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euro. In una intervista rilasciata ad *ArtEconomy24* de *Il Sole 24 Ore*¹⁸, ad aprile 2019, Michele Cristella chiarì da chi sono coperti i costi di produzione del premio:

Il Ducato Prize è istituito dall'Associazione Culturale Coil Art Motive, nata a gennaio 2019 come costola di Coil, il brand della mia famiglia per la distribuzione dei carburanti, con il prezioso sostegno della Fondazione di Piacenza e Vigevano, BnBiz Coworking Hotel a Fiorenzuola D'Arda e con il patrocinio del Comune di Castell'Arquato. L'Associazione sostiene il Ducato Prize con le donazioni che riceve dal nostro brand, il quale non acquista direttamente le opere.

E in che percentuali queste cifre sono coperte da Coil rispetto agli altri finanziatori e sponsor? «Coil Art Motive, supporta e promuove per la maggior parte l'evento. Le percentuali sono: Coil Art Motive 70% e il 30% Fondazione di Piacenza e Vigevano».

Le opere vincitrici entrano poi a far parte della Collezione di Coil Art Motive, l'Associazione con la quale Cristella promuove il premio. Mentre Coil è un brand giovane, nato nel 2012, ma che porta con sé una storia lunga più di quarant'anni. Angelo Cristella, papà di Michele, fondò l'azienda, insieme ai fratelli, negli Anni Settanta a Fiorenzuola D'Arda. Michele attualmente si occupa dell'azienda a 360 gradi, con particolare attenzione alla gestione dei punti vendita.

18. Si veda M. AGLIOTTONE, *Michele Cristella collezionista e imprenditore di Coil lancia Ducato prize*, in *Arteconomy24* di «Il Sole 24 Ore», 16 aprile 2019.

Iconoclasm uninterred. The Jewish roots of American abstract expressionism

Abstract: What does it mean to say that a work of art is “Jewish”? And what role did Judaism play in the linguistic innovations brought by Jewish authors to the XX Century art system? Starting from these and other questions, I will develop an exegetic path to show how Judaism in the arts has been declined in many different ways throughout the past century. One crucial step of my analysis of these issues is the focus on the relationship between the traditional Jewish aniconism and the abstract tendencies of Post-War American paintings. After discussing the peculiarities of Jewish abstraction, I will thus focus on how they’re declined – in an antithetic yet complementary way – in the artistic production of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

Keywords: jewish art – visual studies– iconoclasm – Rothko – Newman.

1. What do we mean when we talk about a Jewish aesthetics?

Paraphrasing the title of Carver’s famous novel¹, we might summarize the question at the heart of our reflection as follows: what do we mean when we talk about a Jewish aesthetics?

This is a particularly telling question in the Jewish cultural debate on Jewish writers, especially in the literary field². There are no openly Jewish references in Kafka’s stories, and it is perfectly possible to read and love his works knowing nothing of his Jewish background. Yet as soon as we come to study his upbringing, the people around him, and the culture of his time in greater depth, it becomes impossible not to read his themes and much of his symbolic universe as an expression of a specific moment in the modern history of Judaism³.

1. R. CARVER, *What we talk about when we talk about love*, Torino, Einaudi, 2015.

2. See, by way of example I. GUTTMANN, *Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972; G. BARONI, *Kafka: letteratura ed ebraismo*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008; A. FURMAN, *Contemporary Jewish American writers and the multicultural dilemma*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2000.

3. In the letter to his father we read: «As a child I felt guilty because I didn’t go to the Temple often enough, I didn’t fast, and so on. I didn’t think I was wronging myself, I felt I was wronging you, but I was assailed by a sense of ever-present guilt. Later, as a young man, I didn’t understand how you could reproach me having no Jewish sentiment, considering that Judaism meant nothing to you, and unlike you, I couldn’t force this nothing into faith (though you told me I ought to, out of piety). It was just a trifle as far as I could see: a joke, and perhaps not even a joke». See G. SCHAKED, *Franz Kafka’s Judaism. Kafka and Israeli Literature*, «La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel», 51,2, pp. 205-225, 1985.

So Kafka is a Jewish writer. Yet insisting on this aspect does not explain or exhaust the depth of his genius, just as defining Flaubert as a French writer is a starting point – a fundamental starting point – but not the key to understanding him. The questions that these reflections raise, also in the field of visual studies, are not easy to resolve, but they are extremely interesting. What does it mean to say that a work of art is “Jewish”? And what role did Judaism play in the linguistic innovations brought by Jewish authors to the XX Century art system? These are the questions we shall attempt to answer in this brief essay

2. Is there a Jewish art?

In the sphere of *visual studies*, we cannot fail to recall a famous talk by Harold Rosenberg held in 1966 on the day after the opening of the Jewish Museum in New York, entitled *Is there a Jewish art?*⁴, in which the brilliant American Jewish critic argued that this was an extremely complex question.

There is a Gentile answer and a Jewish answer. The Gentile answer is: Yes, there is a Jewish art, and No, there is no Jewish art (Needless to say, the Gentile answer, either way, is anti-Semitic). The Jewish answer is: What do you mean by Jewish art?⁵

Among those supporting the existence of a Jewish art were, for example, theorists such as Werner Haftmann who, in his *History of Art*⁶, divided art into *Mediterranean* (a category embracing Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism and Post-Impressionism), characterized by qualities such as rationality, harmony and sensitivity, and *Germanic* (the latter including Expressionism, Bauhaus and Blaue Reiter), marked by subjective, metaphysical, and speculative aesthetics.

