemological problems; rather, it opens a new dimension of truth that best suits the mode of appearance of the self, without aspiring to totalization. If language speaks being, and the identity of the self arises from narrative, then it is within that very narrative that we can find the keys to an ontology of action and of agents as capable beings.

To answer the question of what kind of being the self is, Ricoeur draws on Aristotle's notion of the polysemy of being. However, in the distinction between true and false being proposed in the *Metaphysics*, what remains unthought is the very attestation that bears witness to the gap between reflection and analysis. This testimony, grounded in

attestation, carries the conviction that language, regardless of use, speaks being —more specifically, the true being of the self[2]. Attestation opposes the claim to truth not as its mere contrary but as a means through which truth, in the form of ipseity|selfhood, is reached. In the end, attestation is the assurance of existing in the mode of selfhood|ipseity, as an acting and suffering being.

This may appear to be an easy way out of the problem of knowledge and truth, allowing us —without guarantees— to affirm our own existence, that of others, and of events. However, this conception of certainty as attestation expands our cognitive capacities by enabling trust in our pre-understanding of the world. In fact, suspicion envelops the entirety of existence, as everything attested may be questioned. 'Ricoeur observes that everyday practice of testimony (…) consists in a continuous effort to maintain the unstable balance between trust and suspicion. (…) Suspicion means that wherever there is attestation, there may also be contestation' (Begué 2006, 87).

As is evident, there is no foundational subject underlying this assurance, which corresponds to the phenomenological distinction between *idem* and *ipse.* No criteria grounded in *idem* can eliminate the element of suspicion inherent in attestation. Attestation comes to the self, and thus selfhood|ipseity implies a fundamental reference to otherness, to an elsewhere from which the force of attestation comes —that is, a mode of passivity. In this sense, it stands equidistant from both poles of the cogito debate: the self-founding certainty and the humiliation of illusion. Suspicion is not absolute; neither is certainty.

To summarize, attestation cannot be reduced to epistemological determinations alone; it is also an ontological determination of being. By drawing on analytic philosophy to adopt a realist turn, Ricoeur aims to resist phenomenological idealism without reducing everything to the empirical. The ontological aim of the claim that 'language speaks being', together with attestation, is to reach —through the objectifying mediations of language—an extralinguistic plane that remains dependent on linguistic determinations. This interdependence

prevents the reduction of reality to language, a risk inherent in the linguistic turn that fails to explain the efficacy of action. It is necessary to 'affirm the dependence of the linguistic determinations of action upon the ontological constitution of action' (Ricoeur 1992, 301).

## 2. The Narrative Identity of Mary Wollstonecraft in her Letters

By the late twentieth century, the category of 'life writing' had emerged within the human and social sciences to address, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the instability and hybrid nature of autobiographical texts, enabling the delineation of a dynamic canon that includes autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and other ostensibly amorphous writings. The consideration of this new category has had the effect, in eighteenth-century studies of self-representation, of shifting women from the margins to the center of attention, thereby revaluing works such as Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, by an author who, until only a few decades ago, was almost entirely absent from literature and history curricula. It is in this conceptual light that we use the term autobiography for the analysis of this work. Thus, Myers asserts that the *Letters* constitute "a kind of subjective autobiography superimposed on a travelogue" (1979, 166), a form of self-representation that is part of an emergent canon of the time. A contemporary reading can recognize the centrality of the personal gaze and voice in the epistemic grounding of the narration. Of course, as Bourdieu argues in *L'illusion biographique*, it is absurd to attempt to understand a life story as a series of events whose constant is a subject, a proper name, because

> we can only comprehend a trajectory (…) on condition that we have first constructed the successive states of the field in which it was carried out, and hence, the whole set of objective relations that have linked the agent in question to the other agents engaged in the same field and confronted with the same space of possibles. (Bourdieu 1986, 72)

This reflection underscores another virtue of the epistolary text: it is always opening outward, beyond itself, through its direct reference to a correspondent. For this reason,

we begin by tracing the networks and interwoven threads that constitute the context in which the *Letters* were written and later published —without losing sight of the fact that other configurations yield other possible readings.

As is well known, Mary Wollstonecraft settled in Paris at the end of 1792, with the aim of reporting on events related to the French Revolution for an English periodical, shortly before the beginning of the Jacobin Terror. There she fell in love with an American merchant, Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a passionate romance. The relationship resulted in the birth, in May 1794, in the port city of Le Havre, of her first daughter, Frances "Fanny" Imlay. Yet Gilbert soon revealed his scant interest in conjugal life and fatherhood; back in London, he declared that he would 'try to do his duty by her and his daughter (…) but he expected to retain his freedom in all ways' (Gordon 2016, 289). For Wollstonecraft, this indifference and lack of love was merely the latest in a long chain of frustrations, painful heartbreaks, disillusionments, sufferings, and complications. She experienced what would, without doubt, today be described as a severe depression, which led to her first suicide attempt by taking poison.

In an unorthodox response to this attempt, Imlay proposed that Mary travel to Scandinavia on his behalf in search of a Norwegian vessel —long since untraceable— carrying a cargo of Bourbon silver he had smuggled from France to Sweden when they were still living in Le Havre. Even more unorthodox was Mary's acceptance of the task: she set out on the journey with Fanny, barely a year old, and the French nurse Marguerite[3]. Without apparent success in locating the stolen ship, she arrived in Gothenburg two months later, hoping for some sort of reconciliation with Imlay, but found only absence and rejection. Back in London, she learned that Imlay was living with another lover[4], and she decided to end her life a second time —this time by throwing herself into the Thames from Putney Bridge on 10 October 1795. Unfortunately —or fortunately— she was rescued by fishermen, drawn by the prospect of claiming a lucrative reward recently instituted by the Royal Humane Society for saving would-be suicides from the river. Although for a brief period Imlay agreed to share a

home with her, his new partner soon insisted on ending this arrangement, and together they traveled to Paris. For Wollstonecraft, this marked a closure and, finally, the beginning of a new editorial project.

> She would not fictionalize her experience. Instead, she would edit her letters from Scandinavia and turn her broken heart into a book that would honestly examine her struggle with despair. It would be a travelogue and reflection, an observation and self-examination. (Gordon 2016, 340)

What is striking about this project is that, in a move we might today call Ricoeurian, Wollstonecraft positions herself in a liminal space between fiction and reality with the aim of blurring the boundary between them, discursively crafting her projection into a narrator who, as a character within the plot, allows her to experiment with her thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The inhospitable geographical context seems designed precisely for this exploration, in which alterity emerges —more than ever— as an ontological category constitutive of the *self*. Few people at the time had travelled to the north of Europe, and even fewer were women travelling without male company and with a one-year-old baby. Wollstonecraft is foreign because she is English, but also because she is a woman, an intellectual on a business trip, and because she does not speak the local language.

In just over two and a half years, Mary Wollstonecraft lived in Paris and reported on the course of the French Revolution, fell in love, had a daughter, attempted suicide twice, travelled through three Nordic countries, moved at least three times, published at least two books (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* in 1792, and *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe*, 1794), and began working on a new book that would also prove a publishing success. The heterogeneity of these experiences —political, emotional, philosophical, psychological, erotic, ethical, professional, social, among others— demanded a synthesis: precarious and fragile, but a synthesis nonetheless. We could call this, following Ricoeur, the synthesis of the heterogeneous: the

gathering into a plot of a plurality of disruptive events that seem to fragment personal life experience. It is the attempt to strike a certain balance between a pure ipseity|selfhood, in which identity is eclipsed, and the monotony of a life that is always merely re-identifiable. Yet the paradox sustaining this narrative practice —which grants meaning, cohesion, and concordance to what appears discordant— is that, while it is our own experience, in which we have material and symbolic belonging, it nevertheless requires a moment of distance. 'Distantiation is the condition of understanding' (Ricoeur 1991a, 88) and writing both enables and produces this productive hermeneutical distance. It is no minor point that such a chaotic set of experiences should drive Wollstonecraft to despair and at the same time demand narration and writing from her.

In the case of the work under discussion, this narration or writing has a first moment of configuration: the period when she writes her letters and diary entries during her stay in the Nordic countries. There is a lapse between this initial writing and the rewriting carried out in collaboration with her publisher, Joseph Johnson, for the book's publication. This latter stage involves Wollstonecraft reading her own words with the aim of refiguring them, appropriating their meaning and steering it toward new interests, while preserving the need to remain the protagonist, to split herself into the narrator.

As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that we have no direct access to ourselves and that narrating ourselves is a way of arriving at an understanding of our being, through the construction—or better, co-construction—of our identity as the correlate of a plot. This proves a fruitful key for approaching texts such as Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, which are spaces for the exploration of meaning and occasions for reflection that seek to probe the complexity of the author's mode of being. Wollstonecraft asks herself, time and again, about the qualities that distinguish her, about the particularity of her character and her life experience, in search of that mysterious personal quality that makes her *her*. It is therefore not surprising that this question runs through all her works and that she herself declared she was the heroine of every story

she wrote, which allows us to affirm that her entire *œuvre* is, in some way, autobiographical—from political essays to fiction. 'She had insisted that her work be a metonym for herself and had aimed at projecting an intensely attractive personality to her readers' (Todd 1998, 186). We therefore understand this autobiographical quality as the textual actualization of a performative identity—an identity that acts and attests, that always arrives at self-understanding through meaningful action as text. Accordingly, as both Yousef (1999, 537) and Culley (2014, 180) argue, this construction of narrative subjectivity cannot be read in a Romantic key—that is, as an isolated, self-sufficient self that finds peace in its autonomy. On the contrary, Wollstonecraft weaves her narrative within an intersubjective context, showing that her self-knowledge is always relational, despite the relative solitude in which she carries out her journey.

In the *Letters*, this relationship embraces the foreignness and alterity of the other as a banner. The narrative constructs her own identity in relation to what she finds strange on her journey. 'Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 190), she warns in Letter III, as if encountering alterity were the very expectation —the desirable aim— of her itinerary. From personal hygiene to a society's collective capacity for science and its appreciation for the refinement of art and literature, these are seen as characteristics corresponding to a particular stage of development —one she can interpret because she belongs to a wealthier and more complex society. Her interpretation of this alterity is key to understanding her self, for it is an affirmation of her identity. In Letter VII, Wollstonecraft reinforces this constant scrutiny of her new cultural environments or describes her impressions of Scandinavian nature and society, relating them to her own feelings and convictions. This contrast with 'the other' (customs, landscapes, climate) can be explored through Ricoeur's concepts of alterity and the quest for recognition, since her identity is constructed in relation to what she observes and to those she meets. Attestation presents this double movement: giving an account of action, and, in the same

gesture, giving an account of the self's capacity to affirm itself. We must not forget that alterity is constitutive of identity in its dialectic with ipseity|selfhood. Wollstonecraft's narrative is entangled in the stories of others, but also in History, and the author is acutely aware of the fruitfulness of this link. She therefore presents herself through her act of travelling, which is also a metaphor for life as an awareness of a polysemic process in full development.

References to Wollstonecraft's private life[5] are interwoven —often obliquely— into the rewriting process, which is itself shaped by editorial purposes, and must therefore be read transversally. For example, in Letter I she refers to her exhausted spirit, attributing it partly to the conditions of travel but also to 'other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted' (2024, 173). Undoubtedly, these 'other causes' relate to private matters she does not wish to disclose, yet neither does she seek to erase them, as though the mere hint of undisclosed circumstances were itself part of the enigma of the plot—an enigma in which readers can only surmise suffering, pain, labour, and conflict. Similarly, in Letter X she recounts a dream in which her daughter's footprints in the sand—her traces—become a nascent hope that can muse away despair, just as walking along the rocks allows her to imagine happiness and exclaim: 'Phantoms of bliss! … again enclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the disappointments that render the sympathy painful, which experience rather increases than damps, by giving the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason' (2024, 210). This despair and these disappointments, to which Wollstonecraft explicitly alludes, anchor the narrative in the lived experience of the author. There is also a performative dimension in the rhetoric, which calls for empathy—inviting a reading that is not merely passive but engaged, refusing to remain neutral. This is the proposition of an intersubjectivity mediated by a text that articulates writing and reading in a productive way. In the double distancing —on the one hand, of author from narrator, and on the other, of reader from the 'I' imaginatively unfolded before the text— emerges the space in which interpretation occurs and polyphony takes place.

It is crucial that a hermeneutics of Wollstonecraft's text assume such distancing as a condition. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur maintains that the art of narrative confirms the primacy of the third person in the knowledge of the human, since the 'I' is that about which we speak, the hero of a narrative plot. The question 'who tells?' in the case of *lifewriting* seems to forge a special bond between author and narrator. However, for Ricoeur, the autobiographical account of the self narrating itself is no more valid than the narration of another, for narrative mediation necessarily entails distancing.

In this sense, any author gives testimony of themselves when narrating— whether narrating their own life or that of another person. Yet if we deny the self's exclusive privilege in the construction of the 'I', we might be tempted to assume that autobiography is an impossible genre— or at least a limit case. It is therefore important to gauge the expectations that make autobiography impossible, so that within new aims it might find its own path and legitimacy. Let us recall that autobiographies are works or textual products (conceived in both the broad and the narrow sense of text) which, 'as Ricoeur said in many of his Works (…) cast free from the author's intentions and its initial context' (Abel 2009, vii). The 'auto' particle becomes contentious precisely because it is both an attempt to anchor the narrative in its author and context of production, and a space for challenging the very notion of author— more still, of self-narration. Becoming a character in one's own text is to split oneself in writing, where the self narrates the I and thereby produces it.

To be an author in the context of an autobiographical narrative turns the genre into a kind of *auto-hetero-biography*: a story of oneself as another. Autobiography, consequently, is a documented testimony which —given the lack of ontological identification between author, narrator, and narrative— produces a surplus of meaning.[6] We cannot, therefore, expect autobiography to produce a narrative that corresponds, in a mirror-like way, to an identity in the sense of sameness. On the contrary, it is a quest for understanding that requires interpretation, one that the self addresses both to itself and to others. This does not, however, preclude other interpretations;

rather, each reading places the self before the text, opening the possibility —at best— of being transformed by the world it unfolds. Mary Wollstonecraft was only considered a feminist philosopher almost a century after her death, since the reading of her work was mediated by the interpretation of her husband William Godwin, who posthumously published, in 1798, his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

> Godwin's Memoirs were so con troversial that he was forced to issue a second, revised edition in the same year. Southey wrote that he lacked "all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked," through disclosures about her father's violence, her romantic relationships and the gynecological details of her death (…) Godwin's frank portrayal (…) has been blamed for the subsequent disfiguration of her name. (Rajan 2000, 511)

That Mary is not mere fiction, but neither is she the only Mary. Mary is also the way in which she chose to present herself in her works, what she edited, or what she preferred not to include. These decisions are also part of Mary Wollstonecraft and constitute her. And they undoubtedly speak to us about our own narratives, our journeys, our hidden miseries, and our secrets that we hint at but do not share. Augustine had already identified in his *Confessions*, when traversing the palaces of his memory, that which one does not remember, that which is not shown, but which nonetheless constitutes us.

Lejeune argues that what sustains an autobiography has to do with a pact between author and reader that aims at the authenticity of the work; that is, it refers to the life of a real person from an alternate perspective. This pact stands before a notion of truth close to that of testimony and clearly rests on what Ricoeur calls attestation. The incorporation of the reader as a decisive moment in the very possibility of autobiography allows us to maintain the preeminence of the third person in the theory of narrative identity in the very capacity of the narrative to be erected as an auto-. Alterity appears once again in the interaction implied by the discursive practice itself with a third party who receives it as a testimony of existence. Now, a constitutive element of attestation is the unquenchable suspicion that there is no possible identification between the self recounted and its I: the self always exceeds. Thus, Wollstonecraft's testimony remains within the sphere of truth

as attestation, thanks to these traces of her experience that provide the emotional anchoring of the narrative.

In Letter IX, Mary concludes with a reflection on human happiness, debating whether it is to be associated with the brutality of a state as close as possible to the savage, founded on unconscious ignorance, or with the excitement of a mind devoted to the cultivation of the arts and sciences. She sets into play two valuations of nature: one positive, associated with the ingenuousness and simple beauty of the landscape with which human beings relate pragmatically; another negative, due to the scarcity of means of subsistence and the exhausting boredom of feelings produced by unblemished simplicity. She situates herself between the two, as she knows firsthand the limitations of both conceptions and stages: 'I bury myself in the woods, but find it necessary to emerge again, that I may not lose sight of the wisdom and virtue which exalts my nature' (2024, 206). Karen Hurst maintains that the reference to landscapes is a strategy to address a traditional identification —which Wollstonecraft finds problematic— between the feminine and nature. She positions herself equidistant from nature as a chaotic and alienating force to be mastered, and nature as the transcendence of a literary beauty to be contemplated.

> Wollstonecraft affirms her own power as a part of nature, offering an alternative to her society's containment of the feminine by writing into creation a landscape that rings not with fears of feminine chaos, and not with a hollow silence, but with the strong voices of mother and daughter. (Hust 1996, 498)

Beyond the enormous burden and responsibility that motherhood entails, as attested by her private letters, Wollstonecraft chooses, in her daydreams inspired by landscapes, to present herself as a mother who reads in her daughter the possibility of inhabiting the world outside the false dichotomy of civilization and savagery, of good nature and bad nature. In the narrative, therefore, there is not only the attestation of one's own existence, but also the affirmation of the capacity to imagine a new relationship between the feminine and nature. In a constant interweaving of thought and experience, 'the laws of nature as she felt them —equality,

perfectibility— can eventually influence society' (Hust 1996, 498). In this sense, Fanny's footprints in the sand, to which we have already referred, are a new hope, the possibility of a future that counters the hopeless present. While Todd interprets that what we obtain in the *Letters* are outbursts of the prototypical sentimental mother of fiction, we believe that the author allows herself to experiment with her experiences and to prioritise the closure into which this journey and this book converge, leaning enthusiastically toward the future. Literature, as Ricoeur tells us, is a laboratory of imaginative variations for the reading self, but it is also so for the writing self—not only in the case of fiction, in which the variations are more obvious, but also when we reinterpret, recut, re-signify, and refigure our own experience. Writing is also the occasion to recount once more and to give new meaning to what has been lived.

