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**From Plasticity to Movement. Human Body in Hegel's Aesthetics**

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1. Introduction

Over the last fifty years, scholars have generally approached Hegel’s position on the mind-body relation by considering his philosophy of the subjective spirit, and specifically, anthropology.[[1]](#footnote-2) Contrary to previous widespread views – paradigmatically expressed by authors like Adorno or the “French” philosophers, who understood Hegel as neglecting nature – the recent scholarship has proven that the ‘absolute’ is far from a disembodied spirit[[2]](#footnote-3): in Hegel's philosophy the role of the living body is indeed neither secondary nor downplayed. In this context, the role of the body in Hegel’s aesthetics has been relatively underappreciated, with the important exceptions of D’Angelo (2013), and Peters (2015).[[3]](#footnote-4) This is a promising topic of research since the centrality of the body (and in particular, the human body) in Hegel’s philosophy emerges with particular clarity in his lectures on aesthetics, where Hegel affirms that “[t]he human bodily nature is a given for the artist; it is the expression of the concept as such; and beyond this, it is the expression of spirit as the concept existent-for-itself” (Hegel 2014, 377).

In this paper, I aim to analyze the role of the human body[[4]](#footnote-5) in Hegel’s aesthetics, in parallel with the historical development of art from the classical to the romantic form.[[5]](#footnote-6) I claim that the body does not have its artistic apex in Greek statuary, followed by a subsequent period of decline in the romantic form of art – as instead argued by Torsen, who claimed that “Hegel got the body wrong” (Torsen 2017, 310). My hypothesis is that when it comes to the body, Hegel abandons the neoclassical tradition inaugurated by Winckelmann and developed by Herder and Schiller (among others), even though he has a lot in common with them and was strongly influenced by them.[[6]](#footnote-7) Hegel understands the human shape, not so much as ‘idealized perfection,’ but rather as an expression of finitude, typical of romantic art. In other words, Hegel places the body at the basis of post-classical art in all its carnality, imperfection, and suffering.

On this basis, Hegel’s conception of the body is anything but old fashioned. His reflections are perfectly in line with the role of the body in contemporary art. Indeed, while it is true that some artistic expressions marginalize and criticize the human body for being the product of an anthropocentric perspective,[[7]](#footnote-8) the very topic of the human body runs through both Body Art and Performance Art.[[8]](#footnote-9) Moreover, the body plays a central role in contemporary aesthetic reflections; e.g., somaesthetics, and gender studies. Additionally, the centrality of the body is present in social and fashion phenomena such as body positivity or body neutrality. Of course, the body we are dealing with is remarkably different from ancient Greek and neoclassical statues, such as the paradigmatic sculptures of Phidias, or later, Canova. The body has lost every shred of idealization and sacrality, and comes across in a kind of self-negation, like in those performances where the body is wounded, as in Marina Abramovich’s performances. For these reasons, I believe that we can still talk about a centrality of the human body in contemporary art.

In this direction, Hegel’s conception can provide an interesting perspective to understand the role of the body (or its denial) in contemporary art. My claim is that, according to Hegel, the loss of perfection and ideality specific to classical art is to be identified in movement as a prerogative of the body in the romantic form of art. Detached from the spiritual, in the romantic form of art, the body is thus liberated and can be conceived in its concreteness. The body is no longer static (as it is in Greek statuary) but rather in movement, with its apex in performingarts.[[9]](#footnote-10) This aspect shows how Hegel’s paradigm of art is not restricted to the plasticity of the statuary as it is wholly open to the performing arts, namely, the arts of movement.

After briefly recalling the role of the human body in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics (§2), I will examine the classical form of art, showing that the idealized human body of Greek statues does not represent the human body at its peak (§§ 3-4). I will then analyze how the human body, in its loss of ideality and in its separation from the spiritual, finds its adequate representation in the romantic form of art by stressing the centrality of the body as wounded and finite (§5). Finally, I will show how these reflections put in doubt the conception of Hegel’s aesthetics centered on the plastic arts, opening up his conception to a performative reading (§6).

2. The Movement at the Origin of the Living Human

The relevance of the body in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics emerges immediately at the beginning of the *General Part* and in the context of the definition of the beautiful and of its particularization as the artistic beautiful. There, Hegel affirms that “what is beautiful coincides with the living thing”[[10]](#footnote-11). (224). The delineation of beautiful as the ‘idea’ is thus drawn from the image of the body as a unity of the “members” of the living, according to a process of progressive spiritualization from earthly bodies to the bodies of living organisms. This particularly problematic section of the lectures on aesthetics is connected to the philosophy of nature,[[11]](#footnote-12) showing the puzzling nature of the aesthetic as a moment that has to do with sensibility, conceived as “the ‘spiritualized sensuous’ as well as the ‘sensualized spiritual’” (Hegel 2014, 200). This expresses all the complexity of the word “sense” as explained by Hegel[[12]](#footnote-13).

