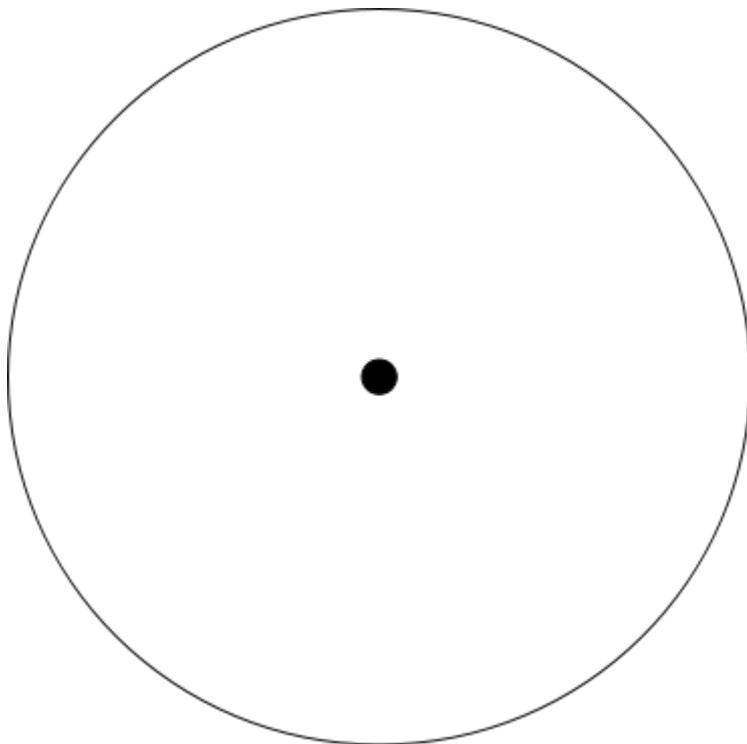


ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SPIRITUAL NOTIONS FOR FUTURE ARTISTS



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Notes and acknowledgements

I started writing this essay in November 2015 and completed it in November 2016. In the meantime, my son was born. My family and I have relocated to Vilnius, Lithuania, in July 2016 for work-related reasons. Notwithstanding the time-consuming process of moving abroad, the major drawback for the completion of the essay was to be taken away from many reference books I have used throughout my research. Therefore, when unavoidable, I have used different online translations of the same text. This does not present major problems with texts originally written in Latin or French, such as with Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts*, both of which I originally read in French. Ancient Chinese texts, however, such as the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi* present a whole other level of complexity, as they were written with many wordplays and meanings in mind. This is particularly true with the writings of Zhuangzi. Unlike Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, Zhuangzi's (or Chuang Tzu)'s writings never had any title, and only what are called the "inner chapters" are officially attributed to him. Therefore there exists multiple translations and variations of the same corpus: *The Zhuangzi* (JiaHu Books), *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (Penguin Classics), *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Hackett Classics), and so forth. My reading comes from a French translation by Jean-Jacques Laffitte called *Le Rêve du Papillon* (Albin Michel, 1986), as for the English version, I chose to use Robert Eno's translation. Eno is a professor of Early Chinese History and Thought in the University of Indiana, and his versions, along with a rich translation, provides additional commentaries and insight related to the text and its different meanings in the context of Taoism.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Grant White for his invaluable comments, input and enthusiasm, that allowed me to bring this essay and myself further than I ever hoped to. *Aide-toi, et le ciel t'aidera*. I would also like to thank Noora for her infinite patience, and my mother for a whole week of free babysitting, allowing me to make it through the final lap.

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For my son Kaius.

Welcome aboard.

Paul Takahashi, November MMXVI

Introduction

The following essay is intended for future artists in order to help them consider the ethical aspect of their intent both as human beings who are artists.

I must immediately define what I mean by “ethical” within the context my essay. Let us begin by distinguishing major types of interactions that occur between art and ethics (presented here in no particular order):

- The ethical aspect of the work itself,
- The moral conduct of the artist, regardless of his practice,
- The ethical aspect of the actions or behaviors of the artist towards other artists or workers within the artistic milieu.

Within the first example I place discussions revolving around controversial works of art, from the scandals of the past like Modigliani’s depiction of pubic hair, to the contemporary world, including extreme performance, blasphemy, animal abuse, etc. presented in the name of art. I also include the material aspect of the work – the toxicity of chemicals used for the fabrication, their provenance and so on. In the second example, the moral conduct of the artist is under scrutiny, whether self-destructive (alcohol consumption, use of drugs, etc.) or harmful to others, including for the most extreme cases rape or even murder. This topic inevitably brings the question of whether one can appreciate for instance a movie made by a convicted rapist, or listen to madrigals composed by a serial killer: i.e., how much of the behavior of the artist himself rubs off onto his work. The third aspect has to do with ethics of working life, for example stealing of ideas from other artists, or behaving odiously towards curators and technicians, and so on.

Even though these three types of discussions seem quite different from each other, they all deal with a certain external aspect: in the first example it is the **form**, in the second it is the **audience**, and in the third it is other **artists** (or people from the same milieu). One might argue that in the second example, the moral conduct has to do with the artist himself; to that I answer that it is, but this does not concern his artistic practice. In other words it has more to do with the human being rather than with the work, therefore we have left the domain of art to that of psychology. My emphasis here is on how the artist’s conduct is perceived by the audience, and how it affects the audience’s reception of his work.

This broadens the discussion on a fourth aspect that will be the main topic of this essay:

- The ethical aspect of the **intent**.

By that I mean how much thought is spent by the artist considering *why* and *how* an artwork should be created, as well as *where* ones creativity comes from. Bringing something into existence is always an artificial act, since there a drive is necessary that pushes one to perform any action, even if the drive is nothing

but instinct. We will see that this will to bring thought into forms is a strange side-product of human consciousness and, just like any psychic agent, can behave like a wild beast until we learn to tame it.

This essay is rooted in my experience as a human being and as an artist. To what extent my personal experience corresponds to a universal definition of human experience is another topic altogether, but I believe that there are sufficient correlations between the universal and the individual to make the sharing of one's experience useful for another. It provides us a departure point I am familiar with, along with my own subjective perspective that I will express clearly when necessary. I trust that the reader will be able to make it resonate with its own perspective and gain something in the process.

The period of my life during which I am writing this essay is also relevant to mention, since it is a turning point for me. In the course of the months that took me to write and complete this text, I have been finishing my Master's degree in the Department of Painting of the University of the Arts Helsinki. In addition, I turned thirty and became a father. Obviously the latter event has been the most transformational one, and is one of the *raison d'être* of this essay. With the concept of transmission being covered here, I will now be in the position of practicing what I preach. Therefore I also intend this text as a testament for my son, in order for him to catch a glimpse of the values I believe in and hopefully to be able to continue to do so.

It is a truism to say that we live in an extremely fragmented age where even artists, once considered at the avant-garde of the social pyramid (to borrow Kandinsky's image¹) with the great responsibility of helping society navigate fearlessly towards the future, feel nowadays disoriented and lacking perspective. Pushed in every direction from their first day in art school, students quickly learn to mock the responsibility of the traditional artist, preferring to repeat instead conceptual formulas to make "clever art", or following post-war fetishistic obsessions with materiality and surface. Meanwhile, those with a more political inclination are either forced to preach to the converted or, if they want to reach out to a wider audience, move into the very dodgy area of political performances (in which case they might as well forget about art altogether and move to a life of activism instead). I feel that it could be useful and probably beneficial for all to step back a little – or dare I say, a lot – and consider the totality of human experience, in order to better understand the place of artists in the contemporary world and bring something constructive to it instead of resorting to schizoid compromises, ironic abdication or plain denial.

Because of the brevity of this essay we will have to sometimes keep the discussion at a very general level. I am aware of the risks of such a method, but the reader will remember that the topic of this essay is the artist's ethos, and everything else is included in this essay to place this ethos within our context. To use spatial terms, we will go in concentric circles, at times stretching all the way up to cosmic scale in order to relocate the smaller circles more precisely.

This essay's original topic was transcendence. There were multiple reasons for that, the first one being the inseparable historicity of art and the spiritual, and the other being the psychological and even empirical similarities between the spiritually and the artistically inclined person. Both share the idea of a personal journey, along with its moments of clairvoyance, lengthy plateaus and numerous traps and dead-ends. Even secular-minded artists have a sense of this narrative, and people enjoy reading about artist's lives

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1977), 19-22.

because the way they lived almost always is imprinted on their practice². (This raises another aspect of my concern: the fact that the audience is more receptive to the story than to the artwork or intent itself. Examples abound where artists start working on their persona more than their practice precisely because the audience wants it so). While I believe that secular ethics separate from religion, as with Kantian ethics, are viable in general, it is the responsibility of an artist to broaden their understanding, to the best of their capacities, of anything they might encounter.

In the post-Enlightenment era many artists still had a clear sense of the spiritual, having to fiercely fight against the disenchanting powers of positivism and science. It was a long-lasting battle, perhaps best illustrated by William Blake repeatedly using the figure of Isaac Newton as a scapegoat for everything science represented. Yet nowadays this delicate question is often avoided, or treated in superficial ways by teachers unable to comprehend the meaning of spiritual values – probably because they were once subjected to the same lack of knowledge by their respective professors – and eventually distort or damage the original intent of many artists. The question of *why* an artist today should at least have a sense of the spiritual becomes even more pressing than the *how*, the latter question hopefully more likely to answer itself organically throughout the life of the seeker.

Perhaps my definition of artist also differs from the general consensus, and to avoid further misunderstanding, I will clarify what I mean by it.

An artist must combine elements of **psychology, tradition and spirituality**.

By **psychological elements** I mean a certain tendency that the person might or might not be aware of. While everybody is capable of creativity as basic cognitive skill – we often talk about the natural artistic tendencies of children – fewer people cultivate it as they grow older as creativity and acute sensitivity are not as useful than learning, say, social rules in order to survive within modern society. For art itself, this would correspond to its poetic aspect, the unexpected, aesthetic form.

By **traditional elements** I mean both the history of art, the philosophy of art and all the skills needed in order to be able to realize one's artistic potential. The artist must understand their place within society, what role their predecessors had for their respective cultures. In other words this also covers the social aspect of the artist as well as their responsibility. For art itself this means meaning, purpose, idea, function.

By **spiritual elements** I mean a sense of the totality of experience, both secular and transcendental. The artist is aware that much of their artistic creation is outside of their own doing. Exactly what this "other" is, and how to cultivate this relationship with this otherness, is of the domain of the spiritual. Even postmodernism – and this is important to understand – cannot shy away from this principle, as it is manifested even in its most stripped form via the concepts of *sublime* (Lyotard) or *saturated phenomenon* (Marion). When the sacred is banished, we still hear of something outside of the capacities of the mind and senses.

² Even when it means distorting the truth to fit the narrative, as it was the case with Louis Wain (1860-1939), whose famous depictions of cats allegedly became more abstract as his schizophrenia worsened. Factual verification revealed that the pictures had been re-arranged a posteriori, as Wain did not date them.

It derives from this definition that I do not believe in the “everybody is an artist” trope. When Joseph Beuys famously accepted anybody who applied in art school (and later was fired for doing so) he did not intend to get a flock of talentless people into art-making. His concern was to develop creativity within each one of us, in order to see creativity flourish *in one’s own field*. He saw creativity as a trait of character (see the first element described above), not a maker of artistic forms (second element). A student of Rudolf Steiner, Beuys believed that creativity and spirituality should infuse every layer of society (third element). This sounds like a blend of Kandinsky’s idealism, with the pragmatism of rōnin Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) when he wrote in his *Book of Five Rings* that any field of expertise could be summed up as a set of winning strategies. Sadly this statement has been widely misunderstood as “anybody can make art”.

One aspect of art that seems so obvious it is barely questioned anymore is that it is, according to our current knowledge, made only by and for human beings. While human nature is relentlessly questioned through the medium of art, rarely is art questioned through the question of human nature, aside from the perspective of the anthropologist and the ethnologist. For the sake of refreshing the reader's mind, and because of the holistic nature of my topic, I feel compelled to begin by exploring the primordial aspects of our species – its specificity, potential, aspirations and limitations. Only from this can we derive the nature and purpose of culture, and ultimately art. Here is the plan of my essay:

The first chapter describes *Homo sapiens* from a very general and ethnographic perspective, as well as its relationship with culture and art. We will locate it in the space-time continuum, discuss its nature, and see whether the artist differs (or not) from the general type.

In the second chapter we will very briefly review the nature of the current world since the Enlightenment and try to untangle the principal undercurrents of our changing world. We bring forth four concepts that complicate every aspect of existence: war, miscommunication, suffering, and evil.

In the third chapter we will offer different tools for the artist to broaden their mind and capacities. Some tools are of spiritual nature, others not. We will discuss the practice of contemplation, the use of imagination, the various spiritual paths, the potential of sound, and the benefits of creating one’s personal world.

The fourth chapter briefly clarifies the purpose of such revitalization of the artistic intent through three major goals: completion, transcendence and dissolution into action. We will finish with the importance of teaching.

For the duration of her or his reading of this essay I am asking the reader to set aside (as much as possible) all perspectives and prejudices they might already have on the given topic. We will attempt to make a *tabula rasa* and begin with facts. Since pure objectivity is virtually impossible since we need at least an understandable framework in order begin the investigation, I shall begin by shedding light on the philosophical methods I have used to investigate the world, and why I have used these particular approaches.

My first approach is **Stoic**, as it is articulated throughout Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*. As a Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius reigned from 161 to 180 A.D. over the Empire. During his years of conquest, he wrote notes to himself, inspired both by his knowledge of Stoic philosophy (in particular that of Epictetus) and his first-hand experience as the key figure of the Empire. It is a summa of self-reflection, humanism, and a plea for reason and contemplation in the face of adversity. In our context, I would say that it is the active side of the ethical aspect I develop below.

The second method is **Taoist**, mainly through Zhuangzi' *Zhuangzi* (c. 3rd century BC) and Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (6th century BC). While they both adhere to the same philosophy, their background and approach is different yet complementary. From what we know, Laozi led a peaceful existence and worked as a librarian, while Zhuangzi lived a nomadic lifestyle during politically troubled times. This gave a certain nuance to their philosophies, with Laozi's ethics being more moral in nature, while Zhuangzi's almost dilettante approach warns us of the toils of engaging too much with the human world. Through these two figures we get two facets of Taoism, which itself professes the limitlessness of the Tao in contrast with the limitedness of human knowledge. The result of this view is the belief that the only path towards happiness (in the philosophical sense of *living according to one's nature*, not merely the feeling of happiness) is to live according to the Tao and not pursue manmade knowledge. In our context, we will consider it as the passive side of the ethical aspect.

I will also make use of the concept of Yin and Yang, to distinguish passive from active complementary forces.

These two methods of inquiry with their similarities and differences are evidently contextual, and in the case of Taoism, actually constitutes a religion. Yet methodologies that do not prevent self-investigation are fundamentally more relevant to the ones that do. The Socratic wisdom of "knowing that we know nothing" should be a first step, and any adequate method of investigation should be able to turn its critical eye towards itself. The risk is too high to fall into confirmation bias, where one starts investigating while having already decided the outcome, cherry-picking facts in order to serve an opinion. Marcus Aurelius himself was not immune to that, when he interrogates the nature of providence, yet concludes that all is well because our fate is in the hands of the Gods³. We must again remember the context of Roman religion, where denying the existence of Gods was punishable by death. With that said, let's move to the next.

A third method of investigation is the apophatic method or *via negativa*. If I had to profess to one testament of faith, it would be nondualism. If God is to be understood as perfect (Thomas Aquinas⁴), indivisible, unknowable and endless (Origen⁵), then spirituality could even be described in geometrical terms – from a relative point (the Self) towards infinity (God). Union is very simple to understand on a conceptual level, but it is immensely difficult to realize fully because of the mesh of systems and webs we call human intelligence. I will continue my parallel with geometry: in mathematical terms, the point has neither mass nor dimension. But in reality as soon as we lay a point on a sheet of paper, it acquires a width, a height, even matter – a bit of graphite – and we cannot do without it⁶. Arguably this puts me at odds with the radical dualism of Gnosticism, whose rediscovery after the translations of the Nag-Hammadi Library made it very popular among spiritual seekers, including me. Certain Gnostic methods of contemplation are, however, of equal interest.

³ "Now departure from the world of men is nothing to fear, if gods exist: because they would not involve you in any harm. If they do not exist, or if they have no care for humankind, then what is life to me in a world devoid of gods, or devoid of providence? But they do exist, and they do care for humankind: and they have put it absolutely in man's power to avoid falling into the true kinds of harm." —Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.11.

Ironically enough, because of this interrogation, Marcus Aurelius is sometimes misquoted by atheist proponents, voluntarily omitting the last sentence.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, "The Perfection of God," in *Summa Theologica*, Pt I, Question 4, Article 1.

⁵ Origen, "On God," *De Principiis*, Book 1.

⁶ One alternative is to draw a cross, leaving the central crossing empty, but four segments remain, creating not one but *four* distinct locations. A quaternity is born.

All of these methods present similarities. They avoid confirmation bias by encouraging the student to always consider the opposite. If something is believed to be true, we must investigate its contrary. Only then can we exhaust the reason of its shortcomings. And since there is no reasoning without shortcomings, the ultimate goal is to go beyond reasoning, therefore transcending it. To overcome contradiction, to annul it and experience existence in its wholeness – this is the *coincidenta oppositorium*, the alchemical union.

For this reason I will often switch throughout my text between two apparently conflicting worldviews – the rational and the spiritual. This conflict is embedded in many layers of contemporary society, and exacerbated in art. The artist is always conflicted, and along with their personal burdens they must carry the cross of the repressed religious systems that remain active underneath the conscious.

In the era of “disbelief of metanarratives”, can contemplation and apophysis still provide a complete worldview and an ethical source of inspiration for artists?

Can there be a complete artist again?

Before the big dive

Homo sapiens

The starting point for this chapter comes from a special issue of the French popular scientific magazine *Sciences & Avenir* titled *Qu'est-ce que l'Homme?* (What is Man?)⁷. In this issue, one hundred scientists were offered to answer that question through the lens of their own professional field. The issue was organized thematically: for instance, the section entitled “Origins” included astrophysics, paleontology, anthropology and ethology, “Symbols” included philosophy, sociology and language; and so on. The remaining themes were “Trajectories”, dealing with history, “Bodies”, “Societies” and “Futures”. One notices the plurality of each theme, as a subtle hint to the fact that the answer is rarely single. I extracted from this text a few recurring key points that are relevant to our topic.

Homo sapiens, at the zoological level, is a hairless primate, prone to sociability, good at problem solving, adaptation and survival. It is considered Least Concern by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species⁸, mainly because of sheer number and excellent capacity for adaptation and transformation of his environment (They do mention, however, “localized declines as a result of disease, drought, war, natural disasters, and other factors”). There is not much more to be extracted for our purpose beyond these facts.

