

HISTORICAL BODIES: ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE HUMAN BEING IN HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART

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Abstract. *This article explores the representation of the human body in Hegel's theory of art, arguing that key elements of contemporary figurative art are prefigured in his philosophical framework. While modern art, particularly in its abstract and anti-figurative forms, appears to distance itself from traditional depictions of the human figure, Hegel offers a more nuanced view of the body's enduring role in artistic representation. The article examines Hegel's analysis of classical and modern art, emphasizing how the human form functions as a manifestation of life, spirit, and cultural meaning. Hegel's conception of the body reflects both an anthropological grounding of beauty and an awareness of art's historical evolution. Special attention is given to portraiture, which Hegel identifies as a distinctly modern form that encapsulates the subjective and reflective character of modernity. By tracing the philosophical and historical dimensions of bodily representation in Hegel, the article challenges simplistic readings of Hegelian classicism and demonstrates the relevance of his thought to ongoing discussions about the body in modern and contemporary art.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Philosophy of Art; Representation of the Body; Hegel's Conception of Modern Art; Theory of Portrait*

1. Introduction

With the rise of abstract painting during the twentieth century the role of the human figure and face as an object of visual art seems to have radically declined. However, it would be incorrect to say that what for centuries had been the main focus of visual art since its very beginnings has simply disappeared. In the predominantly anti-figurative context of modernist painting, there have been artists such as Francis Bacon or Chuck Close, for instance, who have used the

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depiction of the human body to challenge the relationship between representation and subjective identity. While James Elkins may be going too far in stating that «every work of visual art is a representation of the body»¹, anthropomorphism remains an underlying structure of artistic imagination. Certainly, the predominant antimimetic and antiphysiognomic tendency of modern art has modified the approach to the human figure. Body and face are no longer an object of imitation and idealization, but rather manipulable material, filtered by the artist's self-reflection. However, images of the body remain the tool for the representation of the human being and his reality and therefore, as Hans Belting has argued, the history of images continues to reflect the history of the body, understood in a cultural sense².

In the present article, I will argue that some key elements of the contemporary approach to the representation of the human form are prefigured in Hegel's theory of art, which while providing a philosophical explanation of why the human figure as the highest form of life is an inescapable object of art, offers an insightful discussion of the different ways in which the human figure had been represented in the ancient and modern world. Firstly, I will focus on Hegel's take on modernity discussing how the representation of the human body is a key element in the definition of art in general and especially in demarcating the difference between classical and modern art. In Hegel, this raises on the one hand the more general issue of the systematic position and the cognitive function of art as a moment of absolute spirit in its relationship with the previous stages of the development of the spirit, i.e. with the concept of life, namely the organism and the soul-body relationship. On the other hand, it calls into question the speculative foundation of the historical transformation of artistic forms. Secondly, I will examine a related topic, portraiture, which Hegel considers a specific tendency of modern figurative arts. It is my conviction that Hegel's analysis of the historical changes in the representation the body casts doubts on the thesis of Hegel's classicism, showing how in his theory of art is characterized

¹ J. Elkins, *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 1.

² H. Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München, Fink, 2001, p. 88.

by the coexistence, although not without tensions, of an anthropological foundation of artistic beauty and the idea of the intrinsic historicity of art as a cognitive elaboration of reality³.

2. *Body and Soul*

That the human body is the privileged object of artistic representation is almost obvious to Hegel, such that «one can empirically say that men do not know any higher representation»⁴. However, it is the task of philosophy – he states – to explain «That the spiritual, insofar as it exists, must take this form and only this form, the human living form» and from this to provide a speculative argument to support the common observation that the human body has always been the main focus of visual arts⁵. The section dedicated to art as the first moment of the absolute spirit, in the 1830 *Encyclopaedia*, provides a decisive clue for reconstructing the relationship between the human figure and artistic expression. We find here (§ 558) the statement that among the materials necessary to produce the sensitive intuition (*Anschauung*) of ideal content are not only subjective

³ I refer both to the lecture compilation edited 1835 by Hegel's student H.G. Hotho, and the transcriptions of the four Berlin courses (1820-21, 1823, 1826, 1828-29). G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, in Id., *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, vols. 13-15 (I-III), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970; Engl. transl. by T.M. Knox, *Hegels Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975. Abbreviated *Ästhetik* followed by the volume of the German edition, the German page number and the English page number. The four student lecture notes are now available in G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, ed. by W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2015-2023 (GW 28, 1-4). Nachschrift Ascheberg 1820-21 and Nachschrift Hotho 1823, vol. 28, 1; Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, vol. 28, 2; Nachschrift Heimann 1828-29, vol. 28, 3, transl. by R.F. Brown, *Lectures on Philosophy of Art. The Hotho Transcript of the 1823 Berlin Lectures*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998. Where not specified, translations are my own. In this case, the German text is provided in the notes.

⁴ Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 722: «Man kann empirisch sagen die Menschen kennen keine höhere Gestalt».

⁵ *Ibidem*: «daß das Geistige insofern es existirt diese Gestalt und nur diese Gestalt haben muß, die Gestalt der Lebendigkeit welche menschlich ist».

representations, but also «the pre-existing forms of nature together with their meaning, which art must discern and appropriate (cf. § 411)»⁶. In this reference to the concluding part of anthropology, the section on the actual soul (*wirkliche Seele*), two distinct but interconnected aspects can be highlighted: on the one hand, the analogical link between the work of art and the idea of the relationship between soul and body, understood in Aristotelian terms as entelechy⁷, and, on the other hand, the notion that the human body is, precisely because of its unique relationship with the soul, the primary object of artistic representation. The first aspect suggests an idea of art that, as a moment of the absolute spirit, provides a self-conscious form to the relationship between subject and corporeality at a prior stage in the development of the spirit. The second aspect on the other hand lays the foundations for the historical articulation of the visual arts, with classic sculpture at its center.

The relevance of the anthropological rooting of the concept of art in the system is indirectly attested by the cross-references between the discussion of the concept of vitality in the first part of the Berlin courses on the philosophy of art, and the description of the external manifestations of the soul in the human body, in those on the philosophy of the subjective spirit⁸. The actuality or reality of the soul corresponds structurally to the form-content relationship of the work of art. The soul is actual [*wirklich*] in that it has appropriated its own corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*] and has made it its «freie Gestalt»,

⁶ *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1830), GW 20, p. 544; Engl. trans. by W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, revised by J. Inwood, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007, p. 259.