> When we 'write self', however we do it… we track the elusive and shifting traces of the person who bears our name. The *self* part and the *writing* part are inextricably bound together, for when it comes to self, we cannot help but make what we say we find. (Eakin 2020, 108)

Thus, Wollstonecraft not only inscribes herself in time, but also projects herself toward a future in which she attests to her condition as a capable being, and constructs herself through narrative.

## 3. Conclusion

As has been shown, the *Letters* allow for a hermeneutic analysis in which self-narration is not merely an act of memory, but a constant refiguration that gradually reveals a complex identity—both personal and cultural. It is a work in which Wollstonecraft takes on the task of inquiring into her identity, of knowing herself, and of recognising herself as capable of a construction that many never achieve: 'What a long time it requires to know ourselves; and yet almost every one has more of this knowledge than he is willing to own, even to himself' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 206). This is only a small sample of the potential of a Ricoeurian reading of the *Letters*. In the editing of her letters, Wollstonecraft finds both the register and the discursive genre that provide her with the

freedom and the structure necessary to express herself as faithfully as possible to her own self and to her concerns. From the perspective of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, we see how Wollstonecraft seeks to understand herself in relation both to her external world (the landscape, the people she meets) and to her own memories and past experiences, allowing her to narrate herself as a story. The *Letters* illustrate vividly how self-narrative is constructed and reconfigured in response to experiences and contexts, moving within the dialectic between idem-identity and ipse-identity — between the self as a stable subject and the self that changes and responds to events. Wollstonecraft wrote incessantly, often more concerned with expressing an inner reality than with the interests of her addressees. In her letters we can apprehend her thoughts, emotions, and sensations: 'She was concerned to get herself across to herself as well as to both private recipients and public readership, whatever the cost' (Todd 2002, 9). The letters are a space of communion with herself, in which Mary becomes a character of her own making and through which she can process her experiences, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. The kind of truth to which Wollstonecraft's epistolary writing is committed is that which arises from the narration of her own experience, and thus her writing is intensely personal and testimonial. *Letters*, 'unlike a diary or retrospective, they record not a finished ordered life but the dynamic process of living and experiencing, and inevitably they tell a tale no biography can truly match' (Todd 2002, 22). We do not seek to lose sight of the distanciation that ensures there is no primacy of the first person, as Ricoeur affirms, but rather to understand the unique contribution of each interpretation and narration.

Beyond the information Wollstonecraft seeks to conceal, her accounts bear witness to herself, affirm her existence, and demand *créance*. Ricoeur's notion of attestation is especially useful in grasping the claim to truth in a work like this. The narrative is sustained by first-hand testimony; an attestation which, through certain intimate details and personal information the author allows to emerge, affirms her experience as a warrant.

Likewise, the reading of the *Letters* gives us Wollstonecraft embodied in an emotional life within an exuberant nature. The author transfigures her emotion so as to enable the movement from the embodied to the abstract, from the body to consciousness, with the aim of producing an active reading experience that exposes the self to the text and invites a response—almost as if the text were asking about the possibility of a shared interpretation of a feeling. Wollstonecraft reflects on her emotions, personal challenges, and desires in the midst of solitude, conscious that her account has both a personal dimension and a performative one, seeking to have an impact beyond the text. As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that narrative identity is configured in the act of telling and reinterpreting one's own story, and the *Letters* illustrate how Wollstonecraft reconstructs her experiences not only to reflect on her past, but also to better understand her present and to project her capacities and possibilities into the future.

Above all, 'Throughout *Short Residence* the letter writer cycles back to the question that organizes her first reverie: is she a solitary traveler, "a particle broken off from the great mass of mankind," or "a part of the mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself?"' (Favret 2002, 225). Undoubtedly, these letters negotiate a balance between her singularity and exceptionality and her belonging to a collective she cannot entirely reject. The striking beauty of the Norwegian night landscapes becomes the stage for the enunciation of an active principle that keeps her from sleep. The sadness and nostalgia of her contextual assessment, the emotional agony of the suffering with which she lives, make her feel more alive than ever: 'I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not severe myself' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 177). In seeking herself in writing, Wollstonecraft does not encounter the limits of her identity, but rather the network of narratives from which she cannot detach herself and from which, she recognises, she draws a vital energy that gives her perspective and defines her.

**NOTES**

[1] From now on we will refer to it as *Letters*.

[2] The idea that 'language speaks being' is not a direct Aristotelian claim but a Heideggerian transformation of the classical tradition, particularly Aristotle's view of language as a system of signs representing thought and reality (*De Interpretatione*). Heidegger reconceives language as the site where being is disclosed, famously asserting that 'language is the house of being'. Ricoeur adopts and critically reworks this Heideggerian thesis in his own hermeneutic framework.

[3] According to Hurst (1996), Wollstonecraft agreed to undertake this expedition because she needed the money to become independent from Imlay. She is thus thought to have embarked on the journey with the idea of writing a popular book that would provide her with financial support. Hurst bases this view on Wollstonecraft's own Letter XIV. Here we follow Gordon's more recent account, which draws on letters discovered and published in 2005 as well as a broader range of secondary sources. This position coincides with Nyström's thesis, which remains the most widely accepted.

[4] Gordon (2016) recounts that, in her desperation, Mary even proposed to Imlay that they all live together —herself, Fanny, Imlay, and his new partner. The rejection of this proposal became a decisive moment that brought together a series of long-standing hardships: her mother's disdain, her father's alcoholism, the class prejudice and superficiality of her employers, the death of her closest friend Fanny Blood, the rejection by the artist Fuseli, the political failure of the French experiment, and the post-revolutionary Terror, among others.

[5] As Todd states 'she encoded much of the romance with Imlay into her final book, *Letters from Sweden*' (1998, 186), hinting that something was amiss romantically for the author. Perhaps one of the worst betrayals Godwin committed was to publish her private affairs posthumously, disregarding the fact that the text's contemporary interlocutors were in no position to read it hospitably—let alone in defense of independent women philosophers and writers.

[6] It is worth undertaking an analysis that links the personal to the collective in life writing, or autobiography, since the semantic surplus generated by the disjunction between the 'I' of the work and the 'I' of the author gestures toward the identity of a specific historical community.

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# La forme d'une vie. Nietzsche et la littérature

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**Abstract**
**The Shape of a Life: Nietzsche and Literature**

At the core of Nietzsche's philosophical quest lies the problem of truth. This problem, however, is extremely difficult. An insufficiently thorough reading of this work stops at the idea that truth is a value that opposes life. Nietzsche would thus be the father of twentieth-century philosophies of the irrational, in the wake of Klages. On the contrary, I try to show that a higher conception of truth as an opening to the World constitutes the heart of Nietzschean thought, as we find it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This forces us, so to speak, to consider in a new way the relationship between philosophy and literature and to think of truth from the point of view in which the latter now constitutes the source of the former. This thought does not turn its back on reason. It is that of another reason, which leaves the initiative to the image, to the metaphor, as it is highlighted in literature and poetry. Art, thus envisaged, is not an end in itself; through it human existence receives its own form.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, truth, life, individual existence, value, literature, poetry

## Introduction

Depuis quelque temps un spectre hante la philosophie : celui de sa disparition. A trop vouloir imiter les sciences, cette discipline s'enferme dans l'analyse de problèmes particuliers en risquant de perdre le contact avec l'existence humaine considérée comme un tout. Il se trouve que c'est « l'honnête homme » cultivé qu'elle abandonne ainsi, à moins de faire de la vulgarisation et de renoncer à sa mission : explorer les possibilités les plus hautes de l'existence humaine.

Dans cet article je propose, à travers l'étude de la compréhension nietzschéenne de la vérité, une voie pour sortir

de cette impasse. Faisant suite aux recherches les plus récentes sur les rapports entre la pensée de Nietzsche et la phénoménologie (Bertot et Leclercq 2019), ainsi qu'aux recherches plus anciennes sur le rapport de Nietzsche à l'art (Kemal, Gaskell, Conway 1998), je m'interroge sur la manière dont la poésie transforme l'être-au-monde de l'homme – l'ouverture de l'existence au monde comme un tout – et l'idée de la vérité elle-même. Cette étude ne se veut pas simplement un autre écrit *sur* Nietzsche, mais entend explorer *avec* Nietzsche l'idée de la primauté de la littérature et de la poésie lorsqu'on envisage la question existentielle du rapport au monde et à soi.

Pour ce faire, il convient, d'une part, de baliser le terrain en montrant comment ce philosophe rejette l'idée traditionnelle de la vérité pour faire place à l'idée de la vérité comme interprétation. D'autre part, cette conception se meut encore dans le sillage du concept bien qu'elle travaille contre le concept ; elle ne mène pas, comme le montre Fink dont je m'inspire sur ce point (Fink 1965, 75-149), aux profondeurs ultimes de la vie. C'est le langage poétique d'*Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, notamment dans la troisième partie de cette œuvre, qui ouvre le chemin de la pensée nouvelle : celle qui appartient à la poésie tout en demeurant philosophique. En marchant sur les pas de Nietzsche, nous découvrons un continent nouveau où la littérature n'est plus simplement objet de l'interrogation philosophique, comme dans l'esthétique traditionnelle, mais une « source du moi » (Taylor 1998) – et de la philosophie elle-même.

## 1. Le problème de la vérité

### 1.2. Expérience et vérité

La critique nietzschéenne de l'idée de vérité a reçu sa forme achevée dans la première partie de *Par-delà bien et mal*. C'est à la philosophie classique de Platon à Schopenhauer que Nietzsche s'en prend. L'insuffisance foncière de la tradition philosophique européenne consiste à avoir isolé le problème de la connaissance en le séparant du problème de l'homme, de l'existence humaine. La connaissance y est traitée comme quelque chose en soi, avec ses lois et ses exigences propres. La

philosophie elle-même tend à être une forme de discours fermé sur soi, dont l'instrument est la logique. Peut-on libérer la pensée de cette camisole de force ? Nietzsche pense que oui ; j'essaierai de montrer comment il s'y prend.

Je commencerai par contextualiser le problème. Au vingtième siècle, l'ontologie existentielle est tombée rapidement dans la sphère du concept, dont elle aurait dû desserrer l'emprise. Une forme plus subtile d'idéalisme remplace ses formes classiques, anciennes et modernes. La pensée engloutit pour ainsi dire l'être même de l'homme. « Pour Heidegger, seule la pensée agit. » (Haar 1983, 337). La philosophie semble se suffire à elle-même en se fermant au souffle qui vient d'un ailleurs. Elle devient pour finir théorie des *sciences,* humaines ou exactes : l'enfermement dans la sphère du savoir ne fait que se renforcer. La réalité est aussitôt réduite à ce que la pensée théorique peut en saisir.

Nietzsche nous aide à surmonter cette étroitesse du discours philosophique. La pensée peut s'ouvrir à l'ailleurs de l'*expérience*, de « l'expérience vécue » (GS, & 114). La tâche du philosophe est de revivre en lui-même les grandes expériences de l'humanité afin de les évaluer et, à travers les évaluations successives, d'aboutir à une évaluation intime, personnelle, qui soit une *affirmation de soi*. « Celui dont l'âme brûle d'avoir fait le tour de toutes les valeurs, de toutes les aspirations qui ont eu cours jusqu'ici, et longé toutes les côtes de cette idéale 'Méditerranée', celui qui, à partir des aventures de son expérience la plus propre, veut apprendre ce que ressent un conquérant et un explorateur de l'idéal, ou un artiste, un saint, un législateur, un sage, un savant, un homme pieux, un divin excentrique à l'ancienne mode : celui-là n'a besoin que d'une chose, mais essentielle, de la *grande santé*. » (EH PJBL Z, & 2) L'expérience la plus propre, à partir de laquelle l'homme pensant apprend à ressentir les valeurs qui lui sont d'abord étrangères, n'est pas le « toucher » de l'Un au fond de soi, mais la recherche passionnée elle-même : celle de la volonté (de puissance) d'un moi multiple qui tend à devenir toujours plus vaste, à embrasser toujours plus de choses afin de les dominer en soi. La connaissance est foncièrement critique : un dévoilement des erreurs incorporées dans les existences du

passé, par lequel le moi pensant s'éprouve pour les dépasser et affirmer sa puissance.

Le philosophe mène le combat pour la liquidation des traces du christianisme, tapies dans la conscience de l'homme européen du XIXème siècle. Il faut en finir avec la croyance en la dignité supérieure de l'homme posée comme un *a priori*. Réintroduire l'homme qui n'est rien que nature dans la nature d'où il vient, renoncer au privilège gnostique de l'Individu qui affirme son hétérogénéité pas rapport au monde, telle est la tâche de la philosophie de l'esprit libre, comme philosophie critique. « *Le nouveau sentiment fondamental : notre caractère définitivement éphémère.* – Autrefois on cherchait à se donner le sentiment de la majesté de l'homme en invoquant son origine divine : c'est devenu aujourd'hui une voie interdite, car sur le seuil se dresse le singe. [...] Si haut qu'ait pu se développer l'humanité – et peut-être se retrouvera-t-elle à la fin plus bas qu'au commencement ! – il n'y a plus d'accès pour elle à un ordre supérieur. » (EH  PJBL  Z, & 2)

L'homme    est    corps,    c'est-à-dire    multiplicité    de mouvements dans l'espace et de mouvements intérieurs, de désirs, de passions et d'instincts. Au-delà de cette immanence radicale du corps ne se trouve nulle étincelle divine, nulle transcendance. C'est ce que nous sommes en droit de nommer la finitude de l'homme. Cependant celui-ci peut se dépasser vers le surhomme. C'est dans l'avenir et non pas dans son passé que se situe la « vérité » de l'homme.

Si la route vers l'Un primordial est désormais barrée, l'existence finie ne devient pas pour autant l'objet d'un savoir positif. Nietzsche n'a jamais cru en la possibilité de saisir quelque vérité *première* que ce soit. Tout ce qui se situe dans l'homme et hors de lui est saisi à travers un processus d'interprétation infini, jamais directement. Il n'y a pas de terre promise d'une réalité immédiate, qui se situerait en deçà ou au-delà de l'interprétation. Tout ce qui se donne se donne sous forme de pensée ; *c'est comme pensée, à interpréter et à critiquer, que la réalité humaine se donne.* Cependant ce n'est pas la pensée qui est *visée*, mais la vie elle-même ; non pas « en soi », mais dans sa puissance ou sa faiblesse, telle que le penseur l'évalue.

Cela demeure vrai lorsque la réalité visée est la pensée de Nietzsche elle-même. Il ne faut pas la saisir comme un *en soi*, mais en l'évaluant et en opérant des choix, pour construire une problématique. Il vaut mieux penser *avec* Nietzsche plutôt que sur lui, pour construire son propre problème *à partir* de ses écrits. Sans laisser de côté ce que le philosophe a voulu dire, il faut savoir choisir dans cette œuvre foisonnante ce qui nourrit *notre* pensée. Dans les pages finales de son livre, Jaspers montre que Nietzsche ne voulait pas être lu autrement. Lorsqu'il semble se contredire ou se contredit effectivement, c'est pour se débarrasser du lecteur paresseux qui n'est pas en chemin vers lui-même, vers sa propre pensée. Jamais en repos, la pensée de Nietzsche nous apprend à nous mettre en chemin pour de bon : elle se veut éducatrice, comme l'était celle de Schopenhauer. « Parce que Nietzsche ne se simplifie pas à la considération [de sa pensée], parce qu'il est au contraire l'auto-décomposition qui ne construit aucun monde et ne laisse véritablement rien de subsistant ; – parce qu'il est la pure impulsion sans élaboration d'une forme à laquelle il serait possible de participer, il est une transformation qui s'impose à nous et que nous devons faire nôtre [...] Nietzsche devient éducateur. » (Jaspers 1950, 452). Tel est le sens de l'expérience chez Nietzsche : d'être toujours une expérience de pensée qui aspire à former une vie.

La vie ne peut être atteinte directement, mais par les mille détours d'une pensée qui pèse et évalue. La technique moderne sépare la vie d'elle-même, ainsi que le fait la pensée du concept, qui lui est toujours jointe. La pensée conceptuelle crée en même temps une *forme d'existence*, qu'il faut pouvoir dépasser. Nietzsche l'a montré dans la *Naissance de la tragédie,* sans avoir varié depuis sur ce point. Cette forme de pensée est le destin de l'homme européen, mieux, de l'homme planétaire, qui peine à atteindre une *autre* forme de pensée et de vie.

Mais celle-ci existe-t-elle ? Je montrerai que tel est le cas. Mais avant cela il convient de préciser qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un saut hors de la sphère du concept et de la logique, mais d'une déconstruction patiente de celle-ci, pièce par pièce.

## 1.2. Critique de la logique

Toute la philosophie européenne classique de Platon à Schopenhauer se déploie sous la domination de la logique. Certains philosophes croient pouvoir y échapper en découvrant le mystère de l'ineffable, de l'Un. Pour Nietzsche ces deux voies ne sont que les deux faces d'*une* médaille. C'est parce que le philosophe n'a pas encore appris à penser et à ressentir en (y) pensant son propre corps – la « grande raison » – comme à la fois un et multiple, infiniment complexe et profond, qu'il cherche une (illusoire) profondeur dans un ailleurs *transcendant*. C'est par le retour à soi, au soi du Corps, que la métaphysique et ses avatars, notamment le romantisme, peuvent être dépassés. Ce dépassement a lieu non pas en laissant-de-côté mais en intégrant l'exigence fondamentale de la métaphysique romantique : celle qui consiste à penser l'homme entier. C'est parce que le corps inclut l'âme qu'il peut être pensé comme le tout de l'homme. Mais cela n'est guère possible sans une critique de la logique et de la philosophie du concept.