Before going further, we must shed light on a problem at the core of human knowledge, aptly formulated by astrophysicist Hubert Reeves already in the first interview of the aforementioned issue: the quest for human nature comes with a conflict of interest, as we are both subject and object. “We choose the criteria of the prize winners, and place ourselves at the top!”. This is not a new idea by all means. Nietzsche mentioned this problem in his essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, stating that “If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare ‘look, a mammal,’ I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be ‘true in itself’ or really and universally valid apart from man.”⁹ Similarly “animality” only exists in relationship to “humanity”. If this artifice is true when defining animals in general, how partial must we then be when it comes to define ourselves!

Man lives in a man-made world, as he does not perform well in the wilderness. Everything has to be built up from scratch: he has no claws but knives, no fur but clothes, no strength but is able to combine strength. Whereas the tiger's claw is part of the tiger's nature, the knife is a manifestation of the human

⁷ For the full index of the issue, see “Dossier Hors-série Sciences et Avenir n°169”, *Hominidés*, last modified 08/01/12, <http://www.hominides.com/html/references/qu-est-ce-que-l-homme-sciences-avenir-772-0544.php> (in French).

⁸ “Homo Sapiens,” *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, accessed February 2016, <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/136584/0>.

⁹ F.W. Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Continental Aesthetic Reader*, 2nd edition (Abington: Routledge, 2011), 57.

genius. Therefore the tool is not natural, but the making of the tool is. Tools are manifested ideas, and making them is at the center of our nature.

From consciousness to culture to art

The origin of consciousness has been thoroughly researched, and continues to be researched, with no single answer. Some attribute it to bipedalism (Heritier), others to second-degree tools (Boëda, Coppens): tools that are fabricated using other tools, for example a sharpening stone. Coppens also mentions climatic stress as a defining factor, forcing our species into employing ingenuity as a mode of survival. This is relevant to us, because tool-making and survivalism both carry a sense of projection – learning from the past to anticipate the future. The second-degree tool is carried along because it might be needed later, meaning that one can see oneself making another tool in the future and it is therefore easier to use the stone that one has already rather than cutting a new one each time it is needed. Once this idea of projection is started, it does not take long before one starts broadening it to its entire life and inevitably expands it before birth and after death, and ultimately speculate about causes before causes and logic beyond natural phenomena. Spirituality is born.

How does one formulate these projections? Ideas can be brought into the world, applied to walls, or turn stones into buildings, etc. We have no idea what our ancestors were thinking, but we have the artifacts that are projections of these ideas. By looking beyond the form (why is it so evident in the context of prehistory, and anthropology in general, but overlooked in the contemporary culture?) we can conjecturate the thoughts of their time¹⁰.

Culture, as we know, is equally manmade. Something manmade might be a result of social and environmental conditions, negotiations, compromises, resistance, contrition, but whether it will be admitted it or not it is essentially a human fabrication, therefore essentially hollow and cannot account for an absolute truth. Moreover, it is precisely when suggestions (in the sense of political ideas or concepts – I take polis in the largest sense, that is for the city, i.e. for mankind) are mistaken for truth, through the passage of time, or the imposition of decrees, or by superstition, that truth will be questioned by a counteracting force that will lead to revolt, and this will bring in turn new political suggestions, etc¹¹. Nietzsche was suspicious of any belief or truth that had been around for too long, predicting such beliefs or truths always end up becoming lies: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force”.¹²

¹⁰ To the best of our capacities. Prudence is necessary when projecting our own thoughts into the forms of people who are not there to explain themselves. There is a common joke in archaeology that every unknown artifact is considered of ritual nature until its proper function has been determined. And how many “sacred sites” and “fertility symbols” might have simply been bawdy graffiti left there by our ancestors?

¹¹ Like a pendulum, one idea kicks the other out of balance, until it comes back and hits the first one, seemingly perpetually, as in the saying *history repeats itself*. In the cosmology of the pendulum, it is only the structure itself, independent from the movement, that stands still. Moreover, without this structure, there is neither pendulum nor movement. We can understand the pendulum as the immanent, the world of phenomena, and the structure as transcendental.

¹² Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” 56.

Therefore art, with its ever changing definition, will be understood here as the result of craft-making, related to the expression of a thought or projection. This thought can be cultural or practical. In that pre-historic or ahistoric sense, it is the obedient companion that will only fetch what has been asked for. If we throw an idea *out there* (projection), the artist will bring it into form with the best of their technical capacities.

In that sense, art itself is merely a tool. Or, more precisely, it is the tool of tools. It carries no implication of truth, morality, right or wrong. We will return to the question of the amorality of art later.

Space and Time

Let us go back to our primate in the wilderness, and admit that this image of mankind is not satisfying enough, for wilderness, in our context, is only terrestrial – and as we know, the earth is far from being the center of the universe.

Looking at the stars for an answer has not proven successful either, and interestingly enough the scientific approach brought a similar paradox to that of a spiritual approach. Simply put, there is no other answer out there than „If the laws of the universe were slightly different, we wouldn't be there to observe them.“¹³ But this is already an opinion! For another astrophysicist, Trin Xuan Thuan, „Man is the being that observes cosmos.“ he brings forth a more curious point by asking why do humans find the world beautiful: „Is our scientific progress merely a happy accident, or the consequence of an intimate cosmic connection between man and the world?“ The sense of longing for a state or a place we have lost is a recurring element in many traditions. The cosmos provides a universal map for human beings to project their feeling of lostness, thus binding the above (the cosmic) with the below (the individual).

As Above, So Below

Man's physical and philosophical position in the cosmos is an essential point for understanding our current discussion. Traditionally, the position of Man was understood to be at the crossroads between this world and the other. Man as the measure of all things, the microcosm in the macrocosm, the Great in the Small, dangling on a thread between Adam the Fallen and Christ the Redeemer.

Scientifically, and on an individual level, we are nothing more than a dust speck stuck on a minuscule planet amongst trillions of lifeless astronomical objects floating in a gigantic abyss. While this is a simple scientific fact, opinion about this fact is what divides and defines people, and what makes civilizations come

¹³ This is called the anthropic principle, first formulated by physicist Brandon Carter in 1973. There exists the Strong Anthropic Principle, or fine-tuning theory, but it is not sustainable scientifically without resorting to blind faith. To give an image: dandelions sometimes grow in the crack of a highway's concrete. Without knowing the purpose of a highway, a dandelion might be left to believe that the concrete was fine-tuned for it to appear, even though it is entirely accidental.

and go. In classical Taoism, this assigned individual place was a source of wisdom and joy¹⁴, whereas for the solitary Blaise Pascal, it was a great source of distress.¹⁵

So, we are lost in the universe. The first thing we need to know is where we are, and this cannot be done without at least another reference point. At reality's level, we search for clues - the position of the sun, x in relationship to y, etc. Otherwise we ourselves define a transcendental axis, whether literal or symbolical, around which to organize secular life. This is the principle of the *axis mundi* that Mircea Eliade discusses at length in his essay of the same name¹⁶. The axis connects the world with what is not of the world, and takes the shape of a totem, a cosmic tree, a tower, etc. Going back to anthropology, it is of relevance to note that the sense of self-awareness in babies appears only in relationship with the sense of what is *not* self, i.e. the world. Only by creating a separation can the baby begin to define who she is.

Time

But there is another axis - the temporal axis - which we should see as a continuous line made of various segments for the present, that which man is also aware of. Because of the consciousness of his mortality, language and culture developed as tools of transmission as well. If each segment represents one life, or one generation, then transmission is the connector that binds these segments together.

One acquires knowledge either by direct experience or by transmission--which is nothing more than indirect experience. In the process, things get transformed, revisited, ditched altogether; cultures blend, influence each other, symbols appear or disappear. But these are contingencies of a greater whole that is yet to be named. For lack of a better word, we have called it history. And since history is made by historians, ergo human beings, we are back to the beginning.

Time is a misunderstood resource. For the most part, human beings see it as the enemy, for it separates, fragments, ruins, kills¹⁷. In our contemporary society, where "time = money" is the general rule, it is tempting to close the loop with "time = money = devil". Running after any of these amounts to the same thing.

¹⁴ "When a wren builds its nest, although the woods may be deep it uses no more than one branch. When a mole goes to drink though it goes to a river it fills its belly and drinks no more." —Zhuangzi, *Zuangzi*, trans. Robert Eno (Bloomington: Indiana university, 2010), 9, <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Zhuangzi.pdf>.

¹⁵ "Whoso takes this survey of himself will be terrified at the thought that he is upheld in the material being, given him by nature, between these two abysses of the infinite and nothing, he will tremble at the sight of these marvels; and I think that as his curiosity changes into wonder, he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence than to search into them with presumption. For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in regard to the infinite, a whole in regard to nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole; infinitely removed from understanding either extreme" —Pascal, *Thoughts*, translated by Charles Kegan Paul, (London: George Bell And Sons, 1901), http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2407#Pascal_1409_08/01/12103.

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, "Axis Mundi," in *Briser le toit de la maison : La créativité et ses symboles*, trans. Alain Paruit and Denise Paulme-Schaeffner (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 25.

¹⁷ Time is a fragmenting principle, and as such is opposite to the eternal and unchanging. Consequently time is more an affair of the devil than the divine. The Latin word *saeculum*, from which the word secularism derives, means "age" or "span of time".

In the twentieth century the concept of “time poverty” began to appear. It helped define two distinct problems: one pertaining to the Western world, always in a hurry, and the other with gender inequality, as women in traditional society are being asked to perform family duties in addition to an equal amount of work men generally do. There is time we have and time we don’t, but if time is money, then chasing material wealth is like wasting time trying to save time. It’s a conundrum that the contemporary world is very much entangled in.

The Long Now Foundation is one of the most remarkable movements geared towards the re-appropriation of time. As with the Buddha and his dharmic wheel, they began their mission by symbolically starting to build a 10.000 year-cycle clock¹⁸. Their hope is that by widening the concept of time beyond the Gregorian calendar, it will help people understand the long-term consequences of their actions and respond accordingly. The project aims to develop a wider sense of compassion and care for the future.

Body

Is there a human nature without a human body? Certainly not. In order to progress, we must get a few reductive views of the matter out of the way. We do not have the space to discuss the question of body and identity here, although it is an important question, but we will instead distinguish the main division between opinions about the body.

The question of the body is often connected to the world itself, because it is through our body that we interact with the world. It is therefore tempting to link the body with suffering and the experience thereof. Consequently, philosophy found itself more than once at odds with the appreciation of the world. Gnostic sects might have been some of the most “anti-cosmic” and could have influenced post-Pauline Christian thought, but anti-cosmism is to be found in Buddhism as well, particularly in Theravada. The body is transient and worldly, therefore an impediment to human salvation, heavily binding the soul in an illusory place.

As for the other extreme, we find Enlightenment-era positivism in which human nature and corporeality are reduced to a purely mechanical process. According to one of the most radical materialists, Julien Offray De La Mettrie (1709-1751), the mind is simply a sophisticated mechanism that is part of the cruder mechanism of the body. In this extreme more-Cartesian-than-Descartes perspective (and initiated early on by Montesquieu), we are barely more relevant than an automaton built to amuse the upper class. And since automata as non-sentient beings are devoid of morality or ethics, the logical conclusion was that we might as well forget about God and indulge in hedonistic pleasures until the human race dies out.

In contemporary times, a modernized version of this tendency exists that attempts to reduce us to an organized pile of genes, and which toys with percentages in order to make dubious claims. For example it is commonplace to say that we share 98% of our genes with chimpanzees. Very well, but we also share 50% of our genes with bananas, and about a third with some flowers. Consequently, can we say that we are half-bananas? One-third flower? Genes are an element of construction, as were the cog-wheels and the strings of the automaton, and just like a grain of sand neither accounts for the beach nor a glass. Genes piled unto another do not constitute a satisfying basis for a definition of human nature.

¹⁸ “The 10,000 Year Clock,” *The Long Now Foundation*, accessed August 2016, <http://longnow.org/clock/>.

Perception

If anything, artists have a more acute relationship with their environment. Their perception is generally more developed or self-conscious (psychological element), which led to an extensive investigation of the relationship between art and perception throughout the twentieth century. This interest started earlier in modernism, for example through Seurat's pointillism. An interplay of light or a texture on a wall might be of no interest to a by-passer but might fascinate an artist because of its patterns, colors, etc. And perhaps one of the greatest gifts Modernism gave to art has been the emphasis of beauty and poetry in virtually anything, and not only in idealized-Apollonian forms or ideas.

Experimental psychology applied in turn Gestalt psychology to art theory, and along with it one of the most important books about the relationship between visual art and perception, *Art and Visual perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*¹⁹ by Rudolf Arnheim.

Aesthetics

Modernism moved the term *aesthetics* in order to encompass the notion of taste and beauty, prior to that it used to simply designate perception (*aisthesis*), and beauty was thought in a platonic sense, more objective and of a higher degree. The individual's opinion was of little importance. Modernity shed light on the subjectivity of taste; therefore perception and sense of beauty were reunited in the concept of *aesthetics*.

William Blake distinguished the 'vegetative eye' from spiritual vision: "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it."²⁰. This higher vision is similar to the 'intellectual eye' of Plato and St Thomas Aquinas, the difference being the directness with which one can develop it (Blake was wary of the church as an institution), bringing him much closer to the thought of Meister Eckhart.²¹

Mankind as project

While we have not found a satisfying, all embracing definition of mankind, we can articulate an active definition for the purpose of this essay that can be derived from its nature: mankind is **becoming**.

Each individual is responsible for the whole of humankind. A project of this scale implies not only an horizontal conversation (between fellow people of the same time) but also a relationship with (and this is an important and often overlooked point) the **past** and the **future**.

Giving voice to the "democracy of the dead", to borrow G.K. Chesterton's term, is to keep the tradition of our forefathers alive. This evidently does not mean to blindly imitate what people of the past did.

¹⁹ Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press UCP. First published in 1954.

²⁰ *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor, 1982), 35.

²¹ "If my eye is to discern colour, it must itself be free from all colour. The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love." — Meister Eckhart, "True Hearing" in *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. by Claud Field (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1909), 12, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1260-1328,_Eckhart,_Sermons,_EN.pdf.

It is necessary to always consider our own blind spots and bias, and on the modern times, this means what we inherited from Enlightenment. One example is the rehabilitation of the fact that no medieval scholar seriously contested the fact that the Earth was orbiting around the Sun and not the other way around. Such a view was a myth created in the nineteenth century, most likely to prevent Darwin's theory from being rejected on the ground that it was absolutely contrary to the Scripture.

I am not here to discredit Darwin but to discuss the implications his theory has on the destruction of life's meaning. After the problem of object and subject, we have the problem of quest for scientific truth resulting in the destruction of the foundations of meaning. This project of becoming can only make sense when we link **past, present** and **future**. As psychoanalysis has shown over the last century, archaic meanings have not vanished from the human mind. They have receded beyond the layer of "reasonable" secular thought, but is ready to burst out through dreams, neuroses, etc. And is therefore as present as before, only in a feral state.

I believe that letting go of an archaic belief must be done peacefully, and that art can be a very good outlet for this conversation. Social, environmental and technological changes occur repeatedly and forces us to abandon ideas and theories swiftly. The trick is in the speed: the faster it is banished, the faster it resurfaces.

Humanity is a **project, its own project**. Some view this self-awareness as an aberration of nature, some as the divine spark encased inside the brain, others as a great opportunity for awakening. It is no surprise that in such an active form of being, that there is such a fascination for the long-enduring concept that as the alchemical "Great Work". Alchemy, when concerned with the higher gold - *Aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*²² (our gold is not the common gold) – provides an almost safe space for working on the unification of opposites, and has done so over centuries and in various cultures around the world.

One way or another, humanity must transcend its own contradiction, including that of being object and subject of its own knowledge, in order to become whole. Placing a reference point into infinity – God – might be a good start.

That the project changes and evolve is a very normal course of event. With lessons learned and challenges evolving, humanity pushes itself as much as it can, fighting its own demons that are as numerous as its positive qualities.

Contradiction, communication and transmission shape a culture, along with environmental factors. For ideas to perpetuate, they have to be taught in an understandable way. While it is understandable that the direct knowledge of ancient cultures and prehistoric beliefs is partly or entirely lost, it is more damaging that so few people are able to even recognize, let alone read the symbols of their own culture.

When it comes to art, the latest solution for misunderstanding has been to let the audience be the judge. This lack of engagement and placing the responsibility of interpretation entirely upon the viewer's perspective allows pretty much any form of artistic abuse or mediocrity, in the knowledge that there has to be someone out there who will enjoy it. In other words it is the end of the project, and the end of **transmission** – it becomes a chaos of meaninglessness. Conversely, leaving the question of meaning entirely

²² Alchemical maxim of uncertain origins. Sometimes attributed to Gerhard Dorn (1530-1584), or as a fragment of a Latin translation of Ibn Umayl's poem *Risālat ash-Shams ilā al-Hilāl* (Epistola solis ad lunam crescentem, the letter of the Sun to the Crescent Moon), tenth century.

to the artist can be equally damaging if the artist has no sense of his moral responsibility or no skill to express themselves properly.

Legitimate transmission continues in the world of applied arts: architecture, design, comics, illustrators, animators, and others. Even though one might find lack of proper teaching, there is an enormous amount of talented people who simply do not concern themselves with the world of «fine art» any more, knowing very well how little thought is given to classical training²³, also without the awkward rigidity of a closed system like the Art Renewal Center (more about that in Chapter II). Similarly, online courses can help an artist to improve a great deal, provided they are as dedicated to the task as they would be in front of a physical teacher.

The artist: from rebel to visionary

When I speak of the artist type, I always try to remember the human being behind it as well. “Artist” is not only a personality trait but an active way of comprehending the world. Let us begin with psychology, by locating this type through the lens of the Jungian and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

The most common psychological type for artists is the ISFP type (Introverted Sensing Feeling Perceiving), because of their acute interest in the sensorial realm and potential for creativity. Yet the confusion is made once more between individualism – the ISFP being allergic to rules and traditions - and artistic inclinations. The ISFP can certainly perceive things differently, but they are confused by their emotions, their sense of self, and their personal ambition. This is perhaps the glorified artist stereotype, but their concern for ethics and purpose is eclipsed by their creative/sexual energy. (For the sake of honesty I must state that I am an ENTP--Extraverted Intuition with Introverted Thinking--the perfect devil’s advocate.)