⁷ On the Hegelian interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of soul understood «as life, as idea, activity of self-development in and through its relationship with otherness», cf. A. Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 241. On this subject see also B. Hilmer, *Scheinen des Begriffs. Hegels Logik der Kunst*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1997, pp. 77 ff.

⁸ The courses of 1823 and 1826 devote ample space to the question. In the Hotho's edition of the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, the discussion on the relationship between organic form as a signifying unit and artistic form is included in the chapter on natural beauty. As Brigitte Hilmer puts it, the concept of natural beauty in fact serves essentially as a means to explain (*Erläuterungsmittel*) «wie Schönheit als Bedeutsamkeit am Kunstwerk in Erscheinung tritt» (*Ibidem*).

in such a way that not only is reality «ein Erscheinen der Seele», but «what relates to each other is not the soul to the body, but the soul to its appearance in the physical, to its representation in the body»⁹. In other words, corporeality is the means through which the subject perceives himself in his singularity and at the same time offers himself to the perception of others. By becoming the «human, physiognomic and pathognomic» expression of the soul, the bodily form can be defined as the «soul's work of art»¹⁰.

If on the one hand Hegel derives the conceptual structure of the soul-body relationship from Aristotle, on the other he introduces elements of an anthropological-naturalistic nature in his discussion of the specific ways in which the soul expresses itself in the body. The terms used show that he is drawing on the contemporary debate on the biological and physiological foundations of the soul-body relationship, and particularly on the theories of Lavater and Lichtenberg¹¹. He does this when he lists habits, gestures and facial expressions among the effects of the soul on the human body, a topic he deals with in the section on anthropology and returns to in the lectures on aesthetics in relation to the sculptural and pictorial representation of the human body and face.

There is therefore an analogical relationship between the unity of matter and form in the natural body and the vitality of beauty¹². However, the ways in which the interaction between the exteriority of the body and the vital principle that animates it appear are also what the artist's creative practice addresses, they constitute its

⁹ *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes* (Nachschrift von Griesheim, 1825) GW 25, 1, p. 413: «was sich zu einander verhält ist nicht die Seele zum Leibe, sondern die Seele zu ihrem Erscheinen im Leiblichen, zu ihrer Darstellung im Leibe».

¹⁰ *Enzyklopädie* (1830), GW 20, p. 419; trans. p. 137.

¹¹ Physiognomy deals with the correspondence between features and character, while pathognomonic focuses on expressions and gestures as an expression of the subject's inner states. Hegel famously denied Lavater's physiognomy the status of science, and yet he refers to it as an empirical tool for recognizing and classifying the physical characteristics of individuals. On the difference between physiognomy and pathognomy and on their relevance in the culture of the time, see H. Belting, *Faces: Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*, München, Beck, 2013, pp. 83-91. Cf. GW 28, 1, p. 269.

material. In stating that natural forms are what art uses to express the self-understanding of the spirit, Hegel emphasizes that it is not an imitation of the external configuration, but rather, in a sense like that of Aristotelian *mimesis*, an appropriation of their meaning. And this implies that there is a hierarchical order of significance among the natural forms that are processed by the artistic imagination, the highest level of which is represented by the human body¹³. In turn, this order is determined by a progressive distancing from naturalness, i.e. by the integration into the form of the finite and the contingent as the negative.

The relationship between ideality as a «negative unity» of the «mutual externality of the parts» and «an externality that is only an appearing of what is subsisting» is the element that distinguishes the living form from inorganic matter, in which instead the concept has «completely passed into its existence»¹⁴. In other words, and this is particularly relevant for artistic creation, the inorganic has no appearance, but pure existence, because to appear the body must refer to something that is beyond corporeality. For this reason, the relationship that the artistic form has with the inorganic can only be symbolic. Animality manifests vitality at the lowest level of subjectivity, in which the soul is the functionally organized unity of the multiplicity. In fact, the animal organism in general is conceived as a sentient subject, whose ideal unity lies in its corporeality¹⁵. This kind of 'subjectivity' is an embryonic form of the self-awareness that achieves its highest degree in the thinking individual. According to Hegel, the relevance of the organic form for the definition of a work of art does not lie so much in the finalistic concordance of the parts in a unity, as in the necessary constitution of exteriority as the appearance of subjectivity, which expresses at the same time the reality and negativity of the idea. The impossibility of achieving the expression of self-consciousness is what determines the prevalence of the animal figure in the pre-artistic sphere of the symbolic and its subordinate position in classical art.

¹³ See Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1 p. 260; trans. p. 226.

¹⁴ Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 568: «ganz übergegangen in seine Existenz».

¹⁵ See GW 25, 1, p. 296.

As I stated before, it is only the human figure that expresses this unity as a soul in the anthropological sense, that is, as a «single subject in itself», sentient, thinking and acting. Its superiority over all other organic forms lies in «in that the human being presents a graphic picture of what is to be an overall unity of feeling. That is because the blood pulses over the entire surface, and heart and mind [*das Herz, das Hirn*] are present, so to speak, in every part. In its appearance the human body indeed exhibits itself as vitality»¹⁶. Corporeality in human beings is informed by consciousness and shaped by an activity that is directed by the will. The fact that the surface of the body allows the self-conscious activity to transpire is what makes the body anticipate the signifying relation between content and form in the artwork.

The attractiveness of physical beauty, its erotic aura, at the root of many theories of beauty since Plato, does not seem to play any role in Hegel's definition of the idea of artistic beauty. As in general for Hegel it is not a matter of natural beauty: the human body is not beautiful in itself. It is its representation that is beautiful insofar as it allows us to intuit the dynamic unity of spiritual content and form.

The condition for this synthesis to occur is that the expression of naturalness includes its negation. The human body, which is the highest and most complex of the materials reworked by artistic intuition, is not in fact autonomous, in the sense that it bears within it the traces of finitude and the «indigence of nature», and the limits of particular existence. It depends on the context in which it moves, on the infinite series of personal, social and historical conditions that determine its activity, so that «the living thing not only appears as limited but is *also* particularized within itself»¹⁷. In other words, the real human body is immersed in that «prose of the world» that constitutes the limit of the extrinsic manifestation of the immanent infinity of subjectivity. This determines the inadequacy of the natural dimension of the human to its ideality and demands that the form be purified from that which clouds the expression of the spirit.

The complete manifestation of the soul in the human body, that is, beauty in the proper sense, is realized only in art, whose task is «to portray the appearance of vitality, and most especially, that of

¹⁶ Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1, p. 283; trans. 244.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 285; trans. p. 246.

spiritual vitality too, outwardly in its freedom, to make the sensible appearance commensurate with the concept, to lead the indigence of nature, of the appearance, back to truth, to the concept»¹⁸. Only the artist, thanks to her heightened sensitivity to physiognomies and gestures, her memory and her capability to empathetic identification with emotional states, is able to transform the natural body, that still bears the traces of its finiteness and the limits of its particular existence in expression of a spiritual content.