But a small exception got in the way: *Jewish art*. For Haftmann, artists like Chagall, Modigliani, or Soutine, were in fact neither Mediterranean nor Nordic. They were neither Polish nor Russian nor Italian: they were Jewish artists. This was, as Rosenberg comments with irony, an extremely convenient principle, making it possible to lump Modigliani with Rothko, and Motherwell with Vivian Maier in the melting pot of *Jewish art*, without even having to wonder what it is that actually makes this art “*Jewish*”.

However, even taking the opposing view – affirming the non-existence of a Jewish aesthetic as Sartre does, for example, in a well-known essay of

4. H. ROSENBERG, *Is there a Jewish art?*, New York, National Council on Art in Jewish Life, American Jewish Committee, 1966.

5. *Ibid.*

6. W. HAFTMANN, *Malerei im Zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, Munich, Prestel, 1976.

the immediate post-war period⁷ – risks being a misleading and in some way temerarious position.

Sartre was deeply philosophical and anti-fascist, yet precisely because the object of his contention was the thesis that saw the Jews as a destructive force in history, he went so far as to argue that they had no history of their own, existing only by virtue of the anti-Semitism that prevented their disappearance. «A civilization that is properly Jewish» Sartre claims «never existed»⁸. Sartre's Jews are urban people: they are logical and intellectual. They are lovers of abstract thought, able to construct the most sophisticated theories in mathematics and physics, yet they lack the dimension of sensitivity and continuity with the things required to make art.

Thus, even this profoundly anti-fascist intellectual unintentionally and paradoxically found himself embracing the premises of anti-Semitism⁹. As Rosenberg observes, it is but a small step from the image of the man devoid of sensitivity and capable of only abstract ideas to that of the great puppeteer of world finance.

3. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image

Looking for a Jewish perspective on the problem, it is worth dwelling on the main precepts regarding the production of images found in Jewish sacred scriptures, indeed in the most sacred text of all: the Tables of the Law. The Second Commandment reads as follows:

7. J.P. SARTRE, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Paris, Edition Morihien, 1946.

8. Ivi, p. 85.

9. Much has been written about Sartre's essay. While Susan Suleiman considers it an example of «antisémitisme malgré soi» and Enzo Traverso, similarly, condemns «a near total ignorance of the history, culture, and philosophy of the Jews» leading to – as told by Henry Meschinnic – «an invisible difference between a Jew's friend and his enemy» other scholars, like Francis Kaplan, see in this criticism «a kind of paranoia, which finds anti-Semitism everywhere». Following Adrian Mirish and Andrian Van Den Hoven's most recent study, we can probably agree with the necessity to relativize the problem as «if we are to understand Sartre's position in strictly historical terms, he is accurately assessing the nature of anti-Semitism from the perspective of leftist intellectuals, Jewish as well as non-Jewish. In that milieu of the 1930s, and even during the Vichy regime, both French and foreign Jews had been completely assimilated into French culture ». In other words, although Sartre's arguments aren't so far from the classical anti-Semitic clichés, as Jonathan Judaken points out, we cannot help but recognize him the fundamental role to confront incredibly early with such a sensitive issue, paving the way from the French post-war debate on the topic. Cfr. S. SULEIMAN *The Jew in Jean-Paul Sartre's Réflexions sur la question Juive*, in L. NOCHLIN, T. GARB (a cura di), *The Jew in the Text*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p. 202; E. TRAVERSO, *The Blindness of the Intellectuals: Historicizing Sartre's "Anti-Semite and Jew"*, «October», 87, 1999, p. 80; H. MESCHONNIC, *Sartre et la question juive*, «Études sartriennes, Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle», 2, 1984, p. 137; F. KAPLAN, *Sartre Antisémité?*, «Commentaire», 95, 2001, p. 872; A. MIRISH, A. VAN DEN HOVEN, *New Perspectives on Sartre*, Cambridge Scholars Pub., Cambridge, 2010, p. 101; J. JUDAKEN, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2006.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments¹⁰.

When placed in their historical context, the reasons for this prohibition are evident. The first is the repudiation of any act of idolatry (a very widespread practise in ancient times: Terach himself, Abraham's father, was an idolater¹¹ manufacturing idols for the city of Ur), thus creating a distance from paganism and highlighting the specificities of Jewish identity¹².

In a seminal work on this topic¹³, Steven Fine points out how these tendencies are revealed in particular as regards the Jewish visual culture in the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, in a context in which

the artistic values of the majority were generally also those of the Jewish minority and coalesced with an always-developing yet distinct Jewish sense of identity [...], where the default visual culture came into partial or full conflict with Jewish approaches (which themselves were under continual renegotiation) art become a boundary marker, a point of cultural contention and self-definition¹⁴.

This position is further reflected through archeological evidence, where we can appreciate how the more the Hellenistic and Roman cultures became repressive towards Judaism (as it happens, for instance, under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and Caligula), the more anti-idolatrous tendencies became stronger.