When it comes to spirituality the artist is not separate from any other human being, nor does they have any special access to some hidden door of the subconscious. Their inquisitiveness and need to evaluate everything through their own filter is a psychological tendency, not a privilege. To give an example, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy identifies the dual nature of the responsibility of art, and therefore the distinguishable “sin” of immoral action, taking the example of the creator of a devastating bomb and the sin of not satisfying its purpose (in this case, failing to provide a well-functioning bomb)²⁴.

An artist is always out of balance, because of their acute sensitivity (Yin) and/or uncontrollable creative urge (Yang). This is the curse of the artist, which was already sensed by Albrecht Dürer²⁵. But they have also the ability to seize control of the active form – creativity, Yang – and this their great blessing. One can think of it as a double-consciousness. If consciousness is the first separation, as we have seen earlier, then artistic sensitivity brings consciousness of separation – *consciousness of consciousness*. One can reintegrate it, or let oneself swim (or drown) under more sheaths of self-perception. But art, in the meantime, is already at its end; for the most acute viewer it tells more about the condition of the artist than of their

²³ Richard Williams’ *The Animator’s Survival Kit* (Faber & Faber, 2009) is rich with anecdotes regarding the loss in artistic draftsmanship and education, in his case within the context of animation after the “golden age” of Disney Studios.

²⁴ A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2011), 79-81.

²⁵ “Why has God given me such magnificent talent? It is a curse as well as a great blessing.” —attributed to Albrecht Dürer (source unknown).

intent, as French critic Jean Revol (1929-2012) noted in the case of Van Gogh²⁶. The question is to know how much of their own unbalanced filters the artist is aware of.

As far as personality goes, the artist type works with a kind of intuition. They might feel alienated from their family, or from the general worldview and aesthetic consideration of the world, and might find solace with their peers. An artist has a mission that they might not understand. They long for a community, as spiritual seekers sometimes do. I do not believe in any special powers attributed to artists, nor to anybody else. Unless a part of the brain has been damaged or removed, we all have the same functions and abilities. The rest is cultural, social and a matter of practice. The problem arises when what was once the greatest place for any artist – the art school – now lies under the influence of a very specific school thought.

Rebel

Artists are rebellious by nature and the contemporary art world does not provide a healthy space for this rebelliousness to thrive, if only because of its ties with capitalism and the hegemony of postmodern critical thinking. Rebellion is tamed, commodified, turned into artworks that are conceptually safe and/or satisfying the inextinguishable hunger for novelty that will be consumed and forgotten as soon as the viewer leaves the exhibition space.

Artists are often encouraged to cultivate their rebellious nature, but without giving them the right tool to do so, nor really delving into what exactly they are rebelling against. It is like adding more monkeys in front of more typewriters, pushing the statistical probabilities of a masterpiece's likelihood of being written, instead of actually teaching the monkeys basic language and letting them figure what they really want to do. Art students are encouraged to produce witty novelty pieces for an art world that, as a consequence of the loss of higher artistic ideals, will always feel quite dissatisfied, asking for multiple quick aesthetic fixes to palliate a loss much greater than the sum of its components.

Instead of rebelling against the illusions of this world, artists are reduced to being troublemakers; sometimes using shock value to "make a statement" in order to have their names mentioned in appropriate magazines and spaces (I will not give them that honor here). How much have we heard about "that artist who killed a cat", "that guy who ate fetuses", or "that one who let a dog starve in an exhibition space"; and how little does that have to do with art! Unsurprisingly, their "statement" always has to do with "the media showing way worse", as if committing more evil would ward off evil. I recommend that art enthusiasts who always demand more to shift their vile appetite toward ongoing, real-world tragedies such as massive displacement of population, eroding human rights, animal treatment in slaughterhouses, the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch'²⁷ (clusters of plastic debris twice the size of Texas), the growing toxic sludge lake of Mongolia²⁸... the list is endless, and should provide enough shock, hopefully, to curb their appetite. And if it is the art factor that they are missing, they can justify themselves with Duchampian statement "If I call it art,

²⁶ „L'une des missions de l'art est de conduire l'homme à lui-même. Mais l'oeuvre, bien avant l'homme, est déjà au but.“ (One of the missions of art is to bring Man to himself. Yet the artwork, well before Man, is already there.)
—Jean Revol, *Faut-il décourager les arts ?* (Paris: La Différence, 1994), 37.

²⁷ "Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *National Geographic*, accessed September 2016, <http://nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/>.

²⁸ Tim Maughan, "The Dystopian Lake filled by the World's Tech Lust," *bbc.com*, accessed September 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150402-the-worst-place-on-earth>.

then it is art". This type of contemplation should help develop activism or encourage volunteering work. Failure to do so would confirm the suspicion that their statement was hypocritical to begin with.

Vessel

The artist also functions as **vessel**, and much like the mouth of a jar, the more they are open, the more they receive. The mind's "light" is not to be taken literally of course. This light is the light of knowledge or vision, and it could very well bring forth images of darkness. The artist, in this sense, is not responsible for the ideas that appears to them, whether by chance, practice or inspiration (such as in the case of Hildegard von Bingen), but they have the responsibility to consider the creation of an embodiment of this vision or not. The visual artist Denis Forkas Kostromitin compares the process of inspiration to dogs delving into the dark to bring bones.²⁹ Kostromitin also warns that if the dog is not tamed, it will just bring more and more bones until the artist drowns in them. Thus preparation is essential. "Receiving visions" (or forcing them unprepared, with entheogens or special practices or rituals) can be a source of concern, and may even lead to psychic damage.

We can discuss Platonic idealism here. I believe that there are conscious levels, which the artist can cultivate, and unconscious levels, which will react in specific ways to what was cultivated. The subconscious is not simply a mirror or an inverted mirror of the conscious. If the psyche is a garden, the subconscious are the snakes and worms that proliferate in it. We cannot know what they are up to. But we can understand that they will adapt to the circumstances (say, the planting of a large tree), and with enough digging, we can reveal them.

Let us not pretend, also, that commodification has not also affected what is called 'visionary art'. Psychedelic and New Age aesthetics are easily marketable, and might take spectacular forms, as with Alex Grey's anatomical and holistic diagrams. Yet image-searching "visionary art" on any search engine will generate a world of artistically questionable figures in surrealist backgrounds and garish colors, usually borrowing heavily from Hindu and Buddhist imagery, especially hand gestures, along with inevitable checkered grounds, ray of lights, third eyes... Austria even boasts a private school entirely dedicated to "visionary art", inspired by Ernst Fuchs' works, and whose primary goal seems to be perpetuating these visual clichés³⁰.

While this might sound provocative, I believe that instead of doing drugs and looking East the faster an artist understands how the brain works the faster he will be able to fine-tune himself. Cognitive sciences and neuroscience should be taught alongside history and philosophy of art. Learning how to handle visions, or cultivating a space for it, is of equal importance than spiritual practice itself. A vision should tackle higher reality, not wishful thinking; and if artists want to take the position of shaman or healers, they must first understand the profound change it will do to their brain circuitry.

²⁹ Robert Ansell, "The Eglantine Breath. An interview with Denis Forkas Kostromitin," *Abraxas*, no.3 (February 2013), 137.

³⁰ "The Vienna Academy of Visionary Art," accessed August 2016, <http://academyofvisionaryart.com/>.

Alchemist

In the medieval West, alchemists were under scrutiny from the Church, but they could work relatively freely as long as their work was presented as allegorical or following Christian precepts. Being but too well versed in the matter itself, or moving towards magic and occult practices, lent to suspicion of sorcery.

In Carl Gustav Jung's understanding of alchemy, what the alchemical laboratory provided was a place for projections that would have been impossible otherwise as none of these decisions were made consciously. Art is a universal concept, yet much like with alchemy, it is a very solitary activity. The artist is often a conflicted person, perhaps insane, anxious or heroic, depending on the perspective one takes. As long as one considers creativity in its profane form it might be source of earthly joy, but taken in the entire context of one's existence, it can become an immense burden. Once the longing for the Great Work (or unity) is reactivated in the mind of the individual, it will haunt him or her without ever revealing its true form.

Just like an alchemist, an artist might also wonder who he or she is working for, and why. Should an artist even leave a trace? It might sound ironic to ask, but each individual is responsible for us all and therefore should consider its task through different perspectives.

It is often that artists outside of mainstream art education are more inclined to the spiritual, and those inside the art education either keep their thoughts on the spiritual private, or declare themselves agnostic or atheists. In his book *On the Strange place of Religion in Contemporary Art*³¹, James Elkins notices difference in artists' bookshelves as well; outsiders will read Jung and Campbell while art students and theorists will rather focus on Freud and Lacan. Perhaps the emphasis on the subject in the former two examples is more directly understood, or dare I say *felt* more than intellectually absorbed, than in the latter two.

The structure of an artwork, from Plato to Scott McCloud

Form is not the main concern of this essay, but it is the obvious result of the production of any work as well as a major concern in modern and contemporary movements. Therefore it is important to mention why and how form interacts with the artists' intent.

A work of *fine art* is said to serve an aesthetic function –that is, to provide sensual pleasure and/or challenges tastes and norms of beauty. The uselessness of fine art, as opposed to the craft of the artisan, is true insofar as the artist adheres to this view. I prefer to view it as a tool for contemplation, and in that respect the original intent becomes essential, for it can easily be misread or rejected if the form is not in line with the intent.

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud breaks the structure of a work of art into six parts³², so that “any artist creating any work in any medium will always follow these six steps whether they realize it or not”. McCloud's diagram is not new by any means, and is used in his book to describe comic books, but his it is exhaustive enough to be mentioned here.

1. **Idea.** What is the work about, its reason to exist? To me the whole purpose of considering the ethical aspect of the intent is to take control of this input. Many artists ignore where their ideas come from, and in some contexts discussing the source of the idea is purposefully neglected or avoided. Postmodern and

³¹ Abington: Routledge, 2004.

³² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994), 170-171.

deconstructionist thought having become commonplace in the art world, the consequence is that meaningless works of art are treated on equal grounds with meaningful ones, the result being a great deal of confusion and miscommunication.

2. **Form:** The part that is perceived and recognized as a work of art, and that can be discussed independently – It is the result of the idea manifesting itself, limited by the decisions and skills of the artist. In other words, the physical aspect of the work of art. To use an analogy, a tree is the manifestation of the promise of life contained within the seed – its form. Life is formless, but the end result of the process of the seed growing, in resistance with environmental factors as the soil or the wind or gravity will give it a form. The tree becomes unique and accidental, but it resembles the idea of life so much that it becomes an embodiment of it.

3. **Idiom.** The cultural context or background, or set of vocabulary used for work. We can break idioms, as much as creating them or embracing existing ones. A painting can belong to a certain school, a song to a certain known genre or subgenre, etc. Idioms are as relative as they come, and color the work with a certain set of readable signs in order to easily locate them culturally and temporally.

4. **Structure.** The agency or composition of the work. Similar concepts are found in different creative fields, whether drawing, painting, graphic design, all the way to music and fashion: rhythm, balance, contrast, emphasis, variety, unity.

5. **Craft.** The execution. Is it well made? Skillfully painted? Are materials of quality and adequately used? Confusion of intent can arise when it is uncertain whether the artist is not willing to paint skillfully or simply is not skilled enough to bring his idea into a satisfying form. Many will resort to an explanation *a posteriori*, as if the lack of skill was a conscious decision in itself.

6. **Surface.** The most superficial layer. Using the image of an apple, McCloud compares it to the shine of its skin – it attracts the eye but is nothing without content. The surface is also what appeals first and foremost to people. And many followers of trends barely make it beyond copying a surface. For example, the ongoing discussions regarding „zombie abstractionism“, as are called the endless imitators of Robert Ryman, or makers of “clever art” or “MFA art” fall into this category.

With that said, we are ready to enter the world.

II

Enter now the world

History of modern

While the history of art is a long, complex and well documented narrative, the history of the artist is a much shorter one, for the reason that the artist as a distinct figure simply did not exist before the past few centuries.

We generally place the birth of the artist in the fifteenth century Renaissance, as an individual and creative type somewhat more socially distinguished than the craftsman. The publication of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria* (around 1450) already creates a hierarchy of different forms of art, placing some - including architecture - above others. Later, in Germany, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) would add his monogram on his prints. The fate of the artist was sealed in 1550 with the publication of Giorgio Vasari's encyclopedic *The Lives Of the most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. From the anonymous and lowly craftsman of the Antiquity (neither the activity of painting nor sculpting had their muses) to the extraordinary individual worthy of praise, the focus changed from the art to the artist, mirroring the general shift of perspective in the West from the theological to the anthropocentric³³, and later from the anthropocentric to the individual.

The Renaissance and its humanist aspirations provided a safer working ground for individual figures to thrive. Early on Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255-1260) and Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337) had already broken the Byzantine Tradition by bringing human emotions and physical resemblance to images that once were to be understood as visual tools for the education of people. The first modern painter, Caravaggio (1571-1610), had less interest in the story he depicted than in its dramatization. His tumultuous and morally questionable life stood in contrast with the piousness of his subjects, and generated a famous follow-up of Caravaggio-wannabes called *Caravaggisti* who believed that by imitating his paintings and lifestyle, they would be granted the same recognition.

More and more the question of painting comes to light (see, for example, the ongoing interest for Rembrandt's impasto technique) and the subject, particularly the religious one, becomes increasingly a mere excuse to apply paint on a canvas.

Industrial people

³³ For the Traditionalist René Guénon (1886-1951) the shift to modernity, which he greatly despised, is to be found when Pope Clement, under the influence of Philip IV, dismantled the Templar order in 1312. Guénon viewed this event as the day Europe allowed theocratic authority to abase itself before an economical (therefore secular) caprice. Thus began, he claims, the Kali Yuga, or "dark ages."

The Industrial Revolution got its name because for the first time mankind had created not only another tool, but had actually harnessed energy in large enough quantity to allow one tool to create and replicate other tools. Thus machine and factories were born, and instead of manufacturing everything by itself, our *Homo sapiens* merely had to provide energy to the machines, like feeding a beast that would in return promise freedom from pain of labor, cheaper production of objects and finally sustainable economic growth. It did accomplish those goals, for a time.

What constitutes a revolution, in our context, is the overcoming of *Homo faber*. The price to pay was a double alienation from nature, for not only Nature itself was now only considered from an economic perspective (the value of resource to be transformed into energy or object) but also alienation from our very nature (that of tool-making), now reduced to mere maintenance of the said machines. Work itself did not cease to exist, however, but it became only subservient to the machine and therefore lost its directness to the object produced. Manufacturing became alienating, with the reward calculable only in terms of hourly wages³⁴.

P.E.T.R.O.L.

In the Gospel of Philip³⁵, the world is described as a 'corpse-eater' (73,19). In the Christian Gnostic context it was meant to describe the transience and mortality of the flesh, but how even truer does it sound in our age of petroleum, where trillions of liters of liquefied corpses are burned to serve the needs of the industrial world! Living is to be understood as the biological aspect of life, for surely the Gnostic would see contemporary people as dead - shuffling and moving around, always producing more – more what? More noise, more pollution - more death, eventually.

World Wars and Frankfurt School

Walter Benjamin is by far the most cited philosopher when it comes to discuss the transition from interwar to post-war thinking of the function and status of the work of art. His essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* described the loss of the 'aura' a unique work of art might have carried before the age of multiplicity and reproduction. He also linked idealism with the rise of totalitarianism, and suggested new routes for art instead of that of the dangerous quest for beauty and perfection.

Just as Jewish thought influenced the birth of Dada via the input of absurdist poets like Tristan Tzara, the post-war Western world of art would essentially be dominated by the Frankfurt School, and artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, etc.³⁶ With the general consensus of a need for a general *tabula rasa* after the traumatic conflicts that had torn the world apart, it helped creating a fertile ground for new ideas to emerge.

³⁴ "As Meister Eckhart says, "the crafts-man likes talking of his handicraft ": but, the factory worker likes talking of the ball game! It is an inevitable consequence of production under such conditions that quality is sacrificed to quantity : an industry without art provides a necessary apparatus of existence, houses, clothing, frying pans, and so forth, but an apparatus lacking the essential characteristics of things made by art, the characteristics, viz., of beauty and significance." —Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, 66.

³⁵ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, third edition, ed. James Robinson (New York: Harper One, 1988), 108.

³⁶ This is a well-known fact amongst rightwing thinkers and conspiracy theorists that is being used to fuel yet again anti-Semitic propaganda. After ethnic, religious and racial hatred, thence came cultural anti-Semitism, where the Jewish people were to blame for the uglification of the world of art.

Just like a child forced to pick a side after a divorce, art had to depart from ideologies, and what was linked to the general philosophy of art such as conception of beauty, taste, or even purpose had become more politically polarized: taste and beauty became a conservative affair, whereas progressives embraced modernist thoughts and concepts about art, with perhaps the exception of the most radical anti-egalitarian ideas rooted within Futurism. What was one is now two, and the artist, as if standing in the middle of the Red Sea between two walls of forcefully split waters, is now being asked to make a choice: to think and behave either like a post-modern thinker or (as I myself have been labelled as such while being a student in this exact context) to risk being considered a retrograde, close-minded person.

Perhaps the last of the grand narrative of this world was the dualism of the Cold War, blue versus red. It was believed as it was coming to an end that it had generated a kind of Hegelian synthesis of the world, the victory of democracy and, as Francis Fukuyama was predicting, the end of history. Twenty years later we can gleefully chuckle at this thought, but at that time it seemed like the only realistic option.

Further disenchantment: bureaucracy and capitalism

“If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” —David Hume (1711-1776)

What do Enlightenment, bureaucracy and capitalism have in common? Systematic disenchantment, according to the sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920).

With established religion being attacked from all parts, from science to social upheaval to the encounter with other beliefs, as well as the mastery of man over nature through technology and industrialization, the veil of enchantment is lifted up, or fades out, and reveals a materialistic worldview that is finally fitting of Hume’s definition : it is quantifiable. And with numbers comes the sorting and accumulation of numbers – bureaucracy and capitalism.

“For Weber and Benjamin, the factor that solidifies the rise of intellectualism at the intersection of the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation is the emergence of capitalism.” - Kristina Karin Shull³⁷

Until Enlightenment, and even earlier on, the world was truly understood as a magical place, filled with wonders and superstitions, and with people fearing demons and other ungodly creatures. Paradoxically, it is through one of the most emblematic ancient art, that of alchemy, that science developed and flourished. Was it because it provided a safe space for the need of overcoming – transmuting – the great questions of their times, or simply the inevitable result of zealously working day and night with chemical, therefore quantifiable, processes?

³⁷ Kristina Karin Shull, “Is the Magic Gone? Weber’s “Disenchantment of the World” and its Implications for Art in Today’s World,” in *Anamesa: The Culture Issue* (Fall 2005), 61.