I will limit myself to noting that, already in this part, the essence of the living is expressed in its corporeality conceived as movement, echoing an Aristotelian position[[13]](#footnote-14): “The living thing presents this ideality to us; it has a soul, a concept, which has existence, corporeality and indeed has it not as something persisting, not as something constant in face of outward changes. This corporeality is instead always posited ideally, always as an appearance” (Hegel 2014, 226). It is, therefore, the body of the living being that is shown, according to the Hegelian definition, as a “idealism of the vitality, as objective idealism” (Hegel 2014, 226). The living can only exist in corporeality, which can only be conceived as “self-movement [*Selbstbewegung*]” within an environment; namely, an “ongoing process, in continual perishing and renewal” (Hegel 2014, 226).

The fact that living bodies (plants, animals, and humans) have movement at their core is crucial to our investigation. However, Hegel is also interested in showing how the human body differs from plant and animal bodies, representing the moment where the spirit reaches self-consciousness. In other words, he aims to show how the beauty of nature is lacking in comparison to the artistic[[14]](#footnote-15): this is based on the absence of self-consciousness; on the fact that the living animal body remains firm in “objective idealism,” whereas art makes nature a “thousand-eyed argus” self-conscious.[[15]](#footnote-16) Indeed, “[t]his idealism of vitality, then, is *for us,* is evident for us” (Hegel 2014, 227)*.* The movement of the animal body is limited by not having a pre-indicated direction: “When we look at the vitality, what we see is the random movement, the movement that appears as contingent” (Hegel 2014, 228). Interestingly, Hegel contrasts this kind of movement with that of art, and in particular, of a performing art, namely, music, affirming that “[m]usic too involves movement; but this movement is not random; nor is dance random, for it is instead something internally regulated, a concrete movement. Random movement, however, is abstract, is not internally determined” (Hegel 2014, 228)[[16]](#footnote-17). This limitation of nature leads to the transition toward self-awareness that is proper to artistic beauty as ideal; that is, to the human body as a moment of corporeality and ideality as it is represented in art.

3. Human Body and Classical Art

The apex of art as a representation of the spirit in its individuality is the human shape, which constitutes the focus and the main topic of the classical form of art.[[17]](#footnote-18) As stressed by Moland, “the foundation of the classical worldview, then, is the divine in human form. The long search for the correct shape in which to portray the spiritual is over” (Moland 2019, 78). This is evident in the *Encyclopaedia*, particularly in § 558[[18]](#footnote-19) dedicated to art, where Hegel states that “[a]mong such shapes [*Gestaltungen*] the human is the supreme and genuine shape, because only in it can the spirit have its bodiliness [*Leiblichkeit*] and thus an expression accessible to intuition” (Hegel 2007, 259-260. Transl. modified).

The ‘classicism’ that presents the human body as the idealized body of Greek sculpture is, however, already undermined in the parts of the lectures on aesthetics devoted to the classical art form.[[19]](#footnote-20) As is known, in the classic form “art as such is the focus” (Hegel 2014, 315), and Greek sculpture is its expression, being the highest manifestation of the ideal in the beautiful human body. This form of art is fully focused on the human, starting from the moment when Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx; that is, human corporeity wins out over the still diffuse and monstrous one of the Sphinx, bound to animalistic features with a lion’s body and a human head (see Siani 2024, 30-40).[[20]](#footnote-21)

In this context, subjectivity can express itself as the idea in its reality. Hegel here is following the tradition that conceives the perfection of the human figure as the harmony between inside and outside, emblematized by Winckelman,[[21]](#footnote-22) to consider it from the point of view of his system; that is, as the spirit arriving at perfect harmony between the sensible and the spiritual (see Baur 1997). The spiritual, at this moment, can only express itself in the form of the human body:

More specifically, this appearance then determines itself in such a way that the shape *can only be the human figure*, because what is spiritual can reveal itself in the human figure alone. Here the shape is no longer symbolic but is instead the appearance of spirit, the determination of spirit, its emergence out into existence. The sensible shape of the human being *is alone* that in which spirit is able to appear[[22]](#footnote-23) (Hegel 2014, 314).

In contrast to symbolic art, where the corporeal was boundless to the point of monstrosity, the figure of the human body is instead the perfect harmony between spirit and body:

The sensible shape is something bodily, something material, and in this aspect it is different from spirit; yet this form of what is material is the appearance of the spiritual. The human figure [*Die menschliche Gestalt*] is not only living, like the animal, for this figure is the mirror of spirit. The eye is not only outward-looking, for by the eye we see into the single soul (Hegel 2014, 314).