In addition, also a sort of cultural memory played an important role in the Jewish aversion towards idles: it should be indeed recalled that the Jews had been reduced to slavery, poverty, and suffering precisely for the purpose

10. *Exodus*, 20:2-17.

11. *Joshua* 24:2.

12. It is worth noticing that this biblical narrative was partially emended in a later text, the *Book of Jubilees* (170-150 B.C.E.), where we can find a highly political reinterpretation of the episode, likely owed to the coeval Hasmonean revolts: «Abraham said to his father Terah "My father". He said "Yes, my son?". He said: "what help and advantage do we get from these idols before which you worship and prostrate yourself? For there is no spirit in them because they are dumb. They are an error of the mind. Do not worship them. Worship the god of heaven who makes the rain and dew fall on the earth and makes everything on the earth. He created everything by his word; and all life (comes) from his presence. Why do you worship those things which have no spirit in them? [...] Then he said to him "I know, my son. What shall I do with the people who have ordered me to serve in their presence? If I tell them what is right, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them so that they worship and praise them. Be quite my son, so that they do not kill you». *Jubilees* 12:1-15.

13. S. FINE, *Art & Judaism in the Greco-Roman World. Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 57-81.

14. *Ivi*, p. 59.

of creating the great statues of the gods during the captivity in Egypt.

Nevertheless, we merely have to think of Modigliani, Soutine, or Chagall himself to realize that the precept has not always been interpreted literally by Jewish artists. This alone, in fact, might seem sufficient to exclude this characteristic as proper to Jewish art¹⁵.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss such a complex phenomenon as iconoclasm too hastily; rather, it is necessary to give careful consideration to the problem of the dialectic between the figure and the prohibition of images. A dialectic which, as Caroli¹⁶ observes, constitutes one of the greatest enigmas in Jewish culture:

The real mystery derives from the fact that, without denying the original premises, Jewish culture mitigates its prohibitions, largely allowing images of a symbolic type. It is incredible how a totally iconoclastic religious tradition (in theory), can produce such a rich, fantastic and complex visual summa. And all this happens in the Jewish civilization, without denying at any time the iconoclastic or aniconic doctrinal premises on which it is built. So much so that this great mystery even touches our own times. How has a basically iconoclastic culture become one of the most powerful producers of images in the 20th century? Whoever answers this question will solve one of the most profound and subtle enigmas of human civilization and imagination¹⁷.

If, on the one hand, this essay obviously does not pretend to answer such a complex problem, on the other, I think it is appropriate to highlight a further issue closely related to the second question that Caroli raises: how is it that the twentieth century has seen such an extraordinary proliferation of Jewish artists, who have undisputedly come to be at the forefront of innovation in the fields of language and the plastic arts that were its hallmark?

I'd argue that – with regards to the art of the second half of the twentieth century – all this has essentially to do with a very peculiar sort of space-time conjunction. Indeed, we may recall that, in the second half of the past century, many Jewish artists found themselves having to face up to an event (the *Shoah*) that requires them to rethink, express, and question their own identity, and to experience this condition in a society – that of the USA – completely free of the conventions, the deference, and the formal elitism of the European tradition.

American Jewish artists were very numerous in the second half of the

15. But sometimes the price to pay was considerable. Augias writes of Soutine that one day, in his native village, the rabbi's children caught him sketching a portrait of his father in charcoal. Fanatically observant of the Mosaic law that forbids the reproduction of images, they beat him so hard that he ended up in the hospital. See C. AUGIAS, *Modigliani l'ultimo romantico*, Milano Mondadori, 1999, p. 75.

16. F. CAROLI, *Arte d'oriente e arte d'occidente*, Milano, Mondadori Electa, 2012, p. 27.

17. *Ibid.*

twentieth century, and they did not produce “Jewish”, nor, for that matter, “non-Jewish” works: their essential problem was to express themselves as individuals, including their being Jews. Identity is one of the most serious problems in Judaism and in contemporary reality in general, and since the Second World War it has become increasingly pressing. The ambiguous mimetic process of conforming to the American model by inheriting European mannerisms no longer holds, and there is a new, free way of relating to art in independent and personal ways, signaling an art that is truly American but at the same time created through personal individuality.

It has often been said that post-war American art was able to do away with the stale conventions to which European art was still excessively bound. But it is essential to understand that this process was born of the need to *say I*, a naked and all-encompassing need, with no stylistic or historicistic aspirations. And once they found themselves having to say what until then it had never been necessary to say, these “I’s” had to invent a language with which to do so. This language, needless to say, like all languages, can only reflect the *Weltanschauung* of these authors who, while not adhering to a “Jewish style” (which probably does not exist), invent a code of expression that – like the tuning fork – sends out echoes and references, even reaching as far as the second commandment. Which is where we started.

4. Abstractionism; facts do not exist – only interpretations

It is in this light that we should interpret the choice of aniconism¹⁸. Much has been written on the relationship between abstract and landscape painting, highlighting how even the least figurative of works contains references to a real context: *abstract art does not exist*, we could say with George Steiner who, in *Grammars of Creation*, stresses that «no work of art, even the most abstract, hermetic and interior, is autonomous. The most personal lyric poetry, and the most anti-figurative painting, are inserted in a historical-social context»¹⁹.