3. *From Anthropology to History*

The reference to the concept of the organic and the doctrine of the soul is the starting point of the systematic-speculative explanation of the centrality of the human body in artistic representation. However, the analogical relationship of beauty with the idea of vitality and the soul-body connection is still insufficient to account for the intrinsic historicity of art as a moment of the absolute spirit, which as such calls into question the cognitive content and ethical grounding of the work of art. The need to provide a systematic explanation of the role attributed to the human body for the very definition of a work of art certainly has to do with a conception of the exemplarity of Greek art partly inspired by Winckelmann¹⁹, but it has a broader meaning and, as I will try to show, has consequences for the definition of the figurative sphere of the Romantic.

What characterizes classical art, which in visual arts is supremely represented by sculpture, is the complete adaptation of appearance to ideal content, the perfect correspondence of the internal and the external. Since in the spiritual universe of Greek civilization the free spirituality is at the same time exteriority, the divine as individual existence can only manifest itself in the natural

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. On the function of the concept of life in aesthetics see L. de Vos, *Art et vie*, in *Hegel et la vie*, ed. by J.-L. Vieillard-Baron, Paris, Vrin, 2004, pp. 155-182.

¹⁹ On this see S. Houlgate, *Hegel and the Beauty of Sculpture*, in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. by S. Houlgate, Evanston, Northwestern U.P., 2007, pp. 56-89 and J. Peters, *Hegel on Spirit, Nature and the Function of Classical Art*, in *The Art of Hegel's Aesthetics. Hegelian Philosophy and the Perspectives of Art History*, ed. by P.A. Kottman and M. Squire, München, Fink, 2018, pp. 101-124.

form of the human being, and it is an «internal instinct of rationality [*Vernünftigkeit*]» that shows the artist the way to the artistic elaboration of the human figure. In classical art, naturalness is integrated into a spiritual dimension in which it is conceived «as dominant over the external which, as one side of the totality of the inner itself, exists no longer as purely natural objectivity but, without independence of its own, is only the expression of spirit»²⁰.

This full identification of form and content that Hegel sees paradigmatically in the static perfection of the statues of the age of Phidias is in fact the culmination of a historical process of transformation of the relationship between freedom and natural rootedness within Greek culture itself, of which he provides a reconstruction in his lectures on aesthetics, based on mythological material: «Every step forward in culture is well recorded for the Greeks, and they have a myth for each one»²¹. The idea of the Greek «*Kunstreligion*», which has defined the historical-systematic position of classical art since the Jena years, authorizes, so to speak, the use of mythology as a document of the ethical-cultural evolution of the Greek world. An example of this is the interpretation of the story of Kronos devouring his children as an image of time understood as simple passing, «in which there is not yet the political, stable, connected with ends», as opposed to historical time that will be affirmed with the new gods of the polis.²² From his studies on mythology and the transformation of the religious horizon, Hegel derives, as evident

²⁰ *Ästhetik* II, p. 19; trans. p. 432.

²¹ Nachschrift Heimann 1828-29, GW 28, 3, p. 1035: «Über jeden Fortschritt in der Bildung wird den Griechen wohl berichtet, und für jeden haben sie einen Mythos». The series of lectures reflect Hegel's progressively broader engagement with contemporary studies of mythology, from those of his friend Friedrich Creuzer and Karl Otfried Müller to the mythological writings contained in Solger's *Nachgelassene Schriften* (1826), reviewed by Hegel in 1828 in the «Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik».

²² Ivi, p. 1040. The interpretation of the myth of Kronos recurs in several places in relation to the reflection on the concepts of time and space. See D. Karydas, *Von Kronos zu Zeus: Zur Ermächtigung der Zeit durch den Geist*, in *Hegels Anthropologie*, ed. by A. Arndt and J. Zovko, Hegel-Jahrbuch Sonderband, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 141-178.

above all in the various lecture cycles, an implicit historicization of the idea of the classical that partially clashes with the neoclassicism that has often been attributed to him.

The representation of the human body is a significant indicator of the evolution of Greek art. In general terms, in the classical period, the human figure is presented as significant in itself, «as a form of free spirituality» and not as a simple sign. While in principle in the symbolic the relationship between natural existence and spiritual content was one of otherness, in classical art «the human form, face, action, shows itself as spiritual in itself. This is something natural, alive. (...) The human body is not a symbol, but an organ of the spirit»²³. The term 'organ' suggests that we are dealing with a dynamic identity, in which the spiritual principle expresses itself as freedom and the foundation of action. The perfect and isolated bodily form that defines the classic is the result of a transformative process that integrates symbolic contents dialectically, that is, through a determinate negation²⁴.

What marks the transition from the symbolic to the classical is first and foremost «the degrading of the animal element and its removal from the sphere of free, pure beauty»²⁵. This should be understood in two senses: on the one hand, as the reduction of the importance of animal figures, which do not disappear but are, so to speak, desacralized and play an accessory role with respect to the human figure, and remain as a symbolic residue within the classic; on the other hand, in a more general sense as a negation of the traces of

²³ Nachschrift Heimann 1828-29, GW 28, 3, pp. 1032 ff.: «die menschliche Gestalt, Gesicht, Handlung, zeigt sich als Geistiges an ihm selbst. Diese ist etwas Natürliches, Lebendiges. [...] Der Leib des Menschen ist nicht Symbol, sondern Organ des Geistes».

²⁴ For example, in the lectures of 1826: «Es ist schon bemerkt daß diese Formen insofern sie Anschauungen besonderer Völker, religiöse Weisen derselben gewesen sind, sie Momente der Kunst sind und in der spaeteren, wahrhaften Kunst immer noch vorkommen aber auf eine nur untergeordnete Weise». (GW 28, 2, p. 656). On this subject see T. Wieland, *Die Pluralität des Absoluten. Hegels Theorie sozialen Wandels*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2022, p. 100 and p. 105 ff.