C'est dans la première partie de *Par-delà bien et mal*, qui contient l'essentiel de la philosophie critique de Nietzsche, que l'on trouve certaines indications précieuses pour une critique de la logique. « La majeure partie de la pensée consciente doit être imputée aux activités instinctives, s'agit-il même de la pensée philosophique [...] La 'conscience' ne *s'oppose* jamais à l'instinct d'une manière décisive – pour l'essentiel, la pensée consciente est secrètement guidée par des instincts qui l'entraînent de force par des chemins déterminés. A l'arrière-plan aussi de toute la logique et de son apparente liberté de mouvement, se dressent des évaluations, ou pour parler plus clairement, des exigences physiologiques qui visent à conserver un certain mode de vie. » (PBM, & 3). C'est à bon droit que Nietzsche souligne le mot « s'oppose ». Dans une inspiration que l'on pourrait qualifier de hegelienne, cette philosophie s'emploie à dénoncer les fausses oppositions du rationalisme moderne. L'opposition principale, instaurée par Descartes, est celle dont se nourrissent le kantisme et ses vagues successives y compris les plus récentes : celle de la conscience comme lieu de la raison et du reste de la réalité réduite au statut d'*objet* de la connaissance. C'est à partir de cette opposition que les théories

modernes de la connaissance sont possibles. La connaissance sous l'emprise de la logique construit sa toile de concepts en s'emparant de ce qu'elle nomme le réel. Nietzsche dénonce fortement cette illusion. La réalité n'est pas celle de la connaissance, des Idées, comme le veut l'idéalisme ; elle n'est pas plus celle de la matière préexistant à toutes choses, comme le veut le matérialisme. Elle est celle des *corps*, qui sont essentiellement des corps-volontés, mieux, des corps habités par des instincts ou des « exigences physiologiques » : « A supposer que rien ne nous soit 'donné' comme réel sauf notre monde d'appétits et de passions, que nous ne puissions descendre ni monter vers aucune autre 'réalité' que celle de nos instincts – car la pensée n'est que le rapport mutuel de ces instincts [...] Le monde vu de l'intérieur, le monde défini et désigné par son 'caractère intelligible' serait ainsi 'volonté de puissance' et rien d'autre. » (PBM, & 36). Cette réalité intérieure n'est pas un *en soi* indépendant de la pensée ; c'est dans le conflit des pensées et des interprétations qu'elle se donne à chaque fois. Mais à travers les pensées des autres, qui manifestent des instincts différents et opposés, c'est à nos propres instincts, à notre corps, qu'il nous est donné de revenir. Ce corps peut devenir lui-même une espèce de « corps glorieux » par la voie de la création. Avant de montrer cela il faut nous libérer de la tyrannie de la logique. La lecture de Nietzsche nous aide à accomplir effectivement ce travail sur et pour nous-mêmes.

La logique comme « science » présuppose l'idée d'une pensée indépendante du corps dont on prétend étudier les lois. Cette idée est erronée dans la mesure où la pensée n'est pas indépendante du corps, mais plutôt sa manifestation ; elle est une part de son agir. Mais la logique poursuit son chemin : elle saisit le monde dans la perspective de la connaissance. « Le monde de notre expérience est un monde exclusivement qualitatif, par conséquent la logique et la logique appliquée (comme la mathématique) font partie des artifices de la puissance organisatrice, dominatrice, simplificatrice, réductrice qui s'appelle la vie, et qu'elles [sont] donc quelque chose de pratique et d'utile, à savoir de favorable à la survie, mais [sont], de ce fait, aussi éloignées que possible de quelque chose de

'vrai'. » (FP 1886 - 1887, 6 [14]). Cela nous ramène au problème de la vérité. Celle de la vie qui se déploie dans le monde comme puissance organisatrice et simplificatrice. La logique est son instrument principal. Elle est ce par quoi la vie humaine simplifie le monde qu'elle veut dominer, en tant que *vie collective*.

### 1.3. La vérité comme interprétation

*Le premier sens* de la vérité est celui dont je viens de parler. C'est la vérité au sens ordinaire, celle du sens commun, par laquelle nous vivons dans le monde. Nous posons telle idée, principe ou croyance comme étant « vraie » et nous constatons que « ça fonctionne ». La vérité devient celle du discours, et elle s'appuie sur la logique. Un discours, notamment philosophique, a beau être très élaboré ; il n'est pas pour autant à l'abri d'une croyance qui simplifie le monde pour le rendre maniable et homogène au concept. La vérité n'est ici qu'une forme d'erreur, la plus commune. Elle se maintient par sa nature pratique, par sa capacité de s'imposer dans le monde social, soit comme idéologie dominante, soit comme mode intellectuelle. « L'intellectuel » est particulièrement attaché à cette forme de vérité. Enfermé dans ses croyances, il possède l'art de les faire passer pour des vérités de la raison. *Sa* raison devient « la raison ». Comme tout le monde y croit ou presque, il jouit de son pouvoir. « Le fait que nous ne disposons d'aucun organe propre à la *connaissance*, à la 'vérité' : nous ne 'savons' (ou croyons ou imaginons) qu'autant que cela peut être *utile* à l'intérêt du troupeau humain, de l'espèce. » (GS, & 354).

*Le second sens* de la vérité est la vérité-*interprétation* du monde. Celle-ci se comprend comme telle, et elle rejette les interprétations du monde dominées par un dogmatisme étroit. Le philosophe « perspectiviste » ne cherche pas à s'y opposer, mais à les englober. Une interprétation du monde « vraie » est celle qui épouse des points de vue différents en se les assimilant. Nietzsche réfute notamment le positivisme. « Contre le positivisme, qui en reste au phénomène, 'il n'y a que des faits', j'objecterais : non, justement il n'y a pas de faits, seulement des interprétations. Nous ne pouvons constater aucun *factum* 'en soi' : peut-être est-ce un non-sens de vouloir ce

genre de choses. [...] Dans la mesure exacte où le mot 'connaissance' possède un sens, le monde est connaissable : mais il est *interprétable* autrement, il n'a pas un sens par-derrière soi, mais d'innombrables sens : 'perspectivisme'. » (FP 1885-1887, 7[60]). Tel est le côté pratique de toute (grande) philosophie, qui nous aide *à vivre*. C'est le sentiment de puissance du penseur, philosophe ou écrivain, qui est en jeu. Le pensée s'approprie les « innombrables sens » du monde et de la vie humaine. Ceux-ci se cristallisent dans les modes d'existence de « l'homme supérieur », tels qu'ils apparaissent dans le dernier livre d'*Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*. Le philosophe-écrivain les comprend en comprenant la possibilité de leur *dépassement*. Il n'est pas en possession d'un sens supérieur du monde, qui n'existe pas, mais se nourrit de l'approfondissement des possibilités de l'existence humaine : des voies de celle-ci, des réalités psychiques qui la dominent, des conceptions qui l'éclairent, ainsi que de ses valeurs. Cette recherche ininterrompue est bien un mode d'*être* dans la vérité comme ouverture aux manières de vivre et aux « mondes » qui leur correspondent.

Lorsque Nietzsche critique le parti pris de la vérité dans la philosophie européenne, c'est à la vérité comme une forme de *repos* qu'il s'en prend. Tous les philosophes pensent en effet avoir *trouvé* la vérité. Cela est particulièrement valable pour le maître de Nietzsche Schopenhauer. Au contraire, ce dont il s'agit, c'est d'avoir conscience que je suis, moi qui pense et interprète le monde, toujours en chemin. Ce dont je parle en ce moment est *un aspect* du réel, non pas le tout ; bientôt je penserai un autre aspect, et ainsi de suite. Toute thèse « absolue », y compris celle de la vie et du monde comme « volonté de puissance », est elle-même une hypothèse (cf. PBM, & 36) qui relance l'interprétation. Les termes « volonté » et « puissance » ne sont pas clairs si on les considère en eux-mêmes. Si on les saisit dans leur rapport mutuel, il s'agit de savoir comment ils se rapportent l'un à l'autre : la puissance est-elle un *but* de la volonté ou est-elle présente à chaque instant *dans* la volonté ? Quoi qu'il en soit, l'existence est toujours prise dans le *mouvement* de l'interprétation de soi et du monde, un peu comme chez Montaigne, un écrivain que

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Nietzsche affectionnait particulièrement. Ce mouvement est, dans sa totalité, une manière d'être dans la vérité dont je participe dans la mesure où je pense vraiment, en cet instant où j'exprime cette idée. Expression qui implique à chaque fois mon refus d'adhérer à une idée donnée ou un ensemble d'idées, les miennes ou celles des autres. La pensée épouse ici et maintenant le rythme de la vie. Elle ne se détache jamais d'elle. Et la vie non plus ne se sépare pas d'elle-même en se tournant vers des représentations séparées pour devenir étrangère à elle-même. La tâche du penseur consiste à *freiner* la pensée pour ne pas la laisser se détacher de la vie. La pensée travaille à l'intérieur de la vie qu'elle approfondit. La vie s'éprouve elle-même en exerçant sa puissance dans l'exercice de la pensée. La vie de l'homme n'est plus traversée par des forces qui lui demeurent étrangères, mais elle reçoit *une forme* en se confrontant à ces forces et en se les assimilant. C'est ainsi que s'exerce la volonté de puissance du penseur : en créant une nouvelle méthode (un chemin) pour penser en tant que *philosophe* la vérité de la vie.

Nietzsche pose de manière radicale le problème de la vérité ; je viens de montrer comment il le fait. Cependant Nietzsche est en même temps un grand écrivain qui exprime la vérité de sa vie particulière. C'est le sens le plus haut de la vérité humaine qui est ainsi révélé.

## 2. La vérité de « ma » vie et la littérature

Le *troisième sens* de la vérité est celui dont je parlerai dans la dernière partie de cette étude. Il s'agit de la vérité non plus de la vie de tout un chacun, mais de cette vie particulière, celle de Friedrich Nietzsche. Par son regard jeté sur l'ensemble de sa vie, notamment dans *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche atteint le cœur de l'existence, de la sienne et de la nôtre. Il nous révèle le mystère dont se nourrissent certains écrivains : c'est en parlant de soi, de son soi intime, que le penseur atteint l'universel le plus *profond*. Cependant le soi ou le moi essentiel n'est pas une substance donnée à laquelle viendrait s'ajouter les « accidents », les petits événements qui traversent une vie, mais *le mouvement même* de celle-ci qui se confond avec celui de la pensée, telle qu'elle s'exprime dans les écrits du philosophe.

Nietzsche n'a pas eu le temps d'écrire, comme Goethe ou Jung, « Ma vie » ; mais il nous a laissé une esquisse de ce qu'aurait pu être ce livre dans *Ecce homo*. Il nous a surtout fait don des quelques chapitres de *Zarathoustra* qui sont son « produire » (*poiein*) suprême.

La vie particulière (saisie dans son essence) d'un penseur ou d'un écrivain n'est pas sa « vie brute », mais précisément son chemin de pensée, inséparable de son « œuvre ». Comme le dit fort bien Nehamas : « C'est seulement la 'Biographie' qui surgit à travers les œuvres de Nietzsche qui nous importe vraiment, et non pas la « vie » à partir de laquelle naît celle-là » (Nehamas 1996, 275). Autrement dit, c'est le meilleur d'une vie qui compte et qui demeure : l'activité créatrice, la pointe où la vie se révèle pleinement à elle-même dans son pouvoir suprême. En ce sens Nietzsche est bien un fils des premiers romantiques allemands (Béland 2019, 338).

Le sous-titre du livre de Nehamas est « La vie comme littérature ». Un demi-siècle plus tôt, Jaspers avait attiré l'attention sur ce point. Vers la fin de son livre monumental cité plus haut il écrit : « Il nous faut maintenant saisir la vérité de Nietzsche dans la totalité de son existence. [...] La pensée de Nietzsche est pour une grande part auto-compréhension, se réalisant dans des contenus particuliers qu'il comprend cependant grâce à sa position dans le tout. Déjà jeune, il écrit : '*Je cherche l'endroit où ma misère est quelque chose d'universel, ce qui conduit à un devenir personnel*' (à Rhode, mai 1874). Plus tard, il écrit : '*A chaque instant je suis dominé par la pensée que mon histoire n'est pas seulement une histoire personnelle, que je fais quelque chose pour beaucoup, lorsque je vis ainsi et me forme et me dessine*'. Aussi l'auto-compréhension que Nietzsche a de lui-même est liée à sa pensée, non comme une compréhension qui en vient mais la produit. Elle est quelque chose d'essentiel, en sorte qu'elle porte l'unité interne du tout. » (Jaspers 1950, 381.386). En déconstruisant la pensée européenne qui l'habite, Nietzsche libère son moi le plus profond où l'attendent les images fondamentales qui surgissent dans sa pensée et sous sa plume. Mais avant d'en venir là, il convient de souligner la conscience de soi du philosophe-écrivain, soucieux d'enraciner sa pensée dans le sol fertile de sa

vie, et de montrer ces racines. « La liberté de tout *ressentiment*, les lumières sur la nature du *ressentiment* – qui sait si en fin de compte ce n'est pas à ma longue maladie que j'en suis redevable ! Le problème est loin d'être simple : il faut l'avoir vécu à partir de la force et à partir de la faiblesse. [...] A qui voulait me déranger dans mon fatalisme, m'en éveiller de force, j'en voulais à mort ... – S'accepter soi-même comme un *fatum*, ne pas se vouloir 'autrement' – en de telles circonstances, c'est la *grande Raison* même. » (EH PJSS, & 6). L'auto-compréhension de Nietzsche constitue le fondement et le but ultime de sa philosophie : toutes ses idées en viennent et s'y rattachent dans la mesure où c'est la guérison, la « grande santé », qui est poursuivie. La grande Raison, celle qui mène le combat de la transvaluation des valeurs (cf. Z III, ANT), est ultimement la pleine acceptation de soi, c'est-à-dire de la souffrance et des bas-fonds de la vie. D'où l'intérêt de Nietzsche pour l'homme du sous-sol tel que l'imagine Dostoïevski. Le « non » jeté par celui-ci à la face du monde n'est pas une fuite hors de celui-ci, mais une dénonciation des fausses valeurs sur lesquelles il s'appuie – de sa *superficialité*. Même si le monde simplifié (cf. PBM, & 24) dans lequel il nous est donné de vivre est superficiel, l'expérience de l'homme du sous-sol ne saurait être ignorée. Il ne s'agit pas d'une fuite hors du monde ou de la découverte d'un prétendu « noyau » du moi qui serait hétérogène au monde, mais du choc entre le penseur solitaire et le monde *moderne*. Accepter la modernité et la dépasser du dedans : telle est la tâche de Nietzsche-Zarathoustra. Le premier pas est la critique de la logique, plus exactement le refus de ligoter la pensée dans la camisole de force des « lois » de la logique. La phase positive est la découverte de la profondeur du monde et le dire qui y correspond. Le moi de la grande Raison, celle de l'acceptation plénière de soi, fait l'expérience de l'ouverture au Monde qui embrasse les « mondes » historiques particuliers. Cette expérience est exprimée dans le troisième livre d'*Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, dont Fink a montré qu'il contient la véritable philosophie positive de Nietzsche, celle de l'homme tragique, de l'affirmation dionysiaque de l'être-au-monde.

L'ouverture au Monde cosmique a lieu dans le langage imagé et en lui seulement. Nietzsche nous parle de sa vie et en même temps de son *expérience* ultime. « Le concept de révélation, si l'on entend par là que tout à coup, avec une sûreté et une finesse indicibles, quelque chose devient *visible*, audible, quelque chose qui vous ébranle au plus profond de vous-même, vous bouleverse, ce concept décrit tout simplement un état de fait. [...] Tout se passe en l'absence de toute volonté délibérée, mais comme dans un tourbillon de sentiments de liberté, d'indétermination, de puissance, de divinité… Le plus remarquable est le caractère involontaire de l'image, de la métaphore [...] Tout se présente comme l'expression la plus immédiate, la plus juste, la plus simple. Il semble, pour rappeler un mot de Zarathoustra, que les choses viennent s'offrir d'elles-mêmes pour servir d'images. [...] *'Tout être veut ici devenir parole ; tout devenir veut, ici, apprendre de toi à parler.'* Telle est mon expérience de l'inspiration. » (EH PJBL Z, & 3). Lorsque toute chose réelle devient parole et image, le monde lui-même perd sa lourdeur et son épaisseur : il se révèle dans sa profondeur à l'être qui sent, imagine et parle. Il s'agit de l'ouverture ontologique du monde à la faveur de cette expérience bouleversante, de ce « tourbillon de sentiments » qui atteint le fond de l'être. Mais cette expérience n'est pas muette. Elle ne vise pas l'Un mystérieux, indicible dont la *Naissance de la tragédie* pouvait encore parler, mais elle se révèle *immédiatement* dans le langage imagé – les poèmes en prose de la troisième partie du *Zarathoustra*. Ainsi la création littéraire devient l'acte le plus élevé du philosopher de Nietzsche : un lien nouveau de la philosophie et de la poésie se trouve ainsi fondé. La philosophie ne renonce pas à sa nature propre, mais se transforme en s'appuyant sur cette possibilité essentielle : sa relation à la littérature.

