



**The Aesthetics of Challenge:  
Mario Perniola and Dandyism**

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor

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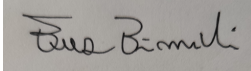
September 2020

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## Declaration

I, the Candidate, certify that the Thesis is all my own work and that I have not obtained a degree in this University or elsewhere on the basis of any of this work.

Signed:  \_\_\_\_\_

Enea Bianchi

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 04/01/2021 \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

This thesis compares the work of the Italian philosopher and writer Mario Perniola and the phenomenon of dandyism. Specifically, it focuses on Perniola's aesthetic and philosophical thought in order to develop and explore its affinity with three exemplar dandies, namely George Bryan Brummell (1778-1840), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The thesis's aim is to show that Perniola's philosophy can be considered a "dandy" philosophy. In fact, as I will argue over the course of this research, his theoretical perspective finds in the dandies' lifestyles a significant realisation, that is, his thought can be considered as an embodiment of the dandies' key behaviours and attitudes. Specifically, my work will provide an original contribution on three main points. First, although Perniola's writings have been translated into over fifteen languages, and in spite of a copious number of reviews, articles and texts published on his work, no scholar has yet highlighted the link between his philosophy and dandyism. This thesis elucidates Perniola's work precisely by interpreting it through that phenomenon, thus giving a central significance to a topic (i.e. dandyism) that has not yet been related to the Italian philosopher. Second, the scholarly literature on Perniola covers specific areas of his research and does not consider it as a whole. This thesis, in contrast, takes into account both youthful and mature writings, providing a comprehensive enquiry into Perniola's reflection. In so doing it will be the first study ever written on the whole of Perniola's thought. Finally, having had access to Perniola's private archive, I was able to gather exhaustive bibliographic material which allowed me to elaborate the first complete bibliography of Perniola's published works. The appendix at the end of this thesis includes books, articles, interviews, essays, and reviews published by Perniola (both in Italian and in English). Thus, my thesis provides a thorough bibliography of primary sources on Perniola useful to those scholars who wish to further the investigation of the Italian philosopher.

## Acknowledgments

Throughout the writing of this dissertation I have received a great deal of support and assistance.

I would first like to thank the Italian Department at NUI Galway, especially my Supervisor, Prof. Paolo Bartoloni, whose expertise into the subject matter was invaluable. Thank you for your consistent support and guidance.

Many thanks also to my External Examiner Prof. Massimo Di Felice and my Internal Examiner Prof. Lindsay Myers, for their precious and careful readings of my dissertation as well as for their beneficial and helpful comments.

I would like to acknowledge Prof. Ivelise Perniola for allowing me to examine Mario Perniola's private archive, which brought my work to a deeper and higher level. I would also like to thank Prof. Antonio Manfreda for his precious advices.

I would like to thank my parents, Daniela Margutti and Giuseppe Bianchi, for their never-ending encouragement and patience which gave me a vital freedom in order to develop this project. Also, my thankfulness goes to my grandmother, Rossana Micacchi, for her unwavering care.

Furthermore, to my friend and colleague, Dr. Paolo Santori, my gratitude for all the hours listening to and discussing my academic concerns, hopes and future projects. Although there are clouds above, the sea has never been this open, and we are on the same vessel.

In addition, I could not have completed this dissertation without the crucial help of my friends and relatives. I would like to single out all those who in any way had a beneficial impact on me and my research during these four years, be it reading and commenting my project or assisting me during some troubling moments: Matteo Paolucci, Arianna Pagliara, Sara Bianchi, Simone Mencherini, Cian O'Brien, Vittorio Dinca, Giulia Peverelli, Zsuzsanna Balázs, Flaviano Petrucca, Giulia Viaggi, Michela Dianetti, Mattia Cestonaro, Giacomo De Luca, Aris Tsoullos, Anastasia Beltramello, Andrea Ciribuco, Anna Gasperini, Richard Jeffery, Manolo De Persis, Sara Bucci, Paolo Bangrazi, Sara Pelagaggi, Sara Falchetti, Elena Nordio, Wang Jianjiang, Giada Lagana, Andrew Ó Donnghaile, Oliver Milne, Mario Inglese, Emanuele Occhialini, Luca C. Palmas, Andrea Quintiliani, Emanuele Curcio, Martina Cesaretti, Albino Lucarelli, Takafumi Kato, Luca Salis, Michelangelo Moffa, Alessio Biancalana, Ayumi Filippone, Sabine Schneider, Clara Polisini, Luciano Micacchi, Palmiro Margutti, Alessandra Margutti, Monica Margutti, Giuseppe De Carolis, Oriana Bologna, Angè Perniola, Nadja Tawfiq, Francesca Pirisi, Hi Dee, Fabiana Bartuccelli. Thank you, every one of you is an inspiration to me, you made this journey intense and unforgettable.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to B. Irene Perin and her love.

## INTRODUCTION

The PhD Thesis *The Aesthetics of Challenge: Mario Perniola and Dandyism* compares the work of the Italian philosopher and writer Mario Perniola and the phenomenon of dandyism. Specifically, it focuses on Perniola's aesthetic and philosophical thought in order to develop and explore its affinity with three exemplar dandies, namely George Bryan Brummell (1778-1840), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The thesis's aim is to show that Perniola's philosophy can be considered a "dandy" philosophy. In fact, as I will argue over the course of this research, his theoretical perspective finds in the dandies' lifestyles a significant realisation, that is, his thought can be considered as an embodiment of the dandies' key behaviours and attitudes.

Perniola's theoretical achievements range from aesthetics to art theory, sociology of communication, and literary and political theory. Philosophically raised at the University of Turin under Luigi Pareyson's supervision, his first book, *Il metaromanzo* (1966a), was reviewed by Nobel prizewinner Eugenio Montale in *Il Corriere della Sera* (Montale 1966), enhancing Perniola's reputation among Italian intellectuals and thinkers. It was in fact during the 1960s that Perniola became acquainted and began to collaborate with figures such as Alberto Moravia, Ignazio Silone, Nicola Chiaromonte, and Guy Debord. He was also the polemical object of a poem written by Pier Paolo Pasolini in the journal *Nuovi Argomenti* (Pasolini

1968). In this fertile and dynamic intellectual milieu, Perniola gained professorships first at the University of Salerno (1970-1983) and then at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, where he taught from 1983 to 2011. Over the decades he founded four journals, namely *Agaragar* (1970-1972), *Clinamen* (1988-1992), *Estetica News* (1988-1995), and *Agalma* (2000-2018), which encompassed multifaceted areas of study, from critical theory to aesthetics, cultural studies, philosophy of art, and non-Western thought. He was also a visiting professor at numerous universities and research centres in France, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Australia, and Japan.

His philosophical trajectory made him a leading representative of Italian contemporary philosophy worldwide. The peculiarity of his figure lies in the fact that on the one hand he belonged to Italian and international academic institutions while, on the other, he was also involved in non-academic milieus, starting with the Situationists in the late 1960s and ranging from Afro-Brazilian contemporary cults to the experimental theatre of the *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*. He was therefore a thinker on and off the beaten track, so to speak – an insider and an outsider at the same time. His bibliography includes, for instance, *Estetica Italiana Contemporanea* and *Estetica Contemporanea. Un Panorama Globale*, two volumes devoted to twentieth-century's most significant aestheticians, and *L'avventura Situazionista* and *Il Sex Appeal dell'Inorganico*. The former consists of a historical account of the Situationist International – a revolutionary movement of the 1960s – and the latter explores the relationship between material culture, sexuality and perversions in the post-modern era. Hence, together with researches on canonical and traditional aesthetics, he developed theories and concepts by investigating fringe, alternative, and uncanny phenomena. Influenced by a variety of currents of thought and traditions from both the Western and non-Western worlds, including Roman ritualism, Stoicism, Jesuit-Baroque thought, twentieth-century avant-gardes, Afro-Brazilian rituals and Japanese aesthetics, Perniola gained the attention of both the academic field and the broader public. The originality of his perspectives lies in the unusual combination of heterogeneous thinkers and experiences that he managed to merge and develop alongside a philosophical, rigorous and coherent theoretical framework.

Despite the number of articles, reviews and essays published on Perniola's thought<sup>1</sup>, no comprehensive monograph on his overall reflections has been produced to date. This thesis fills this gap and at the same time aims to show how Perniola's path can be placed side by side with dandyism. Concepts elaborated by the Italian philosopher, such as the "ritual without myth", the "transit", the "inorganic", and the "artistic shadow", echo and reverberate with various attitudes and behaviours belonging to the phenomenon of dandyism.

Specifically, my work will provide an original contribution on five main points. First, as suggested, although Perniola's writings have been translated into over fifteen languages, and in spite of a copious number of reviews, articles and texts published on his work, no scholar has yet highlighted the link between his philosophy and dandyism. This thesis elucidates Perniola's work precisely by interpreting it through that phenomenon, thus giving a central significance to a topic (i.e. dandyism) that has not yet been related to the Italian philosopher.

Second, the scholarly literature on Perniola covers specific areas of his research and does not consider it as a whole. The only research which holds together multiple aspects of his work was published by Massimo Verdicchio as the introduction for Perniola's collection of essays *Ritual Thinking. Sexuality, Death, World* (Verdicchio 2001). It represents nonetheless a limited view on Perniola's publications, mostly concerned with his output during the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, it does not include fundamental books and articles published both in the previous and in the following decades. This thesis, in contrast, takes into account both youthful and mature writings, providing a comprehensive enquiry into Perniola's reflection. In so doing it will be the first study ever written on the whole of Perniola's thought.

Third, having had access to Perniola's private archive, I was able to gather exhaustive bibliographic material which allowed me to elaborate the first complete bibliography of Perniola's published works. The appendix at the end of this thesis includes books, articles, interviews, essays, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography at the end.

reviews published by Perniola (both in Italian and in English). Thus, my thesis provides a thorough bibliography of primary sources on Perniola useful to those scholars who wish to further the investigation of the Italian philosopher.

Fourth, my thesis underlines the philosophical significance of dandyism. The phenomenon of dandyism has been studied mainly by literature scholars, by nineteenth century historians and sociologists. Therefore, the research on the area focuses especially on a plethora of themes ranging from the English Regency, the 1848 revolutionary Paris and the Victorian Age. My thesis will advance the state of the art on the subject as it specifically revolves around the relationship between dandyism and several key Western philosophical ideas and traditions. I will explore, for instance, the dandies' understanding of Stoicism, the Baroque, the military mindset and aesthetics, and the Jesuit religiosity. In so doing I will focus on less researched aspects of the phenomenon of dandyism highlighting their relevance within the history of Western culture.

Finally, I will show in what terms dandyism can still be considered relevant in contemporary aesthetics and art theory. In fact, by investigating the affinities between Perniola and dandyism, I will be able to point out and examine a series of recurrent dandy ideas which are still of paramount importance within these cultural fields. For instance, in the Second Section I explore Baudelaire's idea of artificiality and "thingness" by also putting it side by side with the current developments of the digital world; also, in the last Chapter of the Third Section I show the relationship between Wilde's idea of the art work as a "living thing" and the current trends of the art world. Thus, this thesis wishes not only to give – so to speak – a philosophical dignity to dandyism, but also to show how the aesthetically oriented lifestyle of several European figures in the nineteenth century can still be relevant for today's debate.

As suggested, this thesis proposes a comparative study between Perniola's philosophy and dandyism, a correlation that no scholar has previously explored. Therefore, the critical direction adopted in the writing of this thesis consists in a comparative investigation of the connections

between Perniola and dandyism, collecting information from both primary and secondary sources.

When drawing on Perniola's own works, I focus especially on seven concepts he has elaborated over the years – *simulacrum*, *transit*, *ritual without myth*, *inorganic*, *strategic beauty*, *artistic alienation*, and *artistic shadow* – which allow me on the one hand to show the evolution of his thought and, on the other, to effectively survey his overall philosophy. At the same time, I support my interpretation with secondary literature produced by Italian and international scholars on those specific concepts (for instance Bartoloni 2007, 2011, 2019; Berardi 1974; Burch 2002; Aylesworth 2004; Marroni 1982, 2019; Sanford 2004; Verdicchio 2000; Wahbeh 2006). Along with primary and secondary sources concerning Perniola, I also examine research published by other scholars who have dealt with issues closely related to Perniola's, but who have not specifically addressed the Italian philosopher, to highlight the peculiarity of his position within the broader contemporary theoretical debate (see for instance Baudrillard 1978; Beard et al. 1998; Deleuze 1969; Rupke 2007; Vattimo 2010).

As for dandyism, I investigate both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources specifically concern Baudelaire and Wilde, since Brummell did not leave any written material. All the information we have on him comes from biographers, anecdotalists and writers of his time. Baudelaire and Wilde, on the other hand, focused on dandyism at various stages in their large body of works, providing a proper theory for the phenomenon itself. My main focus consists in interrogating their claims and theoretical positions about dandyism.

Looking at the secondary literature on Brummell, Baudelaire and Wilde I focus specifically on their dandyism in relation to three main topics. First, the relationship between dandies and their society, which for Brummell was the English Regency period (1800s and 1810s), for Baudelaire the revolutionary Paris of 1848, and for Wilde the end of the Victorian age (1880s and 1890s). Second, the dandy's lifestyle, which revolves around aesthetics, elegance, manners, and exteriority. Third and finally, material culture – that is, the importance given by the dandy to

clothing and artificiality against nature and vitalism. In so doing, I compare the three dandies' outlooks to Perniola's philosophy, highlighting their affinities.

I have chosen three exemplar dandies for one main reason. Having collected data on numerous other dandies before embarking on this thesis, I have found that although a dandyish attitude can be found rather uniformly within the phenomenon of dandyism (elegance and witticism being two central and recurrent aspects of it), a variety of perspectives, standpoints and behaviours have nonetheless arisen within the phenomenon. From my preparatory enquiry it emerged that the three dandies I have chosen present particularly deep and significant affinities with Perniola's thought. As I will explain shortly, Brummell established what I define as a *ritual clothing*, close to Perniola's idea of *ritual thinking*, in which Stoic detachment and Roman religiosity meet the dandy aesthetic; Baudelaire, in his praise of artificiality and exteriority, echoes the theory of the *inorganic* and the notion of *specularism* elaborated by Perniola; and finally, the theory of the art work as a *living form*, proposed by Wilde in *The Critic as Artist*, can be compared with the concept of the *artistic shadow*, presented by Perniola in *Art and Its Shadow* to explain the role and value of the artistic object within mass societies. Taken together, therefore, these three dandies allow this thesis to follow Perniola's path in its entirety.

Other figures related to dandyism I have examined proved to exhibit substantial and incompatible differences with the theoretical framework I have outlined here. For example Lord Byron's (1788-1824) perspective (due to his closeness to the Romantic movement) revolves around themes such as "heroism", "History", and the "absolute", concepts that are explicitly criticised both by the three dandies included in my thesis and by Perniola<sup>2</sup>. Likewise Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), author of *Vivian Gray*, a novel which depicts a cult dandy figure (and who was also a renowned dandy himself beyond being Prime Minister), builds his dandy character as a power-seeking hero in an atmosphere filled with "messianism", pride and "sense of destiny" (Moers 1960, 100). Again, as I will show in the thesis<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>2</sup> See First Section, Chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> See also Third section, Chapter 3.

Perniola and the three exemplar dandies move away from any conception of a heroic life and praise instead an everyday attitude permeated by aesthetic and ironic “storiette”. In addition, Alfred Gillaume Gabriel, known as the Comte D’Orsay (1801-1852), belonged to the aristocracy, which neither Brummell nor Baudelaire nor Wilde did. Although these latter were not revolutionaries, with their witty remarks and ironic statements within the high society of their times they were considered potentially dangerous individuals as they did not fit any standard role within the aristocracy. Thus, an essential characteristic of the three exemplar dandies and Perniola – namely their moving in-between, being at once insiders and outsiders – is lacking from d’Orsay. Finally, although Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938) is considered by scholars as a dandy (Calderoni 2012), his vitalistic and super-homistic attitudes are at odds with the desubjectivation and desubstantialisation of the self involved in Perniola’s idea of *becoming-thing* and in the three dandies’ ritual of *becoming-clothing*<sup>4</sup>. The figures briefly outlined do not represent the phenomenon of dandyism but merely share with “exemplar” or “archetypal” dandies – such as the ones chosen here – less developed aspects.

An aspect which this thesis does not cover is gender theory in reference to dandyism. There are several studies on the relationship between dandyism, body, gender and sexuality. Three main claims have been developed on this issue. Firstly, Kelly – following Captain Jesse’s account on Brummell – argues that the English dandy possessed a “neo-classical body” (Kelly 2005, 169) influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman statues. In fact, according to Kelly, the close-fitting style that Brummell pioneered was influenced by classical ideals of manliness. Brummell’s simplicity in dressing, alongside his proportionate physique, leads Kelly to conclude that his dandyism did not share effeminate or androgynous features. On the contrary, Barbey refers to dandies as androgynous figures: “Twofold and multiple natures, of an undecided intellectual sex, their Grace is heightened by their Power, their Power by their Grace, they are the hermaphrodites of History” (Barbey 1897, 141). Thus, for Barbey the

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<sup>4</sup> See Frist Section, Chapter 4.

dandies are in-between figures which display a combination of what is commonly associated with masculinity (power) and femininity (grace). Finally, Daria Kent claims that the “dandies’ celibate tendencies and attitudes towards attraction is similar to today’s asexuality” (Kent 2018, online source). Specifically, Kent points out that the dandy can be considered a queer figure because he shows a “distaste” and a distancing behaviour towards sex and reproduction. Kent suggests that the dandies, in their search for aesthetic perfection in their persona, cared only for fashion and elegance and not for other worldly pleasures.

In contrast with these three views stands Perniola’s *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico*. Perniola claims that sexuality – within the thingly and neutral dimension of the inorganic – moves beyond the traditional polarisation of masculine / feminine and beyond the classical division of genders. Although this interpretation can be included in today’s umbrella conception of queerness, it does not sit comfortably with any of these three claims about dandies’ sexuality and gender. As Perniola put it, his conception of sexuality “[...] cerca una strada che vada al di là del conflitto tra il maschile e il femminile, cerca un’esperienza cosmica che è priva di riguardo nei confronti della bellezza, dell’età e in generale della forma”<sup>5</sup>. Perniola, in fact, as Bartoloni noted, develops a “theory of segmentation” where “The body/thing becomes an infinitely divisible entity in which the distinction between masculine and feminine is constantly inverted and blurred” (Bartoloni 2011, 159-160). Therefore, I believe that the relationship between Perniola’s and the dandies’ conceptions of sexuality could be developed only to show the ways in which they depart from each other, which is not a main goal of this thesis. Nonetheless, I believe that this thesis opens up a productive critical debate that future studies on gender and dandyism could draw on, generating fruitful insights and contributions on the advancement of knowledge of both dandyism and Perniola’s work.

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<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from a letter that Perniola sent to a reader in 1994.

This thesis is divided into three main sections: *The Aesthetic of Disappearance*, *The Adventures of Feeling*, and *From Artistic Alienation to Expanded Art*.

The first section is divided into four chapters. The first three chapters each turn on a specific concept elaborated by Perniola, while the last is devoted to Brummell's dandyism. The three notions I have chosen to explore in this section – the *simulacrum*, the *transit* and the *ritual without myth* – in spite of their irreducibility and heterogeneity display a common and recurrent thread within Perniola's thought. Specifically, they involve a series of experiences and phenomena including “forms”, “appearances”, and “manners”, and the possibility for “difference”, “innovation” and “change” to emerge precisely from exteriority and formal discourses.

For instance, Perniola does not understand the simulacrum in derogatory terms<sup>6</sup>. If the simulacrum has often been understood as a deceptive simulation, Perniola instead sees it as a useful concept for interpreting both the contemporary world, with its virtual and digital simulations, and numerous experiences and traditions of thought that have arisen in the West throughout the past centuries (such as ancient Roman religiosity and the Jesuit-Baroque tradition).

The second chapter of the first section sets out Perniola's theory of transit. In order to understand this notion, I discuss an article written by Perniola entitled *Per una rivalutazione della nozione di profondità*, published in 2008 in the journal *Ágalma*. Whereas spiritualism and metaphysics link depth with interiority and ideal worlds, Perniola instead ascribes it to the earthly world and more generally to effectual reality. Richness, fullness, and depth – for Perniola – are to be discovered in the actual world we live in alongside its multifaceted manifestations.

Paradoxically, for Perniola reality is deep because it should be considered as a *stratification of surfaces*. Surfaces, for Perniola, do not imply superficiality, immediacy or banality, but, on the contrary, transit – that is, a peculiar theoretical figure for which change and innovation arise by different interpretations of the same thing. If the world is considered as a

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Baudrillard 1978 and Vattimo 2010.

fully available presence, this in turn means that everything is at hand and that it is by endlessly combining this very sameness that new patterns are able to emerge.

The connection between sameness, repetition, and difference links the second and the third sections: from the transit to the ritual without myth. The latter consists of a ritual performance where the accent is not put on a myth (that is, a meaning, a moral goal, an ideology) but on the formal performance itself. Throughout the sections I show how in both Roman and Jesuit ritualism there is a crucial connection between aesthetics, appearances, and manners on one side, and effectuality, action, and openness to the world on the other. Perniola transposes this religious idea into the philosophical realm by elaborating a *ritual thinking*, a non-ideological practice oriented toward effectiveness. Ritual thinking is connected to an epochistic reduction of the self, which implies the suspension of one's own judgement and beliefs. In fact, for Perniola, it is only by dissolving one's own desires, impulses and identity that one can gather in the external world, with its manifestations and endless possibilities.

The three concepts that I discuss in the first section are useful on the one hand to outline Brummell's figure and on the other, to show in which terms the dandy's lifestyle embodies – so to speak – Perniola's philosophy. Specifically, I discuss what I define as Brummell's everyday *ritual clothing*, which exhibits several essential aspects of Perniola's ritual thinking. In fact, where Perniola praised an idea of the ritual against the myth, Brummell likewise moved against the myths of his time (especially of the emerging middle class with its bourgeois mindset). In addition, the English dandy grounded his life on the everyday repetition of an actual dressing ritual, oriented towards the suspension of his identity and subjectivity. Paradoxically, although spending up to three hours a day in front of the mirror, Brummell meticulously worked on the disappearance of himself in the folds of his clothes and fabrics, slowly becoming a simulacrum, an artificial image with a suspended ego that nonetheless managed to become an acclaimed and recognised *arbiter elegantiarum* in the fashion-conscious London of his time.

In the second section Perniola's philosophy and Baudelaire's dandyism are discussed. The first two chapters are devoted respectively to Perniola's *theory of the inorganic* and to his peculiar conception of beauty, which he terms a *strategic beauty*. My main source for the first section is *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, together with primary and secondary sources on Perniola's theory of the thing. Firstly, I distinguish between Perniola's interpretation of the notion of "thing" and the Marxist one. The latter sees the thing as the reifying product of human work within mass society. Perniola, in contrast, traces the experience of the thing back to Paleolithic engravings, to Egyptian architecture, Baroque aesthetics, Freudian psychoanalysis and contemporary phenomena such as art installations, hardcore music, drug addictions and so forth. What holds these heterogeneous realities together is the understanding of the inorganic realm in a non-metaphysical way. In other words, whereas traditional metaphysics divides the organic and the inorganic, privileging the first term over the second, Perniola instead elaborates a peculiar idea of the thing which possesses three main aspects: the *neutral*, the *external* and the *radiative*. The neutral dimension implies an osmosis between organic and inorganic, for which the boundaries between what is inert and what is alive collapse. Instead of conveying the idea of a neutralisation of feelings, it means opening up to what was traditionally left behind by traditional metaphysics: the inorganic realm.

By discussing Perniola's claims concerning both Zen philosophy and Baroque literature, I underline a process that Perniola refers to as "specularism". Specularism implies the acceptance of one's own present in order to allow what is external, what comes from outside, to find a space within oneself. Like the mirror surface which reflects the world around itself, Perniola praises the idea of becoming-thing, specifically becoming-mirror, in order to enter in the neutral dimension of the *thing that feels*. In addition, against Marxist and spiritualist theories, which polarise human and non-human, natural and artificial, Perniola – by drawing from Wittgensteinian psychological theory and Freud's concept of *Unheimliche* – claims that things *radiate*, meaning that they may surprise, astonish and puzzle the observer.

In the second chapter I discuss the notion of *strategic beauty* elaborated by Perniola, which is influenced by several pivotal elements from the Stoic and Baroque traditions. Against objectivist and subjectivist aesthetic theories, Perniola highlights the connection between aesthetics, forms, rituals, on the one hand, and effectuality, tangible results, tactics on the other. Hence his idea of beauty entails a close attention to the present and its manifestations.

Baudelaire's work shares two main aspects with Perniola's discourse, which I highlight in the last chapter of the second section. First, the French dandy links beauty with modernity – that is, the contingent and transient aspect of one's own contemporaneity. In so doing, he does not favour any essentialist or idealistic conception of beauty but, on the contrary, a relative and more plastic one, which it is the dandy's task to extract and explore. Thus he shares both the idea of a strategic beauty, on the one hand, and, on the other, a welcoming disposition towards one's own time, as evinced in Perniola's notions of transit and specularism. Baudelaire, in fact, invites the dandy to become a mirror as large as the entire metropolis, in order to being able to welcome what comes from outside. Second, the French dandy praises the idea of an artificial and suspended life against nature and vitalism – two other polemical objects of Perniola's research. Instead of a spontaneous, ardent and passionate subjectivity, he praises an artificial individual who dissolves his/her identity in clothes and makeup, fostering the idea of an epochistic personality in the midst of urban environments.

In the last section I investigate Perniola's theory of art, focusing first on his early writings and then on his mature thought. The first chapter covers a period from 1966 to 1972, which condenses his overall perspective on art and society of those years. The articles I discuss, alongside his major work on the subject, *L'alienazione artistica*, are influenced by the counterculture of the Sixties (especially the Situationist movement) and the historical avant-gardes (especially Dadaism and Surrealism). Perniola points out that art, throughout Western history, has provided merely a halved and impoverished manifestation of human creativity. Two main reasons back up this claim. On the one hand he argues that art practices have not been

independent, being actually subjugated to ideological political diktats<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand art could have meant creative freedom only for a small number of individuals and never for the community, resulting in a separation between a few “actors” and a mass of “spectators”. Perniola’s conclusion is paradoxical. Provided that art in the Western world has always been accompanied by this alienation of creativity, he claims, the two terms are inseparable: art *is* alienation. Therefore, in order to change the *status quo*, that is, in order to overcome artistic alienation, the very concept of art itself should be overcome as well. Thus his main point is not about the realisation of art within the Western world but the realisation of creativity. In other words, creativity should be realised beyond art, as art never managed to allow individuals to express creativity authentically.

In the second chapter of the third section I discuss a shift in Perniola’s art theory. Specifically, I define it as the passage from a *more-than-life* to a *more-than-form* theory. Whilst in his early writings Perniola’s goal was to develop theoretical and practical possibilities for the re-appropriation of everyday life, following the revolutionary claims of the Situationists, in his later reflections he does not put into question the mass or “spectacular” society. Rather, he focuses on the role and the value that the art work possesses precisely within the contemporary consumerist and capitalist world. It is a shift from the centrality of life to the centrality of form: the revolutionary practice of the counterculture movements leaves room for the “enigma” and the “shadow” of the artistic object. Perniola is interested in exploring the thingly nature of art works in order to show that, regardless of any market or commercial appropriations, it is still possible for artistic forms to convey ideas, meanings and values which resist economic homogenisations. He compares the economic and promotional realms to a “light” which invests the art works. In order to avoid a complete commodification of the art world he claims that it is necessary to protect and guard the enigmatic and mysterious characteristics belonging to the art works themselves. Perniola calls this aspect “shadow”, precisely because

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<sup>7</sup> See Third Section, Chapter 1.

they resist, so to speak, the investment of light produced by art institutions and apparatuses.

Finally, the chapter on Oscar Wilde has two main objectives. On the one hand, it aims to show the continuity of the Irish dandy with the tradition of Brummell and Baudelaire. Specifically, I discuss the essays in which Wilde argues for dandyism and aesthetic-oriented lifestyles focusing particularly on four core themes: the relationship between beauty and contemporaneity; the praise of artificiality against nature; the privilege accorded to exteriority and elegance; and, finally, the critique of bourgeois society. The first sub-chapter shows in which respects Wilde's dandyism still possesses the essential aspects of the previously explored dandies. The subsequent sub-chapters underline, in contrast, both the peculiarity of Wilde's path and its connections with Perniola's philosophy. Drawing on Regenia Gagnier's research on Wilde and the Victorian public (1987), I claim that the Irish dandy's ironic witticism shared several characteristics with the avant-garde practice of the *detournement* (diversion), praised both by the Situationists and Perniola. As I will clarify, Wilde's aim was to use new technological tools – the press, large scale editions, trendy magazines and journals, etc. – in order to subvert them from within, and make art possible regardless of the growing commodification of culture and tastes. In addition, the last sub-chapter investigates Wilde's art theory contained in the essay *The Critic as Artist*, where he claims that the art work can be considered as a “living thing” or ever-changing aesthetic form, which is echoed, I argue, by Perniola's theory of the “inorganic” and by his notion of the “shadow”.

In conclusion, this thesis is based on the hypothesis that the core idea emerging from both Perniola and the dandy as explored throughout the thesis is that of “challenge”. As my overall thesis shows, in fact, the figures investigated share the essential characteristic of engaging in a continuous aesthetic challenge towards their own lives and times. Several polemical objects of this challenge were examined: from the bourgeois mindset to romantic idealism; from vulgarity to nature; from metaphysics to spiritualism. Perniola and the dandies, in other words, have elaborated a philosophy and practice *in opposition*, which nonetheless accepts reality in

its many-sided aspects and possibilities. “Opposition”, “challenge”, and *amor fati* (“love of fate”) are at the heart of the figures I discuss. Brummell, Baudelaire, Wilde and Perniola are united by a unifying common thread that weaves the aesthetical and the practical domains together, creating the possibility that life and art might be united as a whole.

**FIRST SECTION**  
**THE AESTHETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE**

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Simulacrum**

#### *Introduction*

This section is divided into four chapters. The first three develop three core concepts of Perniola's philosophy – the “simulacrum”, the “transit” and the “ritual without myth” respectively. The last chapter shows how these share an affinity with George Bryan Brummell's dandy lifestyle. On the one hand, the objective is to critically reconstruct the core themes of Perniola's thoughts and, on the other, to show how they are synthesised by the figure of the English dandy. I have chosen to start my enquiry on the Italian philosopher by focusing on the notion of “simulacrum” for two main reasons. First, it allows this thesis to clarify Perniola's aesthetical standpoint by comparing and contrasting it with other scholars' theories (in particular that of Jean Baudrillard); second, also the dandy lifestyle – as I will clarify – can be understood within the horizon of the simulacrum. Thus, by focusing on the theory of the image as “simulacrum” both in ancient Roman religious rituals and the Jesuit-Baroque tradition, I will start to discuss several key ideas that will also recur in the last chapter, devoted to dandyism.

## *Beyond Truth and Appearances*

The term simulacrum derives from the Latin *simulacrum*, which means “image”, “representation”. It has the same root (*simul-*) of *simulare*, a verb translatable with “to copy, represent, feign”. In its early use it indicated, above all, a statue or an image of the gods, but also a portrait or a sculpture representing a person. At a first glance, the simulacrum consists of a form or semblance of something else. In this sense, it means “something that imitates another”. This notion has been the focus of several interpretations in the twentieth century which put it at the centre of the philosophical and sociological debates (such as Deleuze 1969, 1983; Baudrillard 1978; Lyotard 1979; Klossowski 1981). Specifically, as Perniola claims: “esso [the simulacrum] prende origine dall’orizzonte concettuale aperto dall’intuizione nietzscheana di una abolizione simultanea del mondo vero e del mondo apparente, intesa come fine della metafisica” (1979, 69). In order to understand this statement, I will explore in this chapter three main thinkers. First, I will develop Gilles Deleuze’s perspective drawing from a chapter on the idea of simulacrum in his *Logique du sens* (1983). Deleuze’s analysis allows this thesis to clarify in what terms the simulacrum can be understood as an anti-Platonic notion – as Perniola also suggests in the previous quotation. Second, I will concentrate on Baudrillard’s seminal article “La précession des simulacres” (1978) and, finally, on Perniola’s overall theory of the simulacrum, mainly developed in his *La società dei simulacri* ([1980] 2011a) alongside other essays and articles (Perniola 1978, 1979). By explaining Baudrillard’s standpoint on the simulacrum, I will be able to distinguish his position from Perniola’s. As I will clarify, in fact, the former still holds the Platonic view that simulacra are “deceptive copies” of an “original” reality; in contrast, the latter explores the very possibility of the idea of simulacra as an existential and effectual dimension which could help the individual in understanding today’s world. In so doing, I will include several scholars who commented on and devoted articles to the notion of the simulacrum developed by the Italian philosopher (focusing especially on Bukdahl 2017).

In his *Logique du sens*, Deleuze points out that the distinction between an original, a copy and a simulacrum can be traced back to Plato's theory of Ideas (Deleuze 1983, 45). For Platonic dialectics it is crucial to distinguish between essence and appearance, intelligible and sensible, Idea and copy, model and simulacrum. But Deleuze emphasises a second Platonic distinction: "*Copies* are secondhand possessors, well-grounded claimants, authorized by resemblance. *Simulacra* are like false claimants, built on a dissimilitude, implying a perversion, an essential turning away" (47). In other words, Plato distinguishes not only between Ideas and essences on the one hand, and copies and appearances on the other: in the very domain of appearances another distinction is brought forward, that between good and false copies. A good copy would be something that "resembles" the Idea, for instance, something is considered "just" if it is founded on the essence of "justice". Likewise, something is considered "beautiful" if it reminds the individual of the Ideal beauty contemplated by the soul before its incarnation. Therefore, a copy is a "good claimant" if it is grounded upon the Idea, which is ontologically superior. The simulacrum, on the contrary, is for Plato an image without resemblance, it is thus deceiving because it does not pave the path to truth, essence and ideas like the good copies. In order to understand how a copy can deceive, Deleuze also refers to the Christian tradition:

The catechism, so fully inspired by Platonism, has familiarized us with this notion [the simulacrum]. God made man in His own image and to resemble Him, but through sin, man has lost the resemblance while retaining the image. Having lost a moral existence in order to enter into an aesthetic one, we have become simulacra. (48)

Deleuze, in other words, stresses the attention over the fact that although a simulacrum can maintain a semblance with its model, it possesses an "interiorized dissimilarity" harshly criticised by both Platonic and Christian traditions. Simulacra would thus be "corrupted images", "degraded icons", subversive and tricky simulations. The simulacrum, to put it in other words, is that which does not obey the hierarchy of semblances

and samenesses. The goal of Platonism and Christianity – Deleuze continues – has been to hunt down and repress the “rebellious” simulacra in order to maintain the “good copies” victorious.

Following Nietzsche’s argument in *The Twilight of the Idols*, Deleuze wishes to “overthrow Platonism” by redeeming the status of the simulacra. In a passage entitled “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” (Nietzsche 2005, 171) Nietzsche summarises what he refers to as “the history of an error”, namely the changes undergone by the metaphysical idea of a “true world” within Western philosophical thought. To recapitulate it, for Nietzsche Plato set up an enduring and influencing distinction, between an illusory and a true realm. On the one hand ideas, essences – truth – and on the other hand phenomena, copies, contingency – illusion. Nietzsche then highlights the progress of this idea, through Christianity, Kant’s criticism, and Positivism, up until its refutation. This last is – for Nietzsche – the main consequence of the event he calls the “death of God”. To put it briefly, this famous statement implies that through science, psychology, biology, and several developments in philosophy (such as the Nietzschean idea of “genealogy”), the recurrent ideas of metaphysics have lost their power and influence.

Nietzsche’s book *Human, All Too Human* displays in its very title the core reason for the fall of metaphysics. Metaphysical concepts such as “truth”, “substance”, “morality”, and “God” appear to Nietzsche as products of the human mind, and thus contingent, relative to a given time, and not “eternal” or more “real” than the supposedly inferior world of appearances. To give a concrete example, Freud’s statements in his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* can be useful. According to the father of psychoanalysis, there have been three great “outrages against” humanity’s “naive self-love” (Freud 2000, 250). The first was the Copernican revolution, which showed that the earth is not at the centre of any cosmos, and that instead it is a planet orbiting around the Sun, with hundreds of thousands of similar solar systems in the universe. The second was Darwin’s discovery that man cannot be considered the product of God’s creation – which would pose him at the centre of the world – but a species among other species descending from lower animals. Finally, the third was Freud’s own psychoanalytic

theory, according to which humans are not masters of their own minds because of the psychic influence of the unconscious. Nietzsche's idea of the "death of God", I would argue, belongs with these transformations. Through his genealogical method, the German philosopher investigated the "all-too-human" psychological origins of metaphysics and its supposedly eternal concepts. The death of God can, therefore, be understood as the end of the (illegitimate) supremacy of absolute truths. As a consequence, the world of appearances not only becomes the only actual existing reality, but it also loses its negative and debasing aspects. In fact, from the moment at which metaphysical hierarchy is no longer imposed over appearances, they are freed from the burden of being mere copies. The ideas of origins and original do not fit in a world devoid of metaphysics: if there are no absolute and eternal ideas on which things are shaped and modelled, these very things lose their statuses of copies and semblances. The circle that holds together original and copy is broken, and instead of a metaphysical polar opposition, humans are left with simulacra, or images which do not refer to an original. Deleuze – following Nietzsche – claimed that the overthrow of Platonism, i.e. the negation of the superiority of the "original", also liberates the simulacra from being "deceptive copies".

The distinction between a real and an apparent world is also investigated by Perniola in *La società dei simulacri*. In this volume, Perniola on one side focuses on the critique of metaphysics elaborated by Martin Heidegger and Pierre Klossowski; on the other he develops his theory of the simulacrum by analysing Roman religious rituals and the Jesuit-Baroque tradition.

I will concentrate in this thesis especially on Perniola's interpretation of several Roman rituals and on St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* for two main reasons. On the one hand I agree with various scholars (such as Silva 1980; Bukdahl 2017; Capovin 2020) that Perniola's most original insights are precisely the ones devoted to the theory of simulacra in these traditions; on the other hand it allows me to show the affinity between the simulacrum of death and the dandy lifestyle, which will be investigated in the last chapter of this section.

As suggested, the theory of the simulacrum goes back to Plato's distinction between a real and a false world (respectively, that of ideas and that of appearances). Nietzsche, followed by Deleuze and Klossowski in the 1960s and 1970s, put the Platonic metaphysical structure into question by starting to elaborate a theory of simulacra as images freed from the burden of any "original". Another significant interpreter of the notion of simulacrum was the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Perniola's first essay on the simulacrum was published in the journal *Traverses* (1978, 39-49), in the same issue as another article on the same subject by Baudrillard (3-38). In order to understand Perniola's perspective on this notion it is important to remember that it was elaborated over the same years in which Baudrillard developed his own. The two philosophers knew and commented on each other's standpoints, reaching divergent conclusions. First, Baudrillard speaks of the simulacrum in terms of a *hyperreal* (*hyperréel*):

If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory [...] Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself. (Baudrillard 1988, 166-7)

This example of the map and the cartographers sheds light on Baudrillard's perspective on the simulacrum. In fact, by considering the territory as *real* and the map as a *simulation*, he appears to still be entangled within the Platonic oppositional worldview discussed so far. In contemporary society, Baudrillard argues in the quoted passage, the real (the territory) is substituted by its simulation (the map). The simulacra, following Baudrillard's claim, have come to possess an ontological priority

over what was once the real world. Furthermore, it is the simulation which shapes the “remainders” of the real, characterised by the French philosopher as “desert-like”.

Baudrillard uses a variety of contemporary phenomena to back up his claims, from Disneyland to popular reality TV shows. Describing Disneyland, which he considers “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation” (176), he employs terms such as “illusion”, “phantasms”, “deep-frozen infantile world”, and “phantasmagoria”. It is well known that Disneyland represents an imaginary world of pirates, anthropomorphic animals, futuristic roller-coasters and castles. But, according to Baudrillard, it hides a much deeper truth about the current world: “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (176). In other words, Disneyland is an example of the (simulacral) map which shapes the (real) territory of the USA. For this reason Baudrillard speaks of today’s reality as a hyperreality, informed and shaped by a simulation: “Per Baudrillard, il simulacro è l’esito della sostituzione del reale con i segni del reale prodotta dal potere operativo del codice semiotico [...] I DNA e i sondaggi non descrivono una realtà biologica o politica pre-esistente, ma la costituiscono, la pre-determinano – ‘precessione dei simulacri’” (Capovin 2020, 21). “Precession of the simulacra” is the name Baudrillard gave to this condition, the precedence of simulacra and simulations over reality. Whereas for Plato the real world precedes the world of appearances, Baudrillard inverts that order: it is now the world of appearances and simulations that reigns over that of reality. Ultimately, Baudrillard is still caught within the idea of the hierarchical superiority of the real over the “illusory” simulacra.

Although both Baudrillard and Perniola, as I will clarify, consider the notion of simulacrum of paramount significance in order to understand current events, they part ways in their interpretations of it. If Baudrillard, as suggested, underlines what he refers to as the dumbing down effects of simulations (from Disneyland to TV shows), which lead “reality” to desertification, Perniola understands it differently – by trying to define and analyse possible solutions to, and alternative strategies concerning, the

relationship between power and knowledge, image and existence within a society of simulacra. Perniola himself claims that Baudrillard's theory is a significant contribution to the field: "L'originalità di Baudrillard consiste nell'applicare questo concetto [the simulacrum] nell'analisi di fenomeni sociali e politici in cui la realtà sembra essersi completamente dissolta in una spirale infinita di rimandi e di segni, privi di referente" (Perniola 1979, 69). Nonetheless, he criticises the "derealisation" (derealizzazione) implicit in the notion of simulacrum as a deceiving "hyperreality" for Baudrillard, where for Perniola the opposite holds true. Baudrillard's nostalgia for the "real" reveals a Platonic approach which is at odds with Perniola's theory:

Il simulacro non è uno spettacolo ricreativo, né una messa in scena manipolatoria e mistificante, ma un mimetismo che implica la scoperta della precarietà dell'esistenza e la sospensione della soggettività individuale: esso è una terapia per sopravvivere, trasformando il sentimento di smarrimento e di demoralizzazione in una volontà di sfida e in un'ebbrezza prossima alla trance. (Perniola 2011a, 8)

This passage – included in the Introduction to the second edition of *La società dei simulacri* – is crucial in order to grasp Perniola's understanding of the simulacrum. First, he disentangles his view by that of Baudrillard claiming that the simulacrum is irreducible to a "spettacolo ricreativo" (such as Disneyland) or to a "messa in scena manipolatoria e mistificante" (such as the mass-media). Perniola characterises the simulacrum with a different set of terms: "suspension of subjectivity" (*sospensione della soggettività*), "survival therapy" (*terapia per sopravvivere*), "will to challenge" (*volontà di sfida*) and *trance*<sup>1</sup>. Why does Perniola associate the simulacrum with such heterogeneous notions? What does the contemporary digital and informatic society share with religious ritual? If several scholars have discussed the contemporary pervasiveness of images in terms of narcissism and cult of the personality (cf. Lasch 1979;

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<sup>1</sup> These notions find a significant affinity with the dandy lifestyle. In fact, as I will discuss in the last chapter of this section, Brummell embodies several core characteristics of Perniola's interpretation of the simulacrum. The English dandy challenges the myths and the values of his age through a desubjectivated and ritual attitude.

Illouz 2013), why does Perniola define our society in terms of “desubjectivation”?

First, according to Perniola, it is misleading to think of a “society of simulacra” as beginning only with the age of the mass-media and the spread of the Internet. The contemporary age is indeed marked by the ubiquitous technical reproducibility of informational content (Benjamin 2008), along with the infinite possibilities provided by its unlimited simulation and repetition through the Web and the virtual world<sup>2</sup>. But religious, political, philosophical, and ordinary attitudes grounded on the simulacrum long predate these modern media. Perniola identifies this concept first in two ancient Roman religious rituals, and then in the religious thought of the Jesuits (discussed in this and the following sub-chapters respectively).

To develop the simulacrum’s meaning, Perniola explores two sources from the Roman era: the *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch (46-120 AD) and the *Saturnalia* by Macrobius (390-430 AD). Specifically, Perniola focuses on the *Parallel Lives*’ thirteenth section, concerning the life of the second King of Rome, Numa Pompilius (754-673 BC). He tells the story of the blacksmith Mamurius Veturius, the “first artist” known to Roman history. The tale is as follows:

Nell’ottavo anno del regno di Numa una pestilenza che serpeggiava per l’Italia invase anche Roma. Dice la storia che, mentre la popolazione era in preda allo sconforto, uno scudo di bronzo cadde dal cielo e finì nelle mani di Numa. Su di esso il re divulgò una storia sensazionale, che disse di aver appreso da Egeria e dalle Muse: lo scudo era stato mandato dagli dei per la salvezza della città, e bisognava custodirlo facendone altri undici dello stesso tipo, grandezza e forma, onde rendere impossibile a chi volesse rubarlo di indovinare qual era quello caduto dal cielo, se fossero stati tutti uguali [...]. Ciò annunciò Numa, e le sue parole furono suffragate, dicono, dalla cessazione immediata della pestilenza. Ma quando presentò ai fabbri lo scudo, tutti rinunciarono, tranne uno, Veturio Mamurio. Questo autentico maestro della sua arte ottenne una tale precisione e li costruì tutti

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see *Software Takes Command* (2013) by the media theorist Lev Manovich.

così uguali, che neppure Numa stesso poteva più distinguere quello originale (quoted in Perniola 1985, 149).

As Perniola points out, the operation carried out by Mamurius is situated beyond the Platonic opposition of “true” and “false”, “copy” and “original”. The theory of the simulacrum opens up an alternative conception of art and aesthetics.

Aesthetically speaking, Plato’s standpoint on art (*techne*) can be described as “metaphysical objectivism” (see Tatarkiewicz 1980, 125-28). Following Polycleto’s *Canon*, for instance, a human body is harmonic if the head of the subject is 1/8 of the height, the torso is 3/8, and the legs 4/8. Objectivism, within the artistic domain, maintains that something is beautiful if it possesses certain properties and qualities which make it harmonic in its whole. Plato’s objectivism, in addition, was grounded not only upon numbers, proportions and measures, but upon the distinction between a true world on the one side and appearances on the other. Hence, a thing is beautiful not only if it is harmonic, but if this harmony leads the human soul closer to the world of Ideas. In contrast, Mamurius’ aesthetics does not deal with copying or mimicking an eternal canon, a perfect measure, or true proportions. He instead makes the original disappear amongst the copies, “abolishing simultaneously” the world of truth and the world of appearances.

Another example of the idea of the simulacrum in Rome – as argued by Perniola – is the religious ritual of *evocatio*. The Romans believed that the deities of the cities they conquered were not enemies *a priori*: therefore, the dictator or a Roman general used to pronounce the so-called *evocatio* before a siege (see Scheid 2011, 75-8). This consisted of an “invitation” to that city’s tutelary deities to move to Rome, where they would have obtained the organisation of a cult and dedicated temples. An indispensable condition for the success of an *evocatio* was that the city and their deities had to be indicated with their true names. In doing so, Roman military attitude is but welcoming: the *otherness* is not crushed, it is received, because – developing Perniola’s argument – an enemy does not remain as

such forever: everything has a temporary nature and can turn into its opposite.

However, it is another aspect of the *evocatio* that Perniola underlines as crucial. Macrobius writes that Rome, in order to avoid receiving an *evocatio* by a rival city, kept its tutelary deities and the Latin name of the city itself a secret. As Pier Aldo Rovatti points out commenting on Perniola's perspective on Roman ritualism: "come se tenendo segreti il dio e il nome latino della città stessa, e dunque non lasciandosi identificare, essi si preservassero dal tipo di cattura più minacciosa, la cattura simbolica" (Rovatti 1981, 43). The *Urbe* in fact entered a "logic of seduction": a seducer who empties himself; who becomes vacant, free from all identity and ready to welcome the specificity of each occasion (this essential aspect of seduction – namely the lack of an identity – will be developed in the fourth chapter – especially when focusing on the dandy, an exemplary model of desubjectivation).

An idiom might help in better understanding the desubjectivation implied by the notion of simulacrum: "l'abito non fa il monaco" (which corresponds to the English "the suit does not make the man"). This idiom is grounded upon a metaphysic framework for which appearances are deceiving. What appears is something like a mask, hiding a deeper and truer reality – the "true" face of an individual. Perniola's understanding of the simulacrum, in contrast, as his interpretation of the Roman rituals suggests, treats it as a dimension which does not contemplate any realm "beyond". What we are given, so to speak, is a realm of surfaces and appearances, but this realm can be seen with disdain only in so far as a hierarchically superior "original" world is taken for granted.

To sum up, by hiding its true name and its tutelary deities, Rome belonged to a third dimension – which was alien to the metaphysical polarity described above – and set its identity as a simulacrum from its very beginning. It is in this sense that Rome emerges as a simulacrum: by posing itself as a copy of *itself*, with no relation to any original. No fraud or deception are to be found in this, but rather subtle motivations stemming from strategic, religious, and political perspectives, for the sake of Roman

civilisation's survival and continuation. Indeed, the simulacral dimension was an essential condition of effectuality. As will become clearer over the third chapter of this section, devoted to Perniola's concept of "ritual without myth", Roman rituals were in fact meant to maintain political, social, and religious stability throughout the Empire's domain.

### *The Simulacrum in the Jesuit tradition*

The previous sub-chapter introduced and developed the re-evaluation of the notion of the simulacrum in the twentieth century, mainly focusing on three thinkers (Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Perniola). Deleuze's aim, following Nietzsche's philosophy, consisted in disentangling the notion of simulacrum from its long-established and influential metaphysical critique elaborated by Plato. Perniola's theory draws from the Deleuzian anti-Platonic view and is at odds with Baudrillard's understanding of the simulacrum as a "hyperreal" dimension by which reality is debased into a "desert". While Baudrillard criticises the new developments in technology and the emerging digital society of his time (the late Seventies and early Eighties), Perniola traces what can be called a "culture" of simulacra. The two main traditions he analyses in *La società dei simulacri*, as suggested, are the Roman and the Jesuit-Baroque. I have started to explore Perniola's interpretation of art and of ritualism in the previous sub-chapter, and I will continue this discussion with particular reference to ritual performances and dandyism. The present sub-chapter will focus on Perniola's claims concerning the relationship between the simulacrum and the Jesuit worldview.

Several questions may arise at this stage: how does Perniola link Christianity (specifically Jesuit Catholicism) to the notion of simulacrum? Is it not true that God belong to the series of metaphysical and Platonic ideas which entail the so far criticised distinction between a true and a contingent world? And how can the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' Catholic

Baroque tradition be linked to today's world? This sub-chapter will discuss these questions.

Perniola's starting point is the role and the value of images within the context of the growing post-World War II mass media and information society. The Italian philosopher claims that in order to understand contemporary approaches to and perspectives on images, it is useful to compare and contrast them with image theories of other eras. Specifically, he goes back to the eighth and ninth centuries' religious debate between "iconoclasts" and "iconophiles", that took place in the Byzantine empire. The fervent "battle" between these opposing sides can be summed up in the following interrogatives: what is the relation between the image of Jesus and Jesus himself? Can Jesus and the Saints be represented through images and icons? The iconoclasts (which literally means the "image breakers") believed that no visual artefacts could represent both the divine and human nature of Christ, and thus banned or destroyed religious images. In other words, they held that the divine nature cannot be encompassed or represented within a painting or a statue – or, to remain within the conceptual horizon of the simulacrum, an image of Christ is a degraded copy of his original substance. The iconophiles, on the other hand, claimed that God, both through the creation of the world and through the incarnation of Jesus, made visible matter worthy of worship. With the icons of Jesus and of the Saints, therefore, the iconophiles believed they were venerating the very work of God. For the iconophiles the "original", Perniola claims, is not beyond the icon but is the icon itself: "l'immagine non deve perciò essere considerata una semplice rappresentazione dell'originale, ma una evocazione, una 'porta' attraverso cui Dio entra nel mondo sensibile. [...] L'originale, l'idea platonica, è per gli iconofili suscettibile di evidenza sensibile: la loro è una metafisica concreta, una teologia visiva" (2011a, 74-5). Perniola then investigates the "modern" versions of both iconoclasm and iconophily, which echo and confirm the metaphysical premises of their religious predecessors.

The modern iconoclasts are – for Perniola – those individuals and groups (such as the Situationist International) which condemn post-World War II society as "an immense accumulation of spectacles", as Guy Debord

writes in his famous book *The Society of the Spectacle* (2014, 2). “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (2). In these inflammatory assertions, the French revolutionary claims that images (from journalism to advertising, political propaganda and mass media in general) shape and influence our everyday lives in such a way that reality is debased into mere appearance. The majority of the individuals would be passive spectators of a never-ending “spectacle”, in which they are told how to live, what to desire, how to work, how to spend their free time and so on. To put it briefly, the modern iconoclasts believe that images do not represent reality and life but appearances and mere survival. For the Situationists, for example, reality and authentic life imply having the ability to effectively act and directly experience the world, to live in first person. They believe that the images of the “spectacle” produce a screen between individuals’ lives and their actions, mediating and influencing people’s desires, beliefs and choices. Therefore, Perniola claims, the modern iconoclasts are still entangled within the Platonic horizon of a “truer” reality and a world of mere appearances.

On the other side, the modern iconophiles are those who praise the “society of the spectacle” by claiming that there is a connection between the image and its original: “un rapporto di affinità tra la notizia pubblicata sul giornale e il fatto cui si riferisce, tra la figura fornita dalla pubblicità e la merce reclamizzata, tra la propaganda del partito politico e la sua realtà sociale, tra la trasmissione televisiva e il suo oggetto” (Perniola 2011a, 76). In so doing, the Platonic dichotomy between reality and appearances is maintained, but in a manner diametrically opposed to that of the iconoclasts: the images *are* reality itself, the copies *are* the original themselves. Therefore, for Perniola both perspectives share the same underlying principle: “la pretesa metafisica di porre un rapporto tra l’immagine e l’originale” (77). In other words, they both remain stuck within a metaphysical conception which ignores the dimension of the simulacrum in relation to contemporary images. The modern iconoclasts and iconophiles are the heirs of two traditional religious positions which are inadequate to understand the significance of the simulacrum. Specifically, as suggested, these two traditions go back to the Byzantine quarrel of the eight and ninth

century, and to the Protestant iconoclasm of the sixteenth century, which grew with the Lutheran Reformation (75). What does it mean, therefore, according to Perniola, to understand mass media and images within contemporary society as simulacra? And why can these images provide the conditions for a “full representation” (*piena realizzazione*) of the simulacra? Perniola himself provides an example:

Essi [the mass-media] possono fornire un'immagine che è enormemente più complessa e costruita di quella offerta da qualsiasi realtà e che ciononostante non acquista un carattere prototipico, una sua originarietà. La televisione può offrire una varietà di immagini di un dato avvenimento senza paragone maggiore di ciò che il singolo potrebbe vedere se fosse personalmente presente sul luogo. (81)

This passage includes several statements which are useful for understanding Perniola's claims about the relationship between the simulacrum and the realm of the mass-media. Perniola does not claim that *every* image produced within a mass-media society is a simulacrum. He employs the expression “possono fornire” (might provide), implying the idea that an image can be considered a simulacrum only if it possesses certain properties or qualities. In the above quotation at least two of these qualities emerge: *artificiality* (“immagine complessa e costruita”) and *lack of an original* (“non acquista un carattere prototipico, una sua originarietà”).

Artificiality consists in the fact that – for instance – a given event can be limitlessly reproduced, re-worked, post-produced, used for a various purposes, transmitted through several media and so forth. Hence it does not “mirror reality” – it does not faithfully represent the world. In so doing, only a metaphysical approach, such as that of the modern iconophiles, would still consider the mass-media images as realistic representations, linking the realm of “reality” to that of “copies”.

At the same time, these images – in order to meet the requirements of the simulacrum – should be “independent”, “with no identity” (81), namely they should not refer to a supposed “original” or “prototype”. “La scelta non è – come nelle età metafisiche – tra verità e menzogna, ma tra

un'immagine che si spaccia per realtà presente o futura, ed un'immagine che si dà come immagine” (82). In other words, Perniola claims that understanding the mass-media images in oppositional terms (realism/falseness, original/copy) means remaining blind to the dimension that they can potentially open: that of the simulacrum.

For these reasons Perniola believes that the debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles cannot bring a new understanding to the modern issue of images. Perniola investigates a third and alternative position, which – according to him – can disclose the significance of the simulacrum: the aesthetics of the Jesuit-Baroque tradition. Specifically, three sources are examined by Perniola: the treatises *De arte bene moriendi* and the *De controversa christiane fidei* by the Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) and the *Exercitia spiritualia* by Ignatius de Loyola (1491-1556) – founder of the Jesuit Order. The main object of Perniola's enquiry is the Jesuit approach to images, which, as I will clarify shortly, is closely connected to spiritual life and to the art of living. As Else Marie Bukdahl writes in an essay on Perniola's interpretation of Baroque aesthetics: “Bellarmino points out that the image has its own autonomy and its own specificity. The image has no relation to an original or a prototype, but has its concrete, intrinsic and *historical* character” (2017, 67). In other words, Perniola finds in Bellarmino a third and alternative perspective on the nature of devotional images. For the Italian Cardinal, in fact, these images are neither a “door” which leads the soul to the original substance of God (iconophily), nor they are debased as mere copies of the invisible exemplar (iconoclasm): “The image of Christ and of the Saints ought to be worshipped not only by accident, or inappropriately, but still *per se* and individually, so that they themselves determine the worship, in order that they in themselves may be considered closely, and not only as those carrying a replacement of the original”<sup>3</sup> (Bellarmino 1837, 400, my translation); “But when the image is praised *per se* and individually, than

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<sup>3</sup> “Imaginem Christi, et sanctorum, venerandae sunt non solum per accidens, vel improprie, sed etiam per se et proprie, ita ut ipsae terminent venerationem, ut in se considerantur, et non solum ut vicem gerunt exemplaris.”

the praise is indeed being restricted to that same image”<sup>4</sup> (500, my translation). The third way elaborated within the Jesuit tradition, therefore, implies that the value of images is not grounded upon the ideal world or the distinction between original and copy but, rather, on the images themselves, in their worldly and concrete aspects.

This does not mean that there is no relation at all between – for instance – the image of God and God himself: “nelle pagine di Bellarmino Dio è lontano: il rapporto tra l’immagine e Dio è secondo lui altrettanto indiretto e mediato quanto il rapporto che intercorre tra il povero, a cui si fa l’elemosina, e Cristo in onore del quale è fatta” (Perniola 2011a, 79). If for the iconophiles there is a direct relationship between the image and Christ and, on the opposite side, if for the iconoclasts there is an irreconcilable difference and alterity, the Jesuits – according to Perniola – seem to have elaborated a third way, in which this very relationship is “indirect” and “mediated”.

Specifically, Perniola’s interpretation takes into account two kinds of images within the Baroque tradition. On the one hand is the “emblem”, the image often used by the Jesuits to illustrate their works; on the other, the spiritual images emerging from Loyola’s *Exercitia Spiritualis*. Perniola’s view of the emblem, as he himself recognises (2011a, 80), draws upon Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. As Bukdahl points out, “the emblem is a pictorial code, an image, thought or a rebus” (2017, 73-4) – in other words, an image accompanied by a sentence, a motto. According to Perniola, Baroque emblems can be considered simulacral images because they do not belong to a metaphysical opposition, in that they are not considered as inferior copies of a superior original while, at the same time, they are not original themselves. On the contrary, the emblems are linked with two central aspects of the simulacrum: “repetition” and “emptiness”. Repetition because the emblems were made through printing: “la stampa non consente lo sviluppo di un interesse feticistico nei suoi confronti, simile a quello di cui sono oggetto le opere uniche, i quadri” (Perniola 2011a, 80). Perniola, in so doing, creates a bridge between the

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<sup>4</sup> “At quando imago honoratur per se et proprie, ita ut in ipsam vere terminetur honor.”

