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Dvořák's *Geistesgeschichte* Against Progress in *Kulturgeschichte*: A Comparative Perspective

Between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, numerous historical and theoretical discussions, converging especially in Central Europe, gave rise to original and influential interpretations of art, culture, and history. A significant part of these debates may be explored and summarised by focusing on the works of eminent scholars from different fields. By comparing and contrasting their intellectual approaches to art, culture, and history, it is possible to reflect on some themes and concepts relevant not only to the history of Western civilisation, but also to the present. These include the relationship between the so-called *Geistesgeschichte* (intellectual history) and the so-called *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history), the concept of *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences), and the debate on the spiritual in art, which arises from the reflection on the spirit-matter dichotomy addressed by most Western philosophers. The centrality of the concept of spirit (*Geist*) in the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the fundamental role of symbols in the history of civilisations led Max Dvořák, Aby Warburg, and Walter Benjamin, among others, to criticise the emerging technological advances, responsible for the destruction of the aura, symbols, and traditions. These reflections necessarily led to questioning the concepts of modernity and progress and the possibility of redemption, and hope, albeit in different ways, by Dvořák and other scholars for a better future.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore these intellectual interconnections by investigating Dvořák's late approach to the study of art with the theoretical tradition that focuses on the concept of spirit and that includes philosophers and theorists such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Wassily Kandinsky, Edmund Husserl, Aby Warburg, and Walter Benjamin.

Geisteswissenschaften and the Spiritual in Art

To shed new light on Dvořák's vision of art history, it is necessary to reconstruct the trajectory that led him to conceive art history as a history of ideas or spirit (*Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*). As Karl Maria Swoboda remarked, '*the expression* "Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte" *was not Dvořák's; rather it was chosen by the editors of his collected works as the title for a volume of essays containing among others* "Idealismus und Naturalismus".'[1] Nevertheless, the turn towards the spiritual is an increasingly growing component in Dvořák's late research, consisting mostly of essays and lectures on the Italian Renaissance art (held in 1919 and 1920, and published posthumously).[2] In these studies, Dvořák conceived of art as an expression of ideas, and offered a reinterpretation of Mannerism as a period of artistic growth, thus giving the term 'Mannerism' a positive connotation.

An example of his late approach, permeated by an interest in the spiritual in art, is Dvořák's reading of Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1498). [1] He argued that the woodcut shows the '*impulse to view the world as a problem of the inner life, and to see art as a means of engaging with God and the Devil, with this world and the next, with oneself and whatever motivates others in general*.'[3] Thus, as claimed by Dvořák, Dürer's print offers a glimpse into the world of subjective life. Similarly, he stated that understanding Tintoretto's works is a matter of learning '*to view the development of art not from the perspective of the imitation of nature and of formal problems, but with a view to the deepening of the purely spiritual*.'[4] Therefore, Dvořák saw the history of art as a binary opposition between matter and spirit. This conception is particularly indebted to the philosophy of Dilthey, and

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1 / **Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**, 1498
woodcut, 38.7 × 27.9 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

presents parallels with Kandinsky's reflections on the spiritual in art and Husserl's transcendental idealism.

In *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910), Dilthey reflected on the definition of that group of sciences that, in the 18th century, were designated as moral sciences, or human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), or cultural sciences (*Kulturwissenschaften*).[5] He did so by highlighting the fundamental role played by the concept of spirit (*Geist*) in this set of sciences. In philosophy and religion, spirit as substance is contrasted with matter and is considered an animating force in humans or, more generally, in all living beings. Dvořák applied this view in his late works, in which he combined the idea of naturalism with that of idealism, the function of which is to express in artistic creation the spiritual qualities that motivate human beings.[6]

Dilthey noted that the definition of '*the most universal property*' of the human sciences is based on '*their having a common reference to human beings, to humanity*.'[7] Furthermore, he argued that '*whether they be institutions, customs, books, works of art, such phenomena always contain, like man himself, a reference back from an outer sensory aspect to one that is withdrawn from the senses and therefore inner*.'[8] The inner aspect to which Dilthey referred in this passage is the spirit. According to Dilthey, in a work of art (in his example, a drama) the artist creates a spiritual nexus that enters the sensory sphere. This idea seems to be present, for example, in Dvořák's study of the book printed in 1498, containing fifteen woodcuts in which Dürer depicted scenes from the *Book of Revelation*. Dvořák's reading of

Dürer's illustrations reflects his concern with the spiritual in art, that is, the relationship between the artist's inner world and the content of the artwork: '*It is* [...] *the artist who now assumes the dual role of poet and seer for in this picture Dürer portrays his own inner vision in a manner rivalling that of the biblical text. He manages to unite reality with unreality and, having evaluated both subjectively, is able to give exactly the right emphasis to each pictorial element.*'[9] Therefore, both Dilthey and Dvořák conceived of the work of art as containing the inner subjectivity of the artist. This is why Dvořák considered Dürer's woodcuts an autobiographical work.[10]