Thus, the body presented here does not lose its material dimension, at the point that Hegel can affirm: “this would be the business of physiology” (Hegel 2014, 314). Yet, the body is in perfect harmony with the spiritual. This is Winckelmann’s lesson, which Hegel certainly reworks here and which has Greek statuary as its artistic expression (see Winckelmann 2013, 41-42)[[23]](#footnote-24). In the *Nachschriften*, we can find the formulation of this equation between the human shape and the harmony between sensibility and spirituality. The fact that classical art depicts the human figure is, therefore, not random or arbitrary; on the contrary, “the human figure is the only necessary and possible one” (Hegel 2014, 314). Or, to put it differently,

the human shape is the essential of the shape. This has already been noted in general: it is the matter of a profound insight to recognize the necessity that the spiritual, insofar as it exists, must have this shape and only this, liveliness and human shape [*Lebendigkeit und menschliche Gestalt*]. (Hegel 2004, 157)

I could continue further by offering other passages from places where Hegel highlights classical art’s need to express itself in the idealized human body of Greek statuary.[[24]](#footnote-25) This is undeniable. However, contrary to Torsen (2017) and a certain classicist reading of Hegelian aesthetics,[[25]](#footnote-26) the role of the human body is not limited to this phase of art. Torsen has reduced Hegel’s reflections to a neoclassical understanding, affirming that in the age posterior to Greek art, “it appears as if the body has been wholly surpassed and left behind by art (it plays no role in the forms of music or poetry)” (Torsen 2017, 307).[[26]](#footnote-27) According to Torsen, Hegel seems to focus only on the role of the body in Greek sculpture, implying a subsequent devaluation of the body that goes hand-in-hand with that of art, as if one could speak of a “past character of the body”. On the contrary, I believe that the body comes to its full expression precisely in the transition to the romantic form of art. In the next section, I will highlight how Hegel was well aware of the limits of the idealized body of Greek sculpture.

1. Limits of the Idealized Body

The fundamental limitation of the idealized body of Greek statuary consists in its static nature. The body, as such, has its full expression in movement. However, this movement need not be random, as in the case of the animal body. It is the movement of the fullness of spirit. In this direction, the Greek statues – the emblem of classical art – express a static and fixed body. They represent an interiority that lacks the highest moment of self-consciousness. Hegel points out that Greek statues are blind: they “lack the light of the eyes; the god does not know himself. The eye, through which the soul sees and is seen, is dark” (Hegel 2014, 333). Just like when classical art is immediately put into question at the very moment it arises, showing the signs that point to the necessity of its being surpassed, similarly, the idealized image of the body must be surpassed, being still abstract. I will follow that tradition of scholars that interprets the challenging question of the past-character of art as a “liberation of art” or as a “new beginning of art”[[27]](#footnote-28): the same structure can, therefore, also be applied to the role of the body as a liberation from the constraint of idealization.

This is expressed from the point of view of the manifestation of the divine and its anthropomorphism.[[28]](#footnote-29) It is here that Hegel distances himself from Winckelman's reading, which was a central reference in the section on classical art. For Hegel, contrary to the accusation that Greek religion is too anthropomorphic, the limitation of the Greek Gods is that they are “not anthropomorphic enough.”[[29]](#footnote-30) The Greek gods remain an ideal and do not share the human character of the Christian God as suffering and dying: “The anthropomorphic element is therefore something essential in the true concept of the divine nature. For religion, the Greek god is not sufficiently human” (Hegel 2014, 315). Here, for Hegel, a fracture emerges that is already present in Greek art and will eventually bring it to its dissolution in favor of Christianity. It is in the romantic form of art that “the god appears as seeing, as self-knowing, in human shape [*in menschlicher Gestalt*]. This human figure is interconnected with the whole world; all diversity is linked to it. It has three ways in which it is present and is known” (Hegel 2014, 333).[[30]](#footnote-31)

This also emerges in the section devoted to sculpture, where Hegel explicitly relates art to corporeality, highlighting the absence of movement. Art has spiritual individuality as its object and lets the spirit appear in its immediate spirituality. The human body is not the expression of the spirit in general, but in particular, insofar as it is something determinate. Symbolic sculpture was even more static. It lacked the movement of the soul, as shown in Egyptian representations where the arms hang alongside the body and no movement is to be found. “In drawings of Egyptian figures we certainly do see them in motion, although this feature appears in bas-reliefs and in painting rather than in works of sculpture” (Hegel 2014, 380-381). On the other hand, Dedalus would have been the first to detach the arms from the body: “The Greek sculptural images are, in contrast, utterly ideal, and we must learn from them what is ideal, for they are unrivalled” (Hegel 2014, 381).