The Western conundrum

The Western world's dark side is multi-faceted, but above all, it is hypocritical. An undying colonial ideology still lies at the core of Western thought, and it manifests itself in multiple ways. Multinational business is a direct descendant of colonialism. It manifests a split between two problematic concepts – white guilt and white pride, and the obsession of the West of always driving the narrative forward. On the other end, there is the intense need to burn all the bridges with that which is ancient. We have talked about the Frankfurt School; one might add Situationist International as a radical way to reinterpret the world anew.

There is no big mystery behind the biggest multinational corporations. A corporation is simply a multitude of companies merged together, with hooks and roots all over the world. And these are only the one purpose of capitalism: profit. Companies and corporation are not "against" the environment, in fact they are not against anything, since there is no ideology behind it. They are *for profit*. And they need energy to run, which is incarnated by oil in our current world. As soon as the money incentive is big enough to change the ideology of a company, it will happily do so, and this is why it is so important to keep working on better renewable resources rather than being paralyzed by the damning fact that oil resources will dry out sooner than we think.

We want information

Bureaucracy might be more destructive than capitalism when it comes to desacralization and disenchantment of the world. With the rise of the internet, big data and "smart" algorithms, even more abstractions are to be expected, transforming experiences and information into quantifiable fragments. To borrow Baudrillard's favorite terminology, they create a simulacrum of reality, soon to be replace the real world, at least within mankind's social worldview.

In the 1968 television series *The Prisoner*, Patrick McGoohan plays Number 6, a retired secret agent sent against his will to a mysterious island where one is free to do as one wants (or so it seems) except for leaving the island. Throughout the series Number 6 refuses his Huxleyian travesty of liberty, increasingly alienating himself from his peers by persistently attempting to escape the Island while simultaneously trying to uncover whoever controls it. His iconic line "I am not a number, I am a free man!" sounds as relevant as ever today, except that now, the island is digital.

There is something important to remember, which many artists working nowadays seem to forget: in the last analysis, we are *none* of these things. To go back to Nietzsche, just as declaring that the camel is a mammal does not make it more or less ontologically a mammal than before, neither is our life reduced to numbers unless we implicitly agree to it, and we decide to view the external aspect of ourselves as being more defining than our inner principle.

- Humanity is NOT a business (remember: becoming, not acquiring – capitalism's mistake is to replace homeostasis with bulimia; it sees the world as a petri dish and people as mold)

- Humanity is NOT a sum of data: yes, digital traces can indeed identify you better than you think you can identify yourself. But these are always traces – prints, shadows. What you have within yourself is, in last resort, to manipulate this data. For example you can easily confuse a computer bot by making dubious researches on Google. The police might soon be investigating your case. But is it you they are investigating?

Note that such experiments have consequences: once fooled, an automated system is less forgiving than a human being.

One is partly entwined in the current times, along with basic natural instincts that fit more or less with a modern conception of oneself – reproduction, survival, and the all-too-human capacity for complex abstraction. We still are a mystery, despite everything. Reducing ourselves to anything else is to fall into a bias made by others, human or system. We do not transform the world, but we can transform our understanding or meaning of the world. If we see things as meaningless, they become meaningless to us. This works both ways.

Exodus to simulacra

Once we have, as Hume suggested, “thrown to the flames” (not such a secular expression) every idea that attempted to speculate beyond quantifiable and verifiable reality, and when the horror of the real is made ever so close and so exploitable, where might the anxious modern mind find solace, even if it means escapism? Modernity found all sorts of palliatives to help us get by until we die, creating distractions by the thousands (poor Pascal...) and a new, alternate reality, that of hyperreality. This is the perfect deathless world promised us by advertising, through pornography (eternal realm of bodily functions, La Mettrie’s dream) and to these examples I might add the more recent surge in virtual reality, graphically impeccable videogames and other immersive digital experiences. The “gamer”, once a guilty, useless mishap of society’s race, is now all powerful. The videogame industry conforms to the player’s desire, for fear of losing its comfortable cash cow. Money is power.

Internet apocalypse

The Internet is still a relatively new technology. Therefore, every study of it so far inevitably suffers from a lack of wider perspective. Originally built for military application (but then, what new technology isn’t?), the internet became stabilized, globalized, then “social.” Consequently, it became as messy and chaotic as the real world.

The internet is a vast depository of every truth and lie in the world. How we navigate it is of great interest to psychologists, neuroscientists, statisticians and businessmen alike, as our behavior online is as vulnerable to manipulation as any other type of behavior. Since there is a “sense” of freedom given to the user compared to how one views a television, fast-reacting businesses and other power structures have found tricks to make people click wherever they want them to.

The Internet is literally apocalyptic in nature. *Apokalypsis* means unveiling, revelation; the internet provides the user with *everything* – including every lie. The obscure sense of hierarchy among information, combined with an easily exploited lack of attention span and common sense, make it very easy to fall into endless traps. Equally, the web is akin to the Library of Alexandria if you know how to navigate it properly³⁸. No doubt Aleister Crowley would have loved the internet. In regard to Crowley’s handling of the notions of

³⁸ How great an addition to school education it would be to provide a course for children on how to navigate the web, and how to evaluate the accuracy of an information found online! Apart from basic security rules, there is so much to be said about the use of critical thought or the weighing of sources.

truth and lie, we only have to remember the honest introduction to 777, his book of correspondences based on the Hermetic Qabalah: “The sceptic will applaud our labours [sic], for that the very catholicity of the symbols denies them any objective validity, since, in so many contradictions, something must be false; while the mystic will rejoice equally that the self-same catholicity all-embracing proves that very validity, since after all something must be true.”³⁹

Therefore we are back to very basic rules of personal ethos: the quality of the intent. Unless one is specifically looking into that specific subject, which means one has already had the right thought in mind, the Internet will give us nothing in that respect.

Art in the light of bureaucracy and disenchantment

“Theodor Adorno shares the notion of the relation between art and economics in the modern age. He describes the rational system of art as “products which are tailored for consumption by masses...manufactured more or less according to plan...The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms.”⁴⁰ —Kristina Karin Shull

Many deem the task of defining art in the light of disenchantment and commodification an impossible task, yet there a few definitions still exist. What distinguishes them from each other is their relationship to the contemporary art world, and the level of art education the person holding that definition has.

One of the most dubious claims I have heard numerous times as an art student is that the history of art is not only linear, but also centralized. It is what the demiurgic Western think-tank decides what it is. This is a blind spot found in the eye of many teachers and artists alike. It all begins a century ago, with whatever Marcel Duchamp said and did being taken at face value. But it is not before the postwar era that many new icons appeared, and whose every words artists tend to hang up to, from Ad Reinhart, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Georg Baselitz,... along with the ego-driven stardom whose ridicule is rarely even mentioned. We get the gods we deserve.

I cannot assign the blame on the art market, for it is a market, and as such it answers to the amoral laws of capitalism once more and has not (or should not have) much to do with art education itself. Therefore if there is criticism, it should be directed once again towards the system of capitalism itself. The influence of the capitalist market on contemporary art is important inasmuch as the works themselves are relevant to any greater context than profit. Otherwise it is as important as comparing the color of one season to another.

Jean Revol was one of the most vocal critics of the concept of closed (secular) art forms, often state-funded, as well as the more liberal ceremonies such as the various fairs around the world. France became the hub for state-funded cultural centers, influenced by André Malraux’s democratic and mystified approach to the arts. Ironically, this made modern art a sort of bourgeois commodity, much to the chagrin of all the rebellious energies that started it in the first place. Dada was not against order, but it was itself distortion of order. It was as much a joke as a laboratory of forms. Nowadays, for the vast majority, it seems to only be

³⁹ Aleister Crowley, introduction to 777 (New York: Weiser Books, 1977), i.

⁴⁰ Kristina Karin Shull, “Is the Magic Gone? Weber’s “Disenchantment of the World” and its Implications for Art in Today’s World,” 63.

relevant to the upper middle-class. Can there be a bourgeois form of dada, planned to sabotage itself from the inside?

Who looks at art? Who is it for? There are a few clichés to be tackled here, including the question of “not getting it”. The difference between “getting it” and “not getting it” is mince, for if one can scoff at the uneducated for finding a work of art incomprehensible, I find myself more often than not thinking about it from the other side of it: I’m “getting it”, but might still consider it rubbish. Is any experience justified simply because it is an experience? If we are to look at the end result of such an approach, what intellectual cleverness and ironic works of art do socially is less education than discrimination.

I must stress that this not an absolute statement, but a tendency. For how long should it be that way? Once art neither serve a traditional purpose (mimesis, communication, sublimation), nor carry a romantic feel, nor continue the mission of avant-garde idealists like Kandinsky, what does it even do? What am I to do with a cardboard box, a soiled bed, a pile of candy? Nothing, I guess, but contemplating it still brings nothing more, apart from reminding me of a certain Andy Warhol quote regarding the attraction of nothingness: “The less something has to say, the more perfect it is. The thing to think of is nothing... Nothing is exciting, nothing is sexy, nothing is not embarrassing... nothing is perfect.”⁴¹

The greatest counter-example in Western history might be the found on the façade of cathedrals, for these were a summa of folk mentality, replete with inner mysteries, contradictions, sacred teaching and lowly superstitions: life in all its contradiction. Nowadays the non-artistically educated crowd simply has lost interest for the content of biennales and instead finds solace in other, less hypocritical capitalist forms of entertainment.

Another type of audience exists that can be called “educated antimodernists”. Its most drastic embodiment is found in the Art Renewal Center (ARC), a private educational organization that actively encourages artists to focus on classical realism, and which on its website lists ARC-approved (and sometimes funded) artists and schools⁴². For the members of the ARC the apex of art is the classical canon, from Caravaggio to the idealized realism of William Adolf Bouguereau, the last of the Academics. This means painting nymphs and satyrs and mythological scenes, along with realistic portraiture. Ironically, they consider themselves heralds of true art while celebrating a very specific aesthetic, nostalgic of the *grand goût*; for an extremely well painted portrait of a young girl holding a basket of kittens is still a portrait of a young girl holding a basket of kittens. In that sense they became the ultimate bourgeoisie, holding a matter of taste and elegance before that of necessity, unwillingly becoming the enemies of Plato and Augustine, privileging form over content. The ARC is actually an excellent database on premodern painters and a great resource for illustrators and painters alike, but their ideology is strangely contradictory.

Art devoid of transcendence is torn between looking at itself into infinity (or should we say oblivion), or turning into political activism that, then, is probably simply activism. While such activism is very laudable in itself, it simply is not art anymore. There is not much left of Kandinsky’s pyramid, for the «intellectual elite» has rigged the upper part of the pyramid and long diverted it in multiple irreconcilable directions. These conflicts bring me to the first large abstraction I wish to shed light on: war.

⁴¹ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (San Diego: Harvest, 1977), 6.

⁴² “Mission Statement,” *Art Renewal Center*, accessed July 2016, <https://www.artrenewal.org/pages/mission.php>.

ALL IS WAR

War never changes, as the saying goes.⁴³

War can hardly be thought of as metaphysical if we consider it merely in terms of its secular definition. When conflicting systems conspire to destroy each other, the outcome is fairly limited: truce, victory, surrender, or annihilation. Yet, warfare as a mode of interaction is much broader than its political manifestation: in effect, conflict is at the very core of nature and will be necessary to recognize and transform. Let us step back forty-six billion light-years in order to embrace the universe in its scientifically knowable totality.

Could the cosmos be at war with itself? So much for a monist view! At the cosmic scale, nothing is quite in balance: since the discovery of the Big Bang, we know that the universe is not quite as infinite as we thought, although its shape and dimensions vary from one theory to another. Dazzling explanations are sometimes found for the universe's apparent infinity, mainly having to do with whether it has a curvature or not. Time is wrapped up in the model as we know that time and space belong to the same continuum. At that rate, the Hindu philosophy concerning the Brahma's dream-cycles explaining the fate of the universe is not that far-out. The unique constant that remains is that the universe is far from balanced, and its inner tensions and fluctuations allows its fundamental elements to exist.⁴⁴

Matter and antimatter are at war with each other, disapproving of each other so much that when they touch, they annihilate. The distribution of matter and antimatter is actually in great imbalance, as its proportions tallies favorably for matter⁴⁵. Similarly, the imbalance between the quantity of ordinary matter (4,9% of the universe) in comparison to dark matter (estimated at 26,8%) and dark energy (68,3%) brings a second blow to the idea that the elements are in any kind of equilibrium. The irony is that only through this unbalanced state can general relativity occur, life thrive, and you be here reading this.

Further on:

- **Galaxies:** Maelstroms of gas, dust, antimatter being swallowed up whole by a gluttonous black hole. Stable as a toilet bowl, as long as one feeds it more and more matter.
- **Solar systems:** Perhaps the most stable level of systems out there, provided the star doesn't start swelling and burning out, leading to nova or supernova, and eventually the possibility of a black hole.
- **Ecosystem:** The stability of ecosystems is compromised from the inside, as life can build up to a certain degree, but is constantly threatened by an invasive or dominant species, condemning others to migration or extinction.

⁴³ A quote uttered in the introduction sequences for most videogames from the *Fallout* series.

⁴⁴ There is a beautiful intuition also to be found in the Kabbalistic tradition regarding this asymmetry. God initially "contracted" itself in order to allow the world to exist. This is called in Hebrew the *tzim tzum*, and is one of the great mysteries – to be there and not-there – and by climbing the ladder of the Tree of Life one might reintegrate the transcendent in its own life-time.

⁴⁵ "Matter/antimatter asymmetry," *CERN Media and Press Relations*, retrieved August 2016, <http://press.web.cern.ch/backgrounders/matterantimatter-asymmetry>.

- **Individual level:** Carbon is a great foundation for life. Carbon allows molecules to build up easily, but the more complex they become, the more demanding their survival is.
- The closest idea of peace at **biological level** is that of homeostasis: “Any self-regulating process by which biological systems tend to maintain stability while adjusting to conditions that are optimal for survival. If homeostasis is successful, life continues; if unsuccessful, disaster or death ensues. The stability attained is actually a dynamic equilibrium, in which continuous change occurs yet relatively uniform conditions prevail.”⁴⁶

What we have, then, is a system that resists change, or regulates it through feedback response, like that of a thermostat. Stability is obtained by using change to control change – entropy is created when one of these processes, either the change or the counter-reaction, is out of balance; therefore this is a very active form of peace. Proponents of the idea that the entire planet can be understood as one large self-regulating system have named this idea the “Gaia hypothesis”⁴⁷. It has since been rejected and is now considered pseudoscience. The paleontologist Peter Ward offered a tongue-in-cheek opposing theory called the “Medea hypothesis”⁴⁸, and suggested that multicellular organisms are suicidal by design, and that life on earth must necessarily go through mass extinctions and revert to microbial life in order to continue existing.

The price of existence is eternal warfare

In light of the previous paragraph, we can then reduce existence to a parasitic Will-to-live that clusters matter around itself in order to survive. That matter has a form that we call “body”. We borrow matter from nature, and give it back later. Let us not think, however, that the toil of human existence is heavier than any other living thing! As the poem goes, “the price of existence is eternal warfare”⁴⁹: from nature's amorality (*without* morality, not to be confused with immorality, *against* morality), a solid interconnected system emerges. Even our planetary system relies on the energy provided by the sun, but other possibilities might exist in the universe.

A well-known non-linear model for conflict between different beings in one territory are the competitive Lotka-Volterra equations, sometimes referred as the ‘predator-prey’ or ‘rabbit-fox’ equations. The model describes the dynamics and interrelations between the birth rates and death rates of both species⁵⁰. On the mathematical surface, it looks like a well-oiled machinery. But not only does the system depend primarily on the sun (an indirect source of energy – so much for homeostasis), from an ethical perspective it also seems like quite a bloodbath. Two works of literature that have specifically explored the violence of natural “order” are: Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972), since we mentioned rabbits, and *Douce Nuit*, a novel by Dino Buzzati from his short story collection *Il Colombre* (1966), somewhat of a cult classic from the sixties in Italy and France. Dino Buzzati’s writing oozes post-war existentialist angst. Buzzati is like a Jose Luis Borges writing small town news, using deceptively simple vocabulary to convey a sense of universality and worldliness to his novels. Sadly, to this day this collection has not been translated into English

⁴⁶ “Homeostasis,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed October 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/science/homeostasis>

⁴⁷ James Lovelock, *Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the gaia hypothesis*, manuscript revised August 20, 1973, <http://tellusa.net/index.php/tellusa/article/view/9731>.

⁴⁸ Peter Ward, *The Medea Hypothesis: Is Life On Earth Ultimately Self-Destructive?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Aleister Crowley, “Blackthorn,” in *The Book of Lies* (New York: Weiser Books, 1986), 80.

⁵⁰ A simulation of the equation, using wolves and moose, can be found here (retrieved October 2016): <https://insightmaker.com/insight/2068/Isle-Royale-Predator-Prey-Interactions>.

in its entirety. In the aforementioned short novel, a woman has a vision of a murder taking place in her garden. Her husband goes to check outside, only to find a peaceful night-time garden. Simultaneously, Buzzati carefully describes the horror of the animal wars happening at the macro level, in the grass. Dismemberment, confusion, bloodshed, and acid spits contrast with the relative calm of the couple's room. In short, if war is not here, it does not mean that it's not there.

When discussing the perennial nature of violence, and violence of mankind over nature, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse refers to the *Orphic myth*:

“Can the human appropriation of nature ever achieve the elimination of violence, cruelty, and brutality in the daily sacrifice of animal life for the physical reproduction of the human race? To treat nature ‘for its own sake’ sounds good, but it is certainly not for the sake of the animal to be eaten, nor probably for the sake of the plant. The end of this war, the perfect peace in the animal world – this idea belongs to the Orphic myth, not to any conceivable historical reality. In the face of the suffering inflicted by man on man, it seems terribly ‘premature’ to campaign for universal vegetarianism or synthetic foodstuffs; as the world is, priority must be on human solidarity among human beings. And yet, no free society is imaginable which does not, under its ‘regulative idea of reason,’ make the concerted effort to reduce consistently the suffering which man imposes on the animal world.”⁵¹

Two continental philosophers made the struggle of life their main object of investigation: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and one of his most ardent follower, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).

For Schopenhauer there is no escape from the Will; therefore life is a battle not worth fighting. The best we can do, he says, is to extinguish all desires (that is, having no will anymore) in order to attain inner peace. A fervent reader of the *Upanishads*, Schopenhauer believed in monism (nondualism) and advocated moral and creative ways to transcend one's condition⁵².

Nietzsche, further expanding on Schopenhauer's thoughts, reflected a great deal on this latter aspect of our condition. However, he differs from Schopenhauer in that he blamed Christianity for most of our negative perception of life (including Schopenhauer's), and rejects asceticism and withdrawal as solutions. He instead goes back to Greek mythology to look for passionate figures to draw upon – the Stoic, the philosopher, the poet, the holy and mad men - in order to define a new figure, beyond God and beast and man - the famous *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche's use of war rhetoric, often misunderstood, refers to the inner war inside ourselves. In this sense the war is psychological as much as metaphysical, and of course the most difficult of all.

