

The Body and the Individual.

On the Conception of Modern Art in Hegel's Aesthetics

1. The project

The object of my research at the Italian Academy is Hegel's conception of modernity in his aesthetics and, more specifically Hegel's view on the representation of the human body in modern art. This investigation is part of a broader project on the reflection on art in German classical philosophy.

Hegel's philosophy of art has increasingly become an interesting issue in current debate, and that especially in the US scholarship. Actually, the most addressed topic is that of the end of art or of the past character of art, which is connected with the interpretation of the last phase of the development of art in the modernity, according to Hegel. Here, I'd like to approach Hegel's take on modernity from a different angle: that of the representation of the human body, which raises the more general issue of the function and the role of art in Hegel's system of knowledge. Or, to put in other words, of the place of art in what Hegel calls the forms of spirit, and, more specifically, of the relation of art with anthropology (the label Hegel gives to the investigation into the mind/body relationship).

The claim that in the representation of the human body art fully manifests the ideal, that is the unity of reality and concept, recurs frequently in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. This is generally interpreted simply as Hegel's reiteration of a traditional principle of classicism, which, following Winckelmann, views canonic Greek sculpture as the model of art in general. Certainly there is some truth in this interpretation, especially if one limits oneself to the idea of "beautiful individuality" of classical art, centred on the idealized figure of a god as a synthesis of spirit and phenomenal form. The question however becomes more complex when one takes into account two facts: The first one is the relevance for Hegel's definition of beauty in art of the concepts of soul, life and organism, concepts that, from a systematic perspective, belong rather to anthropology and philosophy of nature than to aesthetics. This is especially evident in the discussion about the relationship between natural beauty and artistic form in the first part of the *Aesthetics*, which acquires progressively more importance in Hegel's lectures, as well in the section on art in the *Encyclopedia*. The second fact is that according to Hegel the anthropomorphism of classical art is indeed a way of representation

that only partially expresses the deep significance of human existence and, in the romantic art, yields to a much more radical anthropomorphism.

2. Aesthetics and Anthropology in Hegel's theory of art

I consider first the question of the representation of the body from a “naturalistic” point of view, elaborating on the systematic structure of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit. Hegel provides an important clue in his *Encyclopedia* of 1830, in the section dedicated to art as the first moment of the absolute spirit. In this non-specifically aesthetical context, Hegel clarifies that natural forms provide productive intuition – that is art – with the materials whose intellectual content it has to perceive and elaborate. Among these, the human figure “is the highest and the true, because only in it can the spirit have its corporeity and thus its visible expression”. Because artistic intuition does not stop at the external appearance of natural objects but grasps their ideal structure, there can be no mere imitation. To explain how art can take over the essential content of the human figure, Hegel refers back explicitly to a passage of his *Anthropology* (in the section on subjective spirit) that deals with the concept of the soul (§ 411). On the one hand, art has a natural foundation in the embodiment and the in-born sense for physiognomic, and in empathy.

On the other hand corporeality in human beings, which is the first manifestation of the vital unity, is informed by consciousness, 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 ideal work of art. The body is perceived as a perceiver, it is active also in its passive function of observed object and “we could say (...) that art gives to the object a thousand eyes, in order [for art, or spirit] to be seen everywhere in it”. This is why, beyond the structural analogy between the work of art and the mind-body connection, the human body is for Hegel the fulcrum of the mimetic process that is at the basis of artistic creation in figurative arts. Mimesis is here conceived in the original Aristotelian sense of interpreting representation of the object and not as mere imitation.

3. Anthropomorphism in ancient and in modern art

If we look at the historical dimension of the aesthetics, we find that the representation of the human body plays a different role in classical and in modern art.

As already said, the unification of the soul with its external configuration represents for Hegel the ideal of art, which is expressed at its purest in the classic form. In the work of art, spirit rises above naturalness, freeing the principle of subjectivity, the awareness of existence. Yet, as soon as the signification of free spirituality becomes autonomous it must give itself a form and return to naturalness. The essence of the classic consists in this exchange between spirituality and nature, which expresses, as intuition of the sensible, the “life of the concept”. In more specifically aesthetic terms, this means in the first place that classical art, whose exemplary form for Hegel is evidently sculpture, operates on the natural object as a sort of purification of accidental elements, reinventing the figure on the basis of a mediated concept of naturalness: in other words: through idealisation. In the second place, it means that this transformed figure refers only to itself, signifies only its interiority. Since the only natural form that, by signifying itself, expresses a conceptual universe is the human form, according to Hegel the classic in its essence can only be anthropomorphic.¹ We can add that it is precisely the increasingly important role taken by the human body in the development of symbolic (that is the first stage in the historical development of art), that marks the transition from the pre-art to the true artistic ideal, that is the classic.