Baroque aesthetics and the implications of the work of art in the age of “technical reproducibility” (Benjamin 2014). The emblems are not downgraded versions of an original, nor do they represent the loss of the *aura* and of the *hic et nunc* of the art work after its potential unlimited reproducibility through mechanical means. The emblems are from their very beginning thought and reproduced in the horizon of copy-images which nonetheless have their value. What kind of value is involved in the idea of an emblematic simulacral image? For Perniola it is the value of “emptiness”, linked with the idea that a single image is susceptible to multiple interpretations: “l’oggetto è incapace di irradiare un significato o un senso univoco, in altre parole è sottratto alla sua identità” (2011a, 80-1). The emblem, in other words, does not express any univocal sense; it can rather be the vessel for a variety of messages. The Italian philosopher does not provide any specific example of a Baroque emblem, a gap filled by Bukdahl’s research. The Danish aesthetician in fact, in developing Perniola’s image theory, gives a concrete example of a Baroque emblem. Specifically, she discusses an emblem included in the *Imago Primi Saeculi Societatis Jesu* (1640), a publication meant to celebrate the centennial of the Jesuit Society. The selected emblem displays the two hemispheres of the globe with the god of love placed between them:

The subscription underneath ‘One world is not enough’ refers to the Jesuit mission in South America. The Latin poem printed together with the emblem, informs us that Hercules and Alexander did not go far as the Society has done in their missionary work. [...] But the motto might also allude to the fact that our world is not enough – we should have our salvation in mind. The emblem is framed by twining and folding abstract decorations, which indicate that it is an independent whole, what Perniola calls an ‘artificial construction’, containing neither precise depictions of our world nor reflections of the divine. But it contains the conditions for a concrete understanding of the Jesuits’ missionary work and religious aims. (Bukdahl 2017, 74-5)

Bukdahl underlines the “independence” of the emblem, which does not fall under the traditional metaphysical scheme. In fact, not only is the

“artificial” image of the emblem susceptible to different interpretations, it also refuses to assert itself – so to speak – as a new original, as an “entità metastorica universalmente valida” (Perniola 2011a, 81). The emblem can thus be considered as an in-between image, neither entirely this-worldly nor entirely other-worldly, which raises issues that (in this specific case) range from the practical organisation of the Society to the spiritual involvement of the Jesuits themselves.

Linked to the consideration of images as simulacra is Perniola’s perspective on the *Exercitia spiritualia* by Ignatius de Loyola. Loyola’s exercises are a series of meditations and contemplations on several themes ranging over several weeks. Every week corresponds to a different phase, in which the practitioner’s tasks change: the first week deals with sins and repentance; the second focuses on the life of Christ, the third with the Passion and the last one with Resurrection. Specifically, Perniola examines Loyola’s approach to images. Although Loyola’s exercises would influence the Baroque visual arts (see Bukdahl 2017, 69-71), the images involved in the exercises are not concrete paintings or artifacts – they are instead connected with contemplation. In order to make the exercise a much more involving and effective spiritual experience, Loyola elaborates a method in which images and imagination are bound together through a sensory experience. To put it in other words, it is by engaging with the senses that the images contemplated (for instance, the temple where Jesus has been) can provide a spiritual progress. To give an example, in the Fifth Contemplation Loyola writes:

Primo punto. Il primo punto è vedere le persone con la vista immaginativa, meditando e contemplando le loro situazioni, e traendo da tal vista qualche profitto.

Secondo punto. Il secondo punto: udire con l'udito quel che dicono o possono dire e, riflettendo in se stesso, trarne qualche profitto.

Terzo punto. Il terzo: odorare e assaporare con l'odorato e col gusto l'infinita soavità e dolcezza della divinità dell'anima e delle sue virtù e di tutto, a seconda della persona che si contempla, riflettendo in se stesso e traendone qualche profitto.

Quarto punto. Il quarto: toccare col fatto, come sarebbe abbracciare e baciare i luoghi dove queste persone passano e sostano, sempre cercando di trarne profitto. (Loyola 1998, 51-2)

The contemplations depicted by Loyola are thus intended to evoke *vivid* images of the life of Christ, wherein all the five senses are involved in a spiritual and yet at the same time embodied experience. The senses are not enemies of prayer – on the contrary, they are crucial in order to heighten the spiritual experience. Loyola himself claims, at the beginning of his manuscript, that “non dal molto sapere l’anima è resa sazia e appagata, ma dal sentire e gustare le cose internamente” (15). In so doing he “succeeds in evoking an image that is larger, more unexpected, and more sensual than that which our usual viewpoint is able to produce” (Bukdahl 2017, 69).

Nonetheless, at the same time this “application of senses” (*applicazione dei sensi*, Perniola 2011a, 79), is accompanied by a seemingly incompatible and opposite stance: “indifference”. Loyola in fact states that it is necessary “farsi indifferenti riguardo a tutte le cose create” (Loyola 1998, 25). How can being indifferent towards the world be claimed along its opposite, namely engaging with the five senses in order to “feel and taste the things internally”? Do they not exclude each other? The peculiarity of Loyola’s approach (and with it the Jesuit tradition in general, as I will clarify shortly) lies precisely in the acceptance and maintenance of oppositions. Indeed, according to this view, one must be ready to give up everything, along with being willing to enjoy anything that is to be brought along by the future (including suffering and pain, such as those of Christ and the Apostles). It is not a regime of chastity, there is no personal resignation: “L’applicazione dei sensi gesuitica è inseparabile dall’indifferenza: il significato della loro connessione paradossale sta nella *disponibilità* ad accettare, ad eleggere e a volere qualsiasi forma storica, senza attribuirle un valore assoluto o definitivo” (Perniola 2011a, 80). Indifference is linked by Perniola to non-identity, desubjectivation, and emptiness. In other words, the Jesuit-Baroque lifestyle does not share the metaphysical principle of identity on which the dichotomy between original and copies is grounded upon. On the contrary, it means being open to the

world and its prismatic manifestations precisely by silencing oneself, by becoming indifferent to it.

Loyola's indifference is summarised by his famous statement *Perinde ac cadaver!* ("Like a corpse!"). Living as if one is a corpse is the condition to reach consolation and joy (the ultimate goal of exercises): it is the very experience of "indifference" which allows the "difference" of the world to emerge. As Bottani claims in commenting Perniola's view on the Baroque: "Soltanto dalla piccola morte dell'indifferenza (verso tutte le possibilità), nasce l'elezione della differenza della situazione particolare, in quanto possibilità eletta tra le altre" (Bottani 1983, 299). It is no coincidence that, Perniola continues, there is a strong connection – in the Baroque world – between history and death, between nothingness and works. Death, in fact, is not seen as the inevitable event which awaits everybody at the end of our biological life, but, on the contrary, is paradoxically the starting point of action in the world. Bellarmino devoted a treatise precisely to the idea that in order to live well, one must learn – so to speak – how to die while still living: "it is necessary, in the first place, that we die to the world before we die in the body" (Bellarmino 2016, e-book source). Not only, for Bellarmino, must one live well in order to have a good death – for him, the contrary is also true. Bellarmino claims that we can be *in* the world while at the same time not being *of* the world. A seemingly small change in prepositions hides a much more complex and subtle perspective. It implies the paradoxical attitude of living as if nothing that we do, possess, or taste actually belong to us, that is, of a general indifference accompanied by the "application of senses": "Solo coloro che sono già morti, ossia indifferenti, possono operare nella storia, perché essa è continuo movimento, divenire, che dissolve tutte le certezze, tutti i punti fissi, tutte le identità" (Perniola 2011a, 63). Therefore, openness to historical time and to all that is generated from it presupposes *becoming-nothing*. This does not imply nihilism, or quietist monastic asceticism: the success of something does not lie on that 'something' itself, but rather on one's own spiritual disposition towards it: "Gli esercizi spirituali non sono un metodo per realizzare ciò che si desidera, ma per desiderare ciò che si realizza" (Perniola 2001, 123). That which can be termed *becoming-nothing* is the precondition of such

openness. According to Jesuit tradition, death is neither an end nor something other than life for precisely the reason outlined: it is the starting point of *living*. The simulated death, that is, a *desubjectivated* individual who participates in the world and yet is not of the world; an individual who loves his/her fate and says “Yes” to history<sup>5</sup>.

To sum up, both the religious rituals of Rome and the contemplative images of the Jesuits show how the simulacrum can be understood as a non-metaphysical dimension, rather than a synonym for lie and falsehood, imposture and trickery.

The simulacrum, as suggested, can be defined as an image with no identity, or, to be more specific, as an artificial image which does not refer back to any prototype. As Robert Burch notes: “In the society of simulacra there are no essences to be discovered and embraced, but only infinite substitutions in an ongoing simulacral exchange” (2002, 182).

### *Conclusion.*

This chapter has developed Perniola’s concept of simulacrum principally by exploring his volume *La società dei simulacri* (first edition 1980, second edition 2011). Unlike other texts on the same notion published in the late Seventies and early Eighties (especially Baudrillard 1978, 1981) Perniola does not consider the simulacrum as a synonym of deception or falsehood. His philosophy is instead closer to Deleuze’s research on the subject, sharing an anti-Platonic perspective. Perniola, in addition, traces the origins of this concept back to ancient Roman religious rituals and Jesuit aesthetics. In doing so the Italian philosopher recovers, so to speak, the notion of simulacrum, in order to show its meanings and potentialities. Through his work, Perniola claims that the simulacrum does not imply deprivation or loss. Rather, it marks the entrance to an alternative dimension in which metaphysical dichotomies of true/false, copy/original, and

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<sup>5</sup> According to this thesis, as will become clear in the fourth chapter of this section, this is precisely the attitude mirrored by the English dandy George Bryan Brummell.

reality/appearance no longer have reason to exist. In this scenario replicas, repetitions and simulations gain autonomy and dignity – instead of being considered as mere by-products of something truer or more authentic.

Specifically, I claim, what is at stake for Perniola is individuals' relation with their world. By exploring Roman and Jesuit thoughts not only does he intend to give dignity to the concept of the simulacrum, but at the same time to show in what ways it is possible to transform one's own life through the power of the simulacrum (see the Romans' *aesthetic of seduction* and the Jesuits' *simulation of death and election of the difference*, developed over the second and third sub-chapters respectively). In so doing, the theory of the simulacrum should not be understood as a mere attempt to explain the post-modern condition of mass-media society. The simulacrum does not mean a deceptive or illusory hyperreal (as I discussed in elucidating Baudrillard's standpoint); rather, it conveys the idea of a full present, open to the heterogeneous experiences, events, and perspectives which the world constantly pours forth. In other words, openness to the richness and profundity of reality and its manifestations. "Il simulacro è legato alla meraviglia che, nonostante siano dissolte le attese di originarietà e autenticità, ci sia una meraviglia, una gratitudine nei confronti della 'artificiosa presenza'" (Perniola 2011a, 97).

## Chapter 2

### The Transit

#### *Introduction*

The aim of this chapter is to develop Perniola's concept of transit. The first paragraph will deal with the etymology of the word transit, in order to clarify its meanings and uses. It will also show how the transit philosophy conceives reality as a "stratification of surfaces", as it will be clarified further on. The second one will explain the particular conception of temporality implied in the transit. Together with Perniola's analysis, Nietzschean and Deleuzian reflections about "*amor fati*" and "eternal return" will be further explored. This concept is crucial to understand Perniola's overall philosophy as it helps clarifying Perniola's position towards postmodern thinkers and, on the other hand it sheds light on the idea of reality elaborated by the Italian philosopher.

#### *Reality as Stratification of Surfaces*

The objective of this sub-chapter is twofold. On the one hand it will clarify the notion of transit, to which Perniola devoted a volume (1985), on the other hand it will show the peculiar revaluation of the notion of depth developed by Perniola. In disagreement with the long withstanding metaphysical and – as I will clarify shortly – postmodern views that see depth intertwined with interiority and spirituality, Perniola understands depth as "fullness" and "richness" of surfaces. His main aim consists both in disentangling the notion of depth from this spiritualistic interpretation and, at the same time, to explore a radically different understanding of this

concept. According to the Italian philosopher, among the postmodern thinkers there is a commonplace for which the concept of depth belongs to metaphysics (object of criticism by postmodernism) and because of this it is refused and rejected. On the contrary, Perniola argues that depth has other significant meanings which were not taken into account by postmodern theory that enable to rehabilitate this notion in order to understand reality. As it will be clearer further on, Perniola's considerations over the concept of depth can help understand better the notion of transit.

The word 'transit' comes from the Latin *transitus*, namely "passage", "transfer", "transition", which also refers to the verb *transeo*, "to go across", "to pass through", "to transform". Different uses of this term have been arrived at from its Latin etymology: in its daily usage, "transit" can mean carrying people from one place to another, or passing through a place; philosophically speaking, different conceptual declinations are involved.

On the one hand, the idea of transit refers to a certain specific literature based on the transience of life – that is, on the precariousness and the shortness of our earthly passage. A telling example of this literature is expressed by Asai Ryōi in the novel *Ukiyo Monogatari (Tales of the Floating World)*, written in 1661:

Living only for the moment, savouring the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms, and the maple leaves, singing songs, drinking *sake*, and diverting oneself just in floating, unconcerned by the prospect of imminent poverty, buoyant and carefree, like a gourd carried along with the river current: this is what we call *ukiyo* (quoted in Hickman 1978, 6)

Perniola's philosophy takes a different direction on the concept of transit – this topic is elaborated in a volume tellingly titled *Transiti. Come si va dallo stesso allo stesso* (1985, *Transits. How to go from the same to the same*).

The first to dwell on the nature of transit in Western tradition, according to Perniola, was Heraclitus, for whom the things of the world share the essential characteristic of the so called *enantiodromia* – the coincidence of opposites. This implies considering every reality as always-

becoming as everything is susceptible to turn into its opposite. For instance, the famous aphorism “You could not step twice into the same river” implies that one may apparently be immersing oneself into those same waters, yet at the same time the river flows on and thus changes unceasingly, “che è insieme un passare dallo stesso allo stesso e un permanere di ciò che è in sé differente” (Perniola 1990, 24). *Enantiodromia* and transit share a fundamental feature, namely they imply the *atopic* character of every reality. The adjective *atopic*, from Greek *atopos*, both means “a-topos” (“devoid of a place”; “placelessness”) and “singular”, “unusual”, “unclassifiable”. The very history of philosophy, for Perniola, can be understood through this concept. Why many philosophers, from Thales to Socrates, Boethius, Giordano Bruno and Heidegger, have been denigrated, hated or persecuted? Because of the “atopic nature of philosophy” itself: “L’odio della filosofia ha radici profonde, motivazioni inconfessabili, manifestazioni sorprendenti: ciò che però in fondo lo anima è proprio il sottrarsi del filosofo ad una collocazione definitiva, il suo restare in transito” (Perniola 1985, II). The philosopher, according to this view, does not follow any *utopia* or *topicality* but is oriented toward the *atopia*. These three terms share the same Greek etymological origin, namely the word “topos” (place). However, where *utopia* means “no-place”, and *topical* means “actual” in the sense of a “deposito di stereotipi” (II), only *atopia*, according to Perniola, has a privileged relationship of affinity with reality. The *utopia* is considered by Perniola as a non-existing representation that revolves around an ideal community or society only imagined, without a proper consistence and significance: “una immobile e perfetta repubblica dello spirito” (7); on the other hand the *topical* is that particular, ordinary, dimension of thinking, which dissolves reality in the ephemeral actuality. In contrast with these two notions, Perniola sees philosophy as that particular and unique kind of thought that can account for reality, understood as multi-layered and enigmatic. Here reality is used in a broad sense because Perniola develops the transit as a wide-ranging and multifaceted notion: from an “erotic transit” (69-83), to a “transit ritual” (189-203), from a “telematic transit” (217-229) to an “artistic transit” (1989). Even if at a first glance the subtitle of *Transiti* (“How to go from the same to the same”) seems to imply a

sterile movement terminating with the state of a certain thing or phenomenon remaining unchanged, the actual meaning is the opposite, namely the flourishing of difference within each reality:

pensare la ricchezza di cambiamenti impliciti in uno stesso fenomeno, in uno stesso periodo, in una stessa realtà. Non si vuole sostenere che A è uguale a B, C, D,... e che in fin dei conti una cosa vale l'altra, bensì proprio al contrario mostrare che B, C, D... possono derivare da A attraverso scarti minimi, insensibili slittamenti, impercettibili declinazioni. (Perniola 1985, I)

To clarify this passage it is necessary to understand the revaluation of the concept of *depth* (*profondità*) developed by Perniola. In an article devoted to this concept (2013a, 93-100) Perniola argues against the postmodern conception of depth and praises the idea of “depth as stratification”, as it will be clarified further on. In Ihab Hassan’s table of differences between modernism and postmodernism, Perniola highlights the opposition between “depth”, which falls under modernism, and “surface”, belonging to postmodernism. The postmodern opposition, according to Hassan, lies between cause, substance, truth, origin, metaphysic, on one side, and, on the other, flexibility, lightness, ephemerality. The weakness of this dichotomy, according to Perniola, can be seen in the unduly match between depth and metaphysics. Postmodern thinkers, in their crusade against every concept gravitating around the notion of metaphysics, have also wrongly addressed their critique over “depth”. Hassan’s table is a clear example of this perspective, in which there is a direct link between these two notions. This inclusion, for Perniola, misleads the very concept of depth, as it will be clearer over the following paragraph.

Perniola’s understanding of the notion of depth is based on the analysis on the Latin *profundus* and the ancient Greek *báthos*. The Latin *Pro-fundus* – “far [is] the bottom” – had two principal meanings: in the Roman age it used to indicate something immeasurable, without an end, in a pejorative and negative sense (for instance: “profunda avaritia”, deep avarice); with the advent of Christianity, and particularly with the works of Augustine of Hippo, it shifted to a positive connotation. In fact, even though

indicating the boundlessness depth of human sins, at the same time it implied its overturning, namely the salvation through God's love: "l'anima è profonda non solo perché riproduce in se stessa l'abisso del peccato, ma precisamente perché in quell'abisso le premesse per la sua redenzione sono sempre presenti" (97).

The Greek word *báthos*, in its archaic use, expressed the idea of fullness and richness, both physically (the deep sea) and metaphorically (a deep affect, sentiment or thought). Philosophically, Perniola quotes Diogenes Laertius who referred to Heraclitus as a "sea-diver" who immerses himself into the depths of thought. From Plato on, Perniola continues, a decisive turning point occurred. True knowledge started to be conceived as an *ascent* to the hyperuranium and not a *descent* into the profound and earthly world. *Báthos* became pejorative and *hypsélós* (the Greek word for "sublime") emerged. This spiritualistic element marginalized the semantic spectrum of depth (*báthos*). An example of how *báthos* lost its importance by acquiring negative meanings can be seen in Neoplatonism. Indeed, the father of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, considers "depth" the *sinful* things of the world (matter, bodies...) whereas, on the contrary, the spirit, the soul and the ideal can be reached only through a vertical movement of transcendence.

Perniola's aim is to reevaluate the notion of depth by avoiding the postmodern commonplace for which "depth" is closely related to interiority, authenticity, truth and eventually metaphysics. By showing the etymological uses of the words *profundus* and *báthos* he reaches the conclusion that the spiritual element (transcendence, totality, absolute) is not necessarily present in the notion of depth. As the Greek *báthos* and the Roman's first use of *profundus* indicate, these terms used to have an earthly connotation and not a transcendent one. For Perniola, in addition, the Augustinian conception of depth should not be considered spiritualistic but dialectic, as it consists in the awareness that something is deep when it is susceptible of changing into its opposite. Thus, when postmodern thinkers argue against the notion of depth, they wrongly include it within the wide range of metaphysics concepts, by erroneously taking for granted that depth means transcendence and ultimately metaphysics. This is the reason why Perniola

disengages from postmodern critique by reevaluating the very notion of depth within the perspective of the transit. The development of the concept of transit goes together with the conception of reality as deep in the sense of full, available, rich – and not deep because transcendent, as postmodern thought incorrectly claims. Reality, according to this view, is paradoxically made of *deep surfaces*:

Questa possibilità si apre quando penso alla profondità come stratificazione di superfici, vale a dire qualcosa di pieno invece di vuoto. Questa idea mi sembra particolarmente vicina alla profondità archeologica, in cui ciò che è antico emerge strato dopo strato, superficie dopo superficie, nel contesto di una prospettiva filosofica che elimina il vuoto. (Perniola 2013, 95)

Surface *layers* because nothing appears *under* the surface itself. In other words there is not a dualism between an interior which is covered by an exterior. On the contrary it is all surfaces and exteriority. This is why Perniola argues that “filosofare è come sbucciare una cipolla” (Perniola 1990, 13), namely because under every rind there is still another rind. Precisely here lies the link between Baroque thought and Perniola philosophy. In fact, Baroque theory conceives reality as sinuous, rich, full, wrapped and enveloped on itself. This perspective should not be understood in negative terms, on the contrary, it implies that the philosopher’s task lies in explaining and developing what is complex and enigmatic if not labyrinthine. Philosophy, according to Perniola, proceeds through a spiral-like movement: it does not investigate its objects of study in their immediacy as if they were simple and transparent objects; rather, it explores them trying to understand their opacity and thickness, their richness and complexity. Moreover, here lies a theoretical distinction between postmodern perspective and Perniola’s thought. According to Perniola, when postmodern thinkers define postmodernity by marking it as a passage and a rupture with modernity, they actually carry on the very same argument of modern thinkers against pre-modernity. In other words, both modern and postmodern thinkers share the same attitude of considering themselves within a new era brought about by a fracture with what preceded them. The

paradox – underlined by Perniola – is that postmodernity can be considered as a new epoch only insofar as it is not understood as a break with the past, but as a minimal shift, a transition, a transit<sup>1</sup>.

Reality, according to this view, cannot be understood in terms of polar oppositions (such as true / false, substance / appearance), but as a dynamic set of never-ending micro-changes. Instead of judging reality through the meter of an ideal truth (eternally fixed), reality itself should be understood in its *continuum* of mutations and variations, namely in its perennial transit. The very idea of a substantial truth, Perniola argues, mystifies the labyrinthine nature of reality by simplifying it in a once and for all formula: “la conoscenza non è semplicemente la rivelazione di un segreto, né l’illuminazione di qualcosa di oscuro, né infine l’esposizione di un concetto dato a priori, ma lo stendere, lo svolgere, l’esprimere qualcosa che è avviluppato, avvolto, raccolto” (Perniola 1990, 11). It is no accident that one of the recurrent themes in Perniola’s works (1990, 1998, 2011, 2014) is the Baroque period, as it fundamentally mirrors a declination of the transit: from a Baroque perspective, in fact, the world teems with matter coiling, writhing, tangling and developing on itself, exploiting its own inexhaustible subtlety and richness. Importantly, here also lies the post-nihilistic tonality of Perniola’s overall thought. His thought does not deal neither with Being nor with Nothingness, but, more modestly and at the same time more complexly, with the concept of “something” (*qualcosa*). If the world exists, Perniola writes commenting on Leibniz, it is not because it is the best one, “è piuttosto l’inverso, è il migliore perché c’è, perché è quello che c’è” (1990, 15). This world is made of endless combinations of “something” (and never monolithic entities), for which one thing is susceptible of *becoming-something-else*.

This section focused on the relation between the transit and the spatial element (reality as a full inexhaustible presence); the following one will deal with the temporal experience of the transit.

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason Perniola does not actually criticize postmodernity *tout court* but some perspectives that have developed within it (such as Vattimo 2010 and Baudrillard 1978), while his philosophy is closer to other postmodern thinkers (namely Lyotard 1979 and Deleuze 1962).

## *Transit and Different Repetition*

The concept of transit is influenced by a series of philosophies and thinkers who have developed the notion of repetition. Perniola links together Stoic thought, Roman religiosity, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Kubler, and Klossowski. Despite the historical (but also conceptual) gaps between them, Perniola individuates a common thread: the notion of “different repetition”. To have a closer understanding, Nietzschean philosophy will be addressed in this thesis. There are two main reasons for choosing the German philosopher. First, Perniola himself relates Nietzschean thought with the transit (1985, 16-20, 2001a, 48-51); second, Nietzsche can be considered one among the leading modern philosophers to have delved into the very experience of transit. His entire philosophy can be considered an atypical philosophy, together with a thinking attitude of “different through the same” which permeates his work (what Deleuze will call the “difference through repetition”, 1968). The key concepts to understand how Nietzsche can be considered a transit-thinker and – more importantly – what typology of temporality the transit implies, are “*amor fati*” (*love of fate*) and “eternal return”.

Perniola argues that the notion of transit is affirmed in the Nietzschean concept of *amor fati*, as by loving one’s own fate, life is experienced in its “presentness” and availability. On the contrary, metaphysics privileges a time that still has to come (the world beyond the world, that is, the ideal). The objects of Nietzschean critique are the great metaphysical narratives: morality, Christianity, truth, substance. These narratives essentially imply an entry into an ideal dimension, detached from reality and its actuality. In other words, they attempt to fully mould reality, while also emptying it by means of creating a “world beyond the world” – that is, a product of the human mind disguised as eternally existing and true. If the concept of “ideal” orients individual’s life, this means that this very individual shapes his/her life around *how things should be* and not on *how things are*.

Ultimately, at the very rise of each metaphysic, an “ought” (*Sollen*) judgment arises too. According to Nietzsche, this imperative dictating how things ought to be produces an unfixable distance between human beings and their own lives, and between thought and action. This distance emerges because for Nietzsche life is an unceasing becoming in which there is no place for a fixed conceptual entity. Thus, an imperative regarding how things *ought to be*, in his perspective, is an arbitrary crystallization that can only pervert the movement of life itself. Metaphysics, subsequent to this argument, is at its very core nihilist. In fact, to judge reality according to an “ought” implicitly corresponds to a declaration of powerlessness over reality itself:

questa super-realtà è nichilistica nella sua sostanza stessa, perché sa benissimo di non potersi affermare e mantenersi a livello fattuale, empirico, vitale: essa si spaccia per *ideale* perché non è *reale*, pone un al di là perché non ha la forza di essere qui ed ora, parla di una vita trascendente o futura perché è stata sconfitta nell’unica vita esistente. (Perniola 1985, 17)

At odds with this perspective there is Perniola’s concept of *amor fati* borrowed by Nietzsche and defined as the “esperienza di adesione incondizionata e appassionata a *ciò che è*” (19, my italics, underlying effectual reality opposed to the ideal truths of metaphysics). Nonetheless, in what terms should the experience of *amor fati* be understood? On the one hand, through *amor fati* the past is appropriated by the choice of its infinite repetition; on the other hand, life is not procrastinated into a time that is yet to come (an ideal world, a utopia, a paradise...). However, *amor fati* should not be understood as a fatalistic law dominating history, or a theological assumption for which one should passively adapt to life’s events provided that there is a God behind Fate or Providence: it corresponds, instead, to an actively chosen lifestyle, which sees life as an experience of endless affirmation. Several questions may arise here: how can one “passionately” affirm events or things that he/she normally despises? How can sadness, death, misery and unhappiness be accepted and “chosen” in one’s own present? How can one *love*, and not merely bear, the *necessary* of life? To

develop the concept of eternal return, which is strictly connected to *amor fati*, might be of help.

Eternal return is linked to a reconsideration of time, especially of its understanding as a linear configuration, where three main moments can be clearly marked out: past, present and future. These three moments are marked by their mutual difference and by their continued deprivation. The difference indicates the resolution of each event in its uniqueness, so what one experiences now, as far as one can try to repeat it, will be experienced one time only. Deprivation then follows, since all accomplished actions, once acted, are lost in a past, so to speak, already remote “ontologically”. The eternal return is at odds with this perspective. It is the thought of the possibility of a circular time, that is, of the time that preserves itself and which perpetually shows the same combinations of events.

Among the interpretations provided on this notion, the one elaborated by Gilles Deleuze will be highlighted in this section. Deleuze’s argument sets apart the cosmological-probabilistic perspective, that in a finite space, given an infinite time, all possible combinations are eternally reverting, making the return a process identical to itself. This perspective, Deleuze writes, is reinforced by the fact that Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, gave two different expositions of the eternal return:

Of these two expositions, one regards a sick Zarathustra, the other a convalescent Zarathustra, then an almost healed one. What makes Zarathustra sick is the very idea of the cycle: the idea that everything returns, that the same returns, and that everything returns to the same. [...] What happened from the moment Zarathustra is convalescent? [...] Zarathustra understands the identity "eternal return-being selective". How could what is reactive and nihilistic come back, how could the negative come back, since eternal return is that being that can be predicated only as of the affirmation, of the becoming in action? [...] Eternal Return is Repetition; but the Repetition that Selects, the Repetition that saves (Deleuze 1973, 41, my translation).

Deleuze means that Zarathustra himself criticizes the idea of the eternal return at first, as it was conceived by his travel companions – the

eagle and the snake –, since they reduced it to a banal “organ song”, namely to a sterile and identical repetition of what happens. On the other hand, this idea would not be consistent with the discourse on the transvaluation of values, for then the last man, Christian morality, metaphysics and, not least, nihilism would all return. Eternal return is “selective” instead, both as *thought* and as *being*: as thought, since all one wants is wanted according to *amor fati*. On the other hand, it is selective as being, since only what can be affirmed comes back. Deleuze compares the eternal return to a spinning wheel, which, turning faster and faster because of the centrifugal force, expels from its centre all that contradicts its rotation. The being expels from itself, so to speak, all that contradicts its affirmation. Nihilism and reactive forces are encountered only once, since they return transformed from the eternal return’s centrifugal wheel. As Luigi Antonio Manfreda points out, “Il pensiero più abissale è l’apertura alla possibilità che l’istante si emancipi dalla catena del *continuum*, dalla uniformità del processo temporale. Detto propriamente: l’irruzione dell’eterno nell’istante” (Manfreda 1994, 182). The “greatest weight” Nietzsche writes about in *The Gay Science* consists in engraving the instant with the seal of eternity, for it is only by deciding to live again every moment as it has been that the past does not crush man under its unbearable weight. Only the transformation of each “It was” into “I wanted it thus”, does not make the possibility of the eternal return the most terrifying of possibilities. It is precisely for these reasons that Nietzsche defined the doctrine of the eternal return of the same as “grounded upon the highest formula of affirmation that is attainable at all” (Nietzsche 2010, 94). This affirmation consists precisely in the ability to bestow value also on repellent objects. Only in this way, according to Nietzsche, it is possible to make things beautiful:

I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them – thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let looking away be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer! (Nietzsche 2001, 157)

It is crucial to understand that this statement should not be read with a vitalistic emphasis. The affirmation highlighted goes together with the (different) repetition brought about by the choice of eternal return. This repetition, according to Perniola, brings closer to a ritual thinking than to a vitalistic one. Through repetition, the formal element is preserved, which implies continuation, prosecution, transmission. On the contrary, vitalism is considered nihilistic and iconoclastic – by Perniola – as in its effort to satisfy the drives and the instincts of the individual, it dooms each form into dissolution. Perniola suggests that in the traditional philosophical dichotomy between *form* and *life*, Nietzsche has to be understood within the first one. Precisely in this link between form, different repetition and rituality Nietzschean thought meets Perniola's concept of transit. Maintaining the same conceptual register, transit is a philosophy of the present but it is not vitalistic. That is to say, it does not imply an acephalus and unoriented present where the individual lets him/herself go to his/her desires and impulses. It is not a hedonistic present in which insatiable hunger for pleasure guides existences. On the contrary, the present of the transit, through *amor fati*, is *loaded* with the past which is always “redeemed” by a choice of the will. This choice consists in appropriating one's own entire past; if all the past is “ours”, nothing can happen which does not belong to us. Indeed, it is through this attitude towards the existence that, according to Perniola, one can master his/her own condition.

The philosophy of the transit, elaborated by Perniola, is a philosophy of the *present* and of the *presence*, precisely because it does not deal with metaphysics and eternal ideals but with earthly historical phenomena. In other words – as was already pointed out in the first paragraph – it does not privilege a time that still has yet to come (a utopian future), nor the metaphysical conception of time which in turns suspends time by elaborating and believing in *timeless* truths. On the contrary, the transit allows precisely to dwell with the present and its atypicality, namely with its richness, availability, presence and deep (in the meaning given to this word over this section).

Una filosofia del presente e della presenza come quella di *Transiti*, non può lamentare l'assenza di qualcosa, né rimpiangere la mancanza di alcunché: essa non è in lutto per la perdita di qualche valore o ideale, né di qualche entità positiva. In primo luogo perché i valori e gli ideali sono già stati da sempre troppo irreali ed astratti; in secondo luogo perché essa si appropria, assume su di sé, fa vivere nel presente quanto di positivo il passato trasmette. Contrariamente all'immagine di un mondo vuoto, di una *kénosis*, che caratterizzerebbe la società attuale, la mia ricerca è animata dall'immagine di un mondo pieno, di un *pléroma*, in cui tutto è a disposizione. (Perniola 1985, III)

There is no fatalistic resignation in the transit thought. It is both distant from metaphysics (by avoiding traditional metaphysical concepts such as “ideal”, “truth”, “morality” and so on) and from postmodernism (which praises notions like precarious, ephemeral, flexible – nowadays, in addition, the key words of economic neoliberalism). Transit's thought, on the other hand, brings closer to a present where nothing is missing as everything *is present* (though folded and wrapped)<sup>2</sup>.

The philosopher, in addition, being an atypical figure *par excellence* – according to Perniola – is thus a privileged reader and actor of the contemporary age. In fact, by avoiding ideologies and metaphysical truths s/he is in the position of “listening” to the present time in its continuous becoming without obstacles (being them disordered affections or pre-given beliefs)<sup>3</sup>. In order to understand the uncanny events that happen not only in one's own life but also in the broader social framework, the philosopher

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<sup>2</sup> It is precisely for these reasons that, according to Perniola, there is a strong connection between society and thought, and this is why the notion of transit can be considered as a sort of helpful lifebelt in the agitated waters of the current world. Perniola explains how the concept of transit “fits” appropriately into contemporary society, better than the key concepts of modernity, namely “tradition” and “innovation”, since they seem to have vanished in a present unquestioning about “neither past nor future, neither a homeland nor a utopia” (Perniola 1985, 7). Transit is not the diachronicity of a present continuously transcending itself towards the future, but the place where space *becomes* time in the unlimited availability of presence. The orbital centre of contemporary experience should then be localized in the present. Internet developments provide an indispensable framework for placing the transit experience inside contemporaneity.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense the philosopher, for Perniola, should read his/her time according through the so called “ritual without myth”, which will be explored over the next section of this chapter. In addition, in the final section the English dandy George Bryan Brummell will be characterized as an atypical figure sharing affinities with Perniola's perspective on philosophy and reality.

becomes “puro tramite, luogo di transito, *gateway* di fenomeni che ci sorprendono, ci turbano, ci stupiscono, perché si presentano in modo inatteso e imprevedibile” (Perniola 1990, 51). Only in this way the philosopher can be in “direct connection” (*presa diretta*) with the social-historical reality.

### *Conclusion.*

To recapitulate, this section explored Perniola’s notion of transit by developing it in relation to spatiality and temporality (respectively first and second paragraph). In the first paragraph I highlighted Perniola’s revaluation of the notion of “depth”, which according to him can be defined as a “stratification of surfaces”. More specifically, by following Perniola’s enquiry over the semantic expansion of the word “depth” back to its Greek and Latin origins, it was shown how this concept only recently gained a meaning connected to the spiritualistic and metaphysical spectrum of “interiority” and “profundity”. Instead, its ancient uses showed how depth can indicate “fullness” and “richness” linked to the earthly world and more generally to effectual reality. Perniola’s concept of transit can be inscribed into this revaluation of reality intended as a full available presence. The second paragraph, in order to clarify the notion of transit, underlined its connections with Nietzschean philosophy. In particular it revolved around the ideas of *amor fati* and eternal return. I claim that these should be considered as mutual concepts: the former provides the temporal framework that allows to move away from the Western-linear conception of a time made of independents past, present and future; the latter provides, through the acceptance of this temporality, a propulsive energy that allows to love the very thought of an eternal repetition (as it will never be a sterile repetition but a different and selective repetition). The transit can be related to them as it has to be understood as the experience of an “absolute present”, in the etymological sense of *ab-solutus*, namely “untied” (from linear time) in which nothing is missing because everything is at hand, available. This

does not mean that data and events in their immediacy are what to look for. Transit does not imply a vitalistic experience of reality in its immediacy but, as stated in the first paragraph of this section, it conveys the idea of a deep world made of layers of surfaces. Surface, thus, should not be confused with superficiality, immediacy, or banality. The “polemical objective” of *Transiti*, as Perniola points out in the *Prefazione alla seconda edizione*, is the very notion of banality: “il contrario del *transito* è il *banale*, ciò che è perfettamente adeguato a se stesso, ciò che è incapace di trasformazioni” (1985, I). Transiting means going beyond banality without falling into spiritualistic or ideal conceptions by, paradoxically, praising this peculiar perspective of the *surface*.

## Chapter 3

### The Ritual Without Myth

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will discuss Perniola's conception of *ritual without myth*. The first sub-chapter will show how Perniola compares the theoretical framework of this peculiar ritual typology with the phenomenological *epochè* as they both imply a "suspension (of judgement)" in relation to established beliefs. While Husserlian phenomenology privileges the epochistic method in order to build a theory of a transcendental subject, Perniola "expands *epochè*" by including ritual theory. The second sub-chapter will explain why Perniola departs from what he describes as "anti-ritual prejudice" in order to elaborate his particular idea of "ritual thinking". Perniola, in fact, rejects anthropological traditions (Eliade 1973; Lévy-Strauss 1955) that consider the ritual as oriented towards expressing something outside itself (a meaning, a moral goal, a myth, etc.) and understands the ritual as a *form without a belief* which, nonetheless, has an effective impact on everyday life. This claim will be clarified and developed over the third and fourth sub-chapters, in which examples of ritual practices will be explored by investigating Perniola's analysis of ancient Roman religion and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Jesuit thought.

#### *Rituals as Essential Forms of Actions*

Perniola devoted several chapters of his books (1985, 35-8, 119-122, 198-204, 2001, 63-76, 2010, 35-44, 2011b, 66-70) to ritual theory. In addition, a compilation entitled *Ritual Thinking. Sexuality, Death, World* (2001a) has been published in English. This volume is a collection of essays originally published in *Transiti* and *La società dei simulacri*. As well as containing significant reflections about the concepts of ‘transit’ and ‘simulacrum’, which, as shown in the previous chapters, play a crucial role in Perniola’s philosophy, it also (as the title suggests) confirms that ritual theory can provide both a synthesis and a hermeneutical key to better understand Perniola’s overall philosophical path.

As Perniola himself states (2011, 162), it can be useful to borrow phenomenological language to comprehend – at a theoretical level – his particular conception of the ritual. Within the phenomenological conceptual constellation, Perniola interprets two notions: a) *epochè*, and b) *Zu den Sachen selbst* (return “to the things themselves”). While the second notion will be developed in the next section (especially in the chapter devoted to Perniola’s theory of the thing), the first one is relevant for the purpose of ritual discourse. More specifically, Perniola devoted an article (2011) to the elaboration of the notion of “expanded *epochè*”, which, as will be clear by the end of this sub-chapter, can be understood as an enlargement of the phenomenological *epochè* to cover political and practical domains.

The concept of *epochè* dates back to Greek Skepticism. It literally means “suspension (of judgment)”, implying the attitude of doubting one’s own beliefs and claims upon reality. This concept was then taken up by Descartes (1596-1650), who founded his epistemology on so-called “methodic doubt” in order to acquire the gnoseological truth of the *Cogito*: one can doubt everything, but at the very moment he/she doubts, he/she exists (from which the famous assertion “I think, therefore I am” originated). More recently, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed the concept of *epochè* as a philosophical attitude towards the world. Specifically, the phenomenologist should put reality into brackets by suspending all beliefs in the objects of experience.

The peculiar element of the phenomenological *epochè* consists in freeing oneself from the “captivity of the unquestioned acceptance of the

everyday world” (Cogan 2014, online source). Questioning the validity of everyday life as it is normally understood brings about a change in the experiential configuration of the subject, who is able to see the world in a new perspective. Indeed, through *epochè* the world appears to the subject as a *phenomenon*, that is to say, in its heterogeneous manifestations deprived of their ideological background: “In the ‘natural’, preanalytic and prephenomenological attitude [...] we generally believe that objects perceived are real; we believe that we live in a real world. This belief is ‘put out of action’, suspended, we make no use of it. We are left with a world-as-phenomenon, a world which claims to be; but we refuse, for the time being, to pass on the validity of these claims” (Schmitt 1959, 239). The Husserlian *epochè*, therefore, consists in distancing oneself from the experience of the world understood as a set of certainties taken for granted and previously accepted without reflection. It implies a step back, so to speak, a suspension of one’s own commitment to the natural world, by developing a neutral and disinterested attitude.

Given this brief account of the notion of *epochè*, in what terms does Perniola speak of an expanded *epochè*? Toward what does the *epochè* expand? Perniola does not embrace phenomenology in order to elaborate a transcendental theory of the subject: his objective is “expanding the notion of *epochè* to cover the activity of everyday life” (Perniola 2011, 162). In other words, Perniola is not interested in dwelling on the constitution of a transcendental ego, but in the interaction between *epochè* and effectiveness (that is, the practical realisation of something). “Expanding *epochè*” means precisely to embrace the social, historical and political domains without dealing with them according to an ideologically oriented attitude.

If for Husserl the essential forms of knowledge were the *eide* – Greek plural of *ideas* – (165), Perniola asks what the essential forms of action are, and claims that the answer can be found in rituals (165). Perniola’s goal is to elaborate a formal theory of action that, at the same time, does not end in a sterile and empty formalism. In order to justify what he calls a “transcendental theory of action” (165), Perniola investigates the *a priori* conditions of rituals, which must be thought of independently from empirical, ideological and material elements (in order to maintain their very

transcendental nature). By building on the theories of indologists and sinologists (Staal 1990; Bell 1992) Perniola defines the concept of ritual as a “form of pure activity”, that is, a non-empiric action oriented toward effectiveness<sup>1</sup>. The *a priori* structure of the ritual is then discovered, by Perniola, in the notions of *repetition*, *habit* and *form*, as will be clarified over the following sub-chapters.

To sum up, the ritual without myth involves a phenomenological *epochè* through which familiar routines and pre-given conceptions of the world are “suspended”, bracketed. With the *epochè* Perniola continues his exploration – which I have elaborated in the first chapter of this section – of and around the notion of the simulacrum. In fact, both the simulacrum and the *epochè* share a central theoretical aspect, the former being understood as an “image without identity”, and the latter intended as the suspension of one’s own subjectivity. In other words, they are both grounded upon the idea of “indifference” as openness to the heterogeneity of reality and its manifestations.

### *The Ritual without Myth in Ancient Roman Religion*

In order to understand Perniola’s ritual theory, the emancipation of the ritual from the myth, or the *demythologisation* of the ritual, has to be explained. This demythologisation emerges in Perniola’s remarks on ancient Roman religion (present sub-chapter) and Jesuit thought (following one).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Perniola, Husserl elaborates a theoretical-contemplative phenomenology which, although striving to encompass the entirety of everyday life, does not include the political-practical field but only the moral one. The concept of politics for Perniola is oriented toward effectiveness (tangible effects of something on reality); morality is instead developed over regulatory ideas (normative ethics, utopian justice and so on). This is the reason why Perniola is always suspicious when the moral discourse is brought into the philosophical field – because, he argues, it is inherently powerless over reality. Perniola thus moves from what he refers to as the “monastic attitude” of Husserlian phenomenology to practical issues and political commitment, namely from a theory of knowledge to a theory of action: “I have always been dissatisfied with the far too contemplative approach adopted by phenomenology, with its wholly theoretical attitude and the subjective transcendentalism associated with it” (Perniola 2011b, 162).

The demythologisation characterising Roman religious ritual is founded in Rome's peculiar polytheism. Roman religious policy consisted in absorbing deities belonging to other civilizations. For instance, as was already shown in the first chapter of this section, the military ritual of the *evocatio* can be addressed as an example of assimilation, for the deities of the city to be conquered were "invited" to join Roman pantheon where they would find new temples and cults. Incorporating and preserving religious heritages and traditions from other peoples was an important means of maintaining social stability throughout Rome's domains. At the Roman Empire's maximum extent, its borders encompassed large swathes of North Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean basin, Northern Europe and Asia Minor. This resulted in a peculiar pantheon including not only autochthonous deities but also international ones, from Greek to Egyptian, through Solar deities such as Mithras and Sol Invictus, and imported mystery religions.

Religion permeated all areas of society, from public ceremonies in temples and festivals to meetings of the senate and prayers. Several scholars of Roman history (Beard, North, Price 1998; Rupke 2007) noted that *religio*, for the Romans, did not correspond to an "act of faith", like in Christian tradition, but to an "act of knowing". This act consisted in knowing the correct practice and execution of rituals, as they were the most important means of communicating with the Gods and of demonstrating this communicative approach publicly, through the very ritual performance itself (Rupke 2007; Scheid 2011). All the formulations and recitations were "selected" according to their specific purpose and occasion and were observed through correct knowledge and scrupulous practice of the ritual. Indeed, the scholar Clifford Ando refers to Roman religion as founded upon an "empiricist epistemology", because the "cult addressed problems in the real world, and the effectiveness of rituals – their tangible results – determined whether they were repeated, modified, or abandoned" (Ando 2008, 13). Therefore, a religious practitioner, according to this view, would not follow faith, strong beliefs or dogmas, but would rather carefully express a religious body of rituals through his/her performance:

These convictions [actualized in ritual], these beliefs, were never collected in the form of a doctrine for instruction, and above all they did not express a belief in the proper sense – because, for the ancients, belief was an inferior form of knowledge – but a knowing. (Linder and Scheid 1993, 54)

Here lies the link that Perniola elaborates between *epochè* and the practical domain: Roman religion brings a suspension of pre-given beliefs through effectively-oriented rituals. This can be looked as an example of ritual without myth, as the attention to and respect of the ritual formalism, though independent from a myth (that is, an ideological and moral meaning), is never oblivious to the pragmatic element. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the counterpart of a religious attitude, for the Romans, was not a neglect or a denial of the gods (Beard 1998, 217), but *superstition*. Superstition is strictly connected to the formal element of the ritual as it implies on the one hand “excessive forms of behaviour” and, on the other hand, “excessive commitment to the Gods”. In this context a superstition involves “doing or believing more than is necessary” (Rupke 2007, 5). Religion thus becomes a matter of self-control, of desubjectivating oneself and not letting one’s own desires and passions erupt violently. As Perniola points out, in this ritual typology beliefs or inner experiences are not privileged: it is not the interiority that justifies the cult, it is the ceremony – that is, the extremely precise and scrupulous repetition of ritual acts that pave the way for a kind of non-sentimental and non-intimate sensibility (as an excessive commitment leads to superstition).

By allowing for corrections, transformations and modifications of ineffective rituals, Roman religion maintains that rigorous and scrupulous respect of codified actions can be preserved together with a plasticity towards reality and its relativity:

L’indeterminatezza della religione romana, la tendenza a far cadere, a tacere, a dimenticare le identità e le funzioni dei singoli dei e il significato mitico dei riti, risponde così ad un preciso orientamento filosofico, culturale e politico di cautela e di estrema prudenza verso il dato storico emergente, ad una volontà di relativo, ad una paura di dimensioni assolute

[...] la religiosità romana consiste nella capacità di ascoltare attentamente il *fatum*. (Perniola 1985, 112)

In this respect, Stoic philosophy joins Roman ritualism: Roman pragmatic caution is close to stoical indifference (*apatheia*), through which men positively adhere to historical mutability and to the changing of contingent experiences.

A sophisticated interpreter of this tradition, as Perniola points out, is the Baroque thinker Baltasar Gracià, who developed a theory of opportunity (*kairòs*) in which indifference is the main condition of every possibility. According to Gracià, only those who master their passions can grasp the opportunities they face, since “l’occasione si rivela solo a chi è indifferente nei confronti del suo contenuto, solo a chi sta come l’ago di una bilancia in sospeso pronto a pendere là dove cadrà il peso maggiore, quello dell’effettività” (Perniola 1985, 180).

### *Towards a Mundane Catholicism*

Beside Roman ritualism, Perniola analyses the ritual without myth in Catholic religiosity. The peculiarity of what Perniola defines “Catholic feeling” (in his book *Del sentire cattolico*, 2001) corresponds to the attention posed by Catholic religious thought not so much on a dogma, a belief, a commandment, or God as the utmost otherness, but rather on history, on the world and man’s neighbouring things. This account describes Catholic feeling as a “ritual feeling” (*sentire rituale*) centred on historical processes and on their enigmatic manifestations. More specifically, Perniola examines what he refers to as a thinker of “mundane Catholicism”: the Spanish Basque priest and theologian Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Loyola’s religious thought is central to Perniola’s philosophy. The founder of the Jesuit Order appears in several works of the Italian philosopher (cf. especially Perniola 1976, 1980, 1982, 2001, 2014) and heavily influenced

his overall perspective. I have already focused on Perniola's theoretical debt to Loyola in the elaboration of the notion of simulacrum. This sub-chapter will continue to explore the Spanish priest's influence on Perniola by discussing the notions of "difference" and "ritual without myth". In fact, Perniola claims the Loyola should be understood as a "thinker of difference" (2001, 97), and his exercises can be inscribed in the horizon of a "ritual feeling" (2001, 66).

A preliminary explanation is due in order to shed light on Perniola's understanding of "difference". To this end, I will develop the main points elaborated in the article entitled "La differenza italiana", published in the journal *L'erba voglio* (Perniola 1976, 10-15). The article is devoted to the themes of national identity and populism in the Italian context. The underlying issue of the article can be summed up in the following question: what does the specificity of Italian history and culture consist in? Perniola analyses two different possible answers. Both reformism and populism, for Perniola, "non cercano la *differenza* italiana o la *differenza in Italia*, ma soltanto la *diversità* italiana o la *diversità in Italia*, cioè una *identità* da opporre ad altre identità" (1976, 10). In this passage Perniola points out a distinction between "difference" (*differenza*) and "diversity" (*diversità*). To diversify would mean being able to indicate and circumscribe something that is peculiar or specific to a given phenomenon. According to the populist standpoint – Perniola argues – the Italian specificity consists of the supposed identity of Italian people against their "ruling class" (*classe dirigente*); for reformism instead the specificity would be the Italian national identity in respect of the other nations<sup>2</sup>. In other words, to diversify means to identify, to produce an identity. By distinguishing certain features and aspects of a given phenomenon – in this case Italian culture – both populism and reformism fail to grasp the "Italian difference". If diversity is equal to identity, how should the notion of difference be understood then? The difficulty of explaining this notion lies in the fact that, according to

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<sup>2</sup> I will not dwell on Perniola's definition and understanding of reformism and populism in Italy. My claim is that the argument he develops in this article is useful to grasp his conception of difference.

Perniola, it is closer to an experience than to a concept (Perniola 2011b, 158-59).

Metaphysical “concepts”, such as the concept of “identity” in Aristotelian logics, the “a priori judgement” of Kantian criticism and the “contradiction” of Hegelian dialectics, share an essential theoretical framework grounded upon “pure speculation”. “Purity”, in this context, means abstraction from reality and the concrete, practical everyday life scenarios. On the contrary, the realm of experiences, Perniola continues, “è proprio quello impuro del sentire, delle esperienze insolite e perturbanti, irriducibili all’identità, ambivalenti, eccessive” (2011b, 159). Between the “purity” of concepts and the “impurity” of experiences, Perniola claims that the starting point from which it is possible to grasp the idea of difference is the latter. Throughout his philosophy, in fact, he mainly focused on thinkers, traditions and phenomena which showed an affinity with the anti-metaphysical “impure” realm of feeling. In the next section, for instance, I will focus on Perniola’s interpretation of “inorganic sexuality”, taking into account Rilke’s poetry and Freudian psychoanalysis; in the final section I will discuss the relation between artistic processes, “alienation” and “enigmas”. In so doing, I will lay out Perniola’s understanding of the idea of difference and, at the same time, I will show how it can be related to the phenomenon of dandyism. In this sub-chapter, specifically, I explore the “difference” in the Jesuit-Baroque religious aesthetics of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Before turning to Loyola, though, another claim elaborated by Perniola can help in clarifying the notion of difference. Specifically, the metaphysical conception of “value” in contrast to the idea of ritual without myth. To this aim another essay written by Perniola can be taken as cue: his introduction to Nietzsche’s *Antichrist*. This essay contains several statements which may help the reader in understanding Perniola’s critique of the notion of “value”. I have already claimed<sup>3</sup> that Perniola, following Nietzsche and Deleuze’s theories, considers metaphysics as a theoretical construction which debases reality as an inferior copy of the “true” and

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<sup>3</sup> See the notion of “morality” and “ought to” in the chapter devoted to the “transit”.

“ideal” world beyond the world. In terms of morality, the metaphysical key notion is that of “value” (*valore*). The polemical target of Perniola’s article is, specifically, the Kantian idea of morality. For Kant, Perniola argues

il valore è ciò che conta indipendentemente dal fatto di essere, dalla sua realtà storica: anzi, il suo statuto concettuale si fonda proprio sulla ir-realtà. L’ideale è per definizione qualcosa che vale a prescindere dalla realtà, dal processo storico: esso apre un ambito che sta al di sopra dell’effettualità, e che consente appunto di esprimere su questa un giudizio, una valutazione, una sentenza. (Perniola 1977a, 8)

In this passage Perniola highlights the opposition between reality and history on one side and metaphysics and value on the other. Reality, as I explained in the previous chapter, is – for Perniola – the realm of “transit”, i.e. of ever-changing dynamics which cannot be fixed in an ideal formula. Hence, metaphysical evaluations are seen as doomed-to-failure attempts to – so to speak – define what cannot be defined, limit what cannot be limited, circumscribe what cannot be circumscribed. In other words the ideal dimension of how things ought to be judges things how they are: “[un] movimento che si arroga una super-realtà da cui giudicare la vita, e così limitarla, condizionarla, distruggerla” (1977a, 8).

In contrast with this notion of value, Perniola expounds the experience of the ritual without myth. In fact, the ritual without myth implies several aspects which are at odds with a moral perspective grounded upon the metaphysical idea of value. First, the “epochistic” suspension of belief towards reality; second, the focus on effectuality and practical issues; finally, demythologisation. I have discussed these three features earlier in this chapter, and I will now focus on St. Ignatius’ *Exercitia Spiritualis* in order to continue the exploration of Perniola’s perspective.

Loyola’s thought was developed in the first chapter of this thesis, where I investigated the notion of simulacrum. In the fervent debate on devotional images between iconoclasts and iconophiles, which is based on the metaphysical distinction of a real world versus the world of appearances, Jesuit religious aesthetics opens up the possibility of a simulacral image. To sum up, the *Spiritual Exercises* elaborated by the founder of the Jesuit Order

are understood by Perniola as a method of contemplation which keeps the realm of the senses *and* indifference both active – so to speak – at the same time. In other words, the practitioner is asked to both become indifferent to the things of the world and be ready to abandon him/herself with all the five senses to joy and consolation (the ultimate goals of the exercises). Perniola is not the only thinker who interpreted Loyola's work with an emphasis on the significance of "feeling" and "senses". For instance, the Italian poet Giovanni Giudici, who translated the *Exercises* into Italian, underlines the sensory dimension of Loyola's prose as well:

Dove la tradizione mistica tende alla 'luce-in-tenebra' del Nulla divino, in Ignacio è un continuo richiamo alla materialità: visiva, ma anche olfattiva, auditiva, tattile, gustativa; tal che, sotto certi aspetti, si potrebbe affermare che siano appunto i cinque sensi [...] gli strenui protagonisti degli *Esercizi*. Com'era questo e come'era quest'altro, se larga o stretta la strada, se piccola o grande la stanza, di che cosa parlavano Gesù e i discepoli durante la cena, quanto dolevano sul corpo del 'mite Signore' le ferite della flagellazione e della crocifissione: lo spettatore non soltanto è immerso nel centro della scena; è quasi costretto egli stesso a rendersi soggetto *patiens* di una rappresentazione. (Giudici 1998, 130)

Father Pinard De La Boullaye also focused on the relevance of the dimension of "feeling" in Loyola. His essay entitled "*Sentir, sentimento, sentido* dans le style de saint Ignace" (1956, 416-30) is devoted specifically to Loyola's understanding of these aspects. De La Boullaye underlines the extreme frequency of feeling-related terminology in the exercises (417-22), and claims that the realm of feelings can help the practitioner in making the episodes of the New Testament "alive again" through the senses: "Così, nei suoi esercizi, lontano dal proporre unicamente una riflessione su considerazioni astratte, egli [Loyola] concentra l'attenzione sul Dio in carne, che rende in qualche modo accessibili alla sensibilità le perfezioni infinite, – e questo attraverso dei metodi di contemplazione e di applicazione dei sensi, semplici e coinvolgenti allo stesso tempo, poiché fanno rivivere ogni scena evangelica come l'hanno vissuta i loro testimoni di un tempo" (1956, 417, my translation).

Loyola's starting point, therefore, rather than being grounded upon moral judgements or transcendental values, revolves around "emotional facts" (*dati emotivi*, Perniola 2001, 99) and aesthetic experiences. "Il 'sentire e gustare le cose'", Perniola claims "di cui parla Ignazio, è l'esatto contrario della ricezione passiva di una verità dogmatica" (102). In fact, the various exercises do not present dogmatic assertions on the nature of God, nor provide pre-given choices that the practitioner should blindly follow. For instance, the first week is devoted to the self examination of the peculiar "flaw" (*difetto*) or sin one wishes to amend, alongside a general review of one's own life. Loyola never specifies the particular flaws which the practitioner should take care of, nor does he underline which are the worst ones. He recurrently states: "quel peccato o difetto particolare che si vuole correggere ed emendare" (Loyola 1998, 25); or "chiedendo conto alla propria anima di quella cosa determinata e particolare di cui ci si vuol correggere" (26) or "quando mi viene quello stesso cattivo pensiero, e io gli resisto, e mi ritorna un'altra volta ed altra ancora, e io sempre resisto, finché il pensiero è vinto" (28). As these passages highlight, Loyola does not clarify nor provide concrete examples of flaws and sins. He employs a broader and more vague connotation such as "difetto particolare", "cosa determinata e particolare", "cattivo pensiero" and so forth. Not only are the flaws not clearly indicated; the social condition of the practitioner is also left unclear. The Spanish hagiographer Pedro De Ribadeneira, in his *Vita Ignatii Loyolae*, points out that the exercises can indeed be practiced and experienced with profit by heterogeneous individuals:

E il frutto di questi santi esercizi non si limita solamente ad aiutare la religione, ma abbraccia tutte le persone, di tutti gli stati, i mestieri, le età e i modi di vivere. Dato che l'esperienza ha mostrato che molti principi, sia devoti alla chiesa sia laici, uomini eccellenti o meno fortunati, sposati o celibi, consacrati a Dio, giovani o vecchi, iniziando a fare gli esercizi ne hanno tratto profitto o per emendare le cattive abitudini o per migliorare quelle buone che già avevano. (De Ribadeneira 1583, 29-30, my translation)

Loyola's very definition of the exercises can help in understanding his supposed vagueness: "Esercizi spirituali per vincere se stessi e mettere

ordine nella propria vita, senza prendere decisioni in base ad alcun affetto che sia disordinato” (1998, 23). According to Perniola, this premise is of crucial significance. It shows in fact in what terms Loyola believes that humans have a tendency towards disordered affections and passions, which obstruct their way to joy and consolation. The exercises would thus consist of a method which enables the practitioner to distinguish what brings joy and consolation from what brings desolation. The fact that Loyola does not provide specific assertions nor a hierarchy of values implies – for Perniola – that his perspective is at odds with the transcendental morality proper to metaphysical judgements.

A metaphysical judgement implies an absolute assertion about how things ought to be – that is, a claim which should be considered valid in each and every time, regardless of history and contingency. Perniola is interested precisely in the historical features of Loyola’s exercises. By not expressing specific or clearly identified flaws, the Spanish priest implicitly claims that the exercises are relative to each practitioner and are dependent on their peculiar biography and history. Whereas moral values are linked to an ideal world beyond the world (as suggested earlier), the exercises are instead linked to the realm of feelings (joy and consolation as sensorial experiences) and that of reality and history: “La fede è emancipata da ogni fondamento metafisico e trova il proprio ancoramento nell’esperienza storica” (Perniola 2001, 99).