It is therefore always possible for a trained eye to read abstract paintings as “portraits betrayed”, “interior portraits”. Portraits that speak to us of the impossibility of telling through mimesis.

I believe this impossibility may largely be attributed to a “metaphysical crisis” regarding the expressibility of the world by a society heir to Nietzsche’s dogma that “there are no facts but only interpretations”. It forces our artists to embark upon a discourse wherein the truth never goes beyond

18. See V. TRIONE, *Effetto città*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014, pp. 648-672.

19. G. STEINER, *Grammatiche della creazione*, Milano, Garzanti, 2003, p. 228.

the level of mere “interpretation”, posing itself, at the same time, as a discourse on the real and the production of an autonomous version of it. But it can also be read as an impossibility in a more

etymological sense – the “that which cannot be” – as a corollary, for a Jewish artist, of the second commandment that, ghostlike, stands between the world and its representation.

There is a second aspect, in my opinion wholly inseparable from the first, which clearly highlights the affinity between Jewish thought and abstract art. In fact, on closer inspection, the “renunciation” of a univocal representation of the fact in favor of its interpretations is not – although this would have been very annoying for the anti-Semitic philosopher – a Nietzschean invention. It is as old as the Torah and is anything but an indication of atheism: «Abbajè tells us: since Scripture says «One thing God said, two things I have heard; this is the power of God», it must be deduced that a single passage in Scripture gives rise to multiple meanings”»²⁰.

Apart from the prohibition, it is important to keep in mind that the representation of the real is something infinitesimal in comparison to its complexity: what we have is the mere starting point for a discourse in which the gaze must become hermeneutical, whose meanings are multiplied and overlap. We must try to understand, and it is not easy; this is why God is so mighty and humanity so small. Even the written Torah needs to be supplemented with the oral one “like a boat on a river”. And so art cannot pretend to represent the truth, to show everything; it has the duty, however, to be really credible, to become the starting point of a path, of a discourse with an array of meanings that is never definitive. It is interesting, in this regard, to recall what Bruno Zevi says about why God created the world in six days:

God acted like an avant-garde artist: He painted just half the painting, He wrote just half the score, or, if you like, three quarters, leaving it to the user to complete his work, cooperating with Him, perhaps cursing when he fails to grasp the design, or despairing when he comes up against its multivalence and ambiguity²¹.

On the one hand emerges our human destiny as human beings, “interpreting beings” while on the other, the link between creation and artistry – that of the avant-gardes in particular – becomes explicit. The result is a possible interpretation aimed at bringing the more courageous artistic experiences of the last century closer to the most ancient elements in the imagination of the Jewish people.

Once again we can observe how in the twentieth century there was an

20. R. DI SEGNI (a cura di), *Talmud Babilonese*, Giuntina, 2016, Sanhedrin 34a.

21. B. ZEVI, *Ebraismo e Concezione Spazio-Temporale Nell'Arte*, «La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel», 40:6, 1974, pp. 207-222.

incredible degree of coincidence between the ancient dictates of Jewish art on the one hand and the new linguistic solutions and expressive needs of Western art on the other. Two paths that have remained totally unrelated to each other and which – unexpectedly – find themselves running in parallel; even crossbreeding, allowing each other to speak without the “linguistic fascism” of the historical avant-gardes, and giving life to that amazing *koiné* that is the American art of the second half of the twentieth century.

5. Titles; space and time

But what remains of reality in these abstract paintings? Where is the starting point of the discourse? It has been noted²² that the constant concern of abstractionists is to seek strategies to emphasize the link with the sphere of the visible to «prevent what has become invisible from falling into the negation of the unseen»²³. This is performed by the titles of the works, which always refer to real places, thus determining a dissociation between the visual and the discursive. Here, then, is Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean* (an oval in various shades of gray upon which short vertical and horizontal lines meet), Fontana’s series of *Venetians* (for example *Night of Love* in Venice, in which the reflections of moonlight are entrusted to the metal plate used as a base, and light semicircles sketched with the brush faintly remind us of the crowns of Byzantine queens, and, at the same time, of the artist’s devotion to, and love for, his wife). The list could go on to include Kelly’s New York landscapes, Twombly’s Italian landscapes, and works by Scully, Kelly, Raushenberg, and many others.

Once again, within a substantially identical *modus operandi*, we find a substantial diversity characteristic of abstract artists of Jewish origin. Here too, in fact, “abstract” paintings have titles that refer to the world of things but never to a place (I’m thinking, for example, of the *Aleph Series* by Morris Louis or Al Held’s *Prime Moments*) – an almost constant given in most other abstractionists, albeit the outcome of an operation conducted for very different reasons. In the brilliant speech from which the passage cited above²⁴ is taken, Zevi dwells on the substantially *temporal* character of Judaism. A characteristic that, on the one hand, permeates sacred history:

The temporal conception has always prevailed, since from no point of view can Judaism be reduced to a spatial conception [...] The way God identifies Himself in the first commandment is a source of perennial wonder. Among the countless titles that He could attribute to Himself, he chooses that of a liberating enter-

22. V. TRIONE, *op. cit.*, pp. 655-657.

23. *Ibid.*

24. B. ZEVI, *op. cit.*

prise. He does not proclaim «I am the lord your God who created the universe, the world, and man» but presents himself as might a leader of a revolutionary movement, a leader of a partisan brigade that has escaped the siege of Fascist criminals rather than a God. He says «I am the lord your God who drew you out from the land of Egypt». The passport exhibited by God to Moses on Sinai is stamped with a precise historical event: a commitment temporalized not only in the chronological sense but also in the dynamism of its unfolding²⁵.