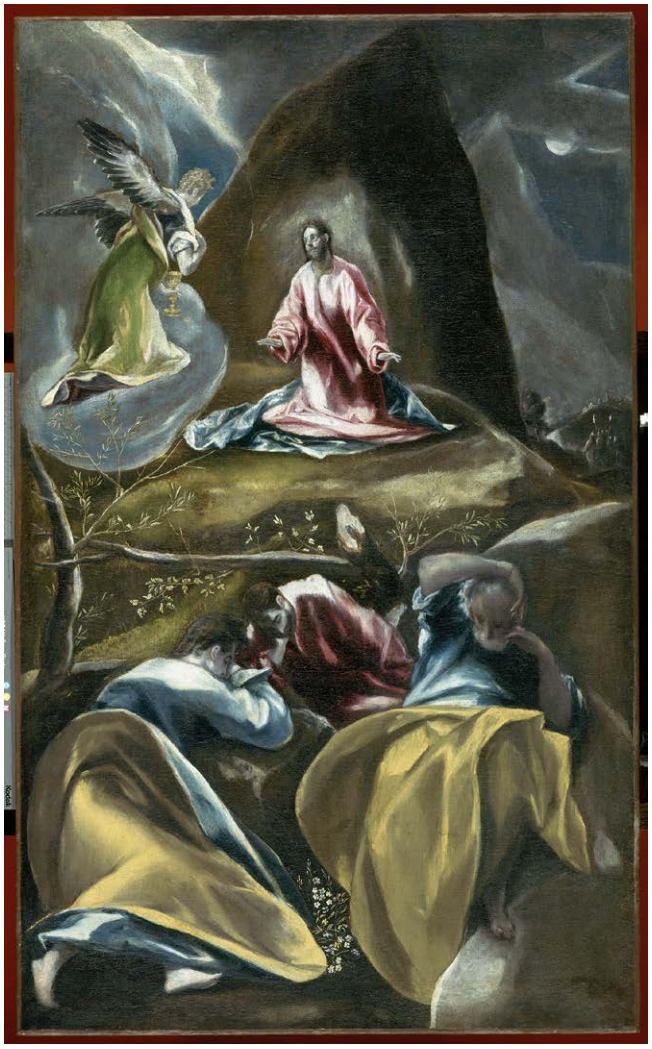
To strengthen his argument, Dvořák compared and contrasted Dürer's attitude towards art with that of his Italian (e.g., Giovanni Bellini and Raphael) and Dutch (e.g., Gerard David) colleagues, claiming that the latter almost completely disregarded the subjective sphere. Therefore, as claimed by Dvořák, artists can have two different attitudes towards art, one that privileges the subjective (i.e., the interpretation of reality according to one's own view), and therefore the spiritual, and another that rejects it. Dürer's interest in the subjective is related, according to Dvořák, to '*his concern for man's spiritual well-being*', which is reflected in his series of woodcuts.[11] Thus, Dvořák's late approach reflects the idea that the subject matter of the human sciences revolves around the spirit. In fact, whereas from the perspective of the natural sciences, humanity is a physical fact '*accessible only to natural scientific cognition*', from the perspective of the human sciences, humanity '*emerges only insofar as human states are experienced, insofar as they come to expression in life-expressions, and insofar as these expressions are understood.*'[12] In art, for example, the artist's depths are revealed to those who understand them through lasting spiritual creations.

From this analysis, it emerges that the humanities (including Dvořák's interpretation of art) trace human life, and the objective spirit it realises, back to a creative source. This idea is connected to the notion of the spirit of a nation, which is the sum of elements such as language, customs, constitution, law, myth, and poetic tradition — bound by the common belief of the people — which together give shape to the specific structure of a people. In other words, '*the individual, the communities, and the works into which life and spirit have entered form the outer realm of human spirit.*'[13] In addition, this outer reality always surrounds people, and art reflects it. This idea is also present in Dvořák's thought, particularly when he argued that Dürer's work reflects humanism, the Reformation, the new Italian and Dutch art theories, along with every aspect of life and nature.[14] Consequently, as Dilthey argued, the development of the human sciences proceeds hand in hand with the identification of the spiritual content in the various manifestations of life.[15] In this sense, '*each single manifestation of life re-presents something common or shared in the realm of objective spirit.*'[16] Moreover, what the human spirit projects today in some manifestation, tomorrow will be history.

The interconnection between Dilthey's and Dvořák's texts explains the reference to spirit (*Geist*) in the term *Geisteswissenschaft* (human science). Therefore, everything in which the human spirit (or human life) has objectified itself (what Dilthey and Hegel called 'objective spirit') is within the realm of the human sciences. Hegel conceived objective spirit as an intermediate stage in the development of spirit between subjective and absolute spirit.[17] Understanding objective spirit, Dilthey explained, occurs not through reason, but through '*the structural nexus of life-units that extends itself into communities.*'[18] Whereas objective spirit manifests itself in the whole that includes language, custom, family, civil society, the state, and law; absolute spirit, according to Hegel, manifests itself in art, religion, and philosophy. In these latter three domains, the creative individual represents commonality. This is how the human spirit objectifies itself in its forms. Thus, the task of the human sciences is to '*grasp the world of human spirit in the form of productive systems as they arise over the course of time.*'[19] It is from this assumption that it is possible to speak of 'the spirit of the times'. For this reason, Dilthey claimed that the spirit is essentially historical and therefore permeated by the memory of an entire people.[20] Dvořák expressed a similar view when he stated that '*classical antiquity has become an integral part of the spiritual heritage.*'[21] And also when he emphasised the importance of the philosophy of the Middle Ages for '*the spiritual development of the European peoples.*'[22] In this sense, the great historical forms of the human spirit exist in human beings as abbreviated spiritual presences.[23]

Dvořák's turn to the spiritual should also be compared with the text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in Munich in 1911 by the Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky.[24] In this text, Kandinsky lamented a general inclination towards materialism, which results in a lack of faith, purpose, and aspiration among people.[25] To widespread materialism, Kandinsky contrasted the spirit (i.e., the immaterial) and the art that springs from the spiritual life of artists; that is, an art capable of arousing subtle and refined emotions in any receptive audience.[26] However, due to the materialistic drive at work, art audiences are '*rarely capable of perceiving the vibration emitted by an artwork.*'[27] According to Kandinsky, authentic artistic forms are able to nourish the spirit of spectators who are capable of finding a resonance of those forms in their soul.[28]

The art Kandinsky referred to is that which is rooted in the spirit of its age.[29] It also has a *prophetic power* that is broad and lasting in its impact.[30] In fact, as Kandinsky asserted, '*the spirit that leads to the realm of tomorrow can only be intuited by feeling (and it is the talent of the artist to open up this path).*'[31] Typically, as claimed by Kandinsky, people primarily pursue success, material goods, and technical progress, which serve the body but not the spirit. As he stated, in such cases, '*the forces of the spirit are at best neglected, if not completely ignored.*'[32] For this reason, he considered the times in which those principles