A crucial question has not yet been answered: if Loyola’s premise is that human beings have disordered affections which his spiritual exercises can help amend, in what terms does this happen? And, even more importantly, how can joy and consolation be attained? Perniola, as I will clarify in the following paragraphs, based his interpretation of the *Spiritual Exercises* on the notion of “difference”. The very chapter of *Del sentire cattolico* devoted to St. Ignatius is entitled “L’elezione della differenza in Ignazio di Loyola” (2001, 97-134). As explained earlier in this chapter, Perniola links difference with history and, conversely, identity to metaphysics. A quotation from Loyola’s work can be useful in order to understand this position: “è necessario farci indifferenti a tutte le cose create [...] in modo che non si voglia da parte nostra più la salute che l’infermità,

più la ricchezza che la povertà, più gli onori che l'infamia, più una lunga vita che una breve, e così via per tutto il resto” (Loyola 1998, 26). History teaches us that each situation, each condition and each phenomenon is subject to continuous change and transformation. As I discussed in the previous chapter, reality – in the context of Perniola’s philosophy – should not be understood as a fixed entity, but rather as a stratification of surfaces, something that is susceptible to constant, surprising if not uncanny mutations and turning points. An initial apparent victory can turn later into a defeat; an initial loss might become a new acquisition. For instance, the life of Christ shows that poverty, misery, death, and crucifixion can bring at the same time victory, salvation, and resurrection. In other words, each event that occurs in our daily life should not be judged good or bad in itself – as the theory of transcendental value would claim.

The premise needed to enter into this perspective lies in the experience of indifference. In fact, only a subject with no identity can surrender him/herself to the “ballet” of history and events. Identity, for Perniola, implies believing that there are specific needs which can fulfil our desires, specific ideologies which can shape our will, specific values which can orient our conduct and so on. When our will, our conduct and our desires do not meet their goals, that is, when life does not go according to our plans, disordered affections – so to speak – kick in. There might emerge anger, suffering, hatred, envy, rage, and so forth. To put it briefly, identity and values bring human beings easily to a path of unhappiness and desolation. On the contrary, understanding the very movement of history – which for Perniola is that of difference<sup>4</sup> – means being open to every possibility that reality can offer to the individual. Only if one dissolves his/her identity can history emerge as the realm of difference; or, in other words, only if one does not channel everything that happens in the orbital of his/her mere desires and interests can the experience of difference become available. Therefore, the paradoxical link between “indifference” and

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<sup>4</sup> “Ignazio però non trova la differenza in Dio, ma nella sua volontà manifesta, cioè nella storia, in ciò che accade, nella vita degli uomini e dei popoli; non nell'eccezionale, nel numinoso, nello straordinario, ma in tutte le cose più correnti, negli affari e nelle conversazioni di ogni giorno” (Perniola 2001, 114).

“difference” can be explained in terms of a welcoming disposition towards every manifestation of reality.

As Perniola highlights (2001, 103) the fundamental precondition for entering into the experience of “the difference” is the dissolution of one’s own subjectivity and identity<sup>5</sup>. In other words one has to avoid his/her strong passions and “disordered affections” as they obstruct the way to joy and consolation (the ultimate goals of the exercises). For these reasons, Loyola’s exercises should not be seen as an ascensional and mystical experience, but as a necessary suspension (*epochè*) in order to enter into the ritual without myth:

L’ingresso nel sentire rituale implica innanzitutto una presa di distanza nei confronti della propria soggettività, che costituisce una condizione imprescindibile del “sentire dal di fuori”. Sapersi vedere con un occhio esterno, considerarsi come “mondo” anziché come “io”, assistere a ciò che nasce ed avviene senza pretendere di ingabbiarlo subito in un’interpretazione preconfezionata o una logica d’interessi personali, questi sono tutti aspetti che provengono dall’antichità classica e che si sono tramandati nel cattolicesimo spesso sotto la veste di umiltà, della pietà, della devozione. (Perniola 2001, 66)

Indifference, in this passage, is expressed through the idea of a “feeling from outside” (*sentire dal di fuori*). It may seem contradictory to link feelings and indifference, but, as I also showed in the chapter devoted to Loyola’s contemplative images as simulacra, these two seemingly incompatible phenomena are precisely the key in order to understand the peculiarity of the exercises. On the one hand *indifference* (which Perniola characterises in terms of “desubjectivation”, “non-identity”, “*epoche*”, “death as simulacrum” and, as I will explain in the first chapter of the following section, “inorganic” and “thing”) and, on the other, *feeling* (the

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<sup>5</sup> Here again emerges a recurrent theme of Perniola’s thought, namely the privilege accorded to desubjectivation against the principle of identity. This will be further explored in the section regarding the dandy Brummell, as the latter, through his lifestyle, produces an inner *distance* from himself.

five senses). A central question may thus be formulated in these terms: how can one be indifferent yet at the same time feel? Perniola's answer is that Loyola's exercises<sup>6</sup> allows the individual to keep these two apparently incompatible aspects together. As stated earlier<sup>7</sup> one can be *in* the world without being *of* the world, as if each possession that we have does not belong to us. Therefore, "feeling from outside" does not imply an abolition of the senses but rather their cultivation within the dimension of indifference.

Indifference, as suggested, allows the individual to experience the difference of reality. Still, the question of why difference should be "elected" has not yet been answered.

The very goals of the spiritual exercises (joy and consolation) can provide a justification according to which difference might be "elected": "La differenza può essere 'eletta', cioè scelta e assunta, proprio perché fornisce gioia e consolazione" (Perniola 2001, 98). The difference of the world – that is, history – should not be tackled with the principle of identity, but rather by imitating, so to speak, its constant movements and transformations. Metaphorically speaking, I would argue that the principle of identity can be compared to a heavy object thrown into the sea which, due to its density, sinks in a very short time. In contrast, the experience of difference is similar to a life-preserver which floats on the surface of the water. Identity, for Perniola, means precisely not being able to adapt to or to imitate one's own surroundings, a failure which ultimately brings unhappiness and desolation. At odds with this perspective is the joy that emerges by "electing" the dimension of difference, that is, by attuning oneself to the fluctuating and ever-changing dynamics of history. The election of the difference, understood as an affirmation of one's own present, is precisely – as I will outline in the chapters of this thesis devoted to dandyism – the dandy's attitude towards his times. (The dandies, in fact,

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<sup>6</sup> Alongside Loyola, I also focused on Bellarmino's treatise on the art of dying well and Roman religious rituals. In spite of their differences, these traditions – for Perniola – share a fundamental assumption: the possibility of thinking the opposition between indifference and feeling in a non-metaphysical way.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 1, especially the pages devoted to Bellarmino's theory of images.

believed that each age has its own beauty which can be extracted, so to speak, and cultivated within one's own manners and lifestyle.)

In this, Loyola's exercises can be understood as an exemplar of ritual without myth. The elements of Perniola's ritual theory can readily be employed in order to discuss the main conclusions of this sub-chapter. The ritual without myth implies an epochistic reduction of the practitioner's subjectivity; this is precisely the function of the fundamental premise of the exercises: indifference. Moreover, the demythologisation of ritual can be seen in Perniola's understanding of the exercises as a practice against the principle of identity and moral transcendental value. Finally, the ritual without myth is linked to the practical realisation of something, taking into account the historical and relative dimension of each phenomenon; correspondingly, the exercises stress the practitioner's attention on history as the realm of difference from which joy and consolation can emerge.

### *Conclusion*

To recapitulate, the basic conceptual framework of ritual without myth can be understood in Perniola's interpretation of the phenomenological *epochè*, in which he defines the "expanded *epochè*" to imply an enlargement of the epochistic "suspension" from a theoretical standpoint to a practical one. Perniola's overall aim is to underline the value of a ritual form which is not oriented toward myths, beliefs and ideologies and, at the same time, maintains its connections with the realm of senses and every day life. Perniola, by exploring Roman polytheist religion and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Catholicism, refers to this very realm in terms of 'world' and 'history' in their inherent *difference*. The originality of this perspective lies in the claim that difference emerges as a consequence of the scrupulous observance and repetition of a formal performance: exercises and rituals. It would be easier to argue the contrary, that from this kind of rituality only a meaningless and useless movement could emerge. Instead, Perniola points out, precisely

because the ritual without myth is meaningless (that is, is not chained to any ideological meaning or belief) it provides a method to master one's own situation. To set aside ideology, according to Perniola, on the one hand clears the obstacle of vitalistic and potentially self-destructive passions from our circumstances; on the other hand it weakens our ego (i.e. desubjectivates us) and allows us to understand better the work of difference, namely the continuous changes that occur throughout our lives.

## Chapter 4

### George Bryan Brummell or Becoming-Puppet

#### *Introduction*

The last chapter of this section will show how the English dandy George Bryan Brummell embodied the concepts developed so far in my discussion. As it was previously articulated, Perniola identified ancient Roman religion and Jesuit-Baroque thought as two pivotal articulations of his aesthetic theory. This thesis claims – as it will be clear at the end of the chapter – that the phenomenon of dandyism should be added to these two. Specifically, this section will deal with Brummell’s lifestyle by focusing on the bibliography produced around his figure.

The first two sub-chapters will introduce Brummell’s biography and will concentrate on his aesthetic attitude towards the society of his time. By doing so the very concept of dandyism will be clarified and, in addition, the peculiar aesthetic form represented by the dandy will be set forth. This form has its Roman antecedent in the concept of *habitus*, namely the idea of an external form that refers to attitudes such as lifestyles and clothing. The third and fourth ones will explain in what terms it is possible to claim that Brummell’s *clothing ritual* (namely his daily efforts devoted to his appearances) shares a conceptual affinity with the ritual without myth elaborated by Perniola. Specifically, the third sub-section will discuss why Brummell does not belong to any myths of his times (neither the falling

aristocracy nor the ascending bourgeoisie); the fourth sub-section will investigate another significant aspect of the ritual without myth, namely the concept of desubjectivation (in relation to Brummell). The fifth sub-section will revolve around the distinction between the English dandy and the main ideals of the Romantic movement, especially the concepts of History as absolute and Nature. This comparison will help understand Brummell's closeness to a concept developed by Perniola, namely the so called *storiette*<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, History and Nature are linked by the Romantics to a heroic existence in which the individual struggles against overwhelming forces in his/her quest for the Absolute. On the contrary, *storiette* imply an ironic detachment towards life comparable to Brummell's endeavours – as it will be clarified – to become a puppet (rather than a hero). The last sub-chapter will show how the simulation of death, developed by the Jesuit school, can be compared to Brummell's lifestyle. In fact, my hypothesis is that Brummell has to be included in the same alternative tradition that, according to Perniola<sup>2</sup>, praises the dimension of the simulacrum instead of considering it as a synonym of falsehood or deception. This statement will be explained throughout the same sub-chapter.

### *The Leader of Fashion*

Before developing the connections between Perniola's philosophy and Brummell's lifestyle it is helpful to provide some essential biographical information on the English dandy. Therefore, this sub-chapter will consist of a short introduction to the fundamental stages of Brummell's life in order to be familiar with his historical context. There are several biographies on George Bryan Brummel<sup>3</sup> (Barbey d'Aurevilly 1897; Jesse 1844; Kelly

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<sup>1</sup> 'Storietta' is an untranslatable term which belongs to a French literary tradition that dates back to the Seventeenth Century, when Tallemant des Reaux wrote his *Historiettes*, a collection of short biographies and personal memories.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1, sub-chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> While Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, respectively the two other exemplar dandies

2005; Comi 2008), as well as numerous volume chapters on dandyism specifically about his life (Moers 1960, 17-38; Coblenz 1988, 33-168; Carassus 1971, 191-200; Natta 2011, 25-63)<sup>4</sup>. Given the large amount of information available on his life, only the most essential will be provided here to then focus on the conceptual significance of his lifestyle. George Bryan Brummell was born in London the 7<sup>th</sup> June of 1778 and died in Caen on 30<sup>th</sup> March of 1840. Ian Kelly, one of his most recent biographers, divides his life into three distinct periods. The first period goes from his birth until 1799 and it consists of Brummell's "ascendancy" – as it will be clarified shortly. 1799, when Brummell bought a house in London, marks the beginning of the period from which his fame and influence spread throughout the high society of the time. The last period (1816 onward) sees Brummell pursued by debts fleeing to France. Firstly in Calais, where he remains for fourteen years, and then in Caen, where he spends the last ten years of his life, dying in 1840 in asylum.

Brummell's father, William Brummell, Private Secretary of the Prime Minister Lord North, was an influential "civil servant" who could afford his son's fees to attend the prestigious colleges of Eton (1786-1793) and Oxford (1793-94). Brummell's reputation on fashion and clothing began precisely in those years, where he also caught the eye of the Prince of Wales and future King of the United Kingdom, George IV. According to Moers (1960, 25), the heir to the throne noticed Brummell during one of his royal visits of inspection at Eton. Brummell never completed his education at either Eton or Oxford, in fact he left the latter aged sixteen. Soon after he was commissioned in the Tenth Royal's Hussars Regiment, a cavalry regiment of the British Army known as "the Prince's of Wales own command". Beginning as a Cornet, third and lowest grade of the cavalry troops, Brummell became Captain within three years. This quick rise is also due to the increasing friendship with the Prince, colonel-in-chief of the troops himself. To provide an example of their bond, Brummell was chosen as

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taken into account in this thesis, have written extensively over the phenomenon of dandyism, Brummell did not write anything himself. Except for a book whose paternity is only attributed to him, all the information available relies on biographers, scholars and chronicles of his times.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed bibliography on Brummell see the references at the end of the thesis.

*chevalier d'honneur* at the Prince's wedding with Carolina of Brunswick in 1795 and he accompanied the Royal couple on their honeymoon at Windsor.

In 1799 begins Brummell's "assault" – as Kelly defined it (2005, 157) – on London society. Significantly, by his coming-of-age, one third of the family estate was released to him<sup>5</sup> – as the other two thirds were given to his brother and his sister. Thanks both to his father's inheritance and to the Prince's support he gained economic stability<sup>6</sup>. In addition, the Prince introduced him to the most exclusive clubs and fashion events in London at the time. In those high society's gatherings his prestige became such that a word, a sign, or even an absence from him was enough to mark somebody's reputation for the years to come. Significant of the complicity and intimacy that tightened Brummell and the Prince is the fact that the latter often attended the various dressing stages of his friend – which could protract up to three hours – and then stayed on most occasions to lunch. The apex of the "Brummellian" domination lasted thirteen years, from 1798 until 1811. Between 1811 and 1816 the relationship between Brummell and the Prince deteriorated. There are several stories accounting for this fracture: Brummell might have ordered the Prince to ring the bell during a dinner (a highly impudent request); or he was commenting too often on the increasing corpulence of the Prince; or because he aroused antagonisms with the Prince and his wife (Moers 1960, 26). In addition to such episodes, in 1811 the Prince became Regent. As a consequence of greater duties and responsibilities many intimacies had to be abandoned. Anyhow, Brummell managed to transform this loss into triumph. His impertinences, in fact, became legendary and contributed to make him a peer with the Prince rather than a subordinate:

The Prince came down the street one day in company with Lord A., and met Brummell and Lord B. strolling in the opposite direction. The Prince stopped to chat with Lord B., ignoring Brummell; the Beau [Brummell], who had taught a whole generation how to cut, turned to Lord A. and inquired loudly, "Who's your fat friend?"

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<sup>5</sup> The fortune herited by Brummell is uncertain and it is estimated around £30.000, nearly £2.5 million of current money (Kelly 2005, 157).

<sup>6</sup> Being one of the Prince's favourites, no one dared to ask Brummell for his accounts.

The other impertinence was merely a phrase. “I made him what he is,” Brummell would say of the Prince Regent, “and I can unmake him”. (Moers 1960, 27-8)

However, since 1811, without the Prince’s protection, Brummell had to face increasingly pressing debts, as well as the loss of his sources of entertainment and commercial credits. From the fashion-oriented clubs he progressively became more addicted to gambling until on May 16, 1816 he was eventually forced to flee to Calais in France. There he received letters, visits and financial help by his closest English friends making him “one of the notable tourist attractions of the Continent” (Moers 1960, 29). Still, Brummell’s scholars and biographers (Moers 1960; Comi 2008; Coblenz 1988; Kelly 2005) agree to mark 1816 as the end of the Dandy legend and the beginning of the Dandy decline. In 1830 he moved to Caen where he was appointed English Consul. Nonetheless his affairs soon went badly. In 1835 some creditors sent him the police which took him off to prison. From there on “he lost, one by one, the qualities that had made him a dandy” (Moers 1960, 30). In his final years Brummell suffered several strokes and became prematurely senile. He was inhibited in many bodily functions and looked after only by the Sisters of Charity. He sadly ended his days in a sanatorium near Caen, where he died the 30<sup>th</sup> March of 1840. Kelly’s volume (2005) offers a significant amount of detailed information over Brummell's last twenty-four years in France. For the purposes of this thesis, the following sub-chapters will explore especially the second period (1798-1811), that is, the one in which Brummell had risen in London’s high society of the time. Lord Byron, who had known him and was one of his devotees, once said that he would have more liked to be Brummell than Napoleon (Barbey 1897, 28). By focusing on the culminant period of Brummell’s parabola, this thesis will argue its significant affinity with Perniola’s thought.

*Clothing and form*

The first part of this sub-chapter will concentrate on Brummell's clothing and will begin to clarify the phenomenon of dandyism. The second will develop the parallel between Perniola's thought and Brummell dandyism by discussing the peculiar aesthetic concept of form on which Brummell's lifestyle revolved.

Why admiration, esteem and devotion have been tributed by writers, poets, politicians and gentlemen to Brummell? What lies beyond the renewal of high society's fashion habits in the first decade of Nineteenth Century's London? To answer these questions, it is necessary to shed light on the very concept of dandyism. Many interpreters have provided a definition of the concept of dandyism, going back to its uncertain semantic and etymological origins (such as Coblenz 1988, 14; Kelly 2005, 2-5). In this genealogical path, it emerged that the term "dandy" was first used as an insult related to exaggerated affectation and foppery in clothing. Only later the term acquired the trait of a phenomenon worthy of theoretical, literary and philosophical attention. One of the first essayists and writers not to use it in a derogative manner was Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, who, in his essay *Du Dandysme and de G. Brummell* (written in 1845) develops the phenomenon of dandyism from a literary and theoretical point of view, choosing Brummell as the archetypal and uncontested master of the phenomenon itself. It is necessary to set aside, Barbey argues, the commonplace that considers Brummell, and dandyism generally, as a solely matter of hygiene and exterior elegance. Brummell's clothes, in fact, were actually simple if not austere. He used to wear a white shirt with a finely arranged neck-cloth of the only colour accepted those years: *blanc d'innocence virginal* (white of virginal innocence). Above the shirt he had a pale or white waistcoat. Under the waistcoat he also regularly used suspenders, which were not so common in the wardrobes of the previous generation of gentlemen. He wore tight pantaloons made of leather or soft stocking-fabric in the morning; whereas evening breeches were of black-silk jersey. A deep blue jacket and black Hessian boots completed the figure. Brummell, to sum up, had not a showy or colourful look. His palette was

sober, monochrome, “revolutionary primarily in its simplicity” (Kelly 2005, 174) and everything was individually sewn, from buttons to loops to buttonholes. The “chaotic history of male costume”, as Max Beerbohm argues, came to a close “when Mr. Brummell, at his mirror, conceived the notion of trousers and simple coats” (quoted in Moers 1960, 33). Brummell used to spend up to three hours each morning on his appearances, which involved also cleaning himself and shaving carefully. It did not involve, instead, using any salves or perfumes, as he proudly used to say: “no perfumes, but very fine linen, plenty of it, and country washing” (quoted in Jesse 1844, 16). Of course, the meticulous focus to the folds of the fabric, to the perfectly knotted tie, to the nuances produced by the combination of certain colours and so forth, is an essential part of the dandy’s character. And yet, as Barbey wrote: “It is not a suit of clothes walking about by itself! On the contrary, it is the particular way of wearing these clothes which constitutes dandyism. One may be a dandy in creased clothes” (1897, 18). A shirt, for instance, should not necessarily be perfectly smooth and immaculate. In fact, Barbey quotes – as an example of dandy attitude – those gentlemen who torn their clothes before wearing them, in order to make them lighter and closer to a “cloud”.

The English dandy described by Barbey appears as a combination of aesthetic lifestyle and simplicity in clothing. Indeed Brummell’s subtlety could be appreciated only by expert eyes, being it too small, minute, if not insignificant to the most. The dandy’s attitude is closely related to the Italian notion of *sprezzatura*, that is to say, a sort of nonchalance in making one’s efforts disappear by showing a relaxed outlook. Commitment, awareness and concerns in getting dressed should not emerge. Although Brummell, as Barbey notes, used to devote hours on his laborious toilette, he forgot all the time spent once the clothing was over. In other words, no vanity in showing the efforts accomplished was visible in his attitude. Brummell’s wanted to show as spontaneous and harmonious what was actually the result of a long and tremendously complex endeavour. The English dandy applies his zeal to obtain, paradoxically, the presence of an absence. As Brummell’s biographer Ivano Comi writes: “his presence was felt through absence; he built himself erasing the traces of his own passage” (Comi 2008, 38-9). In other words,

Brummell wanted his efforts to disappear as for him it was vulgar to strive for the observer's attention at all costs. His precept, quoted by Barbey, states it clearly: "to be well dressed, you must not be noticed" (Barbey 1897, 68). Brummell suppressed excesses in clothing and invested on small details, on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* which transforms a fold at first glance insignificant in an ineffable charming quality. This style had a prominent impact on the fashion-conscious London of those years. The Prince of Wales became one of the first devotees (and used to imitate Brummell's clothing). The Prince was followed by many other aristocratic families such as the Bucks, the Beaux, the Pinks, and so forth: "in this revival of London's fashion, Brummell was easily cast as a priest and prophet" (Kelly 2005, 176).

What stands out from these introductory remarks is the fact that Brummell's efforts were focused on his exteriority. The English dandy aesthetically oriented his life following the surfaces of his fabric, silk, linen and leather. Philosophically, his life gravitated around the concept of "form". This notion needs to be clarified in order to understand by which specific typology of form the dandy attitude is permeated. The dandy form does not refer to the intelligible and the super-sensible form (*eidos*, in Latin *species*) or to the sensitive form (*morphé*, in Latin *forma*) but, as Perniola points out in relation to Roman rituality, to the form as *habitus*. According to Perniola *habitus* has an alternative and lateral meaning as it avoids falling under the dichotomy between an exclusively phenomenal form and a form that goes beyond the senses. The notion of *habitus* has a broader semantic field: "rimanda all'idea di una forma esteriore [...] attribuita agli atteggiamenti, all'abbigliamento, al modo di comportarsi, alle figure della danza, alle forme di governo, ai modi di vivere, alle figure retoriche, grammaticali, geometriche, astronomiche" (Perniola 2011, 65). In the previous section the concept of ritual without myth, elaborated by Perniola, was developed following Roman religiosity and the Jesuit-Baroque tradition. This concept implies a priority of the *formal* aspects of the ritual (with its orthopraxy and manners), over the *material* ones, that is, over the myth (orthodoxy and morals). Brummell stands in the same anti-metaphysical path traced by Perniola as he discusses the concept of form: through his everyday *clothing ritual*, Brummell does not look for an ideal

form (*eîdos*) neither for an earthly one (*morphé*). He does not try to imitate an eternal and harmonious idea of manly masculinity and, at the same time, he does not consider clothing in its most common use (namely keeping the body warm and sheltered from the elements). Brummell, thus, deals precisely with the form as *habitus*, a form that does not go beyond exteriority – namely, it is grounded upon appearances and manners – and which, however, does not end in an empty formalism (a mere shell capable of containing anything indifferently). Its characteristics will be explained over the next sub-chapters.

This sub-chapter focused on Brummell's peculiar elegance and introduced the notion of form as *habitus*. The following one will start to develop the connections between the ritual without myth and the English dandy's lifestyle.

### *Brummell and the Myth's of His Time*

This thesis has previously developed Perniola's conception of ritual without myth in the ancient Roman religion<sup>7</sup>. To review it briefly, Romans emptied their cults' mythology by stressing the ritual. In their practices the myth was left behind while the performance had to be carried out with formal accuracy. In addition, the ritual had to be practiced with temperance and self-control. This happened for a central reason: if the ritual subject was involved too vigorously in the ritual his/her emotional outburst could have implied the possibility of performing the ritual in a hasty and wrong way. The result would have been an excess of superstition and vital subjectivity. Two aspects of this ritual typology find a parallel in Brummell's lifestyle, i.e. a) the respect for a form without *belief* on the one hand and, on the other, b) the disappearance of subjectivity. This sub-chapter will deal with the first aspect, whereas the following one is dedicated to the second.

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<sup>7</sup> See First Section, Chapter 3, sub-chapter 3.

To see in what terms Brummell practices a form without belief, that is, without ideologies or mythologies, it is useful to provide a concise historical framework to situate him in the context of those decades (last decade of the Eighteenth century and first decades of the Nineteenth). The background in which Brummell was active is inseparable from the decline of aristocratic ideals and values. He was part of that “uneasy atmosphere of shifting values that followed the French Revolution” (Moers 1960, 17) which unsettled both the monarchy and the aristocracy. As it will be clearer shortly, Brummell privileges neither the falling aristocracy nor the new bourgeois class. It is true that Brummell took part in high society events and gatherings, yet he was not an aristocrat because of his impertinent and individualistic behaviour. Aristocratic society implied roles which were precisely challenged by his almost disruptive manners (as it will be clearer further on). At the same time it is true that he was against the bourgeoisie and its democratic ideals, and yet, as Kelly points out, his clothing was “quiet, reasonable and beautiful: free from folly or affection, yet susceptible to exquisite ordering. It appeared post-revolutionary, neo-classical, ordered and enlightened and in this it did indeed seem democratic” (2005, 177-8). In other words, Brummell’s clothing was not foppish or showy; on the contrary, it could suit a large variety of classes and occupations.

Productivity, progress, utility, work, egalitarianism, these are among the most important key ideas of the nascent bourgeoisie. Brummell was at odds with each of them: as Emilien Carassus writes, “in the social integrations – or alienation – that of the work inspires an unparalleled horror. He [the dandy] rejects the curse that God did weigh on the descendants of Adam, imposing them to earn bread by the sweat of their brow” (Carassus 1971, 75). Instead of a productive working day, Brummell’s everyday life was permeated by its opposite: a rigorous and disciplined cult of futility. The myth of the progress privileges a proteiform mass of individuals oriented towards productiveness and utility; on the contrary Brummell – if judged by the bourgeois mindset – was an unproductive and useless individual, for he spent most of his lifetime taking care of superfluity: namely his appearances.

Brummell, to sum up, did not express any myths of his era: neither nostalgia for the lost power of the aristocracy, nor an opening towards the ideals of the rising bourgeoisie. Brummell was a-topical, that is, he possessed a fundamental feature of the transit, (see *The Transit's* chapter). The English dandy did not follow any utopia, i.e. he did not recur to fallen myths and symbols and did not replace them with new ones; on the other hand, he did not follow any topicality, i.e. the trivialization of everyday life into its bourgeois stereotypes. Brummell, instead, grounded his existence on the ritual element, specifically the clothing ritual.

Ritual without myth implies three main aspects: priority to form and orthopraxy (developed in the previous sub-chapter); freedom from a belief or ideology (present sub-chapter); and finally: desubjectivation. The following sub-chapter will deal with this last characteristic.

#### Nihil admirari

Perniola argued that one of the main aspects of ritual without myth is that the ritual subject – to observe the performance with accuracy – should control him/herself by avoiding his/her subjective drives and desires to come out. To see in what terms it is possible to investigate a dandy desubjectivation, this thesis will start to develop a parallel drawn by Barbey between Florentine strategic-political thinking (especially with regard to Machiavelli) and dandyism. Specifically, Barbey makes a comparison between Machiavelli and Brummell. According to Barbey, a common thread can be found in the “detached” and “cold” lifestyle of the English dandy who echoes a fundamental Machiavellian precept: “the world belongs to the cool of head” (Barbey 1897, 50). Coldness is connected to the ability to control one’s own passions and emotions for the purpose of one's goal: for Machiavelli this was the preservation of political power and for Brummell the retention of his influence and power as leader of fashion. For this reason Brummell, although often impertinent with his witty remarks and

comments, was never independent from the high-society in which he mixed. In other words, while he was not a transgressor he “dared with tact” (Barbey 1897, 65), that is to say, he ‘played’ with the rules without actually breaking them. To maintain his power as *arbiter elegantiarum* (arbiter of elegances) within high society circles, Brummell had to keep a coldness close to the stoic *apatheia* or the Ignatian indifference<sup>8</sup>. Brummell’s subversive force is voluntarily limited since he needs rules to be able to “separate” from the others while still being among them. A total transgression, in other words, would exclude him from the network in which he exercises his dominion. As for Machiavellian coldness, here emerges an extremely aesthetic aspect of stoicism that is based on the Latin motto: *nihil admirari* (“let nothing astonish you”). Strong passion, excessive admiration and uncontrolled wonder for something imply – for Brummell – an inconstant, imprecise, exalted and vulgar subjectivity. The ritual without myth of the Roman religion is also useful at this stage, since the risk linked to an outburst of individual subjectivity could transform the proper religious ritual into a superstition. The dandy then becomes the herald of this peculiar form of serenity in the midst of modern agitation. The hours spent for personal toilette and clothing had also this goal, namely they worked as a ritual against productivity: in a historical context in which utility and accumulation of capitals are pivotal, Brummell grounded his life on a clothing ritual. Through his daily performance, he therefore expressed a political position of rebellion against the *status quo*.

Brummell based his own power on what is commonly considered as accessory and superfluous: clothing. He brought dressing to an art that goes beyond both the simple regulatory function of the dress (against the bad weather, maintenance of body heat, etc.) and beyond the role constraints of aristocratic values, presenting himself as a singularity not belonging to any traditional rank. The dandy, as Baudelaire wrote, embodied the so called *grandeur sans convictions* (“greatness without convictions”<sup>9</sup>), which,

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 3, sub-chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> A motto conceived by the French poet as the title of a never published work on dandyism. This concept will be further developed in the section regarding Baudelaire.

according to this thesis, underpins Perniola's conception of ritual without myth. The lack of convictions lies in the fact that the dandy does not seek an ultimate sense or an ideology, but only a form, which includes manners, rituals and desubjectivation.

Over the last two sub-chapters of this section it was shown why Brummell's ritual clothing did not share the myths and the ideologies of the time. In addition, it has been argued that his desubjectivation is close to Florentine strategic-political thinking and ancient Roman religion. However, it is still necessary to dwell on the peculiar conception of subjectivity embodied by Brummell, a subjectivity that, as it will be clearer at the end of the next sub-chapter, is at odds with the Romantic conception of the individual.

#### *Against the Romantic Conception of History*

In order to clarify the peculiarity of Brummell's subjectivity, it is useful to differentiate his attitude from that of another figure arisen in Europe during the first half of the Nineteenth century, the Romantic. Both Brummell and the Romantics were part of the same historical European context and both shared a critical distance over the dominant conception of the world. However, among the romantics' key concepts emerge the Absolute, History and Nature (Carassus 1990). On the contrary, Brummell behaved as if there were no ultimate truths to be reached or any Absolute to which orient oneself; Brummell's attitude was not permeated by any Romantic concept such as *Sehnsucht* (translatable as "longing", "craving") or *Streben* ("to strive" [for the Absolute]). The Romantics tried to compensate the boredom and the disenchantment they felt "by exalting the self, by recurring to nature, by expanding to the forces of the universe with a certain confidence in the progressive march of humanity" (Carassus 1990,

32). Brummell, on the contrary, lived as if he was not interested at all in any Absolute, be it Nature<sup>10</sup> or History.

Romantic conception of History is marked by the notion of Titanism, alluding to the mythic war between Titans and Olympic Gods. The Romantic Movement *Sturm und Drang* borrowed the term in order to express an attitude of spiritual and material rebellion against an overwhelming power (be it destiny, God, natural forces and so on). History, thus, is seen by the Romantics as the theatre in which all these uncontrollable, gigantic and irresistible forces happen. The Romantic individual, although in his/her disadvantaged position, can still behave as a Titan by heroically challenging these forces. On the contrary, Brummell does not conceive History as the realm of heroic actions or events. His attitude is at odds with the Romantics: it is not the magnificent, the enormous or the sublime which interest him. He instead lingers over the infinitesimal details of the fabric and focuses his witty remarks about ordinary occurrences. To provide some examples of ironic anecdotes, once he was asked by a lady if he had ever eaten vegetables, and his answer was: “madam, I once ate a pea” (Moers 1960, 21). Or, referring to another gentleman, his dry line has become famous: “Do you call that *thing* a coat?” In many cases, Brummell did not even use words. It was enough for him to raise his eyebrows, or to give a certain glance. As William Hazlitt wrote, Brummell “has arrived at the very *minimum* of wit, and reduced it, ‘by happiness or pains’, to an almost invisible point” (quoted in Moers 1960, 20). The wit allowed Brummell to triumph in an elegant, cold and ironic way in ordinary situations. Brummell’s witty anecdotes and aesthetical lifestyle, I claim, share a relevant affinity with Perniola’s understanding of history as the realm of difference<sup>11</sup> and to the so called “storiette” (Perniola 2016). These short stories are permeated by irony, aesthetic detachment, anti-humanism, all within a post-historical tonality (namely they do not deal with History as the realm of overwhelming forces to be heroically fought). Coblenz refers to this post-historical attitude affirming that Brummell has

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<sup>10</sup> The relationship between dandyism and the romantic understanding of nature will be developed in the Second Section, Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> See First Section, Chapter 3, especially the claims on history and difference within the Jesuit tradition.

no last chapter and no History, as for him “history is nothing but a tasteless novel, or even a pure nothing” (Coblence 1988, 152). The non-substantiality of the self is here configured by taking an indifferent perspective to the historical events of the world. Specifically, Brummell’s detached attitude is reached by plunging into the neutral sphere of artificiality and clothing. In fact, from the daily clothing ritual to the impertinence of his ironic remarks, Brummell does not expose himself as a subject in the etymological sense of the term, *sub-jectum*, (literally “what it thrown under”, “what lies under”). Brummell devotes his efforts to his appearances precisely because he believes he does not need an identity, a subjectivity, a *ubi consistam*: only a subject who wants to emerge, who strives to fulfil his/her desires, needs an identity and with it a subjectivity. Brummell behaves as if his subjectivity lacks a substantial content, that is, those features that make a subject recognizable in terms of identity, desires, pulses and beliefs. In this regard it can be argued that his is an *epochistic subjectivity*<sup>12</sup>, for the English dandy puts into brackets, so to speak, both his identity and the objects of his experience through a neutral and ritualistic attitude. Indeed, Brummell cultivates a lifestyle in order to dissolve his personality, to make it disappear, to remove his *human* side and live closer to a *puppet*. The following sub-chapter will explain this last statement by developing the connections between the concept of simulacrum and Brummell’s lifestyle.

### *Dandyism and the Simulacrum of Death*

Perniola extensively wrote on the notion of simulacrum in relation to the concept of death (Perniola 2011). The aim of this sub-chapter is to show in what terms Brummell’s clothing ritual is close to the Jesuit’s simulacrum of death and why this approach brings the English dandy closer to a puppet than to a human being.

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 3, sub-chapter 1.

In what ways is Brummell close to the existential detachment typical of Stoic and Jesuit thought? In what sense is it possible to argue that Brummell abolishes death by living like a corpse, following the Ignatian motto *perinde ac cadaver*? The first section of this thesis<sup>13</sup> explored the “simulation of the death” elaborated and practiced by the Jesuit school (particularly Bellarmine and St. Ignatius). A significant feature of this conception of death is its anti-metaphysical approach. Perniola, in fact, situates it outside the metaphysical dichotomy represented by the theologian and the humanistic perspectives on death. According to him, even though for opposite reasons, they both abolish death from the realm of everyday life: theology by considering life as a mere passage to the eternal and true reality of the soul after death; humanism, on the other hand, cuts off death from life by considering it a biological fact that occurs when organic functions cease. Perniola argued that the Jesuit tradition has to be considered an alternative way of approaching death which does not fall under metaphysics. Instead of denying death, this approach introduces it into everyday life by a practice of simulation. Perniola’s research on the simulacrum of death meets dandyism precisely at this point. In fact, the exercise and the daily simulation of death correspond to Brummell’s ritual clothing, considered in this thesis as a ritual in which subjectivity disappears in the *artificial*<sup>14</sup> realm of clothes. Brummell’s clothes are not a second skin or an envelope, containing a subjectivity or a body with its natural necessities. Clothes are not an extension of Brummell’s personality, or something that tell us *who* Brummell is. On the contrary, they show Brummell in his constitutive *becoming-thing*. In other words, Brummell shows his effort in deconstructing himself, in vaporizing his own subjectivity and consciousness. Through the clothing ritual he performs an *epochistic reduction*<sup>15</sup> of his beliefs and starts to function as an object or a mechanism. In this process he approaches the Ignatian simulacrum of death, namely by transforming himself as a corpse in front of his mirror. Perniola condensed Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* by considering them as “the election

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 2, sub-chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> The connection between dandyism and the concept of artificiality, thingness and inorganic will be further developed in the next Section.

<sup>15</sup> For further details on the concept of ‘epoche’ see Chapter 3, sub-chapter 1.

of the difference”. Election implies acceptance and affirmation of one’s own present and yet not through a vitalistic approach, that is to say, not oriented to the satisfaction of individual desires and impulses. In the same way Brummell tries to free himself from physical and natural laws, from desires and needs. He “dehumanises” himself, he becomes an inert character, emptied from any identity or interiority. Namely, he becomes a puppet<sup>16</sup>:

The superiority of the puppet comes from the simplicity of the mechanism moving it [...] The puppet is only subjected to the law of heaviness – and yet it is infinitely lighter than a human being. It is not disturbed by any disorder of consciousness, by any movement of reflection. (Coblence 1988, 153, my translation)

Although “puppet” and “corpse” are two different entities, they share a crucial aspect, namely they imply an exchange between the inert and the vital, the organic and the inorganic. For if the puppet is an inanimate object which mimics the living and the characteristics of living beings (such as movement, verbal and non verbal communication), Loyola’s motto “to live as a corpse” should be understood as a devitalisation of one’s own body and subjectivity. In this context, therefore, both the puppet and the corpse can be compared to the dandy’s lifestyle because they involve a transient status between life and death. In this *vaporization* of subjectivity, only Brummell’s simulacrum reflected on the mirror anchors the English dandy to his existence. The concept of simulacrum implies “something that imitates another”. Perniola, as I already stated earlier in this section<sup>17</sup>, departs from those aesthetic traditions which consider this type of imitation negatively, namely as falsehood or deception and praises several alternative traditions (especially Roman religion and Jesuit thought) which positively adhere to the simulacrum. As it should be clearer now, Brummell follows this

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<sup>16</sup> The parallel between Brummell as a puppet and Jesuit thought should not lead one to believe that puppets are more attuned to God than humans. In this case the parallel is drawn to emphasise the disappearance of one’s own contingent necessities and accidents. In other words, both “living as a corps” from the Ignatian tradition and the figure of the puppet share this “elemental” feature of reduction and cutback of one’s own subjectivity.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 1, sub-chapter 1.

alternative approach by literally living in a simulacral dimension through his dandy lifestyle.

### *Conclusion*

This section focused on the English dandy George Bryan Brummell, in order to develop the conceptual affinities between his lifestyle and Perniola's philosophy. A brief introduction was provided in order to familiarize with Brummell's essential biographical information and to situate him in the larger historical background in which he belonged. Brummell lived during the shifting decades where traditional aristocracy was falling and the newly born bourgeois class was ascending. Nonetheless, Brummell did not praise any myths or ideology, on the contrary, he moved as an a-topical figure, transiting in-between ages and symbols. Brummell elaborated a complex and laborious clothing ritual comparable to the ritual without myth of ancient Roman religion and Jesuit-Baroque tradition. The ritual without myth, as it was developed by Perniola, can be summed up as an aesthetic focus on a formal performance not oriented to any beliefs or ideology. In addition, the ritual subject, in order to do the performance correctly, should not let his/her identity to come out. Perniola, in fact, links the identity principle with ego, subjectivity and individual desires. This "natural" or "human" side should be abandoned in order to observe the ritual carefully and avoid any outburst of subjective pulses. In parallel, it was showed how Brummell's clothing ritual can be considered a ritual without myth. His daily efforts on his appearances are marked by a desubjectivation in which his individuality does not emerge: on the contrary, he de-humanizes himself and becomes closer to a puppet than to a human being. This epochistic suspension of his own subjectivity links the ritual without myth to the simulacrum of death typical of the Jesuit school. In fact, Brummell's reaches an indifference closely comparable with the Ignatian motto "perinde ac cadaver" ("like a corpse").

This section drew several conclusions in the overall aim of the thesis. Firstly it started to show in what terms it is possible to argue that the phenomenon of dandyism can be connected to Perniola's philosophy. Specifically it showed how three pivotal concepts elaborated by the Italian philosopher (respectively the "simulacrum", the "transit" and the "ritual without myth") were embodied by George Bryan Brummell's lifestyle. Mutually, by showing these affinities, another objective of the thesis begun to be clarified, namely that Perniola's can be considered a dandy thought as it deals with concepts and categories closely relatable to the dandies' everyday life. By intertwining Perniola's philosophy and dandyism a final objective of this section was to claim that the very phenomenon of dandyism should not be understood as belonging exclusively to the first half of the British Eighteenth Century. This thesis considers, in fact, the dandy's attitude as a broader aesthetic-oriented lifestyle in which common imaginaries and representations are challenged and put into question. This lifestyle should not be confined into a specific decade or age but, following Baudelaire's claim, it should be conceived as the laborious effort of those who are willing to establish a new aristocracy of the spirit against triviality, vulgarity, and the general social downgrading. In this regard, the dandy is a key figure of revolt that has appeared in several ages throughout history and will continue to do so whenever certain individuals "participate of the same character of opposition and rebellion" (Baudelaire 1964, 11). In order to fully understand and further develop this claim the next section will focus on two concepts elaborated by Perniola (namely the "thing" and the "strategic beauty"). On the one hand the thesis will show the theoretical link between Perniola and Baudelaire's dandyism; on the other hand it will deepen the role and the value of a dandy opposition against social downgrading.

**Second Section**  
**The Adventures of Feeling**

## Chapter 1

### The Thing

#### *Introduction*

The objective of this section is twofold. First, it will focus on two core concepts in Perniola's philosophy; second, it will show the conceptual affinities between Perniola's thought and Baudelaire's dandyism. Specifically, it will be divided into three chapters. The first will deal with Perniola's notion of "thingness", the second with that of "strategic beauty" (influenced by Stoicism and Baroque literature), and the last one will show how these two categories are synthesised in Baudelaire's theories and lifestyle. A quotation from Perniola's work in which he provides a significant insight into dandyism provides the key to the reason I have decided to focus on these two concepts:

Solo il dandy, quest'ultimo erede del saggio stoico, si è imposto nel mondo dell'apparenza come una cosa e si è sottratto alle mode in nome di un modo che gli sarebbe inseparabile. Infatti bisogna fare il vuoto in se stessi per acquisire l'aspetto freddo, lontano mille miglia dalle sensazioni immediate che qualifica il dandy. (Perniola 1990, 59)

This quotation not only sums up three relevant aspects of the figure of the dandy (Stoicism, thingness and coldness) but, in doing so, it

establishes a direct connection between Perniola's work and dandyism<sup>1</sup>. It underlines the relationship between things and dandies, and its value; it stresses the centrality of Stoicism which – as I will explain later in this chapter – can be considered the philosophy of the warriors (Sherman 2007). The result of the metamorphosis of the human being into a thing together with the effort to become a Stoic warrior leads to the “coldness of appearances”, which is precisely an essential characteristic of the grand style, the last notion which will be explored in this chapter.

### *Preliminary distinctions: Things and Objects*

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines the thing as “an inanimate material object as distinct from a sentient being” (2010, eBook edition). According to this definition tools, weapons, works of art, and artifacts – for instance – all fall within the “inanimate” realm of things (as opposed to the biological realm of animals and plants). In addition, the Dictionary uses the term “object” as a synonym of “thing”. Interestingly enough, in fact, the same Dictionary defines the object as a “material thing that can be seen and touched”. Therefore, the two terms appear to be interchangeable. In our everyday life we indeed tend to use “thing” and “object” interchangeably. For example, we would not find it baffling to describe a hammer (or a ring, an amplifier, a television and so on) either as a thing or an object; at the same time, we would be at ease in hearing someone saying: “I am not a thing/object, not a work of art to be cherished, I am a person”. In everyday life not only are “thing” and “object” understood as interchangeable, they are also “debasing” terms. An individual designated as a “thing” – as I suggested in the example – perceives it as a degradation of his/her dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> This connection is not developed further in *Enigmi* – the book from where the quote was taken – by Perniola. He elaborates a more extended perspective on dandyism in (2002b, 76-8), as will be discussed in the Chapter 3 of this Section.

Why is this so? And, in addition, should “thing” and “object” really be considered as synonyms or do they have a specificity?

One of the most enduring claims about the nature of things and objects was elaborated by the French philosopher and scientist René Descartes. His standpoint on the relationship between things and objects – as Paolo Bartoloni points out – has had in fact a tremendous influence in both scientific and philosophical Western thought (2016, 41). According to the French philosopher “The relation between subject and object”, Bartoloni continues, “institutes an active agency (the subject) and a passive receiver (the object), to the extent of rendering the notion of relation null by reducing relation to possession” (Bartoloni 2016, 42). In other words, the world for Descartes can be divided into subjects and objects: subjects analyse, objects are analysed; subjects produce, objects are produced; subjects possess, objects are possessed. Ultimately, Descartes’ perspective conveys the idea that the world of things is owned by humans for their aims. In so doing, it is fundamentally anthropocentric. Things and objects would in fact merely be instrumental entities in service of human beings: a knife is useful in so far as it serves its purpose of – for instance – cutting bread; an optical microscope if it helps the scientist in seeing small objects invisible to the naked eye. And Descartes’ view does not account only for human relationship with inert entities. The essential condition of things and objects as tools and instruments can be extended to the ways in which humans today *use* forests, wild animals, and minerals as pure means to their ends.

Scholars such as Latour (2005), Callon (1986), and Di Felice (2010; 2019; 2020) have elaborated new theoretical frameworks in which the interactions between humans and non-human entities are re-shaped and re-thought in opposition to the enduring Cartesian model. Throughout the twentieth century, in addition, several philosophers (such as Benjamin 2009; Heidegger 1967; Sartre 1978), dissatisfied with the traditional Western approach to the world of things, have provided their own peculiar perspectives on the issue of “thingness”. More recently other thinkers (specifically Brown 2001; Harman 2002, 2011; Meillassoux 2008) have rekindled the attention on thing theory within the so called Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) school of thought. Drawing from Heidegger’s

dissatisfaction with the metaphysic understanding of things and objects as mere instrumental entities dependent upon humans, “Object-Oriented Ontology invites us to consider a philosophical shift away from relation and correlation, and fluxes and encounters. The effort ought to be directed instead to the thing as such, and to thing’s ‘reality’” (Bartoloni 2016, 44). In other words, one of the main challenges of the Object-Oriented Ontology’s theoretical framework consists in exploring and re-thinking the significance of things in themselves, in their autonomy and suchness.

In this chapter, my aim is to explore Perniola’s perspective on the notion of the thing, a central theoretical category of his thought. In fact, as I will clarify shortly, Perniola has conducted a significant number of studies on thingness which are disseminated in his books and articles (specifically 1976, 10-15; 1982, 75-77; 1985, 217-228; 1990, 47-67; 2004; 2011). Perniola, similarly to the OOO school (although writing in the early Eighties, almost two decades earlier), starts from Heidegger’s distinction between *das Ding* (the thing) and *die Sache* (the object) (Perniola 1985, 223-229). For the German philosopher, *Die Sache* corresponds to the “represented object”, or, to borrow Bartoloni’s words, “the result of a process of representational transformation of *Das Ding*” (2016, 46). Therefore, *das Ding* would enter – so to speak – the conceptual realm of *die Sache* every time the symbolic spell of language is cast upon it. On the one hand the thing as such (*das Ding*) and on the other the thing transformed into an object of representation (*die Sache*). Perniola, as Bartoloni points out in another essay (2011), maintains this distinction between things and objects. Bartoloni already provides a clue to it by entitling a section of his essay “Things and Objects: Mario Perniola” (2011, 154) in order to underline that the two concepts should not be merged and taken as one. The object, in this usage, is the thing “implacably transformed into an object of consumption” (Bartoloni 2011, 158). “Objectification” is thus understood as a perversion of the thing which gets spectacularised “in the context of a society of emotions” (158). In other words, objects not only fall under the category of usability and presence-at-hand (Heidegger’s *Vorhandenheit*), but at the same time are symbolic representations (in this case of the triumph of global consumerism and fetishism).

Nonetheless, as Bartoloni points out, this is not Perniola's peculiar sphere of analysis. More specifically, Perniola does not focus on the critique of post-modern society that centres its forms of fetishism and commodification. Although the subject is presented at the crossroads of the organic and the inorganic (Bartoloni 2011, 157), Perniola departs from Benjamin's claims concerning the paradigm shift that occurred with the age of technical reproduction (1969). In fact, even if one of Perniola's most known books is named *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* quoting Benjamin (1986, 124), the Italian philosopher does not emphasise the seductive aspect of commodities. On the contrary, as will be made clearer, he develops it in order to explore the significance of an "alliance" between the organic and the inorganic realms. But if Perniola does not follow or continue the theory of commodification within contemporary society, where is his analysis oriented? For what reasons is the concept of the thing central in his philosophy? The overall aim of this chapter is to answer these questions.

According to this thesis, the aim of Perniola's main philosophical effort is to open, develop and explore an alternative path to those of the Western metaphysical traditions. In pursuing it, Perniola builds his theoretical framework by linking figures, schools of thought, and experiences that – according to him – share an anti-metaphysical approach. The first section illustrated this claim by investigating Perniola's research into Roman rituals and Jesuit aesthetics. This one will deal with several other phenomena – from Paleolithic engravings to psychoanalysis, from Stoicism to Baroque literature.

Two major metaphysical polemical targets which recur in Perniola's philosophy are spiritualism and vitalism. Even if the former implies a transcendent movement towards the altitudes of the spirit and the latter a descent into life and its instinctual – if not animal – manifestations, they represent, for Perniola, the two sides of the same coin. Namely, they are the opposite poles of the same metaphysical attitude: in fact, the spiritualistic one emphasizes the transcendent, the divine, or the interior and profound in a spiritual connotation; the vitalistic one stresses subjectivity, identity, desires, inner feelings and pulsional drives. Even if reaching opposite conclusions, spiritualism and vitalism conceive reality in terms of dualisms

and polar oppositions: what they both miss, for Perniola, is that they are not able to conceive it in its transit<sup>2</sup>, namely – as will be also clarified in this chapter – in its continuous and uncanny dynamics. Conversely Perniola is against spiritualistic or vitalistic metaphysics and intends to investigate *the feeling of the difference which is opened up by the encounter between human beings and things, between organic and inorganic, between life and death*<sup>3</sup>. Perniola stresses that history shows that things have not just been understood merely as commodities or instrumental entities. In other words, the individual has always had a mutual relationship with things, which goes beyond fetishistic consumption or simple usability. Therefore, Perniola is at odds with the Marxist perspective that inscribes things in the broader context of alienation and reification. Perniola does not propose a critique of what could be seen as an extreme stage of contemporary reification.

His perspective also departs from Guy Debord<sup>4</sup>. The first thesis of Debord's celebrated book *The Society of the Spectacle*, written in 1967, states that "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (2009, 7). According to Debord, the spectacle is the force that separates individuals by reducing them into social atoms living a passive life. Means of mass communication, cinema, private property, and the general world of consumerism are all factors that, for Debord, increase the isolation of the individual. The individual is, in fact, only left with the pseudo-freedoms of choosing *new things* to buy, to update and to eventually get rid of. There are many occurrences of the words "thing" in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Each of

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<sup>2</sup> See First Section, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship with life and death, in Perniola's philosophy, has been taken into account previously when developing the simulation of death in Jesuit thought. See First Section, Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1966 and 1969 Perniola established a correspondence with the French marxist philosopher Guy Debord (1931-1994). Perniola used to consider him as one of his two exemplar masters (together with the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, 1918-1991). In addition, he published a volume (2013c, first edition in 1973) on the Situationist International (the revolutionary movement founded by Debord) and a critical essay on the man himself (1999). He also held conferences, seminars and university courses investigating the role and the value of the Situationists' critiques of capitalist society. Nonetheless, as will be made clear in the Chapter 2 of this Section, Perniola did not endorse Debord's theory on society. In fact, he was more influenced by his way of thinking and writing – namely, by his *style* – which Perniola himself described as oriented towards the "grand style" (1999).

them reinforces Debord's Marxist point of view on reification, which is at odds with Perniola's philosophy. For instance, Debord writes about the "domination of society by 'intangible or tangible things'" (2007, 17); or: "It is things that rule and that are young, vying with each other and constantly replacing each other" (2007, 31); or again: "The things that the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change" (2007, 35); coming to the conclusion that historical life has been reduced into the "economic history of *things*" (2007, 44) where time is a "*time of things*" (2007, 83).

What emerges from these theses, together with the first one quoted above, is that – according to Debord – objects are the opposite of life. This appears to be so, ultimately, for two main reasons: a) the spectacle isolates the individual by filling their life with a disproportional number of things, and b) these things transform "what was once lived" (Debord here means lived actively, genuinely, in first person) into an abstraction, namely a general passivity wherein actions are pseudo-actions because they are produced and controlled by the overwhelming system of the spectacle. In other words, if individuals act within the framework of the thing, their life cannot be but alienated and dominated by a constant reification.

Perniola, although aware of the Situationist critique of late capitalist society, does not share this perspective. What Debord considers as historical reification, or passive contemplation of one's own life by the means of consuming ever-outdated-things, is actually the re-emergence of an ancient experience that has always been part of the human-world relationship and that would only be partially considered if the research categories taken into account were those of alienation, reification, and commodification. The Marxist critique, in other words, mystifies the thing. It remains anchored to a metaphysical moralism for which "man has a dignity superior to that the thing". In so doing, Marxist critique of alienation meets Cartesian anthropocentrism. Although departing from incompatible premises and reaching divergent conclusions, they both share the unquestioned assumption that subjects (humans) are superior to objects (non-human entities).

### *The Neutral Dimension*

To understand the re-evaluation of the concept of thing in Perniola, its essential features within Perniola's research must be explored. These features can be summarised by three recurrent notions: the *neutral*, *exteriority*, and *radiation*. This sub-chapter deals with the first of these notions, while the other two will be the focus of the following two sub-chapters.

The neutral is defined by Perniola as a “processo di reciproca osmosi [...] tra l'uomo e le cose” (1990, 52). That is to say, a process whereby things acquire qualities inherent to organisms (such as sensitivity, animation, and so on) and, vice versa, human beings enter into an inorganic realm in which subjectivity disappears leaving room for an impersonal feeling. The purpose of this sub-chapter is to clarify this passage.

The earliest evidence of the neutral experience is detected by Perniola in the Paleolithic art sites in the Côa Valley, in Portugal. These rock sites contain thousands of engravings – dated between 20,000 and 11,000 years BCE – depicting humans, horses, cattle, animals, abstract, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures. Apart from the rarity of these engravings, which were incised, carved or picked on rocks outdoors – unlike most Paleolithic engravings, usually found indoors in caves – Perniola's attention is drawn to some features of the drawings. Perniola argues that these should not be interpreted according to the current trends of Rock Art Theory: the “Hunting Magic” hypothesis (Heizer, Baumoff 1976; Breuil 1952) and the “Neuropsychological model” (Lewis-Williams 2006; Whitley 2007). According to the first theory, prehistoric drawings would have had a magical function in order to insure a good hunt; the second one interprets rock art by linking petroglyphs and pictograms to the altered states of consciousness (ASC) of the shamans. The drawings would then be the recordings of the visions and images perceived in the ASC. Perniola is not satisfied with these hypotheses because, according to him, the interpreters

did not manage to step out of a metaphysical approach. Hunting magic, for Perniola, falls under the category of spiritualistic naturalism; the Neuropsychological model under the shamanic spiritualism. In other words, Rock Art theory scholars, by focusing on a transcendent or a vitalistic explanation of the drawings, reproduce the Western metaphysical mindset into the hunter-gatherers' culture and everyday life. In doing so they commit a hermeneutic violence<sup>5</sup>. Perniola, trying to disentangle Rock Art Theory from these metaphysical conclusions, claims that the incisions were possibly meant to show other concerns of prehistoric people:

One of the most uncanny aspects of the remains of the Côa Valley is the animation of some figures carved in the rock, whose movements are represented in a synchronic manner. It is as if the stone itself became animated. (2009, 11)

The prehistoric artist, according to Perniola, did not mean to evoke magical or natural forces, nor did he/she use the paintings as means for a spiritual and mystic “recording” of his or her own subjectivity and ASC. It is rather the contrary: in the effort to reproduce movement on stones, he or she wanted to emancipate him- or herself precisely from the constraints of life and subjectivity by animating what is in itself inanimate, by blurring the boundaries between organic and inorganic. In other words, the engravings were produced not for a purpose of subjectivation but for abstraction. Perniola underlines that by searching movement and life through abstract and geometric figures, the incisions show a sort of suspended and artificial life, a “living mechanics” (4) in which the limits of organic mobility are transgressed and “energy is poured into the dead lines of the stone” (4). In addition, many engravings represent abstract anthropomorphic figures, which, Perniola argues, introduce other perspectives on the perception of the human body, felt more abstract, more material and at the same time closer to an enigmatic life infused by the “stone that vibrates”.

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<sup>5</sup> The same field of study named “Rock Art Theory” borrows the western concept of “art” to indicate products, experiences and phenomena that precede Western tradition by millennia.

Perniola wrote his text *Enigmi*, with the subtitle *Il momento egizio nella società e nell'arte*, in 1990, before the paper presented in Lisbon in 2009 regarding Rock Art Theory. Possibly, if he had known the carvings of the Côa Valley at the time, he would have subtitled it “il momento Paleolitico nella società e nell'arte” instead. In fact, the Egyptian effect and the Paleolithic effect share the same essential characteristics.

In the text, he investigates Hegel's analysis of ancient Egyptian art. In Egyptian culture and religion, elements that would generally be considered inert or dead seem to possess a peculiar life form. For instance, deities' statues, bas-reliefs and monuments were thought of as being able to observe the visitors of the temples, mummies were considered to keep some vital functions, and so on. On the other hand, Perniola does not dwell much on the transformation of the Egyptian man into a thing, affirming quite hastily that “gli uomini, del tutto inconsapevoli di se stessi sono mossi da un formidabile impulso di oggettivazione” (1990, 53). Anyhow, relevant for the claims of this thesis, is that these two sources (Paleolithic and Egyptian) begin to shape the neutral experience according to Perniola's claims. The first implication of this is that this experience is not specific only to our time. The advent of artificial intelligences, robotic prostheses, prototype robots and cyborgs, does not pose for the first time, but repeats the perennial question of the exchange between organic and inorganic, between natural and artificial, and between subjective and non-subjective feelings.