La philosophie grecque a créé *le* concept, c'est-à-dire un penser qui travaille dans le milieu du concept, et où l'image vient lui prêter parfois secours. Platon a parfaitement compris les limites de cette sorte de pensée ; c'est pourquoi il a recours au mythe, à un penser *dans* l'image, pour exprimer ses vérités les plus hautes. Ce geste est sans lendemain : Aristote l'interrompt brutalement ; d'Aristote à Heidegger et au-delà

c'est bien dans le milieu de concept que se joue le jeu de la pensée philosophique européenne. Une pensée méta-conceptuelle fait ici et là son apparition dans les marges de la philosophie, nullement en son centre. Cela est dû à l'idée que les philosophes se font de la vérité. La vérité est universelle, valable de droit pour tous. C'est avec *cette* idée de la vérité que Nietzsche veut en finir. Il en fait la critique dans tous ses écrits, publiés ou non. Il montre ensuite que la vérité du penseur qui interprète le monde est liée à la volonté de puissance, la non-vérité étant l'un de ses ingrédients : les vérités sont créées par ceux qui proposent de nouvelles tables de valeurs, et parfois les imposent. Les fondateurs des religions, les philosophes, les savants, les hommes d'état travaillent en ce sens.

Mais il y a une vérité plus haute, celle du penseur qui crée en disant « je ». Ce *je* prend un autre sens que celui habituel : il n'est plus mêlé à un *nous*. La vérité créée est pour lui, elle est celle de sa propre vie. Il crée aussi pour les autres, mais indirectement. En aucun cas pour tous ; une vérité destinée à tous est vulgaire. Cette vérité intime de l'écrivain je sens qu'elle est la mienne. D'autres sentent et savent cela, eux aussi. Mais le philosophe qui crée sa vérité intime n'est pas devenu un autre : il n'oublie pas ses recherches précédentes. C'est avec les mêmes questions dans l'âme qu'il appelle l'image révélatrice et se livre à elle. La première question philosophique (et déjà phénoménologique) est celle qui concerne l'essence du monde. C'est le monde comme tel, et non pas un monde historique, qui se montre au philosophe-écrivain.

Eugen Fink a mis le doigt sur la manière dont le monde comme un tout se montre dans les poèmes d'*Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*. Pour ma part, en m'appuyant sur l'interprétation de ce philosophe, j'aborderai un autre aspect de la pensée de Nietzsche : celui du rapport de la philosophie à la parole poétique.

Le combat de Nietzsche est celui des valeurs suprêmes que le philosophe s'emploie à créer contre la tradition dominante en Europe, elle-même dominée par le platonisme, le christianisme et la science moderne. Les valeurs sont toujours et essentiellement opposées les unes aux autres. Mais l'instant où le monde comme un tout se révèle à l'âme de Zarathoustra

est-il encore celui où une valeur est créée ? Tel n'est peut-être pas le cas ; car le monde *comme tout* contient toutes les valeurs, et il les précède. Sa dignité ontologique est plus haute. Il se révèle à « l'enfant » et non pas au « lion », dont chaque *pour* est en même temps un *contre* (cf. Z I, TM). Telle est également l'interprétation proposée par Fink à la fin de son livre sur Nietzsche. L'homme est ici conçu « à partir de son ouverture extatique au monde agissant » (Fink 1965, 240), ouverture qui constitue le fond même de la vie. Or, si « toutes les valeurs sont *dans* la vie, *dans* le monde, la vie elle-même, le monde n'a pas de valeur. Cela signifie qu'on ne peut pas les évaluer. Car ils sont le tout, *dans lequel* toute estimation se tient et se joue. [...] Le fait d'avoir de la valeur, c'est la détermination fondamentale que Nietzsche donne à l'être de l'étant fini ; mais l'absence de valeur est la détermination fondamentale de la totalité de l'être, c'est-à-dire de la totalité du devenir » (Fink 1965, 237-238, s. par F.). A l'être du monde qui englobe les valeurs répond l'être de l'homme qui s'ouvre au monde ; il n'a pas de valeur et n'est déterminé par aucune d'elles. C'est l'expérience de l'ouverture au monde qu'il convient de décrire.

Le symbolisme central de l'œuvre-maîtresse de Nietzsche est celui de l'ascension. Zarathoustra habite dans la montagne, et il ne descend dans la plaine que pour parler aux hommes. Contrairement à tous les fondateurs de religions, il n'a pas de proches disciples ; ses seuls compagnons sont l'aigle et le serpent, symboles du regard lointain et de la sagesse de la terre. Cette pensée des hauteurs ne se détache de la terre que pour mieux y revenir : elle ne *flotte* pas dans l'air même si l'air est son élément ; elle est à la fois aérienne et enracinée dans le sol. Mais la vraie terre est le corps, c'est-à-dire les affects, les instincts et les sens. Le but du sage, selon le premier chapitre des *Paroles de Zarathoustra*, est de devenir enfant – mais qu'est-ce que l'enfant ? « L'enfant est innocence et oubli ; un nouveau commencement, un jeu, une roue qui suit son élan propre, un premier mouvement, une manière sacrée de dire oui. / Oui, au jeu de la création, mes frères – voilà qui requiert un dire-oui sacré : l'esprit veut désormais sa propre volonté ; celui qui est perdu au monde acquiert son propre monde. » (Z I, TM). On aurait besoin d'un livre pour commenter ce texte. Il vaut

mieux cependant ne pas le commenter, mais plutôt le lire et le relire pour saisir que ces mots – enfant, jeu, création, oui sacré, volonté, monde – sont l'explosion d'un même sentir, à la faveur duquel s'ouvre précisément le monde. Car le propre monde du philosophe-prophète est bien *le* monde, et non pas l'un des mondes particuliers dans lesquels vivent les hommes de la vallée. Mais cette révélation dépend d'une *volonté*, dans laquelle se concentrent les énergies du futur surhomme. La transformation de l'homme n'est pas l'œuvre d'une grâce divine ; il n'y a pas de chemin de Damas. Elle est l'œuvre d'un vouloir, du vouloir le plus constant, le plus suivi ; un vouloir qui sait rester fidèle à lui-même, concentré en lui-même, ouvert au monde et revenant à lui-même, dans sa propre *immanence*. Cette sagesse de l'immanence n'est pas si éloignée, me semble-t-il, de certaines sagesses orientales, du bouddhisme notamment. (Nietzsche tend à confondre le bouddhisme authentique qu'il connaissait de seconde main avec sa variante édulcorée européenne, celle de Schopenhauer notamment ; et il ne connaissait probablement pas le bouddhisme zen).

Mais qu'est-ce que le vouloir ? Disons d'abord que ce vouloir est essentiellement créateur. Dans le quatrième livre du *Gai savoir*, qui précède de peu le début de la rédaction *d'Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra,* Nietzsche dit : « Mon ambition est bien plus grande, et je ne suis point un chercheur. Ce que je veux, c'est me créer un soleil personnel. » (GS, & 320). Telle est la fine pointe de la volonté. Mais quelle en est la matière ? La réponse la plus convaincante du philosophe semble être celle-ci. « Il faut donc tenir un sentiment ou mieux un agrégat de sentiments pour une composante de la volonté ; mais, en second lieu aussi, la pensée : car tout acte de volonté recèle une pensée qui le commande [...] Troisièmement, la volonté n'est pas seulement un amalgame de sentiment et de pensée, mais avant tout un mouvement *passionnel*, cette passion de commander dont il a déjà été question. » (PBM, & 19). Cet acte de commander peut s'exercer dans plusieurs directions. Dans le *Zarathoustra*, les passions sont hiérarchisées en vue d'*un* but : la transformation du « chameau » (le savant) en « enfant », qui est le philosophe-poète auquel le monde se révèle dans l'instant du silence suprême.

Cet instant est celui où l'individu se retrouve lui-même, dans la solitude. « Il était seul et ne se rencontrait sans cesse que lui-même ; il jouissait de sa solitude qu'il savoura en pensant à de bonnes choses durant des heures. [...] En s'endormant, Zarathoustra dit en son cœur :  / Silence! Silence! Le monde ne vient-il pas de devenir parfait ? Que peut-il encore m'arriver ? [...] Comment ? Le monde ne vient-il pas de devenir parfait ? Rond et mûr ? » (Z IV, M). Ce monde devenu parfait est le Monde unique, qui est pour l'homme dont la vocation est d'être au monde : la mondanéité du monde comme disent les phénoménologues. Le monde qui vient à l'idée de celui qui *peut* être seul, dans l'écoute du silence. Au monde ainsi conçu et vécu, dans l'état poétique, il n'est guère possible d'ajouter quelque chose. Il est « rond » : une sphère qui se montre à l'homme entier, conscient-inconscient. Le monde « vu » et senti dans l'instant est indescriptible. C'est la poésie et elle seule qui nous en ouvre l'accès.

Pressentant les découvertes de la phénoménologie du vingtième siècle et les dépassant, Nietzsche s'interroge sur la manière dont le monde se révèle à l'homme. Mais qui est l'homme auquel le monde comme un tout se révèle ? Il n'est pas l'homme social, pris d'emblée dans les réseaux d'un monde particulier. Et tout aussi peu le philosophe qui prend du recul pour s'interroger sur « le monde de la vie » dans lequel vivent habituellement les hommes. Car le fait de comprendre une expérience étriquée ne nous fait pas avancer d'un pas. C'est à l'homme nouveau, en chemin vers ce que Nietzsche appelle le « surhomme », que le monde comme un tout est révélé. L'homme nouveau est d'abord celui qui a mobilisé tous ses pouvoirs, ses sens, ses pulsions, sa pensée et son imagination, et qui vit pour ainsi dire à la pointe de lui-même. L'homme qui *est* concentré en lui-même est en même temps ouvert au monde comme un tout, étant lui-même un tout. L'ouverture au Monde est un sentiment qui se traduit aussitôt dans l'image, dans une série d'images ; elle est de nature essentiellement poétique. Le poète s'ouvre au Monde et fait partager son *expérience* au lecteur. La philosophie vit elle-même de cette expérience, qui met en jeu l'homme total et le monde. Telle est la vocation de la philosophie chez Héraclite, dont la parenté avec le verbe

poétique a été étudiée (Ramnoux 1968). Nietzsche prend du recul par rapport au tournant logique de la philosophie occidentale qui s'amorce avec Socrate pour redécouvrir cette parenté. A l'homme ainsi tourné vers le monde et vers le ciel qui en est le meilleur symbole, se découvre la *profondeur* du monde. « Ô ciel au-dessus de moi, pur ! Profond ! Abîme lumineux ! En te contemplant, je tremble de désirs divins. / Me précipiter dans ta hauteur – telle est ma profondeur ! [...] Le monde est profond. – : et plus profond que l'a jamais imaginé le jour. » (Z III, ALS). Le jour est ici le symbole de la rationalité, dont le philosophe-poète perçoit les limites. Sous le ciel-monde chaque chose est rendue à elle-même, elle est pour elle-même dans son pur être-là, contingente, libérée du réseau des finalités où elle se trouve introduite par l'*Homo faber*. « 'Par accident' – c'est la plus ancienne noblesse du monde, je l'ai restituée à toutes choses, je les ai affranchies de la servitude des finalités. » (Z III, ALS). Chaque poète fait cela, mais Nietzsche est le premier penseur moderne à y voir l'une des tâches de la philosophie.

La philosophie a la *possibilité* d'appartenir à la parole poétique. Le penseur se livre lui-même à cette parole ; il n'est plus un penseur objectif, un savant, mais l'existant transformé par *cette* expérience. « *Voler*, c'est cela seulement que veut ma volonté tout entière, voler vers *toi* [ciel] et en toi ! » (Z III, ALS). Bachelard saisit parfaitement le sens de cette démarche lorsqu'il écrit : « Dans son accord avec les forces de retour cosmiques, il semble que le rêveur nietzschéen puisse dire à la nuit : 'Je vais faire lever le soleil. [...]'. Dès lors, la conscience de l'éternel retour est une conscience de la volonté projetée. C'est notre être qui se retrouve, qui revient à la même conscience, à la même certitude d'être une volonté, c'est notre être qui projette à nouveau le monde. » (Bachelard 1992, 202). Le sens phénoménologique du penser de Nietzsche est exprimé dans la dernière affirmation. L'être revient à lui-même et se retrouve lui-même dans la solitude. Il s'ouvre au monde dans la mesure où il projette le monde, se jette vers lui en se rendant libre pour lui. Ce monde est vaste ; il est *le* monde, parce qu'il est profond. Et la profondeur du monde se révèle au philosophe-poète à partir de l'atmosphère silencieuse dont il fait l'expérience, et

qui fait contraste avec le bruit de la grande ville. « Dans sa solitude des montagnes, Zarathoustra est maintenant entouré d'un grand 'bienheureux silence' ; dans ce silence palpite le monde. Mais en bas chez les hommes, habite le bruit, le bavardage des hommes, qui réduit à néant son propre objet ; ce bruit qui ne permet plus que s'épanouisse jamais le grand silence du monde, où une existence puisse se recueillir en vue de sa mission. [...] Zarathoustra a le regard nostalgique du lointain, le regard de la grande nostalgie qui s'élance vers le tout, qui cherche l'homme de la suprême ouverture au monde. » (Fink 1965, 118). Le grand silence du monde, tel qu'il est *vécu* par le penseur, est la condition existentielle de l'ouverture ontologique au monde.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Pour revenir à la question initiale, je me demande : dans quelle mesure cette expérience de l'ouverture au monde peut être considérée comme une expérience de la vérité ? Il convient de répondre prudemment à cette question. Il ne s'agit pas de la connaissance au sens habituel du terme, issue d'une démarche de la raison. Il ne s'agit pas non plus de la connaissance telle que l'envisage et l'approfondit Nietzsche dans ses livres purement théoriques, à commencer par *Humain trop humain* ; la connaissance en tant qu'interprétation du monde et de l'histoire y est une forme de la volonté de puissance inséparable de l'affirmation de *certaines valeurs aux dépens d'autres valeurs*. Dans le *Zarathoustra*, surgit une autre expérience, plus vaste et plus profonde : celle de l'ouverture au monde comme un tout, qui n'est pas lui-même une valeur, étant donné qu'il les englobe toutes. Cette ouverture est sans doute une forme de vérité : la vérité de la vie profonde. A la profondeur du monde correspond la profondeur de la vie, et inversement. Il s'agit d'une expérience hétérogène par rapport à l'expérience habituelle du monde. Selon celle-ci, « l'homme construit le reste du monde, c'est-à-dire le mesure à sa force, le palpe, lui donne forme. » (FP 1888, 14 [186]). Or « l'être-vrai », ajoute le philosophe dans le même passage, « inclut cette force qui met en perspective. » Mais l'agir de cette force est toujours partiel ; il s'oppose à d'autres forces qui déterminent *leur* vérité. Une

autre expérience, celle dont je parlais plus haut, est-elle possible ? La réponse est oui : c'est celle du silence. « Alors le silence se fit autour de moi, comme un silence redoublé. » (Z II, HPS). Ce silence est celui de l'être même, extérieur – « autour de moi » – et intérieur. Il naît de la rencontre du « rêve profond » et du réveil (cf. Z III, ACD). A l'instant du réveil l'homme sent que « le monde est profond ». Cette révélation est une joie, un « plaisir plus profond que la souffrance du cœur », qui « veut une profonde, profonde éternité ». Or ce vouloir, qui est à la fois, comme on l'a vu, sentiment et pensée, ne saurait être séparé de son objet. L'éternité désirée est déjà ressentie ; car l'homme ne saurait vouloir un infini dont il ne participe pas. S'agit-il encore d'une volonté « de puissance » ? Oui, sans doute, étant donné que la volonté de puissance constitue le fond de l'être – de l'homme et du monde lui-même. Mais cette puissance ou cette force n'agit plus *sur* quelque chose ; en termes aristotéliciens, elle n'est plus une cause efficiente. Elle est puissance de *révélation* du fond de l'être. « Debout, pensée abyssale, remonte de mes profondeurs ! [...] Sauve-moi ! Tu viens – je t'entends ! Mon abîme *parle* ; mon ultime profondeur, je l'ai déployée vers la lumière ! » (Z III, C). L'abîme n'est pas une substance, mais la source de toutes les forces, humaines et non-humaines. A l'ultime profondeur de l'homme répond la profondeur du monde. Et l'éternité est la profondeur des profondeurs, le trait d'union de la profondeur de l'homme et de la profondeur du monde.

### Remarque finale

Les idées exprimées plus haut n'ont aucun sens tant pour une pensée qui demeure enfermée dans les limites du concept, de la logique. Je me suis longuement arrêté sur la critique de la logique déployée par notre philosophe. La visée de cette critique est double. Elle montre d'une part que la raison n'est rien « en soi », mais qu'elle est enracinée dans l'être intérieur, dans la vie affective. Elle laisse place, d'autre part, à un autre langage, celui de la poésie. Les textes cités plus haut sont de la poésie, c'est-à-dire de la pensée en images. En elle « résonne l'homme tout entier, à tous ses degrés de profondeur – tout ce qu'il est, toute son existence. » (Reinhardt, 99). Mais la

pensée conceptuelle ignore l'homme total et de sa profondeur. La philosophie connaît celle-ci dans la mesure où la poésie lui ouvre la voie. Cette révélation, ce *parler* de l'abîme, est la plus haute forme de *vérité*.

La vérité littéraire est un parler de soi ; son noyau, la vérité poétique, est l'expression de la plus haute possibilité du moi sentant et pensant. Celui-ci se retire de la sphère nécessairement conflictuelle de la vie quotidienne pour rejoindre la profondeur ultime de son être, dans le silence où il entend sa parole. La pensée qui reconnaît la primauté de la poésie est à l'écoute de cette parole de vérité, par laquelle la vie reçoit sa forme propre : celle qu'elle *veut* avoir.

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**Autres abréviations**

Z I, TM : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* I : Des trois métamorphoses.

Z II, HPS : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* II : L'Heure la plus silencieuse.