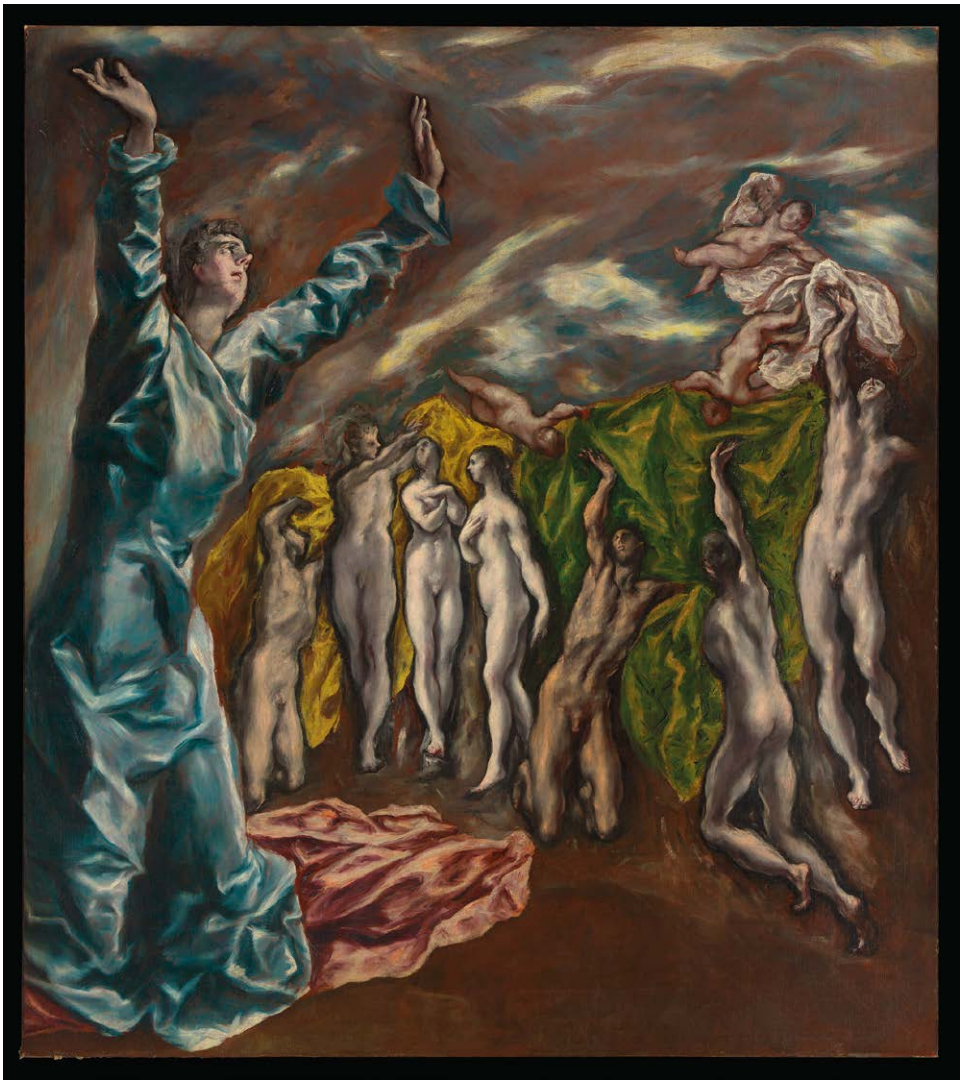
2 / **El Greco, Christ in the Olive Garden**, ca. 1600
oil, canvas, 138 × 92 cm
Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille
Photo: © GrandPalaisRmn (PBA, Lille) / Hervé Lewandowski

prevail as mute and blind. Kandinsky condemned art with the sole purpose of reproducing objects, that which is only concerned with 'how' the physical object should be reproduced, rather than 'what' it should represent.[33] Therefore, for Kandinsky, an art without its soul (without the 'what') can only be dead.

The dichotomy between materialism and the spiritual is omnipresent in Dvořák's late work as well. Referring to two paintings by El Greco — *Christ in the Olive Garden* [2] and the *Opening of the Fifth Seal* [3] — Dvořák compared El Greco to Cervantes's character Don Quixote, stating that they were both idealists: '*Don Quixote was the pure idealist, as indeed was El Greco in the realm of art for his work represents the peak of a European artistic movement which sought to replace the materialism of the Renaissance with a complete spiritual reorientation.*'[34] Thus, Dvořák, like Dilthey and Kandinsky, contrasted materialism with the spiritual, advocating the latter. According to Dvořák, El Greco was a representative of the spiritual in art, a phenomenon that was coming to an end at that time: '*from the seventeenth century onward the cult of materialism once again began to gain ground and all the more so as the popes of the Counter-Reformation thoroughly compromised on this point.*'[35] This is why, according to Dvořák, in the next two hundred years, El Greco was almost forgotten. As was typical of his later approach, Dvořák referred to his times as follows: '*Today, this materialistic culture is approaching its end. I am thinking not so much of its external demise as of its inner collapse which, for over a generation now, we have been able to observe affecting every sphere of cultural life, especially our philosophical and scientific thinking, until today it is disciplines such as sociology and psychology which take precedence.*'[36] It is striking how Dvořák's vision of his times coincides with that of Kandinsky. Both condemned the materialistic drive of their age, which in turn was reflected in art.