The human shapes of the Greek sculpture are still too static. Hegel stresses the quiet character of sculpture and the absence of the specific particularities of bodies: “Sculpture has to represent God for himself in his objectivity, without the agitation of specific action, but as immersed in himself, in his simple calm and sublimity. This self-sustained tranquility, the God's being closed in on himself, is the essential purpose of sculptural works” (Hegel 2004, 172). From this point of view, we can assert that individuality is connected to movement, in a similar way to how plastic representation is connected to stillness. Such representation is limited because it cannot express the activity of the human figure. This theme goes hand-in-hand with the past-character of art: the classical form of art can only be a central point, a pinnacle, preceded and followed by moments in which art is understood to be in motion in its becoming.[[31]](#footnote-32) Just as classical art was destined to be surpassed, the same applies to this idealized conception of the beautiful body in its stillness and fixity: “Christian divinity that can no longer be expressed *plastically*” (Hegel 2004, 126. My emphasis).[[32]](#footnote-33)

So, the fact of being an ‘idealized’ figure goes hand-in-hand with the ‘static’ nature of the body. However, Hegel highlights how, at the very apex of ideal art, the emergence of the idealized human has already, in itself, the seeds of its end. Hegel affirms that, in comparison to painting, “Sculpture is capable of grasping only one moment, and is indeed to that extent immobile [..] Sculpture in fact portrays only an abstract aspect of the concrete, human bodily nature [der *konkreten menschlichen Leiblichkeit*]” (Hegel 2014, 373). Here, “the sculptural image is the calm, self-contained shape, and indeed it is the shape that has detached itself from the material" (Hegel 2017, 146). In fact, “the spiritual in its corporeality, but as material without particularity, presents itself in the image. Particular sensation and *movement* do not emerge.” (Hegel 2017, 146. My emphasis). We can see how Greek statuary ceases to constitute the highest form of representation of the human body. The human body is not properly represented by the abstract and idealized body of Greek statues.

5. The Movement of the Body in the Romantic Form of Art

The moment of transition to the romantic form of art produced by the Christian Revelation marks a fracture. As already mentioned, for Hegel, Christianity does not entail a devaluation of the body, but rather its valorization in the figure of Christ who becomes incarnated. The Greek statues lacked self-consciousness, which emerges with the Christian God. It is at this point that anthropomorphism becomes realized. This is a kind of liberation of the body because the soul manifests itself in a corporeality understood as something non-idealized. In fact, the domain of romantic art is “existing humanity alone” (Hegel 2014, 335), therefore, it is the highest expression of corporeality. Since “it is now permitted to appear as not-beautiful” (Hegel 2014, 335), it can therefore open itself to the body in all its finitude, in its being wounded or deformed.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Hegel highlights the progressive historical development of the human figure in romantic art. In the Religious Circle, where God becomes man, “the human figure is directly known as having the divinity within itself” (Hegel 2014, 334). In the Mundane Circle, humans are presented in their finitude, separated from God but still referring to him. In the last moment of the Formalism of Subjectivity, humans move from finiteness but (unlike in the previous sphere) do not rise to God: they remain in their finitude. The spiritual withdraws from matter and thus lets the body be free.

In this way, the representation of the human body in romantic art gradually acquires more and more concreteness, overcoming idealizations and abstractions.[[34]](#footnote-35) A process that goes hand-in-hand with the liberation of art from the ideal of a representation of the spiritual. The separation and autonomy of the soul – which now has its own content – involves a liberation of the body[[35]](#footnote-36): “it is essentially necessary that, while the soul appears in a body, it at the same time proves to be withdrawn from the body into itself and to live within itself, not within its body” (Hegel 2014, 336). The body should no longer be the beautiful, idealized body, and it can be represented in wounds and pain: “That is because here in romanticism the soul no longer pictures itself in the body; romantic art *does not idealize the body* but leaves it be, just as it immediately is, for the soul has its authentic existence within itself” (Hegel 2014, 337. My emphasis).

Interestingly, this also involves the emergence of the figure of the spectators and of the community: “Accordingly the figure participates more in ordinary humanity. This no longer calls for the austere sensibility of the ideal, but instead calls for the height of inwardness” (Hegel 2014, 337). The appearance of the spectators is also fundamental because they do not see in art the cold ideal of the Greek gods, but they find themselves, their own corporeality:

But now, in Romantic art, externality exists not for the sake of the ideal but instead for others, and inherently involves the element of accessibility to everyone. The audience approaches what is familiar with the confidence that matters are laid open to it. Accordingly the figure participates more in *ordinary humanity* (Hegel 2014, 337. My emphasis).