In order to explore and clarify the concept of the neutral, it is useful to investigate Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry. Perniola himself dedicated some brief remarks to Rilke and the concept of the thing in *Enigmi* (1990, 54). In fact, both Rilke and Perniola share an attitude of “anti-Prometheanism” towards the world. The pretentious arrogance of controlling the things of the world, to penetrate their essence, leads to a subjective pathos which should be avoided. In fact, the subjective feeling, both for Perniola and Rilke, appears to be driven by the individual search for what he/she considers right or wrong, pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable, natural or unnatural. The subject, in this *personal* feeling, never goes out of him/herself and in this way cannot but see him/herself reflected in the world. Alongside the Cartesian “I think”, Perniola critiques its aesthetic

counterpart of the “I feel”. This Cartesian-aesthetic assumption debases reality by interpreting it solely through the individual point of view. In Rilke’s perspective, instead, “egli [the poet] non ha vita propria, è completamente dissolto nel paesaggio, nel suo lavoro. Guardare l’uomo come un paesaggio, come un animale, come un albero, come un minerale, non vuol dire affatto sminuirlo; egli cessa certo di essere il centro del mondo, ma diventa anche più grande” (Perniola 1990, 54). Turning oneself into a thing, therefore, is not a final jump into alienation and reification (as is claimed by Marxism), or a debasement of human dignity (Kant 1996); on the contrary, it represents a privileged way to finally cast off the metaphysical approach to reality and begin to enter into the neutral dimension.

More specifically, Rilke claimed that the individual should become a “thing among things” through poetical experiences and processes. For Rilke, turning oneself into a thing implies becoming a means, an instrument of the *poetical mystery*. The neutral dimension opens up when what is exterior, impersonal, what comes from outside finds – so to speak – a place to linger in oneself. Only through this welcoming disposition can a “mutual osmosis” between organic and inorganic elements happen, as *The Song of the Sea* suggests:

Antichissimo soffio dal mare,  
vento marino nella notte:  
da nessuno tu vieni;  
se uno veglia,  
badi egli a come  
ti sopporta  
[...]  
O come ti sente un  
Germogliante albero di fico  
Alto nella luce di luna.  
(Rilke in Jesi 1971, 60-1)

This poem exemplifies a continuous exchange between humanity and thingness: for instance, Rilke uses the second person pronoun referring to the inorganic “vento marino”, and the fig tree is given an organic and sentient “feeling” (*ti sente*). At the same time, the almost invisible human presence emerging from the personal pronoun “egli”, “veglia”, “sopporta”, watches over the breath of the sea, seems to resemble an old tree exposed to the sea-wind. All these organic and inorganic elements, for Rilke, fall under the notion of “thing”. It is no coincidence that Rilke wishes for someone to write a history of the landscape – intended as an immense space full of things – (Rilke 1955, 59). In fact, he argues that while historians have focused especially on individuals and their lives, deeds, political actions and so on, only very little has been written about the history of things<sup>6</sup>. The landscape opens up a neutral dimension which allows an osmosis between organic and inorganic, between heterogeneous life forms and things. In this sense Bartoloni argues that “In Perniola humans are both individuals and things, and their status is always already a negotiation of this fusion between organic and inorganic: no longer entirely organic and partly thing-like” (Bartoloni 2011, 157).

Metaphysics, in both its spiritualistic and vitalistic ramifications, is considered by Perniola to be a theoretical construction through which the individual experiences reality by privileging what is far and transcended (God-spiritualism) or what is close but only insofar as it is organic (animal-vitalism). Metaphysics, in other words, goes only upwards or downwards: what is organic remains separate from the inorganic. Perniola’s perspective is instead lateral, marginal, moving *in-between*. The philosophy of the difference developed by Perniola can be understood only if the classical polar oppositions and dualisms are left behind. Difference emerges if, within the same space – reality, human, thing, animal or plant – the process of reciprocal osmosis takes place. Perniola, through his research, wishes to demonstrate how there has always existed, alongside metaphysical dichotomies – organic/inorganic, life/death, exterior/interior – a less

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<sup>6</sup> For Rilke, as Furio Jesi noted, the word “thing” includes almost everything: plants, animals, human beings, statues, sea-winds and so on: “ogni arredo della terra” (Jesi 1971, 60).

common way of thinking and acting, an alternative way of feeling and experiencing reality<sup>7</sup>.

By not focusing on only one of the two sides of the supposed polarity, the neutral dimension does not imply a neutralisation of feeling. In fact, the metamorphosis of the human into a thing and of the thing into a feeling surface implies revitalization as well as devitalization<sup>8</sup>; animation and inanimation; abstraction and concreteness; form and content; and, ultimately, life and death: “farsi cosa [...] [significa] arrischiarsi all’aperto, avere la morte dietro di sé e non davanti a sé, uscire dal tempo concepito in modo rettilineo, diventare a poco a poco spazio” (Perniola 1990, 54). The neutral dimension implies the awareness that polar oppositions are entangled within a logic of false conflicts: turning oneself into a thing means understanding how dichotomies (even masculine-feminine) are actually interpenetrating, *transiting*, flowing into one another unceasingly. In fact, as Steven Shaviro claimed in an article on Perniola’s concept of thing: “Perniola invents a new ontological category, that of the ‘thing that feels’: something that is utterly apart from the duality of subjectivity (which we usually equate with sentience) on the one hand, and of insentient objects on the other” (Shaviro 2005, online source). Thus, the neutral is the third term between organic and inorganic that allows one to avoid fixing oneself unduly on one of the two poles and at the same time keeps them both active. (This conclusion will be developed in the third chapter, along with Baudelaire’s writing. By the end of the section, Perniola’s and Baudelaire’s theoretical affinity on the concept of neutral will emerge.)

Precisely because the “thing that feels” redefines the relationship between matter, form, thought and speculation, it also implies a redefinition of the notion of *exteriority* that has been only hinted at and that represents an essential point to be developed in the next sub-chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> This process of continuous and mutual exchange between organic and inorganic echoes the claims made by Perniola concerning the concept of transit (see First Section, Chapter 2).

<sup>8</sup> See also Perniola’s comments on Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* as a ritual in which the practitioner is asked to become “indifferent” and “aesthetically involved” (First Section, Chapter 3).

### *Exteriority as becoming-mirror*

In order to investigate the theme of exteriority, crucial to understand the concept of thing, it is useful to briefly review the notion of surface as it is developed by Perniola (and explored in the second chapter of the first section). In everyday language, what lies at the surface is considered superficial, with a derogatory connotation. Being superficial, from this perspective, means the inability to go beyond surfaces, forms, externalities, supposing that there is another side which is interior, distant, spiritually oriented, and therefore higher and superior. This interpretation is a spiritualistic legacy of Platonism, for which the things of the world are copies, ontologically inferior to their hyperuranic ideal matrix and origin. Against this, Perniola, echoing the Nietzschean critiques of metaphysics, states that the “world beyond the world” debases reality by leaving unobserved or condemning the actual “depth” of the surface<sup>9</sup>. Reality is in fact a stratification of surfaces, i.e. a full, rich exteriority of layers to unfold, untangle, develop. The neutral experience, as a redefinition of the relationship between life and form, organic and inorganic, individuals and things, is essentially linked to the theme of exteriority and surface. In fact, whereas interiority is linked with identity, desires, and subjectivity, exteriority is linked with forms, rituals, and surfaces. To use Perniola’s terminology, interiority is the “feeling from inside” (*sentire dal di dentro*); exteriority is the “feeling from outside”<sup>10</sup> (*sentire dal di fuori*).

Exteriority will be characterized in this sub-chapter as the peculiar dimension opened up by the experience of *becoming-mirror*. In order to clarify this claim, Perniola’s remarks on Zen philosophy, Baroque literature and virtual reality will be taken into account.

To begin with, Perniola focuses on the Zen everyday precept of harmonization between man and world. To live in accordance with the laws

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<sup>9</sup> See First Section, Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> I have already developed Perniola’s privileging of the “feeling from outside”, especially in regards to Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* – see First Section, Chapter 3.

of nature, in fact, Zen monks and practitioners try not to impose themselves. Instead of striving to adapt the world to their affections, they do the opposite: they attempt to dissolve their egos through a mimetic oriented attitude. “Il saggio entrando nella foresta non agita l’erba, immergendosi nell’acqua non la increspa” (Perniola 1990, 38)<sup>11</sup>. The “sage” applies, thus, a strategy of maximum exteriority as he acts not according to inner drives but *reflects exteriority* (in his case nature).

This openness brings Perniola to claim that “la mente del saggio è assimilata dai pensatori dello Zen ad uno specchio, in cui si riflette l’universo intero” (Perniola 1990, 38)<sup>12</sup>. Precisely at this conceptual crossroad between exteriority, reflections, cosmic feelings and mimesis emerges a concept coined by Perniola in his book *Enigmi*: “specularism” (*specularismo*). Specularism derives from the latin word *specularis*, literally meaning “of the mirror”. To clarify this concept, a first, misleading interpretation should be refuted. The mirror is commonly associated with the libidinal investment cast upon the image of the subject mirrored. In other words, the relation between humans and mirrors has been connected with the phenomenon of Narcissism. From Greek and Latin mythology to Freudian thought, mirroring oneself assumed a pathological meaning. The mirror is interpreted in several ways, none of which seems to provide a positive connotation. In everyday language it is associated with vanity, egoism, superficiality; in psychoanalysis it is linked to personality disorders; in sociology it indicates the regression in a private self unable to communicate in a public and social sphere. Perniola intends to emancipate the mirror from this perspective by overturning its terms: becoming-mirror rather than mirroring oneself. As it was for the Zen monk, this is not a matter of mirroring oneself in the world, but of practicing the opposite: allowing the world to be reflected within oneself. In this way the individual becomes a mirroring surface where what is external finds a place to be.

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<sup>11</sup> A possible critique of this attitude might be that it implies a passive reception or a blind fatalism where there is no place for actions. Against this, Perniola notes that in both Chinese and Japanese traditions, Zen has always been linked to effectiveness and success: from harmony between man and nature to success in the martial arts, in archery, in the art of flower arrangement and so on.

<sup>12</sup> In this sense Perniola's perspective links things with an “astral feeling” (*sentire astrale*) for which the inorganic experience is a cosmic experience. See Perniola 1998, 11-21.

Pathology, thus, emerges only when the image of the self is mirrored as it is linked to an always-unreachable idealised image or to an anti-social regression within oneself.

Specularism implies not only an exchange between organic and inorganic – as the individual starts to enter into the neutral dimension of the thing-mirror – but a displacement of human feeling: it is not the individual who hears, touches, sees, tastes and so on. S/he does not say “I feel”: rather, s/he become vicar of an impersonal feeling, received and welcomed from the outside.

Alongside Zen tradition, Perniola examines Baroque aesthetics, and then dwells – especially in his book *Del sentire (Of Feeling)* – on specularism within contemporary society. To introduce the theme of the mirror-man in the Baroque period, Perniola recalls a tale written by Charles Perrault in 1661 titled *The Mirror or the Metamorphosis of Orante*, which he summarizes:

Vi si descrivono le vicende di un uomo, di nome Orante (dal greco “vedente”) la cui specialità era di fare ritratti del corpo e dello spirito che riproducevano perfettamente gli originali: egli non aveva memoria e non riusciva a nascondere nulla. Si muoveva con disinvoltura nella vita mondana dei salotti e riscuoteva un grande successo con le donne. Proprio una di queste fu tuttavia causa della sua morte. Orante infatti amava Calliste (dal greco “la più bella”) e ne riproduceva le bellezze con grande soddisfazione di lei. Sfortuna volle che ella fosse colpita da una grave malattia che ne deturpò il volto. Mentre tutti nascondevano alla giovane donna la triste verità, Orante non potè fare a meno di riprodurre tali e quali le nuove fattezze. Calliste furibonda lo trafisse con uno spillone, colpendolo a morte. Il dio Amore, amico di Orante, sopraggiunto troppo tardi non riuscì ad impedire l’assassinio, ma rese il corpo di Orante incorruttibile, facendogli mantenere le sue doti speculari. Orante fu così trasformato in uno specchio veneziano. (Perniola 1990, 40)

Perrault’s tale contains several insights to be developed. First, becoming-mirror here is not intended as a mimetic strategy of effectuality

and harmony (as it was for Zen) but as the condition of possibility of experiencing affection and love. This shows that Perniola's critique of vitalism, together with the perspective of a hedonistic subjectivity, is not a critique of feelings *tout court*. On the contrary, while it is aimed against the feelings through which the individual uses the personal pronoun "I", it praises those feelings emerging from the impersonal "it". Paradoxically, Perniola argues, the "I feel" is a narrow and partial aesthetic experience; only from the osmosis between "I" and "the world" is it possible to say "it is felt" without perceiving a reification.

In addition, Perrault's tale provides an example of the difference between narcissism and specularism. As Perniola notes, of Orante's and Calliste's loves, only the first manages to last. While Calliste's love turns into hatred when her narcissistic expectations are disappointed, that of Orante continues despite the tragic change of her beloved. Orante – the mirror man – embodies, so to speak, the idea of love as enduring acceptance and appreciation of the other (in spite of the constant decay to which human bodies are subjected). In order to feel and appreciate anything with even greater involvement, Orante's tale seems to suggest that it is more advantageous to turn oneself into a thing – in his/its<sup>13</sup> case a reflecting surface – that accepts and says "Yes" to everything<sup>14</sup>: "una disposizione amorosa a ricevere, ad accogliere, a ospitare ciò che è esterno" (Perniola 1990, 40). The way in which Eros, God of love, rewards Orante is also singular: in fact, the latter is not elevated through a spiritual exaltation but, paradoxically, through the metamorphosis into a thing, or, to use Perniola's words: "attraverso il transito verso il mondo inorganico della materia" (40). The tale of Orante confirms that it is a spiritualistic prejudice to consider elevation only as an ascendent and transcendent movement.

In what terms is the mirroring of the world on the individual, or the individual's becoming-mirror, considered by Perniola as the condition of the contemporary, post-Second World War individual? Why, in other words, are we living in an age of permanent exteriorisation? According to Perniola,

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<sup>13</sup> I have used both the masculine and the neutral pronouns to underline the exchange between human organism and thingness.

<sup>14</sup> Here comes back the concept of transit, or the movement from same to same within the philosophical disposition of the *amor fati*. See First Section, Chapter 2.

the all-pervasive thingly dimension characterises present-day society in “alternative” experiences (such as drugs, perversions, artistic performances...) as much as in the more commonplace occurrences of everyday life. While exteriorisation and specularism in everyday life will be developed shortly, uncanny experiences will be the object of the following sub-chapter, devoted to Perniola’s volume *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico*.

According to Perniola there is a strong connection between specularism and contemporary lifestyles. Specularism implies – as already stated above – on the one hand a symbolic identification of the individual with the mirror and on the other hand the exercise of mimesis. How do these concepts and experiences, developed between the second half of the Eighties and the first half of the Nineties<sup>15</sup>, help in interpreting actual phenomena, with the developed advent of digital society<sup>16</sup>?

According to Massimo Di Felice, sociologist and theorist of communication, who has combined some aspects of Perniola’s philosophy with the digital revolution, contemporary situations redefine the very categories of human and non-human. Perniola’s redefinition of the relationship between individuals and things corresponds, according to Di Felice, to the “sfida intellettuale della nostra epoca” (Di Felice 2010, 283). In fact, the advent of collective forms of intelligence, the Internet of Things, new bio-technological discoveries and so on are – for Di Felice – all consequences and expressions of a reticular knowledge in which the organic and the inorganic develop and evolve reciprocally. From Wikipedia to social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, to augmented reality apps, the subject can no longer be thought of in Cartesian terms, as the holder of a subjective centre, i.e. it can no longer be thought anthropocentrically. Digital networking systems redefine space, architecture, media; transform the ways we inhabit rural villages, cities and metropolises; and challenge our broader environmental perceptions and conceptions.

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<sup>15</sup> See Perniola 1985, 1991, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Perniola uses terms like “video culture” and “telematic”, which can, I claim, be developed fruitfully if replaced with others more apt to the current situation (such as “software society” instead of video culture and “The Internet of Things” instead of telematic). However, in spite of the – so to speak – aging of words, Perniola’s intuitions are still relevant today.

Specifically, Di Felice claims, by drawing on Perniola's thought, that informative ecosystems work in a transorganic way. For example, when a geographic area (made up of human beings as well as non-human organisms and artificial objects) is described through bio-technologies in terms of information codes, flows of communication, big data and so on, an interchange between the organic and the inorganic takes place. "The innovative element", Di Felice argues, "added in recent times [...] has been the advent of another communicative era, the digital one, which with the introduction of informational ecosystems and of virtual worlds, has not only begun to reproduce environments that can only be crossed through the mediation of technical forms of interaction, but has questioned the same meaning of space and that of inhabiting" (16-7). In other words, matter can become informatic code – a hybrid between human, technical, mechanical and non-human elements.

Exteriority and specularism emerge again at this stage: the individual moves away from an organic, subjective, inner feeling and lets the world – including the technological world – be reflected in him/her. For this reason, it is not correct to refer to our age as the era of narcissism, where video technologies and virtual reality are only taken into account insofar as they offer unlimited possibilities to multiply images of oneself globally. It is true that a narcissistic drift is always at hand, given that the individual has never before had the ability to invest in his/her own image to the degree possible today. At the same time, the critique of the software society as a narcissistic society does not grasp the anthropological transformations happening and considers hybridisation between things and men as another step into the realm of alienation and reification. Therefore, affirming that our epoch is narcissistic *par excellence* means not being aware of the challenges implicit in the concept of specularism.

The Italian aesthetician Ernesto Francalanci misconstrues Perniola's claims by arguing that his concept of inorganic is a continuation of Benjamin's theory of commodity fetishism (Francalanci 2006, 34). Francalanci, in fact, in order to show the ubiquity of a commodifying drive within contemporary Western society, borrows Perniola's remarks on the notion of the thing. But in doing so, he misunderstands Perniola's

conclusions. If for Perniola the “transit” between organic and inorganic opens up an aesthetic horizon where human feeling is no longer submitted to the “I feel”, for Francalanci it means that the traditional dialectic categories are directed to a “monstruous combinatory intertwining” (34). Or again, if for Perniola the “thing that feels” implies a significant anthropological mutation, for Francalanci it is the ultimate product of a “progressive hypersignification” cast upon things (understood as commodities) which leads to the “religion of consumption” (34). Perniola’s intention is instead, as should be clear now, to liberate – so to speak – things from the commodifying prejudice. The individual should be willing to accept a new metamorphic relation with things, both in their neutral dimension and in their *ambiguity*. This leads us to the third fundamental characteristic of the thing in Perniola: “radiation”, object of the third and final sub-chapter of this section.

*Uncanny and Radiating Things: The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*

This sub-chapter explores the third and last main characteristic of the concept of the thing. The first falls under the neutral dimension; the second within the experience of specularism and exteriority; the third is based on the phenomenon of “radiation”. “To radiate” is the translation of the Italian verb “raggiare” (translatable as “to shine” or “to radiate”) which is used by Perniola in reference to things (2004a, 168). But what does it mean that things radiate? Can something inert emanate anything? What are the philosophical implications of this statement?

A first definition is provided by Perniola in an unpublished lecture he delivered in Naples in 1994. In this lecture Perniola states that things can radiate when the individual is able to perceive them under new and different aspects: “rivestire tutto il mondo esterno di un intenso interesse”<sup>17</sup>. The

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<sup>17</sup> Quotation taken from an unpublished conference paper (Naples, December 6, 1994).

“interest” linked to the radiation of things has two principal aspects. The first derives from Wittgenstein’s psychological remarks on drawings and colours; the second upon Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the uncanny. Together, as will be made clear by the end of the sub-chapter, these two aspects allow us to understand both the style and thesis of Perniola’s book *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico*.

Perniola suggests that in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* emerges – though not clearly defined by Wittgenstein – a peculiar kind of experience that shows “hidden and substantial affinities” with his theory of the inorganic. Perniola named this experience “the feeling of this thing” (“sentire di questa cosa”) and claimed it consists in “vedere un’entità che resta immutata, ora come una cosa, ora come un’altra” (2004a, 162). A basic example can be found in the famous drawing in which the observer may recognise a duck’s head or a hare’s head. The surprise that accompanies this experience is due to the fact that the thing remains the same, that it actually remains “this thing”, while at the same time one sees it in a different light, one that changes it. For Perniola, this experience can happen at any moment and within any field: from music to architecture, language, sexuality, maths... In fact, it is possible, for instance, to see a geometric figure “ora appoggiata sulla base, ora appesa a un vertice” (162); it is possible to hear the same melody and have different reactions to it each time; familiar words can be found odd and estranging; the bathroom might become suddenly abnormal or mysterious and so on. Perniola, by following Wittgenstein’s remarks underlines that, in all the phenomena mentioned, things are susceptible of rapidly, unexpectedly opening up a new dimension of feeling, or, to use Perniola’s words: “un nuovo mondo sensoriale ed emozionale” (2004a, 164).

The experience of seeing something as something else is not always connected to pacific and conciliant objects – it can also be ambivalent or disturbing. In this sense, the radiation of things implies not only openness to wonder but also the uncanny. Freud provided a psychoanalytic theory of the concept of uncanny in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny), written in 1919 (1977, 77-118). Freud’s examination is grounded mainly on five sources: the etymology of the term *Unheimliche*; the psychological analysis

carried out by Ernst Jentsch; the philosophical claims about the same concept made by Friedrich Schiller; the short story *Der Sandmann* (The Sandman) by Ernst T.A. Hoffmann; and, finally, his personal experiences. While investigating these sources, Freud provides his psychoanalytic theory of the uncanny.

Perniola engages with Freud and his sources (Perniola 2011b: 160-66) and highlights the relevance of Freud's *Unheimliche* in the very history of aesthetics. Freud in fact, Perniola argues, opened up the "aesthetic of difference" with the concept of the uncanny. Before him, the field of aesthetics was mostly influenced by Kantian formalism or Hegelian dialectics which focused on "stati d'animo positivi, quali il bello e il sublime" (165). Through the uncanny, Freud introduced into aesthetics ambivalent or negative states of mind, marginal and concealed aspects of feeling that lead to new problematics and fertile research territories.

Literally, *Unheimliche* means "non (*un*) familiar (*Heimlich*)". The adjective *Heimlich* comes from *Heim* which means both home, household, family and at the same time something secret, hidden, clandestine. The ambivalence of the phenomenon of the uncanny is thus already present in the etymology of the word: on the one hand it conveys the idea of something known and familiar, and at the same time, the opposite. The uncanny might be characterised then as "tutto ciò che dovrebbe restar segreto, nascosto, e che invece è affiorato" (165). Among the sources of the uncanny Freud quotes Jentsch's, who exemplified it with "the doubt whether an apparently animate being is really alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Freud 1963, 20). For instance, an uncanny feeling may arise by discovering that what lies in front of me is actually an automaton and not a human being (as I originally believed), and vice versa<sup>18</sup>.

This experience of confusion, ambivalence, exchange between animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic is also an essential trait of Perniola's theory of the thing. In fact, it allows one to avoid a potential

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<sup>18</sup> Freud provides an example from literature. In the story *The Sandman*, the main character Nathaniel falls in love with Olympia, whom he believes to be – at first – a beautiful young girl and who is actually a doll.

misleading interpretation: the movement between organic and inorganic – for Perniola – does not lead to a dialectical overcoming of the two poles in which identity is restored. In other words, even though organic and inorganic are intertwined in the concept of the “thing that feels”, this process does not end up in a final unity. On the contrary, the thing is intimately permeated by ambivalent – if not restless – feelings and experiences, brought about by the phenomenon of the *Unheimliche*. The uncanny is in fact something that undermines “la nostra fiducia nell’identità degli esseri viventi” (Perniola 2011b, 166), since it presents the familiar as alien and, conversely, the unknown into something rooted in one’s psychological past and childhood<sup>19</sup>. This is the reason why the uncanny is not an absolutely extraneous experience. It is rather a phenomenon that distances what was believed to be close at hand and unites, makes familiar, what was believed to be distant.

A possible objection may arise at this stage: by approaching the personal unconscious with things, does not Perniola’s theory fall back into spiritualism or at least interiority? In fact, it may seem that subjectivity swallows the inorganic world by seeing in it occurrences of the individual psychological past. Nonetheless, to a closer look, this objection forgets an essential aspect of the Freudian unconscious: namely that it cannot be thought without the external world. In fact, as Massimo Recalcati claims, “la mia cosiddetta ‘interiorità’ è l’insieme stratificato delle mie identificazioni con l’altro (padre, madre, maestro, amante ecc.), dunque una exteriorità che ho interiorizzato” (Recalcati 2007, 12-13). The unconscious is not an “interior life” detached from reality and sociality: “la cosiddetta ‘vita interiore’ non è mai così interiore” (12). On the contrary, the unconscious is structured through a continuous relation with the world outside, filled with people, images, words, and things. Thus, I would claim, by exploring Freud’s remarks on the unconscious, Perniola suggests that it should be conceived as a mirror in which the external world is reflected.

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<sup>19</sup> The psychological history of the individual is crucial in the emergence of the uncanny – according to Freud. For instance, removed childhood traumas or anxiety may come back thanks to the effects of the uncanny. However, to pursue these considerations would distract from the main claims examined in this thesis, so they will not be further investigated.

While the pre-conscious and conscious spheres mirror an idealised image of the self in the social world (and thus never escape from the domain of the “I think”, “I feel” etc.); the unconscious welcomes the things of the world. Even in their ambivalence – that is, in their uncanniness.

According to this thesis, Perniola’s philosophy of the thing can be well described not only as a philosophy of the uncanny, but also as an uncanny philosophy. To explain this claim further, it is necessary to turn to *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico*.

The volume, first published in Italian in 1994, translated into English by Continuum in 2004 and in 2017 republished by Bloomsbury, represents the most complete investigation Perniola left into the notion of the thing. In fact, while *Enigmi*, *Del sentire* and *L’arte e la sua ombra* only have chapters and paragraphs dedicated to this theme, *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico* is entirely devoted to it. The text, divided into 27 short chapters (from one to ten pages in length), explores the experience of the thing through a critical dialogue between philosophy, sexuality, perversions and contemporary experiences. From Descartes to Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, from fetishism to masochism, hardcore sonorities, radical fashion, cybersex, artistic performances and so on. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the fields investigated, the whole book is crossed by a common thread: the theorisation of the individual as a thing that feels and the description of his/her experiences – especially linked to inorganic sexuality.

Inorganic sexuality, in contrast to its organic counterpart, is not guided by the pleasure principle for which the subject “feels” the sexual act in the first person. On the contrary, Perniola distinguishes between “pleasure” and “excitement” and privileges the second term. The Italian philosopher dedicated a short essay to this concept (1994, 87-94) titled *Eccitazione (Excitement)*. The purpose of the essay is to investigate the experience of a “feeling from outside” or “impersonal feeling” through the notion of excitement. In order to explain the implications of the word excitement, Perniola does not focus on the Italian word but on the English one. Indeed, he continues, *eccitato* in Italian is too often translated and intended as “sexually aroused” or confounded with *inquieto*, *agitato*,

*impaziente*, corresponding respectively with the English “restless”, “worked up” and “eager”. On the other hand, the English term excitement emphasises much more the aspects of enthusiasm, stimulation, and physical emotionality. In Italian, thus, there is a critical prejudice about *eccitazione* rooted in spiritualistic or vitalistic assumptions. In other words Perniola sees in *eccitazione* two polar meanings: sexual libido (vital) and moral assessment (spiritual). In response, his aim is to emancipate the concept of “*excitement* dalla problematica del piacere-dispiacere attraverso cui la lingua italiana imprigiona l’*eccitazione*” (90)<sup>20</sup>. Excitement, thus, is not intended as a strong feeling of elevation, close to an ecstasy, nor as a vitalistic descent into the realm of sexual libido, in which enjoyment and pleasure play an essential role. On the contrary, according to Perniola, excitement *accompanies* all those experiences related to the feeling from outside, that is, the experiences in which exterior and interior transmute into one another. “L’*eccitazione* sorge ed è mantenuta quando i confini tra il proprio e l’estraneo, tra il self e il not-self cadono: mentre il piacere tiene l’io chiuso in se stesso, nel suo tatto intimo, in un sentire dal di dentro” (92)<sup>21</sup>. Precisely because the ego is suspended, the *epochistic reduction*<sup>22</sup> as a suspension not only of judgment towards reality but as a suspension of personal pleasure emerges. And yet, neutral, epochistic sexuality does not mean the neutralisation of feelings but an entrance into another realm, that of excitement: a feeling from outside that flows uninterruptedly because it frees sexuality from the crescendo ending in the climax of coitus.

An example of the paradoxical “neutral sensibility”, which marks a shift from a natural and organically-oriented feeling to an artificial and inorganic one, can be found in the literature and in the experience of drug addiction<sup>23</sup>. First of all, the addictive experience, according to Perniola, is characterised “by feeling one’s own body as a thing, by making the body extraneous like clothing” (2017, 15). Perniola suggests that the altered states

<sup>20</sup> The word “excitement” is in English in the Italian text.

<sup>21</sup> “Self” and “not-self” are in English in the Italian text.

<sup>22</sup> Perniola also argues that if Skepticism, Phenomenology, Stoicism and Neo-stoicism elaborated a cognitive and a moral *epochè*, his work aims to “expand it” to the realm of sexual intercourse (Perniola 2002a, 8). See also First Section, Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> The relationship between the use of drugs and the concept of the inorganic will be further developed in the section dedicated to Baudelaire’s thought. The French dandy and poet in fact wrote extensively on the phenomenon of addiction as an artificial feeling.

of consciousness allow the individual to distance him-/herself from his/her body and thus to experience it as a thing among other things, without a will, a subjectivity, or an identity, but just as an extension of textures, fabrics, patterns, almost a piece of cloth. In this sense, it is a process through which the body is felt not as personal but as impersonal; not one's own but autonomous; not as close but as distant. Addictions, Perniola underlines, devitalise bodies by removing them to the natural/vital cycle of tension, discharge and reloading.

According to Perniola the addictive experience is paradigmatic for contemporary feeling. He even claims that drug addiction – or at least its main features – has shifted from a pathology to the physiology of contemporary society (2004a, 21). In this regard, philosophy (intended as a speculative suspension) joins addictions more than poetry or art: “Il connubio della filosofia con la sessualità nell’esperienza neutra del darsi come una cosa che sente e del prendere una cosa che sente, crea uno stato affine a quello provocato dalle droghe, perché incurante di tutto ciò che non sia il proprio proseguimento infinito e la propria ripetizione. La sessualità neutra instaura una dipendenza infinita perché sottratta ai ritmi e alle alternanze biologiche: essa si costituisce nel movimento radicale del filosofare e si nutre della sua spinta eccessiva e intransigente” (20). In other words, philosophical *epochè*, or suspension, abstraction, implies precisely a detached attitude similar to that produced in the experience of drug addiction. For this reason Perniola affirms that philosophy and drugs have both assumed a paradigmatic, exemplary status, since they can be considered the model of a radical contemporary feeling.

The complex issues emerging from *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico* are summarised in a letter<sup>24</sup> – worth reproducing in its entirety<sup>25</sup> – that Perniola sent to a reader in order to settle some of her doubts on the text:

Gentilissima Signora,

[...]

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<sup>24</sup> For the first time reproduced in this thesis.

<sup>25</sup> Only names and contact details have been omitted.

Una concezione della sessualità che la leghi alla bella apparenza, al gioco, al divertimento ricreativo, è troppo povera. Essa dimentica, ignora, rimuove tutti gli aspetti inquietanti e perversi da cui nasce e su cui si mantiene l'eccitazione. Essa fornisce una visione idilliaca ed edulcorata dell'esperienza. Essa è troppo legata ad una concezione etico-estetica della vista, che è stata formulata da Platone e soprattutto dal neo-platonismo, per il quale la bellezza sensibile è apprezzata come un momento, un gradino nell'ascesa verso una bellezza spirituale trascendente e metafisica.

Da questa concezione nasce una discriminazione nei confronti dei brutti, dei malati, dei vecchi, dei portatori di handicap, che non ha alcun fondamento nell'esperienza sessuale! Questa discriminazione si basa sullo spiritualismo etico-estetico neoplatonico.

Il mio volume *il sex appeal dell'inorganico* elabora una concezione della sessualità alternativa: essa non si trae indietro spaventata dinanzi alle perversioni (sadismo, masochismo, feticismo, vampirismo...), ma le attraversa: si interroga sulla relazione tra sessualità e dolore, sessualità e reificazione, sessualità e morte, sessualità e paura... Cerca un al di là del desiderio e del piacere, cerca un legame tra l'eccitazione ed attività basate sull'astrazione, come la filosofia, la matematica e la musica, cerca una strada che vada al di là del conflitto tra il maschile e il femminile, cerca un'esperienza cosmica che è priva di riguardo nei confronti della bellezza, dell'età e in generale della forma. Vogliamo chiamarla una sessualità concettuale (per analogia all'arte concettuale)? Sì a condizione di tenere presente che essa si basa sull'idea dell'essere umano come “cosa che sente”.

[...]

Molti cordiali saluti

Mario Perniola

This letter concisely clarifies the main thesis of *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* by introducing several key notions. The concept of excitement appears again, specifically intended as an experience created and maintained by all the phenomena – perversions and uncanny feelings – left behind by natural sexuality. In fact, while the spiritualistic and transcendent

conception understands sexuality as a straight line, almost one-dimensional, in which the only viable directions are ascent (sexual arousal until the coitus) and descent (the fall into a normality without tension after the brief climax), neutral sexuality is given in the horizon of complete availability and permanence (through excitement).

Neutral sexuality is indicated as alternative, “conceptual”, because of its in-between status that places it next to perversions and abstraction. Organic sexuality, conversely, sees in perversions a deviance from the traditional sexual act, which is oriented to pleasure and orgasm through conventional forms of sexual stimulation. It is no coincidence that Massimo Verdicchio, commenting on Perniola’s *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico*, argued: “What is at stake is no longer the subject but the philosophical-sexual thing which triumphs over individual subjectivities and over the world of instrumentality and expectations” (Verdicchio in Perniola 2001a, 36). Moreover, I claim, Perniola’s goal as an interpreter of contemporary feeling is to challenge established clichés and prejudices on sexuality. From the letter it emerges, in fact, that our daily and traditional perception of sexuality is heir to Platonic spiritualism, which has always considered sexuality according to partial terms such as ascent/fall, beauty/ugliness, male/female, youth/senescence and so on. This division represents and reproduces the metaphysical discourse inside the sexual field. The essential link between erotic attraction and its object’s bodily beauty, for example, usually taken for granted, was first established – in Western society – by the Platonic tradition. Plato, in fact, in his *Phaedrus*, asserted the essential unity between sexuality, attraction, love on the one hand and beauty on the other. Consequently, in his theory of ideas (Plato 2010, 47), love sparkles when seeing a body that reminds the subject of the ideal beauty contemplated by the soul beyond heaven (before being born and falling into the actual body). In doing so, sensitive beauty is appreciated as a moment, a step in the ascent towards a transcendental and metaphysical spiritual beauty.

Perniola’s effort is focused on refuting this argument, which asserts itself as an essential truth given once and for all, by claiming its partiality and one-sidedness. By investigating Egyptian art, Rilke’s poetry, Zen philosophy, contemporary experiences and so on, Perniola shows that the

process of turning oneself into a thing has always been part of individuals' daily experiences. Perniola, in other words, points out the continuity between traditional forms of feeling-from-outside across different geographical areas, contexts and ages.

The reason for the academic and commercial success of *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*<sup>26</sup>, in my opinion, consists largely in the fact that Perniola managed to produce an “uncanny” book, in the Freudian sense of the term. That is to say, through his writing style and his provocative conclusions, he managed to make unfamiliar an everyday activity (sexuality commonly understood as the pursuit of pleasure-orgasm) by creating a distance within the reader, a displacement that takes him/her away from his/her ordinary experiences and conceptions. While sexuality is commonly associated with pleasure, erotism and hedonism, in Perniola's book, it emerges as an extraneous and estranging practice, a “subversive dimension” (Camaiti-Hostert 1998, online source). In this regard, Perniola himself asserts that his philosophical style aims at making “matrimoni e divorzi illegali tra le cose” (Perniola 2014, 6). Perniola borrows this “method” – taken from Bacon's remarks on imagination – and reproduces it within philosophy, even though he does not consider his uncanny “matches and divorces” as “unlawful”, but as anti-metaphysical.

In her review of *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* (2010), Patricia Marino objects that “the mental image of two persons touching one another in intimate ways with no desire and no pleasure is an unhappy one” (182). What this critique misses, according to this thesis, is that happiness is not the goal of a neutral sexuality. Marino remains stuck within a hedonist perspective for which sexual intercourse is meant to produce beautiful images of peaceful unity. In contrast, Perniola focuses precisely on the uncanny, enigmatic, and surprising images linked with abstraction, perversion, philosophy and so on. In other words, if one does not move beyond a vitalistic/erotic vision of sex, one is not able to fully understand what Perniola means by “neutral sexuality”, namely a new experiential territory ready to be explored for those who are not afraid of becoming

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<sup>26</sup> With eight translations and several editions, *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* is Perniola's most translated book.

feeling-things: “To do philosophy today means”, Verdicchio argues, “becoming world, abolishing the distance that separates man from thing. It means doing away with building great philosophical systems, and transforming philosophy in adventure with the sole expectation of expanding the territory of the visible and the thinkable by offering oneself to a movement which is both neutral and impersonal” (Verdicchio in Perniola 2001a, 36).

Before summarising the claims explored in this chapter, I would like to look at what appears to me to be an ambiguity of Perniola’s overall philosophical thought. This ambiguity lies in the fact that the Italian philosopher often seems to praise and at the same time reject the same argument. For example, his examination of the status of contemporary aesthetic experience leads him to conclude that our feeling might be defined as a “feeling from outside”, impersonal, neutral, close to a thing that feels. This – as it was shown previously – is positively welcomed by Perniola because on the one hand it links contemporary experiences (from inorganic sexuality to virtual reality, drug addictions...) to ancient and marginal traditions (Paleolithic engravings; Egyptian architecture; Expressionist poetry...); on the other it opens up a post-metaphysical experiential horizon with new challenges and issues for philosophy. At the same time, however, he affirms that contemporary individuals live under the sign of “sensology” (*sensologia*, Perniola 1991, 5). Sensology is different from ideology but shares several essential features with it. Ideology, by providing a system of “already ready” (*già pronte*) doctrines and opinions, consists of a pre-determined vision of the world that “exonerates” the individual from the responsibility of thinking in a personal or critical way. Ideology “thinks” in place of the individual, from whom nothing is then required other than to trace what is “already thought” (*già pensato*). Sensology, on the other hand, corresponds to an ideology of the senses, a socialization of personal feeling in a neutral and, once again, impersonal collectivity. In this sense, the individual cannot do anything but follow what is “already felt” (*già sentito*) because his/her own affectivity is transferred from the subject to something

external. The Italian philosopher even states that our contemporary sensological feeling is a totalitarian feeling (1991, 16). Do not these two conclusions<sup>27</sup> seem mutually exclusive? Should they not contradict each other? Which one does Perniola actually believe?

But the Italian philosopher, I claim, is aware of this ambiguity. He states that, in order to cope with a sensological world, the Marxist approach should be abandoned. The individual should not look for “una riappropriazione, una restituzione, un ritorno al soggetto di ciò che gli è stato tolto” (Perniola 1990, 37). In other words, he/she should not fight the “already felt” with a nostalgic battle in favor of the “I feel”. On the contrary, his/her attitude should be “homeopathic”, that is, “rimedi che guariscano la ferita con l’arma che l’ha provocata” (1990, 37). In other words, according to Perniola, the depersonalisation of feeling must be carried through to its ends. Only in this way does the experience of the thing that feels not relapse into alienation, but instead allow the individual to enter into the phenomena explored in this chapter. Thus, in the end it seems that for Perniola the present time *is* fundamentally alienating and reifying. It is how the individual reacts to this awareness that makes him/her the present’s slave or lover.

### *Conclusion*

To summarise, this chapter investigated Perniola’s conception of the thing. In order to clarify it, the first sub-chapter was dedicated to the distinction between objects and things. As was explained therein, the fundamental characteristic of objects is their “usability”. That is to say, objects in Perniola’s work are marked by a specific function (whether they are instrumental tools or objects of consumption). The thing, in contrast, is a far wider and more complex concept which – according to Perniola – allows

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<sup>27</sup> The “thing that feels” as the emergence of a post-metaphysical horizon and the “sensology” as a totalitarian drift of contemporary feeling.

one to interpret the contemporary world outside metaphysics. The investigation of the “thing” took the remaining three sub-chapters. More specifically, three main aspects emerging from the very notion of the thing were developed: the “neutral”, the “external”, and the “radiation” (respectively the second, the third and the fourth sub-chapters).

Within the second sub-chapter, Perniola’s research on the Rock Art Sites in the Côa Valley, Egyptian architecture and Rilke’s poetry was explored in order to delineate the so called “neutral dimension”. Even though Paleolithic engravings, Egyptian statues and Expressionist poetry are conceptually and temporarily three distinct phenomena, Perniola claims that they are united by a common thread, namely the “osmosis” between organic and inorganic. This osmosis takes place when the boundaries between what is inert and inanimate and what is alive and animate fall. A rock starts to vibrate with an enigmatic energy; a statue has eyes; a tree “feels”; conversely, one becomes thing when anthropocentrism is abandoned in favour of an impersonal feeling. Within this de-centred, anti-subjective experience one does not feel in the first person but inside the “neutral” dimension of the “it is felt”. Instead of implying a neutralisation of feelings, it implies their widening: the third sub-chapter showed that the more an individual abandons his/her subjectivity, the more the external world finds a place in him/her. Zen philosophy, Baroque literature and contemporary networking systems exemplified this experience.

Indeed, welcoming what is external means becoming a mirror, that is, being a surface able to endlessly reflect other surfaces. As was shown, this does not lead to conformism, nor to narcissism, but to “specularism”. Specularism means on the one hand opening oneself to the world and, on the other, exercise a repetition of mimetic reproduction. The Zen sage harmonises himself by disappearing in natural rhythms; Orante becomes a pure loving exteriority, namely a Venetian mirror which reflects everything; digital ecosystems change our perception of what is external and internal by uniting both in the flow of data. What is fundamental is not the individual's singularity, subjectivity and feeling but, on the contrary, the possibility of that very individual’s experiencing a cosmic feeling.

Neutral dimension and cosmic feeling imply an acceptance of the things of the world. The fourth sub-chapter showed, through Perniola's remarks on Wittgenstein's psychological theory and Freud's notion of *Unheimliche*, how things "radiate". That is to say, things may surprise, astonish and puzzle the observer and, at the same time, become the source of uncanny feelings. This is a crucial passage, according to Perniola, as it provides a means of escape from both classical metaphysics and Marxist critical theory. In fact, Perniola refutes spiritualism and vitalism, which polarise human and inhuman, organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, and are not able to see their mutual process of osmosis, their "transit". On the other hand, Marxist theory, by considering things as objects of consumption or as instrumental tools, remains trapped within a subjective and anthropocentric point of view for which the relation between human beings and things always alienates and reifies the "human side".

Finally, it was shown in what terms Perniola's *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* is a fundamental source for the definition of the human being as a thing that feels within contemporary society. Sexuality and philosophy meet perversions and drug addictions. The result is the so called "inorganic sexuality" which is not guided by the concept of pleasure or desire (towards the goal of orgasm); on the contrary it is felt as a suspension (*epochè*) in the abstract and boundless horizon of excitement, which stands against hedonism and eroticism, and beyond the opposition of male and female.

Perniola's overall goal in his investigations of the concept of the thing was, therefore, twofold. On the one hand his aim was to disentangle the thing from its metaphysical constraints by exploring heterogeneous traditions and experiences dating back 20,000 years. According to his research, in fact, there is a metaphysical prejudice debasing the very notion of "thing" which should be cast out. On the other hand, coherently with his philosophy of transit, he elaborated a theory in which there is a continuous flow, an interchange, an "osmosis" between organic and inorganic.

To conclude, Perniola's philosophy can be considered a peculiar kind of monism, since it does not involve two separate and distinct principles or polarities (as a dualism would). At the same time, his monism

is irreducible to harmony and identity – that is, the unity it depicts is never total: within it always lies an enigmatic core, an unconscious opposition, a conflictual tension. Perniola himself defined his philosophy a *double monism* (2010) and a *monism of the difference* (1985). Both of these definitions imply an interchange, a transit between two supposedly opposite realities that allows – as I hope I have clarified at this stage – the emergence of the “difference” against the principle of identity belonging to Western metaphysical thought.

## Chapter 2

### Towards a Strategic Beauty

#### *Introduction*

So far, this thesis has developed several pivotal concepts of Perniola's philosophy. Specifically, in the first section the notions of "simulacrum", "transit", and "ritual without myth" were investigated and compared to Brummell's dandyism. The first chapter of the present section focused on Perniola's theory of the "thing", exploring in particular the related concepts of "neutral dimension", "exteriority" and "inorganic sexuality". These will be further investigated in the next chapter, devoted to Baudelaire's dandyism. The French dandy, in fact, elaborated a theory of artificiality (against nature) which, according to this thesis, can be fruitfully compared with Perniola's claims.

Throughout the previous chapters, several schools of thought that influenced Perniola's reflections emerged: Roman and Jesuit religious rituals; Nietzsche's philosophy; Freud's psychoanalysis; Rilke's poetry. Nonetheless, little has been written on three core traditions and figures which Perniola himself considers crucial within his thought: Stoicism, Gracián's Baroque, and avant-garde movements. The purpose of this chapter is thus to develop this crucial statement by Perniola: "il mio lavoro può essere considerato come una forma di neo-stoicismo barocco che è passato attraverso l'esperienza dell'avanguardia letterario e artistico degli ultimi due secoli" (Perniola 2014, 9). Perniola has always avoided defining his philosophy within a set formula, given that one of the fundamental characteristics of philosophers – according to him – is their *atopy* or

“placelessness”<sup>1</sup>. This statement therefore represents a unique passage which helps the reader better understand Perniola’s overall reflections.

The topics discussed in the following sub-chapters will revolve around the influence that Stoic philosophy and Baroque literature have had on Perniola’s works, while the avant-garde movements will be further explored together with Baudelaire’s dandyism. Baudelaire argued that the dandy is close to a Stoic (2013, 26) and that he should follow the Jesuit-Baroque motto “perinde ac cadaver” (27). In addition, Baudelaire himself is universally known as one of the most influential spiritual fathers of the twentieth century avant-gardes (for his writings on modern societies’ individuals). By developing these themes, the peculiar conception of beauty elaborated by Perniola will be clarified.

Specifically, Perniola places his thought within a *strategically oriented beauty*, which implies a close connection between the aesthetic element and the political one, between beauty on one side and effectuality on the other. In order to understand the peculiarity of this conception, the first sub-chapter will outline the concept of beauty within the Western tradition. From this outlook it will be clear that, until the eighteenth century, the main aesthetic theories shared an objective conception of beauty in which practical and effectual elements were not included.

According to this tradition, which, starting from Pythagoras and Plato, went on to heavily influence Western conceptions of beauty, beauty is defined by objectivity. In other words, beauty is considered as a quality inherent to objects which display harmony and proportion. Besides this major perspective on beauty, a less widespread theory focused on subjectivity – elaborated first by the Sophists. For this tradition the beauty of something depends on the subject perceiving it as such. Alongside these two theories a third one emerged within Stoicism which considers beautiful something that is “appropriate” (*to prepon* in Greek and *decorum* in Latin). This theory, for which beauty *is* action, will clarify the terms by which Perniola combines heterogeneous philosophies and perspectives such as Stoicism, the Baroque, and the avant-garde.

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<sup>1</sup> See First Section, Chapter 2.

*A Propedaeutic Enquiry into Western Conceptions of Beauty*

What is the peculiar conception of beauty elaborated by Perniola? To which tradition does he refer? From which does he distance himself? In order to answer these questions, the main theories on the concept of beauty within Western tradition will be addressed.

In his monumental *Storia dell'estetica* (1979), Władysław Tatarkiewicz identifies the two most influential aesthetic theories from the Ancient Greece up until the eighteenth century. The first is an object-oriented beauty; the second is a subject-oriented one. The objectivist theory of beauty was formulated by the Pythagoreans, for whom the cosmos is governed by a mathematical harmony. Beauty thus emerges from regularity, proportions, and unity of parts. Although the Pythagoreans focused little on the concept of beauty and more on the concept of harmony, the main assumption implicit in their vision of the world spread throughout classical Greece in the works of sculptors, architects and philosophers.

The famous Policleto's *Canon* (a lost treatise on the proportions of human bodies) provides an example of this tendency. The law (*nomos*) on which the canon was based was an application of the architectural form to human anatomy: starting from a measure (the head or the finger) the proportions of the rest of the body were calculated by the proportion method. In the *Doriforo*, for example, the head of the subject is 1/8 of the height, the torso is 3/8, and the legs 4/8.

The artist, in this context, was considered not as a creative man or a genius but as a producer who, with his *techne* (Greek term for art, indicating skill and ability in a broad sense), represented – revealed, so to speak – the laws already operating in nature, without adding anything to them.

The objectivist theory has also influenced many philosophical and artistic schools of thought. Tatarkiewicz, in fact, detects two main branches of this theory: the metaphysical-objectivistic and the quantitative-

objectivistic theories. For example, Plato developed an objectivistic theory of the beautiful from a metaphysical standpoint, which was then largely taken up by medieval liturgical and theological art. In fact, Plato recognized the existence not only of sensitive bodies but also of souls and ideal forms. By privileging hyperuranic ideas, Plato on the one hand spiritualized beauty, and, on the other, elaborated an aesthetic hierarchy whereby bodies are considered beautiful only insofar as they remind us of the idea of beauty contemplated by the soul before incarnating in the human body (Plato 2011, 77). The idea of an eternal measure returns: according to Plato something is beautiful if it resembles its ideal, eternal, and metaphysical form. Above all, for Plato the function of art was psychagogic, literally to “lead the soul” (to the idea of Good). The beautiful and the good are thus inextricably connected, giving beauty a moral orientation.

The Platonic conception was brought to further fruition in the Middle Ages, through theologians and philosophers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Scotus Eriugena, and Bernard of Clairvaux. In fact, once the distinction between the ephemeral reality of the earthly world and the eternal reality of the otherworldly realm was established and consolidated through Christianity, objects assumed value only as “signs” of something else. In other words, the object became a symbol, something that recalls and represents a certain theological assumption or religious truth. Precisely for this reason, many medieval artists, sculptors and architects, such as Benedetto Antelami, Cimabue and Duccio Di Buoninsegna, did not focus on proportions and realism: abstractness and schematism were privileged, as the important matter was to promote a higher message and not allow the eye of the observer to linger on the physical beauty of bodies and objects.

A major representative of the quantitative variety of objectivism was Vitruvius (and with him the architecture and the arts of the Roman era), who, in his famous *De Architectura*, dwells on universal modules and canons. Beauty, according to Vitruvius, is the product of numbers in harmonious proportions. This is again a mathematical and quantitative conception of beauty – of the kind first developed by Policleto – which persisted even in the Renaissance and reached Winckelmann's

neoclassicism. Leon Battista Alberti, in his *De Pictura, De re aedificatoria* and *De statua*, describes beauty as *concinnitas*, that is, as harmony, concordance and consonance among the parts of which a whole is made up. In addition, since the proportions – for Alberti – are not man's creation but a natural fact, they are objective. Again, beauty here is considered an inherent quality of the work of art.

The “Great Theory” of objectivism, as it will be clarified, is at odds with Perniola’s perspectives on the philosophy of beauty. Given that Perniola praises an effectual and strategic idea of beauty (and aesthetics in general) he dismisses this theory as contemplative (i.e., passive and inactive) and metaphysical (because of the dualism it presents between reality and an ideal world). The theory which sees beauty in harmony, Perniola notes, has “una tendenza alla conciliazione degli opposti nell’ambito della sensibilità e dell’affettività. La dimensione estetica sarebbe così agli antipodi della dimensione politica cui è essenziale l’individuazione di un conflitto” (Perniola 2012, 50).

Besides the objectivist theory of beauty, as suggested, the Sophists developed a subjectivist theory, which remained marginal in Europe until the eighteenth century (Tatarkiewicz 1981, 138). The Sophists, according to Tatarkiewicz, “humanized aesthetics and philosophy” (1979, 124). Unlike Pythagorean objectivity, they relativized beauty, focusing – so to speak – on the human side. Protagoras’ famous statement “man is the measure of all things”, mirrors objectivism, for which instead natural laws or ideas are the true universal measures. Protagoras’ point of view implies that the beauty of objects ultimately depends on particular and contingent conditions. Gorgia developed this argument further through what Tatarkiewicz calls the “illusionistic theory of beauty” (126), for which beauty depends on the *kairos* (i.e., on seizing the opportune moment) and on the *to prepon* (the convenient). In other words, beauty is linked to something that is suitable for the purpose for which it was produced and at the same time suitable for a given situation.

Tatarkiewicz then argues that the subjectivist-relativistic theory of beauty has remained less endorsed in Western aesthetics. Some authors,

both in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, began to theorize the importance of the eye, of perception, and generally the relevance of human perception. For example, Aquinas, who defined beauty in terms of *claritas* (“splendour”) and *consonantia* (“consonance”, implied “of parts”), and therefore remains anchored to an objectivist-theological vision, in the *Summa Theologie* also states that what is beautiful is what pleases the eye: “beauty relates to the cognitive faculty: for beautiful things are those which please when seen” (Aquinas 1947, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad. 1). Linking beauty and pleasure, he relates the object to a percipient subject: objective properties remain, but beauty also depends on the relationship between subject and object. Another paradigmatic example is Michelangelo Buonarroti. On the one hand he claims (Faggin 2008) an aesthetic idealism for which the artist shapes matter according to pre-existing forms; on the other, he also dwells on the role of the eye in judging the beauty of an object. Tying the beauty of something to the eye of the observer implies that aesthetic experience is grounded less upon the object and more upon the observer’s perception.

However, it is only with English empiricism and with the French and German Enlightenment of the XIX century that the subjectivist theory of art fully develops. Hutcheson, for example, argues that “were there no Mind with a Sense of Beauty to contemplate Objects, I see not how they could be called beautiful” (Hutcheson 2004, 27), underlining how beauty, rather than being a property of objects, depends more on the principles of perception. Or consider David Hume, who likewise emphasizes the ways in which beauty is the product of mental faculties of the subject: “in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment” (Hume 1975, 173).

The Enlightenment figure who developed the most influential subjectivist theory, however, was Immanuel Kant, with his *Critique of Judgement*. Kant, as Tatarkiewicz notes (1980, 138), elaborated a conciliation between subjectivism and objectivism. Specifically, the philosopher of Königsberg believed that experience and aesthetic preferences are not the result of either the sensation alone or of the judgment alone, but rather of their joint action, which can be evoked by an object capable of stimulating the action of both. When such an object acts on us, its

action is necessary and universal because human intellects have the same faculties, and thus the same object will work in the same way on every subjectivity.

To recapitulate, two main aesthetic theories arose within European history, differing over whether beauty was considered to be objective or subjective. According to the objective theory, beauty depends on an object's properties and qualities (such as proportions and harmony); according to the subjective theory beauty is the result of the relation between a perceiving subject and an object. Given this overall panoramic view on aesthetics, where can Perniola's position be located? The goal of the next sub-chapter is to start answering this question.

### *Stoicism or Beauty as Action*

As suggested earlier, Perniola links his philosophy to Stoicism, the Baroque, and vanguardism. This sub-chapter will deal with the occurrences of Stoic philosophy in Perniola's works; the next will focus on the Baroque tradition, especially the figure of Baltasar Gracián.

Before exploring Perniola's interpretation, I will provide some brief philosophical coordinates on Stoicism. In this way it will be easier to understand the terms in which Perniola has distanced himself from classical aesthetics and, to a certain extent, from Stoicism itself. In fact, as it will be clarified, Perniola elaborates a neo-Stoicism, which departs from the traditional position in several respects.

The first great assumption that differentiates Greek (and late Roman) Stoicism from Platonism is a monistic view of reality. Where Plato elaborates a dualism between the earthly world and the ideal world, where the former is an imperfect copy of the latter, Zeno, the founding father of Stoicism, affirms that the whole world is permeated by the *logos* (reason), and therefore the true good, harmony and beauty, are traceable in the world itself (and not in the hyperuranium). As Gianni Carchia points out, the

Stoics abolish the distinction between form and content: since there is no place to be, so to speak, for ideas within the Stoic theory, the material world is not seen as a copy or as a residue of something greater than itself (Carchia 2006, 139). The ordering principle that governs reality (*logos*), therefore, is not something distant or detached from the world, but is itself present everywhere in everything. In other words, Stoic philosophy is founded on the *physical* universality of the *logos* (not a *meta-physical* Platonic universality). Moreover, since the *logos* – according to the Stoics – is the best ruler, the things of the world necessarily happen the way they happen; that is to say, they are as they ought to be, and cannot be otherwise. For the Stoics, ultimately, there is a universal reason that directs the universal order of the cosmos.

Since the world is given to individuals in its necessity, does this mean that they are enslaved to destiny? That they do not possess freedom and live within a contemplative fatalism? On the contrary, for the Stoics the ultimate goal is to live following virtue (Sherman 2007) by accepting the *logos* and distinguishing what falls under the control of the sage from what does not pertain to him/her. Epictetus, one of the most influential representatives of Roman Late Stoicism (together with Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Cicero) exemplifies this attitude in this way:

Some things are up to us and some are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions – in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or that is, whatever is not our own doing [...] And if it is about one of the things that is not up to us, be ready to say, “You are nothing in relation to me”. (Epictetus 1983, § 1)

Epictetus suggests that we should be able to monitor our actions and thoughts by distinguishing what is “up to us” from what is “not up to us”. In spite of our unknown and uncertain circumstances, what we are capable of doing is – for Epictetus – mastering our judgements on external things in order not to be affected by them.

It might seem contradictory to argue that our emotions, impulses and desires are under our control. But, as Nancy Sherman notes on her volume on Stoicism and the military mind, the “Stoics hold that an ordinary emotion such as fear or distress is not primarily a sensation or feeling but rather an opinion or cognition that something bad is happening and a second opinion that a certain course of action is to be taken or avoided” (Sherman 2007, 9). In other words, emotions are a matter of judgement and will and are thus under our power. Stoic’s suspicious attitude towards emotions is thus based on their belief that ordinary emotions involve false opinions or misguided applications of reason: “emotions, then, are assents to a mistaken conception of what is good and evil” (81). In contrast, “good emotions” (*eupatheiai*) result from the education and the transformation of the true sage and consist of a different feeling repertoire grounded upon – as will shortly be clarified – the acceptance of one’s own destiny: the *amor fati*.

The first objective of the Stoic practice is, therefore, to identify the causes of human unhappiness. For the Stoics, human misery is caused by looking for goods that are difficult to obtain (or destined to disappear) or trying to avoid an evil (which is often inevitable). The aim of Stoic philosophy, as Pierre Hadot argues, is to educate the individual to recognize the worthwhile good and the avoidable evil. This education implies, first of all, reversing the common conception that “humanizes” reality – that is, it means abandoning the human point of view with its values, judgments, evaluations of things, and so on. Specifically, the critical mistake does not actually lie in evaluating things, but in casting value on things that ultimately do not depend on us, being external to us. More precisely, what happens outside the individual’s control is included by the Stoics under the umbrella concept of “indifferents” (Hadot 1988, 38; Sherman 2007, 3, 27, 32). The Stoics distinguish between external goods and internal ones, and maintain that, since only the latter are our responsibility, we should treat the former as “indifferents” – that is, things that on their own are neither genuine goods nor evils. Interestingly, Hadot suggests (1998, 128) that being indifferent towards things does not imply disinterest. On the contrary, it implies “not making a difference” between things, not imposing differences based on our judgements. In fact, since what does not depend on

us is, for the Stoics, the result of a necessary concatenation that goes beyond ourselves, man must live according to a more *desubjectivated* disposition towards the events of the world (a concept close to the *neutral dimension* developed by Perniola<sup>2</sup>). Hence Socrates' life was indeed for the Stoics a model of virtue. In fact, as noted by James Woelfel, Socrates lived “committed to the pursuit of virtue and calm and fearless in the face of opprobrium and death” (Woelfel 2011, 124).

To recapitulate: for the Stoics, we are in control of our desires, tendencies, and assent to things (Hadot 1988, 142). Conversely, all that presupposes an external cause – with respect to oneself – such as honours, fame, and wealth, but also health, other people in general, and so on, should be considered outside of our control, and ultimately accepted in its becoming. The Stoic sage aims to discern between what is in his/her possession from what is not, what depends on him/her and what does not fall under his/her control, what is essential against what is accidental.