²⁵ Cf. *Ästhetik* II, p. 35; trans. p. 444.

animal vitality in the process of personification of spirituality²⁶. In its exemplary genre, sculpture, classic art operates a purification of the natural body from accidental elements, concentrating on spatiality. Nature is first expelled as negativity and then reintegrated as the exterior form of individuality. In the sphere of the symbolic, the abstract relationship of signification tended instead to place the human figure on the same level as other natural objects and determines its schematic configuration. Hegel attributes the rigidity and simplification of the figure in Egyptian art to the limited development of the subjective principle, which remains implicit, as for example in the gigantic statues of the Memnons, «Shapeless, seated figures, with closed eyes, rigid limbs that have not yet developed the freedom of movement»²⁷. The archaic statues of Aegina, unknown to Winckelmann, represent in the sequence traced by Hegel an intermediate stage in the process of the exteriorization of the divine in the corporeal, in which the naturalistic imitation of muscle masses coexists with an indeterminacy of facial features that in Hegel's view depend on a not yet achieved ability to grasp the ideality in the natural as well as to the «artist's tendency to stick to what is traditional»²⁸.

The different ways of representing the human figure therefore reflect the spiritual evolution of Greek culture, culminating in the ethical-institutional order of the polis. In the figurative universe of ancient Greece, the interaction of the spirit with nature undergoes a series of transformations determined by the affirmation of self-conscious subjectivity, which Hegel illustrates through the transition from the old to the new gods. The figures of the classical period, he states, do not represent divinities associated with natural principles or phenomena, but rather express an ethical-political role within Athenian society. A way of interpreting Greek culture that reaffirms

²⁶ On the distancing from animal corporeality as an element of the aesthetic idealization of the human body, see P. D'Angelo, *Der menschliche Körper in Hegels Ästhetik*, in *Kunst-Religion-Politik*, ed. by A.P. Olivier and E. Weisser-Lohmann, München, Fink, 2013, pp. 37-52.

²⁷ Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 675: «unförmliche, sitzende Figuren, mit geschlossenen Augen, starren Gliedern die noch nicht die Freiheit der Bewegung entfalten».

²⁸ Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1, p. 466; trans. p. 279.

the link between the principle of denaturalization and the intrinsically historical dimension of the absolute spirit. The new deities, whose representation constitutes the model of perfect beauty, are now far removed from natural determinations:

They are spiritual moral powers with an essential individuality. Such an essential spirit of a people has been represented in them. In Athena, the existence of Athens is represented both in terms of its activity and in its free spirit, which is presented objectively. Zeus is the authority of the state, the binding force, the treaties, hospitality, and political power, the bonds of human society, practical moral substance²⁹.

All this is reflected in the formal construction of the figures and in the elaboration of recurring and recognizable physiognomic typologies: «Jupiter is the image of supreme dignity and power. His head is distinguished from others. The type of this head can be found in Phidias' sculpture»³⁰. Typification is, according to Hegel, a necessary means for defining the individuality of divine figures (understood as universal individuality, not as singularity), through the medium of the natural body. In the figurative order of ancient sculpture according to Hegel, the recognizability of images and therefore memory play a significant role, although to a much lesser extent than in modern art³¹. On the other hand, Hegel suggests in various passages the existence of a natural basis for the standard of beauty. I refer to the considerations on the Greek profile as the perfect example of what he calls «the line of beauty», the line between forehead and nose, in which the Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper

²⁹ Nachschrift Heimann 1828-29, GW 28, 3, p. 1037 f.: «Es sind geistige sittliche Mächte, mit einer wesentlichen Individualität. Solcher wesenhafte Geist eines Volkes hat sich in ihnen dargestellt. In Athene ist das Dasein Athens sowohl mit seinem Treiben als auch der eigene freie Geist, der objektiv vorgestellt wird. Zeus ist die Staatsgewalt, das Bindende, die Verträge, Gastfreundschaft, und politische Macht, Band der menschlichen Gesellschaft, praktische sittliche Substanz».

³⁰ «Jupiter ist Bild der höchsten Würde und Macht. Sein Kopf ist von andern unterschieden. Im Bilde des Phidias ist der Typus dieses Kopfes zu finden». Ivi, p. 1099. See also *Ästhetik* II, p. 100; trans. p. 496.

³¹ On the role of memory in romantic art see F. Rush, *Still Life and The End of Painting*, in *The Art of Hegel's Aesthetics*, ed. by Kottman and Squire, pp. 160-187.

«finds the chief difference between the formation of human face and animal profile», as well to the references to Blumenbach's theories on the origin of races³².

4. *Enhanced Anthropomorphism*

The idea that the development of Greek art led, through a process of de-symbolization and suppression of the negative in naturalness, to an artistic form in which idea and corporeality coincide is a cornerstone of Hegel's aesthetics. The beautiful religion of the Greeks produced a full spiritualization of naturalness, which does not require any reflective mediation. Hegel, as is well known, declares that the idealized bodies of the divinities represent the pinnacle of artistic production and that it is not possible to reach a higher level of beauty. This principled classicism, which is at the basis of the systematic-speculative position of the Greek «religion of art», contrasts, however, with the evident deeper interest that the philosopher shows for post-classical art.

An initial clue to the fact that the exemplarity of classical does not fully correspond to the function that Hegel attributes to art as a form of self-understanding of the spirit is the motif, variously repeated, of the 'coldness' of Greek art, referring either to the effect produced on the spectator by the sculpture or to its very foundation: «The classical ideal is cold, lone, closed off in itself, its shape its own; there is nothing free about it. Its specific character governs all its features. The ideal is distant, unreceptive, a unity closed off in itself and therefore opposed to what is other»³³. This judgment applies in the first place to the expressive medium that Hegel considers as almost the only one representative of ancient art, namely sculpture, a genre that, in his view, requires an exercise of intellectual understanding to

³² Cf. *Ästhetik* II, 383 f.; trans. pp. 727-28. See also GW 28, 2, p. 807 and GW 28, 3, p. 1097. On Camper's theory see Elkins, *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis*, p. 183 ff. On the meaning attributed by Hegel to the profile of Greek statues see Houlgate, *Hegel on the Beauty of Sculpture*, p. 67 ff. and Peters, *Hegel on Spirit, Nature and the Function of Classical Art*, p. 118 ff.

³³ Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1, p. 413 ff.; trans. p. 337.

reach the aesthetic enjoyment of the image³⁴. «Cold marble» gives form to a ‘severe and elevated’ individuality that does not manifest the subject’s interiority, his emotional dimension and the singularity of feeling:

One therefore had also the impression that a draught of coldness, even more of sorrow, has been poured over| these heads, for instance over Zeus, Pallas pp[.] This sorrow expresses the high beauty which now shows itself in its spiritual form, the natural appearing only as subordinate to the spiritual. They are not happy figures, they do not appear content, not with the fullness of life shown in the Silenuses and the Fauns. Rather, there is a subjugation of the natural and an elevation that resembles sadness. This is the general character of the classical³⁵.