Following the progression of Hegel’s aesthetics from the forms of art to the single arts, the first expression of the romantic form is painting.[[36]](#footnote-37) In the Religious Circle, the painting of the body assumes greater prominence, from the dead body of Christ to the suffering bodies of the martyrs, but also to the body of Mary and her love for the infant Jesus: “The Mary pictures, for instance, portray her relation to the child as the relation of a natural human mother to a human child. They bring this feature to us in the present and highlight the human relationship” (Hegel 2014, 394).

However, in that circle, the human body remains linked to the divine, like the wounded body of the martyrs that, precisely in suffering, could aspire to redemption and openness to divine salvation. In an even more human sense, the Mundane Circle represents the body in its passions and carnality.[[37]](#footnote-38) According to Hegel, “since it does not matter what the content is, painting has this broad scope that can take up anything. That makes painting very much more humanized” (Hegel 2014, 390). Indeed, after sacred painting with religious figures at its center, and with the advent of Protestantism and aniconism, the subjects of painting not only shift to still lives, but also to activities of human life, where - as is often the case in Dutch painting - bodies are depicted in their limitations and flaws[[38]](#footnote-39). Painting ceases to be idealized, and the painted bodies include those of low social strata, e.g., the depictions of scenes of everyday life, from sexual scenes to scenes in taverns representing a vivid embodied humanity (like a particular emblematic figure of the *Barber Extracting a Tooth* from the Dutch Adriaen van Ostade).

This last stage shows a complete separation of matter from spirit, so art is now free and follows its own direction. According to Hegel, “[i]n romantic art we found this same point, that the subject matter is inadequate to the inwardness of the heart. Subject matter and subjectivity are separate, and the progression is to envisage them as one until they diverge once more” (Hegel 2014, 347). Such a process involves “the existence of different elements which, in separating, become independent” (Hegel 2014, 347). The human body is precisely one of these elements. Its liberation in the last form of romantic art opens it to the negation of itself according to the mere will and intention of the artist. This reaches the present day and finds a manifestation in contemporary art, from Giacometti's deformed human figures to Schiele’s portraits (also showing erotic acts of naked bodies) to the very negation of the body in Marina Abramovich’s performances.

6. From Plastic to Performing Arts

Taking up what has emerged so far, we can see that sculpture falls short in its depiction of the human body: “Sculpture in fact portrays only an abstract aspect of the concrete, human bodily nature. Sculpture’s forms are not a diversity of colors and movements, but instead are confined to spatial dimensions” (Hegel 2014, 373). Therefore, sculpture is not the pinnacle of the manifestation of the human body. What painting lost in dimension (from the three dimensions of sculpture to two), it regained through color and perspective, which can express and expand to the human realm.

However, if painting appears more able to express the concreteness of the body, it also falls short of a real representation. Indeed, Hegel presents painting as more human precisely because it somehow includes movement: “The advance in art accordingly gives *movement* to the figures” (Hegel 2014, 396. My emphasis). Just as the progression from ancient sculpture and painting was based on the body’s capacity for movement, for the same reason we must proceed beyond painting to the other two forms of romantic art – music and poetry – since they better express movement. As shown in the beginning, a fundamental prerogative of the body is movement, which, for obvious reasons, is not even perfectly expressed in painting. This reinforce the idea that, for Hegel, the highest manifestation of the human body is not the figurative or plastic arts, but rather the performing arts.

Even though music appears as the least corporeal of the arts, we can still describe it with reference to the body in the general sense of an embodiment of the spirit that realizes itself in the movement of something corporeal.[[39]](#footnote-40) As Moland emphasized: “Finally, Hegel acknowledges that music must be performed. Unlike sculptures or paintings that exist independently, music must be perpetually recreated. It is, after all, based in sound, and sound quickly dissipates” (Moland 2019, 243). Indeed, according to Hegel, “[t]he material aspect depends on the nature of the vibrating body of the musical instrument. That is because the sound as such is the vibration of something bodily, a motion by which that body [*der Körper*] moves internally without changing place” (Hegel 2014, 403). In addition, Hegel also stresses: “The human voice itself provides the most perfect sound. Just as the skin color moderates all the colors within itself, so the human voice combines the features of the wind instrument and the string instrument” (Hegel 2014, 404). If, in fact, the highest form of music is given in song, in that case the human body fully emerges as the very vehicle of art. Music needs to be performed by a human body in its corporeity.

Furthermore, in the development of art, poetry constitutes the highest and most universal moment of art.[[40]](#footnote-41) In poetry, the preceding moments of figurative arts and music come together in the concreteness of the human.[[41]](#footnote-42) It is the human body that is set in motion and represented in poetic action[[42]](#footnote-43):

Since poetry only exists as something human (works of sculpture subsist in virtue of their material character), and poetry’s subsistence is the speaking subject, the human being, the second aspect that appears here is the relation of the work of poetry to the way in which it exists (Hegel 2014, 416).