The Stoics, in addition, take a further step: it is not only a matter of accepting what is necessary, but also of loving it. “Why love? Because nature loves itself, and events are the result of the necessary concatenation of the causes which together constitute Fate, Destiny” (Hadot 1988, 143). Loving one's own fate echoes Perniola's considerations on the election of difference in Ignatius of Loyola<sup>3</sup>. Like Loyola, Stoics' “exercises” were oriented towards experiencing a joyful and comforting disposition through one's life's events. The Stoics, alongside other Greek schools of thought (such as the Epicureans and the Sceptics), but also together with several exponents of the Christian philosophy (as Loyola and Gracián), develop theories on how to behave well in the world. In other words, they teach ways of life, through exercises, meditations, and attitudes.

Stoic philosophy, although explicitly oriented towards ethics and actions, is not oblivious to aesthetics. The key term through which the Stoics designate beauty is *to prepon* (in Greek context) and *decorum* (in Roman environment). Firstly, *to prepon* means “the appropriate”. For instance, according to classical rhetorical theory, a speech can be defined as

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<sup>2</sup> See Second Section 2, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> See First Section, Chapter 1, sub-chapter 3.

*prepon* if it is appropriate for the context in which it is given, that is, if it conforms with both occasion and the public. Perniola provided this definition of the concept of *prepon*: “quel particolare tipo di bello che si adatta, che conviene, ed è perciò opposto proprio in virtù della relazione rispetto a un altro che lo costituisce, alla concezione assoluta e universale del bello, implicita nel canone” (Perniola 1985, 190).

This quote contains some essential elements for understanding the influence of Stoicism on Perniola. To begin with, Perniola, by interpreting the concept of *to prepon* as “the beauty which adapts”, emphasises its difference from the ideal beauty proper to objectivism. An ideal beauty does not adapt to reality, but rather does the opposite. This is why, for Perniola, an objectivist theory of beauty is stuck within a passive contemplation and does not have any connection to reality and its events. Perniola thus privileges the concept of beauty elaborated within Stoicism precisely because its main feature (the *to prepon*), does not forget, so to speak, reality – that is, it does not forget its relationship to history and to particular situations. Perniola does not praise any absolute or universal categorization of aesthetics.

Another element taken from the previous quotation is worth of investigation. Beauty is in fact linked with the concept of “opposition”. If beauty adapts itself – that is to say, it depends on several factors within contextual circumstances – that means that it is produced in *opposition* to something else, because it is caused, generated, by an alterity through which it emerges. In this passage we can begin to see the position of Perniola on beauty: the beautiful is not that which is in itself perfect and complete, but what, placed in front of reality and its manifestations, is able to adapt to it, to have a pragmatic relationship of effectiveness with it.

Among the conceptions of beauty developed so far, Perniola’s philosophy is more influenced by the Stoic one precisely because, as suggested, it abolishes the pseudo-opposition between a real/ideal world and an apparent/false one<sup>4</sup>, and focuses on the material element. It is thus closely relatable to the arguments explored in the first chapter, where the

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<sup>4</sup> See First Section, Chapter 1 and Second Section, Chapter 1, for Perniola’s anti-metaphysical theory of the simulacrum and of the inorganic.

movement from same to same (the transit) and reality as stratification of surfaces were developed. From this point of view, the Stoics can be considered the founding fathers of the experience of transit, not only because they elaborate a philosophy of presence, but also because they do not unfold any metaphysics. The Stoics focus on the dimension of the present in order to free the individual from representations and concerns regarding the past and the future (such as deceiving passions, anxieties, deluding hopes, and regrets).

It is no coincidence that Perniola in *Transiti*, before dwelling on the ritual without myth in ancient Rome and on the role of the ceremony (1985, 189-204), anchors his discussion on Cicero's notion of *decorum* (translatable as "seemliness"). The Roman *decorum* is in fact the transposition of the Greek *to prepon*. *Decorum*, specifically, emphasizes a unity between behaviour and effectiveness. It is associated with being "seemly" towards deities or, for an orator – as Cicero was – towards audiences. It means therefore to possess an exterior *habitus* made of gestures, words, rhetorical styles and rituals that are convenient, suitable, and decorous with respect to the particular circumstances and to one's various roles in life. The link between beauty and *decorum* is highlighted by Cicero himself: "for just as the eye is aroused by the beauty of a body [...] so this seemliness [*decorum*], shining out in one's life, arouses the approval of one's fellows, because of the order and constancy and moderation of every word and action" (1991, I, 98).

Stoicism has influenced Perniola in three pivotal concepts of his philosophy: transit, desubjectivation, and beauty. The transit, as suggested, shares the Stoics' attitude of loving one's own fate. What the Stoics define as *logos* is referred to by Perniola as "difference"<sup>5</sup>. Both *logos* and difference imply a focus on the realm of history, events and material world. Thus, the cornerstone is set on reality and its discontinuous, uncanny, and unpredictable manifestations. Stoics believe that what is external to us is not up to us, and thus should be considered "indifferent". It is a cliché to consider Stoicism only as a moralistic asceticism based on virtuous

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<sup>5</sup> See First Section, chapter 2.

discipline. Instead, the *nihil admirari* (translatable as “do not let yourself be astonished by anything”) of the Stoics is a desubjectivation not to be confused with a self-annihilation. In fact, the disappearance of one's self is pursued in order to act more effectively in the world. As Nancy Sherman writes:

It is tempting to read Epictetus as urging complacency in his listeners or at least a retreat to a narrow circle of safety. But this is not the message. We are to continue to meet challenges, take risks, and stretch the limits of our mastery. [...] In this sense, the message is one of empowerment. But at the same time, we are to cultivate greater strength and equanimity in the face of what we truly can't change. We must learn where our mastery begins, but also where it ends. (2007, 3)

It is not a coincidence that Stoic philosophy has been practiced by emperors (such as Marcus Aurelius) and slaves (such as Epictetus), by politicians (such as Cicero) to contemporary soldiers (such as Stockdale<sup>6</sup>). To downsize one's self is also a crucial point for Perniola. Specifically, his aim is to find a new way between spiritualism and vitalism by highlighting and exploring the neutral dimension<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, the Stoic conception of beauty as *to prepon* and as *decorum* meets Perniola's notion of ritual without myth. As developed earlier in this thesis<sup>8</sup>, Perniola's idea of aesthetics is grounded upon the observation of manners and behaviours which nonetheless are pragmatically oriented. Roman religious rituals and Jesuit tradition were developed as pivotal experiences where a strategic conception of beauty emerged.

Nonetheless, in conclusion, Perniola's philosophy does not wish to replicate Stoicism in its entirety in the contemporary world. What Perniola leaves behind of traditional Stoicism is the focus on the moral element on the one hand and, on the other, the search for harmony between the

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, James Bond Stockdale (1923-2005) a US Navy admiral and aviator, stated that he managed to survive seven years of imprisonment and tortures during the Vietnam War thanks to Stoic philosophy and Epictetus' *Handbook*. See Sherman 2007, 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> See Second Section 2, Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> See First Section 1, Chapter 3.

individual and the world. As will be clear from the next chapter, which will focus on Baudelaire's dandyism and the influences of avant-gardes in Perniola's reflections, the Italian philosopher praises a "polemological" attitude rather than a harmonic one. In other words, philosophy as the identification and the exploration of conflicts and oppositions rather than philosophy as the theorization of a conciliated worldview. The theme of conflict is precisely what characterizes the second theoretical figure taken into account in this chapter: after neo-Stoicism, Baroque thought.

### *Gracián or Beauty as a Blade*

This sub-chapter will show the theoretical roots of Perniola's position on the Baroque, focusing particularly on Baltasar Gracián, to whom, together with Ignatius of Loyola, the Italian philosopher has dedicated careful attention in his writings. Perniola's interpretation of Gracián allows this thesis to clarify not only the choice of the Baroque as a fundamental moment between Stoicism and the avant-garde, but also the concept of beauty developed by Perniola.

In the previous chapters this thesis devoted several sub-chapters to Ignatius of Loyola and his *Spiritual Exercises*. Specifically, it was underlined how these exercises implied on the one hand a simulation of death in order to reach a state of indifference within ordinary life<sup>9</sup>; on the other hand the notion of "electing the difference" was discussed<sup>10</sup>. There is, therefore, a conceptual affinity between the *nihil admirari* of the Stoics and the *perinde ac cadaver* of Ignatius. For both, in fact, the individual should abandon a humanization of the world in order to reach virtue, joy, and consolation. Downsizing one's self is seen, from both these traditions of thought, as a preliminary condition required in order to behave with a "disinterested interest" and succeed in one's own goals. At the same time

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<sup>9</sup> See First Section, Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> See First Section, Chapter 3.

the Stoic *amor fati*, which emerges as an acceptance of what does not fall under our control, returns with Ignatius' concept of electing the difference. Both the Stoics and the founding father of the Jesuit Order in fact adhere, so to speak, to the world and its events, respectively as manifestations of the *logos* and of the will of God.

The other eminent author belonging to baroque Catholicism, to whom Perniola often refers in his texts, is Baltasar Gracián. Gracián, born in Belmonte (Aragon) in 1601, entered the Jesus Order as a young man. He spent his life within the ecclesiastical hierarchies, teaching Latin grammar, moral theology, and philosophy in various colleges between Lérida, Gandia, Huesca, Zaragoza and Madrid. At the same time he knew well Madrid's court environments, having been confessor of the viceroy of Navarre. He published most of his writings, such as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1647), *The Hero* (1637), *The Complete Gentleman* (1646), *The Critic* (1651), and *Wit and the Art of Inventiveness* (1648), under a pseudonym and, therefore, without the approval of the Order. His proximity both to court circles and to some politicians of the time, such as Don Vincenzo Giovanni of Lastanosa, caused him internal enmities within the Society of Jesus. Eventually, in 1651, Gracián lost the Chair of Sacred Scriptures in Zaragoza (the most coveted within ecclesiastical studies) and was transferred to Graus. Almost exiled, away from supporters and friends, he died December 6, 1658, in Terragona.

Perniola focuses mainly on two works by the Spanish priest: *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and *Wit and the Art of Inventiveness*. The first contains a “biotechnique” (Tatarkiewicz 1980, 484), that is, an art of living well. The second is the most important text Gracián left on aesthetic theory. The occurrences of Gracián's reflections in Perniola's writings are as follows: *Transiti* (1985, 180-84); *Enigmas* (1995, 125-139); *Disgusti* (1999, 25-35); *Del sentire* (2002, 71-79); *La società dei simulacri* (2012, 112-113); *Estetica italiana contemporanea* (2017, 199, 204). This sub-chapter will deal with Perniola's interpretation of Gracián's theories and will underline in what ways his thought has been influenced by them. Specifically, Perniola focuses on three main notions emerging from Gracián works,

namely *agudeza* (literally “acuteness”, translated as “wit”), *ingenium* (translated with “inventiveness” and “ingenuity”) and *concepto* (“concept”).

*Agudeza* is presented in a variety of attitudes – a subtle comment, a witty remark<sup>11</sup>, a seductive silence, and so on. *Agudeza* has roots in treatises on courtesy such as *The Book of the Courtier* (published in 1528) by Baldassarre Castiglione, and Giovanni Della Casa’s *Galateo* (1558). Gracián shares with these late-Renaissance writers the attention to subtlety, *sprezzatura*, *je ne sais quoi* – attitudes and behaviours not understood as empty forms but at the crossroads between seduction, politics, and art.

*Agudeza* implies an aesthetic conception of existence in which “ciò che splende e ciò che riesce, la forma e l’azione, l’ornamento e la sostanza” (Perniola 1990, 127) are closely joined. Here we can clearly see the connection between the conception of beauty of Gracián’s literary mannerism and the Greek *to prepon* and the Roman *decorum*. In Gracián’s works, beauty is not unfolded by a proportionate and harmonious object; it does not depend on an eternal canon or measure; it is not essentially spherical, soft, round and it is not an object of contemplation. On the contrary, beauty is the result of a *challenge* between manners and circumstances. I emphasise the word challenge precisely to stress the attention Perniola’s interpretation pays to Gracián’s works. Being witty means behaving like something acute, pungent, sharp, pointed (like a needle or a sword) which penetrates the things of the world: “L’acutezza sta all’interno di un campo semantico-concettuale in cui la parola, il gesto e perfino il silenzio sono intesi come un’arma e l’uomo di lettere un combattente, un guerriero” (Perniola 1990, 127). Thus, wit (*agudeza*) is that particular notion which holds together the dimensions of aesthetics and existence, beauty and effectiveness, art and strategy, opportunity and seduction.

Although the concept of beauty has always been present within the Western tradition, aesthetic principles started to be studied systematically with eighteenth century thinkers like Baumgarten, Burke, and Kant. In fact,

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<sup>11</sup> The importance of wit was also underlined within the phenomenon of dandyism, specifically in Brummell’s ironic attitude towards his contemporaries. See First Section, Chapter 4.

these figures put aesthetics side by side with ethics and logics and researched the conditions of possibility of beauty, taste, pleasure, and so on. A question might arise at this stage. Why does Perniola write frequently on aesthetics – devoting a monograph (2013) to contemporary aesthetics – but state that his influences are to be traced within the Stoics, the Baroque thinkers, or even Palaeolithic engravings and Egyptian and Roman societies<sup>12</sup>? To put it differently: why does Perniola seem to be suspicious towards aesthetics, paradoxically since the precise period it was founded?

Firstly, it is not entirely true that Perniola is not influenced by any authors and aesthetic schools of thought belonging to the last three centuries. But, at a closer look, he can be seen to be influenced by philosophers, artists, and thinkers who had, so to speak, a pre-aesthetic approach to aesthetics. At a first glance this statement might seem contradictory. It becomes clearer when the difference between aesthetics prior to its philosophical foundation and after it is highlighted. The main difference lies in the fact that philosophical aesthetics is oriented, so to speak, towards dissecting the various notions and experiences belonging to the realm of feeling. The main objective is in fact producing a new typology of knowledge around *aisthesis*, the perceptions of the senses. In doing so, aesthetics became a distinct and particular discipline with its own rules and principles. The aesthetics of the eighteenth century onwards, in other words, has produced above all treatises on feeling, in which the main aim has been to systematise it, catalogue it, and grasp its properties. In doing so, beauty ended up being separate if not isolated from everyday attitudes. On the contrary, what Perniola tries to underline by combining rock art, Egyptian architecture, Roman and post-Renaissance rituals, Stoicism, and Baroque, is precisely the idea of an aesthetic that includes a global vision of the individual. To put it briefly: aesthetics and action as two sides of the same coin. This is the reason why a notion like *agudeza*, Perniola suggests, does not “speak” easily to the experience of the contemporary man. *Agudeza* still belongs to the ideal of a man in which will, attitudes, tastes are inseparable from one another. In any event, as will be clarified in the next chapter,

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<sup>12</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 1.

Perniola still praises those figures who in the last two centuries devoted their lives and research to this way of conceiving aesthetics (such as Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Bataille, Klossowski, and Debord). Ultimately, Perniola praises philosophies which are ways of life and not only systems of knowledge.

The second notion explored by Gracián and discussed by Perniola is *ingenium*. The meanings with which Gracián characterizes ingenuity are far from the use made of traditional aesthetics of the same concept. In fact, *ingenium* is connected, in the aesthetic field, to the figure of the *genius*. According to Kant, the artist genius is so because s/he possesses an innate talent that predisposes him/her to art and to artistic creation. On the other hand, ingenious, in common language, does not relate to art and aesthetics but rather to the practical realization of something, especially in the field of technology and mechanics. As Perniola points out, in fact, modern aesthetics “confina l’ingegno in una effettualità pratico-meccanica, dall’altro isola il genio in una purezza poetico-formale” (1990, 130). The ingenuity conceived by Gracián, instead, far from being solely spiritual or merely functional, is closer to the conception that Francis Bacon has of the imagination (and which Perniola borrows in order to define the influence that the Baroque has had on his philosophy), which consists in making unlawful matches and divorces among things. In the *Diccionario de conceptos de Baltasar Gracián* (2005), Jorge M. Ayala suggests in fact that “Gracián believes that the universe is composed of singular things and persons. Nonetheless they are not incommunicable monads [...] The *ingenium* discovers the subtle network of relations that things have in themselves” (Ayala 2005, 154, my translation). In order to clarify an ingenious attitude, Perniola highlights (1990, 130-32) a series of aphorisms within Gracián’s work. The varieties of operations produced by ingenuity can be summarized in the ability to transform nature into culture and make this transformation seem natural<sup>13</sup>. *Ingenium* can be produced by forming paradoxes, concealing criticism through praise, setting enigmas, alluding,

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<sup>13</sup> The dandy shares this feature of Baroque ingenuity. Recall Brummell’s hours spent in front of his mirror carefully taking care of his appearances and, at the same time, never alluding in public to all these efforts. See First Section 1, Chapter 4.

discovering affinities between distant things, and so on. In other words it implies the ability to move, dislocate, and transform with art the data given in their immediacy. The goal of this attitude is to transform a mere fact, event, encounter, into a prism of surprising possibilities. *Ingenium* is thus an act of subtle artifice concerned specifically with beauty: “*ingenium* cannot content itself only with truth, like judgement, but aspires to beauty” (Gracián 1969, 18). And, in addition: “[*ingenium*] is an act of understanding which expresses existing and present correspondence between objects” (Gracián 1969, 242). Gracián writes of “existing and present” relationships between objects, in order to underline that with this “metaphorical comparison”, *ingenium* is not addressed to creativity but to the development of something that is already present. As Hidalgo Serna notes: “*ingenium* counterposes two separate things over against each other and with images objectifies relationships or similarities between them which are already present” (Serna 1980, 253). In this context the focus on presence and the present, one of the main features of both Stoicism and Perniola’s notion of transit, can be found once again.

Finally, the third pivotal notion of Gracián’s aesthetics: the *concepto*. A “concept” is usually defined as an idea that collects the essential elements of a given reality or phenomenon. A concept, so to speak, “grasps”, “grabs”, “seizes” its objects. In order to explain Gracián’s notion of *concepto*, Perniola leaves behind this interpretation and comes back to the Latin etymology of the word concept, which is *conceptus*, derived from *con-capio*. *Con-capio* means “to take” in the sense of “welcoming” or “gathering in” something: “concepire non vuol dire dunque appropriarsi di alcunché, ma fare spazio ad esso” (Perniola 1990, 137). In other words, a concept would imply not so much an activity of the subject towards an object as a disposition of the subject, a welcoming attitude, willing to receive what comes from the outside. Indeed, as Hidalgo Serna writes, commenting on the notion of *concepto* in Gracián:

The Gracián concept is not demonstrative. The logic of the ingenious concept cannot be formal or rational. Its concepts cannot express logical relationships, but always only new, real relationships, which constitute the

unique essence of things. Gracián attempts to show, not to demonstrate. Concepts therefore must be a re-representation of reality... (Serna 1980, 252)

The “ingenious concept” is thus a method for displaying and showing original correspondences between things, combining them in a new language outside rational and logical structures. *Ingenium*, in this case, is considered by Serna and Perniola as a faculty capable of creating a “conceptual attitude” by drawing out relationships between images and objects.

In this context another theme shared by the traditions explored returns: that of a benevolent and affirmative disposition towards the events, towards what is independent and cannot be controlled by the individual. It implies becoming-nothing, downsizing oneself, remaining in a state of suspension<sup>14</sup> which ultimately allows the individual to transform the things of the world. However, since *agudeza*, *ingenio*, and *concepto* are not three separate moments but should be understood as a fundamental triad for the art of living well, gathering in what comes from outside does not mean passively receiving anything. On the contrary, it implies using ingenuity, discerning, having discretion, knowing how to move in concrete circumstances, on occasions that arise from time to time. This conception is what Perniola praises as “strategic beauty”, in which aesthetics and manners are never oblivious to the practical element.

To conclude, Gracián grounded his aesthetic theory upon the notions of *agudeza*, *ingenium* and *concepto*. *Agudeza*, as suggested, has the characteristics of something pointed, close to a needle or a sword. The dimension of penetrating, piercing, and “becoming” sharp is essential to Gracián's theory. The Baroque wise man is close to an elegant warrior, who uses words, gesture, silences, and witty remarks as blades. Gracián therefore places the element of conflict and challenge at the core of an aesthetic attitude which does not necessarily result in a final harmony. Indeed, it is

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<sup>14</sup> See the expanded *epoche* elaborated by Perniola (2011) and discussed in this thesis in First Section, Chapter 3.

precisely the disharmonic or discordant element, as Tatarkiewicz points out, that is crucial for Baroque theory:

The most desirable themes for an artist or a thinker – writes Tatarkiewicz – consist precisely in what is disharmonic, dissonant, disproportionate, paradoxical, incoherent, incommensurable, in *disparidad*, in difficulties, in contradictions, in mystery, in enigmas, in hyperboles, in the imaginative, in the ambiguous, in the unclear etc. All these are the ideal subjects for *agudeza* and constitutes the true essence of Mannerist aesthetics. (Tatarkiewicz 1980, 485-6)

*Agudeza* is highlighted in this passage as that ability which enables one to perceive the conflict that animates the relations between the things of the world without consequently bringing it back to a final unity or conciliation. Its peculiarity, and at the same time its paradoxicality, is that of being on one hand close to Stoic discretion and prudence, and, on the other hand, to a Heraclitean conception of life. In fact, Heraclitus can be considered an outsider among the aesthetics theorists explored so far. His philosophy cannot be traced back either to the objectivistic theory of beauty, nor to the subjectivist theory, nor to that of the Stoics. For Heraclitus beauty emerges from *enantiodromia*, namely the tension between each thing and its opposite. The originality of this perspective lies in the fact that opposition is never overcome by a greater harmony: the state of ambivalence that characterizes everything remains. It is precisely on these grounds – that is, on the link between conflict in the Baroque and in the aesthetic tradition more generally – that we can move on to the next chapter, in which we will uncover the relationship between Perniola and one of the most influential spiritual fathers of the avant-garde movements: Charles Baudelaire and his philosophical dandyism.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Charles Baudelaire, or, Greatness Without Convictions**

#### *Introduction*

This chapter focuses on the theoretical affinities between Perniola's philosophy and Baudelaire's conceptualisation of dandyism. In order to develop this connection, I have explored three main sources. Firstly, I investigated occurrences of the French poet in Perniola's work. Secondly, I looked at Baudelaire's essays, in which the phenomenon of dandyism appears. Thirdly, I consulted scholarly studies on dandyism with a specific focus on Baudelaire. My research has established that several pivotal notions of Baudelaire's poetry are echoed in Perniola's philosophy. Having said that, and while Baudelaire appears in several of Perniola's books and articles (1977, 125, 2001b, 214-17, 2004, 75-81, 2013b, 76, 123-24, 2017b, 200), Perniola's main contribution to a theory of dandyism is only two pages long (2002b, 76-7) and his remarks on dandyism are more brief and evocative than carefully explanatory. The purpose of this chapter is to develop Perniola's insights both on dandyism and on Baudelaire by taking into account the French poet's work and the secondary literature on the subject.

## *Beauty and Modernity*

Baudelaire focused on dandyism in various essays and poetic writings, such as *The Salon of 1846*, *Flares* and *My Heart Laid Bare* (Baudelaire 2011). In addition, in a letter to his editor Poulet-Malassis (Natta 2011, 7), he announced the idea of writing a text entitled *Dandyism, or the Greatness Without Convictions*, which in the end was never realised. *The Painter of Modern Life* remains, however, Baudelaire's most significant and detailed contribution on dandyism, and it is from this text that my discussion of Baudelaire's conception of dandyism will commence.

Baudelaire defines dandyism as a “vague”, “ancient”, and “mysterious” institution “beyond the laws” (1964, 26). In what terms does he employ these adjectives? Why does he also state that Caesar, Catiline and Alcibiades should be regarded as dandies? In order to understand why dandyism is for Baudelaire a timeless institution, his peculiar idea of beauty should be investigated. In fact, as it will be shortly clarified, the unique relationship between the dandies and beauty makes dandyism a phenomenon potentially belonging to every age.

In the first chapter of *The Painter of Modern Life*, entitled “Beauty, Fashion, and Happiness”, Baudelaire claims that beauty is characterised by two key features: an eternal and a relative one. At first glance this invocation of an “eternal” feature could suggest that he supports an essentialist and Platonic aesthetic theory, in which beauty exists at an objective if not absolute level. However the French poet does not dwell on universal measures or eternal canons which make something objectively beautiful<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, he states that “absolute and eternal beauty does not exist” (1996, 1097). By claiming that beauty is composed also of an eternal element, Baudelaire instead means that aesthetic activities, attitudes, and conducts are witnessed in every age and thus are a universal constant of human behaviour. From Palaeolithic paintings and engravings to

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of the objective theory of beauty see Chapter 2 of this Section.

contemporary video art, from ancient monumental statues and architecture to hyper-realistic portraits, humans have always displayed artistic and aesthetic habits or behaviours.

To this timeless aspect of beauty he adds one relative to each age: “we may assert that since all centuries and all peoples have had their own form of beauty, so inevitably we have ours” (1096). The task of the dandy for Baudelaire consists on the one hand to live according to elegance and distinction – regardless of the specific period in which s/he is living – and, on the other hand to find, extract and bring to light the peculiar beauty of his/her times. To put it briefly, that of the dandy is an aesthetically oriented lifestyle that always seeks beauty in what is modern. Here lies the reason why dandyism, for Baudelaire, is paradoxically an ancient institution and at the same time an essentially modern one. The dandies of the past were *modern* in their times; that is to say, they developed and explored their aesthetic lifestyles in light of, or in reaction to, their era’s newest trends. In scholarly terms, modernity usually refers to a historical period (the modern era) between the Middle Ages and post-modernity. In contrast, Baudelaire considers modernity an attitude towards one’s own present. For instance, he claims: “Every old master has had his own modernity” (1964, 13). In doing so, I believe that Baudelaire goes back to the etymologic roots of the Late Latin adjective *modernus*, which derives from the adverb *modo*, meaning “just now” as well as “manner”. Thus, modernity, in his view, does not imply any specific century. It instead involves the ideas of contingency, of precariousness, and of circumstances that make something beautiful only for a certain period. The dandy’s attitude does not praise any idea of an *a priori* beauty: it focuses on the peculiar beauty belonging to each time. Herein lies the “specularist”<sup>2</sup> behaviour of the dandy. The dandy becomes a mirror of his/her own contemporaneity, and thus appropriates and reflects an always-modern beauty.

To give an example, Baudelaire himself uses the metaphor of the mirror: “the lover of universal life enters the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as

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<sup>2</sup> See the concept of “specularism” (investigated by Perniola) in the Chapter 1 of this Section.

vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life” (1964, 9). Baudelaire argues that the dandy is first and foremost someone who is daily engaged in the work of becoming-mirror, that is, a surface that reflects the world around him/her.

The concept of specularism, as it was developed in the first chapter of this section, has several implications which will be further explored in the next sub-chapter. I employ it at this stage to emphasise the welcoming disposition of the dandy towards his/her times. The multifarious external stimuli to which s/he is exposed are in fact gathered in, in the same way that – metaphorically speaking – a mirror reflects the surroundings on its surface. Nonetheless, this attitude does not imply that the dandy considers modernity beautiful in all of its manifestations. A dandy’s task, for Baudelaire, is to unfold the beauty particular to each modernity. I would argue that this belief links Baudelaire’s conception of beauty to the Stoic’s notion of the *to prepon* and to Gracian’s Baroque idea of *agudeza*<sup>3</sup>. *Agudeza* implies an idea of beauty which, like in Baudelaire, does not emerge within a harmonic discourse, grounded upon aesthetic objectivity and unity of parts. On the contrary, it is the consequence of movement, surprise, conflict; of an event in other words that, like lightning, bursts into everyday life, as in the case of the electric lights mentioned in the previous quotation. The *to prepon*, or, the “convenient”, implies that beauty depends on occasions, circumstances, on continually transitory combinations of elements that are relative to a given context. As Baudelaire put it: “Woe to him who studies the antique for anything else but pure art, logic, and general method! By steeping himself too thoroughly on it, he will lose all memory of the present; he will renounce the rights and privileges offered by circumstance – for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations” (1964, 14). Baudelaire underlines that the dandy’s relationship to the past should not be that of imitation, which might end up in a sterile mimicry blind to what the present can offer. Referring only to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 2 of this Section.

classics and what is ancient, according to Baudelaire, “is clearly symptomatic of a great degree of laziness; for it is much easier to decide outright that everything about the garb of an age is absolutely ugly than to devote oneself to the task of distilling from it the mysterious element of beauty that it may contain, however slight or minimal that element may be” (13). The dandy should therefore cultivate the idea of beauty in his/her person, not at an abstract level by imitating previous trends and fashions, but by becoming the mirror of his/her own modernity, concentrating on its fugitive, transitory elements, on the continuous metamorphosis that characterises beauty in a given epoch. It is no accident that Perniola included Baudelaire’s artistic production within the category of “art as occasion” (external circumstances) rather than “art as inspiration” (internal urging). “Per Baudelaire”, Perniola writes, “l’aspetto saliente dell’opera d’occasione è la *modernità*, con la sua capacità di saper percepire il presente nella sua attualità sociale, collettiva, civilizzata, mondana [...] Il poeta, l’artista deve perciò essere non uno specialista di parole e di colori, ma innanzitutto un uomo di mondo, *un homme du monde*” (Perniola 1985, 175).

To sum up, the dandy should firstly have a welcoming attitude towards reality (as each time has its own beauty) and then extract the peculiar beauty of that reality. In this way the acceptance of one’s own present does not imply an unconditional acceptance of everything that is at hand. On the contrary, as it will be clarified in the next sub-chapter, the task of the dandy often implies a challenge, a conflict, if not a revolt, in order to find beauty in what is felt as a vulgar and trivial world. In a short piece titled *A Defence of Cosmetics*, Max Beerbohm, an exemplar dandy of the first half of the twentieth century, wrote a passage that exemplifies the kind of *amor fati*, of self-confidence towards one’s own time that should shape the dandy’s attitude<sup>4</sup>:

Artifice must queen it once more in the town, and so, if there be any whose hearts chafe at her return, let them not say, “We have come into evil times,” and be all for resistance, reformation or angry cavilling. For did the

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<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire also wrote a short essay in praise of cosmetics, which I explore later in this Chapter.

king's sceptre send the sea retrograde, or the wand of the sorcerer avail to turn the sun from its old course? And what man or what number of men ever stayed that reiterated process by which the cities of this world grow, are very strong, fail and grow again? Indeed, indeed, there is charm in every period, and only fools and flutterpates do not seek reverently for what is charming in their own day. *No martyrdom, however fine, nor satire, however splendidly bitter, has changed by a little tittle the known tendency of things.* It is the times that can perfect us, not we the times [...] (1981, 47-48)

Before investigating other aspects of Baudelaire's dandyism, a first and preliminary definition of the dandy can be provided. This sub-chapter showed in what sense dandyism can be considered an ancient institution, one which with Baudelaire "loses all its historical and geographical references" (Favardin and Bouxiere 1988, 88, My translation). This institution is grounded upon the cultivation of beauty. For the French poet, as suggested, beauty is linked with modernity, namely with the contingent aspect of each contemporaneity. However, there still remain many open questions: what kind of beauty is praised by the dandy? What are its characteristics? And what is the objective of the dandy's challenge?

The next sub-chapter will develop these issues.

### *Baudelaire's Anti-Aesthetics*

The previous sub-chapter linked Baudelaire's aesthetic theory to dandyism. The present and the following ones will intertwine Baudelaire's theory with Perniola's contribution on dandyism. Specifically, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, I will to focus on an article which Perniola published in the journal *Ágalma*, entitled "Prova di forza o prova di grandezza? Considerazioni sull'agalma" (2002a, 62-79). In this article

Perniola focuses on several themes revolving around the relationship between aesthetics and economy. Dandyism appears in two pages (76-7), where it is linked by Perniola to a challenge against capitalist society. According to Perniola, the greatness of the dandy is grounded upon three main characteristics: *provocation*, *exteriorisation* and *detachment*. The provocation implies a conflict against the emerging American bourgeois mentality spreading in nineteenth-century Europe; it involves questioning daily life, which is put into question by the dandy's disorientating, witty and ironic attitude. The exteriorisation consists in welcoming what comes from outside (i.e. the *external* world) through a *specularist* approach – as suggested in the first chapter of this section. The dandy, in other words, becomes a mirror, a reflecting surface of modernity. Finally the notion of detachment is linked to Baudelaire's re-evaluation of Stoicism and warrior codes. The French poet elaborates a neo-stoicism grounded upon the cultivation of cold spirit and self-confidence.

This sub-chapter will focus on the first characteristic, *provocation*.<sup>5</sup>

The provocation of the dandy, according to Perniola, is primarily a revolt against the daily life of modernity, with its cult of work, money, progress and utility. The dandy opposes the typical bourgeois mentality of the nineteenth century that conceives everyday life as a polarity between work and free time, fatigue and leisure, production and relaxation. Perniola's remarks are based on Baudelaire's perspective. Baudelaire is interested in the "heroism of modern life". To be such a hero – in Baudelaire's view – means cultivating a lifestyle in contrast to the standards of modernity. Baudelaire himself helps the reader to better understand the dandy's peculiar type of revolt. In fact, the dandy is often called into question as an opponent of certain traits and aspects of the Eighteenth century *Zeitgeist*. As Favardin notes, "the dandy becomes a weapon. Baudelaire quotes the dandy whenever he wants to affirm an idea, a revolt [...]" (1988, 89. My translation). For example, Baudelaire says that money is a "crude passion" (1964, 27), which the dandy should not regard as

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<sup>5</sup> Exteriorisation and detachment will be the objects of the third and fourth sub-chapters.

something essential. Money is abhorred by Baudelaire because it is the core of commerce, which he considers the lowest and most vile form of selfishness (Baudelaire 1996, 1444). In several passages, in fact, Baudelaire endorses, so to speak, the equation “natural = squalid”, where “nature” covers the broad notion of self-interest (for instance animals struggling for their survival and self-preservation). In addition, Baudelaire writes that the figure of the merchant is morally ambiguous (he even states that “commerce is satanic” in 1996, 1444), because besides the element of natural self-interest, the merchant also seeks interests, earnings, and converts his time and life into a machine for profit. The French poet continues his invective against business in general by using other metaphors and examples. For instance, he argues, young men become more and more independent not because they leave their houses for a militant, an adventurous or an aesthetic lifestyle, but because they decide to start a new trade, hopefully to become rich, and perhaps even to compete with their fathers (1405). When money and the spirit of trade become an essential passion within one’s own life, Baudelaire suggests that it colonises our dreams and goals, turning everyone into guardians of safe boxes (1405). Firstly, therefore, the dandy revolts against the passion for money, which is perceived as crude and vulgar, as it enslaves individual, and transforms them into nothing more than profit-oriented functionaries. In fact, Baudelaire goes further in his provocative standpoint: in a fragment of *My Heart Laid Bare*, he affirms that “there exist but three respectable beings: the priest, the warrior, the poet. To know, to die and to create. The other men are tallieable and corvéable, made for the stable, that is, for exercising what one calls *professions*” (1423-24). Baudelaire has an aversion not only for money but also for the concept of utility and function. According to him, being useful in doing something, being functional, means being dependent, enchained by a duty or a job. The individual shaping his/her life according to his/her profession, for Baudelaire, ultimately becomes a fragment, completely consumed in his/her peculiar specialisation.

I would argue that Perniola’s aesthetic theory shares with Baudelaire the essential characteristic of being anti-specialism. The previous chapter showed that the notions of *agudeza*, *ingenio* and *conchetto* belong to an anti-

aesthetic world view (i.e. against traditional aesthetics, considered by Perniola as a narrow specialisation of sensory knowledge). In the same way Baudelaire's dandyism is against specialisms, or, as Favardin and Bouxiere put it in *Le Dandysme*, "the dandy has horror of each specialisation" (1988, 85. My translation). Specifically, Baudelaire challenges not only the specialism of academic theorists: he turns against the concept of specialism in itself. In *Contro la comunicazione (Against Communication)* Perniola defines the Baudelairean poetics by using the expression *anti-aesthetic over-interest* (2004, 76, *sovra-interessamento anti-estetico*). Firstly – Perniola claims – Baudelaire is at odds with the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterest. Kant's theory is based on a formal conception of aesthetics. Focusing on the formal elements that structure our aesthetic judgements *per se*, Kant is not interested in all the sensible contents to which the same judgements are addressed. In other words, Kant elaborates a theory that is able to explain how our aesthetic judgements work, independently of any empirical object contemplated by the subject. A key distinguishing feature of this theory is the notion of disinterest. Kantian judgements are disinterested – that is, the existence of the artistic object is irrelevant to our understanding of how our aesthetic perception works. Kant does not deny that a given object can generate impressions and sensations for its viewer but, at the same time, he does not include these within his formal theory of aesthetics. Conversely, beauty, for Baudelaire – and for Perniola, as should be clear by this stage – is always understood in relation to reality and its relativity, and thus in its concrete historical existence.

Baudelaire's theory of *surnaturalism* is in fact at odds with Kantian formalism. Whereas formalism is grounded upon disinterest, *surnaturalism* emerges only if the individual is over-interested in the world. Baudelaire conceives his poetical attitude as the ability to translate exterior life (1996, 1289), that is, to use the faculties of imagination and creation to transform the existing world into something marvellous and beautiful, and being able to see beauty also in what is normally excluded from it<sup>6</sup>. The dandy, for

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<sup>6</sup> Baudelaire's most famous collection of poems *The Flowers of Evil* can be read through this lens. Namely it is, among the other things, an attempt to show that even repellent objects and beings possess their kind of beauty.

Baudelaire, does not create arbitrary correspondences with the things of the world. On the contrary, s/he is guided, so to speak, precisely by that which is external. Specifically, Baudelaire's *surnaturalism* revolves around the emerging urban life of the metropolis. As Perniola wrote:

I paesaggi della grande città, il fasto della vita civile e militare, l'alternanza di serietà e civetteria, le immagini multiformi della bellezza equivoca, la sfide del dandismo, le seduzioni dell'artificiale, lo *charme* dell'orrore sono appunto gli elementi di una nuova sensibilità lontana mille miglia dalla contemplazione disinteressata dell'estetica accademica. Si accede a questo tipo di sensibilità attraverso un'ascesi mondana che ha nel dandy la sua massima espressione. (2004, 77)

The concept of disinterest is taken as a polemical target by Perniola because, according to him, it produces a hiatus, an unbridgeable gap between aesthetics and the world. Baudelaire's surnaturalist dandyism sews up, so to speak, beauty and reality. The dandy, in this sense, can be considered one of the "painters of modern life" (as Baudelaire's essay is titled), meaning that s/he is able to depict, to provide and re-establish an aesthetic dimension in the modern metropolis without praising bourgeois mindsets. In fact, the French poet is interested in tracing the ideal type of an individual, the dandy, who furthers a kind of aristocracy of behaviours and manners against what he feels as the decadence of modern habits.

Beyond the keywords of bourgeois life, such as money, trade, specialisation, commerce, and so on, Baudelaire is against *subjectivism* and *naturalism*. The critique of naturalism is linked to the privilege that the dandy gives to the exterior and artificial elements; the critique of subjectivism lies in the daily efforts through which the dandy shapes a detached attitude. These two concepts will be the objects of investigation in the following sub-chapters.

### *Dandies and Mirrors*

So far, this thesis has focused on the element of rebellion typical of Baudelaire's dandyism, which Perniola interprets within the broader attitude of "provocation". The other two main characteristics of the dandy, identified by Perniola, are "exteriorisation" and "detachment". As mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, the externalisation consists in the privilege given, by Baudelaire, to that which is external and artificial; the detachment implies a day-to-day attitude of asceticism and worldly desubjectivation on the part of the dandy. The two polemical targets here are, respectively, nature and subjectivity. This sub-chapter will deal with the first concept by developing it within Baudelaire's dandy perspective, and by showing how it is related to Perniola's aesthetic and theoretical theories.

Developing the concept of "thing" in Perniola's philosophy, this thesis has also looked at his studies on the theme of exteriorisation. Specifically, I have explored the concept of *specularism* in reference to the daily practice of Zen monks and Baroque literary aesthetics. To recapitulate, specularism is a phenomenon for which what is external is reflected by the individual's day-to-day behaviour and attitudes. The Zen monk becomes nature himself in order to live in harmony with nature and its rhythms – that is, he mirrors natural cyclic laws and everyday situations in his activities and goals. He thus dissolves his vitalistic drives and desires and reflects – what he considers to be – the harmonic principles ruling the world around him. As for baroque literature I related and discussed the short story of the portraitist Orante, who was transformed by Eros into a mirror (which emphasised his attitude of accepting and gathering in what is external)<sup>7</sup>. The key recurrent issue in both these cases is the desubjectivation, namely the entry into an impersonal, neutral dimension, based on what is external. In what terms is it possible to develop the notion of exteriorisation in the phenomenon of dandyism? Why can Baudelaire be included in the "feeling from outside" explored by Perniola?

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 1 of this Section.

The phenomenon of specularism within dandyism was introduced also in the previous chapter, which detailed the daily clothing ritual of George Bryan Brummell. In that chapter<sup>8</sup> I underlined how the English dandy was constantly striving, in the meticulous care of his toilette, to disappear into the material element of clothing. The toilette ritual is also found in several passages of Baudelaire's work. For example, in a fragment of *My Heart Laid Bare*, he writes "A chapter on The Toilette / Morality of the Toilet / The pleasures of the toilet" (1996, 1434). Although these remarks are sketchy they suggest Baudelaire's interest in that theme. Or again, in *The Painter of Modern Life* he states: "his eyes [of the dandy], are in love with distinction above all things, the perfection of his toilet will consist of absolute simplicity, which is the best way, in fact, of achieving the desired quality" (1964, 27). Baudelaire, like Brummell and Barbey D'Aurevilly, was convinced that this distinction is a matter of the elegance of the dandy, which is not achieved through showy, impressive or expensive clothes. On the contrary, it emerges above all from his/her manner – that is, the *way* in which s/he wears his/her clothes. At a closer look, simplicity in Baudelaire's dandyism appears to be even more rigorous – if not extreme – than Brummell's. While the English dandy in fact used to wear a heterogeneous palette of colours he considered suitable for his style, Baudelaire praised only one colour for his clothes: black. As Moers writes: "What most impressed Baudelaire's friends in those years was his insistence on black – overwhelming, gleaming black from his lustrous high hat to his impeccable polished shoes (1960, 272)<sup>9</sup>.

Why did Baudelaire devote his dandyism to the colour black? Moers claims that this colour conferred to the poet a "spiritual aloofness", an attitude of detachment in an "age of mourning" (274). Blackness, in Moers'

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<sup>8</sup> First Section, Chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Another crucial difference between Brummell and Baudelaire consists in the fact that the former belonged to the high society of the time. As suggested, he was an *arbiter elegantiarum* within balls, social events, royal weddings and so on. Conversely, Baudelaire was not close to any aristocracy. His ideal companions were the bohemian free spirits and the Parisian artists. The latter shared with him a creative sensitivity at odds with bourgeois cult of efficiency and work. Nonetheless, at the same time he distanced himself from them precisely because he did not possess any extravagant affectation and negligent disarray (typical of the bohemians), but an "old-fashioned politeness of manners" (Moers 1960, 273), which made him an anomaly in those circles.

view, implies a melancholic sensitivity which can indeed be found in many of Baudelaire's poems and essays. From *The Flowers of Evil* to *Paris Spleen*, his verses are filled with disturbing images and experiences, depressing and melancholic attitudes. Baudelaire claims that beauty should be found precisely in these representations and events. Again, beauty for Baudelaire – and also for Perniola – is not the result of any harmony or unity of the parts of a given object. Beauty emerges instead from conflicting, uncanny experiences<sup>10</sup>, which “pierce”, “penetrate” the individual in his/her daily life<sup>11</sup>. This is clearly expressed by Baudelaire himself: “I do not pretend that Joy cannot be associated with Beauty, but I say that Joy is one of its most vulgar ornaments: – whereas Melancholy is, so to speak, the illustrious companion, to such an extent that I can hardly conceive [...] of a type of beauty where there is no *Sadness*” (1996, 1396). Sadness and melancholy are both key features of Baudelaire's choice of all-black clothing. He provided an explanation of his colour preference in the last chapter of *The Salon of 1846*, entitled “On the Heroism of Modern Life”. Despite the decadence of manners, of arts; despite the Americanisation or European society, Baudelaire stresses the idea that there still are some figures who he considers heroic. As I have already shown in the previous sub-chapter, the dandy is a pivotal figure of this heroic revolt, and the black suit, according to Baudelaire, is firstly “the symbol of a perpetual mourning [...] we are each of us celebrating some funeral” (1097). In other words, black, being the mourning colour *par excellence*, conveys Baudelaire's attitudes towards beauty and society better than other colours could possibly do. For Baudelaire, in fact, the most heroic challenge is precisely to *be able* to paint only with black, that is, to extract beauty from any age, even one which praises money, profit, commerce, trade and so on. Black is the acceptance of one's own time and world: “Parisian life is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous; but we do not notice it” (1099).

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 1 of this Section, where Perniola's aesthetic is investigated alongside with notions such as uncanny, radiating things.

<sup>11</sup> See also Chapter 2 of this Section, especially the concept of “penetrating beauty” in Perniola's interpretation of Gracian works.

For this reason I am not convinced by Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's notion of modernity. According to the German philosopher, "Modernity turns out to be his [Baudelaire's] doom. There are no provisions for him in it; it has no use for his type. It moors him fast in the secure harbour forever and abandons him to everlasting idleness" (Benjamin 2006, 124). Although the black suit means mourning, it does not imply doom. Baudelaire's strategy is a paradoxical one. He in fact opposes his society by sympathising with it. I use sympathy here in the etymological meaning of *sym* (together) and *pathein* (to suffer), thus, to suffer with or together. Perniola himself underlined this aspect of Baudelaire's attitude: "L'opposizione [in Baudelaire] riesce soltanto attraverso una identificazione col punto di vista dell'avversario [...] è la stessa l'arma che ferisce quella che guarisce" (2011: 111). In addition, the implications of Baudelaire's black suit are akin to the attitude of the Zen monk and share conceptual affinities with Orante's transformation into a mirror, explored by Perniola. All three, in fact, consist of a mimicry in which what is external is mirrored and the outer world is welcomed. Indeed, the metaphor of the mirror helps better understanding Baudelaire's overall aesthetic position, as it implies not living according to the past, imitating it, or reproducing its main features, but leaving room for one's own contemporaneity – that is, being *modern*. A mirror cannot choose what to reflect; it simply "collects" on its surface what is external, affirms it, making the present rich<sup>12</sup>. Becoming-mirror, as suggested in the first chapter of this section, should not be confused with narcissism. A narcissist uses, so to speak, the world as a mirror, to see him/herself reflected all around. A "specularist", like the dandy is, transforms him/herself into a mirror to reflect, or gather in, what comes from outside, i.e. the world and its manifestations. Precisely for this reason I believe that Sartre, in his volume on Baudelaire, misses a crucial point on dandyism, when he states that: "dandyism was an episode in a venture in which Baudelaire was continually coming to grief; he was Narcissus trying to mirror himself in his own waters and catch his reflections" (Sartre 1967,

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<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire's dandyism here echoes Perniola's re-evaluation of the notion of depth, in which he contends that reality can be considered a stratification of surfaces. See First Section, Chapter 2.

135). Not only does the dandy turn him/herself into a reflecting surface, thereby avoiding narcissism, but in addition, even if a dandy may spend hours in front of a mirror, s/he performs a clothing ritual in which ego, subjectivity, and vanity are left behind to open up a neutral dimension. Paradoxically, therefore, the mirror is a means through which the dandy checks that all his/her efforts to disappear are well executed – not, as Sartre suggests, a “water” in which to catch his/her own reflection<sup>13</sup>.

The dandy does not pursue any harmony with nature (like the Zen wise man). Nature in itself, according to Baudelaire, has nothing to make it worth contemplating. It is only the individual who finds “correspondences” between the outer world, the senses, and the imagination. Baudelaire writes: “Nature teaches us nothing, or practically nothing. I admit that she *compels* man to sleep, to eat, to drink, and to arm himself as well as he may against the inclemencies of the weather: but it is she too who incites man to murder his brother, to eat him, to lock him up and to torture him [...] Crime [...] is natural by origin. Virtue, on the other hand, is artificial, supernatural” (Baudelaire 1964, 31-2). Here Baudelaire investigates two different registers, an ethical and an aesthetic one. At an ethical level, he contrasts nature and artifice. He claims that where nature is the voice of personal interest, artifice corresponds to human reason. Self-interest, for Baudelaire, can easily lead to criminal outcomes, because it is driven by survival instincts which he considers blind to their consequences for others. On the other hand, reason, as a faculty belonging solely to human beings, can help individuals to cultivate alternative and ethical lifestyles.

Baudelaire also makes this argument within the aesthetic field: “the majority of errors in the fields of aesthetics spring from the eighteenth century’s false premiss in the field of ethics” (31). In this passage Baudelaire criticises the eighteenth-century Rousseauian aesthetic claim that nature is the archetype of goodness and beauty. Baudelaire’s view is at odds with this: nature does not make any object beautiful, and beauty is not produced by imitating nature. As Giovanni Macchia noted, Baudelaire’s attacks on nature should also be seen within his anti-romantic standpoint:

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<sup>13</sup> See also First Section, Chapter 4, where Brummell’s peculiar aesthetic of disappearance was developed.

“the romantic poet [...] substituted the actor with the man; what marked the so-called triumph of sincerity and freedom was equal to substituting nature to art, identifying art with life” (1975, 128). Baudelaire did not see nature as the source of the absolute (as several Romantic representatives argued), nor as the unspoiled and genuine root of human freedom and spontaneity<sup>14</sup>. For him, nature’s main objective is to guide individuals in their struggle for the survival and continuation of life, and this means pushing aside human creativity and poetical operations.

Baudelaire’s claims are expressed through fragments, projects, and incomplete works, and are often stated in a provocative way. Interestingly, several insights emerging from his works are still under discussion within recent studies on aesthetics and evolution. For example, Stephen Davies (2012), who applies theories of evolution to art in order to discuss its origins and functions, asserts that nature cannot be considered beautiful in itself and that non-human animals do not produce art (2012, 27). For instance, during the mating season, when a peacock opens its tail and shows the brilliance of its feathers – when a bee dances and a nightingale sings – all these activities should not be confused with beauty or aesthetic behavior. In fact, what looks beautiful to us is much more likely to appear to the animals as *good*, in terms of fitness and ability to survive in a world where the strongest eats the weakest. Moreover, the songs and the performances of non-human animals, in spite of appearing and sounding appreciable, are extremely repetitive, monotonous and stereotypical. Thus, Davies argues, these performances cannot fall under the concept of art, as they lack the complexity of aesthetic creations produced by human beings (2012, 97).

Baudelaire did not use a scientific lexicon in order to express his perspectives; he maintained a provocative and challenging register that often disturbs the reader with uncanny and dark images and representations. Nonetheless he separates art and nature and includes the first within human productions and behaviours. Baudelaire’s critique of a lifestyle oriented towards nature’s goals (self-interest and survival) appears clearly also in his *In Praise of Cosmetics*: “face-painting should not be used with the vulgar,

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account on the relationship between Baudelaire and Romanticism, see Part One of Ward Jouve’s *Baudelaire. A Fire to Conquer Darkness* (1980, 11-144).

unavowable object of imitating fair Nature and of entering in competition with youth” (1964, 35); “maquillage [...] is successfully designed to rid the complexion of those blemishes that Nature has outrageously strewn there, and thus to create an abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin, a unity, which [...] immediately approximates the human being to the statue” (33). Firstly, Baudelaire suggests that make-up should not be employed hoping to get one's own beauty back, competing, so to speak, with the passing of time, i.e. with the *natural* course of events. The objective of using make-up, for Baudelaire, is not to re-establish a previous natural state of things. On the contrary, its purpose is to delete the traces of nature from the body's surface. Baudelaire despises a natural skin and praises an artificial one, almost suspended from time, statue-like, close to a paradoxical inanimate and inorganic life.

Perniola's conception of “thing” can be related to this claim. As suggested in the first chapter of this section, the practice of becoming-thing belongs to several traditions of thought and human experience. The Italian philosopher highlighted the inorganic dimension of human phenomena ranging from Palaeolithic engravings to Egyptian society, from Rilke's poetry to Freud's *Unheimliche*, right up to sexuality in the contemporary world. Baudelaire's dandyism can be included within this perspective. On the one hand, by defending the use of make-up and cosmetics, Baudelaire praises an inorganic-oriented individual, where vital and natural elements such as blood and skin imperfections are covered and deleted. On the other hand, his dandy type is described – as was pointed out earlier – as a “mirror”, that is, close to a material reflecting surface, a thing, that welcomes what comes from outside (this phenomenon is defined by Perniola as “externalisation”); and as a “kaleidoscope” which finds the endless combinations emerging from the urban life aesthetically marvellous. The attitude of “extracting” beauty from one's own modernity is linked not only to the acceptance of time and presence (*amor fati*) but also to the aesthetic concept of *to prepon*, for which beauty depends on circumstances<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 1 of this Section.

The process of turning oneself into a thing implies getting closer to a neutral dimension, where subjectivity disappears and the natural drives and impulses are put aside. As Coblence noted, “the experience is akin to that of hashish: in the crowd, like under the effect of drugs, personality disappears, objectivity develops itself atypically and allows one to contemplate exterior objects forgetting one’s own existence; the subject mixes itself with the contemplated things. The artist as well slips among objects and individuals” (Coblence 1988, 287). This statement needs to be further clarified by developing the relation between dandyism and “detachment”, the third and last essential characteristic of dandyism pointed out by Perniola. The next sub-chapter will elucidate this connection.

### *Between Stoics and Samurai*

Developing Perniola’s conceptualisation of beauty, the previous chapter focused especially on Gracian’s strategic beauty and on the Stoic’s notion of *to prepon*. By discussing Baudelaire, the present chapter has shown in what terms beauty is grounded upon “modernity” (in the sense of events, experiences, and representations of contemporaneity). The French poet finds particular beauty in challenges and conflicts; in being against, for instance, the typical bourgeois mindset with its vulgar everyday life. Here lies a connection with baroque tradition, which conceives beauty as something acute, pungent, and penetrating, like a sword<sup>16</sup>.

Some specific aspects of the proximity between Baudelaire’s dandyism and Perniola’s interpretation of Stoic-Baroque thought will now be explored.

Baudelaire refers to stoicism and the Jesuit-baroque world in several passages. For example: “dandyism borders upon the spiritual and the stoical” (1964, 28); “The strictest rigorous monastic rule [...] which also

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<sup>16</sup> For a definition of Baroque conception of beauty, see Chapter 2 of this Section.

imposes upon its humble and ambitious disciples [...] the terrible formula: *Perinde ac cadaver!*” (28). In what terms does the French poet link dandyism and stoicism? Scholars often disagree on Baudelaire’s stoicism. Natta argues that, although Baudelaire states that dandyism “borders upon” stoicism, and despite the fact that even Barbey D’Aurevilly in several passages dwells on this affinity<sup>17</sup>, “the dandies do resemble only from a distance their ancient models” (2011, 111). Specifically, Natta argues that while the classic Stoic sage accepts civil society and nature as necessary outcomes of the supreme *Logos*, the dandy is a key figure of opposition, both against modern urban cities and nature. She continues: “Stoic resignation is not a dandy virtue. The dandy does not resign, he is against, surely with detachment, isolating himself, but he is against. All his behaviour is a protest against society and nature which the Stoics identify with reason” (113).

This criticism, I claim, does not fully grasp the dandies’ re-evaluation of Stoicism. In fact, the dandies’ purpose is not to *reproduce* ancient Stoic doctrine but to develop a neo-stoicism<sup>18</sup>. To claim that Baudelaire’s dandyism is an attempt to imitate the ancient set of philosophical assertions and propositions elaborated by the Stoics is to fail to understand his aesthetic standpoint (developed in the first sub-chapter). As Aurie Zeran pointed out in her thesis *The Evolution of Indifference*, dandy’s neo-Stoicism is based on the concepts of *appropriation* and *parody*: “Appropriation is the practice of reworking or imitating a style from another work to incite re-evaluation or critical challenge. Parody is the use of that imitation to produce satire by applying it to an unlikely subject” (2014, 6). If Baudelaire’s purpose was only to reproduce Stoic philosophy, then Natta would have been right in pointing out that, for instance, nature is praised by stoicism and despised by the dandies. Instead, as Zeran argues, the dandy’s goal is to “rework”, “challenge critically”, “produce satire” by appropriating and parodying stoicism within modernity.

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<sup>17</sup> In his *Of Dandyism and of George Brummell*, Barbey writes: “These [the dandies] Stoics of the *boudoir*” (Barbey 1897, 102). Moreover, as suggested in the first section of this thesis, Barbey frequently associates dandyism with an ancient attitude of calm and self-discipline – typical of Stoic *habitus* – within modern societies’ agitation.

<sup>18</sup> Perniola also stated that his work can be understood as a neo-stoicism (2014, 9).

How then is this appropriation further developed by the dandies, and Baudelaire in particular? On what aspects of stoicism does the French poet concentrate? The main characteristic shared by the dandy and the Stoic is “coldness of spirit” or “detachment”. Baudelaire himself frequently refers to this characteristic of the dandy in *The Painter of Modern Life* but also in *Flares* and in *My Heart Laid Bare*. For instance: “the dandy aspires to insensitivity” (1964, 9); dandyism is “the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never being astonished. A dandy may be *blasé*, he may even suffer; but in this case, he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox’s tooth” (28); “his lightness of step, his social aplomb, the simplicity in his air of authority, his way of wearing a coat or riding a horse, his bodily attitudes which are always relaxed but betray an inner energy” (29); “The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy’s beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses not to burst into flame” (29).

Two main considerations arise from these quotations. Firstly, Baudelaire links the dandy attitude primarily with “insensitivity”. This characteristic emerges from the dandy’s lifestyle, based on simplicity, distinction, cold air, being able to surprise without being surprised and so on. As suggested earlier in this chapter, the dandy praisers an artificial, neutral, almost suspended life where there is no place for natural burst of passions and desires. This does not imply that the dandy has no emotions. Rather, s/he has a “latent fire”, namely s/he controls feelings and sensations within a regime of self-discipline. Secondly, Baudelaire uses metaphors taken from the military world and mindset, from the Spartan who relentlessly resists adversity (symbolised by the fox’s bite), to the clothing ritual that both the dandy and the soldier share daily. Like the dandy, the soldier – to which Baudelaire devotes the chapter preceding the one on dandyism – puts his efforts every day into a clothing ritual, paying meticulous attention to the aesthetic folds of the garment while maintaining a simplicity imposed by his profession. The dandy, too, cultivates the idea

of beauty, training every day to be impeccable in clothes<sup>19</sup>; s/he practices a gymnastics of dressing and aesthetically-oriented manners.

At the same time “Accustomed to surprises, the soldier is unlikely to be astonished. The particular sign of beauty will therefore be, in this case, a martial disregard, a strange mixture of coldness and audacity; here beauty springs from the necessity of being ready to die in every moment” (1996, 1300). Ivano Comi’s *Breve riflessione sul dandy e sul samurai* (*Short Reflection on the Dandy and on the Samurai*) is useful to clarify Baudelaire’s position on the figure of the warrior. Specifically, in his essay Comi outlines the common grounds between the phenomenon of dandyism and the figure of the Japanese warrior *par excellence*: the samurai. For instance, Comi focuses on the samurai’s defence of make-up, which is echoed in Baudelaire’s essay explored earlier in this chapter. According to Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s *Hagakure* (the book of the samurai), a warrior should be “handsome” during battles and combats, because, having the chance of dying at any moment, he must not be found “unprepared” by death, as if it were an ordinary day. Make-up is meant to cover also the vital and natural expressions of involvement in the battle: a perfect warrior does not show his fury, rage, or anger. In this sense cosmetics, both for the dandy and the samurai, transform one’s face into something more neutral, inorganic, close to the impersonal surface of a handsome puppet.