For Hegel, the fundamental limitation of classical art lies precisely in its inability to speak to our sensibility³⁶. There is therefore an intrinsic negativity in the classical, which manifests itself in indifference towards others and in the exclusion of the sphere of

³⁴ Cf. GW 28, 3, p. 1110.

³⁵ Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 725: «Man hat daher auch die Empfindung gehabt, daß ein Zug von Kälte, noch mehr der Trauer über diese Köpfe ausgegossen sei, wie z. B. über Zeus, Pallas pp[.] Diese Trauer drückt die hohe Schönheit aus, die sich nun in ihrer geistigen Gestalt zeigt, wobei das Natürliche nur als unterworfen dem Geistigen auftritt. Es sind keine gemüthlichen Gestalten, sie erscheinen nicht zufrieden, nicht in dieser Satttheit des Daseins die sich im Silen und den Faunen zeigt. Es liegt vielmehr darin ein Unterworfensein des Natürlichen und eine Erhebung die wie ein Zug der Trauer aussieht. Die. Ist der allgemeine Charakter des Klassischen». See also GW 28, 1, p. 163 and p. 392, in which Hegel alludes to the melancholy trait of ancient statues as part of the critique of the classicist vision of art, formulated by Solger in his review of the lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* by A.W. Schlegel. On this subject, see G. Pinna, *Philosophie und Philologie. Solger, Sophokles und die Trauer der Götter*, in *Deutschland und Hellas*, ed. by G. Morrone et al., Hildesheim, Olms, 2024, pp. 101-118.

³⁶ On this see G. Bertram, *Rethinking Hegel’s Modern Conception of Art*, in *Hegel’s Political Aesthetics: Art in Modern Society*, ed. by S. Bird-Pollan et al., London, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp. 196-211 and M. Donougho, *Art and History. Hegel on the End, the Beginning, and the Future of Art*, in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. by S. Houlgate, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007, pp. 179-214.

intersubjectivity, which Hegel traces back, in an apparently paradoxical fashion, to the limited anthropomorphism of ancient polytheism. After repeating that the idealized human body is the highest form of representation of subjectivity and that the classical figure constitutes its paradigm, he goes on to state that the principle of its dissolution is to be found in the image of the human being that is at the basis of Greek religion. The reasons given are historical-theological: «Christianity has pushed anthropomorphism much further; for, according to Christian doctrine, God is not an individual merely human shaped, but is an actual single individual»³⁷.

A figurative universe revolves around the figure of Christ, which on the one hand brings to the fore the emotional and immediate dimension of the person and on the other honors «the fragility of human nature as the presence of the divine»³⁸. Consequently, a new form of anthropomorphism manifests itself in Christian art, connecting the death of naturalness with the affirmation of the inner universe of the particular individual. For this reason, the human figure in post-classical art does not disappear at all but is rethought and reconfigured starting from a different conception of subjectivity and takes advantage of the dominance of a new means of representation, painting, which progressively supplants the three-dimensional body image. Hegel, Hans Belting claims, «clearly interpreted this medial history, distinguishing the ancient bodily image, in which he saw plasticity incarnated, from the image of the soul of 'romantic' painting»³⁹.

The individuality represented by the Greek statue is a universal subjectivity, rooted in an *ethos* perceived as a natural givenness, without reference to the inner condition of a single personality. This excludes the dimension of intersubjectivity, which according to Hegel manifests itself both in the isolation of the figures and in their exclusive self-referentiality. Romantic art, on the other hand, has a single subject as its object, which is infinitely free and autonomously

³⁷ *Ästhetik* II, p. 23; trans. p. 435. See also Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 742.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ H. Belting, *Bildanthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München, Fink, 2001, p. 25.

founded with respect to the sphere of objectivity. For Hegel, this new, peculiar anthropomorphism marks the overcoming of the intrinsic limitation of classical art, paradoxically closed in the adequacy of the idealized human figure, which does not call into question the observer. The romantic artistic universe is therefore anthropomorphic for Hegel, but in a much more radical form, which on one hand concentrates on the specificity of this single subject and on the other hand assumes nature as the negative of the spirit, consequently representing it without the filter of idealization, in its painful or contradictory aspects and even in its ordinary ugliness.

The reason why classical anthropomorphism is no longer possible is that the individual in his singularity can in fact no longer reflect himself «in the perfectly beautiful and indifferent image» of pagan divinities. In Christianity, on the one hand, the symmetrical relationship of similarity between God and man multiplies the ways of representing the human figure and, on the other hand, the principle of the incarnation of the divine in a single man means that that particular body, although denied in its corporeality, is 'sanctified' by the fact of being the object of the divine. It is because of this that, according to Hegel, romantic art develops models for the representation of the human body that are partly directly connected to religious content, and partly derive from the process of autonomization of particular subjectivity set in motion by the relationship between the interiority of the individual and divinity.

The first model for visual art is that of the figure of Christ in the context of the Passion stories, the definition of which indicates some essential elements of modern art in relation to the representability of spiritual content by means of corporeality and the aforementioned opposition between individuality and singularity. The crucial point is the death of naturalness, the corporeal dimension of the human that comes to the fore in the representation, but is placed as «indifferent, casual, negative» and, as such, is wounded and offended. This conception of sensible existence makes it impossible to idealize the figure of Christ, who must express a pain that is not only tolerated, as in the figure of a Niobe, but accepted as an essential part of humanity⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ See Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 822.

Hegel pays great attention to the representation of physical pain, the area where the inadequacy of a spirituality that conceives sensitivity itself as random and negative comes to the fore⁴¹. The variations on the suffering body show the impossibility of reconciling the internal and the external and of reabsorbing negativity, exemplifying a model that is not limited to this specific representation, but refers in general to the relation to signification characteristic of post-classical art. More specifically, in the Romantic, it is not the ideal that is at the center of artistic intuition, but rather its being under threat, its potential dissolution.

If we leave aside the theological component of Hegelian discourse, the attention paid to the denial of corporeality has features in common with some trends in contemporary figurative art. Thus, crucifixion is the starting point for a vast series of possibilities of expressing the opposition between the body and the self that recurs in the visual arts all the way up to contemporary art, as shown by the works of artists such as Francis Bacon or Graham Sutherland⁴².

