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Wounded Beauty: Aesthetic-Theological Motifs in the Work of Alberto Burri and Anselm Kiefer

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Abstract: In their different languages, codes of expression, practices and worldviews, art and religion share a reflexive intention to symbolize the chaos, suffering and ambivalence of the real. In particular, the aesthetic programme of Christianity has sought to combine the opposites of divine revelation attested in Scripture: chaos and cosmos, earth and heaven, betrayal and reconciliation, wounding and transfiguration, cross and resurrection, sin and forgiveness. This paper aims to explore this compositional dialectic, which over the centuries has oscillated between idealization and realism, despair and aestheticization, the ideology of pain and the mythology of redemption. In order to better understand this aesthetic religious programme in all its ambivalences and polarizations, reference will be made to two emblematic contemporary artists, Alberto Burri and Anselm Kiefer. Their aesthetic programme revolves around the memory of the suffering and wounds of history and in seeking to understand these develops a compassionate perspective on them. In their works, the artistic gesture is what saves reality from its horror and reveals a ‘wounded beauty’ that does not remove the signs of its struggle and contingency.

Keywords: biblical aesthetics; Christian beauty; Alberto Burri; Anselm Kiefer; *Cretto di Gibellina*; *Palmsonntag*



Citation: Guanzini, Isabella. 2023. Wounded Beauty: Aesthetic-Theological Motifs in the Work of Alberto Burri and Anselm Kiefer. *Religions* 14: 813. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060813>

Academic Editor: Jakob Deibl

Received: 30 March 2023

Revised: 9 June 2023

Accepted: 13 June 2023

Published: 20 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The legitimacy of an aesthetic approach to the Christian tradition can be traced back to its origins. Within the biblical testimony, the decisive source for all Christian theological reflection, considered first and foremost as text, as language and as literature, one can find ‘aesthetic programmes’ with varying degrees of expressive radicality. On the one hand, the “great code” (Frye 2002) that is the Bible has, over the centuries, represented an essential iconographic atlas for the development of Western, ancient, modern, and contemporary art history. Biblical narratives, images, figures, metaphors, and symbols have inspired creations in every conceivable artistic field throughout the ages, from literature to music, from paintings to architecture and film. On the other hand, ‘in the beginning’ (*bereshit*), that is, in the first chapter of the book of Genesis, the work of the six days may already represent the icon of creative making tout court (Amoroso 2008). In fact, the biblical text opens under the sign of an aesthetic experience: ‘In the beginning God created (*bara*) the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep’ (Gen 1:1–2). The verb *bara*, used seven times in the first chapter of Genesis, represents the work of the woodcutter or the sculptor who transforms a raw and chaotic material. To designate the nothingness that lies behind the divine creative act, the sacred author uses the symbolic triad of desert, darkness, and abyss. It is not by chance that the first creative act will give rise to light (‘And God said, “Let there be light”: and there was light’. Gen 1:3). Through an imperative and effective divine word, order succeeds in prevailing over a ‘formless and deserted’ abyss (*tohu wabohu*). The Bible thus imposes a poetic conception of language, which comes to light in the Hebrew word *davar*, which means both ‘word’ and ‘thing’ (or ‘fact’), and is derived from the parent root *dv*,

meaning ‘order’. From the initial *tohu wabohu*, from this ‘chaos’ as a desolate, dark, and hostile counter-world, ‘the Creator God successively separates out “the world” as a cosmos, which he shapes as a house of life and fills with living beings’ (Zenger 2000, p. 218). Here, the creative power of the word is revealed, through which God, speaking, brought the universe into being. Here, then, creation means, first and foremost, the poietic gesture that is capable of giving form to forces, of giving order to chaos, of taming the abyss, so that it becomes a habitable place for plants, animals, and humans. The aesthetic character of this gesture lies not only in the creative force that gives form to the formless, but also in its ‘Kantian’ trait of judgement: after creating the work in six days, the Lord looks at it and sees that it is *tov*, which is usually translated as ‘good’, but can also be translated as ‘prosperous’, ‘blessed’, or ‘beautiful’ (the Septuagint translated it with *kalōn*, which has a broader meaning than our ‘beautiful’). *Tov* corresponds to an evaluation of appearance and can thus be properly rendered as ‘beautiful’ or ‘attractive’ (‘And God saw that it was good’, Gen 1:10.12.18.21.25). It is perhaps no coincidence that in § 2 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (II. *Against those who hold that there is in the works of God no goodness, or that the principles of goodness and beauty are arbitrary*), Leibniz refers precisely to the biblical ‘he saw that it was good’ in order to criticize the Cartesian and Spinozian denial of the objectivity of aesthetic values: God, in fact, is presented in that scene as an artist who, after creating a work, adopts a certain distance from it in order to be able to better evaluate it and to judge it according to the objective criteria of beauty (Amoroso 2008, pp. 26–27).

At the same time, this first chapter of Genesis reminds us that the good and beautiful reality created by God remains under the constant threat of chaos. The narration of the flood in Genesis chapters 6–9 as a new irruption of destructive powers into the order of the cosmos shows that even after creation the earth remains under threat (Zenger 2000, p. 34). Until a new earth and a new heaven appear, because those that came before have passed away (Rev 21:1), creation will always be exposed to the danger of catastrophe, to the dialectic between chaos and cosmos, life and death, abyss and salvation, to which the current ecological crisis dramatically testifies (Ebach 1987; Ebach 2011). The world we live in is constantly threatened by the chaos and self-imposed disaster that human action can bring (Schupp 1990; Vogt 2021).