Therefore, Kandinsky and Dvořák praised the spiritual over the material, the physical, and the corporeal, the profound over the superficial, creation over re-production. Commenting on El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, [4] Dvořák referred to the metaphysical and spiritual dimension of the work, to something that goes beyond the sensory faculty.[37] As stated by Dvořák, when observing this painting, the viewer '*is raised to a realm of pure spirit.*'[38] This is precisely the purpose of this painting, to uplift the human spirit. Kandinsky referred to something similar when he said that what art conveys is nourishment for the soul.[39] As Swoboda pointed out, '*in Dvořák's approach, the interpretation of the spiritual content of a work of art becomes separable from that of its formal aspect, so that Dvořák in discussing medieval art can speak of a victory of ideal concepts over formal perfection.*'[40] Interestingly, Kandinsky also separated form and spirit. For example, he defined matter as a '*repertoire of forms, from which the spirit selects the necessary form required for its expression at that particular moment*'.[41] Therefore, although spirit is the opposite of matter, the creative spirit draws from matter; thus there is a dialectical relationship between the two elements.[42] Furthermore, it is through form that spirit is perceivable. However, according to Kandinsky (and Dvořák), '*what is important is not the form (matter) but the content (spirit).*'[43] In this sense, the viewer '*should approach a work of art in such a way that the soul is affected by the form and, through it, the inner content (the spirit, the inner resonance).*'[44] This is in line with the idea that '*any form* [...] *has its own inner resonance*';[45] and that every object depicted on a canvas arouses an inner vibration.[46] Kandinsky saw the world as '*a cosmos made up of entities each with their own spiritual resonance. It looks like dead matter but it is living spirit.*'[47] The artist's sensitivity allows him or her to perceive the inner sound of things without excessive effort.

Similarly, for Dvořák, in art both material and spiritual culture is determined by great artists and



3 / **El Greco, Opening of the Fifth Seal**, 1608–1614
oil, canvas, 224.8 × 199.4 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

intellectuals who are able to inspire other people. On the contrary, disregarding the spiritual and cultural tradition established by great intellectuals leads to chaos: '*The roads which had hitherto led men to knowledge and helped them to create a spiritual culture were abandoned, the result being an apparent chaos, similar to that with which we are confronted today*.'[48] In this passage, it is clear that Dvořák's historical approach includes parallels between the past and his own era. With these premises, Dvořák connected El Greco's art with contemporary art.

In his 'Foreword to *Oskar Kokoschka: Variations on a Theme*' (1921), Dvořák further developed his interpretation of the history of art as a history of the spirit.[49] By comparing and contrasting two series of artworks — Claude Monet's *Haystacks* (1890–1891) and Oskar Kokoschka's *Das Konzert* (1920) [5] — Dvořák conceived naturalism and expressionism as two different conceptions of art, reflecting two different worldviews. Whereas Monet's paintings, based on a careful study of nature, belong to a scientific (and materialistic) worldview; Kokoschka's drawings, based on an introspective investigation of the human soul, belong to a spiritual worldview. According to Dvořák, naturalistic art came to an end because of its inability to explore the human soul and the deepest essence of life. Dvořák's analysis shows that the cultural shift that was taking place — that is, from a scientific view (and interpretation) of the world to a spiritual rebirth, which occurred in the period between the two series of artworks — transformed the idea of art; that is, from the representation of sensory experience to '*the expression of the spiritual experience of existence*'.[50] This shift necessarily reflects a '*new conceptual understanding of the world*'.[51] For these reasons, the variations in Kokoschka's series are not to be found in the form, but rather in '*the inexhaustible and uninterrupted, flowing movement of the spiritual animation*'.[52] This is why Dvořák defined these ten drawings as '*studies of the spirit*' (*Geistesstudien*). Implicitly referring to the crisis of his time, according to Dvořák, Kokoschka's series of portraits represents a stage (or so he hoped) towards a new German idealism, which will not be based on the world of the senses but on the spheres of the spirits.

4 / **El Greco, The Burial of the Count of Orgaz**, 1586
oil, canvas, 480 × 360 cm
Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Dvořák's interpretation of art and history also presents some points of contact with another key figure who took part in this debate on the spirit, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. For example, in his essay for the Japanese journal *Kaizo* from 1924, he called for a renewal of the 'culture of the spirit' and the 'idea of humanity',[53] culminating in his lecture entitled 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man', delivered in Vienna in 1935.[54] In this text, Husserl focused on the dichotomy between the human body and the spirit, the object of the human sciences. Following Dilthey, Husserl attributed to the human sciences the task of investigating the life of people, their activity, and the results of this activity. In a way that seems similar to that of Dvořák, Husserl assigned a purpose to life, which is to manifest spiritual creativity. This is precisely what the human sciences are concerned with. Whereas the natural sciences are concerned with living in a physiological sense (a distinction that Dvořák had clearly in mind). However, Husserl encouraged a dialogue between the human sciences and the natural sciences, to the extent that the humanist should trace the spirit back to its corporeal foundations.[55] Husserl had a teleological view of human nature and Europe. He referred to the '*spiritual image of Europe*', which presents '*the philosophical idea immanent in the history of Europe (of spiritual Europe)*'.[56] In the words of Husserl, '*every spiritual image has its place essentially in a universal historical space or in a particular unity of historical time in terms of coexistence or succession — it has its history*.'[57] Moreover, he stressed the importance of humanity as a community of people, bound together only by spiritual relations. For this reason, Husserl saw a spiritual affinity between European nations that transcends national differences.[58]