Furthermore, the body, wracked and distorted by pain, is the focus of another area of romantic religious iconography, which takes on particular importance for the foundation of the sense of community: the representation of martyrdom. Hegel views this as a particularly risky subject for art, since the situations and acts in question are in themselves ugly, unpleasant, often repugnant. The sense of this aestheticization of the ugly, which is nevertheless affirmed as an essential moment of the modern conception of corporeality, consists in its *ex negativo* reference to the irrepresentability of the spiritual in itself⁴³. The «external laceration, the mistreatment of the corporeal» is significant in itself because this unpleasantness has its opposite in the divine, which is shown in the inner firmness of the

⁴¹ The problem of representability in the conception of pain is convincingly discussed by Hilmer, *Scheinen des Begriffs*, pp. 192 ff.

⁴² On the variations and transformations of the crucified body, from Rubens to Rembrandt up to the present day, see Elkins, *Pictures of the Body*, p. 95 ff.

⁴³ For a more detailed examination of the question of the ugly as a central element of modern aesthetics, as opposed to interpretations centered on Hegel's 'classicism', see A. Gethmann-Siefert, *Hegel über das Hässliche in der Kunst*, «Hegel-Jahrbuch», II, 2000, pp. 21-41.

martyr, in the endurance of torments⁴⁴. In other words, it is the principle of the subject's freedom that manifests itself through the endurance of pain by individuals who must «be marked with the imprint of temporal existence», displaying «the fragility of finitude and naturalness»⁴⁵.

In some areas of symbolic art, too, a distortion of corporeality can be found in the representations of the colossal and the grotesque – Hegel mentions the multi-armed figures of Indian deities – but for opposite and specular reasons to what happens in the Romantic. In the symbolic, in fact, the figure as such is not autonomous in its natural configuration, because - having its universal meaning apart from itself – the figure seeks to achieve this meaning by going out beyond itself⁴⁶. The consequences for the representation of the human body were, in the symbolic, a fantastic twisting or an enlargement of the figure, or the extreme schematization of forms (as in Egyptian art), and in the Romantic, instead, the hyperbolic representation of its possible destruction. In the religious sphere of the Romantic, this imbalance in the direction of an immediate naturalness that the concept is still unable to give form to, is counterbalanced by the expression of a spirituality that relates to the natural as to its own negativity. Although, even in romantic beauty the soul manifests itself through corporeality, it must «show itself at the same time as being brought back out of this corporeality into itself and as living in itself»⁴⁷. The soul remains extraneous to corporeality, it does not try to penetrate the body or idealize it. The body is thus opposed to an interiority that presents itself as the foundation of existence: art can therefore accept within itself and subjectively mold «the traces of temporality, the necessity of nature, the exteriority of existence». On the one hand, reality is reduced to an indifferent appearance, on the other hand, the soul can only be understood and represented through the suffering of the body.

The denial of the body that is at the center of religious imagery and representation, however, is not the only way in which the

⁴⁴ See GW 28, 2, p. 745 and *Ästhetik* II, p. 161.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1, p. 345; trans. p. 295.

⁴⁷ *Ästhetik* II, p. 144; trans. p. 531.

human figure is depicted in the romantic period. Hegel's considerations on the first phase of romantic art are based on one hand on the idea of the historical-intellectual fracture represented by Christianity and on the other on the contemporary revaluation of medieval and Nordic painting, with which he had come into contact through the Boisserée brothers in Heidelberg⁴⁸. An additional dividing line was notoriously traced by the process of secularization triggered by the Reformation, which corresponds to the phase of the «abstraction of subjectivity», artistically embodied above all in Flemish and Dutch painting. Its various forms, from genre paintings to portraits, represent for Hegel the worldly dimension of post-classical art, the foundation of which is subjectivity, which progressively asserts its independence from objective conditions, manifesting itself in its contingency and specificity. In the more recent phase, in the modern in the true sense of the word, the key concept becomes singularity (*Einzelheit*), which defines the subject acting autonomously within the historical context: «it is the actual individual person in his inner life who acquires infinite worth, since in him alone do the eternal moments of absolute truth, which is actual only as spirit, unfold into existence and collect together again»⁴⁹. In Hegel's analysis, this does not lead to an «almost disappearance» of the human figure in modern art, which would go hand in hand with the decline of the figurative arts, as Torsen states⁵⁰, but rather to a progressive shift in the focus of representation, on the one side from the human figure to the human figure in relation to others, in context or in movement, on the other side from idealization to the rendering of the individual features. This is particularly relevant in pictorial representation, but also partly concerns, as I will show later, post-classical sculpture.

⁴⁸ On this see O. Pöggeler, *Hegel und die Geburt des Museums*, in *Kunst als Kulturgut – Die Bildersammlung der Brüder Boisserée*, ed. by A. Gethmann-Siefert and O. Pöggeler, Bonn, Bouvier, 1995, pp. 197-205.

⁴⁹ *Ästhetik* II, p. 131; trans. p. 521. On the 'abstract subjectivity' that defines the final phase of romantic art, see G. Pinna, *Formalismus und Geschichtlichkeit. Zur Pluralität der modernen Kunst in Hegels Ästhetik*, in *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen. Formen und Funktionen von Pluralität in der ästhetischen Moderne*, ed. by S. Schneider und H. Brüggemann, München, Fink, 2011, pp. 77-88.

⁵⁰ I. Torsen, *The Future of Hegelian Art History. On the Body in Late Modern Sculpture*, in *The Art of Hegel's Aesthetics*, ed. by Kottman and Squire, pp. 303-330.

5. *On Portraiture*

In the historical-artistic framework outlined by Hegel, the variety and greater complexity of the ways of conceiving the relationship between interiority and corporeality coincide with the transition from sculpture to painting as the prevailing medium of figurative art. In modern painting, the face becomes the focal point of the representation of the body and of the image in general, since in the irrepressible particularity of individual features what manifests itself is not only an interiority concentrated on itself, but also a complex of relationships that bind the subject to its historical, social and personal context. The role and meaning that Hegel attributes to the human face in modern art depends not only on the fact that the «appearance of the spirit» is always present in it, but also on the fact that this appearance calls forth the reflective and emotional reaction of the spectator. As mentioned above, Hegel takes from the physiognomic tradition the idea of a correspondence between the different parts of the face and the psycho-physical constitution of the human being⁵¹. Hence the considerations on the expressiveness of the mouth, on the profile as an indicator of character and above all on the eyes, through which the image establishes a reciprocal relationship with the spectator. Modern culture proceeds by way of reflection, and the physiognomic intuition of the artist is what, according to Hegel, makes possible a figurative synthesis that goes beyond the expressive possibilities of the natural figure as well as the reconstruction of a historically determined reality through the variety of singular figures.