Against this background, this article aims to explore the peculiarity of the aesthetic programme of the biblical-Christian tradition in its attempts to symbolize the abyss of the real, yet without removing it, by referring to two emblematic contemporary artists, Alberto Burri and Anselm Kiefer. The choice of two of the most important painters of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is justified by the assumption that it is possible to establish a relationship between biblical and contemporary aesthetics.

Anselm Kiefer’s artistic production feeds on biblical imagery and mythology, which he aesthetically re-creates from the tragedies of contemporary history. The biblical narrative represents a heuristic principle of his works, which in turn open up an entirely new, somewhat anti-canonical perspective on various biblical texts and their theological, mystical, and cabalistic interpretations. In Alberto Burri’s work, direct quotations from or allusions to biblical-Christian imagery, while not absent, are certainly rarer. However, the aesthetic intent that runs through his entire oeuvre—to make matter speak, to make it alive, to humanize it (Maraniello 2019, p. 80)—reveals eminently biblical traits.

In both Kiefer and Burri, the artistic gesture seeks to rescue reality from its horror, to lift it from its heaviness, to give it order. In such manner, they create a wounded beauty, a beauty that is burned by history and does not remove the signs of its struggle and contingency. Their aesthetic programmes revolve around the memory of the suffering and tragedies of history and search for a form within which the world can once again become liveable. Thus, in their different languages, codes of expression, practices and worldviews, art and religion share a reflexive intention to symbolize the re-emerging chaos, suffering and ambivalence of the real.

The biblical text could be interpreted as a narrative configuration which from the very beginning (*bereshit*) aims to contain or hold back chaos, to transform the abyss into a

habitable place, and to give form to that which tends to repel it. The creation account in Genesis deals with the original chaos in which the ambivalent dimension of forces is seen to emerge in order to symbolize it, that is, to name it, to give it contours, to set limits to it, and therefore to make it less violent. In this perspective, the biblical narrative can also be interpreted as the verbalization and elaboration of this sphere of forces that come to light through stories of love and hate, jealousy and anger, adoration and blasphemy, sacrifice and resistance, acceptance and escape, death and resurrection. However, this chaos can resurface at any time through human acts of violence and abuse directed towards other human beings, towards the earth, and towards God (Collet et al. 2022).

Scripture and Christian tradition have sought in various ways—and with different outcomes, imbalances, and tensions—to elaborate throughout the ages the negative and the excess of the sacred in an attempt to signify the world and God. In its history, symbols and institutions, Christianity carries the legacy of a scission and the hope of reconciliation. The central figure of the Christian faith is a crucified and resurrected human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who experienced both terrible humiliation and glorious exaltation. In the theological tradition, the pain of death and the joy of resurrection do not cancel each other out but remain in a tension that cannot be extinguished at either pole. This means that the aesthetic programme of Christianity cannot be reduced either to metaphysics or to mere humanism. On the contrary, it has sought over the centuries to reconcile the opposites of theophany—wounding and transfiguration, cross and resurrection, earth and heaven—without sacrificing one to the other.

In different eras and historical contexts, however, the theological understanding of divine revelation has often been polarized between idealization and despair, the metaphysics of light and the mysticism of darkness, the sacrality of pain and the mythology of redemption, visions of the beautiful and icons of the miserable. These aesthetic approaches tend to emphasize only one side of the biblical narrative, extinguishing the vital and never-resolved tension that animates the poetics and drama of the text.

This paper will attempt to show that both the removal of death and the denial of resurrection would pervert the profound meaning of the Christian mystery, which is revealed precisely in the tension between the two (Sequeri 2000). The fragile balance of this dialectic, or *coincidentia oppositorum*, was described in exemplary manner by one of the fathers of Christian theological aesthetics, Augustine, in the ninth of his *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*:

There now are two flutes which seem to make discordant sounds: howbeit one Spirit breathes into both. By this it is said, *Beauteous in loveliness surpassing the sons of men*: by that it is said in Esaias, *We saw Him, and He had no form nor comeliness*. By one Spirit are both flutes filled, they make no dissonance. Turn not away your ears, apply the understanding. (Augustine 2010, p. 886)

Augustine states that this discordance that is associated with the figure of Christ must not simply be removed or resolved; it must be understood. To this end he refers to the prophet Isaiah (53:2) and the suffering servant without form or beauty, and to the letters of the Apostle Paul, in particular the letter to the Philippians, where in his view the opposition resonates most clearly: ‘Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men’ (Phil 2:6–7). The experience of *kenosis*, that is, of emptying and dispossession, becomes here the signifier of a dismissed and wounded beauty.

In Christian iconography and theology, the resurrected Jesus bears the indelible marks of laceration. In the Gospel of John, the disciples see the wounds on the risen body of their master (Jn 20:24–29) and the lamb of the apocalyptic vision appears pierced by a purple furrow, a sign of his immolation. The beauty of the resurrected body is neither naive nor childish but is marked by trial and passed through a second birth (Rev 5:6). In this regard, one can certainly think of Piero della Francesca’s *Resurrection* (1465) or Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* (ca. 1602), but also of the contemporary version by Anish Kapoor (*The Healing of St. Thomas* 1989), which also reminds us of Lucio Fontana’s

famous series *Spatial Concept, Waiting* (1960), in which the artist creates wounds on the canvas to give the idea of a void, an infinite space beyond the canvas. These artists are able to create a perpetual dialogue within elements and forces, between transition and eternity, conjoining opposite poles and thus demonstrating the never-reconciled dialectic of Christian symbolism.