War rhetoric is universally efficient because, as we have seen, struggle is an essential component of life, therefore of consciousness. It has been widely admitted that the nature of thought allowed the development of warlike strategies. It is of no surprise that some war-themed books are now considered as ‘classics of wisdom’, as it is the case with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*.

⁵¹ Herbert Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution“ in *The Continental Aesthetic Reader*, 2nd edition (Abington: Routledge, 2011), 261.

⁵² Robert Wicks, “Transcending the Human Condition of Conflict,“ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer/#5>.

In French, there is a saying: *ce qu'il leur faudrait, c'est une bonne guerre* ("what they need is a good old war"). This is mostly said by the older generation, and targeted towards what they perceive as weak or useless members of society: young people, unemployed, immigrants. War, and more generally military service (we must remember that conscription is not mandatory in France since 2001) is used as a reminder of the harsh reality of life. Apparently nothing beats extreme physical activities, social humiliation and the killing of others: *in extenso* masculinity in all its pathetic glory, to grasp the fullness of life...

In his book *Yeats and Nietzsche*, Otto Bohlmann reaffirms Nietzsche's claim that his war is of spiritual nature, contrasting it with Yeats', who is a bit more ambiguous on that subject. War rhetoric is powerful, though, and can be subverted. Because human nature is fond of war rhetoric, and the concept of enemy-making is essential for social cohesion, it might be the best way to tackle more complex battles such as global warming, to picture these ongoing problems as enemies to be slain through strategy. For instance, Marina Abramovic, a self-proclaimed warrior of art, wants to engage in a global environmental fight through art and action⁵³.

Civis pacem...

The concept of war would not be complete without a word about peace. Religion tries to bring peace in order to unify and harmonize people, and to this end, they have sometimes encouraged war. Let us not forget how historical eras such as *pax romana* and *pax brittanica* came to exist...

Zen peace is vigilant peace, 'active passivity': keeping one's thoughts at large still requires an effort. We are conscious of our lower instincts. War is here understood as mind power used to keep passion under control.

War is ultimately the dynamic aspect of change, and the meeting between two entities both programmed for survival.

Miscommunication

Zhuangzi: "Suppose you and I disagree on certain things and argue. If you get the better of me, are you necessarily right and I wrong? Could it be that we are both partly right and partly wrong? Or that we are wholly right and wholly wrong? You and I cannot know this, and consequently, we both live in darkness. [...] Therefore nothing is more effective in understanding all the facts than openly and honestly comparing what we know with what we don't know. Only by doing so can we stop unnecessary arguments."⁵⁴

Miscommunication plagues humanity's search for truth from time immemorial. It distorts an idea by by means of the passage of a thought, expression, or idea through multiple filters that the speaker possesses, whether it might be emotional, cultural or simply for a lack of proper words, and from there to the listener's ears (notwithstanding the noise in between) through an equally embedded set of filters.

⁵³ Nancy Groves, "Marina Abramović: 'The planet is dying. We have to be warriors'," *The Guardian*, accessed June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/18/marina-abramovic-the-planet-is-dying-we-have-to-be-warriors>.

⁵⁴ David H. Cheng, "Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu Compared," *Network Chinese*, accessed July 2016, http://www.networkchinese.com/others/note_sub6.html.

Methods, such as the dialectical method, have been developed to resolve the problem of miscommunication in the West, similar to that suggested by Zhuangzi in the above quote. To communicate properly, one must begin by agreeing that both are looking for the same end: truth or knowledge, otherwise the conversation becomes a matter of right and wrong, and that is the realm of sophists.

One must also learn about one's own cognitive bias or biases and blind spots. This is the most difficult task, for it cannot be done alone. Rather, it has to be revealed through a conversation that will shed light on this particular blind spot. For example, while we laud the Greek philosophers for their supremely developed philosophy, we must remember that they were also unable to consider any other language than Greek as capable of making any sense, and considered "barbaric" languages as meaningless as the chirping of birds⁵⁵.

Moving towards spirituality, the major issue is that nobody has met God. Surely there are many who have *claimed* that they have, but we can only take their word for it, and words are full of snakes. My way of dealing with this problem is to investigate early religious figures as much as possible. While it a rejected methodology in scholarship, I find that it is most rejuvenating on a subjective level. Whenever you find the thought of, say, an early Christian, like Origen, or the creator of a new religion as the Buddha, you find an original, direct experience of the transcendent. It does not prove that they held the truth in their hands but their drive, engaging their whole life, was to formulate or defend a new approach against what otherwise kills a thought: its stiffening. They were moved by Spirit and not by Letter – by revelation and not by speculation or dogma.

To consider examples in the world of art, Hilma Af Klint hid her more personal, mystical work as she knew that it would be misunderstood. One hundred years later we can still see the wisdom in her decision. She is called an abstract pioneer, even though she was clearly making theosophical diagrams. She might have closer links to abstract expressionism (see the Parzifal series) for her attempt at extracting a feeling and transforming it into color, something Rothko would spend his life doing, but there is a nuance to be kept in mind when one associates her with the likes of Malevich, Mondrian or Kandinsky. Although they all had a spiritual angle to their work, their primary concern was that of image. Hers were channeled visual representation, and as such, considered very figurative, when taken in the sense of "representing the real" as opposed to the world of shadows.

Rothko suffered all of his life from being misunderstood, and from being associated with purely formalist painters. His ambitions were all-encompassing, as it can be read in his 1943 manifesto (co-written with Gottlieb): "We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." This is quite a statement in a world that was giving itself over to materialism and relativism. His being misunderstood and his troubled relationship with his own works met a tragic ending: he eventually took his own life.

To end on a lighter note, at the very opposite of the spectrum we can find the remark of Frank Stella, complaining that his work was being over-interpreted. Stella, famously stated that his paintings were flat surfaces with paint on it, "and nothing more".⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Which, incidentally, are not that meaningless...

⁵⁶ This quote gets repeated from an article to another without ever mentioning its origin. It might have been overheard, as some sources trace it back to the early sixties. See, for example, http://rogallery.com/Stella_Frank/stella-biography.htm (accessed October 2016).

Suffering

When you are bleeding: Blood washes blood from your face

When you are screaming: The voice of truth drowns your lies

When you crawl: You are what you are

Haus Arafna - *Alive Through Pain*

The dimension of suffering that I am going to review here concerns neither the stereotypical image of the “tortured artist”, nor those masochistic acts performed for shock value. Once more (and we cannot stress it enough) the intention of the artist is the underlying current at stake. Here we are referring to artists who explore the various dimensions of suffering for the purpose of self-analysis, whether on a theoretical basis or through the transformation of personal experiences. In this sense, suffering is bringing art as close as it can to the spiritual experience, as contemplation of suffering is quintessential to the quest for meaning.

If religious and mythological imagery of suffering abound, it is because suffering is universal and often the first cause of existential questioning. Laocoön, Prometheus, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Niobe, even Lucifer (in the Miltonian view at least): all share a tragic destiny that ends in suffering.

Why do we suffer? Is life only made of suffering? Does suffering have a meaning, and can we express it through art? Answers to these questions are as numerous as the questions themselves. The Stoic view of distinguishing pain and suffering, and accepting the former while rejecting the latter emphasizes the non-essential nature of suffering, in that it is not part of our own inner principle unless we allow it to be so. Mystics often stick to that view once enlightened: whether dismembered or burned on a stake, they will rejoice in knowing that their inner principle is absolute and immortal (remember Al Hallaj). Suffering is regarded as connected to the flesh, and the flesh belongs to the world. Once the flesh is “killed”, there lies the state of spiritual bliss.

Taoist philosophy reminds us that nature has no regard for morality, and that death is as normal as birth. Both the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi* state that suffering only appears when one is not living according to the natural principle: that is, when we attempt to escape death or pain, or decide that it is unfair. In this regard it is very close to the stoical view of the topic.

The Vedic notion of karma teaches that we are suffering because of our past deeds. As such it is to be accepted as a consequence of our own doing as a first step in purifying and ultimately freeing ourselves from the chains of interconnected events.

A resulting idea is that since suffering is inevitable for the purification of one’s soul, voluntary suffering can lead to holiness in the form of an accelerated process. Hindus and Christians are perhaps the most proponents of this extreme form of asceticism, sometimes distinguished by the term “unnatural asceticism”. While natural asceticism is simply reducing the bodily needs to a bare minimum (frugality, poverty, abstinence), unnatural asceticism includes practices such as self-inflicted wounds, starvation, and so forth.⁵⁷

In the world of art, outside of their religious purpose, artworks exist as objects of contemplation, and therefore only provide a form or image for the viewer to confront itself with. Even so, there are many nuances

⁵⁷ Vincent L. Wimbush, Richard Valantasis, *Asceticism* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 33.

in the artist's intent that are worth noticing. Below are three possible variations related to the intent of displaying suffering through art.

Healer

First we have the empathetic artist, as in the case of Finnish painter Henry Wuorila-Steinberg. His imagery can be daunting and terrifying at times, but he makes it clear that it is only a process of revelation (*apokalypsis*, "unveiling") and healing:

"An artist reveals and gives that which he can. People expect art to give something, I believe it is solace and vision, something that has to do with personal emptiness. This means that the artist's task also involves an ethical dimension, which for me is the same as non-violence (this must not be taken as implying that a painting should not embody anger or aggressiveness). For me it means that I do not harbour evil intentions in my work. In other words, I do not have a need to lash out if someone asks me for help. Instead of a fist, paintings should offer solace. If you exhibit darkness and violent energies, you do so in the hope that the viewer will become aware of those forces, those things that are within oneself, in all of us. The purpose is to heal, not to make the darkness and the bogeyman frighten the viewer or cause anxiety."⁵⁸

Observer

A more neutral point of view, and perhaps the closest to what I defined earlier as visionary in the Pythic sense can be found in the artworks of Elina Merenmies⁵⁹. An artist of few words, Merenmies often evades the question of content by stating that she merely paints what she *sees*. Being a devout Orthodox Christian with active participation in ritual practice, one can easily conjecture that an apocalyptic worldview also infuses her brushstroke, away from the Weberian commodification of the art work. Her representations of the world does not make much case of the human as she paints clouds and portraits with the same attitude; and often contrast a great subtlety and delicacy in the execution with a merciless depiction of the toils of human existence.

Accuser

There is one more case that is rare enough to be mentioned, that is the one experienced from the perpetrator's perspective. This is the case with Haus Arafna, a couple making industrial music whose clearly complicit worldview is at the core of their output. Since their beginnings, the guideline for Mr. and Mrs. Arafna has been to explore "the morass of the human mind"⁶⁰, using cruel lyrics and sounds generated by analog synthesizers and oscillators. The melodic element is scarce, most of the effect relying on dissonant and sometimes saturated drones, hisses and noises or controlled minimalism.

⁵⁸ "Words," ed. by Mika Hannula, *Henry Wuorila-Steinberg*, accessed October 2016, http://www.wuorila-stenberg.com/texts/henry-wuorila-stenberg_1?l=en.

⁵⁹ "Elina Merenmies," *Galerie Anhava*, accessed October 2016, <http://www.anhava.com/artist.php?id=16&name=Elina%20Merenmies&action=2>.

⁶⁰ "Haus Arafna [Anstalt]," *Haus Arafna*, <http://www.hausarafna.de/english/hausarafna.html>.

The duo released a finely crafted album in 2010 that broke the fourth wall, starting with its title – *You* – along with the tagline “You are guilty. You are here.”⁶¹ The black and white cover (a recurring aesthetic for the band) presents an androgynous and headless body with arms outstretched, reminiscent of Christ's universality as much as George Bataille's transgressive *Acéphale*. Even though the aesthetic level is high, it does not distract from the content at all; if anything, it emphasizes the seductive aspect of their music all the more.

In *You*, the listener is thrown into a purgatory made up of pernicious yet seductive lyrics and harsh, noisy compositions reminiscent of the Australian industrial noise band SPK. But there is more than violence in their intent, which makes it compelling. One can see them as Romantics, in the supremely German meaning of the term, and evidently pessimistic. They have developed a unique way of expressing themselves through the sonic textures that experimental music can offer. When asked in an interview about their primary impulses, the answer comes bluntly: “The fail[ure] of mankind, being trapped in the body and being unredeemed.”⁶² This sounds like a religious answer: failure implies that mankind would have a mission to begin with, being trapped implies a separation between the body and the Self (otherwise it might make as much sense as saying that an apple is trapped in its skin), and being unredeemed implies the theoretical possibility of redemption. If their previous album, *Butterfly*⁶³, was even more radical, it is because it developed the form on which *You* would base its narrative. To quote a reviewer, “If *Butterfly* was the wound, *You* is the scar”⁶⁴.

Their calmer, more feminine and danceable side-project November Növelet has proven to be more accessible (and commercially successful), yet the lyrical content is equally potent and pernicious, particularly in the case of their album *Magic*⁶⁵, which uses similar “under-the-radar” seduction in order to deal with the same problem of duality, betrayal, suffering and condemnation.

Contemplating suffering leads to the problem of evil.

Nature of evil

The problem of evil, or theodicy, is an extremely difficult and universal question that has even turned some believers into apostates. The problem can be formulated thus: if God is all powerful and compassionate, why does he allow evil to exist in this world?

Most religions have a set of responses – St. Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Augustine, providing for Christian theology, but many theologians disagree with each other on the specifics. The problem of evil generates multiple intellectual strategies around the concepts of responsibility, sin, free will, justification of evil, theodicy or greater good. While the discussion might lead to a stalemate in terms of right or wrong, it is still one full of meaning and wisdom that needs to be studied by everyone.

⁶¹ Haus Arafna, *You*, (Galakthorrö 025, 2010, CD / LP).

⁶² Justinas Mikulskis, “Shaping the vague life concrete - an interview with angst pop architects Haus Arafna,” *Secret Thirteen*, accessed June 2016, <http://secretthirteen.org/secret-thirteen-interview-haus-arafna/>.

⁶³ Haus Arafna, *Butterfly*, (Galakthorrö 014, 2003, CD / LP).

⁶⁴ Vincent Lenglet, “Haus Arafna: You,” *Guts of Darkness*, published August 31, 2011, <http://www.gutsofdarkness.com/god/objet.php?objet=10245> (in French).

⁶⁵ November Növelet, *Magic* (Galakthorrö 019, 2007, CD / LP).

I am in no position to discuss the metaphysics of evil. My conception of evil is simple: it is what brings more confusion and suffering to the world as well as what pushes mankind further from itself. I judge the tree by its fruits. What I would like to offer is a list of conceptual or abstract forms through which evil manifests, based on personal observation.

- Evil as **chaos**. Perhaps the most abstract form of evil, yet the oldest one in human history as it is already to be found in the Sumerian myth of Tiamat against Marduk. Chaos is either formlessness before form, or the end of energy, as defined by the second law of thermodynamics. As we have seen earlier every organized structure depends on a bigger structure to sustain itself; but with the irreversibility of time bringing the whole universe towards a tepid Armageddon, or maximum entropy, no smaller system will survive its inevitable loss of energy. This is the destination towards which every system is directed, and as humans we have the dubious gift of being aware of it. That reminds us of death, therefore loss, therefore suffering, therefore evil. Entropy, disorder and chaos are all different scientific terms, but rejoin in their general meaning in that they are unpredictable, inevitable, and enemies of order.
- Evil as **separation**. This is a fundamental concept in most religions, as consciousness and culture separates us on from other animals, and consequently alienates us, creating a universal sense of loss. It is relevant to consider the fall from Paradise from that angle, since there is no possible humanity without this sense of alienation or separation. In Plato's Symposium, Aristophanes speaks about the separation of the original androgynous people⁶⁶. Separated from each other, or from our true nature, or from God. Modernity brought further separation, which we mentioned earlier, but most importantly it introduced a separation from our primal ingenuity. Either way we must learn to fill this gap again; perhaps, as Aristophanes suggested, through love and compassion.

Satan is also known as the Great Divider, and schisms are known to be great evils. People turning against one another is a great toil for mankind, and the motto *divide et impera* as a rule of conquest sadly still rings true today. If there is unity in God, it follows that there is great fragmentation in Hell.

- Evil as **laziness**, including **thought**. *Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum*.⁶⁷ It is worse to know and lie than to unknowingly sin. Errors are the ways by which we learn, but committing the same error twice is no longer an error. At best it is delusion, at worst, deception.

Good and evil are like warm and cold on a strip. In the middle, impossible to know where we are. (Thomas Aquinas puts God at the good end of the strip – see argument of degree). Always using the reference points colder and warmer.

One reason I believe in non-duality is justified by the violence that inevitably transfers into any strictly dualistic worldview. I believe in true dialogue between arts, science, philosophy and religion, as did the physicist David Bohm throughout his life, as embodied in his most important book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*⁶⁸. Transcendence of one's mental limitations here becomes a moral and ethical imperative. Coexistence in the mind (rational thinking and metaphysical thinking) is as important as social coexistence.

⁶⁶ Plato, "Symposium," in *Collected Works of Plato*, 4th Edition (Oxford University Press, 1953), 520-525.

⁶⁷ Attributed to either Seneca or Cicero (*Philippicae* XII, ii, 5). It later reappeared in Augustine's *Sermons* (164,14).

⁶⁸ Abington: Routledge, 1980.

A critical word on Traditionalism

As this point it is important that I also state my position on Traditionalism. I do not claim to possess any truth on the matter, so consider this as an opinion. Let us ponder, however, upon this injunction from the Gospel: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”* (Matthew 7:15-16). I have not met the first Traditionalists in the flesh, nor did most of my contemporaries. But I have seen many of their fruits, and apart from a few who would rather stay hidden, I can say that there is more damage than healing. My view is that while Traditionalists (this includes René Guénon, Julius Evola, Titus Buckhardt, Martin Lings, and to some extent Mircea Eliade for his accepting de facto of a transcendental –timeless– and sacred state of being) are admirable for their contribution in reminding the world of the necessity of metaphysics. Yet the rigidity upon which they rely on their own teachings, of a Platonic and sometimes Pauline nature, far from inspiring humility drawn from *imitatio Christi* –like Origen or St. Francis– in fact enables and fuels intolerance and segregation on a social level that is very dangerous as it confuses interpretation with dogma. In this world nobody knows, and those who do, *do not speak*.