This is connected to the emergence of what Hegel calls the portrait-like character (*das Portraitartige*) of romantic art, which can be found in different ways both in Christian imagery and in the representation of the individual within secularized bourgeois society. The term portrait does not only designate an artistic genre, notably pictorial, but also a specific method of representing an internalized subjectivity, alienated from nature and shaped by the individuality of the character. The centrality of the face aims to bring out the

⁵¹ Cf. GW 28, 3, p. 1097. On this topic see A. Koschorke, *Zur Kunstgeschichte der Nase*, in *Gesichter. Kulturgeschichtliche Szenen aus der Arbeit am Bildnis des Menschen*, ed. by S. Weigel, München, Fink, 2013, pp. 187-200.

personality of a specific individual. Despite a partial elimination of naturalistic details, necessary for Hegel in the elaboration of the image as an artistic product, the specific imprint of the person represented as a real person must remain.

Actually in Hegel's account, the nature and use of the portrait varies depending on the phases of romantic art. Hegel also includes in portraiture the representation of the face of Christ, which, he argues, cannot be pure ideality as in the representations of Greek gods, since its essential feature is the pain that marks him as part of the human as well as of the divine. Because the human appears in Christ as «an individual, in single temporality», in which absolute inwardness is revealed, – Hegel affirms – his figure «as an object of art is not an ideal, but a portrait, this man»⁵². The idealization typical of classical statues is replaced by the iconographic fixation of somatic features that express the inner suffering of the god-man. In short, for Hegel the images of Christ, as well as those of the main religious figures, represent a sort of middle ground between the tendency towards the individualization of portraiture and a peculiar form of Christian idealization. This quasi-portrait status is connected almost exclusively to the representation of inwardness in the religious sphere and differs from the idea of the portrait that Hegel indicates as a typical expression of the secular modern world.

As he notes in commenting the work of the contemporary painter Gerhard von Kügelgen, it is not possible to represent the face of Christ or saints, who are figures from another time and another world, with features that «show the basic tone of modern facial formation»⁵³. Contemporary religious painting seems anachronistic to him in its attempt to visually adapt the representation of figures expressing a past phase of the development of subjectivity to a secularized sensibility. Although the religious sphere remains a current dimension of individuals' lives, in the late phase of

⁵² Nachschrift Heimann 1829 (variant Libelt), GW 28, 3, p. 1059.

⁵³ Hegel's reflections on the subject are contained in a 1821 essay, and reiterated in his aesthetic lectures. Cf. *Über von Kügelgens Bilder*, in *Schriften und Entwürfe I (1817-1825)*, GW 15, p. 204 ff. Cf. also GW 28, 1, p. 157. On this topic see G. Stemmrich, *Das Charakteristische in der Malerei – Statusprobleme der nicht mehr schönen Künste und ihre theoretische Bewältigung*, Berlin, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1994, pp. 126-136.

Romanticism, marked by what Hegel calls abstract subjectivity, it has lost its cultural centrality. On the opposite side are Murillo's begging children, whom Hegel seems to admire greatly, as well as the portraits and genre scenes of Dutch painting, which, precisely through their renunciation of idealization, make their spiritual content visible, an earthly, secular joy of life⁵⁴. The difference between what I have called a quasi-portrait and a portrait in the proper sense clearly emerges in his descriptions of the large pictorial groups of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance in which, alongside the figures of saints, whose «exterior form is adequate to express their piety, humility and love», we see those of the commissioners, real individuals immersed in the «prose of life».⁵⁵

These considerations express a view of the representation of the human figure that reflects the evolution of the romantic in the direction of modernity in the proper sense. Here Hegel concentrates specifically on the difference between the religious and the secular world reflected in the artistic treatment of facial traits. While it was Christianity that determined the 'enhanced' anthropomorphism of post-classical art, the progressive reduction of the religious component in the visual imagery of the Western world has resulted in the prevalence of an individualizing treatment of features and expressions (physiognomic and pathognomic characterization) that distinguishes itself from, or even in contrast with, the iconographically fixed emotionality that transpires from the faces and postures of the Madonna and the saints.

⁵⁴ Hegel discusses Murillo's works, exhibited at the Staatsgalerie in Munich, in the 1828-29 lectures. See GW 28, 3, p. 961 and *Ästhetik* I, p. 224; trans. p. 170. On Hegel's interpretations of dutch painting see A. Gethmann-Siefert, *Hegel über Kunst und Alltäglichkeit. Zur Rehabilitierung der schönen Künste und des ästhetischen Genusses*, «Hegel-Studien», XXVIII, 1993, pp. 215-265; B. Rutter, *Hegel on the modern Arts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 63-119; Rush, *Still Life and the End of Painting*; G. Tomasi, *La bellezza dell'ordinario. Su Hegel, la pittura olandese del 600 e Jeff Wall*, «Verifiche», XV (1-2), 2016, pp. 183-218.

⁵⁵ Specifically, Hegel refers to the so-called Columba Altar by Rogier van der Weiden (in his time attributed to van Eyck) of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, then part of the Boisserée collection, where he had the opportunity to admire it. Nachschrift von Griesheim, GW 28, 2, p. 125. See also *Ästhetik* III, p. 55 ff.

In the section on romantic form of art, the term portrait indicates, with different nuances, both the pictorial genre and the prevailing expression of the abstract-subjective tendency of the last phase of romantic art, which relates to the concept of characteristic.⁵⁶ At the center of portraiture in the proper sense is the evidence of the real existence of the subject and his self-perception. What is relevant, however, is not the actual identity of the person depicted, but the historical and social status of the individual, which, together with the physiognomic characteristics, determines the meaning. In the portrait, the subject appears as a self that actively contributes to the representation and is staged as part of a specific symbolic context. Since activity defines the essence of the modern subject and his or her self-understanding, the depiction cannot rise above «this particular active and operative form of life; for as a portrait it is a particular view of the individual in his particular environment»⁵⁷.

Intersubjectivity is involved at various levels in the construction of the image. Firstly, it is only through a process of interpretation and understanding that the artist can select the elements of the face and figure that express both the character of the subject portrayed and the general abstract subjectivity (what Hegel calls in his 1823 lectures «*der Humanus*»). The portrait – Hegel states – must be «the expression of the spiritual peculiarity, of the particularity of the character» and «it is not enough that the artist sees the face only once, but he must know more or less the way of being of the man, he must know more closely the type of sensations and how they are expressed in the physiognomy»⁵⁸. It is a process of comprehension that is not solely sensorial and visual but also rational, the result of which is reflected into the representation. This reflective mediation is the criterion for the visual construction of the image, when «exteriority has become a more indifferent exteriority» and is offered «to

⁵⁶ The theme of the portrait appears in the Berlin lectures mainly in three points: in the discussion on the beauty of nature in reference to the concept of imitation, in the section dedicated to the dissolution of the romantic art form, which is called from time to time «the formal» (1820-21, 1829), «formalism of subjectivity» (1823) or «the particularity of character» (1826) and finally in the section on painting.