Burri and Kiefer are also creators of a beauty that does not forget its wounds, of a material that bears the traces of the cuts, burns, and mending of history, as some of the works presented below testify.

2. Alberto Burri and the Wound of Beauty

Burri graduated in medicine, but after witnessing the horrors of the Second World War as a medical officer, he decided to leave medicine and become a painter: 'I used to paint all day long. It was a way of not thinking about what was around me and the war. All I did was paint until the Liberation. And in those years, I realised that I "had" to be a painter' (Zorzi 2016, p. 14). In his artistic work, which was scandalous and unacceptable to many at first, he accommodated materials and forms that had hitherto been unthinkable, incapable of generating beauty. The early cycles that made him famous include 'moulds', 'tars', and 'hunchbacks', in which Burri rips, melts, unwraps, and clamps. The blowtorch and poor, harsh, and often discarded materials are the new tools the artist uses in his constant search for balance. His material aesthetic has the traits of a cosmogony, that is, the generation of order and balance from the roughness of deteriorated, disused, worn-out, burnt-out materials: tars, jute sacks, plastics, moulds, metals, and wood are the shapeless Platonic *chora* or the biblical *tohu wabohu* waiting for the form that Burri-Demiurge intends to create. However, unlike Kandinsky, and many other forms of contemporary abstractionism in which the work of art is called upon to emancipate itself from the oppressive gravity of matter in order to rise to the supersensible, Burri remains faithful to immanence. As Recalcati states, Burri does not propose a mere antagonism between the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of formlessness (Recalcati 2019, p. 14), between the spiritual and the material, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. On the contrary, his work is capable of elevating even the poorest, most torn and traumatized material to the dignity of form. In his work, matter is not an inert reality begging to be spiritualized but the most adequate receptacle for beauty.

In Burri's aesthetics and poetics, the material radicality of a *continuous incarnation* is revealed, one in which beauty is given in the twists, burns, tears and wounds of matter. This is the Christian trait of Burri's aesthetic programme, at the centre of which is the *kenosis* of the spirit in matter. Burri creates a grammar of the informal—the laceration, the hole, the burn, the cut, the tear, the convulsion—constantly 'tamed' by the need for form. Burri's bruised and torn materials are composed in the work in an absolutely rigorous order, within which, however, it is possible to perceive the reality of the trauma from which they originate: 'The pulsating matter contaminates the abstract neutrality of the painting and brings it to life' (Recalcati 2016, p. 49). The masterful control of the formless and the unforeseen is emblematically realized in the *Combustions*, in which the artist's hand shapes and regulates the anarchic force of fire, measuring and containing it within the geometric surface of the painting. In a caption to a 1955 work, Burri writes: 'I have long had it in mind to say how things burn, how combustion is, and how in combustion everything lives and dies to make a perfect unity' (Cenza and Burri 1955, p. 50; De Sabbata 2017, p. 57). When the fire is then directed towards cellophane, an everyday material that is difficult to handle because it is transparent and highly flammable (as in the work *Plastic T*, 1962), this work of modelling through flame becomes an aesthetic and technical challenge with unpredictable results (De Sabbata 2017, p. 62).

Burri gives combustion and the action of fire—on paper, plastic, wood, jute sacks, and iron—a programmatic aesthetic meaning: art balances chaos, regulates tensions, defends against destruction. However, he insists on neither its destructive nor its constructive character. In fact, the two elements must coexist in order to generate a balance at the 'fire

test'. To invoke Nietzsche, it is the opposition between the Apollonian element (order, beauty, balance, form) and the Dionysian (the shapeless and uncontrollable fire) that generates the beauty of the painting-form. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states that 'art is the highest task and the properly metaphysical activity of this life' (Nietzsche 2016, p. 35), and that life needs art if it is to become bearable. However, the barrier of the Apollonian, the aesthetic form, does not imply the removal of the horror of the Dionysian:

Both these so heterogeneous tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance, and continually inciting each other to new and more powerful births, to perpetuate in them the strife of this antithesis, which is but seemingly bridged over by their mutual term 'Art'. (ibid., p. 36)

The Apollonian represents the need for form in the face of the terrifying chaos of the Dionysian. The abyss is not overcome but covered by the Apollonian consciousness of measure like a veil. Consequently, in Nietzsche, art is configured as a product of the tragic knowledge of the swirling chaos of Dionysian fire, which demands to be joyfully limited in order to be endured: 'His entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, which was again disclosed to him by the Dionysian. And lo! Apollo could not live without Dionysus!' (ibid., pp. 50–51).

In Burri's works, too, it is possible to find the same intention to penetrate to the enigmatic, painful, and volcanic depths of things, to make space for them and thus to shape them within artistic creation. In any case, painting for Burri 'must "respond" to the canons of composition and proportion', and express a 'balance, which can have terrible pulls on one side or the other', but is still a balance, 'even if it gives a sense of vertigo', and thus seems to be an 'unbalanced balance' (Burri in Zorzi 2016, pp. 32–33).

In addition, following Nietzsche, one can therefore state in relation to Burri that 'the genius in the act of artistic production coalesces with this primordial artist of the world' (Nietzsche 2016, p. 57), the subject and object of an *artistic cosmody*. This means that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence and the world be justified (Halliwell 2018).