On the other hand, daily life:

Heschel says that «Sabbaths are our cathedrals», explaining how the Sabbath, by its very essence, is absolutely outside the tyranny of spatial things, tuning in to the holiness of time. «From the world of creation to the creation of the world». From being to becoming²⁶.

And lastly, political history: a temporal and dramatically anti-spatial history that begins with a diaspora, later subject to migration, and later still a new diaspora (after the destruction of the second Temple) and so on over the centuries, between flight, exodus and attempts to return. Nomads, then wanderers. Until Herzl's dream came true with the birth of the modern State of Israel (an event that, as we shall see, would also have a strong impact on the American artists we are discussing).

Zevi dwells on the iconoclastic principle of Jewish aesthetics, underlining its link with the plurality of reality, but linking this to an instability caused by the dynamism of the temporal flow into which this aesthetics is introduced. The flow races on, and the truths multiply, changing appearance and substance. For Zevi, the aniconic character of Judaism derives precisely from its temporal character:

The knowledge of space feeds idolatry, that of time marks heresy. In art, in the ancient world, the iconoclastic attitude was a heretical act; it depended not only on the wish not to interfere with an unrepresentable principle in terms of its content but also on a consideration of the inadequacy of the representative form. Egyptian images are static. The Greek ideal represents being in an absolute, supra-historical, timeless sense, the type, the archetype. This art could not be used to communicate the Jewish message²⁷.

So, this temporal conception of reality (antithetical to the spatial one) emerges powerfully in abstractionism too, where links with reality are extremely tenuous. If, in fact, among the great gentile artists we have mentioned, the reference to reality is always physical (Venice, Naples, New York, Cairo and many others) – in what might be understood as an attempt to per-

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

form «a phenomenological *epoché* in order to listen to the voices of an urban landscape»²⁸, to recount a metropolitan space that is becoming more and more complex and elusive – among Jewish artists the titles will also refer to the real, but they are to be understood in a temporal dimension: they speak to us of an event, of a becoming.

We must also remember that this dissociation between the discursive and the representative levels (the contrast between the referentiality of the title and the self-referentiality of the image) assumes new depth if read in light of the key role that words play within Jewish thought.

In Kabbalistic doctrines, knowledge of the different ways in which letters can be combined allows man to approach God, who created the cosmos through the word and, in turn, makes man capable of realizing other forms of creation through the word. The Eternal One asking Adam to give a name to the created animals (Genesis 2:19) can be seen as a confirmation of man's role in the Creation as far as elements connected with language are concerned. The practice of using "concrete" titles therefore has a completely different depth of meaning for a Jewish artist. It is something that cannot be taken lightly, because by giving names to things one acts like God. If abstractionists never see a painting as a reproduction of the visible but as its reinvention, this is even truer of Jewish artists: here the disparity between word and image is not mere renunciation, not the choice of "lateral" strategies to attest to a crisis of referentiality in the face of the stability of the real (the referent), nor a question of linguistic economy to avoid redundancy. For Judaism, the word *is already* the thing; as concrete as its manifestation, if not even more so. The image, besides being impossible, thus actually becomes useless. And the canvas then chooses to become a surface ready to accept anything that goes beyond the sphere of direct representation: order, structure, sense, emotion. It is not only a question of a pictorial act, a mechanical practice: it has to do with metaphysics. It is not meant to be an obstacle (as the first avant-gardes saw it) to our *perception* of reality, but rather to question its *essence* as it is commonly considered. In this regard, speaking of abstract expressionism, Rose writes that:

any attempt to attribute the conquest of abstract expressionism to a formal revolution ignores the essence of its meaning as a challenge not only to the geometry inspired by the mechanics of cubism, but also to the empirical and materialistic bases of the content of cubism itself as art for art instead of art created for God²⁹.

28. V. TRIONE, *op. cit.*, pp. 656.

29. B. ROSE, *Paradiso Americano: saggi sull'arte e l'anti-arte 1963- 2008*, Milano, Libri Scheiwiller, 2008, 52.

6. Barnett Newman

In my examination of the complex linguistic research that animates the informal works of post-war American Jewish artists, I have chosen to focus on two key members of abstract expressionism: Barnett Newman and Marc Rothko.

Newman was born in 1905 in New York to two Jewish immigrants (Barnett is an Americanized form of Baruch) from Lomza in Poland. After years spent studying philosophy, then working as a writer, critic, and art teacher, he chose to devote himself exclusively to painting only in the 1940s. His first works, however, were inspired by surrealism, and it was not until 1948 (and as we shall see, this is not an insignificant date for the purposes of our discourse), on the occasion of an exhibition at the *Betty Parsons Gallery*, that we see the artistic turning point that would lead to the Barnett Newman we all know: this was the year he began developing the vertical band he called *zip*, that would feature in all his later work.