Drama is the highest manifestation of poetry since “dramatic poetry can be considered to be the most complete stage of poetry and of art as such” (Hegel 2014, 429). In fact, the human body is expressed in its totality since events are not described (as in the epos) but are put into action[[43]](#footnote-44): “Actual human beings [*wirkliche Menschen*] have to portray it” (Hegel 2014, 429). Drama thus includes a ‘performative’ aspect; an aspect of enactment of the body that is finally realized in its complete dimension.[[44]](#footnote-45) According to Hegel, “*[h]ere the statues appear animated*. The stage setting, like the temple, is the architectonic aspect, the surroundings. The gods appear in motion, speaking” (Hegel 2014, 429. My emphasis).

Corporeality achieves its full reality through movement. From this point of view, ancient dramas were still ‘plastic,’ whereas in modern dramas, individuality and corporeity fully emerge with facial mimicry, after the abandonment of masks typical of ancient theatre: “We moderns call for specific particularity; to us, changing facial expressions seem a major part of it” (Hegel 2014, 429). It is in this sense, that the figurative arts appeared to fall short in representing the human body; lacking the movement of the flesh-and-blood body that in modern drama manifests corporeality in all its nuances and particularities.

It must be noted that this emergence of the body is not a return to the “objective idealism” that characterized the animal body, being rather a realized corporeity that through art emerges as the full expression of the human. At the beginning of the lectures, Hegel has, in fact, differentiated the arbitrary movement that characterizes the body of the living from the movement that is proper to art, using the performing arts of music (and dance) as examples of the human body in its movement. Therefore, the body acquires true reality in movement. Moreover, it is no coincidence that romantic art sees the emergence of the figure of the beholder as the one who returns himself to the work of art. Drama is expressed by actors in the scene who represent, for a spectator, humanity in its entirety.[[45]](#footnote-46) Performing arts are particularly suited to representing such reality.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, if it is true that, in some cases, the body seems less relevant to contemporary art, it is also true that the body acquires a particular prominence in body art or in the performances of artists who go so far as to injure their bodies, thus manifesting their carnality. From this point of view, Hegel ascribes a central role to the body, understood as something non-idealized; something suffering and defective that maintains an ‘opaque’ aspect since it is no longer the perfect manifestation of the spiritual, being in some sense inessential. If, therefore, the human figure is central in Hegel, this is not to be understood as a tribute to, or a remnant of the influences of neo-classicism, but rather as a perspective where the body is liberated and thus can represent the particularity of the human, such as Bacon's series of painting *Study from the Human Body*.

In Hegel’s aesthetics, we can already find the limits of an idealized and abstract representation of the body in classical art. The romantic form of art, detaching the spiritual from the material, is indeed the peak of the manifestation of the human body. Although painting is more apt than sculpture to depict the human body by overcoming an idealized understanding, the limit of the figurative arts in general is the absence of movement. The latter is indeed defined by Hegel as the essence of the living being, and of human beings specifically: the spirit acquires its highest manifestation in the human creature, whose movement is not arbitrary, but rather ordered. In this direction, it is possible to show that Hegel’s paradigm of art is not sculpture, but rather the performing arts, namely the arts of movement. Further investigation could follow this path, developing a performative reading of Hegel’s aesthetics.