The ferocity of some of Burri's works, such as *Rosso Combustione Plastica* (1957) or *Rosso Plastica* (1964), in which the red of the fire seems to mingle with the red of the blood flowing from a wound or from a congested crater, somehow finds space, containment, and order on the black support of the canvas, without, however, completely subsiding. The lacerations, the combustions, the bursting of the material, the hunching of the surfaces and the breaking through of the margins of the painting go beyond all allusive and significant intentions and become an aesthetic act, both destructive and constructive. Art here is to be interpreted as a symbolic practice aimed at treating the ungovernable excess of the real. The aesthetic treatment of this excess aims to organize, circumscribe, or edge the 'Thing', that is, the ungovernable, uncanny, and opaque abyss of life. The traumatic real—which in Burri's case refers above all to his disturbing experience as a doctor during the Second World War—is embodied in jute sacks, in tar, in rotten materials, in plastic or cellophane, iron or wood, and so on. Matter here is never an inert substance but rather a pulsating force that is striving for order. In the *Gobbi* cycle, bodies and materials emerge unexpectedly from the classical, two-dimensional surface of the canvas, traumatizing and deforming it, as if trying to pierce it: 'At a certain point, Burri, instead of merely digging craters, opening wounds, imposing patches, forces the painting from behind to take on protuberances, bulges' (Brandi 1963, p. 29). The material protrudes from the canvas and so the painting becomes a sculpture. Here, Burri's aesthetic gesture reveals the need to maintain contact with the primordial chaos of reality, to literally bring it to the surface, symbolizing it through the miracle of form.

The idea and practice of beauty as the 'form of the formless', as an edging and organizing against the opacity of matter and the imponderability of fire, echoes the position that Freud expresses in *The Poet and the Fantasy*. Here, Freud recognizes the true *ars poetica* as having the capacity to make the disgusting and the repugnant bearable (Recalcati 2011, p. 73). However, beauty as a defence against the trauma of the real does not mean the simple removal of its perturbant aspect. Rather, beauty is an Apollonian veil that alludes

to the Dionysian chaos pulsating within so that they are inseparable from each other. Or, to use religious terms, there is no harmony without dissonance, no form that is not the transfiguration of pain. Nietzsche writes: ‘There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth’ (Nietzsche 1988, p. 159). This means that artistic order and balance are ‘the possible redemption of wound, of death, of matter’ (Recalcati 2019, p. 12). It is not the representation of an idealized reality that rejects and transfigures the formless, but the creation of a ‘wounded beauty’ that is like the revelation of grace. This means that beauty does not have to veil or embellish the real or the trauma of life. On the contrary, beauty can reveal itself precisely in injury and death. This is why Burri is by no means aiming at a poetics of the scabrous or the formless, but rather at an anti-ideal object in which the gesture of tearing, burning, and piercing is never separated from the gesture of mending, sewing, and recomposing.

This is clearly expressed in the cycle of jute sacks (*Sacchi*). The sack is one of the most common and miserable materials, a symbol of human stories and destinies, characterized by an ‘ontological humility, a metaphor for a suffering humanity’ (Nicoletti 2017, p. 88). Beauty appears here completely de-idealized, without glory, even outraged, removed from the classical model of harmonic perfection or unharmed form (Recalcati 2016, pp. 68–70). Burri attacks an already raw and rough material with cuts and tears; he wounds the canvas, burns it, yet does not abandon it to itself, but repairs it, holds it together, and brings the material back to life. The work of art becomes a humble Franciscan gesture—concrete and material—which repairs what is torn without hiding the mending. The act of tearing the material is followed by a repairing, in an unresolved tension that nevertheless generates the absolute form of the painting.

Above all, this wounded beauty takes space and body in the majestic work of land art created by Burri in Gibellina, Sicily, after the earthquake in 1968 which killed 1150 people, left 98,000 homeless, and destroyed 6 villages in the Belice Valley in the province of Trapani. Here, art takes on the task of showing and bearing the wound of death. The violence of the earthquake completely destroyed the old town of Gibellina, leaving only corpses and rubble. The inhabitants’ desire for rebirth led to the construction of a new town 20 km away from the destroyed one, which over time became a tragic pile of rubble under the open sky. After a few years, the mayor of Gibellina invited some well-known artists and architects, including Burri, to contribute to the social and civic redemption of the rebuilt city. Emotionally affected by the catastrophe of the earthquake and the razed city, Burri refused to work in the new Gibellina and decided, in 1981, to build a great architectural work on the ruins of the old, traumatized town. Work on his *Grande Cretto* (Figures 1 and 2) started in 1985, was interrupted in 1989, and was only completed in May 2015, twenty years after Burri’s death in February 1995. The wounds of death and destruction were not removed but were left to their own devices and physically incorporated within a 90,000-square-metre concrete casting, a huge concrete shroud that absorbed and incorporated what remained after the earthquake—objects, corpses, parts of the city. Some of the white alleys that one walks through today are the same as those in the city’s historic centre before the disaster, their undulating walls giving the effect of a seismic wave. Here, art is born from the remains of death and stays in its harrowing proximity. The *Grande Cretto* does not repress or transfigure death but repeats its trauma, reproducing the cracks caused by the seismic tremors and artistically crystallizing them for posterity.

