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THE SPIRITUALITY OF ART AFTER KANDINSKY

Abstract: Wassily Kandinsky defined the character of the spirituality of modern art and outlined its territory, becoming, along with Duchamp, a patron of various trends in modern art. The notion of the spirituality of art has proved to be an important characteristic feature of works of art. It figures prominently in the writings of art historians, theologians, and aestheticians, and it seems to correspond to Charles Taylor's conceptions of epiphanic art. Nevertheless, the very notion of the spirituality of art is far from clearly defined: it can refer to the spiritual nature of an artwork itself or to the creative process, or to the spirituality of a work of art that can be determined by its theological context. In this paper I have compared several distinct readings of the notion of the spirituality of art, with Kandinsky's thought constituting the frame of reference for the interpretations of the works of Rothko and Viola.

Keywords: spiritual, modern art, epiphany, religious, Kandinsky, Rothko, Viola.

One of the most significant distinctive features of the avant-garde is that its artists were deeply involved in building a social utopia through new art, which, according to Saint-Simone, was potent enough to achieve results comparable to those produced by technology or industry and which, as Le Corbusier famously stated, was like revolution. A number of heated disputes and fierce polemics centred on what shape art should assume so that it could best achieve its purpose of changing the world and man. Nevertheless, avant-garde artists were unanimous in their politically-tinged opposition to the aesthetic nature of a work of art and, as a consequence, their rejection of aesthetic categories of beauty, mimesis, and aesthetic experience. Wassily Kandinsky's conceptions concerning the spirituality of art are usually placed in this context of utopian thinking. Stefan Morawski defines them as an utopia referring to transcendence, to anti-rational Logos, which he also finds in the work of Malevich, Kruchonykh, Khlebnikov, and Artaud.[1] According to Piotr Piotrowski, the movements which turned the spirituality of the cosmos into a universal foundation of social activity constituted the metaphysical pole of the avant-garde.[2] The importance of this interpretational thread is un-

1 S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki,* Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1988, p. 349.
2 P. Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją i reakcją,* Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 1993. pp. 51-52.

deniable, validated to a certain extent by Kandinsky's Moscow period, when the artist was actively involved in the organization of the Soviet institutional world of art. However, taking into account the antinomic aims of the avant-garde movements, the non-aesthetic conception of art can also be considered from another, equally appropriate, perspective, with the focus on its spiritual, rather than socio-political, dimension. Such a perspective brings out the trend in modernity to preserve, uphold, and re-establish contact with spirituality in a new way. Michalina Kmiecik, for one, distinguishes a distinct aesthetic-religious current in avant-garde art, which leads her to see it as a response to the ideological crisis.[3] The artists of this circle shared the belief in the spiritual aspect of art, with a work of art becoming a means by which individuals could re-establish their relationships with the source of meaning in the times of the crisis of *Erfahrung*. Art proved to be a place where a deeper dimension of reality, its unchanging foundations and principles, were revealed and could be experienced. The focus was shifted from the revolution against the world of bourgeois values to revealing the spiritual meaning of reality.

On the first pages of his book *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky assesses the crisis brought about by the materialistic viewpoint which affected the modern person: the crisis "which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over". Yet the artist announces the awakening of spirituality: "Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbour seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose".[4] In the introduction to *Der Blaue Reiter* Wassily Kandinsky and Franc Marc declare that "We are standing at the threshold of one of the greatest epochs that mankind has ever experienced, the epoch of great spirituality".[5] Art is what will release the human soul from the materialistic prison. Grabska and Morawska argue that this text is more of a poetical prophesy than a treatise.[6] It is, however, a prophesy which combines both modernist and post-romantic elements as it draws on science as well as theosophical teachings. Kandinsky, a member of the Orthodox Church, lived in the climate of openness to alternative approaches to spirituality: he undertook ethnographic studies of the peoples of Eastern Finland, and like Mondrian and Malevich, adopted Goethe's holistic view of the world. The artists of the time were fascinated by occultism, Helena Blavatsky's theosophy, Rudolf Steiner's

3 M. Kmiecik, *Drogi negatywności. Nurt estetyczno-religijny w poezji i muzyce awangardowej w XX wieku*, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków 2016, pp. 106-111.