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1. See Ferrini (2009), Ferrini (2012), Pinkard (2012), Testa (2012), Illetterati (2016), and Ferrarin (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. “The idea can be grasped *as reason* (this is the genuine philosophical meaning of reason), *further as subject-object, as the unity of the ideal and the real of the finite and the infinite, of the soul and the body, as the possibility that has its actuality in itself, as that the nature of which can only be conceived as existing*” (Hegel 2010, §214, 284. Emphasis in the original). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Peters (2015) stressed the centrality of the body in Hegel’s aesthetics claiming that beauty in Hegel is detached from art and coincides with the living human individual. In this context, Peters remarks that “[i]deals for Hegel can never be *mere* ideals, indifferent towards and detached from their potential of being actualized” (Peters 2015, 9). In this contribution I will make a weaker assertion, stressing that the human body is the apical expression of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hegel employs both the term *Körper* (emphasizing the material character of the body), and *Leiblichkeit* (highlighting the aspect of the body as an expression of an interiority). When referring to the human figure, he instead uses the term *Gestalt*, translated as ‘human figure’ or ‘human shape.’ I will point out the different lemmas in the course of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For a perspective on the political and social potentialities of the role of the body, see Malabou and Butler (2011), and Ferrini (2020). These authors focus on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and on the relation between Master and Slave. In particular, Ferrini elaborates an original reading on the significance of the expression “you be my body for me,” “not as a “bodily substitution,” but as a “bodily extension,” against the background of the master’s mind-body union. […] This master's self-feeling is the means for projecting its subjectivity into externality and ultimately submitting its own peculiar and arbitrary will to universal laws” Ferrini (2020, 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For the influences of the authors of the *Goethezeit* on Hegel’s aesthetics, see Amoroso (2014, 13-28), and Siani (2024, 10-24). For the relation between Winckelmann and Hegel, see Baur (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See D’Angelo (2013), 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See O’Reilly (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. My sole aim here is to lay the groundwork for a performative reading of Hegel's aesthetics, showing the centrality of the role of the body as movement. As it is well known, ‘performative aesthetics’ originated in the 1990s, and constituted itself as an alternative to the classical tradition; something still alive in the works of Fischer-Lichte (2008), who has credited Hegel – together with the hermeneutical tradition – with a conception of art that is reduced to the artistic object. In opposition a future development will be to show how that in Hegel’s aesthetics itself we can find a paradigm able to explicate art from a performative point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This assertion is the basis of Peters (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. In the part of the *Philosophy of Nature* (1830 edition) devoted to animal organisms, the living being (in its corporeality) is identified as “essentially process” (§ 356). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Art is a form of the absolute spirit that has the peculiarity that it “stands halfway between the sensuous as such and pure thought” (Hegel 2014, 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. For an analysis of the definition of beauty in Hegel that takes into account the lectures on aesthetics and the anthropology, see in particular Peters (2015, 17-38). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. In contrast to the greater centrality of the beauty of nature presented in Hotho's reworking, the *Nachschriften* of the individual courses shows us fully how the beauty of nature plays a liminal role in Hegel’s thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. “We did say previously that the pulsating heart is evident everywhere in the human body, in contrast to the animal body. In the same way we can say about art that what appears at all points on the surface art has to raise up to the eye, the seat of the soul, which allows spirit to appear” (Hegel 2014, 247) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Obviously, according to Hegel, dance is not part of the system of fine arts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. “The ideal beauty, Hegel claims, is found above all in fifth- and fourth-century Greek sculptures of the gods, such as the *Dresden Zeus* (a cast of which Hegel saw in the early 1820s) or Praxiteles’ *Cnidian Aphrodite*” Houlgate (2007, 58). See also Houlgate (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. In a section of Anthropology, in § 411, Hegel affirmed that the soul “in its bodiliness it has its free shape, in which it feels Itself and makes itself felt, and which, as the soul's work of an, has human, pathognomic and physiognomic, expression” (Hegel 2007, 136). This “special correspondence of soul and body” is a fundamental theme of Hegel’s *Anthropology*. I cannot focus on this point here. See, among others, Testa (2012), and Illetterati (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. The body is also at the center of the symbolic art form as bodies in their grandeur and sublimity (e.g., the Memnon). However, it has not yet emerged in the greater perfection of the human body. For this reason, the present investigation focuses on the role of the human figure in classical and romantic art. For the question of the classicism in Hegel, see Gethmann-Siefert (1984). For a reflection that stresses the *Encyclopedia* as more classicist than the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, see Siani (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. In Siani’s reading, the transition to the last phase of romantic art, marked by having the human at its center, shows a “revenge of the Sphinx over Oedipus and of the enigmatic (no longer just oriental, at this point) over the pure brightness of the Greek (or Western?) ‘rational’ consciousness and its neuroses” (Siani 2024, 40). For the limits of a classic paradigm in Hegel’s aesthetics, see D’Angelo (1989), who stresses the perduring role of the symbolic element in Hegel’s conception of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See Winckelmann (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. See Hegel 2004, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. For an inquiry dedicated to the role of sculpture, and to Hegel’s renewing of Winckelmann’s theory see Gjesdal 2021. The author also stressed the centrality of sculpture as embodiment: “The most salient point to glean from Hegel’s philosophy of sculpture is not a perfectionist aesthetics, nor its commitment to the representation of the human body for its own sake, but an interest in the phenomenon of embodied mind and minded nature as this is expressed in and through the human practice of art-making in general, and the making and