Z III, ACD : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* III : L'Autre Chanson à danser.

Z III, ANT : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* III : Des anciennes et des nouvelles tables.

Z III, ALS : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* III : Avant le lever du soleil.

Z III, C : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* III : Le Convalescent.

Z IV, M : *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* IV : Midi.

EH PJSS :  *Ecce homo. Pourquoi je suis si sage.*

EH PJBL, Z : *Ecce homo. Pourquoi j'écris de si bons livres*, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra.*

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# Revisiting the Media Modalities Model: Critical Thoughts and Suggestions

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## Abstract

The intermedial field of inquiry studies the relations between media and human interaction with them in perception and communication. Elleström, with his media modalities model, demarcates the perception of media products according to four modalities (material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic), while fundamentally distinguishing between semiotic and pre-semiotic modalities. This article systematically addresses questions, aporias and potentialities emerging during intermedial analysis, as well as indicates basic critical intermedial areas that would benefit from further research and discussion. It revisits the semiotic/pre-semiotic distinction in light of an ecological-performative-phenomenological approach, by challenging the primordiality of materiality in the perception of media products, grounding spatiotemporality in the encounter between the perceiver and the media product and highlighting the making of senso-semiotic making of meaning on-the-go, in real-time. A subjective, embodied, performative perspective from within the dynamic field of the encounter between the perceiver and the media product is proposed, instead of the point of view of an objective observer located outside. The compulsive, obligatory "correct" meaning-making, that involves the coupling of objective entities or events with inner, subjective interpretations, gives way to a broader understanding of semiosis, where pre-interpreted, dynamic signs are abandoned for a dynamic and interactive semiotic functionality.

**Keywords:** intermediality, media modalities model, medium theory, ecology of perception, semiotics, cognition

## Prologue

Intermediality appears to be a relatively new field of inquiry, acknowledged by scholars as having sprung out roughly around the mid-1980s, when a group of German arts and media studies specialists-researchers coined the word

*Intermedialität* (Larrue, 2016)*,* and was more widely established by the 1990s (Elleström, 2010).[1] Intermediality's alleged theoretical roots include intermedia (Bennet, 1990), intersemiotic translation (Clüver, Eco, Schober and Queiroz, indicatively, all in López-Varela, 2023) as well as "aesthetics, philosophy, semiotics, comparative literature, media studies and interart studies" (Elleström, 2021, 9). Although intermediality may be considered as a rather novel field of inquiry, it carries on several discussions that are also explored in parallel by other fields and disciplines, such as semiotics, narratology, communication and media studies, media ecology, comparative literature, film and television studies, theatre and performance studies. But, intermedial theory, although in the early stages adopted "neohistorical analysis, iconography, semiotic analysis, ethnomethodology, poststructuralist, gender or postcolonial approaches" (López-Varela 2023), coined its own sub-fields of inquiry, problematics and methodologies. At the theoretical periphery of intermedial studies, several theoretical approaches and concepts were developed, such as Auslander's *mediatization* (1999), Bolter and Grusin's (2000) *remediation* (2000), and Jenkings' (2006) *media convergence*, which had a considerable impact on intermedial theory. Lately, new discussions emerged within intermedial studies, responding to synchronic discourses about the Anthropocene and ecocritism (Bruhn and Salmose, 2023), truthfulness in media (Schirrmacher and Mousavi, 2024), the digital turn[2] and established certainties (Timplalexi, 2023; Timplalexi and Führer, 2023). This polyphony and rhizomaticity of intermedial studies, in terms of theoretical origins, siblings and progeny, partly explains why there are multiple "intermedialities" (Clüver, 2007; Elleström, 2010; 2021; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kattenbelt, 2006; Rajewsky, 2002), to name but a few.

A set of robust, thoroughgoing and enduring intermedial voices comes from Lars Elleström and the IMS intermedial group in Sweden. Elleström demarcates intermediality in a broad sense as regarding "relations among (media products belonging to) dissimilar qualified media types" (Elleström, 2021, 72), while Bruhn and Schirrmacher (2022) situate under the intermedial umbrella the comparative interaction between

media types and products and the changes when there is a process of transportation from one media type to another (3), as well as "the ways in which objects and phenomena can function as media products" (9). In effect, members of the IMS intermedial group nowadays develop their own theoretical approaches within intermedial studies, while also enhancing the Elleströmian legacy. For Elleström has indeed proffered an inspired, rich and coherent intermedial theory and terminology (2010; 2021, plus multiple chapters and articles in journals), by developing intermedial classifications (i.e. basic or qualified media, media types, media products, technical medium of display), putting forward the media modalities model (2010; 2021) and the medium-centered model of communication (2018, 2021), while foregrounding medial transformative processes, such as transmediation.

Elleström's take on intermediality, especially through his media modalities model, notably aids the intermedialist tackle the demanding and multifaceted intermedial field of inquiry with a perspective of order and abstraction. The researcher, tormented for some time by various issues cropping up during attempts at juggling with theoretical and empirical aspects of the media, observes, dispersed in Elleström's *oeuvre,* slots for questioning and challenging certainties.[3] Elleström (2021) himself sporadically opens up discussions and relativises his positions, enhancing and nurturing such slots for potential re-evaluation.[4] These slots often feel like threads that, if picked up, could lead to discoveries of new intermedial territories, new alliances with other fields of inquiry and new methodological tools.

This article, a theoretical utterance emerging from a dialogue with Elleström's texts (that, despite their admirable coherence, are considered to be open to such a revisiting perspective), comes in the form of a self-reflexive essay, in response to the assumed potential of his media modalities model (2010; 2021). It aspires at summing up most of the ideas, challenges and suggestions the intermedialist notes down, while making use of it. Obstacles met and pitfalls observed during intermedial analysis are highlighted, echoing a deep need to clarify and possibly revise points in intermedial theory,

as Elleström (2021) had started doing, judging from his *virtual spheres* model (31), which was left under development.

As technological aspects of intermedial theory are not part of the problematic, thus not discussed here, an ecological (Gibson 1979/2015), embodied-performative (Schechner, 2002) and phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) approach is embraced, rather than a post-phenomenological one, at least as outlined by Ritter (2021); a starting point that supports that a media type or a media product becomes dynamically such through a perceiving process in relation to a perceiver, rather than existing as a thing-in-itself, in its own right.

## 1. The media modalities model: an introduction

The major axes Elleström's intermedial theory proposes when approaching media products (Elleström, 2021) are four modalities (46), as well as two qualifying aspects, the contextual and the operational ones (60). The modalities include the material modality, which encompasses different states of matter – liquid, gas, plasma, organic and inorganic matter (47); the spatiotemporal modality, "a four-dimensional spatiotemporal entity consisting of width, height, depth and time" (48). The sensorial properties of media products "must be perceived by one or more of our senses to reach the mind and trigger semiosis" (49). Since "all media products have semiotic traits, by definition" (49), the semiotic modality serves as a "frame for understanding representation" (ibid). The general purpose, use and function of media (60) is addressed through the operational aspect, whereas the demarcation of media in specific historical, cultural and social circumstances through the contextual one (ibid.).

## 2. The modalities revisited

Although appearing to be inspired by the ongoing phenomenal interaction between the perceiver and the media product in real-time, a closer, scrutinizing look at Elleström's media modalities model unveils a primal scientific adherence to an objective expert stance *outside* the field of interaction under observation. Despite indications this expert observer is

immersed in a first-person perspective, as with the "traditional sculpture" example (2010, 23), such an observer exercises and expresses certain degrees of knowledge *prior* to denoting the media product. By contrast, embodied cognition, said to be welcomed by Elleström (2021, 12), as situated within the dynamic field, would coherently instead propose a subjective perceiver's point of view as a starting point, understood as embedded within a larger whole. This subjective point of view, sporadically met in Elleström's writings (such as whenever he relativises suggestions that may sound dogmatic to the reader),[5] could be developed and enhanced with an ecological-performative-phenomenological approach to intermediality.

In this section, the media modalities are revisited and the interrelating dynamics between them are underlined, taking into account a few ignored and controversial points found available in the model.

## 3.1. Material modality

Elleström (2010, 15), remaining loyal to abstraction, although initially acknowledging that, for human beings, nothing exists outside perception, does not pursue this path in his analysis. By so doing, he misses the chance to question the pre-given character of materiality, exactly because he suggests a materiality known *prior* to sensoriality and semiosis. And this is a thread we are picking up here and now, questioning whether the "latent corporeal interface of the medium" (Elleström, 2010, 17) *exists* or *becomes* in the eyes of the perceiver.

Elleström's point of departure on media products is that the latter pre-exist our perception. This becomes evident by the very primordiality of the material modality in the media modalities model, instead of, for example, the sensorial one. However, when a perceiver, for example, experiences a surface, an object, a human figure (Elleström, 2010), organic or inorganic matter (Elleström, 2021), or the exact sound qualities that make them enjoy a Bach's fugue, they have to come to terms with various light levels and decibels: they may experience irritation from ambient light while seeing a painting in an exhibition hall or misophonia while deciphering a tune.

The material modality is thus revealed as primordial solely through the eyes of an omniscient observer, positioned outside the perceptual interaction dynamics, and not through those of one situated *within* the dynamic field.[6]

Indeed, the very perception and experience of any entity or event means some basic meaning-making is already at work. Elleström (2021) actually acknowledges this when distinguishing between the visual and the iconic (Elleström, 2021): "whereas the visual is about using a specific sense faculty (whether this is connected to iconic, indexical or symbolic signs), the iconic is semiosis based on similarity", he notes (45). Thus, it is the sensorial that grants "access" to the semiotic, while any understanding of the material is inscribed within the semiotic continuum. Otherwise, how can anything material be categorized as, for example, two-dimensional (2010) or organic (2021)? A certain level of meaning-making, involved in recognition is here implied that remains rather latent. The perception of an entity as a surface or a human figure, liquid or plasma, inorganic or organic matter, cannot be void of *semiosis* already. What is a surface or a three-dimensional object without basic geometrical knowledge, or, how may a sea rock covered with tiny micro-organisms be classified as purely organic or inorganic matter, especially as the element of carbon is met in both?[7] When encountering media products, are we not already in the domain of *semiosis*, for example, as soon as we recognise a statue as such? Several undecided or a failed automatic recognition moments of any entity or event in perception, or even moments of indeterminacy (Pepperell, 2006), outside individual or collective comfort zones, empirically testify that the primacy reserved to the material modality over the sensorial and the semiotic could freakingly creak.

In general, in terms of the material modality, it feels like the model is based on a gradual reveal of an alleged medial material essentiality, as if there is a painter that sketches actuality in layers. First appear to come the lines, straight, crooked or curved; shadows or lack of them reveal the three or two-dimensionality of an entity; its non-staticity may testify towards the shape of an animated human being, an animal or an insect. The organic and inorganic matter categories fill in

the gaps, whereas solid, liquid, plasma and gas states of matter complete the material mode. A short parenthesis: in the name of consistency in an intermedial analysis, it could be argued that colour and material should be part of the material modality too. Materials, on one hand, expand in a vast array, varying from wood, plastic and marble to nowadays fabricated nanomaterials. A mention to the notion of the material could be introduced in the material modality, without the obligation to list excessively potential materials. The second notion that does not reach the material modality at all is colour; when we see a line, and recognise an entity as two dimensional, for example, we automatically perceive it as black, grey or green. The material modality could benefit from including colour too, which, as far as we know, is a specific range of wavelengths within the rather narrow visible spectrum; light waves have, in fact, been included right from the start in the list of the material modality (2010). Hence, not only the primordiality, pre-sensoriality and pre-semioticity of materiality may be questioned, but also the category of the material modality appears to be selectively restricted, as it may encompass practically infinite aspects of matter not listed in the media modalities model.

Closing with the conundrums on the material modality, last but not least comes the problematic posed by the very listing of light waves and sound waves under the material modality. Elleström probably took into account the dual nature of the electron, when including light waves in the material modality. But the wave discreetness in the environment and the media product is relative. Light waves belonging to media products, such as those available to the perceiver from a film shown on a cinema screen are not perceptually distinguishable from those available in environments. In spite of a film emitting light waves, ambient light waves dynamically interact with the filmic ones and together create a unique enmeshed ensemble. The same goes for sound. When in a concert hall, one cannot separate the sound of touching a string from the melody produced. This signifies, in a nutshell, that the overall experiential outcome of an encounter with a light or sound-based media product cannot stand on its own *outside* the

dynamic field of experiencing environments and media products.

To recap, challenges in relation to the material modality encompass its alleged *primordiality*, *pre-sensoriality, pre-semioticity;* the implied *a priori* cognition of material states (solid, liquid, plasma, gas) and exact synthesis (organic, inorganic matter); the potential inclusion of several other qualities of matter under the material modality, such as material (stone, wood and plastic, for example) and colour; and finally, the alleged discreteness of light and sound waves of media products and their enmeshment with light and sound waves of their environments.

## 3.2. Spatiotemporal modality

When it comes to this modality, there are quite a few layers to be discussed. First of all, when Elleström describes the four dimensions of this modality, there are indications he assumes a generic, mathematical, abstract and objective space and time duality, pre-given and pre-semiotic in intermedial terms. This stance, already manifest in the subject/object divide occurring through the initial adoption of the objective observer's point of view, when taking the perceiver's biographical axis into account, rules out the crucial importance of the perceiver's space and time in their encounter with the media product, a factor to which we are coming back shortly. On a different tone, the ecological approach to perception, as proposed by Gibson (1979/2015), in combination with an embodied performative (Schechner, 2002) phenomenological approach inspired by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), would encourage intermedial theory to embrace the unfolding of various spatiotemporal multiplicities, instead of favouring generalised, established approaches to the spatiotemporal category. Integrating a degree of ecological, embodied-performative and phenomenological relativity would posit that different observers signify and perceive by default differently where and when entities are and events occur, due to the uniqueness of their sensorial and semiotic horizons, as well as their biographical points of departure. Here, even the "cosmic spatiotemporality" can be

seen inscribed within the trajectory of the virtual, enveloped in an ongoing semiotic process.

Moreover, although Elleström coins this modality as *spatiotemporal*, it is then conceptually further split in space and time, probably for the sake of analysis. Although space is acknowledged in its bidirectional dimensionality, time is acknowledged as unidirectional. Indeed, space is further analyzed in width, height and depth, whereas time is taken as a single and unique dimension (Elleström, 2021, 48), and not in relation to its compounds of past, present and future, as these nuances would belong to the human perceptual/cognitive sphere. However, this is a breach of the four-dimensional spatiotemporal continuum that has some considerable implications, not only due to subjective space and time not taken into account, but because even space and time in their alleged objective physical unity change. Otherwise, temporal changes do not have a "scene" to occur, nor spatial changes register, unless time passes and present becomes past.

In addition, when contemplating the material modality, although we are encouraged to tell surfaces from three-dimensional objects (2010), that is to understand materiality in relation to space, we are not encouraged to perform an analogous understanding of time. For example, material change, such as corrosion, relevant to media products, is related to time, not necessarily in a negative way; ancient Greek statues, for example, have been loved and strongly qualified as "classical", having lost their initial colours. Or antiques are relics of commodities of other eras.[8]

If we embraced an understanding of materiality in relation to time as well, perhaps space and time would stand more equal in intermedial analysis, as space would no longer enjoy a privileged position in intermedial modalities model analysis. Only if we apply this understanding of materiality bound to time and not just space, the latent and selective spatial staticity is revealed. It goes something like this: spatially speaking, at least two discrete spatial dimensions (i.e. height, width) prevail as a prerequisite for the manifestation of media products; on the other hand, the phenomenal absence of time, i.e. a blink of an eye in a film showing (Elleström, 2010;

2021), is said to determine time staticity or non-staticity.[9] The lack of at least two discrete spatial dimensions in media products is unthinkable, whereas the presence of time, in its totality, is alleged to be optional, since its presence or absence determines the staticity or non-staticity of a media product, such as a performance or a film. This approach is revealed as mostly conceptual, not fully empirically informed, and implies a certain degree of preference: if phenomenal time, and not conceptual, is taken into account, so as to determine a static from a non-static media product, why does not the phenomenal "shifting space" of a music tune or a dance render it non-static space-wise? Staticity, then, it becomes obvious, is not contemplated much in relation to spatial dynamics. Time is not the only dimension that determines staticity or impacts it, but staticity could signify relatively steady states in relation to space as well, such as those in effect for paintings or statues, whereas autonomous moving entities, i.e. humans, animals, or animated surfaces, objects, i.e. puppets, on the other, could be considered as spatially non-static. This is of major importance when contemplating, temporally speaking, non-static media types, such as clusters of media products from the performing arts, film, animation, video games or tv shows. This path of thought could return the sense of unity to the spacetime continuum, as well as provide a potential understanding of medial entities as spatiotemporally relatively static or non-static and events as non-static – until we realize, of course, that perceiving an entity is an event too and never static, as coming up next.