Transcendental phenomenology is the method through which Husserl investigated and analysed the fundamental essence of spirit. As Husserl stated, '*from the point of view of soul, humanity has never been a finished product, nor will it be, nor can it ever repeat itself*.'[59] Therefore, the spiritual *telos* of humanity lies in the infinite. Husserl saw the origin of spiritual Europe in the emergence of Western philosophy, namely ancient Greek philosophy.[60] He attributed to philosophy the role of guidance, which is crucial for social orientation. In this way, he justified its usefulness beyond the ever-comprehensive technological and scientific innovation. This is the '*special infinite task*' of philosophy.[61] As Husserl wrote, '*the human belongs to the universe of objective facts, but as persons, as egos, men have goals, aims. They have norms for tradition, truth norms — eternal norms*.'[62] For this reason, the natural sciences should also consider '*the mysteries of spirit*.'[63] This is because '*the spirit is real and objectively in the world, founded as such in corporeality*.'[64] As noted above, this view also emerges from Dvořák's readings of the works of artists such as Dürer, El Greco, and Kokoschka. Both Dvořák and Husserl saw the crisis of European man in the absorption of naturalism and objectivism into European culture. In fact, whereas Dvořák criticised naturalism for being soulless and tried to overcome the materialistic drive at work by conceiving art history as a history of the spirit, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology overcomes naturalistic objectivism '*by beginning one's philosophising from one's own ego*'.[65] According to Husserl, the crisis of European culture can be solved in two ways: '*in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit; or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through a heroism of reason that will definitively overcome naturalism*.'[66] Husserl was confident that the second way would succeed because the spirit is immortal.

Dvořák's rejection of scientific positivism and naturalism in favour of an idea of a subjective experience of art — in the age of great upheavals (both in the 16th century as well as during World War I) — and his hope for a new spirituality that would solve the crisis of the European peoples with an 'ideal rebirth', make possible a comparison with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. In fact, the trust in the achievements of subjectivity is shared by both Husserl's transcendental idealism and Dvořák's idea of a subjectivation of art. It

5 / **Oskar Kokoschka, The Concert II (Das Konzert II) from the series The Concert (Das Konzert)**, 1920 (published 1921)
lithograph, 66.7 × 48 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

is worth mentioning that, in the conclusion of his essay on El Greco and Mannerism, Dvořák offered an account of the change in aesthetic norms, and of a more general cultural shift, due to the rise of scientific modernity and technological development: '*these were years dominated by the natural sciences, by mathematical thought and a superstitious regard for causality, for technical development and the mechanisation of culture — years dominated by the eye and the mind but demonstrating an almost complete disregard for the heart*.'[67] Dvořák's belief in the primacy of the spiritual over the materialistic values of the age — shared by Dilthey, Kandinsky, and Husserl — led him to criticise the technological innovation of his time; a concern shared by, among others, Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin.

The Critique of Technology and the Concept of Aura

Dvořák, Warburg, and Benjamin shared similar views on the impact of modern technology on Western civilisation. A comparison of their perspectives on this matter may help shed new light on the concept of progress as opposed to cultural memory, which all three were committed to preserving. For example, in a text published in 1916 on Goya's *Disasters of War*, Dvořák described the war by contrasting liberal individualistic materialism with the socio-ethical drive, and scientific positivism with philosophical and historical idealism.[68] Therefore, he saw the war as a profound conflict of 'spiritual culture'. His valorisation of the spiritual goes hand in hand with his critique of technological progress and scientific positivism, which have characterised Western modernity. Dvořák's view of modernity draws on a specific intellectual tradition, including Friedrich Nietzsche, who interpreted political and military conflicts as '*geistig*' crises.[69] Nietzsche considered modernity as a period of crisis of values. It is worth noting that, in his youth, Dvořák read Nietzsche, whose work was also of great importance to Warburg.[70]

In a newspaper article on monument conservation and art (1910), Dvořák, long before Benjamin, criticised the technological reproduction of the work of art.[71] He considered the technological reproducibility to be the cause of the loss of the idea of originality and uniqueness (what Benjamin called *aura*) and of any artistic relation to the artistic values of the artworks of the past and present. Dvořák attached great importance to the connection of monuments and artworks to a specific place. He related this connection to the concept of memory. Even in his *Katechismus der Denkmalpflege* (1916), Dvořák discussed technology in negative terms, speaking of an '*idolatry of technical innovations that not only makes us forget other considerations, but often goes beyond what is also purely technically useful and opportune*'.[72] In his opinion, there is a secret contempt for the old that lies behind such '*misunderstood ideas of progress*'.[73]

Thus, the '*idolatry of technical innovations*' (Dvořák) and the '*emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual*' (Benjamin) destroy the original 'artistic value' of the work of art through its banal 'use value' and its 'technological reproducibility'.[74] In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1935), Benjamin deepened this discourse by theorising the concept of aura in response to technological progress, which allows works of art to be reproduced an infinite number of times. Benjamin defined the aura in the following terms: '*It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualises that which is reproduced*.'[75] Therefore, by reproducing the work of art, its aura disappears. The separation between the work of art and tradition is the fundamental element that led Dvořák and Benjamin to criticise technology applied to art. Reproduction devalues the '*here and now of the artwork*' and therefore its authenticity.[76] Thus, the aura has a spatiotemporal character. As Benjamin stated: '*The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it*.'[77] Along with the 'historical testimony' also the 'authority of the object' disappears with reproduction.

Benjamin applied the concept of aura not only to 'historical objects', but also to 'natural objects'. The aura of the 'natural object' refers to the '*unique apparition of a distance*', which opposes the desire of the masses to get closer to things and to overcame their uniqueness by reproducing them.[78] This is what Benjamin called '*the social basis of the aura's present decay*.'[79] For example, in photography and film, technological reproduction can use certain expedients, such as enlargement and slow motion, to record aspects of reality that escape natural optics. To an artificial observation mediated by technology Benjamin was opposed, supporting a natural observation which maintains distance. In this respect, in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939/1940), Benjamin argued that the artistic crisis resulting from technical reproducibility mirrors a crisis of perception.[80] A further unbridgeable difference between art and technology is that, according to Benjamin, whereas art aims at the beautiful, in technological reproduction there is no room for beauty.[81]