His first work in this phase is *Onement I*. The title³⁰ is the archaic term from which the modern *atonement* derives, or “the condition of being brought back to unity”, and in fact, it is the zip that holds the work together, that gives it unity.

As the artist would later say, this was his first work characterized by “no picture making”³¹ and, in fact, the first thing we see is the total absence of figures: a neutral brown area and a vertical band – *zip* – create a chromatic contrast between fields of color so marked as to eliminate any figure-background relationship: the zip does not stand out against the brown background, rather it juxtaposes, opposes, it. At a stroke, Newman does away with all the European pictorial conventions, eliminating their essential dichotomies: without background and foreground, without vertical and horizontal, without cold colors to harmonize with warm ones.

These are the foundations for a new aesthetic whose various possibilities Newman would explore over the years to come, varying the scale, type of surface, thickness, and color.

This was what the first American commentators saw. And, on closer inspection, there is absolutely nothing “Jewish” in this image: no brides, no

30. Newman exemplifies our remarks on titles in the previous paragraph. His works with *zips* often have concrete titles relating to events associated in some way with time. To name but a few: *Moment*, 1946; *Midnight Blue*, 1970; *The Moment*, 1966. Highly significant in this regard, emphasizing this idea of becoming, of process, revealed by the titles, giving dynamism to and propelling the fixity of the work into becoming, is the moving series dedicated to the stations of the Cross, *Stations of the Cross*.

31. B. NEWMAN, *Selected writings and interviews*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1992, p. XX.

violins, no dances, no reading scenes. Yet when Newman died in 1970, a series of Gershom Scholem's mystical books was found in his library, and this gave rise to possible new interpretations, retrospectively shedding light on the meanings of the titles of his works.

This was particularly relevant to the interpretation of some of the sculptures, such as *Zim Zum I* of 1967 (two large zigzagging steel plates placed in parallel, so they could be crossed like a small corridor), seen as a reproduction of the divine act of *Ein Sof*: the absolute essence in its contraction³². But also Newman's pictorial works were subjected to new "esoteric" interpretations: Hess, one of Newman's first critics, and the most insistent supporter of a Kabbalistic interpretation of his *oeuvre*, refers to *Onement I* in terms of:

a complex symbol of Genesis itself, an act of division, a gesture of separation, as God separating light from darkness with a line drawn in the void. The artist must begin as a god, with chaos, with emptiness. And so Newman begins with an act of division, which creates the image. The image re-acts the first act of God. He literally took the image of the "creative act" of the "artist like God" from the Creation³³.

This relationship with creation may also be linked to a reference to sexual procreation and therefore to the female organ, which is part of *Yesod*, the foundation of the *Sephirot* tree in the *Kabbalah*.

We can now see for ourselves the metaphysical vocation that constitutes a (perhaps unexpected) characteristic peculiar to abstract expressionism. And this idea of the artist as *faber mundi*, as *alter deus*, is not mere speculation on the part of critics. In an interview of 1945, Newman affirmed the need for:

a modern mythology concerned with numinous ideas and feelings [...] the present movement in American art transcends nature. It is concerned with metaphorical implications, with divine mysteries. These new painters have brought the artist back to his original primitive role as the maker of gods³⁴.

The idea of the artist as "*maker of gods*" should not, however, lead us to consider Newman's theoretical conclusions as the achievement of an übermenschian conception of reality. His idea of humanity is closer to the Sartrean model (Sartre had visited New York in 1945 and enjoyed a huge following in America in the fifties), the nakedness of man divested of all but his actions – what he chooses to do with his life.

It cannot be denied, and recent criticism tends to underline this³⁵, that

32. See D. ROTHBART, *Jewish Metaphysics as generative principle in American art*, Napoli, Ulisse&Calipso Edizioni mediterranee, 1994, pp. 28-29.

33. T. HESS, *Barnett Newman*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1971, p. 209.

34. B. NEWMAN, *Memorial Letter for Howard Putzel* (1945), in B. NEWMAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

35. On the relationships between Sartre and the abstract expressionists, see K. MINTURN, *Greenberg Misreading Dubu[FB00?]et*, in J. MARTER (a cura di), *Abstract Expressionism the international*

there is a particularly strong link between Newman's work and existentialism. The "cursed fascination" of abstract painting is that nothing is univocal. If the *zip* can be read (as Hess reads it) as the first act, the creation, the separation of darkness from light, the firmament from water, and water from the earth, Newman's works can also be thought of as a mirror of those who observe them, and the line itself as the greatest degree of abstraction of the human figure, *à la* Giacometti. They are emblematic of an isolated and naked humanity and, at the same time, a record of an action, a testimony to the presence, to the human and irreducible existence of its creator.

While critics have focused on Newman's search for Kabbalistic references in his work, we should note that these references are always fairly superficial, vehicles of a discourse relating to a vitalistic self-affirmation of the individual that has far more in common with Sartre and Whitman than with Rabbi Luria or Sholem³⁶, clearly indicative of Judaism being used as a *cultural memory* whose symbols interact in an unorthodox way with a specific historical-ideological context to ultimately lead to the profession of a complex identity that cannot be reduced to his religious *background* alone (but where it continues to play a fundamental role in the artist's imagination and the *Bildung* of the artist's ego).