A rather obscure matter prevailing in the modalities analysis is *whose* or *what* space and time Elleström talks about: the space and time of the perceiver, of the media product or of their encounter? Elleström cannot be speaking about the perceiver's spatiotemporal dimensionality, because this is never static time-wise. Let us illustrate two examples. In the encounter between an individual perceiver and a statue, for example, the media modalities model would denote the statue as being a three-dimensional static inorganic medial entity. However, the performance of perceiving the statue is non-static, which, time-wise speaking, from the perceiver's point of view,

grants also non-staticity to the statue. This means that, even if a statue is *per se* static, neither the encounter with it is spatiotemporally static, nor its perceiver. If the case was a dance performance, it could share the notion of non-staticity with the perceiver's perceptual performance – but this non-staticity would not be identical, the same. Hence, the claim that a statue is a static media product clearly refers to a proclaimed ontological state of the media product, just as the blink of the eye does not stop physical time.[10]

Now, reaching another hot potato, so to say. Under the umbrella of the spatiotemporal modality come two subcategories, virtual space and time respectively. Virtual space is unpacked with reference to perspective (Elleström, 2010), grounded in the so-called representational spectrum. However, although virtual space may be intended through a painting, for example, it does not "occur" objectively *in* the painting; it is rather a product of cognitive construct. We may cognitively augment a square into a cube, without any special aesthetic representational trigger; architectural media products so often do this, they provide "simple" two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional spaces. Or, temporally speaking, in a film, we may see days and nights coming one after the other and even with gaps, not necessarily successively. This time is obviously subjectively constructed to formulate a temporal continuum. Hence, virtual space and time are cognitive and not objective representational products. The skull encrypted in *The Ambassadors* acts as a reminder of the subjective spatiotemporal construction of the real. This results in the inscription of the perceiver within the spatiotemporal continuum and renders relevant the initial attempt to involve the perceiver in intermedial spacetime. Plus, it reveals the hybrid modal nature of virtual space and time scattered between the semiotic and the spatiotemporal. This is why Elleström later (2021) rather referred to "cross-modal representations" within the semiotic framework (68), having also planted references to virtuality in his virtual spheres model (31), where such a mental sphere is created by communicative semiosis and consisting of cognitive import formed by represented objects (29).

This latter point made, leads to an overlap between envisioned spacetime triggered by visual representation and the dramatic/diegetic/fictional one. More specifically, dramatic time and space refer to dramatic texts and theatre performance, whereas diegetic time and space to literature and film, as all share the element of fiction.[11] In this case, the time and space proposed through the media product, such as a theatre performance, a film or a tv episode, could be claimed to be "virtual time and space" respectively, attributed meaning to in unique ways. These spacetimes "are" only metaphorically latent within the media product, but are given life to, animated only through cognitive augmentation, just as the experience of the skull in *The Ambassadors* showcases. Hence, the semiotic nature of such spacetimes becomes all the more clear.

To sum up, in this section, Elleström's abstract, objective, mathematical take on space and time was remarked. The split of spacetime and emergence of space privilege over time in intermedial analysis was underlined, especially in relation to staticity. Spacetime enmeshment between the perceiver and the perceived in their encounter was further highlighted. The performative, peripatetic, non-static experience of static media products was found to be of central importance as a basic correlation determining, from a first-person perspective, the experience of media products, acknowledging the perceiver's own spatiotemporal dimensionality, that of the media product, as well as of their interplay. In addition, consistent with Elleström's insistence on abstract concepts, the promising but unfortunately not fully explored aspects of virtual space and time were contemplated as semiotically augmented perceived/conceived materialities, rather than objective, materialized representational ensembles. Analogies were drawn between iconic virtual space and time and the diegetic/dramatic/fictional ones. As a result of the discussion, it prevails that any understanding of the cosmic spatiotemporal continuum, even if heralded as abstract and mathematical, is always inscribed in the interplay between the sensorial and the semiotic, as well as intertwined with the material, as a human-beings are also material entities. In

short, no pre-givens make sense beyond the horizon of subjective meaning-making.

### 3.3. Sensorial modality

In terms of the sensorial modality, Elleström (2021) sporadically refers to sensorial traits as being inherent in the media product (20), which sounds paradoxical, since senses are hardly conceived in relation to "things". He adheres to the distinction between *exteroception*, which includes five main sensorial modes (namely seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling), and "other human senses", such as "*interoception* (sensing the internal state of the body) and *proprioception* (sensing body position and self-movement)" (49). This means that the human interface, as such, is seen as a limit of some sort, providing a base for understanding what it means to be human *and not* the environment. This feels almost a natural categorization, which can be questioned, especially in light of the ecology of perception (Gibson, 1979/2015), new materialisms (Coole & Frost, 2010), post-human performativity (Barad, 2003) and ecomedia (Rust et al., 2016).[12] Since being-in-the-world is not merely a matter of agency, but also of affect, passive reception and suffering, we are inevitably *also,* inevitably, part of the environment. Bone aching reminds us sometimes how we resonate with levels of humidity in the atmosphere. Or, when at a wild party, we interoceptively echo loud music, with all our sensorial and material constituents mingling, we cannot tell our heartbeat from the tune rhythm. It prevails that the membrane separating us from our environment is porous and fragile, for "benefit or injury" (132), as Gibson (1979/2015) puts it. But also, psychologically speaking, human beings are part of the environment one for another, objectified through the gaze as a collective "not me", unless they attract this special mode of attention reserved to subjects. Hence, the distinction between exteroception and "other human senses" has only relative value.

There is another good reason for this. Semiosis has a strong interoceptive dimension that deserves further attention. What is semiosis if not interoceptively performed? As a sense, it refers to the sensing of "the internal state of the body". If thought and meaning making are overall considered to be

constructed and to remain within the aforementioned interface membrane of the subject,[13] the formulation of meaning-making becomes absolutely dependent on its perception, on the sense of interoception - not just exteroceptive senses reach available information. Although meaning-making appears to excessively involve outer data, it clearly also involves inner ones, like fantasies or scenarios. Hence, since interoception involves the sensorial perception of inner data, then it is this sense that gives access to meaning-making too. Intermedial theory does not in particular nurture this rationale. It acknowledges the existence of a perceived actual sphere which is "joined by mental introspection and semiosis" (31). This logic presupposes the objectivity of the perceived actual sphere, leading to an understanding of the sensorial modality as *pre-semiotic*. This certainty has been questioned (Timplalexi, 2023), claiming that meaning is processually produced during perception, while highlighting the latter's neglected semiotic dimension. Indeed, should sensoriality be considered as the ultimate condition for perception, and perception involves perceiving data outside-the-self, but also inside-the-self (the "other senses" also sensing data), then, the formation of "presentations", subjective impressions of unique assimilations of both inner and outer data, make us cognise materialities, spatiotemporalities and attribute meaning (Timplalexi and Führer, 2024). Carrying on the same key, it could be claimed that the sensorial modality is primal and the rest of the modalities are *post-sensorial*. However, that could underestimate semiosis during perception. Subjective impressions are feasible only through meaning-making, as cases of indeterminacy, illusions and affective moments of human life, outside comfort zones, often evoke.

In conclusion, with regards to the sensorial modality, issues with it being pre-semiotic have been touched upon and counter-argued. Interoception was found as potentially conceivable to bridge the sensorial and the semiotic and to frame the interplay, as well as foster the collision of inner and outer data in perception under the tab of "impressions", implying also the subjugation of the spatiotemporal and the material to the subjective senso-semiotic continuum.

### 3.4. Semiotic modality

Is there anything like an ideal objective perceiver, some sort of a prototype, who can sense the "real" for all of us? The uniqueness of human-beings has been widely recognised as a major criterion of humanness, despite challenges posed by materialism, new materialisms and post-human performativity. Yet, when we abstract by focusing on essential features, while omitting details or empirical instances, we tend to easily forget about the precondition of uniqueness, which both pre-requires subjectivity, as well as results in it. This technique of abstraction, as reduction of "unnecessary" elements, shapes the distinction between objective materiality and an implied subjective but "normal" sensoriality: it is not the senses that belong to perceivers but sensorial traits are said to belong to media products (Elleström, 2021, 20). Although reduction is indeed an option, some caution should be taken; instead, a truly subjective point of view would expand beyond such sensorial and semiotic "normalcies".

Indeed, while we partake in communities and the society, certain degrees of uniformity may appear to have occurred and keep on occurring, but, our assimilations (Piaget, 1951/1999) are unique, as our sensorialities and cognitive processes considerably differ. The fact that, through our cognitive development and education, a perceptual/semiotic comfort zone has been created, consisting of relatively unchallenged stable *schemata*, should not hinder the understanding of all perceived matter as subjectively perceived and signified, a fact that becomes evident under stress or unfamiliar circumstances. Equally, any materiality, and not just that of the especially designated media products, becomes a candidate for the potential triggering of meaning. Of course, objective, media products-related matter occupies a special place in social practices and is bound to aesthetic evaluation. But this does not exclude any form of matter being potentially perceived as a media product, from a work of art to a sunset on Santorini (Timplalexi and Führer, 2023). Accepting a difference between such objective/subjective media products, is individually, socially and spatiotemporally conditioned.

Intermedial analysis, and more specifically the media modalities model, does not highlight the unique assimilation of matter as a sensorial precondition, although, within the horizon of the sensorial, the importance of different sensorialities could be thought to hold some part, especially if sensorial traits were not outlined as innate to media products. More specifically, the role of the precondition of the subjective assimilation of matter in unique sensorial and cognitive ways is not addressed in the discussion of the semiotic in Elleström's model. This impacts the semiotic modality with the burden of a prototype for a correct and accurate passive reception of assumed features of pre-semiotic elements, a premise that so deeply contradicts active, fluid perception. Peirce himself must have struggled with the importance of change and movement, since he acknowledged sign chain processes being at work, but must have had difficulties in grounding the correlation between *being* and *becoming* in a subjective framework, as the overall semiotic fluidity and movement suggested is inscribed within an assumed "Firstness", a view that stabilizes becoming into existence.

Obviously, Elleström's semiotic modality is based on Peirce's version of imagination being discreet from reason. Although Peirce does use terms denoting "interiorising" processes, such as "'absorb it,' 'sleep over it,' 'assimilate it'" (Restrepo in Barrena, 2013), his "imagination" is capable of performing analysis rather synthesis, by separating "objective reality" from what appears to us; hence, his levels of separation include "dissociation", "prescision" and "distinction" (Barrena, 2013). However, by potentially performing these grades of separation, imagination becomes a tool to logic, rather than a matrix for it to evolve in a holistic embodied cognition perspective. In this way, a clear-cut distinction is established between the objective actual, "real", and the conceived, which stands in the way of acknowledging the real as conceived, constructed.

In effect, crucial to resolving the semiotic implications in the modalities model is the awareness of contradictions residing in Peirce's *oeuvre*, that intermedial theory has overall embraced. Peirce's semiotics are multifaceted; so many varying

elements co-exist in his overall theory (Nöth, 2011). In (just some of) Peirce's own words:

> A sign . . . [in the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce 1931–58, 2.228, qtd. in Chandler, 2007)

Peirce starts by introducing the initial sign with a certain relativity and vagueness (*something which stands to somebody for something)*. However, by then bringing in the interpretant (an *equivalent* or *more developed* sign) as situated *in the mind*, he performs a separation between the latter (the *interpretant*, a cognitive sign) and the initial sign. In search of the first sign's situatedness, the automatic assumption is that it has to reside in the actual world. Otherwise, Peirce would have specified that he had considered the initial sign as residing *in the mind* too. This topological differentiation between the sign and its interpretant, when established, consequently situates in different *topoi* the two signs. But, a pre-given, clear-cut distinction between "in" and "out" is not to be axiomatically accepted. Indeed, when Peirce supports that "the being of things" contains reason and logic (Pape, 2015, 1), it is logic enough to understand that he initially sees things as *being* and *discovered correctly*, rather than, right from the start, *becoming* in human cognition, just as his objective, dynamic objects inescapably cause universal and uniform sign-processes "that govern human conduct become effective" (Pape, 2015, 4).

Reacting to this universal and uniformal rationale of pre-givens, alternate voices in intermediality, taking into account performativity, memory and imagination (Timplalexi and Führer, 2024), argue that the initial sign, although not necessarily a conscious one, is cognitive too, and occurs on the same *topos* with its understanding – and any further chains of meaning-making. In this perspective, events and entities objectively situated in the actual world, outside the self, collide with subjective events, on the basis of their assimilation as a

subjective impression; no entities are listed here because imagining, remembering or coining a subjective entity is a cognitive performance, an event. A chair is never quite the same for each one of us, both due to sensorial differentiations as well as semiotic predispositions; the same is valid for a dream we dreamt – when we think about it, we construct our version of it.  Thus, since both the initial sign and the impression are cognitive in nature, there is no need for a topological distinction putting pressures, nor for the coupling between an objective and a subjective element. The compulsive, obligatory "correct" meaning-making that involves the coupling of objective entities or events with internal, subjective "representations" has been so far dominant in philosophy and communication theory (Timplalexi and Führer, 2023). In an ecological-performative-phenomenological approach to perception, this coupling between two cognitive subjective signs, also encompassing imaginary and mnemonic constructs, feels natural and logic – without an alleged necessity of a combination with an objective, actual entity or event. The formation/construction of the objective actual into a subjective process is based on the interplay between the sensorial and the semiotic.

Furthermore, Peirce soon compromises the relativity of his initial sign by stating that a sign *addresses somebody,* a notion grounded on a pre-existing outside, having to be assimilated passively, which makes this process sound even more inescapable, obligatory and universal. On one hand, the sign appears to have "agency" (*it addresses somebody and creates in their mind an equivalent or more developed sign*), instead of the perceiver actively constructing it (i.e. somebody focuses their cognitive attention on something). On the other hand, the initial sign is alleged to present overlaps with an actual object, and not with a primordial assimilation, which raises again issues with regards to "correct" couplings and interpretations; instead, the acknowledgment of this in-between senso-semiotic assimilative stage would allow in perception the very formation of impressions of entities and events.

Elleström (2021) clearly underlines the objective anchoring of the sign in reality pervading Peirce's semiotics. Indeed, just as matter *exists* and does not *become,* signs are

anchored in a universal Firstness and in pre-existing items in reality, that *have to* stand for objects and create in the mind interpretants. Peirce's Firstness comes in from an experiential void, as this abstraction cannot occur prior to experience; in order to abstractly distill, an experiential sum to perform the abstraction upon is required. How can we ground "redness" as a notion existing prior to experiencing red? Is there a human mind in the void, bare of experience and cognitive *schemata* determining what redness means to them? Besides, this whole logic totally contradicts the claim that signs are "dynamical functions established by relational constituents that exist only in interaction with each other" (Elleström, 2021, 21). An ecological-performative-phenomenological perspective would benefit the intermedial semiotic stance and allow a ray of variability and virtuality to enhance on to enhance its potential.

Let us now see in greater detail how Elleström accommodated the three Peircean sign constituents:

> In brief, Peirce held that signs, often called representamens, stand for objects—this relationship results in interpretants in the perceiver's mind: 'A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'. This means that the representamen stands for an object in some respects and thus 'creates in the mind of that person' an interpretant (Peirce 1932: CP2.228 [c.1897]). This entails that signs are not pre-existing static items, but rather dynamical functions established by relational constituents that exist only in interaction with each other. Signification is a mental process, although both representamens and objects may be connected to external elements or phenomena; however, the interpretant is entirely in the mind. (Elleström 2021, 21).

Elleström selected a different fragment from Peirce than the one we opted for earlier. In this fragment, what stands to somebody for something, in some respect or capacity, is no longer *just* the sign, but its synonymous term, *representamen*. Elleström's selection reveals that Peirce himself was trying to take into account subjectivity ("in the mind of *that* person" – emphasis added). But, although this is a start, Peirce's Firstness, as well as the split of the object into "dynamic", pre-interpreted and "immediate" (Hausman, 2006), interpreted, renders this impossible. Elleström's remark that signs are dynamical functions and not pre-existing static items,

established by relational constituents that exist only in interaction with each other, acts as one of those threads dispersed in his writings, as it reveals a different nuance of the term "dynamic". Peirce's dynamic object is assumed as pre-existing; Elleström's "dynamical function" is put forward as opposing pre-existence ("and *not* pre-existing static items" – emphasis added). May we add here, that, indeed, for this interaction to occur, it is the subjective impressions, assimilations of external elements or phenomena that are attributed meaning to, and not "objective" entities or events. Besides, to cognise anything as pre-interpreted means to have interpreted it as such.

Peirce also proposes the three modes of the sign, with his foundational trichotomy of the symbolic, the iconic and the indexical. Symbolic signs, such as language, are said to be highly conventional and arbitrary. Iconic ones, such as a painting, onomatopoeia or even metaphors (Chandler, 2007, 37) are said to evolve a certain degree of resemblance and similarity, with regards to at least some of their qualities; while indexical signs are based on contiguity, as they "direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion" (Peirce in Chandler, 2007, 38). But, there are deeper issues with the three functions of the sign altogether.

The symbol/symbolic function is the one in which the *represantamen*, according to the Peircean fragment quoted in Elleström (the signifier, in Saussure's wording), is alleged not to resemble the interpretant, but their relationship is described as fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional, so that it must be agreed upon and learned (Chandler, 2007, 36). However, if metaphor is included in the spectrum of the iconic, and metaphor is always an analogy, is not every cognitive analogy a performance bound to iconicity? In other words, when selecting a source and a target for each analogy, an iconic relationship is at work (Nöth 2024). Much in the same tone, any phase previous to the alleged agreement or convention, aforementioned as a characteristic of the symbolic function of the sign, presupposes an initially failed attempt to somehow reach a perfect understanding based on resemblance. In this case, when diachronically contemplated, the symbolic function

is but a diversion of the iconic, resulting from the need for comfort and speed in human communication and interaction: we cannot dedicate too much time to recall the fact that the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, "Gimel", once used to signify "camel" (Russell, 1972, 10). Indeed, when one does not acknowledge the symbol as a *diversion* of the icon, one silences the fact that the former is a "second-best" cognitive solution, rather than a discreet function of the sign. The same goes for the index/indexical function: what is an index if not an analogy between a source and a target pinpointing a physical, causal or conceived connection that has once been learned? The causal connection between smoke and fire, for example, needs to be experienced and learned for the smoke's indexical capacity to unfold. This "direct connection" semiotics attributes to the index is but an interrelation between two icons, a dual iconicity of the fire *and* the smoke. Hence, both the symbol and the index may be considered *diversions* deriving meta-performatively from one unique, iconic source, recognising a meta-level to the other two sign functions. The meta- of the index refers to the shaping of a causal correlation between two icons, whereas the meta- of the symbol involves a convention saving time for avoiding semiotic iconic genealogies, such as the letter "Gimel" and the camel. In this perspective, the interconnectedness and fluidity of meaning-making, this sense of *becoming,* is highlighted on the common denominator of the icon, over the operational theorising about discreet categories of signs and sign functions with different denominators (icon, index, symbol). The latter approach reaches the intermedial semiotic modality, even if declaring that the three functions are intertwined. Instead of seeing the functions of the sign subject to another pre-given, fixed, existing taxonomy, we can appreciate them as part of the performative dimension of the semiotic modality, which is further outlined in the following paragraphs, with respect to semiotic intra- and trans- aspects of intermedial analysis.