Here, Burri’s aesthetic programme is expressed in its most dramatic yet formal character. Burri symbolizes the earth tremor, making it exist once more, making it a work of art. The *Cretto* incorporates the wound, concretely collecting objects and what remained in Gibellina after the tremors, making memory of the trauma, showing its scar (Recalcati 2019, pp. 38–39). Burri created this huge scar in white so that the trauma of death, although not forgotten, may not have the last word but may rather be healed. The cement casting elevates the wound to the dignity of beauty, giving form to the formless. It is possible, therefore, to interpret the *Great Cretto* as a Christian image of resurrection, as the figure of Christ emerging from the tomb, bearing the wounds of the crucifixion in his body.



Figure 1. Alberto Burri, *Grande Cretto* of Gibellina (© Stefania Mattioli).



Figure 2. Alberto Burri, *Grande Cretto* of Gibellina (© Stefania Mattioli).

3. Anselm Kiefer and the Trauma of Memory

Anselm Kiefer is a German artist who was born after the tragedy of Auschwitz but wants to live alongside Auschwitz. From 1970 onwards, his work becomes what Daniel Arasse calls a ‘theatre for memory’, an ‘*ars memoriae*’ ([Arasse 2014](#), p. 87) that seeks to represent, rescue, and restructure German identity. Kiefer is continually attracted to those icons, motifs, and themes of the German cultural and political tradition that had fuelled the symbolic order of the previous generation, leading it towards the tragedy of the Second World War and the Holocaust. His work revives the myth of the Nibelungen, even in

its Wagnerian translations; it re-proposes the cult of trees and forests and cites and other places that are emblematic of German unity and identity, places such as Nuremberg, the Markische Heide or the Teutoburg Forest, the mystic *Urwald*; it stages a theatre of German philosophers, artists, intellectuals (*Germany Spiritual Heroes* 1973), and military men who played an important role in the Nazi propaganda machine (including Fichte, Klopstock, Clausewitz and Heidegger), re-creating allegories of some of Hitler's major military feats (Huyssen 2003, p. 383). Although the sources and figures of reference have changed over time, the link to the history and memory of German culture remains central to the ever-changing constellation of associations and references within an aesthetic totality that is always in gestation, in a 'continuous morphogenesis' (Arasse 2014, p. 21) and fabric of memory, charged with an existential dimension.

Through his aesthetic use of the image-world of Nazi-fascism, Kiefer sought to transgress a boundary and violate the most serious taboo in post-war German culture, namely the memory of the Holocaust. The total removal of the trauma, along with the systematic choice not to process it, generated an avoidance and obliteration of the past and a substantial 'inability to mourn' (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975, pp. 34–35). In post-war West German society, the difficult process of reconstruction by forgetting found expression not least in the triumph of abstraction in the visual arts and in the removal of Nordic folklore and mythology from schools and universities (Biro 1998, pp. 156–58), which Kiefer interprets as an escape from reality, from anything that might be associated with Nazi propaganda, in order to start again from 'zero hour' (*Stunde Null*).

The country that had produced the Weimar cinema and a wealth of avant-garde art in the 1920s and that would produce the new German cinema beginning in the late 1960s was by and large image-dead for about twenty years: hardly any new departures in film, no painting worth talking about, a kind of enforced minimalism, ground zero of a visual amnesia. (Huyssen 2003, p. 385)

Together with Joseph Beuys, Kiefer wants to violently break the silence and cultural oblivion, to confront his own history, without avoiding the encounter with the real, that is, Germany's un-nameable and unbearable unconscious. He counterculturally decides to directly pose the question (originally Adorno's) of how it is possible to be a 'German artist' after the Holocaust. Through the melancholy and grandiosity of obsessive quotations, through the repeated pictorial evocation of a nightmare, Kiefer wants to deal politically and aesthetically with the blocks in the contemporary German psyche. In this sense, Kiefer is a radically historical artist, evoking, layering, recomposing, recovering, and collecting cultural memories that have been reduced to oblivion or, perhaps above all, profanation.

Therefore, Kiefer's aesthetic programme can also be seen, at least until the 1980s, as an 'act of mourning' (Arasse 2014, pp. 119–61). The disconcerting motif of the painter's palette, which appears often in Kiefer's work between 1974 and 1980 (*Heaven-Earth* 1974; *The Painter's Guardian Angel* 1975; *Palette on a Rope* 1977; *Falling Angel* 1979; *Herzeleid* 1979; *The Book* 1985; *The Source of the Danube* 1998, among others), addresses exactly this question by problematizing the moral and political ambivalence of art and culture after Auschwitz whenever they choose to 'flee' into abstraction. The sculptures *Palette with Wings* (1985) and *The Book* (1985), in which Kiefer introduces a material crucial to his art, namely lead, represent in mythical form the contrast between the artistic desire for the ideal, for the supersensible, and the weight of history, which drags all illusions to the ground. The palette weighs like lead, it cannot fly, and loses all spiritual aspiration.

In this sense, the lead becomes an expression of the desire for the spiritual in art and the sense of its historical impossibility, or more precisely, the irrecoverable loss of confidence in the spiritual mission and dimension of art experienced by a contemporary German artist. (Arasse 2014, p. 238)

Among contemporary artists, Kiefer is perhaps the one who has drawn most from the themes and images of the Jewish tradition, and precisely because of the tragic role of this tradition within German culture (Salzmann 1999, p. 3). This willingness to creatively

process the mourning of history emerges most strongly in the works dedicated to the poet Paul Celan, who is, along with Ingeborg Bachmann, one of the essential references in Kiefer's art. In the different variations of *Dein goldenes Haar Margarethe*, inspired by *Todesfuge*, the most famous of Celan's poems, Kiefer borrows numerous themes from the Jewish tradition, but renovates and transforms them. In response to Adorno, Paul Celan had actually expressed the need to continue making poetry after Auschwitz, almost inventing a new German poetic language, using the fatal and criminal idiom it provided him to provoke a crisis in language itself (Lefebvre in [Celan 1998](#), pp. 7–8). Just as Celan, because of the impossibility of continuing to write classical poetry after the Holocaust, decides to question poetic language itself, directly confronting its atrocity (*Todesfuge*), so Kiefer authentically mourns classical painting, even that of his early years, and radically transforms it.