Comi also emphasises a connection between dandyism and the precepts of *bushido* (the warrior ethic), by stressing this passage of the *Hagakure*: “Non può essere sempre primavera, o estate, e ugualmente non può essere sempre giorno; quindi, se anche desiderassimo riportare il mondo allo spirito del secolo trascorso, ciò non sarebbe possibile. È importante trarre il meglio da ogni generazione” (Tsunetomo quoted in Comi 2014, 44). A feeling of melancholy may accompany the transience of beautiful seasons, days, the passing of time, and broadly speaking the precariousness of earthly things. Nonetheless, a major precept for the warrior is to accept this unchangeable law and practice every day to become more skilled, both practically and spiritually. This welcoming attitude links not only Stoic

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<sup>19</sup> See also Brummell’s daily clothing ritual in First Section, Chapter 4.

principles and the warrior's code, but also – as should be clearer now – the military world and dandyism.

The crucial difference is that, where the samurai seeks to protect, for instance, his homeland, the dandy gathers in the external world and accepts it from an aesthetic point of view. The dandy's search for beauty is not oriented towards any function, usefulness, or ultimate goal. Beyond appropriation lies parody. Where the ancient Stoics devoted their lives to the universal Logos, where the soldiers and samurai protected their country, family, and lord, the dandies are only concerned with the cultivation of their elegant lifestyle, devoting their efforts in dressing simply and impeccably, in order to stroll in the boulevards, to conversate among artists and poets in the urban metropolis or to gamble and often mock people with witty remarks. It is no accident then that the title of the work that Baudelaire had in mind was *Le dandysme ou la grandeur sans convictions* (*Dandyism, or the Greatness Without Convictions*). Perniola links this sensibility to Baroque literature. He does not use the notion of parody specifically, but, referring to Baudelaire's art of linking disparate experiences and attitudes together (such as seriousness and frivolity, vanity and death, clothing and eroticism) he states that “è interessante [in Baudelaire's dandyism] solo ciò che accomuna i contrari e li mantiene nella loro opposizione” (2011, 178).

The dandy devotes his/her efforts to create and maintain a lifestyle revolving around the notion of greatness. This greatness is grounded upon distinction, simplicity, beauty, and manners, without any utilitarian goal (utility is linked to a set of values which the dandy sees as vulgar and for the masses), but out of love for one's destiny, perpetually in revolt against banality and triviality.

Whether these men are nicknamed exquisites, *incroyables*, beaux, lions or dandies, they all spring from the same womb; they all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt; they are all representatives of what is finest in human pride, of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combating and destroying triviality. (Baudelaire 1964, 28)

## *Conclusion*

This chapter developed Baudelaire's idea of dandyism and its connections with Perniola's thought. Firstly, I investigated Baudelairean aesthetics in order to specify the notion of beauty cultivated by the dandies. Beauty, for Baudelaire, is of two kinds: an eternal and a relative one. The eternal can be seen in the universality of artistic behaviours and practices among humans. The relative one implies the contingent configuration of circumstances which make something beautiful in a given period (and possibly ugly or less aesthetically pleasant in another). At the same time, the dandy is precisely someone who devotes his/her life to the cultivation of beauty through an aesthetically-oriented lifestyle. The dandy does not seek beauty by imitating or reproducing classics or ancient aesthetic ideas and abstract concepts. S/he seeks a *modern* beauty – that is, one emerging from the transitory combinations of elements within his/her present time.

In the second sub-chapter Perniola's remarks on dandyism were discussed to further explore Baudelaire's standpoint. Specifically, Perniola highlights three essential features of the dandy: provocation, exteriorisation, and detachment. The first notion is linked with the dandy's challenge towards his/her society. As Baudelaire also argued in his writings on dandyism, even if beauty should be found in one's own contemporary world, this does not imply blindly accepting everything that is at hand or available. Primarily, the dandy is against the bourgeois mindset, with its cult of commerce, money, specialism, and function. Baudelaire's critique can be recapitulated as a wider opposition against the notion of "utility". Utility, for him, means becoming a function and thus living as a fragment, employing one's own time in duties, trades, and businesses. The dandy, conversely, does nothing, or, to put it in other words, is engaged in activities that appear useless from a function-oriented perspective. Therefore, his/her daily efforts in the clothing ritual, the hours spent strolling down the urban streets and boulevards, and the nights spent gambling or in company of artists and poets, amount to an aesthetic opposition to everyday, conventional life.

The notion of exteriorisation was linked to Perniola's concept of "specularism", explored in the first chapter of this section. The dandy, in his/her search for beauty within modern urban environments, reproduces an essential characteristic of the mirror: being a reflecting surface. Like a mirror, the dandy gathers in what comes from outside (specifically the images and the atmospheres of the city) and accepts it, grounding his/her aesthetic lifestyle in it. For instance, Baudelaire's choice of dressing completely in black can be understood as the manifestation of his poetic ideas about his epoch, which for him was filled with wonder and surprise, while at the same time being decadent and cause for mourning. Perniola's affinity with Baudelaire's thought was also further explored by comparing the concept of the inorganic with that of artificiality. Both the Italian philosopher and the French poet praised the idea of a suspended and abstract life in which nature is set aside. Specifically, Baudelaire devoted several passages to the importance of cosmetics and make-up in order to support artificiality against nature.

Finally, the notion of detachment was investigated by looking at Baudelaire's remarks on stoicism and on the figure of the warrior. The poet did not aim at reproducing Stoic philosophy within modernity. As Zeran argued (2014), he elaborated a neo-stoicism by *appropriating* and *parodying* ancient aspects of this philosophy. Specifically, Baudelaire appropriated the Stoic practice of desubjectivation – that is, of detaching oneself from identity and interiority and living as a cold spirit who can astonish and at the same time never be astonished. The dandy's self-confidence is also close to the warrior's conduct. Both the dandy and the warrior, for Baudelaire, should live in the constant knowledge that death may occur at any stage of one's own life, while, at the same time, being ready to cultivate beauty. The element of parody can be detected in the dandy's attitude of re-working and re-evaluating ancient practices and perspectives (such as the Stoic *ataraxia* and the warrior's abnegation to the cause) without actually orienting them to a function (such as protection of the homeland for soldiers). Unlike the Stoic or the soldier, Baudelaire's dandy aims at making an existential challenge against triviality in order to find beauty in the world around him/her.



**THIRD SECTION**  
**FROM ARTISTIC ALIENATION TO EXPANDED ART**

## Chapter 1

### The Supersession of Art

#### *Introduction*

Within the aesthetic horizon developed by Perniola, this thesis has focused in particular on the concept of beauty and on aesthetically oriented lifestyles. Concepts such as “simulacrum”, “transit”, “ritual without myth”, and “thing” emerged as pivotal in Perniola’s broad theoretical approach. However, Perniola’s view on art has not yet been analysed. The importance of art theory in Perniola’s work is evidenced both by the amount of studies on the subject (which number over thirty articles and several monographs<sup>1</sup>) and by the scholarship on the area, which made Perniola an internationally acclaimed figure in the contemporary art scene.

This section, therefore, will revolve around Perniola’s reflections on art theory, including both the early writings and the most recent ones. My main objective is to depict Perniola’s perspective chronologically, highlighting its developments and transformations. Specifically, this chapter will be devoted to Perniola’s early works (1966-1972), while the next one will focus on the following decades (1980 onwards)<sup>2</sup>. As will become clear, a theoretical shift can be located in the mid-seventies, when the Italian philosopher moved from a *revolutionary* theory, based on the overcoming or supersession of art, to a theory of art considered as “enigma”,

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<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix at the end.

<sup>2</sup> From 1972 to 1980 Perniola mainly focused on philosophical themes, investigating especially the works of Nietzsche (1975, 1978a), Freud (1976, 1978b), Bataille (1977) and less on art theory.

“simulacrum”, “remainder”, “shadow” – all notions the latter that, I would argue, fall under the comprehensive concept of *difference*. The last chapter, finally, will be dedicated to the dandy Oscar Wilde – his lifestyle, work, and especially his conception of art. This discussion will outline the theoretical affinities and divergences between Wilde’s dandyism and Perniola’s interpretation of artistic activity. Specifically, I will investigate on the one hand Wilde’s closeness to Perniola’s philosophy (in particular the notions of “transit”, “thing”, and “strategic beauty”); on the other I will examine the relationship between Perniola’s theory of art – developed in the present and in the following chapter – and the Irish dandy’s essays on the same theme.

### *Art and Revolution*

The objective of this chapter is to explore Perniola’s perspective on art between the years 1966 – when his first article on art was published – and 1972. During this six-year period Perniola elaborates – mainly due to his closeness to protest movements such as the Situationists and Ludd – a political and militant theory of art that later, from the second half of the Seventies, he would revise and rework in its basic assumptions and ideas. The year 1972, with the last issue of the journal *Agaragar*<sup>3</sup>, marks the beginning of a theoretical rearrangement regarding art theory for the Italian philosopher. The following phase, in which Perniola would develop several notions on art which would garner him the attention of a larger international public, will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Perniola’s first interests in art concern, on the one hand, the latest expressions of the twentieth century artistic avant-garde (particularly Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism); on the other, especially with the volume *L’alienazione artistica* (1971), the relationship between art and society in the broader Western tradition. In an article published in 1966 in

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<sup>3</sup> *Agaragar* was a journal mainly devoted to the critique of bourgeois society. Founded by Perniola in 1970, it published five issues until 1972.

the journal *Nuovi Argomenti*, entitled “Il surrealismo oggi”, Perniola echoes a fundamental Dadaist standpoint: namely, that the essential aspect of artistic activity does not lie in the production of an artistic object, but in the revolutionary aim of its project, which consists in the possibility of undermining existing social and political conventions in the pursuit of new experiences of life. For example, discussing Surrealism, Perniola states: “Il surrealismo non deve il suo nome ad un ipotetico rapporto con i regni del diabolico o del divino ma all’incessante contestazione della realtà” (1966b, 69). In other words, although Surrealism is known as the art of the “marvellous”, understood as an expression of the unconscious desires of the human being, what must be emphasised and carried forward by this movement – according to Perniola – is not a mere knowledge of the mechanisms underlying the human psyche. On the contrary, its objective should be to develop new lifestyles that can work as alternatives to the dominant ones. Therefore, Perniola praises only a type of Surrealism intended as a constant challenge to reality and which can introduce an effective change in our collective life.

In the same article, Perniola harshly criticises the late Sixties’ Surrealism. Attending the Cerisy-la-Salle Surrealist colloquium (July 1966), Perniola, alongside two other politically and artistically engaged friends, wrote and disseminated a short manifesto against the state of the Surrealist art. Surrealism, Perniola argued, from Cerisy-la-Salle onward became the study of philosophers, sociologists, theorists and generally speaking professors and members of academies and galleries. In so doing it mutated from a life-changing oriented movement into a historical, philosophical, and aesthetical object of study. In other words, the manifesto’s authors reproached Surrealism for being “dead” from a revolutionary point of view, as it was gradually integrating itself with popular culture, institutions, and broadly speaking the diktats of the *status quo*. Written at the age of twenty-five, “Il surrealismo oggi” gathers together several key assertions on art theory that Perniola would develop in the following six years, which I will now clarify and explore in detail.

The article dwells on the relationship between art and revolution, which would be a constant in Perniola’s reflections of this period. What is

the purpose of art in contemporary society? What kind of bond exists between the counterculture of the Sixties and the artistic avant-garde? According to Perniola, the relationship between art and revolution should be addressed seriously and approached radically. Specifically, in an article written shortly after “Il surrealismo oggi”, entitled “Arte e rivoluzione” (1966), he depicts three ways in which this relationship has been articulated within Western tradition, and attempts to elaborate a fourth one.

Firstly, Perniola focuses on the so called “respective autonomy” (*autonomia rispettiva*) of both art and revolution. Autonomous art is furthered by those thinkers who have tried to identify the principles of sensitive and affective knowledge and – for Perniola – ended up “dissecting” art itself for the sake of specialized treatises, valuable from a theoretical standpoint but far from a relationship with the concrete reality of the artistic activity. The supporter of art’s autonomy, in other words, places art alongside with science, politics, ethics, religion, and, in doing so, they isolate it into a mere field of specialist study. Perniola thus argues that the autonomy of art implies its separation from other contexts, with the risk of isolating artistic activity into a powerless abstraction where concepts and distinctions take over authentic experiences and creative transformation of life (the ultimate goals – as I will argue – of artistic activity for Perniola). This statement echoes several claims explored in the previous chapters when, for example, I looked at Perniola’s critique of the Enlightenment aesthetic<sup>4</sup>. Perniola’s critique of the idea of art’s autonomy can be summed up in this main claim: the attempt to provide artistic principles leads to an isolation of artistic creativity. Art’s autonomy does not furnish new possibilities for aesthetic experience, but is devoted to establishing a specific type of knowledge – aesthetic knowledge – in its distinction from others. Thus, on closer inspection, Perniola criticizes the very category of philosophical aesthetics, which he dismisses as a “disciplina interamente separata dal vivere” (1966, 69). In other words, aesthetics as a *per se* compartment, with its proper rules and categories, furthers the idea of a knowledge separated from everyday life and reality.

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<sup>4</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 2.

On the other hand, the idea of a “revolution’s autonomy” is linked by Perniola to the discipline of “politics”, which he regards in a Machiavellian light, as a strategic notion distinct from morality that deals with how to obtain power and how to maintain it. Given this initial assumption, according to Perniola, any political revolution would only reverse the *status quo* and replace it with different *façade* systems which share essential features (namely a hierarchy with a few actors in power and the majority of the people as powerless spectators). In other words, hierarchies change but the concept of hierarchy remains, which will therefore produce further exploitation and new forms of political submission. The main issue, for Perniola, lies in fact not so much in tactics to gain and maintain power – what Perniola refers to as “political revolution” – but in laying the groundwork for a “total revolution” (a concept I will shortly clarify).

Alongside the “respective autonomy” of art and revolution, Perniola criticizes two other possible combinations of this relationship: “art in the service of the revolution” (*arte al servizio della rivoluzione*) and “revolution in the service of art” (*rivoluzione al servizio dell’arte*). The first corresponds to a theory of political commitment for which the artist is seen as a helper or collaborator of the revolution. Commonly known as an *artiste engagé* and closely associated to the bomber or the partisan, within this perspective “l’arte è uno strumento come la dinamite o il mitra” (1966, 71). In so doing, the artists are subordinated to party decisions. For instance, a politician might decide whether art should be “realistic”, “romantic”, or “abstract” for the purposes of a certain struggle. On the one hand, therefore, the artist is not free and depends on a pre-given ideology; on the other, however, the logic of the political revolution remains: the goal is to overthrow the government and succeed it with other politicians while maintaining the same hierarchical order that has always existed in societies: “il caso normale della successione di forme di governo, tutte basate sulla passività e la subordinazione generali, non può in alcun modo essere chiamato rivoluzionario” (Perniola 1966, 71). The third perspective developed by Perniola is then revolution in the service of art. Ironically, Perniola compares this attitude to those who participate in revolutionary contexts “per ottenere idee o esperire emozione da usare nei loro lavori, allo stesso

modo in cui odorano le rose per scriverci un sonetto sopra” (71). The artist, Perniola claims, tries to eternalize his/her name through a work (be it a poem, a painting or a sculpture) that goes beyond his/her life. In doing so, however – Perniola underlines – s/he loses contact, so to speak, with the only existence s/he has and, at the same time undermines any revolution by transforming it into a decorative poetical pretext.

The crucial weakness highlighted by Perniola over the arguments briefly developed so far consists in the fact that they all further an incorrect conception of both art and revolution. Art emerges on the one hand in its “aesthetic” isolation and, on the other, as an activity oriented to the production of artistic objects. The political revolution is instead understood as a temporary shift which occurs when a new regime overthrows the old one, representing merely a turbulent interlude between two hierarchical orders. Contrary to these conceptions Perniola elaborated his perspective focusing on the *identity* between art and revolution:

L'identità assoluta tra arte e rivoluzione, tra arte e vita, implica soprattutto l'affermazione che ciò che è essenziale non sia l'opera, ma il vivere, il processo creativo, l'attività artistica [...] non c'è una differenza sostanziale tra il credente che si sacrifica per l'aldilà, il borghese che risparmia per accrescere il capitale e l'artista che crea opere per la posterità: tutti rinunciano a vivere e meno vivono più merito, più soldi, più opere accumulano. (1966, 72)

From this brief passage Perniola's perspective begins to take shape. *Producing* an artwork, for Perniola, means pursuing a theological attitude that – as suggested – corresponds to challenging one's own mortality with the desire to become eternal through something that lasts beyond one's own existence. In other words, works of art are the artists' answer to the fear of death and the unceasing transience of life. An artwork is seen as the possibility of turning what is temporary (a feeling, a person, a landscape, and so on) into a product not affected by the passing of time. In so doing, there are no substantial differences between the artistic, the religious, and

the mercantile mindsets. In fact, as Perniola points out, instead of allowing one to live new existential possibilities and experiences, they all *alienate* the individual and his/her desires into objects, capital, or into an ideal world. On a closer inspection, therefore, when Perniola praises an identity between art and revolution he is underlining the possibility of living in an authentic way which enables an effective realisation of one's own "desire" without falling into any potential reification.

I would argue, however, that this essay has an argumentative weakness: Perniola does not fully develop several assumptions and conclusions. For example, claiming that in the modern era the relationship between art and revolution emerged in three ways means merging attitudes, figures, and movements into the same cauldron without distinguishing them properly. Perniola identifies general tendencies within the western artistic and revolutionary tradition, and yet he does not dwell on any alternative form of theorizing/experiencing? art and revolution. On the contrary, in his later works – as the previous chapters of this thesis show – Perniola investigates precisely aesthetic experiences alternative to the dominant thought. For example, the common thread uniting Stoicism, Roman ritualism, literary baroque, and contemporary society illustrates the ways in which Perniola reworked and re-thought Western philosophical and political tradition after his early works.

In addition, in "Arte e rivoluzione" Perniola borrows a stylistic militancy which does not meaningfully explain, for instance, what the "authentic life", "desire", and "realisation of happiness through art" consist of. The Italian philosopher simply gives his support to the radical criticism carried forward by student movements of the time and by the Situationist International, arguing that these countercultural manifestations were against the capitalist society of the time, grounded upon the notions of commodity, utility, authoritarianism, bureaucracy, "fake" welfare etc. To best understand Perniola's perspective, therefore, the ideas evoked in "Il surrealismo oggi" and "Arte e rivoluzione" (and which recur in his other writings published before 1972) should be placed within the broader countercultural atmosphere of the time.

### *Separation and Situation*

Perniola's writing style in his texts on art theory between 1966 and 1972, as suggested, is highly influenced by that era's broader context of revolt and contestation. These texts unfold a conceptual "arsenal" from which Perniola's youthful political militancy emerges. One of the major tasks for the contemporary reader consists in trying to reconnect almost-violent assertions, strong statements and evocative ideas to their conceptual matrix. For example, Perniola writes: "L'arte non muore, deve essere uccisa affinché la creatività si realizzi nella rivoluzione" (1969, 12); "L'arte è una manifestazione dimezzata della creatività" (12); "L'arte è il ghetto dell'attività" (1971, 146), "il processo di liberazione mira ad una condizione di perenne e totale reinvenzione di situazioni autonomamente significative" (193). Now, to better understand these statements, this sub-chapter will be dedicated to the Situationist theory which influenced Perniola's conception of art in those years.

One of the main notions on which Perniola's theory of art is built is that of "separation" (1966, 1969b, 1969, 1971). Guy Debord, the founder and main representative of the Situationists, wrote: "Separation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle" (Debord 2014, 8). To put it briefly, Debord sees the capitalist Western world as a realm of divisions and specialism furthered by the bourgeois mindset. For example, everyday life under capitalism systems can be polarized between working hours on the one hand and leisure or recreational moments on the other. As a result, Debord argues that subjects cannot find any totality or unity in their life: the working environment pushes people to work to get a salary, while at the same time the mass media industry colonises free time in order to empower consumerism. This is the reason why elements usually associated with the well-being and economic boom of the 1960s are strongly criticised by the Situationists. If the increasing consumer demands and the greater purchasing power of individuals and families – according to the

Situationists – can guarantee an individuals’ survival, it does not help them live “authentically”: “we do not want a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation is bought by accepting the risk of dying of boredom” (Vaneigem 2001, 18). This motto written by Vaneigem, another important figure of the Situationist movement, draws a distinction between authentic desires and alienated ones. According to the Situationists, an alienated desire consists largely in a consumption-driven attitude, spread across the population through a mediatic colonisation of the imaginaries. Perniola as well, in “Arte, immaginazione e recupero culturale” (1969), distinguishes between alienated desires and authentic ones. Specifically, he claims that, within capitalist societies, at stake is not the fulfilment or the ability / inability to realise desires, but the “miseria intrinseca dei desideri stessi che [il capitalismo] fa sorgere” (1969, 12). That is to say, the problem is not whether capitalism can guarantee desires’ satisfaction: it is rather the nature of desire itself which is distorted under such economic system (12). Human freedom is reduced to the freedom of choosing which car to own, which apartment to buy, which TV channel to watch and so on. Situationists argues that this is not freedom but pseudo-freedom: a car facilitates travelling but at the same time isolates the individual, who perceives the urban and non-urban environment simply as a matter of going from point A to point B; city apartments might have modern comforts but, if they are designed merely from a functionalistic point of view, they convey an impoverished and simplified idea of architectural spaces, wherein a house matters only insofar as it fulfils its functions of protection from the elements, eating, and sleeping; finally, television, as well as mass media in general, implies the idea of a general *passivity*, with spectators contemplating a screen on which the lives of other people are represented. The “spectacle”, from which the very title of Debord’s 1967 cult book *The Society of the Spectacle* derives, consists in the “monologue of images” which nonetheless shapes the daily life of “separated” individuals. The spectacle system works more effectively precisely over “atomised masses” (Debord 2009). In other words, where the individuals’ lives are disjointed in many roles, oriented to survival, economy, and functionalistic utility – that is to say, where the individual lives daily in a state of fragmentation and

atomisation – the spectacle can assert itself as a system able to provide the idea of a unified existence (based on the dominion of commodities, consumption, where individuals struggle to reach the “American dream”, a given status symbol, and so on). But Debord does not consider this unity genuine. For instance, he claims that achieving status through a commodity-driven lifestyle means fulfilling only inauthentic and alienated desires (18-23). According to his view, individuals in such a society are allowed to fulfil only standardised needs and desires which are dictated by cultural industries and communicative propaganda. In so doing, they are not able to fulfil their own desires, but only to aspire to fulfil an “external” one; that is to say, they alienate their uniqueness and exchange it for something that has never belonged to them. Therefore, although these individuals might share common imaginaries, lifestyles and attitudes, there exists no real community but just a pseudo-unity of – as suggested earlier – “atomised masses”. This is why, for Debord, within the society of the spectacle, “totality” is not a rediscovered unity of existence, but only the monopoly of “spectacular” power. The spectacle is therefore not only the passivity of the individual in front of the television (or, today, the mobile phone or computer), who, so to speak, looks at other people’s lives and “forgets” about having one while sitting on the sofa. The spectacle is in fact, for the Situationists, a whole apparatus of structures and institutions that fragment individual life into parcelled roles and boycott imagination, desire, and creativity for consumerist, pseudo-active, and pseudo-free experiences and attitudes.

Perniola dedicated an entire issue of his journal *Agaragar* to the history of the Situationist movement<sup>5</sup>. The two notions of “separation” and “spectacle” can be traced in this passage:

La tendenza totalitaria del capitalismo moderno che sussume non soltanto il lavoro, ma anche ogni aspetto della vita, al valore di scambio, all’incremento del capitale, allo spettacolo, mediante un processo di quantificazione e di astrazione che si svolge ormai su scala planetaria, si manifesta paradossalmente nella progressiva separazione, sbriciolamento e

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<sup>5</sup> This monograph, translated into many languages, was then re-published in 1998 by Castelvechi and in 2013 by Mimesis.

isolamento delle singole attività, ridotte a specializzazioni. Esse sono insieme mezzo e fine: mezzo, perché consentono appunto il dominio capillare sui singoli ambiti della vita sociale; fine, perché, rotto ogni legame con la visione globale della vita, permette la manipolazione senza limite dei desideri e delle aspirazioni della gente. (2013, 76)

Separation consists thus in the proper condition of individuals within a spectacular system: isolated and fragmented, they fail to reassemble the pieces into which their existences are torn. In the above passage Perniola states in fact that the society of the spectacle is the triumph of the category of fragment against totality. Totality implies having, firstly, a *direct* relationship with the experiences of life, and secondly, *power* over one's own actions in a collective and community horizon (Jappe 1999, 39-44). In fact, as Anselm Jappe points out, the true social nature of man – for Debord – is community (1999, 39). In other words, according to Debord, a real dialogue, an authentic communication, and a genuine community can exist, but these are unceasingly corroded by the supremacy of the capitalist discourse within the passivity of the spectacle. According to the Situationists, thus, the possibility of a true dialogue among people is undermined and substituted with a pseudo/spectacular communication. As Jappe argues:

In the past, these preconditions [of a genuine community] have sometimes been partially met: the ancient Greek polis and the Italian republics of the Middle Ages constitute the most highly developed examples, although only certain portions of the population were affected. But villages, neighbourhoods, guilds – even local taverns – can also nourish forms of direct communication whereby each individual retains control over at least part of his own activity. Where the spectacle holds sway, by contrast, a *fragment* of the social totality, having detached itself from collective discussion and collective decision making, issues orders via *unilateral communication*. This occurs whenever subjects no longer gain access to the world through personal experience but instead by means of images, which are infinitely more manipulable and which in themselves imply passive consent. The Situationists were convinced that direct communication

between subjects was sufficient in itself to banish social hierarchies and autonomous representations. (1999, 39-40)

A crucial issue emerging from this passage is the polarisation between *activity* and *passivity*. Where the spectacle and its communication model reign, every genuine dialogue – according to Jappe’s interpretation of Debord’s theory – is replaced by a pseudo-contact that reproduces the dominant images, with their institutions and hierarchies, and thus deprives the individuals of the possibility of acting autonomously according to their own desires. Direct and “personal” experience, Jappe argues, is no longer accessible insofar as every act is mediated by the images of the spectacle. This in turn implies that individuals do not have an effective power on their lives. On the contrary – unless they radically critique the spectacular society searching for alternative lifestyles – if they reproduce and follow the apparatus of images, they in turn only reproduce and justify the entire system of the spectacle.

So far, I have developed the Situationists notions of “spectacle” and “separation”. This excursus will help in better understanding Perniola’s theory of art. Nonetheless, a crucial notion still has to be developed, that of “situation”. The concept of situation is critical within Debord’s reflections. It is no accident that it gives the name to the movement he founded in 1957, the Situationists.

The revolutionary answer to the society of the spectacle, according to Debord, consists in the creation of “situations”. As suggested, spectacular society allows the subjects to enjoy a pseudo-freedom which consists mainly in buying commodities and, at the same time, a pseudo-communication where relationships and dialogues are shaped through the medium of images. In this sense, individuals follow a standardised way of living based on capitalist-driven attitudes which on the one hand provide a homogenizing and impoverished idea of what a human life can be and, on the other, in so doing approve and maintain the *status quo*. Against the repetition of pre-existing lifestyles, loyal to the capitalist apparatus, Debord bases his revolutionary project precisely on the creation of new types of

situations, which criticise the existing order and open up the doors to a re-appropriation of everyday life.

The Situationists elaborated practices for this re-appropriation from several points of view (urban, architectural, artistic, political and so on). For example, the so called “drift” (*dérive*), considered as a “rapid passage technique through various environments” (Debord 1958, 19), consists in experiencing the urban world in an alternative way with respect to the dominant functionalism. Ordinarily, one moves around in a city to go from point A to point B, that is, approaching the urban space only in a function-oriented manner. The Situationists rethink the very relationship between individuals and their urban environment through *drifts*, a urban practice which has to do with neither strolling nor walking. A drift consists in the creation of a qualitatively alternative situation – different from the exclusively functionalist approach, which conveys a merely quantitative idea of space and considers the urban setting only as an obstacle to be traversed. Within a drift there are no set goals or timetables, there is no fixed destination known in advance; on the contrary, much is played by chance and random encounters. Jappe refers to Situationist drifts as the “creation of a passion-filled atmosphere [...] the creation of ambiances that did not merely allow feelings to find expression but actually provoked new feelings” (1999, 59). This practice is part of a broad field of study which is defined as “psychogeography”, or the study of the “effetti precisi che l’ambiente geografico, consciamente ordinato o meno, esercita direttamente sul comportamento affettivo degli individui” (Perniola 2005, 16). A drift thus implies a theoretical study of the emotional aspects that it produces on a psychological level. The drift is an example of a situation, that is, of the deliberate construction of a creative experience against (but within) the society of the spectacle.

Another practice that attempts to instantiate a qualitatively different situation from the *status quo* is the so-called *détournement*. This term can be translated as “rerouting”, “hijacking”, “displacement”, and consists in the attribution of a new value to pre-existing elements. For example, images belonging to the capitalist world, as advertising, comics and posters are no longer used for the purpose for which they were produced: their original

context is transformed into a revolutionary perspective. To give an example, the image of a smiling couple next to a refrigerator, which, according to the advertising logic of the market conveys an idea of happiness linked to consumption, is completely subverted by the Situationists<sup>6</sup>. Instead of a bubble where the couple express its satisfaction with the purchase, the Situationists inserted statements such as: “my thoughts have been replaced by moving images” or, “I didn’t go to work today; I don’t think I’ll go tomorrow. Let’s take control of our lives and live for pleasure not pain”. In short, the Situationists sought to reorganize the meaning of a certain object by transforming its context and purposes. In this sense, the *détournement* is a critical weapon against the spectacle. According to Perniola, a *détournement* has two main aspects: “la perdita di importanza del significato originario di ogni elemento autonomo e l’organizzazione di un altro gruppo significante, che dà a ogni elemento un nuovo fine” (2005, 22-3). The *détournement*, as Jappe notes (1999, 61), is a practice that allows us to understand an essential characteristic of the concept of society according to the Situationists. In fact, the construction of situations – such as those brought by drifts, *détournement* and so on – does not imply any utopianism, in the sense of a search for the revolutionary moment in a future that is yet to come. On the contrary, the premises for the revolution are all present, they are already *ready-made* – to borrow a notion typical of Dadaist avant-garde – that is to say, it is a matter of recombining the present<sup>7</sup> to “reassemble” it in order to open up new possible experiences and ways of existence. The situation, therefore, implies a choice in favour of the present and its not-yet-uncovered possibilities, which await practices and exemplary actions to be elaborated and developed.

According to Perniola three interpretations of the concept of situation can be given (2005, 19-21): a psychological one, a technical-urbanistic one and an existential one. The first is linked to the issue of desire

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of *détournement*, elaborated by the Situationists but also developed and praised by Perniola, will be investigated alongside Wilde’s dandyism. In fact, the Irish dandy, as Regenia Ganier claims (1987), by criticising the institutions and the values of late Victorian societies through a witty, subtle and “displacing” prose anticipated the Situationist practice of the *détournement*.

<sup>7</sup> This element of fullness of the present will never be dismissed by Perniola. See the concept of transit and the Baroque influence on Perniola’s thought (respectively First Section, Chapter 2, and Second Section, Chapter 2).

and its alienation. In the society of the spectacle, as suggested previously, only alienated desires are created and promoted, based on commodity consumption. A situation is meant to provide the space for a free expression and an authentic satisfaction of individual desires. The second interpretation consists in the elaboration of a “unitary urbanism” which, similarly to the re-appropriation of the urban environment through the practice of drifts, consists in a critique to the functionalist architecture of urban spaces. The third interpretation insists on a radical renewal of life, i.e. the realisation of an existential project based on the dimension of the “authentic”. It does not consist, Perniola writes, in producing a “unique moment or instant”, but a “trasformazione totale delle condizioni di esistenza connesse con la fine dell’economia” (2005, 21). According to Perniola, thus, to create new situations implies on the one hand producing a radical critique of the capitalist Western world and, on the other hand, showing that an alternative way of living, qualitatively oriented to the realisation of subjects’ authentic desires, is still possible.

The situation, as a phenomenon against any reification, is also against certain aspects of artistic activity. According to Debord, artists, in their effort to produce an artwork, reify experiences by trying to transform them into a fixed and immobile object, reducing to the status of a thing “l’esistenza soggettiva dell’individuo” (Perniola 2005, 13)<sup>8</sup>. According to the Situationists, art must therefore be overcome, in the Hegelian sense of critique and realisation – that is, negation and achievement of a higher level. For the Situationists – and, as will be clear at the end of the next sub-chapter, for Perniola as well – art should therefore dissolve itself, and in its place a non-alienated and authentic creativity should emerge. This type of creativity is thought of, both by the Situationists and Perniola, as being capable of expressing and realising individuals’ desires through the construction of situations. This issue of the overcoming or supersession of art, which Perniola draws mainly from the Situationist milieu, will be the subject of the next sub-chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> An element of discontinuity between Perniola’s early writings on art and his future works can be located here. His critique of reification, which approximates the artist to a “thing”, possesses in this passage a pejorative meaning. In contrast, as I argued in the First Section of the previous section, the notion of ‘thing’ plays a pivotal role in his later reflections.

### *Against Art, in Praise of Creativity*

The main focus of this sub-chapter is Perniola's book *L'alienazione artistica* (*The Artistic Alienation*). Although this text was published in 1971, it contains two essays published in *Rivista di Estetica* (1969a, 1969b), and one in the journal *Agaragar* (1971a). In addition, several concepts explored in the book can be found in other texts of those years as well (see Perniola 1966, 1966b, 1969). *L'alienazione artistica* thus represents a compendium of theoretical efforts the Italian philosopher made on the relationship between art and society in his early reflections. This sub-chapter will investigate the main claims elaborated in the volume, in order to clarify Perniola's views on art.

A crucial assertion Perniola makes in *L'alienazione artistica* is that art, within Western tradition, has always been an alienated manifestation of creativity (1971, 18-34). A first question arises at this point: what conception of "art" is Perniola proposing here? Perniola does not share an essentialist or *a priori* perspective of art. On the contrary, he considers it as a "historic category" – that is, art as the complex network between society, history, institutions, class struggle on the one hand and artistic-oriented activities on the other. This definition implies taking into account functions, uses, and goals informing artistic production throughout the history of western world. For example, Perniola writes, "Una volta accertato che il disegno rupestre della preistoria aveva un significato magico, la sua comprensione è connessa ad uno studio della situazione magica dell'uomo preistorico" (1971, 10). According to Perniola, therefore, art emerges from and depends on its social and historical expressions. *L'Alienazione artistica* does not provide any set definition of art because any essentialist or metaphysical characterisation would be at odds with its constitutive historical – and thus mobile, relative to a given period – aspect.

At a closer look, Perniola understands art as a manifestation of human creativity. His goal in *L'alienazione artistica* is in fact to dwell on Western history in order to evaluate whether artistic activity promoted a genuine experience of creativity or only realised a poorer or “alienated” manifestation of it. Together with this anti-essentialist basic assumption, this book should be read in the broader context of the protests of the time. In fact – as I will show – its style is profoundly influenced by the notions elaborated by Debord and by the Situationist International, discussed in the previous sub-chapter.

*L'alienazione artistica* is divided into three parts. The first one (1971, 9-78) can be considered a preparatory part which sets out and define several key notions of the text, such as “art as a historical category”, “alienation”, “separation”, “situation”, “revolution of everyday life”. The second part (79-166) is dedicated to the origins of the so called “artistic alienation” – which I will explain shortly – in ancient Greece and its continuation during the Italian Renaissance. Finally, the third part (167-266) explores the “critique and realisation” of art both within modern philosophy (from Hegel to Adorno) and within the artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century. In spite of his youth, Perniola (who wrote the book between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty) elaborates an extremely wide-ranging theory of art, which encompasses thinkers such as Marx, Lukács and Debord, and, at the same time, involves aesthetic, anthropological, economic and sociological issues. It is no coincidence that the complexity of the text is emphasized by Pierre Sansot in the Preface to the French edition, published in 1977: “this work is a melange of youthful enthusiasm and immense culture, of radical criticism and of positive imagination” (Sansot 1977, 7, my translation). It is therefore a text with a multifaceted structure which, nevertheless, possesses a specific common thread: identifying the reasons for which art has carried forward an “alienated” experience of creativity and, at the same time, exploring the possibilities of a genuine and authentic realisation of human creativity. This sub-chapter will clarify Perniola’s perspective and discuss its main claims. In so doing, I will also explain in what terms Perniola’s early works on art cannot be associated or compared with the phenomenon of dandyism. In fact, as it will be

suggested, the main assumption emerging from *L'alienazione artistica* is grounded upon the idea of *revolution*, which implies a *total* transgression of the *status quo*. In contrast, the dandies, as I argued previously<sup>9</sup>, do not wish for a new idea of community and social life but prefer to live within current societies and urban environments, playing with the rules, “daring with tact”, and never breaking the law for a revolutionary purpose.

As suggested, Perniola explores the relationship between art and society in various eras, starting with archaic Greece. Specifically, his initial focus is on the Greek's *genos*, a basic organisational group grounded upon the power of noble lineage. In this type of society only the *basileus*, i.e. the householder, had access to rituals and effective power, while the other members of the family did not participate and could only repeat or witness myths and religious experiences. This hierarchy, Perniola continues, did not belong only to politics but also infested creativity. Specifically, the *epos* (and the following Homeric epic poems) is understood by Perniola (following Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis) as “la prima impresa Illuminista della civiltà occidentale” (Perniola 1971, 88). This is due to two main factors: firstly, the *epos*, by narrating legendary actions, celebrates a culture oriented around the figure and the role of the master, that is, a patriarchal ruling power; secondly, the poems merely “tell” and “represent” the realisation of morally significant actions and myths, creating – for Perniola – a hiatus between passively watching an action which takes place on a stage and actively being able to change one's own life. In so doing Perniola borrows Debord's analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle*, trying to use its premises and methodologies to show the ways in which ancient Greek's epic poems are also embedded within a spectacular-type system of power.

The overwhelming majority of the population, Perniola continues, are only involved in a pseudo-participation which in reality consists in repeating and justifying the mythical history of the actual ruling class, accepting in turn the *status quo*. For these reasons Perniola argues that the poetry, literature, and theatre of ancient Greece allow the artistic subjects

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<sup>9</sup> See First Section, Chapter 4.

(the *aedo* or the actor) to express themselves creatively only on the condition that they convey a pre-established ideological meaning. Poetry, according to Perniola, is therefore counter-revolutionary because it is inseparable from the manifestations of power. It is also a “separate” dimension because the action endowed with “meaning”<sup>10</sup> (*significato*) is only reproduced on the scene and imitated through masks. A meaningful action is thus portrayed not as something that can happen, but only as something that *happened*, which can be observed, and of which one can be a spectator without playing any effectively active role. The creative action is thus actualized within the framework of a story, but in so doing it is segregated on the stage – that is, in a context that Perniola – influenced by Situationist terminology – considers “spectacular”, “separate” (Perniola 1971, 111), which does not constitute a real alternative to the state of things and does not produce any genuine community. The weak point emerging from Perniola’s analysis rests in that, in his early works, he considers that only the identity between art and revolution can bring to an effectively realised creativity and to a genuine community. Everything that is not inherently revolutionary, i.e. everything that does not imply an upheaval of the *status quo* and of the hegemonic-order (which Perniola, influenced by the situationists, defines as “spectacular” and “alienating”, even when referring to Ancient Greece’s art world), is dismissed as “pseudo-community” or as “halved-creativity”. Hence, Perniola – who, as I will illustrate, in later years will abandon this early view – judges the world of art only in terms of pure entertainment and is *de facto* indifferent with respect to instances of participations in which artists as well were personally involved.

However, Perniola argues that in ancient Greece a poetic and literary *alienation* arose. The alienation consists mainly in two aspects: on the one hand artistic activity is alienated from the majority of the people; on the other, given that the *epos* praises the ruling powers, it is a “halved” form of creativity, realising not a free activity but an ideological one. Artistic

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<sup>10</sup> Perniola uses the word “meaning” (*significato*) often in *L’alienazione artistica* without giving a clear definition. Anyhow, he associates it with the ideas of “authenticity”, implying that an action can be considered “meaningful” if it expresses and realises human creativity in a non-alienated way.

activity thus begins to assert itself in the Western world as a dimension in which creativity is expressed as incomplete, mystified, or, to use Perniola's terminology: separated and alienated.

Perniola then investigates the relationship between art and society in the Middle Ages and in the Italian Renaissance (1971, 135-166). According to him, between these two historical periods, a turning point in the very notion of art, which can be exemplified in Leon Battista Alberti's work, occurred. Perniola devotes a section of the third chapter of *L'alienazione artistica* to Leon Battista Alberti, considered as a crucial figure of a paradigm turning point between craft and art. The telling title of this section is: "Il pittore come borghese: L.B. Alberti".

According to Perniola, Alberti theorised a major aspect of the art world during the Renaissance. In *The Family in the Renaissance* he "formulates the theory of the acquisition and direction of the work of others" (Perniola 2002, 127<sup>11</sup> – that is, the conceptualisation of manufacturing capitalism. Trade capitalism implies the idea of the merchant as a dealer of goods made independently by himself; manufacturing capitalism instead conveys a conception of the merchant as a "manufacturer of goods made under his control" (127)<sup>12</sup>. During the Middle Ages paintings, sculptures, carvings and so on were included in the broad field of artisanal handicraft. In Marxist terms – used by Perniola – the craftsman placed himself in the commodity-money-commodity horizon, that is to say, he sold his work (for instance a painting) to get money and finally buy other

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<sup>11</sup> Perniola comes back to the Renaissance turning point several decades after *L'alienazione artistica*. Interestingly enough, although the causes of this turning point are explained in the same way, his evaluation of it substantially changes. Specifically, as I will show in the next section, while in 1971 he considers this paradigm shift as a significant step in the process of artistic alienation, in 2002 he regards it as the emergence of the "learned artist", who learns and teaches in academies: an artist who "cannot be ignorant" (2002, 128).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance these passages in which manufacturing capitalism is elaborated more explicitly by Alberti: "to increase my tranquillity, I would like to have something secure, something I could see improving under my hands from day to day. Perhaps I would have men working wool or silk or something similar. This kind of business is less trouble and much less nerve-racking than trade. I would gladly take on an enterprise like that" (Alberti 1994, 66); or "I would select with care and have good and honest employees. I would keep a close check on things, too, and go over even minor transactions. Even though I already knew the answers, I should ask questions just to appear watchful. I would not do this in such a way as to seem over-suspicious and distrustful but in a way that might influence my agents to avoid becoming careless" (67).

goods (for instance bread). He therefore lived off his private work by producing goods and owning the means of production.

Starting from the Fourteenth Century, though, with the development of Florentine financial holdings (of which Alberti's was one of the wealthiest), alongside new commercial trends and mechanisms, the figure of the merchant emerges. Perniola uses the term merchant (*mercante*) ambiguously. With merchant he refers to both the artisan workshops and to actual Renaissance artists. In order to avoid confusion, I mark the distinction between the two by referring to Renaissance artists as proto-bourgeois entrepreneurs. Perniola outlines the figure of the artist/entrepreneur in Marxist terms, where the notions of "commodity", "money" and "profit" are central. According to the Italian philosopher, as I will shortly clarify, the work of Alberti shows that a bourgeois mindset was emerging during the Florentine Renaissance. The Renaissance artist/entrepreneur, anticipating the methods of the fully developed capitalist production of the following centuries, focused on exchange value, that is, on the economic surplus that can be attained by selling a given commodity. In so doing, the value of use (i.e. the time employed to make something together with its specific utility) is dissolved. Renaissance proto-capitalism would therefore aim to increase the exchange value of a given object. The value of a work of art begins to be dependent not so much on the customer's request but on the anonymous "market demand", that is, "una forma astratta che domina l'artigiano" (Perniola 1971, 142). Perniola argues in turn that between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the notion of art underwent a shift which transformed the artisan's workshop into a capitalist enterprise. Perniola is not the first scholar who focused on the economic developments occurred in Florence during the Renaissance. His sources are Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* (1925) and Saponi's *Le marchand italien au moyen âge* (1952) (although quoted only once each) and Alberti's *The Family in Renaissance*. Sombart argued that capitalism was firstly and also thoroughly elaborated precisely in Alberti's work. The economic principles developed by Alberti, for Sombart as well for Perniola, would still be relevant for future capitalism. Specifically, both Sombart and Perniola quote several passages from the text in order to emphasise its main precepts. For instance, "keep the word", i.e.

honouring a contract (Sombart 1925), or “economise”<sup>13</sup>, namely to being thrifty and moderate with money, or “invest” both in and outside the household<sup>14</sup>:

The old doctrines of Alberti still hold sway. Never let your expenditure exceed your income, he urged his disciples. And calculate. Today this advice is faithfully obeyed by the modern bourgeois. Herein his mode of living differs from the seigniorial. The seignior scorns money. (Sombart 2017, 91)

The same “economic virtues”, Sombart argues, can also be found in Benjamin Franklin’s books and thoughts: Alberti wrote “a book second to none in its bourgeois sentiments, a book which already breathed the spirit of Benjamin Franklin” (Sombart 2017, 52). At stake here is the fact that art, as a unitary category distinguished from crafts, was elaborated precisely during the Renaissance. This in turn implies, for Perniola, that the modern concept of art was born together with a new spirit of capitalism exemplified by Alberti’s precepts and reflections. As a consequence, the historical category of art is, for Perniola, inseparable from capitalism itself and thus counter-revolutionary. As the art historian and curator Stefano Taccone notes, in a recent article dedicated to *L’alienazione artistica*, whereas the Renaissance is commonly known as a crucial moment for artists’ autonomy and creativity, according to Perniola it marks instead – on the contrary – a loss of the creative dimension (Taccone 2017, 19). Perniola cites two factors to back up this claim. On the one hand, as suggested, the proto-capitalist mindset, which brought new typologies of commerce and trade, alongside the figure of the entrepreneur, which in turn start to re-shape the art-world. On the other, the widening division between crafts and arts, that is, between manual labour and works of art. As soon as art is placed in the higher and autonomous dimension – compared to craftsmanship – creativity is excluded from manual operation, and therefore a whole series of activities are cut off as “servile” and “vulgar”. Perniola argues that this turning point excluded

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<sup>13</sup> “Save the surplus of things, and keep it safe” (Alberti 1994, 93).

<sup>14</sup> “I have found it wise to set aside a certain amount for outside use, for investments and purchases” (Alberti 1994, 77).

creativity from everyday life and confined it to a realm of “gifted few”, higher spirits, geniuses. As a result, the artist’s autonomy in the Renaissance – Perniola argues – is a “miserable” triumph: “la miseria di questo preteso ‘trionfo’ è pari alla miseria del concetto borghese di creatività, che è ritagliato sulla misura della merce. Creatività non vuol dire semplicemente produrre un oggetto nuovo ed originale, ma innanzitutto creare una situazione vitale che garantisca al suo autore e a tutti i partecipanti una reale *attività*” (Perniola 1971, 145). The notion of “situation” returns in this passage, implying a renewal of everyday life. As Sansot argues, commenting on *L’alienazione artistica*, Perniola “evokes with much eloquence the double misery of art and everyday life that are based on a divorce between reality and meaning” (Sansot 1977, 14-15, my translation) – that is to say, the separation between creativity – confined to the supposed superiority of the artistic world – and usefulness, proper of artisanal and manual operations.

Moreover, during the Renaissance, especially thanks to the influence of neo-Platonic spiritualism, the artist slowly becomes understood in terms of the emblematic figures of the “solitary”, “melancholic”, and “counter-current” individual. According to Perniola, the neo-Platonic doctrine, which involves a metaphysical idealism wherein notions such as spirit, idea, and soul are considered superior to matter, earth, bodies, etc., even further deepens the general separation between artists and reality. For example, Perniola notes, in Michelangelo the influence of neo-Platonism can be seen in his conception of artistic activity conceived as “un dar forma corporea, un riprodurre nella materia l’Idea metafisica” (1971, 158). In other words, Michelangelo’s early Mannerism consisted of a spiritualistic shift of the artistic product, which continued to debase – on the opposite side – all the crafts and handiworks insofar as their origin was not the soul of the artist but an everyday commission grounded upon applied skills and practices. As Robert W. Kretsch put it commenting on *L’alienazione artistica*: Perniola’s survey is against “the ultimate neo-Platonic belief that artistic creativity can arise only in an ideal, separate world” (Kretsch 1972, 570).

In this sense Perniola underlines that in Michelangelo “il prodotto artistico si differenzia qualitativamente dalle merci artigianali o industriali

proprio perché è l'esito di un tormento spirituale" (Perniola 1971, 159) or again: "ritiro dal mondo, solitudine, isolamento, che paiono caratteristiche essenziali dell'esercizio della creatività, sono in realtà il prezzo che gli artisti devono pagare al nuovo ordine sociale: è lecito essere attivi, a patto di essere estranei per definizione alla vita" (Perniola 1971, 161). According to Perniola, the tormented artists, or as Rudolf and Margot Wittkower emphasise in their seminal volume on the subject (2005), "the saturnine artists", are not so because they are struggling with themselves trying to express their creative freedom. On the contrary, the torment derives precisely from the fact that the artists themselves perceive their activity "confinata nel *ghetto* dell'invenzione di forme senza rapporto apprezzabile con l'organizzazione sociale della vita" (Perniola 1971, 162). Therefore, the figure of the melancholic artist, at war with the world or with him/herself, should not lead to think of an essential connection between creativity and mental imbalance, but rather as indicative of the fact that the artist feels his/her own condition as that of someone who is left with a merely spiritual and abstract idea of creativity, which has no appreciable effectiveness on collective everyday life. In other words, the ruling class with its apparatus of institutions (from the Greek theatre to patrons, politicians, clerical environments and so on) permits a certain degree of freedom to artistic behaviours precisely because they are ultimately reduced to substantially harmless and extraneous-to-life activities. In this sense Perniola claims that art is that peculiar dimension in which, although "meaning" finds an expression (through a work of art), it is a meaning without "reality" – that is to say, creativity without effectiveness. The very title of the book should be understood in this light – namely that throughout Western history art should be considered as "alienated", or, in other words, as an alienated way of expressing creativity.

To sum up, the panorama that has emerged so far on the relationship between art and society is ambiguous. According to Perniola, artistic activity allows a certain degree of individual creativity, and yet the possibilities of its expression are "halved", since Western manifestations of art are integrated with the ruling powers, the merchant classes and, broadly

speaking, the economic realm. Therefore the art-world becomes a place in which power is celebrated – and hence justified and left substantially unchanged – or in which an “isolated” meaning finds expression. Isolated because it does not have the social goal of a more authentic life for the entire community (the ultimate aim of Perniola’s perspective). Art is therefore alienated because it expresses a kind of creativity that does not provide any separation between individuals and their lives. In these terms Perniola states that “l’arte è il ghetto dell’attività” (1971, 146): instead of becoming an activity that aids the free invention of life, it echoes and promotes the separation and the alienation already present in societies where – in Marxian terms, borrowed by Perniola himself – economic struggles occur.

As suggested in the first sub-chapter, Perniola pursues an idea of art as revolution. However, since art – as a historical category – has asserted itself as an alienated activity, if there is no alienation, there is no art as well. In other words, according to Perniola, art, in the Western world, is synonymous with alienation, as it has always manifested itself as ideological or separated. Therefore, any efforts in eliminating this artistic alienation would also mean dissolving the historical category of art. Art, for Perniola, should be overcome in everyday life, that is, it should be on one side *criticised* as an alienated activity and, on the other side its creativity should be spread into the realm of collective everyday life: “l’arte non muore ma è necessario ucciderla affinché la creatività si realizzi nella rivoluzione” (1969a, 12).

Perniola’s perspective is influenced by the Hegelian-Marxist tradition (supported also by the Situationists and especially Debord), specifically referring to the three-valued logical movement of the dialectic. This movement comprises three stages of development: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, which Hegel also refers to as abstract-negative-concrete. Importing this method into art theory, Perniola argues that art as a historical category has always remained within the first stage: its alienation, as suggested, implies in fact its separation and abstraction from authentic social life. Although the Renaissance’s artistic process of production still implies a number of social interactions, both within and outside the

workshops, Perniola claims that Florentine proto-capitalism triggers the evolution of these very workshops towards the progressive alienation of the workers from their products, which will culminate in the modern industrial system. Perniola's critique, then, can work as an example of negative moment (the second stage), wherein the alienation is criticised in sight of the third stage, where artistic creativity can finally be realised in a more concrete, communitarian way. This dialectic movement describes the "supersession" or "overcoming" of art. In fact, Perniola's main claim in *L'alienazione artistica*, on a closer inspection, is not so much about the realisation of art as the authentic expression of human creativity in everyday life:

L'arte è l'unica manifestazione delle idee di creatività e desiderio che sopravvive nel mondo borghese: è una degradazione e perpetuazione del desiderio. Essa corrompe la struttura originale totale del desiderio spiritualizzandolo; d'altro canto lo preserva nella sua forma alienata, rimuovendo il rischio dell'estinzione completa. Specificamente, dunque, non dovremmo parlare di una realizzazione dell'arte, ma di una realizzazione del desiderio autentico, di cui l'arte è una espressione storicamente alienata. (1969a, 12)

According to this passage, it is not a new concept or idea of art which should be advanced. In spite of its contamination with the political manoeuvres of the ruling classes and their economic ideologies, art appears to be – metaphorically speaking – a treasure trove from which what is precious (i.e. creativity) should be drawn and developed elsewhere (i.e. within a revolutionary existence).

For these reasons, in the third part of *L'alienazione artistica*, Perniola also dwells on Dadaism, considered an exceptional movement which tried to lay the groundwork for the suppression of art as alienated category. According to Perniola Dadaists in fact understood that "L'essenziale dell'arte non è l'opera, ma il vivere, il processo creatore, l'attività artistica" (1971, 200). To privilege the work, the artistic object, as suggested earlier, means still possessing a theological mindset: by fearing

death and the transience of things artists delude themselves of becoming “immortal” or “eternal” by producing an object that can last longer than their mortal existence. The artistic object is therefore understood by the Dadaists (and Perniola with them) as one of the main causes of artistic alienation. Trying to produce a “permanent form”, that is, a potentially everlasting artistic object, means in turn providing a visible and concrete expression of an alienated activity. Subjective creativity is understood by Perniola as infinite, not objectifiable: confining it within the parameter of “product” means at the same time mummifying it. To express one’s own desires through art does not mean realising them but, on the contrary, not living them practically and reifying them into a product detached from life, enclosed in its abstractness of inert object. Precisely for this reason, Perniola argues, art and economy are two complementary sides of the same coin: art implies a creative freedom with no concrete effects on collective and social world; economy is instead the realm of efficiency which does not express creativity. Perniola explains this complementary relationship with the sentence “art is meaning without reality” (*significato senza realtà*) and “economy is reality without meaning” (1971, 48, *realtà senza significato*)

In a review of Pierre Cabanne’s conversation with Marcel Duchamp (1968) Perniola underlines that “Dada non è una poetica ma uno stile di vita totale” (1968, 29). Totality means taking seriously into account a revolutionary and creative lifestyle every hour and in every activity. Being creative just on specific moments or for certain purposes, means – as suggested in the second sub-chapter – again reproducing the individual fragmentation which takes place in spectacular societies. Each restricted form of creativity is considered by Perniola, following Duchamp’s perspective, at the same time partial, fragmented, limited. Here lies the reason why Perniola understood the revolution only as *total*. In fact, if the notion of totality is not central, all the alienation and separations proper of a bourgeois mindset come back. The identity between art and life, however, does not consist in aestheticism. The latter, intended as a movement based on the perspective of *art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake, of which Oscar Wilde was a supporter and whose works represent one of its most renowned expressions), as Perniola points out, “propugna l’estensione dei valori

estetici alla vita e vuole una vita *bella*”, on the contrary, “Dadà vuole distruggere non solo l’estetica, ma anche l’arte, ed esige una vita autentica” (Perniola 1971, 210). Dandyism, as it will be clarified in the third chapter of this section, does not share a theoretical affinity with Perniola’s early theory of art: *art pour l’art*, that is, the aestheticisation of life, implies devoting oneself in the effort of *making life beautiful* and not *authentically revolutionary*. Dandyism, I would argue, would be understood by the young Perniola as an insufficiently revolutionary aesthetic attitude. For instance, Wilde’s famous remark “to become a work of art is the object of living”, only apparently praises the realisation of creativity in everyday life. Turning into a work of art does not mean criticising or dissolving art in existence, but instead taking the reified category of “artistic product” and incorporating life into it. If art is, for Perniola, similar to a “ghetto”, turning life into a work of art implies paradoxically enlarging at an existential level the very alienated dimension of the ghetto. Living artistically means to perpetuate alienations and separations inherent to the very notion of art. Therefore, art for art’s sake consists in the realisation of the alienated concept of art and its further expansion to the detriment of existence.

In addition, as I argued in the first section of this thesis, focusing on George Brummell, the dandy is not interested in a social revolution, s/he does not want to overturn the rules of the *status quo*: s/he “plays with them”, s/he “dares with tact”<sup>15</sup>. A dandy’s attitude is thus not that of a revolutionary but rather that of an aristocrat of the spirit who knows how to move within urban environments, both those of high society (as was Brummell’s case), and in those of lower-class society, among bohemians, outcasts and street performers (like Baudelaire). As I will further explore in the chapter dedicated to Wilde, therefore, Perniola’s early work on the relationship between art and society cannot be considered akin to dandyism.

Perniola, as should be clear, links creativity and revolution. A creativity which remains stuck into a work of art, or within the artists’ emotional torments and melancholy, cannot give life to social and collective “situations”<sup>16</sup> in which both the author and the participants act together,

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<sup>15</sup> See First Section, Chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> In the Situationist understanding of this notion, accepted by Perniola as well.

aiming at the realisation of the authentic desire of human beings, not reified by the injunctions of consumption and the market. If art is therefore the “ghetto of activity”, in order for this activity to be freed, its first aim should be to turn spectators into participants, becoming collective. The Dadaists, with artistic processes, ready-mades, collages and so on, did not wish to produce art-works, but to *carry out actions*. As Carla Subrizi notes in her volume on Duchamp’s work, “l’arte [dadaista] era una procedura per costruire idee, azioni, modi di vivere [...] L’arte poteva appropriarsi di oggetti qualsiasi per modificarne la funzione o aprire nuovi *possibili* del senso” (2008, 4-5). In the same way the Situationists, with countercultural practices such as urban drifts, *détournement*, the construction of situations, did not intend to propose a new way of making art, but a more authentic way of living, not fettered by alienation. Perniola echoes both Dadaists and Situationists through such programmatic and militant statements as the following: “il processo di liberazione mira ad una condizione di reinvenzione perenne e totale di situazioni autonomamente significative, ad una sintesi definitiva tra il significato e la realtà, ad una vita così piena e padrona di se stessa da mettere immediatamente in pratica la teoria” (Perniola 1971, 241).

This sentence summarises several key points that I have elaborated in this chapter. Perniola writes of a “liberation process” which aims to transform the *alienated* creativity of art into a *full* creativity. This liberation implies carrying out “significant”, “exemplary” actions, creating new possibilities of life through “situations”. In other words, Perniola’s overall goal in *L’alienazione artistica* is, by following several fundamental assumptions of both the Dadaists and the Situationists, to provide a militant and at the same time theoretical framework for a re-appropriation of a community-oriented everyday life.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter explored the theory of art elaborated by Perniola in an early phase of his philosophical journey. Specifically, it has taken into account his writings covering a period from 1966 to 1972, which corresponds to Perniola's first intellectual efforts on the relationship between art and society. Many of the articles produced in this period, as well as the volume *L'alienazione artistica*, must be understood within the context of the counterculture that spread in the Western world – and not only the Western world – in those years. More precisely, Perniola's language owes a debt to the Situationist movement and the reflections of Guy Debord – in particular, as I showed in the second sub-chapter, for the notions of “separation”, “*détournement*”, “situation”, and “revolution of everyday life”. Perniola develops on the one hand a radical criticism of the notion of art, and on the other its overcoming. His critique goes back to the foundations of Western thought in ancient Greece, to then cover the Italian Renaissance and the twentieth century avant-gardes.