Benjamin's critique of modernity is very close to Warburg's, particularly when Benjamin stated that '*instead of dropping seeds from airplanes*', society '*drops incendiary bombs over cities; and in gas warfare it has found a new means of abolishing the aura*.'[82] Like Dvořák and Benjamin, Warburg saw the crisis of Western culture in the positivistic thrust of the modern sciences and technology. He expressed his critique of modern positivism in the conclusion of his 1923 lecture on the serpent ritual of the Pueblo Indians of North America.[83] As he himself recounted, during his 1896 trip to the United States, Warburg was able to observe the cultural change that led people to '*overthrow the cult of the serpent and overcome the*

fear of lightning'.[84] As he bitterly admitted, '*the American of today no longer worships the rattle-snake*.'[85] Electricity has replaced the magic of ritual: '*Electricity enslaved, the lightning held captive in the wire, has produced a civilisation which has no use for heathen poetry*.'[86] He further stated: '*The forces of nature are no longer seen in anthropomorphic shapes; they are conceived as an endless succession of waves, obedient to the touch of a man's hand*'.[87] In this way, according to Warburg (in line with Benjamin), the civilisation of the mechanical age has destroyed '*the sanctuary of devotion, the remoteness needed for contemplation*.'[88] Technology empties reality of the power of myth and poetry. For Warburg, people like Benjamin Franklin and the Wright Brothers, inventing the airplane, destroyed our sense of distance, whereas the telegraph and the telephone '*are destroying the cosmos*.'[89] Therefore, the mechanical age frees itself from myth and symbols, which establish '*spiritual bonds between man and the outside world*', and '*create space for devotion and scope for reason*'.[90] Like Dvořák and Husserl, Warburg hoped for a '*disciplined humanity*' capable of stopping this destruction.

Baroque Modernity, Progress, and Redemption

Dvořák's, Warburg's, and Benjamin's perspectives on the crisis of the times are connected to the concept of progress and that of redemption. To a certain extent, they all believed in a future redemption (from positivist modernity), which would re-establish the primacy of the spirit (or of the human, with its beliefs, myths, and symbols) over the materialism of the machine. This idea seems to coincide with a vision of history that excludes the idea of progress. In other words, technological and scientific progress does not necessarily translate into the idea that there can be progress in humanity and in history (including art history). On the contrary, historical or cultural memory can be seen as a phenomenon that undermines the very idea of progress. That is, the survival of the past in its various manifestations — which for Warburg was the *Nachleben der Antike*, for Dvořák was the rebirth of the spiritual in art in certain epochs, and for Benjamin was the periodic re-emergence in history of the Baroque form of the tragic drama — demonstrates that the concept of progress must be periodically redefined. For instance, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin viewed the Baroque as a period of decadence: '*the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will*.'[91] Benjamin saw periods of 'decadence' as periods of artistic 'will'. These are periods in which art is made by epigones rather than by great masters. In the words of Benjamin, '*the reason for the relevance of the baroque after the collapse of German classical culture lies in this will*.'[92] Benjamin borrowed the term 'artistic will' (*Kunstwollen*) from Alois Riegl, who devised it in reference to the art of the final period of the Roman Empire.[93] Benjamin, like Dvořák, had become interested in Riegl's work as a student, and in 1929 wrote that '*in the last four decades no art-historical book has had such a substantive and methodologically fruitful effect*' as *Late Roman Art Industry*.[94]

One of the main characteristics of Dvořák's method is the comparison between the past and the present, as if he wanted to trace a line of discontinuity (with an alternation between materialism and spirituality) that continues into the future. In this way, he could hypothesise a possible future redemption from the ongoing crisis he observed, the same redemption that he sometimes saw emerging in the past when the spirit prevailed over materialism (as for example in the era of El Greco). This is why he could read the scientific and technological domain not as the apex of an evolutionary process but as momentary and transitory, as a parenthesis between two eras steeped in spirituality.

Benjamin also drew parallels between the past and the present, as is evident in the following sentence: '*In this state of disruption the present age reflects certain aspects of the spiritual constitution of the baroque, even down to the details of its artistic practice*.'[95] Therefore, both Dvořák and Benjamin conceived history (and culture) as a succession of periods of decline and rebirth, thus rejecting the notion of progress. In this respect, Benjamin stated: '*in seventeenth-century Germany, literature, however little account the nation took of it, underwent a significant rebirth. The twenty years of German literature which have been referred to here in order to explain the renewal of interest in the earlier epoch, represent a decline, even though it may be a decline of a fruitful and preparatory kind*.'[96] Dvořák's and Benjamin's conceptions of history are thus linked to the notion of redemption, which Benjamin also read into German drama.[97] For example, in comparing the Middle Ages to German Baroque tragedy, Benjamin stated: '*Whereas the middle ages present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German* Trauerspiel *is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation*.'[98] However, as stated by Benjamin, tragedy always presents a temporary redemption as a solution.[99]

Benjamin deepened his conception of redemption in his essay 'On the Concept of History', written between February and May 1940.[100] According to Benjamin, history is not a movement toward progress, but toward redemption, which brings discontinuity and disruption.[101] Redemption is the reason behind historical struggles and political revolutions. In these terms, as Shoshana Felman put it, '*redemption is the allegory of a future state of freedom, justice, happiness, and recovery of meaning*.'[102] In this respect, Benjamin wrote: '*the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history*.'[103] In another passage, Benjamin reiterated that the course of history is not homogeneous: '*History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time* [Jetztzeit]. *Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted*

out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate.'[104] According to Benjamin, new theories of history emerge under epochs characterised by danger and emergency (which actually seems to be what Dvořák did with his history of art as a history of the spirit): '*Articulating the past historically does not mean recognising it "the way it really was". It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger*.'[105] The parallel between the past and the present is once again seen as a precondition for the study and understanding of history.

Referring to Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920), [6] Benjamin interpreted history as a catastrophe: '*There is a picture by Klee called* Angelus Novus. *It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before* us, he *sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is* this *storm*.'[106] Therefore, Benjamin saw history as a vast and growing pile of ruins. He identified the storm responsible for the catastrophe with progress. Yet, there seems to be hope, in the opposite direction to the historical course (the angel is facing the past), that is where, according to Benjamin, but also according to Dvořák and Warburg, there is redemption.