In relation to semiotic interrelations, virtual space and time bear a considerable spatiotemporal but also semiotic load. Virtual spatiotemporality, indeed, is a cognitive outcome, depending on knowing how to understand perspective, thus to

cognise a two-dimensional surface as an index for a three-dimensional space. Equally, when virtual spatiotemporality involves dramatic/diegetic space and time, it depends on knowing how to acknowledge fiction and fictional characters in relation to the "real". This view not only sees virtual space and time as coming under the umbrella of the semiotic modality, but also appreciates the intra-diegetic tensions emerging between actual and virtual spatiotemporalities. More specifically, the term "intra-diegetic" in this context, freely inspired by role playing games analysis (Fine, 1983), based on Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis,* denotes the dynamics between three rims, or reference frames, of performance and corresponding functional roles providing access to the rims. Further unfolding this lens, firstly, the outer rim provides the primary framework, accessible through the persistent role of the social individual. It suggests a biographical and a socio-political dimension.[14] Secondly, on an in-between, systemic level, the role of the player/designer permits the handling of functional aspects, such as rules and constraints. This level enables access to the third rim, the fictional layer, where the role of the fictional character allows the interaction with the specifics of the possible fictional world, the plot and fictional relationships. Put simply, when a media product is perceived, it always contains an element of make-believe, fiction, even if this is attributed thanks to the theatricality of the gaze (Féral, 2002).[15] In such a rationale, there are media types such as theatre performance, film, desktop video games, that work with intense intra-diegetic dynamics. Here, their virtual space and time are more discreet, socially and spatiotemporally situated, causing greater friction with quotidian life, than in those media types with less explicit and discreet spatiotemporal borders, such as novels or poems and pervasive games.[16] Let us briefly explain why the friction is more traceable in the former case as opposed to the latter. When a media product is clearly framed and its process unfolds equally framed, its virtual space and time tends to be less porous than when it is pervasive – of course, there are cases of underdistancing even in such non-pervasive media types. As pervasive we can define media types and products the engagement with which manifests beyond

specific social, temporal and spatial constraints (Svahn, 2014). But also, the portability of a book edition of a novel allows fragmental interaction invisible to others, without a disruption of the norm of actuality, enmeshed with quotidian life more seamlessly than watching a film at the cinema, for example. On the contrary, a theatre performance usually takes place at a specific stage for a couple of hours; a desktop video game requires the player to be usually seated, situated in the same environment for a specific time, even if on a daily basis.[17] Thus, not only the diegetic fictional worlds of media products proposed trigger *semiosis*, but also the dynamics between their fiction and reality attract several aspects of meaning-making, and with considerable subjective variations. This is the reason why intra-diegetic dynamics are inscribed within the horizon of the semiotic.

In addition, the transdiegetic and transperformative layers in effect during the encounter with a media product complicate even more the semiotic dynamics. Theatre performance, film, dance, video games, extended realities (XRs) actualise alternate possible worlds and agents, human or synthetic, and encourage us to perform on a transdiegetic level by bridging different contexts and actual-virtual spacetime circumstances through multimedia franchises or transmedia storytelling. Of course, the same could be said for all media types, up to a certain extent, as make-believe is a mindset (Heliö, 2004) rather than just a matter of any designer's or author's intention.

In drawing things to a close, this section proposed an expansion of intermedial studies, confirmed to be mainly under the influence of Peircean semiotics and logics, so that principles and findings of phenomenology, performativity and ecology of perception apply. The importance of perception of the actual world in meaning-making processes has been highlighted, aspiring at subverting the topological distance between the actual and the cognitive, on the basis of the former's unique individual assimilation by different sensorialities and cognitions. Furthermore, the trichotomy of the sign functions, at least as inherited to Elleström, has been challenged, arguing the symbol and the index as meta-performative diversions of

the performative icon. Enriching the understanding of virtual space and time under the semiotic umbrella completed the analysis on the semiotic, as well as suggesting that intra- and trans-diegetic and intra- trans-performative dynamics and friction levels between the actual and the virtual as also involved in *semiosis*.

## 4. Epilogue

In this article, an attempt was made to systematically address questions, aporias and potentialities rising during intermedial analysis while applying the media modalities model, as well as to indicate basic critical intermedial areas that would benefit from further research and discussion. Indeed, the media modalities model, even if tending to acknowledge the intertwinement of all modalities, was found to latently be organised hierarchically, by sticking to the conceptualisation of modalities as *pre-semiotic* and *semiotic*; for a modality to be *pre-semiotic*, it should be void of meaning. However, as with Peirce's pre-interpreted, dynamic objects and interpreted, immediate ones, for anything to be considered as pre-interpreted, pre-semiotic, an interpretation about such a nature has already taken place, constituting an *a posteriori* reflexive realisation, which clearly presupposes meaning making processes being at work during material, sensorial and spatiotemporal cognising. This paradox resonates respectively with implications echoing in *pre-semiotic* modalities. The primordiality and objectivity of materiality present in the model means that sensoriality and *semiosis* come after materiality and do not run parallel. Materiality is thus not cognised as subjugated to the senso-semiotic continuum, despite media products and their qualities being already paradoxically materially cognised *prior* to their analysis (surfaces, objects, waves, organic/inorganic matter). In this stream of thought, the *pre-semiotic* character of the material, but also of the sensorial and the spatiotemporal modalities, can be questioned. The sensorial modality framing perception cannot either be void of *semiosis*, because meaning is being made in real-time, while perceiving, as uncomfortable encounters with the unknown or the indeterminate in the environment and art indicate. Chains

of *semiosis* may, of course, occur theoretically forever. But even *semiosis* is totally dependent on the sensorial just as the sensorial is dependent on the semiotic; because, if semiosis is inner and cognitive, the sense that allows the understanding of thought is interoception. The difficulty in accepting that thoughts and meaning are also interoceptively perceived is mostly due to the privilege attributed to the mind over, for example, the heart or the stomach, but the exact nature of interoception, a discussion which we cannot exhaust here, depends obviously on how cognition is seen and defined. Finally, the spatiotemporal modality cannot be pre-semiotic, because, even the conceptualisation of cosmic spatiotemporality, supposed to objectively circumscribe human life and media products, is clearly a concept, a meaning *made*. In addition, the spatiotemporal modality was found to rather converse with the space and time of encountering the media product, thus, bearing semiotic connotations when seen from the perceiver's side. Especially virtual space and time were found to be hybridly anchored in the semiotic and the spatiotemporal.

Hence, it prevails that, although Elleström proposed an immensely helpful abstract model that gradually unfolds and unveils medial nuances when encountering media types and products, the point of view adopted in his model is located *outside* the dynamic field of the encounter between the perceiver and the media product. The model does not overall challenge its keystones, such as the subject/object divide and the material/immaterial discourse. However, it is here suggested that Elleström's abstract model could expand and apply to a rephrased and extended understanding of the dynamic field of a perceiver's encounter with a media product, taking into account the ecological-performative-phenomenological approach we proposed throughout the article.

There are some indications that Elleström (2021) would have shifted towards more subjective, phenomenological and socially interactionist approaches, seeing human communication based on shareness (28-33), rather than on transfer. Puzzling is the ascendance of the spatiotemporal modality in the model's second position in 2021 from the third

one it occupied in 2010, possibly indicating that Elleström read some tension with regards to this modality. Would the spatiotemporal modality have reached position number one, beating even the material modality at a later stage? In his virtual spheres model, "cosmic spatiotemporality" would rather fall within the category of the "unknown", circumscribing any "actual phenomenal spatiotemporality" of media products experience, communication, and meaning-making. It appears as possible that the spatiotemporal modality would have become the primordial modality in the model, an assumption worth exploring within the horizon of Elleström's *oeuvre*. Should, however, the emphasis have been placed on the term "virtual", met in the *virtual spheres* model, the assumption that perhaps Elleström would have doubted the pre-existence of pre-interpreted dynamic objects in order to fulfill signs as dynamic functions, and not dynamic in name only, is not that preposterous. This speculation would have allowed him to see everything enveloped in semiotic processes - besides, what does "everything is intermedial" really mean?

Even if Elleström meant just as a theoretical distinction the articulation of the four discreet modalities, there remains pending a return to the modalities unity. And this unity occurs enveloped in meaning making. If knowing is an outcome of acknowledgement, the cognition of any materiality, sensoriality, spatiotemporality and semioticity comes within the space of the cognitive, hence, is attached to meaning-making processes bound to the semiotic. In other words, even "cosmic spatiotemporality" is but a thought, a meaning made, just like colour, shape, material, and as such comes inscribed within the horizon of interoception and *semiosis*. Hence, there is a constant interplay between the sensorial and the semiotic with the spatiotemporal and the material. We could in fact claim that the sensorial and the semiotic modalities belong to the subjective sphere, whereas the spatiotemporal (we have spoken about virtual spacetime) and the material one are "out there", available to interfere with our subjective spheres. But, this would not pay respect neither to interoception, nor to proprioception. Even these two more objective modalities are interacted with solely if assimilated cognitively by perceiving

subjects, as dementia, daydreaming or various psychological situations make us realise.

How could the media modalities model be articulated from within the perspective of the perceiving subject-media product encounter remains an ongoing project. Instead of a hierarchical construct dividing between presemiotic and semiotic elements, taking for granted the primordiality and objectivity of materiality, and with the intention of relativising the modalities discretedness in light of so many modal overlaps, perhaps the potential of a layered schema, such as one proposed by frame analysis (Goffman 1974), especially as interpreted by Fine (1983), could be explored. Or, perhaps a three-dimensional moving spherical schema with the media modalities in the form of loops impacting the encounter between the perceiver and the media product could denote the centre as a dynamic point. In effect, there could even be names describing dynamic movements, such as "materialisation", "sensorialisation", "spatiotemporalisation" and "semioticisation". Or, an even bolder and simpler proposal could be put forward, that the primal cognitive duality of the senso-semiotic matrix circumscribes spatiotemporal, material, sensorial and semiotic-oriented meaning, situated within cognitive horizons as performances of ever-shifting impressions. Not only we cannot tell the dancer from the dance; we cannot tell the spectator from the dancer and the dance. We enrich our understanding on the relativity and hybridity of the media modalities, as they dance too, perceived from within the dynamic field, affecting meaning, perception, materiality, and spatiotemporal orientation, listening to Protagoras' whispers: "Πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἀνθρωπος". Only this *ἀνθρωπος* is not another one of Peirce's dynamic objects, some "universal", abstract normalcy, but humbly becomes the abstract, yet subjective and varying, sum of us all.

**NOTES**

[1] See indicatively Bal, 1991; Mitchell, 1986; Müller, 1996; and Wolf, 1999.

[2] More information can be found in the Book of Abstracts of the 7th conference of the *International Society of Intermedial Studies Intermedial Networks: The Digital Present and Beyond* (2024), available on https://open.lnu.se/index.php/indpb/issue/view/291

[3] Such certainties mostly date back to authors who influenced Elleström (2018), such as Shannon (272) and Peirce (287).

[4] For example, as with the archeological finding of a bone and the role of belief in communication (Elleström, 2021, 16)

[5] See, for instance, how Elleström relativises the discreetness of "cognitive import", broadening it up to encompassing even undeveloped or intuitive meaning (2021, 12).

[6] Despite few references to the term "dynamic" in Elleström's works, such as the "dynamic nature of human communication" (2021, 37), or "dynamical functions" in relation to signs (2021, 21), the notion of dynamic interaction, if inspiring, could have caused the challenging of pre-semiotic qualities of the other three modalities, as well as of the pre-given character of materialities.

[7] "This is a biological rather than physical distinction" says Elleström (2021, 48) but, overall, the organic is juxtaposed to the inorganic, as if both are clear-cut and homogeneous.

[8] The colournessness of the statues has already been perceived as a sign, initiating a semiotic process relevant to time and change through time. Hence, subjective time, memory, imagination, knowledge, discursive power, all come into play during perception, allowing metaphorically even a backwards movement, when statues had colours

[9] But, when we close our eyes, time does not stop. There are multiple levels of time involved, not solely the assumed innate time of the media product

[10] Fluxus art has often challenged this staticity by creating, for example, ephemeral installations, or even "vandalizing" artistic works for the sake of change. Banksy's *Girl with the Baloon* being remotely commanded to be shredded at the auction stands as a rather good example. Or, what happens to media products, such as short films provided online, where the perceiver controls the arrow of time? It becomes obvious that there is a certain degree of relativity applying to the discussion.

[11] The choice of the term "diegetic" over of the term "dramatic" echoes the dominance of the narratological paradigm on the dramatic/theatrical/performative one. This is a very selective understanding; narratology wants narrative to allegedly circumscribe drama and theatre, whereas the narration process, as an element of the narrative instance, proves exactly the opposite. A narrator and a narratee are variations of the actor-spectator duality.

[12] For an exemplary assimilation of the ecomedial problematic within intermedial theory, see Bruhn and Salmose (2023).

[13] Communication has for long been seen as cognitive transfer. Until there is adequate scientific evidence that cognitive import may travel, we could live without the literality of transfer. Our impact on materialities, literal, as well as symbolic, may trigger indications of thought to ourselves and others. Schirrmacher (Elleström, 2021) considers that in human communication "'a chain of interactions' involving producer's mind, media product, perceiver's mind and everything in between" is at work (19).

[14] Since Goffman defines performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959, 15-16), the *role* of the social individual

is not surprising.

[15] In fact, Féral's reference to the gaze is fundamental to the semiotic lens proposed. See Timplalexi (2024) for the interrelations between the theatrical gaze, perception and communication.

[16] Pervasive gaming allows the leak of the domain of the fictional to the domain of the ordinary (Montola, 2009, 12), with three strategies, namely social, temporal or spatial pervasiveness (Svahn, 2014, 4).

[17] However, even within these media types, we may have exceptions that have either a pervasive nature, or are marketed as such, i.e. immersive theatre, binge-watchable tv series. Also, within the framework of intra-diegetic dynamics, come risks or failures because of the problematic movement between the three rims, such as when role-players project fictional behaviours in their quotidian lives, or when users of extended realities (XRs), such as Virtual Reality (VR), feel restricted by conditions of XR environments.

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# Book Reviews

# Towards a Philosophy of Music

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Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, *The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul*, Mimesis International, Milano-Udine, 2024, 172 p.

This review examines *The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul* by Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, a work that explores the intersection between philosophy and the music of Radiohead. Rather than offering a biography or lyrical analysis, the book investigates the band's aesthetics through three key concepts: music, technology, and soul. The authors identify three phases in Radiohead's career, each marked by a distinct relationship with technology – first as an alienating force (The Bends, OK Computer), then as a medium for creative expression (Kid A, Amnesiac), and finally as a more integrated and nuanced element (Hail to the Thief, In Rainbows, A Moon Shaped Pool). Drawing on Adorno's critical theory and Heidegger's philosophy of technology, Marino and Guzzi argue that Radiohead's music transcends conventional categories of popular music, blending technological experimentation with emotional and artistic depth. Ultimately, their study suggests that philosophy is not a distant, abstract discipline but something that quietly permeates the cultural artifacts we engage with every day – even the music playing in our headphones.

Speaking of 'the philosophy of Radiohead' might sound unusual. After all, the members of Radiohead are musicians playing in a pop-rock band, not philosophers – it is not like they have ever written a philosophy compendium. But the idea that philosophy is just a distant, abstract system, disconnected from everyday life, needs to be challenged. This is exactly what Marino and Guzzi have done in their book. Their work is not some theoretical exercise – it is about making sense of it all, putting "Everything in its right place", as the title of a Radiohead song suggests.

*The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul*, authored by Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, was published in its English translation in 2024, following the original Italian edition, *La filosofia dei Radiohead*. The title already clarifies the specific authors' approach. The book does not simply narrate the history of the band or the biographies of its five members, nor is it an analysis of their lyrics. In fact, Marino and Guzzi's study is original precisely because of the aim it sets from the outset: to reconstruct and interpret what could be called 'the aesthetics of Radiohead'. Obviously, the authors do not confine Radiohead to a 'philosophical system' but explore insights that bridge philosophy and pop-rock.

The analysis unfolds around three key concepts: *music*, *technology*, and *soul*. According to the authors, Radiohead's uniqueness manifests itself in their ability to constantly articulate and redefine the role of technology. The latter is not merely a recurring theme in the lyrics of the songs and albums of the band, but it is rather a structural element that shapes their musical experimentation, to the point of becoming its very soul. To articulate the relationship between these three concepts, the authors identify three main phases in Radiohead's career, each marked by a distinct relationship with *technology* – and therefore also with *music* and *soul*.

In the early phase, with works such as *The Bends* and *OK Computer*, technology is portrayed by Radiohead as an alienating and oppressive force, while the band's musical style remains traditional, with minimal electronic integration. This

is the starting point of a creative journey that established the presupposition for the subsequent development of the band's distinctive style (p. 31). In many tracks on *The Bends*, such as "Fake Plastic Trees", Radiohead explore profound and topical issues, including society's obsessive drive toward consumerism facilitated by advancements in new technology. In fact, as the authors highlight, the plastic becomes a metaphor here for materialistic emptiness and commodification, which oppress the human being in present age. A few years later, in "No Surprises", a track from *OK Computer*, the bright, linear harmonies serve as the backdrop for lyrics that are anything but soothing. The verses portray the tormented mindset of a man who has passively resigned himself to an ordinary life defined by the refrain "no alarm no surprises".