Perniola's goal is to show that historically art and artists only managed to convey an idea of “halved” and “impoverished” creativity, since it was ideological – and therefore constrained to justifying the ruling powers – or expressively free only within a “ghetto”, that is, in a position of isolated ineffectiveness. The status of art is therefore ambiguous: on one side it is an alienated activity; on the other it represents the only space in which the expression of human creativity is allowed (albeit in a halved and mystified form). However, precisely because it still gives voice, so to speak, to individual creativity, it should not be completely left behind and forgotten. Rather – according to Perniola – it is necessary to start from that same “halved” creativity and socialise it, transforming it into a collective situation which is able to open up new possibilities of action within society. In other words, to disseminate what is still present in the creative artistic activity in the daily life of the community. Only in these terms, according to Perniola, can creativity be fully realised *beyond art* and authentic desires be pursued.

As I pointed out in the first sub-chapter, the texts I took into account frequently appear vague or generic in their development. Specifically, Perniola often seems to reduce all Western tradition to a single great manifestation of the Situationist concept of spectacle. In fact, in his analyses

on both ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance, he claims that artistic activity has been allowed in so far as it remained the activity of “few chosen ones” who have the possibility of expressing something meaningful and creative, while the vast majority of people are destined to observe, imitate and passively contemplate. As I have argued in other chapters of this thesis<sup>17</sup>, conversely, in his subsequent writings, Perniola would identify numerous manifestations of thoughts and “feelings” – within both Western and non-Western traditions – alternative to the dominant ones. It is precisely on these alternative lifestyles and world conceptions that Perniola would focus most of his philosophical attention, which would give him an internationally acclaimed position in the contemporary academic and non-academic environment.

Finally, as I pointed out above, in his revolutionary militancy, this phase of Perniola’s art theory cannot be assimilated to the dandy’s lifestyle for two main reasons: first, dandies did not promote a concept of revolution in everyday life, but rather a subtle lifestyle based on ironic witty remarks and elegance, all within pre-existing rules and laws, which therefore were not questioned; secondly, the dandy’s aesthetic life, which, according to Wilde – as I will explore in the third chapter of this section – is wrapped up in a conception of *l’art pour l’art*, implies (for the early Perniola) remaining within a halved manifestation of artistic creativity, as it would not put into question the validity of the concept of art, but would limit itself to its total extension to life.

The next chapter will deal with the development of Perniola’s thoughts on the relationship between art and society from the second half of the Seventies onwards. As will become clear, the concept of *revolution* will be set aside in favour of a series of notions, such as “enigma”, “shadow”, “remainder”, and “crypt”, which can be included in the pivotal concept of *difference*.

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<sup>17</sup> Such as First Section, Chapters 2 and 3; and Second Section, Chapter 1.

## Chapter 2

### Enigmas, Shadows, Things

#### *Introduction*

Having already explored Perniola's early reflections on art theory, in this chapter I will dwell on the second phase of his thought on the subject, the period that is from 1980 to 2015. As suggested in the previous chapter, from 1972 up until the late 1970s, Perniola focused less on art theory and more on theoretical philosophy and psychoanalysis, interrogating especially on Nietzsche (1975, 1977a), Freud (1976a, 1978) and Bataille (1977). With *La società dei simulacri*, published in 1980, Perniola returns to the investigation of contemporary art.

In this work both his writing style and his crucial assumptions diverge from those employed in *L'alienazione artistica*'s period. Perniola, in fact, no longer focuses on the historical avant-gardes, but on the neo-avant-gardes, which spread in the Western art world from the Sixties onward. If the historical avant-gardes were informed by the idea of transgression – that is, the critique and the overcoming of the *status quo* for a new, genuinely realised and collective creativity – the neo-avant-gardes instead – as I will clarify – propose a pseudo-transgression, wherein subversive drives and motifs find an alliance with art institutions and the broader economic realm.

The second sub-chapter, below, deals with Perniola's claims in *L'arte e la sua ombra* (2000), specifically focusing on his critique of the extreme realism of the Nineties. Perniola claims that the so called "return of the real" (within the art world) mischaracterises the very idea of reality by including in it only abject and disgusting experiences. A more complex and nuanced conception of the real is then proposed by Perniola, which takes into account not only traumatising phenomena, but also uncanny and alternative post-human ideas.

The third sub-chapter revolves around the Italian philosopher's last book on art theory, *L'arte espansa* (2015). The 2013 Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, marks what Perniola calls the "fringe turning point". The fringe turning point implies a change from "transgression" and "pseudo-transgression" (which characterised both the historical avant-gardes and the neo-avant-gardes) to *encyclopedia*, that is, a collection of heterogeneous works and authors stitched together by a common criterion. The encyclopedic criterion chosen by Gioni consists in the notion of "fringe" – that is, marginal art, outsider art, and so on. As I will clarify, Perniola is both enthusiastic about and wary of this development. Enthusiastic because it involves the institutions recognising experiences and phenomena traditionally left outside as artistically valuable; wary because this turning point could potentially inflate a giant speculative bubble within the art world, by placing a hyperbolic economic value upon the newly included authors and works.

Whereas the first three sub-chapters outline Perniola's critical interpretations of the art world (*pars destruens*), the last one will delve into Perniola's theoretical claims (*pars costruens*). Specifically, I will focus on his idea of a *third* regime of art, alternative to both the pure economic discourse and the upward/downward conception for which art lies either in what is spiritual and transcendent or in what is earthly and immediate. In the third regime of art the idea of the work of art as a thing is proposed, which implies – as I will show – several pivotal notions revolving around the notion of "difference".

Therefore, the main objectives of this chapter are as follows: to provide a chronologically exhaustive enquiry into Perniola's interpretation

of the art world in between 1980 and 2015; to highlight and explore the shift that occurred in his thought, compared to his early writings; and to begin to show the terms in which Oscar Wilde's dandyism can be related to Perniola's thought. In fact, not only can Wilde's lifestyle be inscribed in the common thread of dandyism analysed so far in this thesis (implying, thus, a close theoretical connection with Perniola); in addition, I argue, the Irish dandy's perspective on art, aesthetics, and society shares several affinities with Perniola's art theory. However, since this chapter is devoted particularly to Perniola, and the following one to Wilde, I here only indicate where the two authors' perspectives meet. I will then explore my claims at length in the final chapter of this section.

*From the historical avant-gardes to the neo-avant-gardes*

To understand Perniola's approach to artistic issues from the 1980s onwards, it is useful to look at the article *Del arte como transgresion al arte como profesion* (2007). In a passage from this article, Perniola highlights a fundamental shift that has occurred in the art world:

The idea that the essence of contemporary art is transgression derives from the historical avant-gardes, of which I think I am one of the last living witnesses, having participated at one of the last manifestations of Surrealism (the congress of Cerisy-La-Salle in July 1966) and having been involved in the activities of the Situationist International from 1966 to 1969 [...] Instead, contemporary art, starting from the Pop Art of the early Sixties, having always been linked to institutions, has taken an opposite path to that promoted by the Situationists. (2007, 18, my translation)

In this passage, several aspects worth developing emerge. Firstly, Perniola identifies the concept of transgression as a fundamental characteristic of historical avant-gardes. As I explained in the previous

chapter, the Dadaists and the Situationists promoted – despite their different theoretical and militant standpoints – the idea of an “overcoming” of art which encourages creativity in collective everyday life. These movements were dissatisfied with the *status quo* and therefore aimed at its “transgression” in order to free individuals’ desires and creativity in a non-alienated way. In this context, there was no dialogue between Dadaists and Situationists on the one hand and institutions (both artistic institutions as well as academia, the state and the market) on the other. In the countercultural atmosphere of the time, where artistic discourse was guided by the idea of transgression, Perniola wrote the texts that were investigated in the previous chapter. The Italian philosopher believed in the possibility of a genuine transgression which could help the individual in their search for a more authentic life. In other words, the possibility of freeing oneself from the *diktat* of the *status quo* (which implies a standardised lifestyle based on commodity consumption) to a higher idea of life: from mere survival to more-than-life.

In the above-quoted passage, Perniola argues that with the advent of Pop Art and the neo-avant-gardes, the situation changes radically. *La società dei simulacri* helps in better understanding his account of this transformation – in fact, in this book Perniola devotes an entire chapter to the analysis of the neo-avant-gardes (2011, 63-90). First, neo-avant-gardes, according to Perniola, have led to the artistic solemnisation of any possible image or object (even outside the art sphere). For example with Pop Art comics, advertising images, and photography; with New Realism secondhand, ruined and consumed objects; with Land Art nature; with Minimal Art industrial and geometrical materials, and with Conceptual Art writing, graphics, information etc. (85). Perniola states that what seems to be an overcoming of the separation between art and life – since the art world opens its doors to objects that are normally considered extraneous from it – is actually the creation of an immense speculative bubble founded on the creation of a new artistic market: “Mentre prima della Pop Art le opere d’arte nascevano come tali e solo successivamente diventavano merci di lusso, ora esse nascono già come prodotti di un mercato in cui circolano beni di lusso: la mercificazione è la loro essenza stessa” (86). In other

words, Perniola maintains that before the neo-avant-gardes there were movements (such as the Surrealists, the Futurists, the Cubists, etc.) in which artists were only later “discovered” and promoted through merchants and galleries. With the new avant-gardes the opposite happens: the works are conceived, created and promoted from the beginning to satisfy the market, and therefore the artistic nature of something, Perniola holds, depends on the fact that the managers of the artistic institutions (merchants, gallery owners, critics) are interested in attributing an economic value to it.

The new avant-garde, therefore, involves the birth and the development of a new type of art market – which has its new capital in New York and no longer in Paris. This market is presented not so much as the result of a creative activity by the artist, but as a “production” of a particular type of business.

Commodities (from Coke to bean boxes as in Warhol’s case) normally belongs to a certain market – for instance, the food business, the toy business, or the car business. The introduction of everyday objects into the art world does not erase this economic discourse; it simply places it on another level, that of the artistic business. Perniola states that, in so doing, art can no longer be considered as an alternative to the market, but must be seen as what he refers to as its “opposite duplicated” (87, *opposito duplicato*). Opposite because the uselessness of the artistic object – with respect to functionalistic discourses and of utility (typical of the economic discourse) – is maintained. Duplicated precisely because the economic discourse still holds sway. Thus, the artist is included in an artistic enterprise in which what counts are the judgments of gallerists, merchants and critics, as well as the methods of promotion and dissemination through advertising and the media.

For these reasons, according to Perniola, one should not refer to the neo-avant-gardes as “art movements” or “art”, but as “artistic fashions” and “fetishes” (89). A genuine movement, for instance, has a theoretical manifesto, a program, a common goal for artists (as was the case for most of the historical avant-gardes). It often arises in a certain field (for example, art) and then expands into others (literature, popular sensibility, cinema and so on). Fashion, on the other hand, is associated with an aesthetic expression

of short duration, usually seasonal, which revolves around the imperative of being continuously up-to-date. Artistic fashion, thus, seeks the excitement of the latest trend and yet does not propose anything truly new: it is a pseudo-novelty (91) precisely because even if the objects and combinations change, they are nonetheless grounded upon “l’estensione indiscriminata e totale dei valori” for which “tutto è arte” (91). Fashions, also based on the commodification of everyday objects, elects money and exchange value as a fundamental artistic category, which can be exponentially cast upon any object up to the price of millions of euros. Ironically, Perniola comments that this produces an “aesthetic of money” for which “il bello è il denaro, è il valore di scambio, e solo il denaro è bello” (91).

According to Perniola, within the neo-avant-garde the concept of art is used to indicate a dimension which should no longer be considered art. This dimension is that of the fetish. Perniola’s description of fetishism refers to Freudian theory. To put it briefly, Freud (1950) holds that fetishism consists of a “split attitude” whereby a child denies that the mother does not have a penis and at the same time recognises that she does not have one. From this image, according to Freud, the child starts to worry about being emasculated (the so-called “castration anxiety”). To protect himself from this fear he produces a substitute for the mother’s missing penis by investing his libido over another area of the female body. In other words, a compromise is created between the actual perception and the counter-wish. The fetish is precisely this compromise, which acts as a protection from the castration complex.

By transposing this discourse into the artistic sphere, Perniola contends that the artistic environment possesses the same split attitude, meaning the coexistence of two incompatible psychic attitudes (recognition and negation) towards an external reality (Perniola 2011, 86). The art world, being grounded upon economic enterprises, denies the very transgressive aspect of the objects; at the same time “sostiene la necessità dell’arte” (86), because immense profits can be drawn from it. The element of compromise is represented, according to Perniola, by art works themselves, which can no longer be considered as such, and should be seen as “artistic fetishes”. Akin to the Freudian substitutive element, they embody two contradictory aspects

of the artworld: “ammettere che l’arte è inutile e ciononostante attribuirle un valore di scambio maggiore dell’utile” (86). In the same years in which *La società dei simulacri* was published, several other theorists also focused on the relationship between market, postmodernism and neo-avant-gardes (cf. Baudrillard 1978; Lyotard 1979; Sloterdijk [1983] 2001; Danto [1984] 2005). The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in his seminal book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, characterises the post-modern experience in terms of cynicism. Specifically, he distinguishes the ancient Cynicism of Diogenes and his followers from its contemporary and popular European version. The former implies a critique of social conventions through an uncompromising lifestyle based on resolute, also provocative and ironic, practices of refusal (Sloterdijk 2001, 101); the latter, instead, although sharing with its ancient counterpart the disillusionment towards institutions and society (from politics to arts, philosophy and the sphere of affections), possesses a fundamental resignation and apathy: the modern cynic on the one hand has a lucid awareness of social, economic, and political dynamics; on the other s/he is not driven by a critical attitude of resistance or revolt (like the ancient Cynicism) but by a disillusioned conformism for which anything is permitted. An exemplar figure emerging from Sloterdijk’s claims is, for Perniola, Andy Warhol: “la sua visione [di Warhol] della società contemporanea è priva di veli ideologici [...]; tuttavia ciò non lo porta a rifiutare apertamente il capitalismo, l’*American way of life*, la società dello spettacolo, ma a stabilire con queste realtà un rapporto di rivalità parodica, di duplicazione oppositiva” (Perniola 2000, 41-2). Warhol, according to this quotation, would be a model of “cynical reason”. In fact, on the one hand he possesses a detached and disenchanting attitude towards the art world and the society of his time (that is, all the transcendent values are negated); at the same time he does not pursue a revolution of everyday life or a new practice which criticises the *status quo*. In fact, the artistic fashions of the neo-avant-gardes, in which Warhol was one of the most acclaimed personalities, appear to Perniola as inherently entangled with the cynic economic discourse in which quantity reigns over quality. In other words, two pivotal ideas of the historical avant-gardes, “transgression” and “creation”, are left behind for a “pseudo-transgression” wherein provocative

art works are not meant to evoke the possibility of a new experiential or political horizon, but are embedded within capitalist enterprises which follow economic *diktats*. According to Perniola, the artistic environment, akin to a fetish, revolves around an internal split whereby on the one hand it is recognised that the art work is worth nothing and, on the other hand, it is given a hyperbolic monetary value. Therefore, from Pop Art onwards, the uselessness of the artistic object radically alters in its implication: from being a transgressive and alternative uselessness, potentially carrying new possibilities of existence against the dominant ones, it turns into a market oriented uselessness that potentially converts any object into money: from the value of transgression to the pure value of exchange.

What I find controversial in Perniola's argument is that he does not dwell on any specific artists or movement. He does not give any particular examples or case studies. Instead, he provides a perspective halfway between theoretical philosophy, critical theory, semiology and psychoanalysis. In so doing, he manages to elaborate a coherent and conceptually cohesive argument, but a major question remains open: can all contemporary art be labeled under the expression of "artistic fashion" and "artistic fetish"? Is there any author or work which allows an alternative artistic view to emerge? I would argue that Perniola has never praised or focused carefully on specific artists or movements since the last avant-garde of the Situationists. Nonetheless, a more nuanced theory is proposed within *L'arte e la sua ombra*, which will be the object of the next and the fourth sub-chapter.

I will also show – in the last sub-chapter – the ways in which Wilde's dandyism can be compared to Perniola's theory of art. In fact, both Wilde and Perniola deal with the massification of art works within the society of the spectacle. Although in the last decades of the nineteenth century these phenomena were only in their initial stages, Wilde had to face the novelties brought by the burgeoning consumerism of the late Victorian society, which implied large scale editions of books, journals, and magazines that, together with a growing literacy, paved the way for the "cultural industry" of the twentieth century. Both Wilde and Perniola, as I will clarify, ask themselves what they consider crucial questions: what is the

role and the value of art within a mass / capitalist society? What happens to the idea of art when its “aura” fades away through the means of mass reproduction? My aim, in this chapter, is to shed light on Perniola’s viewpoint. The following chapter will then explore Wilde’s standpoint, highlighting both the contrasts and the commonalities between him and the Italian philosopher.

### *Extreme Realism*

The previous sub-chapter discussed Perniola’s interpretation of the neo-avant-gardes which, from the Sixties onwards, have penetrated the art world with artistic fashions based on fetishes and hyperbolic exchange value. In addition to the neo-avant-gardes, Perniola investigated the rise and the development of Posthuman art over the course of the Nineties. Exploring Perniola’s reflections on that decade is pivotal for a chronologically exhaustive enquiry of his theory of art. In fact, it can be considered the most prolific and heterogeneous period within the path of the Italian philosopher. In addition to dozens of articles<sup>1</sup>, several books he wrote in that decade have been translated into over twelve languages. Specifically *Enigmi* (1990); *Del sentire* (1992); *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico* (1994); *Più-che-sacro Più-che-profano* (1995); *L’estetica del Novecento* (1997); *Disgusti* (1998); and *L’arte e la sua ombra* (2000). The text which I will mainly investigate in this sub-chapter is *L’arte e la sua ombra* (translated in English in 2004). Published at the dawn of the third millennium, *Art and its Shadow* is a collection of essays that range from contemporary art to Warhol and the postmodern; from philosophical remarks on cinema to the elaboration of a “third system of art”. Some of the chapters were previously published in journals and books (Perniola 1994, 1997, 1998). Moreover, in this book Perniola frequently refers to other works he produced in those

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<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix at the end.

years, such as *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, *Disgusti*, and *Enigmi. L'arte e la sua ombra*, therefore, represents and gathers together all Perniola's efforts at re-thinking the art world during the Nineties.

Perniola's theory in *L'arte e la sua ombra* presents several points of difference from his early writings and, to a certain extent – as I will clarify – from *La società dei simulacri*. Specifically, he focuses on the diffusion of the concept of “realism”. Perniola notes that in the Nineties, a sensibility spread around the so-called manifestations of a particular type of real, namely the real in its harsh, repellent, crude, extreme, traumatic and shocking sides<sup>2</sup>. The novelty of this realism is pointed out by Perniola in the following passage: “Non si tratta – come in passato – di una rappresentazione il più veristica possibile di queste realtà, ma di un'esposizione diretta e povera di mediazioni simboliche di eventi che suscitano sgomento, ripugnanza, se non addirittura ribrezzo e orrore” (2000, 4). It is therefore not a matter of a return to reality in the sense of naturalism – that is, of objective reproduction of the external world – but of showing the most disturbing and extreme aspects of it without a theoretical-linguistic intervention, in their immediacy.

Perniola has two interpretations of these phenomena. One gathers them under the term “idiocy” (*idiozia*), the other under “splendour” (*splendore*). I will develop the first characterisation in this sub-chapter and the second in the fourth. As suggested earlier, whereas the first three sub-chapters are mainly devoted to Perniola's critical views of the contemporary art world, the last will provide his underlying perspective on art.

The first interpretation lies in the fact that, for Perniola, as for the neo-avant-gardes, the Nineties art world is still a market-based dimension. Borrowing Walter Benjamin's notions from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*, Perniola maintains that although the neo-avant-gardes have moved away from the artistic “aura” (that is, from the metaphysic idea of originality and uniqueness) on the other they have replaced the auratic aspect with pure money. In other words, for example, the iconic photographic prints of Warhol and Beuys may have – so to speak

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<sup>2</sup> Perniola refers also to the seminal book *The Return of the Real* by the art critic Hal Foster (1996)

– “killed God” (i.e. the metaphysical discourse of art), but, in doing so, they have replaced the previous God of art with the God of commerce and economy. Thus, Perniola notes, the neo-avant-gardes have extended into the artistic field the main tendency of capitalist societies, namely consumerist materialism.

In these terms, then, from the Second World War the Western world has witnessed a general leveling of the symbolic, linguistic, and cultural spheres, within both ordinary life and the artistic environment (2000, 22). This tendency reaches its peak, according to Perniola, precisely with the “return of the real” in the Nineties. If “the real” is intended as the raw side of reality, it means immediacy without any theoretical and cultural mediations. For this reason Perniola writes of a “levelling of the symbolic” (*livellamento del simbolico*), involving both the neo-avant-gardes and the extreme realism of the Nineties: “Il realismo estremo di oggi ha proprio questa pretesa: mostrare l’esistente senza nessuna mediazione teorica” (7). In this sense, the neo-avant-garde’s transgression of the auratic element, the “demystification of the metaphysical and auratic element of art”, is not properly such. It is instead a hypermystification: they do not actually deny the aura, but mystify it, i.e. they resurrect it through the exaggerated economic evaluation of the artist’s signature. The corollary of this phenomenon – Perniola argues – is that art critics and gallery owners have become mere advertisers and promoters.

Therefore, extreme realism not only entails the artistic mystification of the neo-avant-gardes: it boosts it, since in pursuing an emotional shock in the viewer (through the exhibition of the real in its disgusting and abject elements) it re-enacts the same cultural and symbolic leveling implicit in the neo-avant-gardes. Considering reality in terms of disgust and abjection means interpreting it from a spontaneistic, vitalistic and immediate perspective. In this sense Perniola interprets Nineties art in terms of “idiocy”, precisely because it implies remaining blind to much more complex manifestations of the notion of reality. In so doing, Perniola points out, disgust (*disgusto*) has taken the traditional place and role of taste (*gusto*).

As stated in the first chapter of the previous section, throughout Western history art theory has been mainly informed by the great objective theory of beauty (harmony, unity and proportion of parts). The extreme realism of the Nineties, therefore, seems to be the antithesis of this theory, shifting from notions such as the beautiful and the proportionate to the revolting, the abject and the disgusting. Hal Foster's claim (1996) is that what characterises contemporary (Nineties) art is reality in its traumatic and terrifying aspects. Nonetheless, for Perniola, displaying disgusting objects, secretions, worms, human insides, physical deformities, and tumors, does not necessarily mean entering the realm of transgression, nor that of the post-human. The disgusting is in fact linked with a "surplus" of the vital, a hyperbolic, grotesque manifestation of what is alive that expands itself to the detriment of what surrounds it: "il disgustoso è appunto la pretesa del vitale a dilatarsi a oltranza inquinando tutto ciò che viene a contatto con lui [...] è una vita impregnata di morte che continua con più accanimento che mai la sua lotta contro la forma" (Perniola 2000, 9-10). The disgusting, therefore, according to Perniola, is not post-human but rather the supreme realisation of the human. It is life without limitations, which grows against all form and shape. In other words, the disgusting is precisely life, desperately striving to continue itself, which in turns ultimately destroys the world around it in a furious vitalism<sup>3</sup>. Much of post-human art is labeled post-human where, for Perniola, it does not reach *beyond* the human and *beyond* the organic, but instead remains stuck within both categories.

In addition, this extreme realism does not differ much from the neo-avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century for another fundamental reason. It is in fact part of a promotion system boosted by television, cinema, internet, graphics, and design, sharing the features of artistic fashion, i.e. the seasonal and ephemeral search of novelty which transforms genuine ideas of provocation and transgression into a trend or a slogan. In so doing the real becomes the object of a weak, ephemeral fascination, perpetually overcome by the immediate artistic fashions replacing one another. It can thus produce a shock but fails to open a new,

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<sup>3</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 1 for Perniola's critic on the notion of vitalism.

disruptive dimension that undermines the fundamental assumptions of the individual.

Moreover, if the neo-avant-gardes have dissolved art into fashion, extreme realism has dissolved fashion into communication. Several years after *L'arte e la sua ombra* Perniola published *Miracoli e traumi della comunicazione* (2008), in which he identifies a series of “matrix events” which, due to their disruptive visual impact, have produced significant shifts in the viewer’s perception of images, videos, and in general medias. Events such as the fall of the Berlin wall, the 9/11 Twin Towers terrorist attack, Abu Grahib’s inmates’ torture, Breivik’s massacre at the Utøya island, have had, he claims, such a huge impact on the collective imaginary that all the performances and exhibitions belonging to the realism of disgust seem only pale imitations of a much more traumatic reality. In this sense Perniola argues that the shock of the real has been overtaken by the shock of communication, implying that as soon as the media apparatuses and industries adopted a strategy similar to that of the artistic practices of the Nineties, the latter were replaced by a far more powerful and tentacular competitor: communication.

Nonetheless, I have also intimated that Perniola – following Baroque literature – elaborates and develops the idea of beauty as *agudeza*, as something that stings, pierce and “penetrates” minds and feelings. Does this mean that the viewer’s shock pursued by the extreme realism is close to Perniola’s interpretation of the Baroque? The answer is ‘yes’, I would argue, only if a crucial distinction is made within Nineties art between *realism as disgust* and *realism as difference*. The former, as I have shown in this sub-chapter, entails a partial idea of the real, grounded upon vitalism and abjection. The latter involves a more complex and enigmatic characterisation, which will be dealt with in the following fourth sub-chapter. Before developing this conception, however, we must look at *L'arte espansa* in order to complete the chronological survey of Perniola’s critique of contemporary art.

## *The Fringe Turning Point of Art*

After *L'arte e la sua ombra*, the most significant further elaboration of Perniola's art theory emerges in 2015 with the publication of *L'arte espansa*. This sub-chapter will explore the main claims on display in this book. Although between 2000 and 2015 the Italian philosopher devoted articles and issues of the journal *Ágalma* to contemporary art, he maintained the perspectives emerging from *Art and its Shadow* substantially unchanged. For example, in *Ágalma* n. 9 (2005), entitled *Professione: Artista*, he focused on the so-called "magic corporation" – that is, the whole communicative and promotional apparatus of institutions, galleries, artists, critics and curators who are able to label something as art. He compares this practice to the sorceries, spells, and enchantments of tribal and primitive societies and thus refers to it as a "magic" corporation (Perniola 2005, 5-6). The magic corporation is therefore the continuation of the discussion elaborated so far in this chapter, for which the artist is not an isolated creator but the center of an artistic enterprise.

Nonetheless, according to Perniola, a turning point occurred in 2013 with the Venice Biennale, to which he devoted his latest and last volume on contemporary art: *L'arte espansa (Expanded Art)*. Borrowing the title of a 1970 seminal work by Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (2010), Perniola claims that the current art world has been destabilised by the opening of new horizons and the widening of its traditional boundaries.

Before defining the "expansion" of art, Perniola sums up the second half of the twentieth century art world in a few introductory pages. It is useful to look at some passages from them in order to see how Perniola's perspective on the neo-avant-gardes has not changed between 1980 and 2015. Firstly, Perniola points out that starting from Pop Art the artistic world entered into a speculative bubble in which numerous ephemeral fashions followed one another. In this context, gallery owners and institutions consecrated not so much works of art but artistic fetishes

(Perniola 20015, 3)<sup>4</sup>. The fetishes were boosted by media operations and the artists became stars with hyperbolic signatures alongside the “hyperbolic economic enhancement” of art works. What characterised this “bubble” was the reduction of art criticism to an advertising function. In short, the neo-avant-gardes have transformed the artist into a “divo di una microsocietà internazionale i cui interessi erano essenzialmente economici” (6).

This context radically changed with the 2013 Venice Biennale:

Questa esposizione [the 2013 Biennale] ha un’importanza pari a quella del 1964, progettata e realizzata da Leo Castelli e Ileana Sonnabend, che segnò la solennizzazione della Pop Art e la fine delle avanguardie storiche. Con l’esposizione di Gioni, si chiude un periodo della storia dell’arte contemporanea durato cinquant’anni. (12)

In what terms does Perniola claim this? What distinctive features does the 2013 Venice Biennale possess compared to the state of contemporary art? For Perniola it is the very assumption of making art that undergoes a transformation. While the historical avant-gardes and the neo-avant-gardes were based on the notion of transgression<sup>5</sup>, the orienting principle behind the 2013 Biennale is a complete different one, that of *encyclopedicity*. It is no longer a matter of founding manifestos, artistic programs, or ephemeral fashions and artistic fetishes. The main point no longer lies in identifying a poetic around which one or more artists gather and with which they identify themselves. The criteria through which artists and works are included or excluded do not depend on a cohesive and shared perspective. The very distinction of what is art from what is not depends on a new operation of legitimisation: *encyclopedicity*.

What does this consist of? On which criteria is the inclusion of a work of art in an “encyclopedia” based? Perniola devotes several pages to the analysis of the 157 extremely heterogeneous authors present at the Biennale. There were both world-renowned artists, such as Cindy Sherman,

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<sup>4</sup> Perniola, thus, uses the same term adopted in *La società dei simulacri*, thirty five years before, to define this phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Although for the neo-avant-gardes, as suggested, it would be more appropriate to talk of a *pseudo-transgression* in which the provocative and rebellious elements were merely convenient means to media resonance.

Walter De Maria, and Richard Serra, and people who have never called themselves artists, or who have never been part of the cultural and aesthetical worlds. Considered together as artists also appear figures linked to the oneiric and the esoteric realms, such as Carl G. Jung, Rudolph Steiner, and Aleister Crowley; adventurers, futurologists, and embalmers; religious *ex voto*, Art Therapy art works, and so on. Therefore, Perniola underlines, there is not a unique, comprehensive theme shared by the authors included. Rather, several pivotal issues of aesthetics and art are put together: from Surrealism to the relationship between action and contemplation; from collection versus accumulation to the separation between art and life. Significantly, there is much less emphasis, compared to the Nineties' atmosphere, on realism. Perniola argues – in the wake of a statement by the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen – that after 9/11 the path of trauma and the extreme real has become impractical for art, since “nessuna operazione artistica può più battere l’effetto traumatico o immondo di un reportage fotografico” (Perniola 2015, 29). In this sense, the numerous references to authors and works related to the magical, supernatural, and oneiric worlds evince a return to Surrealism and the abandonment of themes related to the notion of the real.

A pivotal question is still left open: what is the criterion on which any object, from a traditional artistic product to something foreign to art, is included in the “encyclopedia” and therefore becomes art? If with the neo-avant-gardes the critics and gallery owners had a purely media promotional function, which nevertheless allowed the artistic micro-environment to become international and to dramatically increase the economic value of fetishes, who are now the figures possessing the legitimacy to transform something or someone into art? In order to answer these questions, Perniola distinguishes two notions: “artisticity” (*artisticità*) and “artistisation” (*artistizzazione*). Artisticity consists in giving artistic value to something that is potentially aesthetically valuable and has not yet been recognised as such (35). Perniola takes as an example of this process Natalie Heinrich’s studies on Van Gogh. From being considered as a mad and almost unknown painter, a process of valorisation was cast on his work – decades after his death – that made him gradually become one of the most relevant artists in

modern history. Van Gogh's case is emblematic of the "artisticity" process, for which the aesthetic qualities of an artist – although previously present – are later finally recognised. Given that the encyclopedia of the 2013 Venice Biennale does not revolve primarily around the recognition of artistic and aesthetic qualities, Perniola dismisses artisticity as a criterion to understand the paradigm shift in art it represented.

In contrast, to describe the peculiar aspect of *artistisation*, Perniola uses the English term *agency*,

... che implica un decentramento dell'azione dal singolo a un sistema di relazioni molto complesso, all'interno del quale qualcosa o qualcuno che è fringe, vale a dire marginale, addirittura estraneo al mondo dell'arte, viene ammesso a farne parte, oppure ne fa parte a pieno titolo ma non è mai stato trattato secondo una prospettiva inusuale, non convenzionale, alternativa, antagonista, sperimentale [...] Si tratta di uno spostare, un dislocare, un trasformare ciò che è dato, secondo un procedimento che appartiene per eccellenza alla poetica barocca teorizzata da Baltasar Gracian. (45-6)

The strategy adopted by Gioni, curator of the 2013 Biennial, seems to recall a whole series of conceptual and aesthetic figures investigated by Perniola himself throughout his philosophical path. For instance, in the quoted passage Perniola himself traces in Gioni's work the "making and unmaking [of] unlawful matches between things", typical of the Baroque attitude; in the same page he also identifies the movement from the same to the same typical of the *transit*, and the "disorientation" typical of the uncanny, which I developed while discussing the notion of the inorganic. According to this theoretical standpoint, *artistisation* implies that something might not necessarily be "artistic" on its own. Perniola claims that there are no objective characteristics which define something as artistic, but rather an "agency" through which fringe, marginal, and surprising sides of productions, attitudes, and experiences are explored, disseminated, and developed.

Perniola seems enthusiastic about the operation carried out by Gioni. He even compares the contemporary art situation inaugurated by Gioni as a

“lowest beginning” (*infimo inizio*), borrowing from the Chinese Daoist tradition. According to this tradition – to put it briefly – we do not live in a compartmentalised world where opposites are clearly marked and different from each other (masculine/feminine, active/passive, strong/weak, etc.) but rather one where they flow unceasingly into one another. More precisely, when one of the two poles in such a dichotomy reaches its peak, the other imperceptibly begins to emerge and slowly grows up until it replaces the other. Transposed into Perniola’s perspective, this means that the neo-avant-garde bubble has reached its ultimate manifestations, and Gioni’s Biennale represents the lowest beginning of a new tendency: “nulla è di per se stesso arte. Esso lo diventa attraverso molti fattori” (45). These factors certainly depend on the audience reception and on the critics, but also on how authors place their own works, how they present them, in which terms they are evaluated, and so forth.

Precisely because anything can be included in the sphere of art, even what was previously left behind, Perniola highlights the possibility of a risky outcome: “si corre il pericolo di affogare in un abisso di insulsaggine e di futilità, in cui scompare non solo la vecchia idea dell’arte, ma anche ogni possibilità di fornire un orientamento in un *melting pot* in cui tutto si confonde con tutto” (48). In other words, Perniola is well aware of the *ambiguity* of the fringe turning point of art. While on the one hand it finally seems to give significant recognition to heterogeneous phenomena and manifestations of the surprising, the marvelous, the “radiant”, and the uncanny, at the same time, I would argue, it implies the possibility that after all *expanding art* means expanding the already existing economic bubble. This bubble, therefore, becomes even more gigantic precisely because it incorporates new territories hitherto excluded from traditional Insider art. In other words, it could mark a move from the speculative bubble of the art world to the immensely larger speculative bubble of the art worlds, plural.

*L’arte espansa* met several critiques. Both the art critic Stefano Castelli (2016) and the aesthetician Stefano Velotti (2016) perceive the claim that a “turning point” occurred with the 2013 Biennale as an exaggeration. For them, in fact, Gioni’s operation is nothing more than the extension of the neo-avant-gardes’ logic to other objects and realms.

Nonetheless, as suggested, Perniola himself was aware of this possibility. What both Castelli and Velotti fail to see is a crucial shift highlighted by Perniola within this context. A major issue emphasised by Perniola in *L'arte espansa*, but also in *L'arte e la sua ombra*, is that the art critic, throughout recent decades, became mostly a promotional and marketing figure. But, reflecting on the fringe turning point and on its complexity, Perniola says: “questi elementi sono strettamente connessi tra loro e la loro gestione necessita quella visione sintetica che solo la filosofia può fornire” (Perniola 2015, 45), adding several pages later: “nessuna strategia artistica può più fare a meno di una strategia teorica” (86). Thus, scholars, philosophers and authors, are called to defend – so to speak – art from the threats of communication and provide coherent and elaborated theories concerning art works and exhibitions.

Gioni's encyclopedic criterion is not the only one that shares, for Perniola, a broader philosophical “synthetic” attitude. In addition, for instance, in order to legitimise his operation, Gioni edited a catalog which contains essays by philosophers and scholars, including Simon Critchley, D. Graham Burnett, Anthony Grafton, and Brian Dillon. Perniola sees in this choice precisely the will to once again include theories within the art world. If, as suggested, the neo-avant-gardes left behind the cultural and critical elements by praising immediate provocation, together with the thrill of fashion and communication, Perniola maintains, this marks the return of the thinker to the arena in order to legitimise what can be considered as art. One of Perniola's concerns is precisely the lack of theoretical perspectives in the artistic environments. In an interview released in 2001 he claimed: “Negli ultimi anni c'è stato un pericoloso abbandono della dimensione teorica, tanto dagli artisti ma ancora di più dai critici: la critica d'arte si è ridotta alla pura promozione o pubblicizzazione del prodotto artistico” (2001, 54). Thus, a return to a more theoretical attitude is welcomed by Perniola, for it means re-evaluating programs, poetics, and manifestos which were essential aspects of historical avant-gardes. Perniola does not wish to return, nostalgically, into modernism and vanguardism. He believes that, nonetheless, the “transgressive” role of traditional avant-gardes, alongside

with the theoretical coherence of their perspectives and claims, could encourage a shift from mere quantitative discourses to qualitative ones.

Another of Castelli's arguments is that Perniola has a fundamental flaw in criticising *tout-court* the second half of the twentieth century's art as entirely accomplice to economic and communicative purposes. He claims: "Con una premessa fallace (tutta l'arte contemporanea è da gettare? Tutti gli artisti, tutti i critici, anche Rauschenberg, l'Arte Povera, Arthur Danto, Hal Foster, per fare solo quattro esempi?) è prevedibile che lo svolgimento della tesi risulti viziato" (2016, online source). I would both agree and disagree with this claim. On the one hand it is true that Perniola, as already suggested in the case of *La società dei simulacri*, provides broader interpretations to discuss patterns he believes to be dominant in a specific context. In so doing, authors and thinkers which do not fall, so to speak, within this pattern, might remain less visible. Nonetheless, it is not true that Perniola considers all the artists, critics and movements – as Castelli argues – to be discarded as economically and capitalistically oriented. His effort is, on the contrary, precisely that of trying to theorise a conceptual framework for those who wish to resist the *status quo*, and at the same time exploring and opening alternative experiential and practical dimensions.

This sub-chapter has focused on Perniola's last book on art theory, *L'arte espansa*. To recapitulate, the Italian philosopher claims that the 2013 Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, destabilised the art world by changing the very idea of labeling something as art. To be specific, it replaced the traditional notion of transgression with that of encyclopedicity. This change implies new ways of legitimising works and authors. In the Biennale, Gioni's operation was to collect under the encyclopedic criterion everything considered as "fringe", meaning marginal, alternative and minor. The distinction between Insider Art and Outsider Art does not hold true anymore, according to Perniola. In so doing, the economic artistic bubble that emerged in the Sixties with the Pop Art has exploded. Has it been replaced by an even larger, or to borrow Perniola's terms, "expanded" bubble? On the one hand, the Italian philosopher seems to support Gioni's operation in so far as it allows a greater recognition to accrue to

unconventional phenomena. On the other hand, he is well aware that the expansion of the art world might result in a new economic bubble, leading to speculation over objects that up until now, at least, were not touched by financial commodification.

### *The Art Work as a Thing*

So far, this chapter has developed Perniola's perspective on three pivotal moments of contemporary art: the first sub-chapter focused on the neo-avant-gardes; the second on the extreme realism of the Nineties; the third on the so-called fringe turning point of the 2013 Venice Biennale. Perniola has always tried to keep pace, so to speak, with the latest art trends, trying to provide a conceptual framework capable of explaining and taking into account the complexity of the artistic environment. In so doing several concepts, such as "artistic fashion", "artistic fetish", "extreme realism", "expanded art", and "fringe turning point" emerged. Although in the previous sub-chapter I have shown that Perniola, to a certain extent, also praises the current art world, I have not clearly formulated what I consider to be Perniola's core position on contemporary art. This final sub-chapter is devoted to develop his main theoretical standpoint on the subject.

Perniola's polemical targets within the art world are various. In the previous chapter I highlighted the main two: the ideology of power which uses art practices as political tools, and, on the other side, the idea that creativity stems from melancholic and tormented individuals, supposedly belonging to superior "geniuses". Ideology limits art to a justification of the ruling powers; the saturnine genius debases art as an ineffectual and idealistic activity. In this chapter, the critical targets, as suggested, have been principally located in the intertwining of art and market capitalism. This union, alongside the combined actions of merchants, gallery owners, and artistic enterprises, subordinates artistic activities to the pure value of economic exchange. If Perniola, in his early writings, proposed the

“overcoming of art”, or, rather, the dissolution of art in favor of a fully realised creativity at a collective level, what does he propose later? So far, I have examined Perniola’s critiques of the current art world, included particularly in *La società dei simulacri*, *L’arte e la sua ombra*, and *L’arte espansa*. This chapter will focus less on the exploration of these critiques and more on Perniola’s peculiar perspective. What emerges from these texts, as I will argue, is that Perniola has always sought an alternative way, in the effort of re-thinking the intertwining of art and the economic world on one side and, on the other, of disentangling art from abstract and spiritualistic conceptions.

Perniola’s developments on contemporary art go hand in hand with his broader philosophical perspective, which is particularly sensitive to the notion of difference<sup>6</sup>. In order to understand Perniola’s interpretation of the notion of difference within his theory of art, it is useful to provide a broader philosophical and conceptual clarification.

At a theoretical level, a transition from Hegelian dialectic to the thinking of difference occurred within Perniola’s thought. As I have shown, in *L’alienazione artistica* Perniola shared the Situationist assumption – heir to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition – that art had to undergo a triadic or dialectical transformation: from its initial abstract and alienated state (thesis) to a radical critique (antithesis) up to its concretisation in a new collective form, able to realise individual creativity and desire (synthesis). Perniola deviates from this dialectical movement as he believes it fails to think the negative, contradictory and conflictual element to its very end. In fact, by advocating a final synthesis, that is, a new unity after the dialectic contradiction, it tames, so to speak, the conflict into a greater final conciliation. In doing so, the conflict, within dialectics, is thought as something always already reconciled. Essential to traditional Hegelian aesthetics, according to Perniola, is the temporary nature of the negative moment: “la prefigurazione di una fine del conflitto, di una pace a venire, di un momento irenico, in cui il dolore e la lotta sono, se non definitivamente soppressi, almeno temporaneamente sospesi” (Perniola 2000, 19). In other

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<sup>6</sup> See First Section, Chapter 1 and 3, and Second Section, Chapter 1.

words, the dialectic fails to see the surplus, the overabundance of the negative and conflictual element that allows the difference to emerge. The thought of difference is therefore understood by Perniola as “l’esperienza di un conflitto più grande della contraddizione dialettica, verso l’esplorazione dell’opposizione fra termini che non sono simmetricamente polari l’uno rispetto all’altro” (20). Perniola, to give an example, takes up Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In fact, Freud elaborates the notion of the unconscious in opposition to the pre-conscious / conscious system. However, between these two elements the opposition is not thought in a traditional way, i.e. according to the principles of identity and dialectical contradiction. Between unconscious and conscience there is in fact an *asymmetrical opposition* (Perniola 1978), since the former never manifests itself fully on the scene (although ever-present in each individual’s daily life). The unconscious, in fact, appears indirectly through compromise formations, such as dreams, slips of the tongue, forgetfulness and so on. The difference, in this case, emerges as a type of thought in which notions such as a-symmetry, non-identity – that is, of experiences far from the traditional philosophical logic, both Aristotelian and Hegelian – fall.

The point that Perniola emphasises is precisely that there is a leap between dialectics and the thought of difference. The former is based on logical-theoretical speculation and has its roots in concepts such as non-contradiction and identity; the second is rather closer to the sphere of *feeling*. Feeling, unlike abstract speculation, is connected with a more empirical, bodily dimension, which also includes impure, disturbing, uncanny, ambivalent, psychopathological, and equivocal phenomena. Feeling, unlike dialectics and logic, does not have its purpose in the need for completeness and final reconciliation. On the contrary, it is a type of sensitivity that opens the door to psychopathologies, drug addictions, perversions<sup>7</sup>. Perniola is here influenced by several “thinkers of the difference”, such as Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot and Michelstaedter. For the purpose of this chapter, I will concentrate on the notion of difference within the artistic domain, trying to

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<sup>7</sup> See Second Section 2, Chapter 1.

provide an answer for the following questions: what is the relationship between the artistic object and difference? How can the work of art be thought within the problematic of difference? From the very formulation of these two questions a clear difference between Perniola's early and later writings can be highlighted. If between 1966 and 1972 the concept of "art work" implied the immobilisation and the mummification of the creative energies into a motionless, reifying and alienating object, here the opposite holds true: the work of art is pivotal as it is able to convey the idea of difference. This change in Perniola is due, I would argue, to a new and more elaborate conception of the "thing". The status of the work of art as a thing is explicitly set out by Perniola himself in this passage:

Contrariamente alla tesi platonica che considera l'arte come imitazione della natura, come mimesi, qui si attribuisce all'opera lo stesso statuto delle cose reali, secondo una tradizione che affonda le sue radici nella cultura dell'antico Egitto [...] ciò che colpisce nell'antica esperienza egizia dell'arte è il fatto che essa attribuisce alle opere facoltà sensoriali; alle statue è attribuito il potere di vedere i visitatori dei templi. I confini tra l'organico e l'inorganico sono aboliti e l'opera d'arte appare come un corpo vivente [...] (Perniola 1992, 82)

In Perniola's early writings the *thing* is synonymous of reification, inert objectivity, if not even complicity with the capitalist mindset, devoted to the consumerist accumulation of goods and things. In the quoted passage the thing is instead attributed other complex characteristics. I have devoted the first chapter of the second section to the deepening of the notion of "thing" in Perniola, so here I will only focus on some aspects pertinent to the artistic context. To recapitulate, the dimension of the thing, for Perniola, is opened up by three key notions: the "neutral"; the "external" and the "radiant". Neutral is intended by Perniola as a process of osmosis between organic and inorganic. From Paleolithic engravings and ancient Egyptian religiosity, to the reticular ecologies of current digital society, Perniola investigates phenomena where subjects and objects are neither entirely organic nor totally inorganic, but *transorganic*, implying an interchange

between what is alive and what is inert. This dimension, according to him, opens up the doors to a neutral dimension of feeling, where subjectivity disappears and what is personal (“I feel”) becomes impersonal (“it is felt”).

The “external” is characterised above all by the experience of becoming-thing. I specifically focused<sup>8</sup> on the idea of becoming-mirror, namely a reflecting surface, capable of gathering in the world and its heterogeneous manifestations. Turning into a thing, therefore, implies a disposition of acceptance towards the world, similar to the Stoic *amor fati* (*love of fate*). I have also developed, in the final chapter of the second section, the several affinities Baudelaire’s dandyism shares with Perniola’s interpretation of the thing. The French dandy, in fact, embodies, in his aesthetically-oriented lifestyle, the crucial features on which Perniola builds his theory of the thing<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, the thing is seen by Perniola not as a dull, fixed, and stable entity, but as a continuously changing one. Taking up Wittgenstein’s and Freud’s works, Perniola dwells on the “radiation” of things, namely the fact that they can be at times surprising, at times repellent, disturbing, or attractive. The thing in turn, far from being the fixation of alienated creativity into an object – as it was in *L’alienazione artistica* – is for Perniola a new experiential territory to explore and further investigate.

To think the artistic work as a “thing” means taking into account the three fundamental components briefly summarised. For Perniola, in fact, the art work is not a thing in the sense of a static, inert object, incapable of change – a bearer, so to speak, of the logic of identity. Nor is it the ultimate end of a process of reification of the individual. On the contrary, it can “radiate”, it can be “uncanny”, it implies a transit between organic and inorganic. In other words, as I will shortly clarify, from the art work a surplus stems, an excessive content which goes beyond surfaces and forms. To put it in other words, the work of art is never just an *object*, it is a *thing*<sup>10</sup>. As Farris Wahbeh points out, commenting on Perniola’s conclusions in *L’arte e la sua ombra*: “Perniola reconceptualises the art

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<sup>8</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on the distinction between *object* and *thing*, see Second Section, Chapter 1.

object as an entity that plays a larger role in human interaction, that interacts with the human body” (Wahbeh 2006, 493). Or, to use Alberto Bertozzi’s remarks: “What makes Perniola’s discourse worth reflecting upon, I maintain, is the fact that it is a completely different direction for aesthetics: neither upward, towards harmonious beauty, nor downward, toward a mystification of its apparent opposite (ie, ugliness and abjection) but towards the ‘beside’ of the thing” (2005, 376). Thus, the “artistic thing” – as it could be named – elaborated by Perniola, does not involve an ascensional idealism or, to the contrary, a focus on earthly abjection (as was the case for most Nineties art). In other words, neither loyalty to the “aura” (that is, the metaphysical feature of the art work) nor to the abject and the disgusting. Neither high nor low but lateral. It implies that the artwork is an in-between entity that flourishes at the margins and not at the heights and the bottoms.

Perniola, in order to clarify his thought, writes of *lights* and *shadows* regarding the art work. On the one hand there is the light, represented by all the discourses of the institutions, the market and the communication apparatuses cast upon the thing. In recent decades, Perniola claims in an interview released in 2001, the economic aspect of cultural practices and activities has been dramatically growing. Museums all over the world continue to multiply exponentially and involve many other commercial fields. For instance, Bilbao’s Guggenheim has become a strong enterprise from which not only artistic boutiques but tourism in general, including new hotels, restaurants and shops, flourishes. Thus, museums and exhibitions have become, Perniola argues, similar to carnivals, fairs, or amusement parks. Perniola’s concern, in this context, is not that art has become more and more “democratic”, trying to establish a closer dialogue with the audience. It is rather a theoretical issue: if artists and art works are involved in ephemeral processes of production, fruition, and destruction, that is, “artistic fashions”, what happens to the very idea of art? If, traditionally, the Western idea of art implies a work that lasts longer than the author’s life, which could be transmitted to future generations, what happens with short-termed oriented art works and artistic practices? The major risk is that the capitalist mindset floods the artistic environment, transforming the art works into artistic products or fetishes where quantity counts more than quality. To

put it in other words, an environment in which money is far more important than creativity.

Perniola's response to this *status quo* is to highlight the necessity of keeping the "other side" of art alive. Figuratively speaking, wherever there is a light there must be a shadow. Thus, Perniola argues, in spite and because of light, a shadow is projected at the margins of the art work. The art work has a "remainder" (*resto*), an excessive element, which Perniola defines as its "shadow". The shadow represents the enigmatic core of the art work which survives beyond the light of economy and communication. Precisely in this enigmatic feature Perniola sees the notion of difference, entailing "l'idea che sussista nell'arte come nella filosofia qualcosa di irriducibile ai processi di normalizzazione e di standardizzazione in atto nella società" (Perniola 2004, 94-5).

This remainder is something that Perniola does not explain and does not explore carefully within *L'arte e la sua ombra*. Renato Barilli, commenting on the book, states that the main thesis it proposes is "criptica, evocativa ma scarsamente comprovata" (Barilli 2000, 12). In my opinion, looking for the meaning of the "shadow" exclusively within *L'arte e la sua ombra* might well leave the reader puzzled and confused. It is better understood through other texts, where Perniola focuses on the neutral, thingly, and external dimension of the material world (such as *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, *Transiti*, *Enigmi*, and *Del sentire*). From these texts it appears clearer that Perniola's goal is to elaborate what he refers to as the "third regime of art" (*terzo regime dell'arte*): against the economic homogenisation of art, and against the upward and downward movements respectively of spiritualism and abjection, Perniola praises a third alternative. This alternative, at a closer look, consists in Perniola's overall effort to re-think contemporary society through several traditions of thought and authors (from Stoicism to Baroque literature, to Jesuit thought and Situationism).

From this philosophical path, Perniola coined or developed several notions, such as "enigma", "transit", "ritual without myth", "simulacrum", and "thing". The idea of the "shadow" is, I would argue, the prosecution of this common thread within the art domain. As I have argued throughout this

thesis, one of Perniola's main objectives is to investigate current phenomena and experiences without falling into traditional metaphysical interpretations. For instance, besides the opposition between original and copy, he elaborates the simulacrum; besides the ideas of pure ritualism and mythological perspectives, he elaborates the ritual without myth; besides the polarity between organic and inorganic, he elaborates the idea of a more complex and intertwining entity, the thing. This list, I would argue, could cover all the main concepts on which Perniola focused throughout his writings. The same holds true for art: against the opposition between economy and spirituality and the polarity between "aura" and mechanical reproducibility, he explores the idea of the art work as an artistic "thing" which possesses a "shadow". The shadow is within the orbital discourse of the difference, for Perniola, because it implies considering the art work as a thing, that is, as a radical heterogeneity, an experience which rejects quantitative and economic appropriations.

The work of art, moreover, does not exhaust the author's intentions, as further studies and interpretations might open new hermeneutical and experiential possibilities. Therefore, for Perniola, besides the poetics for which a given work of art is created, it is pivotal to focus on its minor, residual, and unspoken aspects. To sum up, on the one hand the work of art, entangled in the economic realms (the *light*), embodies the ultimate reduction of things in the pure value of exchange, but on the other, it opens the dimension of difference (the *shadow*).

At a closer inspection, Perniola's conclusion can be seen here both as continuation and as reversal of the main thesis he developed in his early philosophical years. In the first chapter of this section I underlined how for Perniola art, although being an alienated manifestation of creativity, nonetheless allows the conditions for this (partial) creativity to exist. In *L'arte e la sua ombra*, Perniola uses the notions of "creativity" and "alienation" far less and those of "difference" and "economy" much more. If the two terms are swapped, a similar conclusion appears at first sight. In fact, it is correct to claim that in both cases Perniola considers the art realm as a complex intertwining of alienation/economy and creativity/difference. The crucial distinction lies on two specific points.

Firstly, the distinctive meanings given to the notions employed. Creativity, for instance, is considered within a subjectivist horizon – the realisation of one’s own unique desire – whereas difference is considered in the context of the experience of desubjectivation – i.e. of becoming-thing. In addition, a major difference can be found in the divergent proposal put forth after the analysis of the *status quo*. In his early writings, Perniola argues that it is necessary to elaborate a project for the total realisation of creativity within collective social life. In contrast, in his later writings, he does not propose the end of the economy by praising a revolutionary creativity. He accepts – so to speak – the economic dimension of artistic objects and yet he states that this dimension does not exhaust the work of art. Precisely what resists and goes beyond the economic side of the art work is what, for Perniola, should be looked at.

What appears to be a constitutive ambiguity of the art world can be clarified by referring to a chapter of *L’arte e la sua ombra* entitled “Idiozia e splendore dell’arte contemporanea”. Specifically, Perniola states that the extreme realism of the Nineties can be understood in two different ways, namely idiocy and splendour. “Idiotic” realism has already been analysed previously. It consists in proposing as post-human what is actually only the culminating and destructive moment of the vital. In fact, by overlapping vitalism and realism, idiotic realism provides an ideological and partial version of the notion of the real. For Perniola, in fact, the real cannot be simply traced back to the empirical vital element, but needs to be investigated taking into account ambiguous, disturbing, repellent-and-attractive experiences, in which there is an exchange between the thingly and the organic elements, between the linguistic and the non-linguistic ones. Perniola reaches the conclusion that current art can be both seen in its idiocy and its splendour. Ultimately, post-human art could be positively regarded if “realism” means a multifaceted and much more complex idea of reality.

Similarly, as I have pointed out earlier, the “fringe” turning point of art can be regarded as well both positively and negatively. On the one hand Gioni’s encyclopedic catalogue takes into account numerous experiences of difference. On the other, it can lead to a melting pot of futility and fuzziness. Here too, therefore, Perniola does not entirely criticise contemporary art but,

so to speak, interprets and accepts it in its constitutive ambiguity – that is, in its possibility of being both idiocy and splendour, teeming with fringe, anti-metaphysical experiences and the risk of providing endless combinations of interchangeable futile objects. Perniola’s thought is an in-between thought, which moves within the contemporary art world and at the same time outside of it; that is, the Italian philosopher tries to understand current logics (mercantile and communicative) and at the same time tries to identify the potentially surprising, wonderful elements, capable of provoking amazement and uncanny experiences.

In the next chapter, I will compare Perniola’s idea of the “shadow” with Wilde’s claims about art. In fact, as I will clarify, the Irish dandy proposes a conception of the art work that shares relevant affinities with that of Perniola. Specifically, both of them consider the art work in itself only as a starting point to be further developed and explored. Although Perniola has never quoted Wilde in his writings on art, he echoes several of his conclusions. In Wilde’s essays I have traced the occurrences of notions such as “mystery”, “secret”, “wonder” which are employed in order to characterise the art work. Both thinkers, I would argue, claim that the art world – although involved in a growing process of commodification – should not be abandoned or regarded as an alienating and reifying realm. On the contrary, they focus on the excessive, hidden, and creative remainders which can still be developed and explored.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have developed Perniola’s theory of art after 1966-1972. Specifically, the first three sub-chapters have provided a chronologically oriented enquiry on Perniola’s criticism of contemporary art, whereas the fourth and last sub-chapter has been devoted to investigating his underlying perspective on art theory. The first sub-chapter revolved around the book *La società dei simulacri*, published in 1980,

which contains the Italian philosopher's standpoint on the neo-avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth-century. For Perniola it is not correct to label the neo-avant-gardes as "artistic movements" in which "art works" are involved. Instead, he claims that they should be considered "artistic fashions" involving "artistic fetishes". Where artistic movements are based on the notion of "transgression" of the *status quo*, artistic fashions provide an ephemeral trend which is always replaced immediately by a more up-to-date one. In addition, the hyperbolic economical evaluation of their objects makes them closer to commodity fetishes than to products of creativity.

In the following sub-chapter I focused on Perniola's analysis of Nineties art, included in *L'arte e la sua ombra*. Despite the fact that a lot of those exhibitions, artists and artworks are classified as post-human, they are in fact the ultimate manifestation of the human. Perniola claims, on the contrary, that in the violent display of abjection, typical of the traumatising art of the Nineties, a partial and weak interpretation of the notion of the real is carried forward.

In the third sub-chapter I focused on Perniola's final effort in interpreting the current art world: *L'arte espansa*. This book explores what Perniola refers to as the fringe turning point of art, occurring with the 2013 Venice Biennale curated by Massimiliano Gioni. The turning point consists in the shift from the notion of transgression and pseudo-transgression (belonging respectively to the historical avant-gardes and the neo-avant-gardes) to that of encyclopedicity. The criterion on which Gioni based his encyclopedia is the notion of "fringe". By praising lateral, marginal, and minor authors, artists, writers, directors and philosophers, Perniola praised Gioni's operation. According to the Italian philosopher, in fact, the art world is finally embracing what is normally left outside of it, such as the experiences of minorities in general (psychopaths, animals, children, but also esoterists, visionaries, outsiders etc.).

In the last sub-chapter, I focused on Perniola's perspective of art as difference. To recapitulate, the democratisation of art, which goes together with the multiplication of exhibitions and Biennales around the world, boosted the process of transformation of cultural practices into economic enterprises. In so doing, "le opere d'arte oggi durano come i vestiti o i

computer” (Perniola 2001b, 54). In order to avoid a complete commodification and homogenisation of the art world within the economic realm, Perniola claims that it is necessary to protect and focus on the enigmatic aspects that the art works possess. He refers to these aspects with the term “shadow”, naming a hidden, darker dimension which is not infested – so to speak – by the lights of communication and the logics of cultural capitalism. The role of the thinker is on the one hand guarding these resistance elements; on the other hand s/he has to further explore and develop the dimension of the “thing” which is opened up by the art work.

To conclude, I would argue that his thinking is fundamentally Heracliteian. In fact the world appears to Perniola in its *enantiodromia*, that is, in the possibility that things can change into their opposites, showing hidden and darker sides. Things do not appear as transparent and irreducible to themselves but, on the contrary, in their constitutive ambiguity and ambivalence. Several key concepts I have analysed in this thesis recur in this context. Even within the art world Perniola ultimately fosters Ignatian thought<sup>11</sup>, for which individuals should accept their present, trying to silence their desires and beliefs. Being able to listen to the *difference* inscribed in the present, one must paradoxically live according to a thought of *indifference* – in other words, in a neutral, desubjectivated dimension, in order to approach each manifestation of the world (including the art world) without ideological prejudices. Only in this way, according to Perniola, can an interpreter of the contemporary world avoid getting lost in reactionary nostalgia or utopian futurism.