On the other hand, his total absence of dogmatism is already underlined by the fact that for any Jew, the act of comparing oneself to God would be as desperate as it is blasphemous (we recall that Jewish mysticism is the only one that does not lead, at the culmination of the experience, to a union with the Divine, which always remains intangible, distant). Our artists have no theoretical orthodoxy: they are not commentators or illustrators. For them, secular artists, Judaism functions as a strategy for finding a fragile identity, albeit felt with painful evidence, especially in the late 1940s. Any relationship they have with Judaism is not religious but cultural. Newman therefore uses his cultural heritage to construct his own discourse about the world, putting the words of others into a syntax of his own.

I feel that his *zips* should be not read so much as an act of faith but, on the contrary, an act of resistance and at the same time of rebirth in such meaningful years, with the *Shoah* behind him and the birth of the modern State of Israel in the years ahead. A creative act that resumes God's creation, but almost challenges it. His is a God who no longer deserves devotion, and nor does the society whose linguistic conventions Newman boldly and complacently violates.

context, Rutgers, 2007, p. 127.

36. On this, and especially Newman's errors in the interpretation of the Kabbalah, see M. BAIGELL, *Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take*, in «American Art», 8:2, 1994, pp. 33-43.

In his major theoretical text, *The sublime is now*, published at the same time as *Onement I*, we read:

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, and what have you that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or, life, we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete³⁷.

And, in fact, his «rejecting cathedrals and searching for images from ourselves» can be read as an attempt to universalize the individuality of his action, moving beyond the figure, beyond the Jewish identity that is its premise, reaching a larger dimension, that of a humanity and world renewed³⁸.

7. Marc Rothko

The second artist to become a protagonist in this complex linguistic revolution in pursuit of the most suitable form of expression with which to speak of his fragile search for identity in post-war America was Marc Rothko³⁹, born Marcus Rotkowitz in Dvinsk (in present-day Latvia) in 1903. He emigrated to Oregon with his parents and brothers in 1913. His formal relationship with Orthodox Judaism ended at the age of 11 when, despite his Jewish upbringing, Marcus said he never wanted to set foot in a synagogue again. He was a brilliant student. As a boy he devoted himself to writing and showed an early interest in politics; in 1921 he was admitted to the University of Yale, Connecticut. However, disgusted by the reception he received from the WASP elite as a Russian Jew from a Western public school living off campus (being unable to afford a dormitory), he left university after two years without graduating.

Unlike other artists (e.g., Newman), Rothko, albeit not religious, was always particularly attached to his Jewish identity, and he actively lived it. In the twenties, he taught at the Brooklyn Jewish Center and in a Jewish school in Queens, New York. In the 1930s, he founded “*The Ten*”, an association of artists whose members (including Gottlieb) were almost all Jewish leftists. It is no coincidence that his works from this period (such as his 1938 *Standing Man and Woman*) are very close to socialist realism.

37. B. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

38. It is worth mentioning, albeit *en passant* (as the question, although of great interest, is beyond the scope of our discourse), that almost all the abstract expressionists were either explicitly or ideologically Communist and sympathetic to the Soviet Union and extreme left parties.

39. For Rothko's biography I refer to J.E.B BRESLIN, *Mark Rothko: a biography*, Chicago&London, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

There can be no doubt that, especially in the light of Rothko's attachment to his roots, the events in Europe in the following decade could not have left the young man indifferent and would also have important repercussions on his pictorial language. In fact, his output underwent an important change at this time, namely a thematic shift from metropolitan scenarios to Christian or mythological subjects and, in stylistic terms, from realism to a more abstract and biomorphic conception of form, which has something in common with Mirò and Gorky.

To understand the meaning of this output (with subjects such as Iphigenia, Orestes, and Agamemnon), it is essential to bear in mind that Rothko was tirelessly reading *The Birth of Tragedy* at that time⁴⁰. At least two elements in this text probably had a great influence on his work.

On the one hand, it is reasonable to believe that Rothko shared Nietzsche's profound dissatisfaction with the contemporary art scene and the overall conviction of living in a society that had committed an act of self-mutilation when it eliminated the tragic from life. «Without monsters and gods» writes Rothko, «art cannot enact our drama [...] When they were abandoned as untenable superstitions, art sank into melancholy»⁴¹.

On the other hand, for Rothko, as for Nietzsche, this profound disillusionment was accompanied by the hope of redemption and social palingenesis (an element that we have already seen to be significantly present in Newman) through the search for a discourse capable of touching the very depths of the human being (a discourse that, of course, Nietzsche at first believed could be found in Wagner's work but that these artists understood as both an individual and social necessity). We shall see that Rothko would always remain faithful in this regard, but instead of realizing it in myth, he would fully achieve it later, when he embraced abstraction.

One wonders why an American artist in the late 1940s would read *The Birth of Tragedy* with such interest. This reflection on the tragic and urgent need for social palingenesis is, of course, also a direct effect of the European tragedy; for Rothko, however, recourse to myth meant universalizing "his" tragedy, eliminating its Jewish specificity (he changed his surname to Rothko at this time in an effort to establish a greater distance from his roots) and at the same time speaking in the most effective way possible of the timeless horror inherent in human nature.