In the Guénonian world, religion is not necessarily linked to mysticism or spirituality. Having met and later opposed the then-thriving Parisian “occult” scene, Guénon instead emphasized on the one mystery that could not be dealt apart from tradition: that of initiation. The uninitiated as well as the counter-initiated (a term referring to what he considers inauthentic religious paths) live in death, whereas “those who know” live in life, following a supposedly unbroken chain of knowledge that still survives hidden within the morass of the modern world. Initiation, then, leads into the objective reality of the transcendent. His only motivation for writing books was to help the world awake before its complete dissolution into chaos. One must remember that in the Age of Kali Yuga, the sacred has been so defiled that it is much easier to be saved than in the so-called Golden Age. I wonder what Diogenes would have thought of all that?

The blind spot of traditionalists is their absolute certitude in the objectivity of doctrinal knowledge, therefore their own knowledge. Guénon is a unique example - and for that a very necessary one, I believe – of an anti-modernist standpoint so intense it is still debated today. Yet, apart from a minority that explores his idea with profound interest, the majority of his followers prefer instead to mimic his blunt, and cold “matter-of-fact” approach to a topic that is everything but rigid. Topped with Julius Evola’s sociopathic methods of transcendence and Frithjof Schuon’s arrogance, what we get in fact is a ready-to-use ideal figure of a well-versed master (and guardian) of arcane knowledge in the face of adversity that is represented by everything remotely modernist.

What happens, then, is that just like many angry young men suddenly associated with Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as soon as they heard about it, a strange fringe of people decided that after reading Julius Evola they suddenly saw themselves as “differentiated”, “aristocrats of the soul” and “riding the tiger”. This last phrase meaning pretty much engaging with the modern world but secretly not, as absurd as this may sound. One can find them sometimes even bragging about it on Facebook, of all wretched places. If only they could read a few more pages of Nietzsche, particularly the ones regarding doctrinal truths...

I find the blind rejection of psychology and psychoanalysis by Traditionalists equally revealing. Since Darwin destroyed the claims to truth from the religious narrative, the danger for psychology of “unveiling” a more psychiatric or even neurological source for God became equally very real. Carl Gustav Jung, in particular, was seen as highly suspicious by Traditionalists. This is because he was seen as toying with the very symbols traditionalists held as purely transcendental in nature, in other words, archetypal above

consciousness, and not “below” as with Jung’s archetypes. Jung fought his critics, without naming them, in the introduction to his essay *Psychology and Alchemy* by explaining that he was actually working along with them, by Christianizing the soul of the Western man from *within*, while their “mission” was to do it from the outside (the conscious)⁶⁹. Obviously the other aspect of the issue is to be found within the mind of some Traditionalists: undiagnosed paranoid delusions, sociopathic or bipolar disorders, persecution fantasies, schizophrenia.

Beware of myths

In an essay on portraiture⁷⁰, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy reminds people that traditional conception of portraiture was to reveal the perfect face the deceased will have in his afterlife. Traditionalists call it revelation, modernists call it mystification or revision. Coomaraswamy claims that we are to remember the person in its mythified (should we say mystified) perfection. The same would therefore apply to noble casts of aristocrats, intellectuals, etc., just like remembering the Samurai as noble warriors perfectly in line with the Bushido and not as the more historically accurate portrayal as merciless thugs; equally, medieval knights should be remembered as chivalrous and courageous, and evidently Templars as hypostases of the divine⁷¹, instead of more earthly papal mercenaries. In this world of ideals mostly at odds with reality, Golden Ages certainly appear as within human’s reach, and the Kali Yuga as an objective conception of the world.

Paving the road of Hell

Good always is accompanied with controversy, for it must segregate evil. There is the good intention of thinking we are doing good. But without a definitive definition of good – which none of us have – what good, then, is our intent, if through misguidance we commit more evil, if not here, over there? When Marcus Aurelius dutifully persecuted the Christians, he was doing it for the good of the Roman Empire, and it was based on a rational assessment of the situation. Thankfully martyrdom has found a very central part in the Christian precepts.

In the next chapter we will review a few tools and that the artist can use to sharpen their intent and artistic ethos in the light of the persistent conflicts that have been discussed throughout this one.

⁶⁹ C.G.Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 12-14.

⁷⁰ Coomaraswamy. “The traditional conception of ideal portraiture” in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, 117-129.

⁷¹ Coomaraswamy, 81.

III

Tools

This is the turning point of my essay.

We have noted earlier that it was human nature to make tools in order to project ideas into form. We also saw that the conundrum of all human interaction lay in the dissonance between subject and object; when added to the statement that mankind is becoming, confusion ensues and generates its own form of seemingly inescapable web of interrelated systems that constitutes the world we live in.

Below are but a few tools that any artist can consider in order to evaluate and perhaps improve their practice in the light of what has been discussed earlier in this essay. The tools we will suggest are: contemplation, imagination, choosing a spiritual path, creating ones own world, making sounds, and finding balance.

Contemplating the world

“It is requisite for the good of the human community that there should be persons who devote themselves to the life of contemplation.” —St. Thomas Aquinas⁷²

Contemplation is often used as a synonym for meditation, as both activities are quite similar and their definition is often interchangeable, depending on the context. They contain one major distinction, but since there is no global agreement on which is which, I am going to distinguish the two in this manner:

- I call meditation all mental activities consisting in *inwards* concentration.
- I call contemplation all activities consisting in *outwards* concentration.

By inwards concentration I mean turning the attention towards the rhythms of the body (breathing meditation), recitation of a mantra (mantra meditation, transcendental meditation), or concentration exercises turned towards the Self. In these processes we disengage from our regular Self by turning it into an object. Meditating allows some transparency of the body and the mind, but it takes time, practice, and concentrated effort.

By contemplation I mean disengaging from the Self by contemplating nature, or the nature of human activities, or a specific concept such as death, or Christ, etc. Therefore in that context I categorize Christian meditation (as with the Franciscans for instance) as contemplation. It is evident that these are two means towards the same end – unity – and therefore the distinction only operates as a starting point.

For St. Thomas Aquinas, contemplation is of the highest order as its finality is union with the first principle (here: God), citing Gregory and Augustine as sources⁷³. Non-contemplative activities, whether good or bad, are inferior in regard to their intent or finality: relief of suffering (charity), teaching (education), etc. Furthermore, all forms of contemplation (such as prayer, reading, even listening) are necessary to reach the

⁷² St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, I, 2.

⁷³ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt II, Question 180.

truth, for according to St. Thomas Aquinas, man does not comprehend the truth by his senses alone:

“We are now speaking of the contemplative life as applicable to man. Now according to Dionysius (Div. Nom. vii) between man and angel there is this difference, that an angel perceives the truth by simple apprehension, whereas man arrives at the perception of a simple truth by a process from several premises. Accordingly, then, the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed, namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity. Yet it has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act. Some of these pertain to the reception of principles, from which it proceeds to the contemplation of truth; others are concerned with deducing from the principles, the truth, the knowledge of which is sought; and the last and crowning act is the contemplation itself of the truth.”⁷⁴

My distinction between meditation and contemplation derives from a Stoic approach, since Stoicism advocates contemplation of everything that we can observe. We must engage by observing each thing, interrogate its reason, its origin and purpose.⁷⁵

Instead of immediately engaging with the world, it is good to learn to contemplate the actions of men, the desires and aspirations that underlines every act, including ours. By practicing contemplation, a person might start sensing that he or she is losing his or her **opinion**. Opinion is like a weed: it will come back until we get to the source of the problem. Why is the seed growing? Why do we have opinions? On what are they based, and does the world need them?

Artistic subjectivity is often considered as a gift, while it could very well be treated as a curse. Art education should consequently act as an exorcism to lift that curse.

The more one contemplates opinions and beliefs, the more it seems that they can all be placed on a strip extending in space and time. The matter is only to remember who is where.

Contemplating nature

Nature gives and takes all of us, no matter how hard we try to escape it. There is however a great trait that we humans possess over other living beings – the ability to contemplate nature.

Nature is essential to the survival of mankind. It is a truism the modern world slowly wakes up to, and contemplation of nature is essential for the balance of the human psyche. Nature is transcendent in that its own purpose is other than tool-making. What this purpose is, is a mystery that is outside the scope of human perspective; nature is the ultimate Other. Through contemplation of this Other, and otherness, we can put our own nature in perspective, and learn some useful lessons for developing and overcoming ourselves⁷⁶⁷⁷.

⁷⁴ *Summa Theologica*, Pt II, Question 180, Article 3.

⁷⁵ “This thing, what is it in itself, in its own constitution? What is its substance and material?” —Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.11.

⁷⁶ “Celuy qui transmua le premier n’avait aucun livre, mais suivait la nature, regardant comment et avec quoy elle travaille.” (The first one to transmute had no book but followed nature, observing how and with what it operates.) —Nicolas Valois (1475-1537). The alchemical Great Work, in this sense, is but a lesson in imitation of nature.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche, while repeating that nature’s essence is ineffable throughout his oeuvre, continues using examples from the animal reign to place humanity into perspective: for example that of the bee, that of the gnat.

One can imagine a distant future where mankind has finally overcome itself and evolved beyond its own limitations, but this is not the case just yet. The more we are engaged with other human beings, the more the need for encounter with nature there is (if only to experience a meeting with the mirror of the subconscious and not the conscious).

Empty mind

There can be a great distress in reaching the conundrum of the human mind. Whether it is by circular reasoning, or because of the subject-object conflict; or whether, like King Midas's touch, everything reason touches is corrupted, it is as if the thing-in-itself escapes or turns into stone as soon as we approach it.

Ascetics deserve respect because they have sacrificed their whole existence for the unity with the Good. *Imitatio Christi* has been being taken more or less literally throughout the history of Christianity, but unity through emptiness can be found in other contexts as well. We could mention *henosis* (union with God) via theurgy, or Plotinus advocating contemplation in order to reach one's true nature.

Making silence in our room or retreating to our own mental place is a good starting point: "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray" (Matthew 6:6).

As laymen, do we need to retreat entirely and proclaim ourselves dead to the world? No. One does not need to disengage from the world, but it is important to be conscious of the passions at play. Being dead in this world, in this flesh, means that something else is at work. I do not advocate death, but consciousness.

Ex nihilo...

While slowly freeing us from opinion and reason, contemplation makes room for a renewed sense of compassion and virtue. This is the cultivation of the *nous* (Intellect), in the scholastic sense: the higher capacity of the soul to reach higher sources of wisdom from within. While solving secular problems of manmade thinking, contemplation also generates **humility, compassion and love**.

- **Humility** is allowing the other to shine and encounter us within ourselves. It is Narcissus lifting his head up, or letting the transparency of the water show something deeper and other than the reflection of his face.
- **Compassion** is innate, and as with any other tendency, one can cultivate or extinguish it. Buddhism emphasizes compassion so much that the whole concept of the Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism is based on placing compassion before our own liberation.
- **Love** is connection. In Plato's *Symposium*, the origin of love explained by Aristophanes as through the mythological tale of Gods separating people from their primordial, androgynous state. Love is therefore the loss of unity that we seek to find again, for ourselves and each other.⁷⁸

Love is of utmost importance in order to reach and understand the divine in us, and for many believers, it is the only way. Without love, theology is but an affair of speculation and metaphysics. Emmanuel Levinas often emphasizes the importance of experiencing the divine through the encounter with each other;

⁷⁸ The rock musical *Hedwig And The Angry Inch*, written by John Cameron Mitchell and with music by Stephen Trask, contains a beautiful musical and visual rendition of this myth in the song "The Origin of Love".

as for Christianity, the famous fourteenth Century mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or the writings of St John of the Cross remind us that God is veiled behind a vast blanket of cloud, and only through the ladder of love, we may ascend further.

The yoga tradition also distinguishes Bhakti Yoga, the devotional practice of loving God, and Jnana Yoga, the intellectual path. As with Aquinas, both are necessary and the emphasis on one or the other depends on the practitioner's natural inclinations.

Imagination

Imagination is a tool, just like art or a carving knife, and is another stunning faculty of the human mind. Because of its potential of affecting reality or overcoming it, it can sometimes be considered as supernatural.

Imagination is a tool of the mind that has the characteristic of being rooted in the uncreated. It is like an open hole in the back of our heads through which, just like a fly, an idea might appear. What we do – catch the fly, release it, crush it, or just let it pass through is what makes up most of our choices. Where did this fly come from? Could we stretch the hole to attract other, bigger animals, or as David Lynch would have it, to catch a bigger fish⁷⁹? And what happens when the hole is directed towards the heavens – to borrow a metaphor from Eliade: what happens when we break open the roof of the house? Even answering these questions might require more holes and more flies.

Science tells us of the left brain/right brain dichotomy. Imagination occurs when synapses create bridges with other synapses that are further afield than the most logical or used ones. They break their habitual pattern through conscious effort. The scientific mind with a spiritual inclination will be at odds with certain aspects of imagination. Remember Blaise Pascal, the mathematician-turned-Christian-apologist who shunned imagination as a distraction from the truth – a belief that can go back as far as Augustine and Plato, both distinguishing imagination, a fancy, from proper vision. This still happens in most of the Orthodox ascetical tradition. Pascal actually had to place a *bet* on faith as any other choice of activity lead him to despair and disillusion. Interestingly he did experience visions (due to a physical condition), thus confirming the aforementioned distinction in that he considered these visions very differently than the ones produced by his imagination.

On the other end of the spectrum there is William Blake, for whom imagination itself was the manifestation of the divine, and therefore was to be celebrated accordingly. He was aware of the problem of interpretation⁸⁰, yet he fiercely rejected reason and intellect as the only ways to transcendence; he is the most well-known proponent of the idea that the devil is creative energy, and heaven a static or passive affair. In imagination, Blake saw the potential of all things to come into existence, still dancing in the uncreated,

⁷⁹ David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (New York: Tarcher, 2006).

⁸⁰ “Both read the Bible day and night, but thou read black where I read white.” —Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel,” in *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V.Erdman, 524.

divine realm of imagination that one could access through contemplation of nature, as it is often interpreted as a manifestation of the divine at work⁸¹.

In this Blakean aspect, imagination can be seen as the consequence of or even counterpart to contemplation. Whereas contemplation is a passive, humble activity, creativity is an outwards, generative activity. Even when not turned into action, imagination generates mental forms, images or visions.

We briefly mentioned projection in the first chapter. Imagination is what happens before projection, it is the mental image or thought that forms around the idea of not how things are, but how things could be. As such, it is a tool that can only go as far as one's own mind: whereas the formless can exist without form, form cannot exist without the formless. The divine is sometimes understood as *supraformal*, beyond form.

After Blake, another well-known proponent of imagination is Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, human truth is relative and ultimately artificial. Consequently, he suggests that there is no essential obligation toward truth and therefore one should learn to live its life according to one's own imagination. According to him, the Greeks had a much more intense life because it was full of Gods – always living alongside the transcendent – but having lost the sense of connection on the way, we are better off making up our own sacred figures than succumbing to the despair of existentialism.

The French painter Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) is a good example of an artist stuck between tradition and modernism; he uses sources from Byzantine and medieval pre-classical art, but with a very individualistic mindset. Imagination allowed him to generate a certain element of mystery. Art for him was less a philosophy than an allegory. It must intrigue, yet came with a hearty dose of aestheticism as well. It might have been more honey than medicine.

Letter or Spirit

In a religious context, the Letter refers to the Law or dogma, and the Spirit to the direct ability for the soul to receive grace and experience the divine. In Christianity it is often linked to the conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus: "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (1 Corinthians 3:6), but there are other contexts in which the illiteracy (*il-literate*, without the Letter) of a given individual is emphasized as a mark of pure Spirit, as for example within Zen Buddhist tradition (In the apocryphal story of the Dharma-transmission from Hongren to Huineng, the sixth Patriarch of Zen (638-713), Huineng had to dictate his stanza for another one to write⁸²).

The Traditionalist worldview, mostly rejected by scholars of religion, claims that there is no possible authentic relationship with God outside of established Tradition since our modern, "corrupted" minds are so remote from God that it is now unreachable without proper initiation. Only Ancient people had a direct connection with the transcendent and no modern mind could even begin to comprehend it. One might wonder then how this applies to figures that openly broke the Law – should Jesus and the Buddha's teachings

⁸¹ „This world of Imagination is the World of Eternity, it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World <of Imagination> is Infinite & Eternal whereas the world of Generation or Vegetation is Finite & [for a small moment] Temporal. There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see are reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.” —Blake, "The Vision Of Last Judgement," Ibid., 555.

⁸² John McRae, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Hawai'i: BDK English Tripitaka Translation Series, 2000), 31-33.

be invalidated because they went on their personal way to find the Truth?⁸³ These were of course exceptional callings, and the majority of people living a mostly secular life will either be at peace with a lighter form of spirituality if at all, or by adhering to an established religion.

Left or Right

The terms Left-Hand Path (LHP) and Right-Hand Path (RHP) broadly refer to two opposing approaches of one's spiritual journey. These notions are contextual and since there is no consensus on what they exactly embody, I will clarify their origins and how I use them.

The terms originated from Madame Blavatsky's translation of the Sanskrit word *vamachara*, referring to heterodox Tantric practices, and literally meaning "left-handed attainment". It has become commonplace to use it in the context of occultism and ceremonial magic, the RHP being used to define white or benevolent magic, and LHP black magic.

Vamachara is generally used to define intense spiritual practices considered heterodox and defying acceptable norms by breaking them. The belief is that since all is one, then all is holy and in the primordial state of being there is no taboo. This can be found for instance in Tantra or Shaiva asceticism (the Aghori sect is a typical example of holy men embracing apparently unholy practices). Either uses of the terms are acceptable since they always distinguish a nuance between two ways of approaching one's goals, however, one must be careful when it comes to defining these goals.

In the context of religions, which is also my context, the RHP can be understood as the orthodox way, embodied by organized religion. Through an established Tradition, the believer follows a set of practices, dogmas and rituals in order to purify his body and mind and devote oneself to the deity or deities and the mission they have for them. The LHP, in contrast, emphasizes the divine already present in the Self and is a way to access Knowledge (gnosis) either by defining one's individual set of ethos and practices, or - somewhat paradoxically- adhere to certain cults that declares themselves on the LHP. In this context, we can consider the LHP as "the road less traveled", and more exactly, the road to transcendence through direct experience.

The association of oddness, suspicion and negativity of the left as opposed to the righteousness of the right can be found in most religions. The Bible says "And he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right, but the goats on his left." (Matthew 25:32-33). In Hindu and Islamic culture the left hand is used for personal hygiene, and is therefore deemed unclean. It is probable that just like other minority traits, such as red hair or non-heterosexuality, left-handedness was simply shunned because of its difference.

Risk management

The devil loves solitary minds. This idea is found across cultures and religions. The demon Mara sent beautiful girls to tempt Gautama Buddha during his meditation under the Bodhi Tree. Satan also tempted Jesus and numerous ascetics in the desert, and will gleefully prey on people thinking they can travel alone.

⁸³ In the case of the Buddha, René Guénon indeed saw him as a degenerate figure since he negated the importance of the caste system, particularly the metaphysical role thereof. It might be noted that other traditionalists have since corrected René Guénon's view and asserted Buddhism as a valid religious system.