Nevertheless, the anthropomorphism of the classical art is for Hegel an incomplete one. Indeed the human figure in its sculptural perfection, in which corporeality itself signifies the soul in its individuality, represents at once the center of classical art but also its limit. The limit is the “imperfect” anthropomorphism of the naturalistic conception of ancient polytheism, in which the figures of divinities do embody a universal subjectivity, but never arrive at expressing the interiority of the single subject. The ancient god is defined as an “universal individuality”, that is as a type, without any reference to the internal condition of a specific personality. This excludes also inter-subjectivity, a fact which explains, according to Hegel, the tendency in Greek sculpture to isolate figures. Also the emotional component of the artistic rendering of the human is very little, since the process of idealization of the body reduces radically the physiognomic recognition.

In Christian art, anthropomorphism is again expressed in a new and more complex form, associated with the changed theological and historical-systematic coordinates of artistic intuition in the Romantic universe. The difference between the classic ideal and the divided ideality of the modern, the human (*der Humanus*), lies first of all in the distinction between the concepts of individuality and singularity, referred to the condition of subjectivity as the

¹ See *Philosophie der Kunst* 1826, 116 [translation mine].

content of art. In general, individuality in Greek art is a universal subjectivity, rooted in an *ethos* perceived as a natural datum.

Romantic art, instead, focuses on the single subject, which it sees as infinitely free and autonomous from the sphere of objectivity. Romanticism is therefore for Hegel anthropomorphic, but in a much more radical fashion. On the one hand it concentrates on the specificity of this single subject and on the other hand considers naturalness as the negative of the spirit, consequently representing it without the filter of idealization, in all its painful and contradictory aspects and, at times, in its ordinary ugliness.

Hegel concentrates himself on the one side on two aspects of the religious sphere of the romantic art that are especially relevant for our topic, the histories of Christ and the images of the martyrs, and on the other side on the portrait as a general tendency of representation in the modern world.

a. The first point is the death of naturalness, the corporeal dimension of the human that is brought to the foreground in representation, where it is posited however as “indifferent, accidental, negative” and as such is wounded and offended. This view of sensible existence makes it impossible to idealize the figure of Christ, which must express a pain that is not simply tolerated, as in the representation of a Niobe, but accepted as an essential part of humanity.

The body lacerated and contorted by pain is at the center of another genre in romantic religious iconography, which is particularly important for the establishing of a sense of community: that of martyrs. This is a particularly perilous subject matter for art, according to Hegel, because it portrays objects and actions that are ugly, unpleasant, or even disgusting. Yet, this aesthetizing of the ugly is an essential aspect of the modern conception of corporeality, which refers, *ex negativo*, to the impossibility of representing the spiritual in itself.

b. According to Hegel, the portrait is a dominant artistic expression in the more recent phases, in the modern proper, in which the key concept is singularity (*Einzelheit*). That defines in general the subjectivity that progressively affirms its independence from objective conditions, and considers itself authorized to manifest itself in its contingency and unique specificity. In this sense, singularity represents the conceptual basis of personality, the autonomously acting subject in the historical context.

Among the aesthetic consequences of this configuration of subjectivity in the modern is the re-focalization of the representation of the human figure which – maintaining its absolute

centrality in the iconic horizon of the West – progressively takes on the form of the portrait and concentrates on individual physiognomy. The spirit that perceives itself as a subject, i.e. the absolute subjectivity as abstraction, finds in the representation of a specific human figure, and in particular of a specific face, its most adequate expression. For this reason, Hegel does not consider the portrait, except sporadically, as an artistic genre, but rather as an overall tendency in modern art. Indeed the portrait, or rather, the portraying tendency (*das Portaitartige*), plays an essential role in an artistic context in which “ beauty doesn’t deal anymore with the idealization of the objectivity, but the inner form of the soul”² and the artist, free from the requirements of idealizing types, searches for, in interpreting specific physiognomies and forms, the unitary sense of the multiplicity of experiences that determine the ideal horizon, the Human in the single individual.

² *Ästhetik* II, 144.