One of the most powerful paintings in this series on Celan's poem is *Shulamite* (1981), which refers to the name of the 'ash-haired' Jewish girl who appears in the Old Testament *Song of Songs*, as well as in Celan's poem, as a persecuted counterpart to the Arian golden-haired Margarethe. Kiefer represents the figure of Shulamite literally in ash form and extends her name to the entire Jewish culture and tragedy. In this painting, the representation of the dark, brown arcade of the *Soldiers' Hall* (*Soldatenhalle*) in Berlin by Wilhelm Kreis (ca. 1939), a piece of architecture that commemorates Nazi soldiers and their persecution of the Jews, is converted by Kiefer into a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. This is a truly critical *Umfunktionierung* in the manner of Benjamin or Brecht ([Huyssen 2003](#), p. 388) which aims to realize an act of mourning for the whole of German culture ([Arasse 2014](#), pp. 146–47).

Like Burri, Kiefer intends to pass through the trauma, to reactivate the unspeakable catastrophe of German culture, to turn the monstrosity of the thing into a work of art: to convert it into a wounded beauty. His goal, of course, is not to glorify the violent past, but to go through it, to incorporate its traumatic dimension—like Burri's *Grande Cretto*—and feel painfully a part of it, representing yet remembering it without removing its scabrous and unacceptable elements.

Above all, Kiefer aims to free Germany's cultural, spiritual, and mythological past from its ideological and military appropriation by Nazism. His aesthetics thus represent an act of resistance against horror in the very place where that horror was culturally nurtured and historically realized. Emblematic of this perspective is the shocking series of self-portraits (*Occupations* 1969) in which the artist uses his own body to give the Nazi salute in various countries occupied by Germany during the Second World War. Here, the 'Sieg Heil' figure is tiny, overpowered by its surroundings, in which no festive masses or other emblems of Nazi power appear. It is not simply a fierce satire or a ridiculing of the Hitler myth within an ironic-critical interpretive perspective. At its centre is a radical and symbolic rehabilitation of the German memory and image-in-the-world, which fascism had systematically perverted and abused, turning icons, landscapes, texts, and monuments into mere ornaments of demagogic power.

With a similar artistic gesture, in his works *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (1973), *Operation Sea Lion* (1975) and *The Red Sea* (1985), in each of which the symbol of three chairs with flames refers to the exploitation of Christian figures by Nazism ([Arasse 2014](#), p. 138), Kiefer reactivates and actualizes past myths and images, *makes new use of them*, free from all violent appropriation and abuse, and offers new impulses and icons against the post-war visual oblivion and lack of imagery: 'To Kiefer, these myths still possess their power: they "re-enchant" the world by allowing us to perceive the ever-present action of timeless forces' (ibid., p. 202). Within a messianic horizon, which Kiefer inherits mainly from Luria and Benjamin, the artist rejects any linear, progressive view of history—which in Germany led to catastrophe—and believes in the 'present' of the creative process and in the epiphanic force of his monumental yet fragile works.

Kiefer does not wish to offer consolation or shelter, but to confront his generation with its own history, restating the trauma, re-proposing in his works the heroes, myths,

fables, intellectuals, and artists who formed, directly or indirectly, the Nazi ideological background. What is at stake in Kiefer's paintings is not just the opening of wounds, not even a challenging of the repressions of those who refuse to face terror; the issue, in other words, is not whether to forget or to remember, but rather *how to remember* and how to deal with representations of the remembered past (Huyssen 2003, p. 384).

In this sense, his works are not mere objects but 'symbolically active' social objects (Desideri 2016, pp. 33–34) which move within a paradoxical middle ground between being purely an object and being purely a subject. They incorporate a form of life, that is, an agency (Gell 1998), since they perform an act of mourning for the symbols and works of the whole of German culture. In addition to the many symbols and myths from the Judaic, cabbalistic, Egyptian, alchemical, and Nordic traditions, in recent years Kiefer has begun increasingly to use explicitly Christian images and symbolism (Biro 1998).