We recall his 1944 *Tiresias*, emblematic of his output in this period: in Greek mythology, Tiresias is a blind soothsayer, forced to wander eternally with his head twisted round and forced to walk backwards, as a "counter-

40. For the relationship between Nietzsche and Rothko, see A. CHAVE, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, New Heaven, Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 77-91.

41. M. РОТКО, *The Romantics were prompted*, in «Possibilities», 1, New York, 1947, p. 84.

point" to his ability to predict the future. Rothko sees himself in Tiresias, in the tragedy of a man deprived of sight and at the same time endowed with the terrible gift of prophecy. He portrays him with just one large eye, distorting the figure, which maintains some verisimilitude but remains unknown, fragile and threatening.

And yet, this phase too would soon be abandoned by Rothko, who – just like Newman – would produce his greatest formal innovation only after the war. It is as though there are, at times, feelings of such intensity that they cannot find absolution in form, in the figure.

In fact, the works he produced from 1947 onwards seem almost to reify Adorno's "*philosophical no man's land*", whereby: «After Auschwitz, no poetry, no art form, no creative statement is now possible. The relationship between things can only be established in a vague terrain, in a sort of philosophical no man's land»⁴².

This is a point of arrival where Rothko's Jewish roots become both the motive and substance of the work, albeit, as we shall see, most subtly. While links have been found with the Eastern Jewish illuminated manuscript tradition, where a common method of distinguishing blocks of text was to outline rectangular areas of color, I think this is certainly not the major characteristic to note when looking for the "Jewish specificity" of Rothko's work. Rather, it is the use of indefinite forms that almost detach themselves from the canvas, establishing a pure dialogue between color and light: structure and substance dissolve, leading us to a dimension that precedes things, a dimension that Rothko himself defines as religious, and that I would dare describe as mystical. A phenomenological *epoché* that touches us as the things of this world cannot do and an emotional explosion that silently imposes renewal on our deepest nature.

There is only one message in Rothko's monumental "fields of colors", and this constitutes perhaps the most "Jewish" aspect of his painting, transcending the tragic incidents that led to its coming into being. Faced with the definite nature of form, the certainty of truth and falsehood, the certainties of European rationalism, he sends up his prayer, calm but intense, wrought with pain. It is as if he were saying "stop building certainties, there is a need for silence, there is a need to think".

It is interesting to note how the two artists, incredibly close on both the existential and stylistic levels, pursue the same objective from opposite directions. While Newman reclaims a sense of the *übermensch* and an all-encompassing need to "say I", to the point of leaving almost nothing else on the canvas, and the universality reached by his work derives specifically from the generosity of this "I" that cancels out the individual artist's voice

42. T. ADORNO *Dialettica Negativa*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004, p. 326.

amid the universal, Rothko, on the other hand, seems to be engaged in the total dissolution of this individuality, making room for supra-historic, supra-personal, and absolute states of mind. Rothko's abstractionism is a painting of destruction and ecstasy.

8. Fragments of a conclusion

What I have tried to show, in an analysis limited to two artists although it could easily extend to other leading protagonists in the art world of the second half of the last century (Sol Lewitt, Anselm Kiefer, Eva Hesse, Dennis Oppenheim, Roy Lichtenstein, Christian Boltanski, László Moholy-Nagy, Adolph Gottlieb, and Franz Kline to name but a few), is that it is difficult – suffice it to recall the stylistic differences of the artists I have mentioned – to speak of a “Jewish style”, meaning an unconscious subtext that invisibly links the most diverse artists⁴³. Any such attempt would only produce a hermeneutic forcing, necessarily highlighting only some aspects of what these artists were investigating, relegating to the background their artistic points of reference, their individual circumstances, the influence of context, and forgetting the radical irreducibility that is precisely what identifies a style as such. It would be a forced and, I dare say, somehow dangerous reading, too close to a “genetic” or “racial” conception of style (especially as we are speaking largely of non-religious artists), mimicking a reasoning not very different from what led some in more unfortunate times to speak of “degenerate art”.

What I find fascinating, however, is how complex it was for non-religious Jews in America to define their identity in the aftermath of the Second World War and, at the same time, to relate to a society that needed to be rebuilt, to be rethought on new foundations. This odyssey of the spirit is told by American Jewish artists with a certain elasticity, hidden between the lines of style. A style that has the courage to do away with European visual conventions, with a Europe in which they no longer believe.

A militant style, one that has always been wary of figurative representation, with a wariness that has now led to hyperbolic doubt, to the need to speak of what lies beyond the abused image of the real, of the complacent hypocrisy that any act of mimesis contains within itself. Abstractionism thus becomes an image of becoming, an act of re-founding, a pure emotion that rejects the word; the cry of the “I” no longer surrounded by objects, the ultimate death of the “I” in a gaze that belongs to everyone and to no one.

43. On this point, see M.R. RAPHAEL, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art*, London, New York, Continuum, 2009.

They do not create a Jewish language, but the fact that they are Jews leads them, in this context, to create a completely new one resembling nothing, one never seen before: a language that will be a fundamental starting point for all the artistic experiences that will follow.