The devil is not to be irrationally feared either, as this leads to superstition. Darkness must be confronted. Faced with the devil, Jesus never backed up. He revealed himself and rejected each temptation.

Within western occultism, the LHP has sometimes become merged and confused with Satanism, whether theistic or not. The truth is that LHP encompasses Satanism and satanic practices by definition, but is not limited to it. On a more superficial view, it is still to be considered seriously: direct experience means bringing out inner demons (the alchemical *nigredo*) and revealing what constitutes the darkest and innermost layer of the mind. Needless to say, these practices require guidance and self-discipline as psychic damage is never far away.

Magic

“Artist, you are the priest: art is the great mystery and when your efforts result in a work of art, a holy beam descends on the altar ... Artist, you are the king: art is the true empire; when your hand writes a perfect line, the cherubims themselves descend to take pleasure in it as if in a mirror ... Artist, you are the magician: art is the great miracle and proves our immortality”
—Joséphin Péladan⁸⁴

"Magic is the divinity of man conquered by science in union with faith; the true Magi are Men-Gods, in virtue of their intimate union with the divine principle." —Eliphas Levi⁸⁵

We must understand magic as an in-depth transformation of the self and the will. As such, it transcends the sole domain of psychology, psychoanalysis or religious versus secular definitions. Neither is it really an affair of sorcery, witchcraft or Spiritism. Magic is the belief in communication between the conscious and the subconscious through the use of symbols and rituals. It is a tool that can bring direct transformations first unto oneself and then, through a transformed self, unto the world.

Belief in the potency of a ritual, or accepting the mystery of transubstantiation, belongs to the domain of the supernatural, but these are acts of grace – from the transcendent to the immanent. Magic is the immanent and the transcendent working in union in the soul. Art is a sparkle of magic and, much like alchemy, magic derives its concepts both from nature and the inner workings of the mind.

Art is condemned by its very nature. It is a curse to the artist, but a blessing to humanity; artists must travel alone in their own deserts like abandoned prophets. Seekers without lineage are numerous, especially in the modern era: one striking example is the novelist Karl-Joris Huysmans (1848-1907), who went from naturalism to Satanism and finally to Christianity. Remember Blake: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”⁸⁶.

In post-Enlightenment times there were exceptionally strong individuals who decided to reconnect themselves directly with the divine, some making extensive use of magic, such as Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) and Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956). The history of Western magic is a fragmented one, going through

⁸⁴ Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, *Les artistes belges et la Rose-Croix*, Bulletin des Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique, 4.

⁸⁵ Eliphas Levi, *The Paradoxes of the Highest Science*, trans. unknown (attributed to Madame Blavatsky), 1883, 1.

⁸⁶ “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, 35.

multiple ramifications between Enochian magic, Goetia, Solomonic magic, Kabbalah; all of it has been synthesized into a new postmodern system of magic, coined in the seventies as *Chaos magic* (or magick).

Chaos magic thrives in a world that we perceive as infinitely fragmented and individualistic. The attentive reader will note here a seeming contradiction with my earlier classification of evil, in which I placed fragmentation as an evil force. Remember that chaos can either define the uncreated (Tiamat, Ein Soph) or derive from fragmentation of what was One (the Monad). It is the formless aspect of form. In an ideal “Golden Age” people were directly connected to the One and there was no room for confusion or evil. This sounds all very well, but we have established that we are far from living in such an Age and that therefore we must deal with ourselves with what we have at hand. Remember that tool-making is our nature? And what do we have at hand? Chaos, war, deconstruction and confusion. In other words, energy wasting itself—entropy.

Peter Carroll’s *Liber Null*⁸⁷ and Jason Louv’s *Generation Hex*⁸⁸ are considered landmarks of this school of thought. What chaos magic brought is, apart from brilliantly integrating Spare’s *sigil magic* into a more general system, is a framework that accommodates itself anywhere. The resurgence of occultism in the end-of-the-millennium Zeitgeist also witnessed the birth of curious new forms of paganism, such as *technopaganism* (embodied by the Temple Of Psychick Youth’s extensive use of televised performances), city magick, and others.

Pop culture and magic also have a strong connection, if only for the way they interact under the radar of mainstream academism and religious life. Both comic writers Alan Moore (*Watchmen*, *Promethea*) and Grant Morrison (*The Invisibles*), introduced Chaos magic to the general public through their comics:

“I believe that magic is art, and that art, whether that be music, writing, sculpture, or any other form, is literally magic. Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words or images, to achieve changes in consciousness ... Indeed to cast a spell is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's consciousness, and this is why I believe that an artist or writer is the closest thing in the contemporary world to a shaman.” —Alan Moore⁸⁹

Suffice to say that nowadays appropriation of occult symbols is everywhere, crosses are turned into any angle possible, hand signs decorate tote bags and alchemical symbols are now as commonplace as hashtags. Yet unlike most spiritual systems, Chaos magic is well aware of the hegemony of capitalism, and can sometimes *grow* from it, as we shall see from the following case study.

Case study: The Abode of Chaos

The Abode of Chaos (in French: *la Demeure du Chaos*) is a museum and art installation⁹⁰ near Lyon, France, that uses the chaotic undercurrents of our world in order to disrupt the information overload and recycle ongoing events into anarchic and alchemical works of art⁹¹. Its founder Thierry Ehrmann went all the way to the European Court of Justice to defend the Abode of Chaos and sustain its growth and visibility, as

⁸⁷ Peter Carroll, *Liber Null & Psychonaut: An Introduction to Chaos Magic* (New York: Weiser Books, 1987).

⁸⁸ Jason Louv (Editor), *Generation Hex* (The Disinformation Society, 2005).

⁸⁹ “DeZ Vylenz”, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, video documentary (Shadowscape Productions, 2005).

⁹⁰ “La Demeure Du Chaos (online flyer),” accessed October 2016, http://blog.ehrmann.org/2010/lypo2010_online.pdf

⁹¹ Noora Mäntyranta, “Looking Back at Europe’s Turbulent Year 2015 at the Edgiest Art Museum in France,” *Wanderella Story*, published January 15, 2016, <http://www.wanderellastory.com/arts-culture/installation-art/looking-back-at-europes-turbulent-year-2015-at-the-edgiest-art-museum-in-france/>.

he is in constant threat from being forced to dismantle it, on the basis of its uncompromisingly brutal aesthetic in the middle of the picturesque village of Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or. He secured himself the reputation of being a "luciferian punk" in the academic art world, particularly with regard to his love of intuition, occult symbolism and arbitrariness – and indeed, chaos – as a tool for creation.

If we are to juggle with terms, I would say that Ehrmann's work, before being artistic, is magical by nature. He transforms facts into experience, information into objects. Alchemy is transmutation of metal into purer forms; Ehrmann seems to transmute information into metal and "lowbrow" images. His whole house-office-museum is a palace of transformations. The political, antisystem aspect of his work is easily questioned by the capitalist nature of his own business, the successful marketplace *artprice.com*. On the other hand, it gives him the very special insider-outsider approach that is essential when tackling such ambitious projects.

Completely opposite to the nearby *Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval*⁹², created in autarky, pebble by pebble, by a lone mailman willing to build himself a personal palace, the Abode of Chaos is a self-transforming pandemonium essentially feeding on the chaotic nature of the current world.

Sound

"The real world is a vibrational world, and, up to 2,000 years ago, everybody knew that." —Z'EV⁹³

The power of sound, and by extension music, is unrivalled as a communication tool. One reason is physiological: since sound is vibrational and not physical, we receive it through our body before interpreting it intellectually. Having nothing to do with touch also brings a sense of equity, for both the musician and the listener are enjoying sounds all the same. The other major reason is its relationship to time, particularly the present. Time does not affect the experience of an image, since the image, in painting in particular, only records its fabrication process⁹⁴.

Because of its ethereal nature and power, and its contrast to language with regard to meaning, music is often linked to the invisible and the spiritual. In the more materialist Western world, music has long been viewed with suspicion. Singing was sometimes believed to attract the Devil (or inversely, beautiful melodies could be used by supernatural beings to enchant innocent souls – consider the piper's song, or that of the sirens...) and the Church allowed singing only under certain conditions.

In the East, with the Vedic tradition of seeing the world as illusory, sound was a much more common occurrence in religious ceremonies and other ritual practices. It can take spectacular forms – as with the Bön and Tibetan tradition of using Long horns and thigh bone flutes – to the extreme minimalism of Zen music, which is nothing but the sound of nature (here the Taoist influence is evident more than ever). Sometimes sound is reduced to a few repeated words, as with the case of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (one mantra), or Pure Land Buddhism (three words).

Art criticism and music criticism do not mingle well. I feel that what irritates most art critics is the degree of freedom and arbitrariness that a musician allows himself to use, because of the abstract nature of

⁹² "The Ferdinand Cheval's Ideal Palace," accessed September 2016, <http://www.facteurcheval.com/>.

⁹³ "The Processing of a Non Resident," *Vacation magazine*, Spring 1981. Interview by Dorothy Gammes of Bootle. Re-edited by Jon Wozencroft, Winter 1990, accessed August 2016, <http://www.touchmusic.org.uk/zev.html>.

⁹⁴ There are obvious effects related to the materiality of a work: oxidization, fading, cracking, etc. But these are slow processes that do not affect the content of the work the way a detuned piano would affect a musical performance.

the medium. Some sounds, mostly electronic, are so remote from any natural sound they are impossible to describe until one hears it – one example is the squelching „acid“ sound of the Roland TB-303. McLuhan’s famous quote “the medium is the message“ rings truest when applied to music. Music without lyrics would be almost as if the whole history of painting was made of abstract paintings.⁹⁵

First case study: Musical interpretations of the Bardo-Thödol

Since its translation in English in 1927, the *Bardo-Thödol* (*The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, known in the west as the Tibetan Book of the Dead) has never ceased to fascinate western readers. This fascination is to be expected, for at least three reasons:

- It is a work of eastern esotericism, and as such carries already the double attraction of being exotic and esoteric. Artificially associated to the Egyptian Book of the Dead by their common theme, it came to light as the West was looking eastwards for a renewed sense of spirituality as their faith in their own religions dwindled.
- It tells of the transmigration of the soul, offering not only a vivid speculation on the afterlife but also an immersive look into an intricate cosmology. The fear of death is overcome through revelation that it is only one part of a much greater cycle, that of the bardos (intermediate states).
- Perhaps the most radical idea, and central to our topic, is that it is said that by only hearing a recitation of the *Bardo-Thödol* (literally: *Liberation Through Hearing*) one might be freed from the cycle of transmigrations.

While Tibetan buddhists keep their text in all respect for what it is – a sacred text to be used in specific ritualized contexts – non-Buddhists have taken the *hearing* aspect of the content into new forms. Here are some examples:

Pierre Henry - *Le voyage – D’après le Livre des Morts Tibétain* (1967)⁹⁶

The French composer Pierre Henry (1927-) explored many religious themes in the early sixties through the lens of the newly created concept of *concrete music*, starting with the more familiar Gospels, recomposing all four Gospels and the Apocalypse into abstract sound collages. It is no surprise that he later also recorded an interpretation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

Sigillum S - *Bardo Thos-grol* (1987)⁹⁷

This is a powerful antithesis of Eliane Radigue’s version (see below). Sigillum S is an Italian post-industrial band delving into all kinds of fetishistic and occult themes, typical of the era in this type of music, as were groups like Sleep Chamber or Zero Kama. Their interpretation of the Bardo-Thödol is entirely steeped into the sinister (literally: left-handed) „feel“ one might get when embracing the afterlife.

Eliane Radigue - *Trilogie de la Mort* (1988-1993)⁹⁸

⁹⁵ I believe that music needs equal treatment as an art form. It operates very differently, like seeds that grow a bit more after each listening (in the case of recorded music). There exists the concept of *earworm*, but unless I am mistaken, there is no such thing as an *eyeworm*. In order to haunt you an image should impact quite heavily at an emotional level, but any inane novelty song can hook itself for days in the ear canal. This is very well known by commercial producers, and can be exploited in more creative ways.

⁹⁶ Philips, 836 899 DSY.

⁹⁷ Self-published as a tape in 1987, then reissued as a CD in 1991 by Unclean Productions (UPR 0691 CD-01).

⁹⁸ Reissued as a 3 x CD set in 1998 by Experimental Intermedia Foundation (XI 119).

The most abstract and 'serious' Western interpretation there is. Eliane Radigue (1932-) studied Tibetan Buddhism for three years until her guru Pawo Rimpoche convinced her that her place was in her own country, building on her own forms. Her version of the Bardo-Thödol is based on filtered drone and is a form of meditation in itself.

Voice of Eye - *Transmigration* (1995)⁹⁹

Even further away from any academism or religious praxis, New Mexico duo Voice of Eye built their own instruments, and created terrifying and absorbing soundscapes with an almost sensual, cinematographic feel. The instinctive use of microtonal voices and vibrations is reminiscent of Penderecki, displaced in a red desert at dusk.

Second case study: Helixes Collective

Sound can also be a side-product of a spiritual practice, the same way that art can be traditionally seen as a side-product of craft. A prime example of this is to be found within the Helixes Collective, a small group of like-minded individuals living in Northern Finland who are engaged in personal "pilgrimage[s] to the soulside"¹⁰⁰ through *sui generis* manifestations of shamanic activities, as well as through the careful study of traditional ritualistic practices, in search for a primordial connection beyond cultural boundaries. In one of their configurations, the ritual group Arktau Eos, the music comes as a natural consequence of researching the essence of tradition and ceremony, while in another – Halo Manash – it delves into the primeval roots of shamanism and animism¹⁰¹. If the musical form were to come first in term of intent or priority, it might fail to become more than entertainment, regardless of whether or not it revolves around spiritual themes.

Either way, the listener is left with the act of listening, and can only be engaged with the spiritual through hearing and sometimes participation in the performance via sharing of libations or dancing along, among other possibilities. It might help the listener or spectator to shed light on parts of his soul that he thought non-existent or incapable of such receptivity.

An example of sound performers engaging their audience entirely was the defunct Californian percussion-actionist group Crash Worship, which became infamous in the early nineties for their dangerous performances, pouring milk and honey on their audience, often playing alongside them or in a parade configuration. They often left venues damaged or lit on fire, which unsurprisingly led to the demise and the dissolution of the group. The audience, however, still remembers the unrivalled intensity of their experience to this day¹⁰².

I found that in general, ambient music is most prone to embody spiritual themes. In a sense, religious music is always ambient; it sets a particular atmosphere to facilitate the calming and concentration of the soul. Ritual or ceremonial music makes the listener more active and directly engaged with the ritual itself, but this does not remove the possibility of enjoying the music separately, despite Coomaraswamy's discouragement from doing so¹⁰³, for it might very well also invite the listener to be more acquainted with

⁹⁹ Cyclotron Industries – CYCI CD – 333.

¹⁰⁰ For a description of the different groups within the Helixes Collective as well as the activities of the associated label Aural Hypnox, see <http://helixes.org/auralhypnox/>.

¹⁰¹ Simon Mernagh, "Language of Embers: An Interview with Arktau Eos," *Heathen Harvest*, published June 12, 2016, <https://heathenharvest.org/2016/06/12/language-of-embers-an-interview-with-arktau-eos/>.

¹⁰² There are numerous Crash Worship live recordings on YouTube. Fire and chaos is the only constant among the varying quality of the images themselves. A chariot of offerings moving in the audience can be seen here at 3:05: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-4zQuTRqGI> (accessed October 2016).

¹⁰³ "To 'enjoy' what does not correspond to any vital needs of our own and what we have not verified in our own life

what surrounds the music itself.

There has been postmodern use of ambient music that one might consider spiritual as well. Most can be traced to the concept of “haunted music”, that is, music based on previously recorded music, but also samples from TV, loops, etc. It is a music that deals with memories and recordings. Those interested in the topic are invited to read David Toop’s remarkable essays *Haunted Weather*¹⁰⁴ and *Ocean of Sound*¹⁰⁵, dealing respectively with digital memory and ambient music.

At the very least, music can provide an “absolute elsewhere” that offers a mental space much wider than the regular one, where imagination and creativity can flow more easily. This is the topic of my next chapter.

Absolute Elsewhere

When I was younger, I often wondered if there could be a way to step out from existence for a while, like a week or two, before returning to one’s daily activities. I didn’t think of it as sleeping or death (for we are not aware the passing of time when unconscious) but a complete disappearance, not experiencing anything else than total non-existence and/or pure consciousness. Having no particular knowledge of spiritual or religious matters at that time, I devised my own interpretation of reality with the tools I most responded to at the time: existentialism, psychoanalysis and theoretical physics.

“This corporeal life’s a fiction / And is made up of contradiction.” —William Blake¹⁰⁶

Each individual consciousness, as I saw it, was but floating above the surface of reality, like icebergs drifting on a vast sea. Perhaps phenomena were a bit more real than the shadows of Plato’s cave, but incomplete nonetheless. Below reality, there was a great darkness. Floating islands (the hidden part of the icebergs, i.e. the individual subconscious) could be seen here and there, at times connected by whatever means of transportation a mind could conjure up (a train, a metro, or anything similar. Logic and relativity did not apply in my world, the rules being that of dreams) subjective places whose appearance depended mainly on the individual’s perspective. Some places were public, similar to gigantic landfills or dumping grounds for individual fears and traumas, building up like sediments. This an idea I explored in an unpublished book I wrote ten years ago¹⁰⁷.

Later, I figured out a second outer layer. Beyond the vast void the absolute light hid. This light, to be understood as the final fabric of cosmic existence, was of such power that it sometimes ripped the inner layers, dripping into the void under the form of gigantic milky droplets, petrifying anybody that would even lay an eye on it. Without any knowledge of religious affairs, I had intuitively sensed the essence of the

can only be described as an indulgence. [...] It is the same if we read the scriptures of any tradition, or [...] if we listen to sacrificial music for the ears’ sake only. We have a right to be pleased by these things only through our understanding use of them.” —Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, 125.

¹⁰⁴ David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory* (Chandler, AZ: Five Stars, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ David Toop, *Ocean of Sound* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001).

¹⁰⁶ A deleted fragment from The Everlasting Gospel, that can be seen in the margins of the manuscript: see “The poetical works of William Blake; a new and verbatim text from the manuscript engraved and letterpress originals; With variorum readings and bibliographical notes and prefaces”, ed. by John Sampson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 239.

¹⁰⁷ It was called *Suppliant Asylum*. It was rich with photographic documents, inspired by André Breton’s semi-visual form of his book *Nadja* (1928). Sadly it never went beyond the state of partly illustrated manuscript.

mysterium tremendum – the experience not only of awe, but of terror, when encountering the transcendent directly.