In this regard Perniola echoes Baudelaire’s perspective in *The Painter of Modern Life*<sup>12</sup>, for which the dandy, metaphorically speaking, should know how to paint modernity without taking refuge in the beautiful creations of the past. The dandy, in fact, must know how to extract what is beautiful from every age. This dandy lesson, so to speak, is incorporated by Perniola throughout his entire philosophy, not least – as this thesis argues – in the context of art. In addition, Perniola widens and expands the characteristics of the thing to cover the human and organic realms. In other

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<sup>11</sup> See First Section, Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 3.

words, the neutral dimension – as it should be clear now – does not belong only to inert objects, but also to vital beings. In this sense, my general aim is to show how the dandy's lifestyle consists precisely in the embodiment of Perniola's notion of the thing.

The next chapter will focus on the last exemplar dandy I have chosen to put side by side with Perniola's thought. After the English Regency archetypal dandyism of George Bryan Brummell and the aristocratic dandyism of the French poet Charles Baudelaire: the subversive witticism of the Irish dandy Oscar Wilde.

### Chapter 3

#### Oscar Wilde, or the In-Between Dandy

##### *Introduction*

The previous two chapters of this section revolved around Perniola's theory of art. In the first, I discussed Perniola's early writings, from 1966 to 1972, heavily influenced by the countercultural atmosphere of the time. In the second, I focused on his subsequent writings, from 1980 up to 2015. It emerged that Perniola neither re-evaluates the "auratic" element of the art work, nor praises an idealistic or revolutionary utopianism. As I argued, Perniola is interested instead in excessive, enigmatic, and uncanny features of the art work to which he refers to by the term "shadow". Unlike his *L'alienazione artistica*, Perniola's later writings do not entirely condemn the market and communication apparatuses: rather, the attention is drawn to what lies in the hidden and darker sides of the "artistic thing".

The aim of this concluding chapter is to explore Oscar Wilde's perspective on art, showing in what terms it can be related to Perniola's overall theory investigated throughout this chapter. Specifically, the first sub-chapter will underline the recurrent dandyish standpoints emerging in Wilde's theory. I will show the continuity between Brummell's,

Baudelaire's and Wilde's dandyism by focusing on four core ideas: the anti-bourgeois mindset; the cultivation of elegance and exteriority; the search for beauty in one's own age; and the praise of artificiality against nature. We shall see common traits linking Wilde to Brummell and Baudelaire, traits to which Perniola's philosophy has been related.

The second sub-chapter will delve into the relationship between Wilde's dandyism and the emerging mass culture of the late nineteenth century. Several scholars have criticised Wilde's figure by claiming that, although ostensibly opposed to Victorian values and moralities on the one hand, and the emerging means of mass communication on the other (the press, large scale editions, trendy magazines and journals etc.), he himself was continuously involved in and influenced by the very *Zeitgeist* he despised<sup>1</sup>. In other words, if Wilde proclaimed himself against the vulgarity of money and profit, or against journalism and the opinion of the "mass", at the same time he was a journalist, targeting and writing for middle and upper class audiences. A contradiction between his standpoints and his institutional roles appears. Nonetheless, drawing from Regenia Gagnier's research on Wilde and the Victorian public (1987), I claim that in spite of taking part in an early-stage "cultural industry", Wilde was a subversive dandy and writer. Specifically, his ironic witticism shares several characteristics with the avant-garde practice of the *detournement* ("diversion"), praised by both the Situationists and Perniola. In other words, as I will show, only at a first glance can Wilde's work be considered compromised by the Victorian values and the communication apparatuses of the time. His aim was to use the new technological tools in order to subvert them from within, and make art possible notwithstanding the growing commodification of tastes.

Finally, the third sub-chapter will revolve around Wilde's essay *The Critic As Artist*, where his conception of art criticism and art in general is developed. As I will clarify, Wilde claims that the art work can be considered as a *living thing*, an ever-changing aesthetic form which is

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<sup>1</sup> See Guy and Small 2004; Moers 1960.

echoed, I would argue, by Perniola's theory of the "inorganic" and by his notion of "shadow".

### *Recurrent Dandy Ideas in Oscar Wilde*

Oscar Wilde (Dublin 1854 – Paris 1900) was not only an internationally renowned dandy at the end of the nineteenth century (especially well-known in Ireland, the United Kingdom, France and the USA). Like Charles Baudelaire (and unlike Brummell), in addition to an aesthetically oriented lifestyle, he published numerous writings. He was in fact a poet, a playwright, a novelist, an essayist and a journalist. In the wide panorama of Wilde's writings, this thesis dwells specifically on his essays. In fact, the Irish dandy – while maintaining the typical witty prose of his most acclaimed literary works – develops his perspective on art and society clearly and cohesively precisely in his essays<sup>2</sup>. By exploring Wilde's essays and the scholarly literature on the subject I will show in what terms Perniola's philosophy shares theoretical affinities with Wilde.

To begin with, four core ideas of dandyism recur in Wilde. First, the criticism of the bourgeois mindset; second, the privilege accorded to the artificial over the natural; third, the cult of exteriority, form and elegance against vulgarity and triviality; fourth, the search for beauty in one's own age. In this sub-chapter I will focus primarily on these four ideas within Wilde's dandyism. Thus my first aim will be to demonstrate the continuity between Brummell, Baudelaire and Wilde – and, in the process, with Perniola.

Wilde himself establishes a theoretical connection with Baudelaire. Specifically, in *The Relation of Dress to Art* (released in the fashion magazine *Pall Mall Gazette*), Wilde focuses, in addition to the themes of clothing and aesthetics, on the broader relationship between artists and their

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<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in his novels and poems his underlying perspective tends to be – for narrative purposes – diluted and fragmented.

own age. In doing so he quotes the following passage from Baudelaire's *Salon of 1846*: "les grands coloristes savent faire de la couleur avec un habit noir, une cravate blanche, et un fond gris"<sup>3</sup> (Wilde 1995, 51). As suggested earlier in this thesis, Baudelaire considered the dandy a "painter of modern life" – that is to say, a figure capable of extracting beauty from the contingent and transient features of contemporaneity. This element of contingency is precisely what Baudelaire called "modernity", and which Wilde himself seems to have included within his own aesthetic perspective: "the true artist does not wait for life to be made picturesque for him, but sees life under picturesque conditions always [...] under certain conditions of light and shade, what is ugly in fact may in its effect become beautiful, is true; and this, indeed, is the real *modernité* of art" (Wilde 1995, 51). Or again, in another passage within his *Lecture to Art Students*, he states: "Do not wait for life to be picturesque, but try and see life under picturesque conditions" (129). Hence, the idea of an effectual beauty, which has the strength – so to speak – to manifest itself concretely in the world, recurs several times in Wilde's work.

Beauty, for Wilde as for Baudelaire, does not depend on objective canons, in which the harmony, proportions and unity of the parts play an essential role. The aesthetics of the dandies – like Perniola's – is not an objective but a strategic, worldly type of beauty which takes into account everyday life in its multiform manifestations. In addition, as developed in the third chapter of the second section of this thesis, Baudelaire's poetry, according to Perniola, is guided by the notion of *over-interest*<sup>4</sup>, as against the traditional idea of aesthetic *disinterest*. Wilde shares this anti-traditional and anti-academic standpoint when he writes: "Art is not thought to be taught in Academies. It is what one looks at, not what one listens to, that makes the artist. The real schools should be the streets" (1995, 53). Why should art not be taught in academies? Why should the streets be instead privileged? Wilde, by opposing academies and streets, alongside the use of his famous ironic witticism, stresses the idea that academies provide an

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<sup>3</sup> "The great colourists know how to create colour with a black coat, a white cravat and a grey background" (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 3.

overly abstract and ideal conception of beauty, and that, on the other side, the streets can – so to speak – counterbalance the passivity of institutions. The streets represent the chance to see and to participate with all the senses – not only the passive hearing of the lecture hall – in the atmosphere of modernity, grasping its architecture, design, styles, clothing, and fashion. In this sense, according to Wilde, the streets work as “real schools” that demand the dandy and the artist adopt a lifestyle receptive towards their own present. In this context the first duty of the dandy consists in being able to find and extract the conditions of beauty and of the picturesque.

Another passage which shows the influence Baudelaire had on Wilde can be traced in a lecture he delivered in New York on January 9 1882, entitled *The English Renaissance of Art*. Here Wilde, focusing in particular on the pre-Raphaelite movement, appears to be profoundly influenced by the French poet (although the latter is not explicitly mentioned). Firstly, Wilde returns to the critique of traditional philosophical aesthetics, stating at the very beginning of the lecture: “I will not try to give you any abstract definition of beauty – any such universal formula for it as was sought for by the philosophy of the eighteenth century” (1995, 3). Wilde’s polemical targets are above all those thinkers belonging to the Enlightenment, such as Kant, who elaborated the conditions of possibility for the universality of the judgement of taste within the aesthetic field. Secondly, a few pages later, he echoes the Baudelarian distinction between the two elements of beauty, the eternal and the ephemeral<sup>5</sup>.

To recapitulate, for Baudelaire beauty possesses two distinctive features. Firstly, an eternal aspect corresponding to the artistic and aesthetic behaviour of man. Mankind has always produced heterogeneous manifestations of beauty, from the Palaeolithic caves to contemporary art. At the same time, it has a relative aspect, peculiar to each age, that makes beauty endlessly unique and specific. In other words, beauty always exists, yet is never a mere repetition of itself. Again, Wilde echoes Baudelaire’s position: “The artist is indeed the child of his own age, but the present will not be to him a whit more real than the past; for, like the philosopher of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Second Section, Chapter 3.

Platonic vision, the poet is the spectator of all time and of all existence. For him no form is obsolete, no subject out of date [...] There is indeed a poetical attitude to be adopted towards all things” (13). In this passage Wilde claims that the artist is “child of his own age”, thus reiterating the connection between modernity and beauty; in addition, he points out that, since man has always produced artistic “forms”, he also is invited to explore everything that has been done before him: “For beauty is the only thing that time cannot harm. Philosophies fall away like sand, and creeds follow one another like the withered leaves of autumn; but what is beautiful is a joy for all seasons and a possession for all eternity” (21). In his poetic prose, Wilde departs from a Western point of view based on an idea of form linked to permanence (unlike, for instance, the Eastern Buddhist tradition based on impermanence). That is to say, although ancient Roman and Greek Gods – for instance – were replaced by other ones, yet, Wilde continues, architecture, sculpture, poetry and art is what is capable of surviving in spite of the passing of centuries. The “forms” of the past work as a testimony of human artistic behaviour throughout history. Forms, intended in this way, are not to be considered merely as potentially endless structures, buildings or works. They also provide a glimpse of what Wilde calls the “common intellectual atmosphere between all countries” (21). In so doing, Wilde refers to a shared, recurring attitude towards beauty and artistic attitudes.

Wilde’s notion of form does not refer only to figurative art. For example in *The Truth of Masks* he elaborates a philosophy of clothes by focusing on Shakespeare’s theatre. If there is an archaeology of buildings, Wilde maintains, there also should be an archaeology of clothing. Where the former helps us understand a historical period’s aesthetics and architectonic techniques, the latter gives us crucial information regarding the manners, rituals, clothing trends, and broadly speaking the lifestyles and social conditions peculiar to it. Exteriority is understood by Wilde as a dimension worth exploring, as in its communicative richness it provides on the one hand information for the historian and on the other for the dandy and the artist, by bringing the past back to life:

The ancient world wakes from its sleep, and history moves as a pageant before our eyes, without obliging us to have recourse to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia for the perfection of our enjoyment. (Wilde 1987, 1006)

Wilde, in this passage, claims that aesthetics should be appreciated and can be properly understood only if it involves human senses in their complexity. A book – for instance – is not able to stimulate hearing and only in a limited way sight and touch. Thus, according to Wilde, it is most likely to produce a poor aesthetic experience based on visual abstraction. This in turn implies that aesthetics must not remain stuck within academies and encyclopaedias but should be actualised in life. Precisely for this reason Wilde saw in the dandyish attitude the proper lifestyle in which to continuously live under the sign of aesthetics and elegant life. His main objective was indeed to *become* a work of art, and not just to *produce* them<sup>6</sup>.

Aesthetically-oriented lifestyles are also cultivated by dandies to distinguish themselves from the bourgeois mentality. Wilde, like Brummell and Baudelaire before him, considers notions such as “utility”, “profit”, “quantity”, and “function” to be at odds with dandyism. For example, he states: “Each of the professions means a prejudice. We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid. And, harsh though it may sound, I can't help saying that such people deserve their doom. The sure way of knowing nothing about life is to try to make oneself useful” (1987, 981). Just as did Brummell and Baudelaire, Wilde despises the principle of utility. Being useful, for the dandies, means devoting the individual's efforts to a profession, a function, a job, and thus depending on a series of duties and values which are not worth following within an aesthetically-oriented lifestyle.

These claims are echoed in another essay by Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, which is devoted to, among other things, a critique of the late nineteenth century capitalist society. Wilde, in fact, criticises the very

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<sup>6</sup> Perniola also dwells on the unity between aesthetics and life, especially in his interpretation of Gracià's Baroque precepts. See Second Section, Chapter 2.

idea of private property. According to him, an individual who employs all his time, energies and abilities to obtain property and then laboriously work to maintain it literally becomes a slave who loses the joy of living (1995, 1022). In other words, since, according to Wilde, all people potentially have creative energies, the duty of the state should be not to allow citizens to find an employment and keep it as long as possible, but, on the contrary, to free them from the fatigue of working. Similarly to Marx, who had criticised the alienation of the worker, Wilde borrows several core themes of the nineteenth century's socialist and communist ideologies. He even goes further by praising technology and automated working machines as they could replace men in doing their jobs. Wilde's claims, I would argue, anticipate those of the Situationists (heirs of the Marxist tradition) and of the collective creativity praised by Perniola in his early writings. In fact, here, too, the distinction between survival and life is outlined, that is, between an existence subjugated to a salary in order to survive – which never puts into question the *status quo* – and an existence that, according to both Wilde and the Situationists, is grounded upon an authentic realisation of human creativity. In his invective against work and private property, Wilde anticipates the Situationist motto “ne travaillez jamais” (*never work*) by almost 90 years. Working in a capitalist society means – for this common thread of thought – approving and maintaining an oppressive apparatus, which consists of the collective realisation of slavery, and not transgression and creativity.

Wilde speaks of socialism in so far as it leads to a new kind of individualism. Specifically, Wilde distinguishes two types of individualisms, one erroneous and one genuine (1987, 1022). The first is individualism understood in a pejorative sense, meaning what is commonly understood by thinking only of oneself. This implies an individualism that confuses “a man with what he possesses” (1022). In other words, the individualism present in capitalist societies implies a shift from being to having, that is, from having power over one's own life, to simply being an accumulator of objects, capitals, properties etc. Socialism then, thought of by Wilde as that form of government which converts private property into public wealth (1019), transforms competition into cooperation for the

benefit and the well-being of everyone. However the ultimate goal of socialism is, according to Wilde, to allow everyone to be fully and genuinely individualistic. Here the other form of individualism comes into play. According to Wilde individualism does not mean being selfish, but rather the opposite.

Common morality praises altruism and deplores individualism. For Wilde the opposite holds true. If altruism does not aim at subverting an oppressive order, it works only as a momentary palliative, an ephemeral relief which ultimately never puts into question the poverty and the misery of the masses. Instead, through socialism<sup>7</sup>, freed from the burden of work and property, people can finally employ their time and skills authentically and above all put an end to poverty.

So far, Wilde's claims possess, I would argue, a strong similarity with the Situationists and Perniola's *L'alienazione artistica*. In fact, both the Situationists and the Italian philosopher promoted the end of economic capitalist domination in the Western world in favour of a permanent revolution of everyday life based on individual creativity<sup>8</sup>. The insurmountable difference between the early Perniola and Wilde, however, consists in the fact that the former proposed an *overcoming* of art, while the latter an *expansion* of the artistic domain within everyday life.

For the early Perniola, Western art has always conveyed an alienated manifestation of creativity, since it has always either been dependent on the ideologies of power or, failing that, independent only in so far as it was isolated and harmless – that is, not able to provide concrete alternative perspectives. It therefore should have been overcome and the creative drives should have been extended into the realm of everyday life.

In contrast, Wilde proposes a transformation of life – so to speak – through the very eyes of art: “Art is individualism” (Wilde 1987, 1030). By linking individualism and art, he implies that people's guiding attitude should follow the principle of art. It is precisely in this claim that Wilde's

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<sup>7</sup> To be specific, in his essay Wilde does not develop a traditional idea of socialism as a government-centred political system but as a more anarchic and libertarian approach. He in fact believes – as suggested – that socialism should be understood only as a phase that will lead to individualism.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1 of the present section.

aestheticism appears. For Wilde the individual should become a work of art, in order to make him/herself and the surrounding world beautiful. In other words, the main purpose of Wilde's dandyism is to *realise* and *express* in one's own body (through elegance) and attitude (through individualism) what most of the artists only *produce* through objects (paintings, sculptures, poetry and so on). The young Perniola would have considered this perspective, I would argue, still within the artistic alienation inherent in Western aesthetics. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde criticises one kind of alienation, that of the workers under capitalism systems; nonetheless, if we follow early Perniola's view point, he does not recognise another one: that of art itself.

Finally, the last recurrent core dandyish idea that emerges in Wilde is the despising of nature<sup>9</sup>. I will focus on a passage which helps the reader understand why Wilde – and dandyism in general – does not appreciate the natural world. Like Baudelaire before him, Wilde links nature with survival, mere self-interest, and above all lack of proportions, comfort, and design: “the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition [...] If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we feel all the proper proportions” (1987, 909).

Firstly, Wilde considers nature as a series of natural and physical phenomena lacking “style” – that is, the human ability to go beyond raw reality in its immediacy and elevate, transform, and recombine it according to new aesthetic perspectives. Nature privileges the individuals who – in order to survive – adapt themselves. In contrast, Wilde seeks rarer individuals who are able to build a higher life upon mere survival. And, since he considers art as the most significant expression of human behaviour, his ideal type of higher individual is the dandy. In fact, the dandies are precisely those individuals who embody in their everyday lives an artistic and aesthetically-oriented attitude. Hence, for Wilde, self-

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<sup>9</sup> I have already delved into this theme in the Second Section, Chapter 1. Thus, here, I will merely recapitulate it in order to show the terms in which Wilde echoes it.

consciousness is crucial. Natural behaviours are in fact, according to him, only instinctively driven; arrayed against this stands the “self-conscious culture” of mankind (1987, 916). Nature can work as a first source of inspiration, but it is never the ultimate goal of art. It is only through the agency of humans that art can actually be expressed.

This sub-chapter has shown several aspects of the continuity of Wilde's dandyism with Brummell's and Baudelaire's. Specifically, the three of them share four central dandyish standpoints: being against nineteenth-century bourgeois mindset, despising nature, aestheticising life, and cultivating the beauty of one's own era. I have also highlighted the ways in which Wilde, specifically in his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, borrowing from nineteenth century socialism, is close to both Debord and the young Perniola. This appears so especially regarding the abolition of workers' alienation in favour of a fully realised creativity. However, a crucial divergence arises: Perniola proposes an overcoming of the notion and the experience of art, while Wilde advocates its extension into everyday life.

Nonetheless, although Wilde condemns the bourgeois and capitalist society of the time, it was precisely thanks to it that he became the well known and still-acclaimed dandy he was. In fact, as Josephine Guy and Ian Small claim – in their volume on Wilde and the culture industry in the late nineteenth century (2004) – the American and European tours Wilde made in the early 1880s – of which the bourgeoisie formed the main audience – gave him an initial sparkle of international fame. In addition, despite condemning journalists, public opinion, and “the masses” in general, Wilde himself – as suggested earlier – was a journalist for and editor of several magazines of fashion and popular culture read especially by middle and upper class people. In other words, Wilde, at a first glance, shows several contradictions between his writings and his public image. The next sub-chapter investigates these contradictions in order to show the singularity of the dandy Oscar Wilde with respect to Brummell and Baudelaire and, at the same time, further explores Wilde's perspective alongside Perniola's.

### *Subversive Writings*

Scholars have been debating over the complex contradictory figure of Oscar Wilde since his first works were published. In the vast mass of these writings several critiques have been elaborated. Most of these criticisms mainly focus, as I will clarify shortly, on the contradictions between Wilde's statements – especially those condemning economy, journalism, and the late nineteenth century's values – and his mediatic personality, in which fame, money, institutions and professions played an essential role. In this sub-chapter I will concentrate on these criticisms, placing them alongside Perniola's thought on the relationship between art and society.

Wilde, as suggested, did not devote his life solely to elegance and dandyism. Beyond cultivating dandyism in his persona, he was in addition a writer, a poet, an editor, a journalist, a lecturer and a critic. In other words, he had many occupations and institutionally recognised roles. For example, Wilde wrote for several magazines and journals, including *Woman's World*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Court and Society Review*, to which he contributed regularly, especially during the 1880s. He also embarked on a fifty-date tour across the US (1881-1882), delivering lectures on disparate topics, from furnishing to art, clothing, and make-up. As Regenia Gagnier points out (1987, 69), unlike Brummell, Wilde did not have a patron and although he came from a family with a high intellectual level (his mother was an Irish revolutionary and poet, his father a renowned ophthalmologist), he did not have a conspicuous inheritance. For these reasons, Gagnier continues, Wilde had to come to terms with the market and with the emerging media of the time (press, publicity, popular books, trend magazines and so on).

An institution such as the market, for instance, has written and unwritten rules, depending particularly on the product's resonance with its audience and the number of units sold. Taking into account the opinion of

the “masses” and the “quantitative” discourse is – at should be clear – at odds with the dandy’s elitist lifestyle. Nonetheless, as Josephine Guy and Ian Small claim in their volume, many texts by Wilde were negotiated with the market industry (publishers, printers, theatre-managers) and were therefore inevitably influenced by them (2004, 9). Guy and Small’s study focuses on empirical data, paper material, letters and notes exchanged between Wilde and his editors. The authors come to the conclusion that Wilde had been writing for money all his life (21-2). Specifically, they point out how the Irish dandy realised, starting from his American lectures, that he could earn a living from his knowledge as much as from his image.

Here lies the main reason for which, according to Guy and Small, Wilde commodified his personality to produce a popular and marketable image. Wilde himself was aware of the contradiction between books and attitudes. He in fact stated: “Would you like to know the great drama of my life? It is that I have put my genius into my life – I have put only my talent into my works” (Wilde 1987, 689). Wilde distinguishes here between genius and talent, placing a higher value on the first. For him, genius refers to his spontaneous dandyism, namely his devotion to elegance, his witty and ironic remarks (the aestheticisation of lifestyle). Talent, on the other hand, is considered as a by-product, a secondary result of his attitude, which helped him in writing books. It is no coincidence that the literary historian Holbrook Jackson, commenting on this very sentence, claims: “What he seemed to be doing all the time was translating life into art through himself. His books were but incident in this process (1997, 336).

Wilde, as suggested, attracted criticisms from numerous scholars. Ellen Moers claims that he used dandyism for the purposes of notoriety (1960, 298), and should thus not even be considered a dandy but a go-getter (299). The drama critic James G. Huneker sees Wilde simply as a “smart journalist” (1997, 343). G.K. Chesterton argues that Wilde was at the same time an artist and a charlatan. Specifically, Chesterton claims that Wilde’s writings can be divided according to two different criteria: the sentences in which the Irish dandy felt he was free to express himself (which Chesterton considers valuable), and the ones in which he strived for attention and popularity (that for Chesterton mainly consists in banal formulas and

slogans) (1997, 312). In the article *Oscar Wilde, commodity, culture* (2004) Dennis Denisoff argues that Wilde's main paradox consists in the fact that he regarded art as an almost holy realm, at odds with market concerns, but at the same time he himself transformed art into a commodity to sell (119). In short, many critics see Wilde as the incarnation of mass industry and society. In this sense, Wilde contradictorily declared himself against the bourgeoisie even while the expanding middle class was his main target and audience.

Although these briefly-outlined criticisms have concrete empirical data on their side, they, I would argue, can only be accepted in part. In this thesis I follow Regenia Gagnier's perspective developed in *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. Gagnier's book offers a critical understanding of the relationship between Victorian "cultural industry" and the figure of Oscar Wilde. According to Gagnier, Wilde's work should be considered one of the first attempts to problematise and provide a concrete answer to the issue of art's place within a consumerist society (1987, 5).

Wilde's attitude, according to Gagnier, was surprising and in some cases anticipated the artistic avant-gardes and countercultural practices of the twentieth century. Specifically, Gagnier's main claim is that although Wilde wrote essentially for a middle-class public and although he set his works within middle- and upper-bourgeois contexts and environments, he did not reflect or fall under the influence of middle-class values. On the contrary, rather than considering Wilde as a poser, if not a middle-class pimp, Gagnier argues that he employed specific writing techniques in order to subvert his audience's cultural and moral codes. In other words, if it is true that Wilde's poetical imagination was imbued with the *clichés* of the dominant apparatuses, it is also true that he always added a subtle twist, namely an unexpected, surprising or uncanny substitutive word that radically transformed the meanings involved: "His legendary wit consisted in practice of a talent for inverting Victorian truisms [...] His mind was stocked with commonplaces, and seem to have been there for the sole purpose of their subversion" (7-8). For instance, in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde writes: "Under individualism people will be quite natural

and absolutely unselfish” (Wilde 1987, 1040); “charity creates a multitude of sins” (1018); “Democracy is the bludgeoning of people by the people for the people” (1026); “In the interest of the rich we must get rid of it [private property]” (1020). All these statements, the tip of the iceberg of Wildean witty prose, are – on one side – grounded upon a “commonplace”, and – on the other – deployed to convey a new if not opposite meaning.

For instance, according to common morality, individualism means thinking only of oneself, therefore being an egoist. Wilde flips this truism by stating that – as suggested previously in this chapter – egoism should be distinguished from individualism. The former involves, for Wilde, asking or obliging other people to live according to how one lives or believes it is right to live. It is therefore a potentially authoritarian imposition that often leads to the censorship of differences and otherness. The latter does not place any obligation on others, but rather leaves the individual free to express his/her way of life. Thus, individualism does not mean selfishness - it implies on the contrary the crucial right to express oneself.

On the other hand, charity and altruism, understood by ‘common sense’ as two pivotal values, are both criticised by Wilde. In fact, for the Irish dandy, compassion and benevolence towards the afflicted can merely work as palliatives which keep them in a state of survival – that is, perennial misery and poverty. By not attempting any subversion of the *status quo* and focusing instead on transitory moments of altruism, charity is understood by Wilde as an aggravating factor of social difficulties and not as a genuine remedy. In this sense, paradoxically, it is closer to sin.

Wilde’s work can be considered as a deconstruction of the categories of bourgeois thought from within – that is, within the mass apparatus that was advancing alongside the middle class. To borrow Gagnier’s words: “Wilde’s epigrams and paradoxes exploit the self-critical possibilities of the Victorian language and thought patterns” (1987, 32). In so doing, the Irish dandy was able to be both critical of the dominant order and, at the same time, to be a prominent personality incessantly advertised and promoted within it. Gagnier notes that Wilde’s style of writing forerunned Guy Debord’s *detournément*, explored in the first chapter of this section in the context of Perniola’s early developments on art theory. The *detournément*,

translatable as “diversion” and “displacement”, consists mainly in the appropriation of a given content and in its re-organisation in an unsettling way, possibly ironic, which loads it with a new subversive meaning. Wilde’s texts, far from echoing the middle-class mindset, were actually a subtle and complex combination of witticism, cynicism and subversion. His artistic attitudes, focusing on aesthetics and elegance, were never dissociated from the political element. Another common aspect shared by Perniola and Wilde can be found here: as Perniola elaborated the notion of strategic beauty, which links aesthetics and effectuality, Wilde, akin to a modern Gracián, elaborated an acute, pungent, provocative, stylistically jewelled and seductive prose, which is never oblivious of the political and effectual elements.

Specifically, Wilde had two main aims in his prose writings: on the one hand criticising the institutions and values of the time (from the market to the academy, from journalism to the professions, from altruism to charity); on the other trying to create and educate an audience able to receive his conception of the relationship between art, life, and society. Wilde, in other words, did not draw back from what he perceived as a decay in customs, manners, and more generally art and literature. In an age where technical reproducibility of objects was starting to impose itself, Wilde believed that the best strategy did not involve nostalgically searching for the lost aura. He remained within the field of a commodified arena, and yet he tried to elaborate and develop excessive elements of subversion.

A further connection with Perniola’s reflection on art can be traced here. Perniola, despite criticising neo-avant-gardes and commodity fetishism, does not propose a transcendent alternative, i.e. a return to the unique aesthetic authority of the artistic object’s aura. He praises instead the so called “shadow of art”, which, as I argued, corresponds to the irreducible elements of difference stemming from the work of art considered as a “thing”. The shadow is that marginal and lateral side of art which the lights of economy and of communication cannot reach. Perniola’s conception, I would argue, is similar to Wilde’s. Although “God is dead”, Wilde seems to say, that is, although we can no longer rely on transcendent, supreme values and on art’s aura, this is not a reason to remain stuck inside a nostalgic

passatist position or be submerged by triviality and vulgarity. If one can no longer be or live like Brummell, this does not mean that dandyism has to perish. Wilde, in so doing, represents a later phase of dandyism, which faces the huge transformations European societies underwent throughout the nineteenth century. If it is true that Wilde explored the tools and the instruments of the time – namely the press and advertising systems – it was not to become a servant of these new technologies. In other words, Wilde did not use his era's new possibilities and opportunities to level his thought to an average middle-class standard. On the contrary, he used these very tools (for instance through the insistent use of ironic *detournément*) *against* the dominant discourse.

Wilde's use of literary diversion, I would argue, shares an essential characteristic with Perniola's notion of "shadow". Perniola claims that the work of art receives – so to speak – the light of the institutions and possesses, at the same time, a liminal, hidden area which is produced within this very light and which cannot be grasped by it. Similarly, Wilde's *corpus* of publications is heavily invested by the lights of consumer culture and middle-class popularity. In other words Wilde's works exist within a capitalist context but at the same time they produce a flaw, a hole, a short circuit in the bourgeois imaginary. They manage to guard and protect – so to speak – the qualitative aspect (creativity and difference) within a quantitative domain.

To recapitulate, this sub-chapter has firstly shown the terms in which several scholars have criticised Wilde's overall attitude. According to them, Wilde contradicted his elitist views by publishing volumes and delivering lectures for the "despised" middle class. Nonetheless, at a closer look, by drawing on Gagnier's work on the relationship between Wilde and the Victorian public, I have argued that he represented a peculiar and unique position, namely that of an outsider within the insider discourse. That is, Wilde maintained his subversive, non-conformist and transgressive ideas precisely within the dominant apparatuses and horizons of meaning. In so doing, he anticipated the avant-garde practice of the Situationist *detournément*, which would be praised and developed by Perniola.

In fact, both the Italian philosopher and the Irish dandy refused to step back in front of the commodified and commodifying arena in which culture, art, and aesthetics are continuously integrated. They did not search for the lost and transcendent “aura” since the technologies of reproduction transformed the very conception of art and artistry. They instead explored the new tools provided by this scenario by subtly managing not to be swallowed by it. In other words, both Wilde and Perniola said “Yes” to the present, trying to find the beauty in it, without celebrating the *status quo* but moving in-between, at the margins, in alternative and subversive ways.

### *The Art Work as a Living Thing*

In order to further develop the affinity between Perniola’s statements on art theory and Wilde’s perspective, this sub-chapter focuses on Wilde’s essay *The Critic as Artist*. Written when he was thirty-seven years old, it shows on one side Wilde’s idea of art and on the other his peculiar conception of the role of art criticism. As I will argue, this text can be fruitfully compared with Perniola’s thought, especially *L’arte e la sua ombra*.

*The Critic as Artist* is a dialogue between two friends, Gilbert and Ernest, divided into two parts. Gilbert is Wilde’s spokesperson, while Ernest asks questions and sometimes summarises the arguments. The essay focuses on the status of art criticism. Wilde, through Gilbert’s voice, unfolds his philosophy of criticism, explaining the critic’s role, function, and, in general, the relationship between criticism and art. Gilbert is often pressured by Ernest who expresses his doubts (a literary device Wilde uses to outline his standpoint with more precision). In this sub-chapter, I will not provide a step by step explanation of all the arguments involved. My aim is not to summarise the text but to develop Gilbert’s (Wilde’s) pivotal positions, in order to compare them with Perniola’s thought.

At the start of the essay, Ernest claims that the art critic is a fairly new figure. According to him, when classic art was flourishing in ancient Greece (V-IV centuries BC) there were no such figures. Gilbert immediately contradicts Ernest by claiming that the Greeks were indeed highly developed in critical skills. From philosophy to theatre, poetry and literature, Gilbert maintains, the Greeks possessed a critical spirit which will be hardly ever attained again in the following centuries. Thus, from the beginning of the essay Wilde links criticism with the broad ability of thinking critically, that is, to have a disposition capable of grasping distinctions, imagining, interpreting and judging in the aesthetic domain. In order to refine these intellectual skills, according to Wilde, the critic needs to possess heterogeneous and deep knowledge. Paradoxically, he claims that the critic should know more than the artist (1987, 961). In fact, the artist, for Wilde, is basically a man of action: s/he *acts* upon a canvas, a block of marble, a piece of wood, and so on. The same applies, for Wilde, in the realm of history. According to Wilde, it is much harder to talk about history, than it is to actually do it. For instance, Wilde argues that it is easier to shoot a political leader than to understand such an event and its broader historical implications. In the same way, he paradoxically points out that it is easier to make art than to discuss it. This holds true, according to Wilde, because it is not just actions but also emotions, and in general vital pulses, that humans share with the animals. Since doing and feeling are not the work of education, refinement and intellectual cultivation, for Wilde there is not a great deal of merit in them. On the contrary, it is only through an appropriate language and a refined sensitivity (“self-conscious culture”, as suggested earlier), that it is possible to discuss something, write a novel, or analyse historical events. The Irish dandy writes: “The world is made by the singer for the dreamer” (1987, 964). For Wilde, in other words, the critic should not be interested in reality in its vitalistic immediacy, but in the re-combination of empirical sources and their elevation in a new complexity under the sign of aesthetics:

... it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation

to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive [...] For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say. (Wilde 1987, 968)

Wilde makes clear in this passage that he is more interested in the aftermath of a work's accomplishment, rather than its actual process of creation. The beholder is not the active figure of the artist who paints, carves, sculpts and so on, but another figure, that of the critic, whom Wilde considers a creator as well. The critic produces a further creation by adding something that the artist may not have thought of, imagined, or even understood.

Wilde focuses on Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* in order to explain his position (968). He speculates that perhaps Leonardo "was merely the slave of an archaic smile" (ibidem). With this provocative line, Wilde means that although his painting is of crucial importance for the history and theory of art, nonetheless, while painting it Leonardo might not have "contemplated", for example, "the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the Middle Age [...] the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias" (968). That is to say, for Wilde, Leonardo might have not taken into account all the quoted expressive elements which were then imagined, added and created by critics in the following centuries. For this reason criticism cannot confine itself to the mere "discovery" of the intentions of the author but should build new creative interpretations upon the art work.

Wilde states that the highest form of criticism is "the record of one's own soul" (966). This sentence seems to apparently convey the idea of a strong subjectivity, an identity that finds an ultimate expression through the work of criticism. Juxtaposed with Wilde's praise of individualism, this perspective seems at odds with both dandyish desubjectivation and Perniola's interpretation of stoic-Jesuit indifference previously explored. Yet Wilde does not convey the idea of a strong, unitary identity which displays the certainties of the Cartesian *cogito* and of modern science. On the contrary, Wilde has in mind an empty subjectivity which is capable of

welcoming what comes from outside: “we must surrender ourselves absolutely to the work in question, whatever it may be, if we wish to gain its secret” (Wilde 1987, 986). This sentence, I would argue, is pivotal not only to the aims of this section but of the overall thesis. It contains, in fact, a recurrent dandyish standpoint and, in addition, it has an element which I will shortly link to Perniola’s theory of art. This sentence refers specifically to desubjectivation on the one hand and to a hidden dimension of the art work on the other (“its secret”).

In the first section I investigated the so called “election of the difference” in Jesuit thought. To summarise it, in order to be able to attune oneself in the surrounding world and to grasp the ever-changing and unpredictable historical manifestations, the individual should live *like a corpse*, following the Ignatian motto *perinde ac cadaver*. It is precisely the approximation to the inert, thingly, inorganic dimension of death which allows on the one hand the disappearance of personal identity and, on the other, the possibility of understanding the subtle phenomena and experience through which one passes. Brummell, the “subject without guarantee” which disappears in his everyday ritual clothing, on the one hand approaches the inorganic dimension of the “puppet” and at the same time manages to become the most renowned *arbiter elegantiarum* of English Regency. In the second section, I elucidated Perniola’s conception of the thing. In the first chapter I outlined the terms in which, for the Italian philosopher, becoming a thing, specifically becoming a mirror (that is, a reflecting surface), implies gathering in what comes from outside by muting one’s own beliefs and vitalist drives. In the same section, following this common thread, I showed the terms in which the French poet Charles Baudelaire believed that the dandy should become – metaphorically speaking – a mirror as large as the entire urban setting. In so doing, the dandy is capable of extracting the peculiar beauty that emerges from the transient, fugitive and contingent atmospheres of the modern urban environment. Wilde – I claim – can be inscribed in the same theoretical and experiential direction. “Surrender oneself to the work” means precisely abandoning one’s subjective drives to an external object – that is to say, withdrawing oneself and letting the work

speak through oneself. Only in this way, Wilde points out, it is possible to glean the work's "secret".

Not only does Wilde praise a de-subjectivated, de-centered dimension of human subjectivity; he also adds that specific surplus element, which in this passage is called "secret", and which Perniola, I would argue, refers to as "shadow". As becomes clear in the passages immediately following the one quoted above, Wilde frequently uses, with respect to the artistic object, connotations surprisingly close to those of "shadow", "remainder", and "residue". For example he speaks of the "mystery", the "wonder", and the "ultimate secret" of the work of art (Wilde 1987, 970). Wilde rejects the idea that the artwork has just a single message, an individual meaning or representation to convey: "The critic [...] will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men" (972). The critic carries out a process in which the work of art is only a starting point. In fact s/he does not remain satisfied with the supposed intentions of the artist and goes beyond them towards a new creation. In this sense Wilde considers the critic *as* artist, since by deepening and discovering symbols, meanings and expressions in the art work, the critic continues the creation begun by the artist. In fact, Wilde states that "the critic will always be reminding us of great works of art are *living things*" (973).

I put the emphasis on living things because, I would argue, the combination of *life* and *things*, i.e. between organic and inorganic, between movement and inertia, is at the heart of Perniola's philosophy. A form is alive since it is never simply the result of a single intention; it does not convey a unilateral and individual single message or meaning. Poetically, exploring Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Wilde refers to this "life" of the art work in this way:

... whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre, and stand before that strange figure "set in its marble chair in that cirque of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea", I murmur to myself, "she is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has

been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her: and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as St. Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands". And I say to my friend, "The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years man had come to desire;" and he answers me, "Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary. (Wilde 1987, 968)

In this passage, Wilde compares the *Mona Lisa*'s condition as an art work to that of a vampire. The vampire, as Perniola also pointed out in *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, "è un essere a metà strada tra la vita e la morte" (2004, 97), that is, an in-between, intermediary entity, not completely alive nor entirely dead. To consider the art work as a manifestation of the idea of the "undead" means opening up the dimension of the thing. In fact, the art work is not understood merely as an object, namely a fixed entity, potentially signifying the reified expression of an alienated creativity<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, it possesses the life of things; it is – as Wilde wrote – a living thing, an entity susceptible to transformation and mutation as soon as it comes to existence. The *Mona Lisa*, taken by Wilde as an exemplar of a living thing, shows precisely the terms in which an art work is able to go beyond itself and its creator's intentions.

Paolo Bartoloni, in an article on Perniola's notion of transit and contemporary art, refers to a phenomenon he calls the "cumulative image" (2019, 99-108). This idea implies a "new language of combination", which is the result, for instance, of divergent interpretations of the "living things" accumulating – so to speak – over time, and of the different contexts and environments in which they are involved. The rose, the rocks, the smile and the waters of the *Mona Lisa*, for instance, hold together, gather in and accumulate centuries of readings and understandings, but also historical events, "desires", "merchant traffic". This perspective implies a

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<sup>10</sup> As it was for Perniola's early conception of the art work.

fundamental characteristic, also pointed out by Bartoloni, who refers to Perniola's concept of transit. In fact, it is precisely by allowing the "coming together of different genres, styles and tastes" (Bartoloni 2019, 106) that difference emerges. Although – for example – the *Mona Lisa* has always been the same painting, the same oil on the same poplar panel, it is not a mere sameness which is at stake. In fact, novelty and originality paradoxically stem from sameness: difference is unfolded by an unfamiliar configuration of the same entity. In addition, as Bartoloni argues in his article, Perniola's notion of transit, and, this thesis would add, Wilde's conception of the art work as a living thing, also involves to "take a step back" regarding the traditional understanding of the art work (106). This step back, Bartoloni continues, implies focusing neither on the greatness of an art work, nor on its transgressive and revolutionary purposes, nor even on its communicative and promotional ends. On the contrary, it means welcoming alternative experiences of art itself which are made possible by the very artistic categories this thesis has explored.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has focused on the figure of Oscar Wilde in order to develop his affinities with and differences from Perniola's thought. In the first sub-chapter I have shown the terms in which Wilde's dandyism is heir to both Brummell's and Baudelaire's attitudes and lifestyles. In so doing, I have underlined four core dandyish ideas which also recur in Wilde. Firstly, the relationship between beauty and modernity. In several passages Wilde argues against universal and abstract aesthetic notions – typical of eighteenth century aesthetics and traditional academies – and praises an earthly, contingent and ever-changing idea of beauty. Specifically, by quoting Baudelaire himself, the Irish dandy claims that each *époque* has its own beauty, which it is the artist's and dandy's task to extract and explore. Secondly, Wilde criticises the bourgeois ethos grounded upon notions such

as utility, profit, private property and common moral values such as charity and altruism. According to him, the capitalist market alongside the middle class mindset limit and impede the expression of individual creativity. Thirdly, the contempt of nature. Like Brummell and Baudelaire before him, Wilde shares the typical dandyish irony against nature and its manifestations. For Wilde nature is repugnant because it mainly involves survival instincts and immediate vital pulses, which are regarded as vulgar compared to the refinement of self-conscious culture and art. Following this claim, the fourth core dandy idea consists in the privilege accorded to exteriority, elegance and forms. Wilde himself explores a “philosophy of clothes”, according to which the exteriority of behaviours, rituals, manners and clothing is significant for one main reason: encyclopaedias and books – for Wilde – involve only partially and limitedly involve the human senses and sensitivity. In contrast, art works, theatre performances, dandyism and generally speaking the more empirical and concrete manifestations of the bodily dimension engage human feelings in a more comprehensive way.

In developing Wilde’s main dandy ideas I have recalled the affinities with Perniola’s philosophical path that emerge, namely the idea of “difference” against the supposed identity and unity of the dominant order; the idea of a “strategic beauty” against metaphysical and transcendent interpretations; the theory of the “inorganic” against vitalism; and the conception of “stratification of surfaces” in order to explain the richness of reality.

In the second sub-chapter I have firstly focused on scholarly critics of Wilde and secondly on Regenia Gagnier’s understanding of him as a subversive writer. The critics I have mentioned argue that a major contradiction emerges when we compare Wilde’s statements, on the one hand, with his everyday attitude on the other. Specifically, they claim – to put it briefly – that Wilde was paradoxically against the middle class while at the same time his books and lectures were precisely targeting a middle class audience. In so doing, Wilde was entangled in the very commodified arena he abhorred. Nonetheless, if it is true that Wilde was part of the growing industrial culture of the time, this does not imply that he was a servant of the *status quo*. Drawing on Gagnier’s researches I underlined

how the Irish dandy's writing style is closely relatable to the Situationist practice of *detournement*, also praised by Perniola in his early works on art theory. In fact, Wilde's works do not provide a justification for Victorian morals and economics. On the contrary, they convey a resolute critique of middle and upper class ordinary life from within. By playing with the very categories and backgrounds of the society of the time, Wilde managed to organise new – aesthetically oriented – horizons of meaning.

Likewise, Perniola (in his later thought on the art world) does not wish for the end of the economic realm or the communicative spectacularisation of the art works. He accepts the dynamics and the issues arising from the new technologies and modes of artistic management. Nonetheless, he believes that, alongside all the institutions and apparatuses of galleries, museums, exhibitions, Biennales and generally profit-oriented artistic environments, it is still possible for creativity and difference to emerge from the art work. As suggested in the previous chapter, beside the light of communication and economic logics Perniola places the hidden and darker dimension of the shadow of the art work.

This brings me to the last sub-chapter. I focused on Wilde's claims developed in the essay *The Critic as Artist*, in which the Irish dandy sets out his perspective on the role of the art critic and outlines his conception of the art work. Specifically, I dwelt on Wilde's characterisation of the art work as a "living thing". By underlining and praising the combination of the vital/organic and the inert-inorganic aspects of the artistic object – exemplified by Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* – Wilde presents the art work as a starting point which has a life of its own, transcending the author's intentions and conceptions. In so doing, the artistic "thing", instead of representing the reification of creative energies, is instead the fertile soil for new creations, different understandings and original interpretations which combine and accumulate over time. Hence Wilde's art theory does not share an affinity with Perniola's theory of art alone: it can be related to several other notions developed by the Italian philosopher and explored in the context of this thesis. In fact, firstly, considering the art work as a thing means precisely the entrance of the neutral dimension of the inorganic – developed in the second section of this thesis. In addition, by advocating the

richness and the plurality of the same entity, Wilde's conception of the art work is closely relatable to Perniola's idea of "stratification of surfaces" and transit – developed in the first chapter – that is, the idea that change and transformation stems from new combinations of the very same entity.

To conclude, according to this thesis, Oscar Wilde represents a turning point within the phenomenon of dandyism. In fact, he managed to re-think and re-shape the dandy lifestyle by facing and developing the complex dynamics of the cultural industry of the time. The relationship between dandyism on the one hand and consumer and mass society on the other is of crucial significance. Brummell and Baudelaire could still look for an oasis, so to speak, unspoilt by the general commodification of lifestyles, looks, everyday culture and so on, while at the same time remaining in the urban environment. Besides this, a dandy on their model can withdraw from what he despises as vulgar and trivial – like, for instance, the capitalist mindset – or join small, niche circles in their efforts to oppose homogenising thoughts and practices. Wilde's peculiarity, in contrast, can be traced in the fact that he lived, wrote and published within the very system he relentlessly criticised and tried to subvert through his witty, seductive prose and his aestheticising dandyism.

## CONCLUSION

This research aims to compare the phenomenon of dandyism with Mario Perniola's philosophy. My main objective is to show how the thought of the Italian philosopher echoes the lifestyle of three exemplar dandies, namely George Bryan Brummell, Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde. In each chapter I develop Perniola's philosophical and aesthetic thought in order to explore and present his ideas. This course of action has two central purposes: to provide the reader with interpretative keys to understand Perniola's works, and to show those works' relationship with dandyism.

In the course of my research I investigate seven pivotal notions elaborated by Perniola, taking into account both his youthful and mature writings. These notions – specifically *simulacrum*, *transit*, *ritual without myth*, the *inorganic*, *strategic beauty*, *artistic alienation*, and *artistic shadow* – enable me to focus on the heterogeneity of Perniola's thought, ranging from art theory to sexuality, theoretical philosophy and religious thinking. In so doing, on the one hand I underline Perniola's specific philosophical voice in the contemporary Italian cultural environment; on the other I show the international impact of his research. Perniola has continuously dealt with crucial themes marking current debates: from the relationship between art and revolution (late 1960s and early 1970s) to that between simulations, simulacra and transits (1980s); from posthuman theory in sexuality and art (1990s) to communication and the Web (2000s). The Italian philosopher has

always endeavoured to connect his philosophy to the main movements and themes emerging over several decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, maintaining a critical dialogue with thinkers and scholars worldwide.

Perniola's philosophical investigation, in addition, was not informed by a predetermined ideology – that is, he did not investigate current phenomena through a set doctrine to which they could be either validated or discarded. His thought, as I claimed in the *Transit* chapter, cannot be confined within a set formula, but should be understood in its *atopy*, or placelessness. Alongside his critique of vitalism, naturalism and spiritualism, Perniola praised an idea of desubjectivation in which the individual is open to the heterogeneous manifestations of reality. This concept was not developed just in terms of an abstract and ideal individual, but was put into practice by Perniola himself. His very body of work can be understood as “desubjectivated”.

In fact, by silencing – so to speak – any pre-given beliefs or ideologies, his philosophical technique can be compared to that of a tailor or a stylist, sewing together and linking diverse experiences and concepts. As I demonstrated throughout my thesis, Perniola traced unthinkable and surprising threads that depart from the present time and are connected to other contexts and historical periods. To give a few examples, the artificial and post-human feeling finds an uncanny affinity with Egyptian religion and Neolithic petroglyphs; sexuality and perversions find an echo in the Husserlian phenomenological *epoche* and in the Stoic *ataraxia*. Furthermore, digital simulation is approximated to the simulation of death in the Jesuit tradition. In other words, Perniola did not only develop the notion of transit, his work itself is a place of transit, that is, a place where ideas, notions, experiences and feelings are continuously re-combined, re-written, re-shaped.

My research, which has taken into account primary and secondary sources on both Perniola and the dandies, demonstrates that Perniola's philosophy can be considered a dandy philosophy. This affinity can be summarized in the notion of “challenge”. What does this challenge imply? Challenge against what or whom? Can it be compared to a revolt or a revolution? As I write in the fourth chapter of the first section, the one

revolving around the figure of Brummell, the dandies' attitude cannot be considered revolutionary, since the dandies did not question the *status quo* openly and violently with the aim of transforming it from its core. The dandies, these "arbiters of elegance", lived according to a daily ritual of aestheticisation, precisely within the urban world of middle class and high society. Therefore, they accepted the rules proper to those environments and, at the same time (as I underline in the fourth chapter of the first section), they played with these very rules – they "dared with tact". Revolutions, in contrast, involve a break, a jump, a rupture between the new and the old. The dandy challenge implies instead the emergence of novelty and difference within the pre-existing social configuration.

The dandies investigated in this thesis, in fact, were not representatives of the aristocracy and nobility, nor of the emerging bourgeoisie. Although surrounded by aristocrats and bourgeois, they moved *in-between* social classes and roles. Their lifestyles entail on the one hand the acceptance of the *status quo* and its institutions and, on the other, a peculiar aesthetic challenge to society's ideologies and myths. Their kind of wit was not tolerated by the rigid codes of conduct proper to the aristocracy (see for instance the enmity between Brummell and the Prince of Wales due to the dandy's witty remarks on the Prince's body). In addition, Brummell, Baudelaire and Wilde repudiated the bourgeois mindset, oriented towards "profit", "capital", "entrepreneurship", and "money", and elaborated the cultivation of beauty in the face of the general downgrading of taste due to the growing industrialisation of goods and lifestyles. The dandies did not passively witness and complain about the "vulgarisation" of manners and existence. Their lives show instead a continuous search for "beauty", "elegance", "artificiality" and "*amor fati*" precisely within a society they despised. Brummell elaborated a clothing ritual wherein his subjectivity disappeared in the folding of his fabrics; Baudelaire praised the idea of becoming a mirror as large as society; Wilde urged his listeners to find what was picturesque in their own epoch by leaving the academies and walking the streets.

These attitudes, as I point out in this thesis, imply a challenge to society which can be paralleled with Perniola's philosophy. Neither the dandies nor

Perniola follow a revolution or a utopia, but are interested in the development, the unwrapping and the unfolding of what is already present. The transit, as “the movement from the same to the same”, means precisely the idea that difference, innovation, change and surprise do not stem from the cult of novelty for its own sake but from a re-combination of what already exists. In this sense, Perniola’s dandy philosophy calls and challenges the individual not only to criticise or refute certain aspects of society, but also to be open to the manifestation of a rich, profound, deep, and inexhaustible layered world, an idea which I define as “reality as stratification of surfaces”.

The dandy philosophic challenge also implies interpreting a given object or a phenomenon never as it appears first and foremost, but as it multiplies its openings. The challenge is to see it from multiple perspectives and points of view. For instance, if a Marxist considers “things” as the result of exploited human work and thus as an alienated and reified product, the dandy challenges this view by seeing them as the opening of the neutral dimension of feeling. Through this conceptual fissure, a new layer of perspectives and traditions emerges (Stoicism, the Baroque, sexuality, simulacra, and so on).

My research encompasses a variety of themes not only belonging to philosophy and aesthetics but also to literature, critical theory, sociology of communication and art. In so doing it is informed by an interdisciplinary approach which can foster a debate within a plethora of research areas. First, it provides an interpretation of Perniola’s philosophy from the early to the mature writings, including a complete bibliography of Perniola’s works, which can be of paramount utility for researchers in Italian Studies and contemporary philosophy. Second, the majority of publications on dandyism focus on its literary and biographic aspects. Only a few scholars have given a philosophical dignity to this phenomenon (see especially Coblenz 1988 and Gagnier 1987). In contrast, my thesis wishes to enhance and deepen the discussion of dandyism within philosophy, especially in the area of aesthetic theory. For instance, recent studies on Oscar Wilde (Guy and Small 2004; Denisoff 2004) focus particularly on the dandy’s national and sexual

identities alone. By comparing Wilde's aesthetics with Perniola's I show how the essays of a late Victorian Irish dandy is still in dialogue with the post-World War II European society.

My thesis also shows that dandyism is not only a historical and philosophical phenomenon, but has also a geographical value. The selected figures belong to different geopolitical settings: Brummell the English Regency; Baudelaire the 1848 revolutionary Paris, and Wilde between Dublin and London at the end of the Nineteenth century; Perniola was instead an Italian intellectual between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless they all shared a dandy attitude towards life. By linking these figures I also want to underline the development of dandyism in a European context across time. This could be the starting point for future investigations on dandyism not as a national-dependent phenomenon but instead as a movement encompassing post-industrial Europe.

Furthermore, dandyism and Perniola's thought are not solely the interest of scholars and academics. Dandyism is an aesthetically-oriented lifestyle which still appeals to many clubs and small circles globally, with exhibitions, websites, blogs and YouTube channels. At the same time, pop stars and artists, not to mention philosophers and psychoanalysts, are oftentimes broadly labelled as "dandies", mostly on the basis of elegance and wit. Perniola's works have influenced artists, performers, dancers, and musicians (see for instance RiLaben, Di Ponio, and Pensa). Hence, a study devoted to dandyism and philosophy can be widely disseminated (through the publication of a book, journal and magazine articles, conferences, and media contents), and could become a central theoretical work of reference for further research in the field. My thesis is suited for dissemination both in the academic sector and in channels dedicated to the general public.

A perspective which could be further investigated is the relationship between Perniola's idea of the inorganic and contemporary gender theory. As suggested in the introduction of this thesis, I have not focused on this intersection for a theoretical reason. Dandyism is associated by scholars with androgyny, that is, the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics in a single individual. Perniola's neutral and inorganic sexuality, on the other hand, can be defined rather as a conception of

sexuality *beyond* gender. In the first chapter of the second section of this thesis, I discuss how Perniola overcomes the gender distinction between masculine and feminine (and the combination of the two in androgyny) by linking human sexuality with the dimension of the thing, specifically the idea of a *thing that feels*. This idea entails an experience of the body and sexuality in which the very idea of gender is cast out, suspended, within the neutral dimension of feeling. Therefore, although I do not consider gender theory to be a pivotal aspect of Perniola's thought, future research could nonetheless explore the originality and specificity of his perspective on the relationship between identity, sexuality and philosophy. Specifically, two texts can be useful for the researcher who wishes to investigate the relationship between gender theory and Perniola's philosophy. First, the novel *Tiresia*, published by Perniola in 1966 (republished in 2017); second, his still unpublished autobiography (written during his two last years of life while struggling with an incurable disease), titled *Tiresia versus Edipo*. Significantly, in fact, both at the beginning of his career – when *Tiresia* saw the light – and in the final period, Perniola explored the conceptual relevance of the mythical figure of the blind prophet Tiresias, known not only for his clairvoyant abilities but especially for his gender fluidity (he was transformed into a woman for seven years, according to the myth). Therefore, particularly from a literary and theoretical perspective, scholarly studies on Perniola's standpoint on gender issues could find a fertile soil in these two works.

Given the amount of similarities and the relevance of the affinities between Perniola and dandyism, I was surprised that the Italian philosopher did not notice this himself. As stated above, he only devoted two pages on dandyism in general and several others only on Baudelaire's poetics. He never wrote neither on Brummell nor on Wilde, in spite of the striking connection detectable. My analysis of Perniola's private archive showed that he did not possess a copy of Wilde's essays but only an edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a collection of aphorisms. Perhaps he might have found resonances of his thoughts if he had read Wilde's prose instead. In this sense – and not only within this context – it is a shame that the Italian

philosopher passed away in January 2018, while this thesis was only at its initial stages.

In conclusion, this thesis emerges at the crossroads of different debates, which specifically concern Italian contemporary philosophy, the phenomenon of dandyism, and the relationship between aesthetics and lifestyle. Perniola's understanding of Italian culture and tradition takes a different path compared to the so called Italian Thought whose theorists are, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Toni Negri, Massimo Cacciari and Mario Tronti. Whereas these thinkers recurrently focus and develop the theme of bio-politics, Perniola's reflections, instead of taking into account the politicisation of a "naked life" (see, for example, the notion of *nuda vita* in Agamben 1995) revolve around its opposite: life's entrance into a neutral dimension. This very dimension does not imply that life – so to speak – is undressed or reduced to its biological and animal terms; it is rather clothed, coated, covered, and layered within the realm of things and artificiality (as I discuss in the chapter devoted to the inorganic theory). While Agamben isolates – so to speak – the minimum degree of life in order to discuss contemporary bio-political scenarios, Perniola explores life in its interaction with artificiality and anti-naturalistic phenomena (from the Paleolithic engravings to contemporary drug addictions). In so doing, his philosophy can be considered as an autonomous attempt to explore the human and non-human conditions of the current world, parallel and not to be confused with that of the Italian Thought thinkers.

One of the main purposes of this research, in addition, is to witness how philosophy, far from being an abstract discipline, enclosed within itself and its arguments, valid and effective only at a purely theoretical level, implies a crucial challenge for the individual: to constantly interpret the surrounding world and carefully shape attitudes, manners and everyday choices. By investigating Roman ritualism, Stoic exercises, the Jesuit and Baroque traditions, dandyism, the avant-gardes of the twentieth century – guided by Perniola's philosophy – I wish to show how, against the misological ("hatred of reasoning") drift of contemporary social and political fields, there has always been a co-belonging, that is, a more or less explicit link

between philosophy, aesthetics and life. A dandy philosophy is a philosophy which trains the individual to live well, challenging the *status quo* but at the same time accepting and loving his or her own fate.

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## APPENDIX

### Published Works of Mario Perniola (in Italian and English)

#### BOOKS

2019

*Tiresia* (Second Edition with a new Preface of the Author). Milan: Mimesis.

2017

*Estetica italiana contemporanea*. Milan: Bompiani.

2016

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London-New York: Bloomsbury.

2013

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*L'avventura situazionista. Storia critica dell'ultima avanguardia del XX  
secolo.* Milan: Mimesis.

2012

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*Presa diretta. Estetica e politica. Da Nietzsche a Breivik.* Milan: Mimesis.

2011

*Berlusconi o il '68 realizzato.* Milan-Udine: Mimesis.

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Author). Milan: Mimesis.

*L'estetica contemporanea. Un panorama globale.* Bologna: Il Mulino.

2009

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2004

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1998

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1990

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1986

*Presa diretta. Estetica e politica.* Venezia: Cluva.

1985

*Transiti.* Bologna: Cappelli.

1983

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1980

*La società dei simulacri.* Bologna: Cappelli.

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*Georges Bataille e il negativo.* Milan: Feltrinelli.

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2016

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