As Richard Wolin noticed, '*the storm of progress is viewed as blowing* from *Paradise*.'[107] Thus, Paradise (the source of the storm) and progress (represented by the pile of debris) are at opposite ends of the continuum of history. The angel is pushed toward progress, thus moving away from Paradise. For this reason, for Benjamin, the philosophy of history is *Heilsgeschichte* (the history of salvation). In addition, the ultimate goal of the method of redemptive criticism (in other words, the function of historical memory) is to rescue the now-times (*Jetztzeiten*) — that is, the times ripe with revolutionary possibility and therefore detached from the continuum of history — from the fate of oblivion.

Conclusion

What emerges from this analysis is that, although from different perspectives, for Dvořák, Warburg, and Benjamin the question of redemption was a crucial element in their understanding of cultural history. They did not recognise redemption only in some junctures of the past, but also hoped for a near future salvation from a dangerous and deeply crisis-ridden modernity. Significantly, they all insisted on the primacy of memory over the idea of progress, which they saw as oriented towards a future that eludes the past with its values and history.

In conclusion, a close and comparative analysis of Dvořák's late work reveals that he had a comprehensive and complex vision of European artistic and cultural history, from classical antiquity to his own day, and that he was well-connected to the intellectual debate of his time. This is confirmed by the direct and indirect dialogues that can be traced between his work and that of other scholars, theorists, and philosophers such as Dilthey, Kandinsky, and Husserl. In this way, this comparative study shows his work from a new perspective — it shows, for example, that his interpretation of art, history, and his time belongs to a well-structured philosophical tradition, which has its roots in an idea of humanity as a creative and spiritual potential. Furthermore, it is important to point out that Dvořák's main concerns expressed in his late works — from the crisis of the times to the concepts of progress and redemption — are still current themes.[108] In fact, these concepts have been explored more recently by other philosophers. For example, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has also abandoned the conception of history as a global linear progress of humanity.[109] Žižek's starting point is Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), in which, reinterpreting the interconnections between the concepts of myth and

6 / **Paul Klee, Angelus Novus**, 1920
monoprint, 31.8 × 24.2 cm
Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner

enlightenment, they argued that the notion of progress can also turn into regression.[110] In this respect, Žižek stated that '*there is no "right side of history" directed towards progress, the predominant trend is towards catastrophe*.'[111] This idea converges with Dvořák's understanding of history and his concept of art history as a history of the spirit, which interprets technological progress as a social and cultural catastrophe.

Therefore, the meditations on the essence of history of intellectuals who came after Dvořák — from Benjamin to Žižek — have indirectly confirmed the originality and pioneering position of Dvořák's late conception of culture and art. Dvořák's scepticism about the idea of progress was also proved to be well-founded by the major tragic events of the 20th century, most of which he could not see: the Second World War, nuclear weapons, and the current social and political upheavals — partly due to technological development. This idea of 'progress' has in fact led to catastrophes that only a return to the spiritual can heal. In this way, this essay offers a new perspective on Dvořák's thought and lays the foundation not only for new art-historical reflections, but also for a reconsideration of today's technology-driven life,[112] which demands redemption against constant and endless progress.*

NOTES

1 Karl Maria Swoboda, 'Preface', in Max Dvořák, *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art*, Notre Dame, IN 1967, pp. xix–xxx, here xxv. The book that Swoboda mentioned is Max Dvořák, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte: Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, Munich 1924. See also e.g. Hans Aurenhammer, 'Max Dvořák and the History of Medieval Art', *Journal of Art Historiography* II, 2010, pp. 1–17. — Matthew Rampley, 'Max Dvořák: Art History and the Crisis of Modernity', *Art History* XXVI, 2003, No. 2, pp. 214–237. — Mitchell Schwarzer, 'Cosmopolitan Difference in Max Dvořák's Art Historiography', *The Art Bulletin* LXXIV, 1992, No. 4, pp. 669–678.

2 See Max Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Akademische Vorlesungen. Erster Band: Das 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, München 1927. — Idem, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Akademische Vorlesungen. Zweiter Band: Das 16. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1928.

3 See Rampley (note 1), p. 10.

4 Ibidem.

5 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works — Volume III: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Princeton NJ 2002.

6 See Swoboda (note 1), p. xxiv.

7 Dilthey (note 5), p. 106.

8 Ibidem.

9 Max Dvořák, 'Dürer's Apocalypse', in Idem, *The History of Art as the History of Ideas*, London 1984, pp. 54–61, here 57.

10 Ibidem, p. 59.

11 Ibidem, p. 60.

12 Dilthey (note 5), p. 108.

13 Ibidem, p. 168.

14 See Dvořák (note 9), p. 61.

15 See Dilthey (note 5), p. 153.

16 Ibidem, p. 168.

17 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford 1894, p. 167 (§ 553).

18 Dilthey (note 5), p. 172.

19 Ibidem, p. 178.

20 Ibidem, p. 296.

21 Dvořák, *Idealism* (note 1), p. 11.

22 Ibidem, pp. 10–11.

23 See Dilthey (note 5), p. 296.

24 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York 1977. For a comparative study on the spiritual in art, see Norbert Schmitz, *Kunst und Wissenschaft im Zeichen der Moderne: Exemplarische Studien zum Verhältnis von klassischer Avantgarde und zeitgenössischer Kunstgeschichte in Deutschland: Hölzel, Wölfflin, Kandinsky, Dvořák*, Alfter 1993.