What I was doing, without formulating it, was already in line with something many well-known heretics advocated: make this world your own by redefining it through your own artistic illusion, then learn to overcome it. But once the problem of imagination versus vision is solved, the heresy of artists is redeemed, and both Blake and Nietzsche rejoice in unity.

Because of an early existentialist bias, I always understood one's imagination as something to be *explored* more than experienced. This puts me – the traveler, the artist, the narrator – outside of my own contingencies. In that sense I was, so to speak, the tourist inside my mind, unwilling to unfold the mind from the inside out. It was more like an ocean of solitude in which to bathe and observe, like Vishnu resting on the Ocean of Milk, as if none of these forms actually concerned me. Personal responsibility is indeed the artist's biggest blind spot.

In my understanding, however hard I was trying, if God ever was to be associated with the blinding light, then it would be a very silent one. Some sort of astrophysical god that was not more than a scientific and psychological god. I liked this image, however incomplete and imperfect it was. It was only a simulacrum, but at least it was mine. Outsider art is full of these kinds of *absolute elsewhere*: the aforementioned Palais Idéal, Achilles Rizzoli's inner architecture, Augustin Lesage's temples... yet not getting lost in one's own world is what makes all the difference. Outsider art could really be called insider art, as they are not only outside the art world but very far inside their own, for a lack of a better place to be.

Finding the middle way

“Think in the morning. Act in the noon. Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night.” —William Blake¹⁰⁸

If one dives too deep, one drowns. But stay on the surface, and you won't find anything. The key is to follow the middle way. Moderation is rarely advocated in art, as extremism is always so tempting and romanticized. For an artist, it might mean becoming completely the slave of one's own work, disregarding his or her bodily needs, or the needs of the family. This attitude can be self-destructive in the long run, although the awareness of this fact does not always result in any change.

If you bend a bow too much, it will break. Bend it not enough, and the arrow does not go far. The key is not in strength but in precision. Once the target is in focus, there is no more target, and the arrow will constantly reach it.

Remember to take care of your body and mind. Breathing correctly is the secret of perfect meditation, but it is good to expand these cycles to the whole of your life. Sleep well, work accordingly. Asceticism is not an easy path, and while transforming physical matter into spiritual matter might sound inspiring, it is not for everybody. Unless one is ready to take this path – and that person would not be reading this – it is healthier to first learn to get to know one's own life rhythm.

¹⁰⁸ “The Marriage of Heaven And Hell,” in *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, 37.

What artists do and how they use their energy is a mystery to many. I would say that they use their energy in such different ways than regular people do, that an artist's life might seem daunting at first. Some artists seemingly do nothing at all, but in reality they might be thinking, or contemplating. Unless they really are doing nothing at all? Some artists sleep and drink all day, only to be furiously creative in the darkest hours. Some performers will stop at nothing, even death, to fulfill their mission.

To what end?

Goals

Completion

What are the goals an artist should strive for? Why am I writing all of this?

I have explained earlier that the artist has a mission, and that is to embody ideas. The artist also has a responsibility: to harness the right ideas. Nature and the macrocosm might be his best guides as they are very powerful creators themselves.

The artist should be like Jesus in Blake's *Everlasting Gospel*: forgiving and vengeful, meek and proud, chaste and impure, violent and kind, fully in the flesh and fully transcendent. Blake's Jesus is as much as he is **becoming**.

Equally, a masterpiece should embed *innocence* and *experience* in one transcendent wholeness, or fail at it so violently that it would generate unexpected new paradigms from which another work of art could begin anew. What makes works of art unique is not merely the practice itself but the practice meeting the artistic skill of the individual: in other words, how short the artist falls from perfect intent and realization. Perfection is not to be attained but sought after. Flawlessness is best left to robotic engineering.

Just like his or her masterpiece, the artist ought to be complete in the sense that they *become* their idea and their practice *becomes* the form. An old teacher of mine often said that within us is a lock – i.e. the passive, the feminine, Yin – and we must then actively forge the key, Yang, to create balance.

An artist is always imbalanced, because of her or his acute sensitivity to the world that surrounds us. This is the curse of the artist. But they have also the ability to seize control of the active form, and that is their blessing.

One can imagine this sensitivity as a double-consciousness. Consciousness is the first separation; artistic sensitivity brings consciousness of separation: consciousness of consciousness. The artist can take control by taking a first step towards mental balance via artistic practice, and is then already much closer to completing the circle when it comes to becoming whole.

Who is the complete artist? William Blake, certainly, as well as Goethe, perhaps Leonardo Da Vinci, or Fra Angelico whose perfect unity of humility and dedication still shines through his frescoes today? We might add, with one extra degree of interaction, Hildegard Von Bingen whose visions have been recalled in all their glory by talented draftsmen through the centuries. We are still discussing the inputs, visions and suggestions of these individuals today. Their mission was larger than themselves, and certainly greater than the scope of art itself.

What is the goal and purpose of such an ethical practice, from an artist's perspective? We have established that if we were to describe the spiritual advancement of a person, it would fall very close to that of an artist within his own niche. Both include ritual practice and slow but steady purification of daily life and thoughts. Nearly every religion names ritual purification as an essential component of the adept's life. One can apply Buddhist precepts as much as Taoist or Stoic or Islamic (for example the request of purifying oneself, both in an exoteric and esoteric sense, before reading the Qu'ran).

It might come about, more than once, that the work of art is so powerful it is seen as heretical. Heresy takes one aspect of a theology and gives it more importance than what is accepted by the prevailing dogma. We must remember that heretics bring something new to the table, or confront the dogma not necessarily in an unacceptable way, but in a way unacceptable to the heralds of this particular dogma. William Blake is in all respects a heretic, but so were once the Roman Catholics to the Orthodox, The Protestants to the Roman Catholics, etc. Buddhism has countless sects that thoroughly disagree with each other. As for Islam, I believe contemporary events speak for themselves. Artists are probably heretics to most regular people, yet, "That by which you fell, you must rise again." William Blake becomes a prophet, and Nietzsche the mystical voice of secular transcendence.

Zhuangzi often reminds his readers to contemplate animals, as they are complete in their being:

"Zhuangzi and Huizi were crossing the Hao River by the dam.

Zhuangzi said, "See how free the fishes leap and dart: that is their happiness."

Huizi replied, "Since you are not a fish, how do you know what makes fishes happy?"

Zhuangzi said, "Since you are not I, how can you possibly know that I do not know what makes fishes happy?"

Huizi argued, "If I, not being you, cannot know what you know, it follows that you, not being a fish, cannot know what they know. The argument is complete!"

Zhuangzi said, "Wait a minute! Let us get back to the original question. What you asked me was 'How do you know what makes fishes happy?' From the terms of your question, you evidently know I know what makes fishes happy."

"I know the joy of fishes in the river through my own joy, as I go walking along the same river."¹⁰⁹

Only humans perceive tragedy, even in the brutality of nature. For Zhuangzi, joy is the sense of fulfilled purpose, living according to one's own nature: and the fishes' nature is to swim in the river.

In the deepest sense, completion IS the purpose of human life. Any way is possible, or more exactly, each way, depending on the individual. In Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot, the Four of Wands represents Completion:

"This card refers to Chesed in the suit of Fire. Being below the Abyss, it is the Lord of all manifested active Power. The original Will of the Two has been transmitted through the Three, and is now built up into a solid system:-Order, Law, Government. [...] In the symbol, the ends of the wands touch a circle, showing the completion and limitation of the original work. It is within this circle that the flames (four double, as if to assert the balance) of the Energy are seen to play, and there is no intention to increase the scope of the original Will. But this limitation bears in itself the seeds of disorder."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Merton. *The Way of Zhuang Tzu* (New Directions Books, 1965). There are more than one reading of that text, as it is the case with the whole of the *Zhuangzi*. See Lukas Klein, "Anarchist Anthropology, Happy Fish, and Translation: Where do you get that?", *Paper Republic* (blog), February 11, 2014, <https://paper-republic.org/lucasklein/anarchist-anthropology-happy-fish-and-translation/>.

¹¹⁰ Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (New York: Weiser Books, 1995), 235.

Secular transcendence?

By secular we mean that which is not related to religion. The Latin word *saecularis* means “worldly”, “of an age”, itself derived from *saeculum* (“generation”, “century”, “era”). The connection to time, as opposed to transcendental timelessness, is essential here. Where the concept of the profane can be opposed to that of the sacred in relationship to its divine nature (or lack thereof), the concept of the secular adds the notion of timeliness as opposed to timelessness. As we have seen earlier, time is a fragmenting principle: ergo, diabolical¹¹¹. As Charles Taylor explains throughout his book *A Secular Age*¹¹², a society becomes secular when the question of belief has also become a matter of individual choice. Overcoming the problem of secularism means overcoming the question of good and evil, an ethical question, without succumbing to an animalistic or Darwinist “survival of the fittest”.

One of the most radical attempts at creating a secular religion was Auguste Comte’s *Religion de l’Humanité* in the early XIXth century. Created soon after the French Revolution in order to harness the social structure and appeal of the Church for the Commune’s own agenda, Comte’s „religion“ was nothing more than a superficial revamping of sacred sites, replacing holy figures with intellectual concepts such as reason, morality, ethics, and so forth. It went as far as organizing parodic rituals inside the churches themselves that, according to witnesses accounts, were more often than not lewd and orgiastic in nature. The abuse was such that Comte had to back up a little, adding a generic, nameless „Supreme Being“ to his religion in order to smooth out the transition towards absolute secularism.

A more recent attempt was Objectivism, a full-blown secular and individualistic system created by Ayn Rand in the mid-twentieth century. A very controversial philosophy, Objectivism cares neither for compassion nor for intellectualism, replacing it by a self-serving autocracy of the Ego, and even more problematically offers philosophical justification for *laissez-faire* capitalism, the very same ideology that is turning the planet into abstract numbers and a full-blown carbon dioxide coffin.

The same problem of capitalistic ideas (should I say *ideals*) resurfaces in the much debated topic of *transhumanism*. In theory, science offers us the possibility of transcending our mere human corporeality – to overcome weakness, sickness and death through mutation, transplants and genetic engineering. In theory, this possibility could be linked to Plotinus’ assortment that happiness is not to be found in this mortal world, full of decay and fool’s gold. But what does it really offer, and for whom? The risk is great in that special technological enhancement will be only provided to a selected few, be it through social ranking or wealth or a combination of both, further aggravating inequality among people. Mutation and genetic engineering also carry the risk of irremediable damage to the physical nature of our species¹¹³.

Another recurring trope of secularized transcendence is the blending of science and New Age theories as in the case of “conscious evolution” – the belief that human beings, with their awareness of evolution, are able to decide of their fate and move towards evolution into becoming purely spiritual beings. This demands faith in already rejected theories such as “morphic resonance” (that species share a collective

¹¹¹ The Austrian black metal band Abigor composed a whole album on this theme, named *Time Is the Sulphur in the Veins of the Saint – An Excursion on Satan's Fragmenting Principle* (End All Life Productions, 2010). Included in the lyrics is a relevant quote from Albert Einstein: “Time is Satan's way of keeping everything from happening at once.”

¹¹² Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹¹³ For an artist working on the representation of posthuman mutations, see Jason Hopkins: <http://www.abhominal.com/> (accessed July 2016)

memory that is constantly updated) when it really comes down to a question of belief, just like magic but with scientific pretension.

Study case: The Prisoner (TV series, 1968)

This section contains multiple spoilers. I recommend skipping to the next chapter for the readers who have not seen the series and want to watch it before reading about it.

Patrick McGoohan's television series *The Prisoner* (1968) revolves around the question of secular transcendence through the themes of personal freedom, individuality, disobedience, breaking free from every prison and control system the world has built for us, ending with the prisoner's very own mental prison. This program was made during the era where behaviorism prevailed, before the advance in cognitive sciences.

One must remember the divergent nature of the final episode of the series, which was intended to overturn what was a clever spy adventure into a metaphysical rite of passage for the viewer itself via the seemingly absurd trial of the main protagonist. "When the last episode came out in England," says McGoohan, "it had one of the largest viewing audiences, [...] because everyone wanted to know who Number 1 was, because they thought it would be a 'James Bond' type of Number 1. When they did finally see it, there was a near-riot, and I was going to be lynched. And I had to go into hiding in the mountains for two weeks, until things calmed down."¹¹⁴ This overreaction pleased him, as he knew how receptive and eager the audience was for an epic finale, but not for the kind he delivered. "As long as people feel something, that's the great thing, it's when they're walking around not thinking, not feeling, that's though, that's where all the dangerous stuff is..." They wanted distraction, the type Pascal despised, and all they got was a mirror into their soul. This is the one power that makes pop culture superior to any established system or academic work – it targets unarmed minds without preparation. Some scars are revitalizing.

A crucial detail in the very last image of the last episode is the door of Number 6's house, which closes automatically in a similar fashion to the ones on the island. *There* is immense beauty in the idea of a transcendental worldliness, but in the last analysis, the prisoner is still prisoner of his mind. His free will is his own prison, because this is the last one he refuses to abdicate. A Gnostic image indeed...

Nietzschean transcendental artist-tyrant

As an artist, one already has Nietzsche's favor, because of one's closeness to insanity, excessive dionysian complexes, as well as hypersensibility. A more creative form of secular transcendence is to be found in the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, or, as Rüdiger Safranski formulates it, the artist-tyrant.

Both Nietzsche and Blake had the Church as pet peeves. While Blake reclaimed the right to glorify Christ under a completely different light (and understanding – than that of the Church of England), Nietzsche created his own unnamed prophet of mankind, the *Übermensch*, who joins the Blakean Jesus figure in that they are living embodiments of their contradictions and, in contrast with the general Christian worldview, are fully in the flesh and in-this-world. Their conflicting states of being are overcome in both cases, and they are whole in their multiplicity.

¹¹⁴ Interview of Patrick McGoohan by Warner Troyer in 1977 for the Canadian Television. Available online on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiIUnCMpGbM> (accessed June 2016)

Early Buddhism

Nothing is transcendent in early Buddhism, unless we understand *moksha* (liberation) as a form of transcendence. In reality, early Buddhism is more like a pragmatic manual to resolve the Vedic problems pertaining to the infinity of cyclical times as well as cycles of rebirth and reincarnations.

Nirvana was then defined as a state of consciousness, just as the Kingdom of God is already “within you” (Luke 17:21), not above or elsewhere. It is only with Mahayana and its many following derivations – Vajrayana, Tibetan, Zen, Pure Land... that cosmological elements were added.

Leaving no trace

Why should an artist leave a trace?

Karma is the result of intent (*cetana*) gathering up what it needs to act upon a thing or a goal. This intent is what Schopenhauer came to define as the Will, a drive that is larger than the self and happens mostly outside of our consciousness. Eastern philosophy is infused with karmic concepts, even Zen.

As artists, we should seriously consider the question of whether leaving a trace is good or not. Doing it because we need to do it, without ever questioning it, is the action of an instinctive, primal nature – the Will to survive – and is not above ethical interrogation.

One way of leaving as little trace as possible is asceticism, which is being dead to the world of passions, the world of Will. Another is to cultivate and dissolve into perfect action, that is, one outside of karmic interference, *Wei Wu-Wei*. Equally, living in accordance to the Tao does not generate karma.

Learning to die is at the core of the religious life, but this can also be done in our lifetime. We have seen that the artist’s goal is **completion**. The work is done, the idea has been communicated, and the message is passed on. Avoiding generating further karma means that the artist must dissolve herself or himself into action.

Wei Wu-Wei. Dissolution into action

Wei = action. *Wu-Wei* = non-action. *Wei Wu-Wei* = action without action, in accordance with the Way, perfect action.

The purpose of human life is unification, reconciliation. The complete man is both **secular and sacred**, awoken and overcome. *Homo sapiens* is whole again, throughout life and death. Some people might find the formulation complex. Yet, artists often catch a glimpse of dissolution when they are so concentrated in their practice they forget themselves. The experience becomes self-explanatory. Consciousness seeks unity with action, through concentrated intent and, later, absence of intent.

A Zen Koan: “Everything returns to the One. Where does the One return to?”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, second series (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2008), 238.

Teaching

“Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them then, or bear with them.” —Marcus Aurelius¹¹⁶

Is dissolution really the end, or does life continues?

Great spiritual teachers were said to be “dead to the world”. They still fed their bodies, but their passions were finally extinct and their remaining purpose was simply to help others in need. Hermit monks were never completely unreachable, since many seekers took the journey to visit them, regardless of how remote their location was. Similarly sadhus having renounced to the affairs of the world still mingle with the crowd as holy men in and around India.

In the Chinese Ox-Herding Pictures, a popular series of images that that depict the journey of the seeker from the beginning of the quest until its end (unity), the last panel is not union with the absolute (this is the eighth, beautifully depicted by a blank picture), but the return of the enlightened person to normal life. This final panel means that as long as the person is alive, her or his purpose continues, regardless of where the person is in his or her journey. For Buddhists, this is the distinction between an Arhat and a Bodhisattva; in art, perhaps, between a misanthropic artist who chooses their inner palace to be their tomb, and the one who ends up teaching either to a wider audience, or to a few selected disciples, in order to transmit their knowledge.

Teaching is not the same as becoming a teacher. A person can learn to be invisible to the secular world, shine through their actions, leaving hints or seeds for other to pick up. In contrast it is often wise to avoid outspoken people who write books or series of books (that includes me). *Those who know don't speak*. It is better to look for the hidden ones. They are here, always.

There are different ways to help upon the return. Of course, this “return” does not happen at a specific time, it is merely a way of expressing the return of the favor that such a quest grants. What you receive through devotion, you must share through compassion.

The finality of life is to die: in other words, to reunite with the infinite. The moral purpose of life is to help others to reach the same goal. Teaching, in many ways, is so much more than mere repetition. It completes the transmission circle along with learning, and help knowledge branch further down the streams of time. With the master/disciple tradition having fallen out of fashion, transmission might seem fragmented, but it gives all the more consciousness to the one who truly seeks.

Teaching = helping

Teaching, however, is not an easy task. Firstly because of miscommunication, as we have seen earlier, but also because of the level each person is at. You will be mocked, scoffed at as a pedant or know-it-all. Perhaps your actions do not reflect your speech? Actions are more valuable than speech. Provide the example. When it comes to art, produce a work so complete people will be drawn to it again and again. Novelty in art fades out, as well as trends. Be trendless, be tasteless. But don't be lazy.

¹¹⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.59.

I give Lao Tzu the pleasure to conclude with more wisdom I could ever gain in a lifetime:

*Too many words are exhausting
Hold fast to the center.¹¹⁷*

Paul Takahashi MMXVI

¹¹⁷ Lao Tzu, Sam Hamill: *Tao Te Ching: A New Translation*, (Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications, 2007), 5.

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Ars longa, vita brevis