appreciation of sculpture in particular (Gjesdal 2021, 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. “The classical conception revolves around the human individuals. The unity of spirit and nature that constitute beauty is embodied by the human individual. […] In other words, as mentioned above, it is not accidental to the classic conception of beauty that it functions as a comprehensive human ideal, but essential to it” (Peters 2015, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See, among others, Pippin (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Torsen’s aim is instead to reevaluate the central role of the body in modern sculpture. In my view, this aspect is not actually in opposition to Hegel's conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. “So romantic art has ended up where it began” (Hegel 2014, 349). This topic is one of the most debated by scholars of Hegel’s aesthetics. Here, I am referring to the tradition that considers the ‘end’ of art as a new possibility and liberation of art. See Gethmann-Siefert (1984), Bertram (2019 and 2020) and Siani (2024). In particular, the latter stresses that “[i]t is precisely the disintegration of art and the break-up of the relationship between the artist and objectivity that lays out the prospect of a new, however weak, fragmented and not absolute, role and raison d’être of art which is entirely appropriated to our time […] Every work of art reproduces only a fragment or a perspective: we need to see art as partial” (Siani 2024, 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See Hegel 2004, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. For the strict relation between art and religion see Jaeschke (1982) and Amoroso (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Particularly in the *Nachschrift* of 1828, Hegel stressed the difference between the anthropomorphism of the gods of Greece and the more complete anthropomorphism of the Christian God who becomes flesh. In that context, he made reference to Schiller’s poems “The God of Greece” (see Hegel 2017, 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. “Imagination also ‘brings the man before us above all in action,’ including supplying motives, feelings, thoughts. Sculpture’s essential inaction means it is unable to portray this crucial part of our understanding of human freedom. Its singular place in the trajectory of the individual arts is indicative of art’s vexed position in Hegel’s philosophy in general. At the point of art’s culmination, sculpture also provides evidence of art’s limitation” (Moland 2019, 193). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. It is interesting to remark that plasticity, as the essence of the classical form of art, was already indicated in the period of the Heidelberg *Nachschrift*:the “classic” form of art was named “die plastische Kunstform”. I had the opportunity to hear about this from Klaus Vieweg and Francesca Iannelli in a presentation of the manuscript of Carové during the conference of the Humbolt Kolleg *“For Sense is this Wonderful Word.” Hegel and the Aesthetic*, 23-24/03/2023, at the University of Pisa. In light of the new discovery, it will be interesting to analyze how the Hegelian conception of the body and its plasticity evolved from the Heidelberg period to the Berlin lectures. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. See Heimann 101. For a reflection on the content of a modern art that can be “no more beautiful,” see Iannelli (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. “The truth of human Nature must be found here at this stage. whereby an isolation arises, that the corporeal [*das Körperliche*] is naturally exteriority and is not at all determined by the internal. It is therefore not ideal” (Hegel 2017, 117). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. In a quite opposite direction, Torsen stresses a process of a progressive loss of relevance of the body regarding sculptures, paintings and the other arts: “This is evident in, for example, Hegel’s description of the ‘magic’ of sfumato, resulting in ‘an inherently objectless play of pure appearance […] so fine, so fleeting, so expressive of the soul that they [the colours] begin to pass over into the sphere of music’. In this most extreme formulation, it seems to be almost accidental to the artwork that there are bodies in these paintings; instead, visual art approaches the less ‘bodily’ genres of music and poetry” (Torsen 2017, 307). Although it is obvious that the individual limbs for Hegel are arranged according to a process of progressive dematerialization, this does not necessarily imply a progressive loss of centrality of the human body as represented by the arts. For art as dematerialization see Ophälders (2014, 213-228). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. For a reflection on the role of modern painting in Hegel’s thought, see Pinna (2005, 143-54). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Kottman stresses that the apex of the expression of love in all its carnality and humanity is not given in the Catholic painting (as claimed by Pippin (2018)). The love of Mary still has a kind of abstraction. Rather, love in its concreteness is perfectly expressed in the part dedicated to poetry, and to modern poetry in particular. See Kottman (2017) and Kottman (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. The paradigmatic role of Dutch painting has been at the center of different readings; see among others Rush (2018), and Rutter (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. For a reading of the role of music in Hegel’s aesthetics that stresses the performative character and the central role given to improvisation, see Bertinetto (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. For the role of poetry, and a discussion of its centrality in contraposition to prose (in connection to the question of the end of art), see Speight (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. “The content of poetry is more near is to the spiritual in its determinacy, the human [*das Menschliche*], but so that it, be it otherwise limited, determined as it may, constitutes a free form, a whole” (Hegel 2004, 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. For the centrality of actions in romantic form of art, and particularly in chivalry, see Pinna (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. “Drama can never achieve the complete interpenetration of spirit and nature found in sculpture. But it achieves a reconciliation— a unity that includes subjectivity’s negativity— by showing how subjectivity, although it can never be fully represented, is physically embodied in human action. Hegel’s theory of drama, as poetry’s final genre, is in its broadest sense the culminating aesthetic instance of the reconciliation that underlies his system” (Moland 2019, 272). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. “For Hegel the primary artistic medium for the representation of human figures must be one that is capable of presenting human individuals as involved in action. The most likely candidate for such a medium would be drama. This line of thought in fact finds some support in the *Aesthetics*” (Peters 2015, 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. For the centrality of modern drama in Hegel, and in particular of Shakespeare’s dramas, see Kottman (2018, 263-301). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)