25 Kandinsky (note 24), p. 14.

26 Ibidem, p. 15.

27 Ibidem. See also p. 117.

28 Ibidem, p. 15.

29 Ibidem, p. 17.

30 Ibidem.

31 Ibidem, p. 27.

32 Ibidem, p. 21.

33 Ibidem.

34 Max Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', in Dvořák (note 9), pp. 97–108, here 107–108.

35 Ibidem, p. 108.

36 Ibidem.

37 Ibidem, p. 97.

38 Ibidem, p. 98.

39 See Kandinsky (note 24), p. 105.

40 Swoboda (note 1), p. xxvi.

41 Kandinsky (note 24), p. 117.

42 Ibidem.

43 Ibidem, p. 120.

44 Ibidem, p. 121.

45 Ibidem, p. 52.

46 Ibidem, p. 58.

47 Ibidem, p. 131.

48 Dvořák (note 34), p. 104.

49 Max Dvořák, 'Foreword to *Oskar Kokoschka: Variations on a Theme*', in Kimberly A. Smith (ed.), *The Expressionist Turn in Art History: A Critical Anthology*, London and New York 2014, pp. 231–234.

50 Ibidem, p. 233.

51 Ibidem.

52 Ibidem, p. 234.

53 See Josef Vojvodík, '*Vide de corps — tombeau vide*. Die Kraft des Abwesenden: Das Kenotaph für Max Dvořák und die Dialektik des Visuellen von Georges Didi-Huberman', *Umění/Art* LX, 2012, pp. 186–213, here 206.

54 Edmund Husserl, 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man', in idem, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, New York 1965, pp. 149–192.

55 Ibidem, p. 152. See also Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Evanston 1970.

56 Husserl (note 54), p. 156.

57 Ibidem.

58 Ibidem, p. 157.

59 Ibidem, p. 158.

60 Ibidem, p. 159.

61 Ibidem, p. 178.

62 Ibidem, p. 183.

63 Ibidem, p. 184.

64 Ibidem.

65 Ibidem, p. 190.

66 Ibidem, p. 192.

67 Dvořák (note 34), p. 108.

68 See Max Dvořák, 'Eine Illustrierte Kriegschronik vor hundert Jahren, oder der Krieg und die Kunst', *Kriegs-Almanach*, 1916, p. 12.

69 See Nietzsche's text *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 57–123.

70 See Karl Maria Swoboda, 'Vortrag zum 30. Todestag von Max Dvořák', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Denkmalpflege* XXIII, 1974, pp. 74–81, here 76. — For Warburg see e.g., David Freedberg and Claudia Wedepohl (eds), *Aby Warburg 150: Work, Legacy, Promise*, Berlin and Boston, MA 2024. — Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London 1970.

71 See Max Dvořák, 'Denkmalpflege und Kunst', *Neue Freie Presse*, 1910, 15 September, pp. 1–3. — For Benjamin see e.g., Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Cambridge, MA and London 2014. — Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, Stanford 2013. — Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, Chicago, IL and London 2010.

72 Max Dvořák, *Katechismus der Denkmalpflege*, Wien 1918, p. 17.

73 Ibidem.

74 Ibidem. — Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Selected Writings: 1938–1940*, Cambridge, MA and London 2003, pp. 251–283, here 257.

75 Benjamin (note 74), p. 254.

76 Ibidem.

77 Ibidem.

78 Ibidem, p. 255.

79 Ibidem.

80 Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in Benjamin (note 74), pp. 313–355.

81 Ibidem, p. 338.

82 Benjamin (note 74), p. 270.

83 See Aby Warburg, 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual', *The Journal of the Warburg Institute* II, 1939, No. 4, pp. 277–292, here 292.

84 Ibidem.

85 Ibidem.

86 Ibidem.

87 Ibidem.

88 Ibidem.

89 Ibidem.

90 Ibidem.

91 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London and New York 2023, p. 55.

92 Ibidem.

93 See Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, Rome 1985.

94 Walter Benjamin, 'Rigorous Study of Art: On the First Volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*', in Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, New York 2000, pp. 439–451, here 439.

95 Benjamin (note 91), p. 55.

96 Ibidem, p. 56.

97 For Benjamin's notion of redemption, see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994.

98 Benjamin (note 91), p. 81.

99 Ibidem, pp. 116–117.

100 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in Benjamin (note 74), pp. 389–400.

101 For Benjamin's conception of history, see Shoshana Felman, 'Benjamin's Silence', *Critical Inquiry* XXV, 1999, No. 2, pp. 201–234.

102 Ibidem, p. 211.

103 Benjamin (note 100), pp. 389–390.

104 Ibidem, p. 395.

105 Ibidem, p. 391.

106 Ibidem, p. 392.

107 Wolin (note 97), p. 61.

108 As also pointed out by Josef Vojvodík, '"Fading, fading…": Ztráta, vzkříšení a dějiny umění jako palingeneze: K uměleckohistorickému myšlení Maxe Dvořáka na pozadí fenomenologie jeho doby', in Kateřina Krtilová — Kateřina Svatoňová (eds), *Mizení. Fenomény, mediální praktiky a techniky na prahu zjevného*, Prague 2017, pp. 155–202.

109 See Slavoj Žižek, *Against Progress*, London and New York 2024. — Idem, *Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist*, London and New York 2024. — Idem, *Freedom: A Disease without Cure*, London and New York 2023.

110 See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York 2016.

111 Žižek, *Christian Atheism* (note 109), p. 139.

112 The impact of technology on contemporary life and its role in the psychological crisis of adolescents have been analysed by the South Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han (see the editorial introduction to this issue by Tomáš Murár). I drew attention to this problem in Fabio Tononi, 'The Transformation of Images in the Age of Modernism, Postmodernism, and Digital Reproducibility', in Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, Fernando António Baptista Pereira and Maria João Gamito (eds), *On Portraiture. Theory, Practice and Fiction. From Francisco de Holanda to Susan Sontag*, Lisbon 2022, pp. 517–543. — Idem, 'Images in the Age of Social Media: Capitalism, Consumerism, and Liberalism', in Szymon Wróbel and Krzysztof Skonieczny (eds), *Regimes of Capital in the Post-digital Age*, London 2023), pp. 179–202.

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