However, according to the authors, the sense of alienation permeating Radiohead's lyrics gradually evolves, transforming from a purely negative state into a driving force for creativity. In this light, the sense of alienation that may derive from the overwhelming power of technology today becomes a means to potentially build an entirely new world – a liberating escape from the confines of contemporary society, inviting listeners to reimagine their existence. In this regard, Marino and Guzzi suggest that Radiohead's philosophy echoes Adorno's critical theory. Indeed, the Adornian conception of self-reflective and critical knowledge favours the development of the capacity to consider the existing social order not only as it currently is, but also "in light of what could be" (p. 44). According to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, philosophy needs to preserve the possibility of seeing through the existing situation, recognizing it as a context of guilt that is cancelled through blinding, and thus of breaking through it. Through the aesthetics of Radiohead, music can bring our focus back to our lives and regain contact with what we can call the natural rhythm of human experience.

In this regard, the second phase of Radiohead's career and 'philosophy', inaugurated by *Kid A*, can be considered a sort of act of rebellion driven by the goal of freeing itself from the mindset of a homogenizing, standardized culture. In this phase, technology deeply penetrated the band's music in a way that is

challenging compared to their earlier albums. Marino and Guzzi, indeed, refer to this album as a "turning point", as the negative perception of technology is here processed in a much more complex manner (p. 64). The tracks on *Kid A* aim to communicate the truth not by distancing themselves from technology but, in fact, precisely through it – they are imbued with sounds created by the electronic devices themselves. Beyond the avant-garde sounds created by technological means like samplers and digital software, on *Kid A* the band also manifested its interest in the first electronic instruments from the beginning of the 20th century, like the Theremin and the Ondes Martenot. *Amnesiac*, the band's fifth album, stands near *Kid A* both thematically and stylistically – unsurprisingly so, given that it was conceived in tandem with its predecessor. So, this album is also filled with technological sounds resulting from the band's search for a new style.

In this regard, works like *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* can also be drawn close to a philosophical perspective such as Heidegger's: indeed, the idea is that it is only and through technology that certain hunts signals can be intuited and perceived. So, in this phase, Radiohead's music attempts to find an aesthetic form that critically challenges the realty through technological innovations and artificially sounds. As the authors suggest, it is undeniable how the music of Radiohead, especially in this phase, has taken on the character of works of art that adopt a critical position on the existing reality, pierce the veil that masks the social contradictions in which ideologies lie and, in this way, reveal the prospect of a possible utopian reconciliation in the future, "in the Adornian way, so to speak" (p. 95).

In the later albums, such as *Hail to thief*, *In Rainbows* and *A Moon Shaped Pool*, the band has reached a balance, blending electronic elements with traditional instrumentation. The relationship with technology is more nuanced now, exploring themes of crisis and digital society with greater emotional depth and introspection. In this third phase, the topics discussed in the lyrics find their counterpart on a formal

level in the music, where disparate genres and styles come together in a meaningful synthesis (p. 97). In particular, *In Rainbows* puts greater emphasis on the expressive and purely human component of the songs: the technological dimension sometimes appears stimulatingly in contrast with a greater singability, connected to Thom York's unique use of the falsetto technique. To be precise, in general, in the third stage of Radiohead's evolution the presence of sinuous melodies in an imposingly technological sound texture has the task of bring the band's energy back to a psychological dimension, glorifying the poetic language of humans rather than technology itself (p. 114).

Certainly, as the authors highlight in each chapter, technology can be observed from a dialectical point of view, inasmuch as it seems to exhibit positive and fruitful qualities counterbalanced by negative and adverse one. As evidenced by the band's trajectory, outlined by the authors, Radiohead have not been overwhelmed by technology but have instead learned to engage with it, seeking what Adorno called "the flight from the banal" in his essays on the culture industry and mass culture (p. 160). For this reason, according to the authors' final thesis, Radiohead's aesthetics cannot be simplistically classified – following Adorno in an orthodox way – as part of *popular music*, which is traditionally characterized by its adherence to the principles of standardization. Undoubtedly, Radiohead avant-garde style – although remaining in the field of pop-rock music – is based primarily on the band's extremely original attempt at fusing technology and expression; secondly, this development rests on the fact that the group never suffocated a legitimate dimension of aesthetic gratification.

In conclusion, *The Philosophy of Radiohead* is not just a book about a band: it is a journey through the intersections of music, technology, and soul, offering a new critical perspective on the world. In their analysis, Marino and Guzzi take us beyond the surface of Radiohead's sound, revealing how their art serves both as a reflection of contemporary anxieties and to reimagine reality. Like in "Reckoner", where Yorke sings "because we separate, like ripples on a blank shore", the band's music thrives on tensions between human and machine, emotion and abstraction, oppression and escape. Marino and

Guzzi's work capture this complexity, demonstrating how Radiohead have never settled for the predictable. Their music, like this book, has managed to remain in the search for a place where art still has the power to transcend, disrupt, and transform, without claiming to find it forever.

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# Phenomenology of Body and Soul in Pregnancy and Early Motherhood

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Susi Ferrarello, *The Phenomenology of Pregnancy and Early Motherhood: Ethical, Social, and Psychological Perspectives*, Routledge, 2025, 184 p.

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Susi Ferrarello's book stands out in several ways. It is extremely well written and a real joy to read – which certainly does not hold true for every philosophical book. In order to give evidence of how well written it is, there will be numerous citations throughout this review. Furthermore, it is methodologically coherent and convincing. The author takes a phenomenological approach which proves very well suited for the topic under discussion. Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience and thus well equipped to explore the experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood. It is also a method capable of working with the accounts of others, as Ferrarello shows in detail. Moreover, phenomenology is a method that connects well to other disciplines, such as psychology. The solid methodological grounding and the various connections are strengthened by the ways in which Ferrarello turns to the founders of phenomenology, especially Edmund Husserl. She presents Husserl's ideas and concepts in clear and comprehensible terms, which is not an easy feat, and enriches his work by connections to those authors who are to my mind

best suited for current expansions of the phenomenological project, such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler.

The book also stands out by tackling a rather unusual topic – a topic that might sound marginal to some people. But as Ferrarello points out rightfully: "Motherhood is not a whim but a fundamental aspect of our humanity. As humans, we should learn how to make space for each other in our society" (xii). It is indeed crucial for our humanity to acknowledge that even though not all of us will be mothers, all of us have experienced versions of motherhood when we grew up. We owe it to each other to thematise this aspect of our existence and to see to it, as society, that mothers are supported and their voices being heard.

This is the case even more so because it is impossible to properly imagine motherhood before experiencing it. As Ferrarello explains, it was only when she underwent these experiences herself and saw her challenging they were that she felt a "sense of guilt toward all the women—friends, students, colleagues and relatives—who became mothers before me. I did not understand the magnitude of the transition they were undergoing. […] I recognize that the significance of such an event is comparable to a metaphorical death, given the profound psychological and physical transformation it entails" (4). To understand the magnitude of the transition, this book is crucial. It is only on the basis of such an understanding that we can give others the space to reinvent themselves after the event.

The book contains about thirty pages of stories from mothers from quite diverse backgrounds who underwent a wealth of different experiences. These stories are woven into the book as Ferrarello proceeds. They constitute helpful evidence for her interpretations as well as a treasure of material for further research. I would like to cite from the story of Maren Wehrle, a fellow phenomenologist, who captures some of the challenges of the childbirth situation in a particularly articulate fashion: "Things are being done with you, and decisions over your body are being made, at times without being communicated or explained to you. In the best case, this is because it is urgent and you yourself cannot speak or

communicate properly anymore (because of the pain); in the worst case, you feel like a statistic in your own birth, observing it as if from a distance, and suffering on your own (but probably not in silence). There is nothing scarier if nurses or doctors suddenly act as if in panic and you neither know what happens nor can do anything yourself" (20/21). This account shows how crucial it is that healthcare professionals in this special situation communicate clearly and in a reassuring fashion. It also shows that coming out of this limit situation and attending to the infant, which is itself a difficult challenge, depends majorly on the contributions of healthcare professionals; and as society, we should improve their working conditions. The author's own story is also part of the book, and it is a moving story, as well as insightful in its reflections on cultural contexts. My hope is that you will seek an opportunity to read these stories for yourself.

After the stories, the book attends to the first trimester of pregnancy as a particularly challenging period. It is challenging because the experience is altogether new, it is in many cases especially difficult due to morning sickness, and there is a general tendency to not yet communicate to others about the pregnancy due to the high risk of miscarriage at this stage. But without proper communication, the difficult feelings of alienation and objectification cannot be thematised, which again confirms the significance of Ferrarello's book: "The feelings of alienation, resulting from this objectifying process, take women's agency away from their bodies, leading to a depressive state, which is dangerous for the mother, her partner and her new family. […] I will focus on these three relevant emotional problems (alienation, objectification and loss of identity), especially as they set their roots in the first trimester of pregnancy, and I propose to use phenomenology as a mindful approach that can help the woman to be present to herself in the here-and-now if these problems arise and before medical interventions become necessary" (36). It becomes obvious that Ferrarello builds on phenomenology to suggest solutions, and the combination of phenomenology and mindfulness strikes me as a particular fruitful one. More on the theoretical background of this fruitful combination can be found

in a volume co-edited by Ferrarello (with Hadjiannou) entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Mindfulness*.

One of many strengths of Ferrarello's book lies in the way in which the author remains entirely honest about the challenges of the situation and the emotional rollercoaster it entails while always retaining the kind of optimism that emerges when we reflect on difficult situations and learn our lessons from them: "Feeling scared, inadequate and confused are more complex and yet common emotions that might become part of the new system of habitualities" (45). The lessons that we learn from motherhood are lessons that we can bring to bear on many aspects of human experience. But thorough reflection is indeed needed to establish such a system of habitualities and to be able to enact this system in light of new challenges, be they parenting teenagers, caring for elderly parents, challenges at work or encountering sickness.

Susi Ferrarello then turns to breastfeeding as another challenging yet instructive embodied experience. She points out rightfully that if one adds up the hours spent breastfeeding, especially also at night, it turns out to be equivalent to a full-time job, and a difficult one! It is a mistake to assume that breastfeeding comes to us naturally: "Yet, to use Jean-Luc Nancy: 'Nowhere does 'Nature' occur in a 'natural' state. Human beings have not always been there; but when they arrive the nature within them humanizes itself—that is, displaces itself in a new way' (2011, pp. 43–44)." Our distance from nature is not something that we can avoid, as it has always already happened. When we learn to be more in sync with our bodies and those of others, this learning process is a cognitive one and does not immediately get embodied, let alone habitualised; yet this is again an area in which phenomenology proves a fruitful approach.

Psychological challenges for the mother after giving birth are plentiful: "When milk production becomes an obsession for the new mother, her connection with her body suffers. Reduced to a mere technique, breastfeeding ceases to be about bonding and getting to know each other; it becomes mainly about how much milk this now alienated body can produce" (62). With respect to breastfeeding as well, it really

helps to share stories to encourage each other – Ferrarello calls them 'gossip' in a deliberately cheeky yet helpful fashion which is warranted by the etymology of 'gossip'. When breastfeeding has been learned and becomes comfortable as an intercorporeal activity, it is rewarding on so many levels: "Breastfeeding as a way of life is a comprehensive approach that celebrates the profound connection between mother and baby, recognizing its significance beyond mere nutrition. It encompasses emotional bonding, physical health, mutual growth, resilience in facing challenges, seamless integration into daily life and awareness of cultural and social dimensions" (63). It indeed becomes an activity that will be missed when the baby has been weaned off, as the calming effect cannot be easily replaced.

One of the main emphases in this book concerns the way in which the experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood invite and necessitate a challenging transformation on the part of the mother: "During this unique stage of life, a woman must stretch her logic to perceive herself as at least three different beings: the person she has always known, the new person taking on the role of mother and the being growing inside her" (73). These different levels are indeed difficult to process, and it is well justified that Ferrarello focuses mostly on the mother: it is still tempting to believe that becoming a mother happens naturally for a mother whereas the father who has not experienced pregnancy as such would be the one struggling to adapt to the new role after birth. But as this book shows in multiple ways, it is far from a smooth transition for the mother.

Therefore, Ferrarello turns to Husserl's phenomenology to disentangle the changes and challenges. Husserl's philosophy is notoriously difficult, and his writing style is a deterrent hard to overcome. The best way to make sense of Husserl's difficult concepts is to elucidate them through examples, and this is something which Ferrarello manages to accomplish masterfully. Concepts such as habit, association and motivation all relate to each other: "Indeed, habits serve as a primitive form of 'association' that drives the lower layer of emotions to solidify raw experiences into a foundational character that shapes the core of our motivational life" (75). Such foundational connections are otherwise usually discussed from a

psychoanalytic perspective which only some people would be sympathetic to. Ferrarello stays true to the phenomenological perspective throughout, thus allowing us to follow every step. Disentangling the different levels involved in our actions and decisions might not be able to give us answers about our unconscious motivations, but it gives us plenty of fruitful material to understand ourselves better, which strikes me as much more important.

While phenomenology is sometimes criticised for its commitment to 'mere' description, Ferrarello shows how it can be brought to bear on a number of important dilemmas. Breastfeeding means that the bodies of mother and baby are part of one circle, which is relevant where gassy food items are concerned: "The mother's body might need iron and feel the desire to eat lentil soup, but her reflective subject understands that fulfilling this need could be harmful to her primary goal, which is the peaceful survival of her baby. Clearly, being constantly alert to such decisions creates overstimulation that can be very draining for a new mother" (79). While this is only one example, it already involves too many dimensions and unknowns to find a fully satisfying solution. What appear to be small decisions can easily become overwhelming due to the constancy of decision-making as well as the complete lack of verbal communication from the infant.

All these dilemmas and the constant responsibility create additional challenges for the new mother who is already too sleep-deprived to reflect on the transformation which the role of mother means for herself. It is very helpful that Susi Ferrarello undertakes exactly this much needed reflection – and offers helpful advice: "The main proposal from this interpretation of the motivational layers of this lived experience is for the woman to take an interest in her own life without forcing the understanding of the motivational force. Additionally, she should exert her willpower (resolve, fiat and action) as much as possible, even in small actions. The combination of both efforts would contribute to the creation of a core set of habits that reinforces both lower and higher motivational forces, from which a renewed identity will emerge" (89). The phenomenological emphasis on habits and

on different layers of motivation allows understanding how active self-interest and exertion of willpower are the opposite of selfishness.

Throughout the book, there is a refreshing and much needed emphasis on the experience of the mother and what the new experience means for her: "According to this new perspective, the primary caregiver, in this case the mother, seems, to use Heideggerian terms, to have been thrown again in the world. From here, she can choose whether to look at what this thrownness teaches her or not" (115/116). Taking such lessons on board is important for the entire family, as Ferrarello explain with respect to the philosophically always challenging topic of temporality: "The woman needs to come out of the instantaneity of the event in order to see herself stretching in time, no matter how restricted this stretch might be. Being able to find her present would help her to find her presence in the new intersubjective being she re-presents" (117). The connection to mindfulness shines forth again; yet for a proper explanation of these connections and their implications, I need to refer you to the final chapter of the book with the strong heading: "Women who come back: Reconnecting with one's resources, space and time".

The only point in Ferrarello's book that I at least initially disagreed with is her closing remark: "As a closing remark, I would like to stress the importance of refraining from imposing or deducing the paradigm for any ethical structure from this complex lived experience. Using this embodied bond as a model for an ethical behavior might add more pressure on the complexity of this experience, spoiling the genuinity of the emerging sensory-motor identity between the two" (117). I understand that Ferrarello's main concern here is to not impose the pressure of being a role model on new mothers who are navigating a very difficult situation which is regularly underestimated in its challenges and complexity. Ferrarello draws on Judith Butler to explain that gender roles are certainly also involved in this difficulty: "I believe that romanticizing this fact of nature would enhance the problem of performative gender (Butler, 1988) and conforming to norms that are unfit for our personal growth" (118). Yet I wonder

whether these important experiences could not nevertheless function as a paradigm – not by imposing the responsibility of being a role model on the mothers themselves, but by reflecting philosophically on the lessons that can be learned. One such lesson could be to reconceive of our social bonds and realise, in the words of Judith Butler, that "the reconsideration of social bonds as based in embodied forms of interdependency gives us a framework for understanding a version of social equality that does not rely on the reproduction of individualism" (*The Ethics of Nonviolence*, 21). In developing such ideas of embodied interdependency, Butler takes inspiration from Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas presents pregnancy as a kind of paradigm for existence in general as pregnancy means having the other person literally under one's skin whereas we generally notice that the Other metaphorically gets under our skin. I agree with Ferrarello that we should not impose the responsibility of serving as a paradigm on pregnant women and new mothers. But I do believe that there are valuable tasks for phenomenologists in drawing such lessons. This could allow opening phenomenology up towards ethical frameworks based on embodied and gendered experience.

There are several other interesting topics and discussion in this book, for example, regarding the temporality of pregnancy and early motherhood, 'expanded consciousness', and many lessons from the fabulous stories provided by mothers which Ferrarello connects to the folk tale 'Sealskin, Soulskin'. I have enjoyed reading this book more than any other academic book in as long as I can remember – due to its clear, articulate, engaging writing style, methodological cohesion, ability to unpack complexity, and fascinating topics. I suggest you see for yourselves whether you are inclined to agree.

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# Journal Details

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