The monumental installation *Palmsonntag* (2007, Figure 3) refers to the biblical narrative of Jesus' journey into Jerusalem shortly before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. A huge, uprooted palm tree, preserved in resin and fiberglass, lies on its side on the gallery floor supported by a ruined brick wall. The tree is surrounded by thirty-six large glass-covered fibre panels made of clay, paint, shellac, adhesive, metal, palm fronds, fabric and paper and displayed like the pages of a gigantic herbarium or a choir of saints from a postapocalyptic future, where long-dead palm fronds, dried seeds, sunflower pods, mangroves, and roses are beautifully arranged on the dry, cracked earth. On one of the panels, Kiefer has inscribed the Latin text from Isaiah 45:8, '*aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem et iustitia oriatur simul*' ('Let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour and let justice spring up at the same time'). The word '*Palmsonntag*' is written on the panels in different languages, interspersed with the *Ave Maria* and the mysterious verse from Isaiah, even though the latter two texts are part of the Advent liturgy, the preparation for Christmas, for the birth of the Saviour. Here, as in all Kiefer's works, the layering of myths, symbols and narratives prevents a definitive and objective reading of meaning. Any deciphering remains ultimately ambiguous, as Kiefer takes up myths and legends and associates them with mystical texts, philosophical concepts, or, in the case of *Palmsonntag*, a biblical narrative. In addition to these liturgical texts, references appear to Hercules' labours to obtain eternal life. Moreover, the palm tree is not only a Christian symbol of resurrection, but also a Greco-Roman symbol of victory and immortality, used for instance to celebrate the figure of Caesar after his military triumphs. In this work, therefore, the palm is revealed as an ambiguous symbol with which the crowd welcomes Jesus as a victorious Messiah, thus misunderstanding his true mission and identity. Kiefer's Messiah, associated here with a palm that has fallen to the ground, subverts the imperial symbols and political hopes of the Jewish world and is revealed in all his failings and transience. Kiefer seems to be showing us that Jesus came to Jerusalem not as a triumphant hero but as a fallen man, humiliated and emptied of his power on the road to Golgotha.

Palmsonntag symbolizes, therefore, a decisive moment in the history of Christianity condensed into an image of *both triumph and failure*. Lying on the gallery floor, the fallen tree is the body of Christ before his resurrection, suggesting both mortality and an eventual new beginning. The work emphasizes neither the imminent crucifixion nor the hope of a resurrected body; rather, life and death speak here the same language, blurring in the materiality of the resin, the palm leaves, the dried sunflower pods, and the dusty mangroves. Kiefer seems to suggest that removing both the negativity of death and the hope of resurrection perverts the deeper meaning of the Christian mystery, which is revealed precisely in the tension between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, *kenosis* (Phil 2:7) and transfiguration. Here, Augustine's two flutes seem to resound with discordant but not dissonant sounds. The *Ave Maria* and the verse from Isaiah seem to hold open the possibility of invocation and prophecy within a theatre of memory, loss, and transformation. With this work, Kiefer by no means denies the reality of death, but symbolizes it aesthetically through the majestic, melancholic, and splendid presence of an apocalyptic nature that has fallen but is seeking redemption.



Figure 3. Anselm Kiefer, *Palmsonntag* (2007). Oil, emulsion, shellac, soil, dried plants, plaster on canvas on wood in steel and glass frame 20 elements, each 280 × 140 cm, overall: 560 × 1400 cm. Resin palm tree, soil, and terracotta bricks 575 × 1380 cm © Anselm Kiefer, Photo: Charles Duprat.

Furthermore, the presence of the herbarium with its dead leaves, seeds, and dried flowers, stiffened by the dust of time and stored in the cases, as well as the majestic-looking palm tree, withered and fallen to the ground, seem to hint at the ‘slow violence of extinction’ (Nixon 2011, p. 3) and ecological catastrophe in the Anthropocene, in which even the most common and hardy plants will disappear as a result of human activity (Batsaki 2021, p. 395).

Kiefer’s visual assemblage suggests a mysterious relationship between the figure of the Messiah, evoked by the title and the palm, and the environment, which is drained of life and crying out for salvation. The words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans seem to resonate here: ‘For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now’ (Rom 8:22). The creation bears the marks of decay and vanity because it has been exposed to the elements and to human exploitation. It needs a saviour, as the verse from Isaiah, which Kiefer engraves on the panels, proclaims: ‘Let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour, and let justice spring up at the same time’.

In and through his work, Kiefer stages a crucial narrative of the Christian tradition and makes novel prophetic and political use of it. He takes a symbol of military power and lays it on the ground surrounded by seeds, plants, and earth as the hope of rebirth. For now, the plants and seeds, hinting at a possible rebirth, are simply condensed and preserved in the vitrines, are made objects of memory and protection within a beautiful taxonomy of melancholy and decadence. In the Gospels, Palm Sunday prepares for and announces Easter, but in Kiefer’s work the body of triumph does not yet seem to have the strength to rise from the ground.

At the same time, the installation seems to signal an awareness that extinction also lies in the future of Christianity, which is itself included in memorization, in the risk of becoming an herbarium, a museum of dusty images and dead narratives held within frames. In this perspective, *Palmsonntag* is another performative act of mourning in anticipation of

the extinction of religious rituals and imageries, an elegiac work of memory and a symbolic re-activation, an act of resistance against loss and amnesia.

4. Conclusions

The trauma of the past as a problem and *skandalon* (stumbling stone) is a common ground of Burri's and Kiefer's work, a space within which they both make art. In Kiefer, the emphasis falls on the matter of the past as a crisis of identity, and therefore on a heroic obsession with destiny. Art cannot be a mask or an escape; trauma is something that has happened and always happens as a tragic effect of life and matter. Burri, too, does not intend to evade the material and chaotic roughness of experience; rather, he wants to challenge it directly in a desire to give it form and order. Both artists use materials alien to classical art in order to explore the boundaries of representation, to break or stratify the picture-surface and to go beyond the limits of the classical frame. Kiefer and Burri stage the symbolic power of matter, without removing its rough, decomposed aspects, and convert it into figure and order through an alchemical and 'metallurgical' work analogous to the mythical, original work of the six days.