⁵⁷ GW 28, 3, p. 1094.

⁵⁸ Nachschrift von Griesheim 1826, GW 28, 2, p. 578.

a third party, the spectator»⁵⁹. The subject depicted therefore appears at the same time as identity with himself and as a being for another, but above all he challenges the sensitivity and judgment of the viewer.

The relationship established between the spectator and the image through the gaze of the portrayed individual is intrinsically intersubjective:

the portrait [...] becomes present to us in a living fashion when it looks at us, when its gaze is directed at our eyes: but this is because it now seems to us as if we were present to it, for it seems to look into us, to reflect on us, there is a mutual relationship, an interest, as it were, of the one towards the other⁶⁰.

Curiously, Jean-Luc Nancy, according to whom Hegel «both protested – with what was, for his time, genuine insight – against the debasement of the portrait as a genre and saw in it the true completion of painting»⁶¹, claims that Hegel ignored the question of the gaze in order not «to accord too much ‘spirituality’ to painting»⁶². In reality Hegel points to the gaze of the portrayed individual as the element that distinguishes the modern representation of the face from the classical ideal. The different expressive capabilities of sculpture and painting, which evidently play a role in the configuration

⁵⁹ Nachschrift Hotho 1823, GW 28, 1, p. 413 ff.

⁶⁰ Nachschrift 1823 (variant Kromayr), GW. 28, 1, p. 392: «Das Portrait z.B. wird auf eine lebendige Weise für uns gegenwärtig, wenn es uns ansieht, wenn sein Blick auf unser Aug gerichtet ist: dies kommt aber daher, weil es uns nun scheint, als seyen wir für dasselbe gegenwärtig, denn es scheint in uns hineinzublicken, über uns zu sinnem, es ist eine gegenseitige Beziehung vorhanden, ein Interesse gleichsam des Einen am Andern».

⁶¹ J.-L. Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, Paris, Galilée, 2000, p. 28; Engl. trans. by S. Clift and S. Sparks, *Portrait*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2018, p. 18. Cf. *Ästhetik* II, p. 102.

⁶² Ivi, p. 31; trans. p. 114. In defense of Nancy, one can remark that Hegel's considerations on the gaze of the portrait are found above all in the later published lectures of 1823, specifically in the transcription of Kromayr, reported among the variants of H.G. Hotho's transcription in volume 28, 1 of the *Gesammelte Werke*.

of the face, are subordinated in the Hegelian perspective to the historical transformation of the idea of subjectivity that is at the basis of artistic expression. The focus of Romantic painting on the gaze, which acts as a counterpoint to the empty eye sockets of classical statues, is a sign of the intrinsically relational, unresolved and non-self-explanatory character of modern art. The absence of the gaze in the portrayal of divinities, Hegel states, takes on «*eine höhere Bedeutung*» for us, that is, a philosophical value, if we look at the figure (*Gestalt*) of romantic art, in which the gaze, «even if it expresses nothing else, it still directly expresses the subject's self-knowledge in a specific external reality»⁶³. The gaze is therefore the feature that evidences most evidently the spatial and temporal determinacy, and the relational character of the represented subject, namely, his historical nature.

However, one should point out that the correlation between the medium of representation and the historical period is far from unambiguous. Although they too lack a gaze, modern statues according to Hegel tend towards the portrait and necessarily allude to the relationship of the represented subject with the real-life context in which his activity takes place⁶⁴. As mentioned above, in his considerations on modern, especially Dutch and Flemish painting, Hegel emphasizes the rendering of everyday life and the sensuous shining of the images. On the contrary, what interests him in modern sculpture is the historical and monumental aspects of the figure. In his accounts of his visit to the Netherlands in 1822, which was notoriously crucial for the development of Hegel's definition of the characteristics of modern painting, alongside reflections on still life and genre painting, we find a description of a sculptural group in which the individualization of the figures serves to convey a sense of historicity. This is the tomb of the Counts of Nassau in Breda, much admired by him and erroneously attributed to Michelangelo, in which «the Count lies beside his Countess in white alabaster, life-

⁶³ Nachschrift 1823 (variant Kromayr), GW 28,1, p. 410: «wenn er auch weiter nichts ausdrückt, so drückt er doch unmittelbar das Sichselberwissen des Subjekts in einer bestimmten äußerlichen Wirklichkeit aus».

⁶⁴ Nachschrift Ascheberg 1820-21, GW 28, 1, p. 141: «Die Statuen der in neuern Zeiten lebenden Personen sind Portraite, und als solche müssen bei ihnen auch die äußeren Umstände, ihr Hinaustreten ins äußere Leben, angedeutet seyn».

size on a black marble base. At the corners Regulus, Hannibal, Caesar, and a Roman warrior [...]. Nothing is more interesting than to see a character, like Caesar, depicted by Michelangelo»⁶⁵. Aside from the incorrect attribution which, as Gombrich rightly observed, testifies to the philosopher's limited knowledge of the history of art, what is relevant here is that in Hegel's reading historicity directly affects the configuration of the image and indeed constitutes the very object of the representation⁶⁶. More in detail, two aspects of modernity come into play in this group: the representation of individuality in the reclining figures (the principle of the portrait) and the historical-symbolic perspective of their institutional role expressed through the images of great personalities of the past. Here, the Ancient does not simply coincide with the classical ideal, that is, with the idealized naturalness of Greek statues, but is an integrating part of the development towards the expression of individuality in its historical concreteness. Michelangelo, after all, represented for Hegel the meeting point between the ancient and the modern. The fact that the Michelangelo he used was a fake construction certainly warns us against considering Hegel reliable as an art historian but does not call into question the fact that his conception of the relationship between the intellectual configuration of an era and artistic forms had, as Gombrich himself notes, a decisive influence on the development of modern art history.

⁶⁵ *Ästhetik* II, p. 460; trans. p. 790. Cf. also Hegel's letter to his wife from Breda, 9 October 1822, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. by J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Meiner, 1953, vol. II, p. 360.

⁶⁶ E. Gombrich, *Hegel und die Kunstgeschichte*, «Neue Rundschau», LXXXVIII (2), 1977, pp. 202-219.