It is possible to maintain that both of their aesthetic programmes have a biblical signature, through which art still has the task of 'taming the abyss', of 'framing' the trauma and violence of the senseless and excessive real, of symbolizing its horrific and insidious force, and offering a collocation to its radical and untamable strangeness. This creative process of sublimation does not seek to idealize reality. The purpose of their aesthetics is no longer the 'sensible presentation of the Idea' (Nancy 1996, p. 90) which for centuries marked the tradition of classical art. However, neither is the intention to represent the degradation of that idea in the name of an immediate cult of the real in all its horror, in an entropic horizontality of crude materialism, as can be seen in some expressions of the post-Avant-garde. Neither Burri nor Kiefer can be absorbed into this ideology of the formless and the destruction of beauty. Nor does the path of abstractionism, which risks overflying the story and betraying the abysmal pain and vitality of the material, apply to either of these artists.

Rather, their aesthetics aim at a kind of anti-idealization that recognizes the lethal effects of trauma and is able to lead it in a new direction, to present and re-enact the 'Thing'—*das Ding* in Freudian–Lacanian language (Lacan 1992)—without being destroyed by it. Art, according to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is a symbolic-imaginary treatment of the real, because 'to a certain extent, a work of art always involves encircling the Thing' (ibid., p. 141). This corresponds to a form of beauty as the palpable effect of a disturbing encounter with the Real, in which Apollonian form and Dionysian force meet in a work that touches the subject. Art defuses the horrible destructibility of the Thing and allows it to symbolize it, to make it 'beautiful', because of an 'infinite desire of meaning' (Arasse 2014, p. 322).

This is the meaning of their 'wounded beauty', which is not "a promise of happiness" (A. Nehamas 2010), but the material revelation of a form (Burri) and the mysterious re-creation of the world (Kiefer), which bear the marks of a past disorder and destruction. The indestructible need for form and beauty must, in Burri, pass through combustion, tearing, fusion, and earthquake: it is the need for repair, almost a secular *tikkun olam*, which gives order to chaos, showing and not removing the marks and wounds left by its traumatic occurrence. Therefore, the balance and beauty of his works host vertigo and imbalance, as if to offer them a material space in which to dwell. Beauty is not a veil, a concealment of the wound, but, as in the Christian symbol of the cross, is in the wound. This means thinking that "the wound, in short, coincides with the very place of beauty" (Recalcati 2019, p. 15). What remains, however, is beauty, as Burri himself states:

I just see beauty. And beauty is beauty, whether it is a beautiful sack, whether it is a beautiful cellox or a beautiful wood, or iron or whatever... It is the same. It is just the same. As long as it is "beautiful". (Zorzi 2016, p. 96)

Moreover, it is the (biblical) miracle of a form that repeats the trauma, so that the pain does not fall into oblivion. The *Grande Cretto* of Gibellina does not simply cover up

the tragedy of the earthquake, but makes it art, honouring its dead. Highlighting the violence of the earth shaking, Burri works biblically on the abyss of the Real, incorporating it into creation. There is neither removal nor idealisation, but true sublimation of trauma. The work of art incorporates the wound, wishes to heal it, without hiding the signs that remain. This gesture refers not least, as indicated at the beginning of the contribution, to the Christian iconography of Easter, in which the risen body bears the signs of crucifixion (Jn 20:24–29). The *Cretto* is the white scar laid on the earth in the Sicilian silence, preserving the echo of the earthquake's roar, without letting it have the last word on life. That is why the *Grande Cretto* is like a holy shroud of the suffering earth, but at the same time an icon of resurrection. Here we find again the two flutes mentioned by Augustine, "which seem to make discordant sounds", but reflect the aesthetic programme of Christianity, in which *kenosis* is not simply deactivated by resurrection.

In a similar way, one can read the poetics of Anselm Kiefer, which is condensed in *Palmsonntag*, where every symbol of triumph seems rendered inoperative by its having collapsed to the ground. Here, too, the experience of a beauty that is not innocent and does not correspond to any naive promise of happiness is revealed. The melancholic beauty of the flowers, seeds, mangroves, and roses surrounding the palm tree appears as a prayer to contingency through a Christian icon. In this, as in many of his other works, Kiefer shows how certain tales and symbols from the biblical tradition retain their power, while also displaying their intimate and unresolvable tension. Here, too, an aesthetic programme is developed that cannot be reduced to either metaphysics or simple humanism. Rather, it is a biblical and at the same time alchemical form of creation, which enchants matter, even the most crude and dried-up, re-activating its sacred and dismissed potential and giving it shape.

Burri and Kiefer, following George Steiner,

tell us of the irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world. Only art can go some way towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer inhuman otherness of matter—it haunted Kant—the retractions out of reach of rock and wood, of metal and of fibre. [...] Without the arts, form would remain unmet and strangeness without speech in the silence of the stone. (Steiner 2013, p. 197)

Both seek the encounter with otherness where this otherness is most inhuman: in the scandal of history, in the trauma of the earth, in the hardness of lead, or the roughness of sacks. The "artist/craftsman transforms materials into works" (Arasse 2014, p. 245), like a demiurge makes matter into forms, showing their fate of death and at the same time the (messianic) possibility of new beginnings, as in *Palmsonntag*.

Art and religion are different ways of relating to the Thing and of treating the trauma of the real in such a way as to humanize history and give form to chaotic matter. The aesthetic programme of the biblical-Christian tradition can help to read the artistic work of these two great voices of contemporary art, especially when that tradition does not give up thinking about the *coincidentia oppositorum* that marks religious experience. Similarly, Kiefer and Burri remind Christianity to remain faithful to its biblical, chaotic beginnings and to its witness, both kenotic and glorious, to the Word becoming flesh and matter and coming to dwell among us.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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