4 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in: *Complete Writings on Art*, eds. K. Lindsay, P. Vergo, Da Capo press, New York 1994, p. 128.

5 W. Kandinsky F. Marc, *The "Blaue Reiter" Almanac*, ed. K. Lankheit, Viking, New York 1944, p. 250.

6 *Artyści o sztuce. Od van Gogha do Picassa*, eds. E. Grabska. H. Morawska PWN, Warszawa 1963, p. 287.

concepts of art.[7] Kandinsky shared Schönberg's and Scriabin's views on the correspondence of colours and sounds; he engaged in systematic studies on colour, without discriminating between medicine, psychology, chemistry and occult knowledge.[8] Pure art, for Kandinsky, included not only painting and music, but also dance, and, while Mondrian and Malevich restricted its cosmic expression to abstract art, he found it in figurative art as well, providing some examples in the final part of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Ultimately, he attributed spirituality to humankind and its progress. Seeing in religions little more than manifestations of power and ideology, he had no interest in the theological interpretation of spirit and the soul.[9]

Nonetheless, even before Kandinsky, the Romantics opposed the mechanistic conception of reality deriving from the spirit of post-Cartesian science and found their way towards the spiritual and aesthetic condition of humanity and the world in art and nature, the way given not directly but by symbolic means. They expanded the philosophical and religious background far beyond the Bible drawing on theosophical texts, Swedenborg, the Apocrypha, and archaic beliefs. Charles Taylor claims that Romantics initiated a fecund trend of thinking of art as an epiphany of being, the trend which was explored and developed by artists of all modernist tendencies. The secularization of the worldview and life itself as well as of time and space, of nature and the human condition, which, as Taylor insightfully demonstrates, has been progressing since the Age of Enlightenment, has effectively obliterated the experience of God's presence: we no longer live our lives against the certainty provided by the metaphysical or theological backdrop.[10] The previous state is impossible to restore, since "a tableau of the spiritual significance of things"[11] is no longer accessible, therefore, the only possible way to preserve the spiritual element is through its subjectivization: "The moral or spiritual order of things must come to us indexed to a personal vision".[12] What we are left with is the testimonies of individual epiphanies, which an artist's imagination can incorporate into a work of art. Art, from this perspective, is not understood in aesthetical categories: the value of an artwork lies in its openness to the spiritual order and its purpose is transfiguration. The spiritual aspect of a work is determined by the strength of the emotional response it provokes, its impact on the public, and, according to Taylor, some epiphanies, like the Gospel or Baudelaire's poetry, retain the ability to draw such a reaction whereas others lose it with time.

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7 J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 79.
8 *Sixten Ringbom, The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Åbo 1970, p. 185. ÅÅ See also on Bauhaus.
9 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 139-140.
10 Ch. Taylor, *Oblicza religii dzisiaj*, trans. A. Lipszyc, Znak, Kraków 2002, p. 52 and following.
11 Ch. Taylor, *Sources of The Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 427.
12 Ibid., p. 428.

A work of art arises from an epiphany and is an epiphany in its own right. "What I want to capture with this term is just this notion of a work of art. As the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals".[13] No formal criteria of spiritual art exist, no one model, since epiphanies can assume various forms determined by the individuality of their creators, and, as a consequence, they express different moral viewpoints. Thus in Romanticism an artwork as a symbol was a reflection of spiritual reality, as exemplified by Friedrich's or Constable's paintings, it held onto the view that nature was good, whether in the Christian sense or as understood by the enlightened rationalism. Taylor calls this view the epiphany of being. In the nineteenth century, apart from the affirmation of nature, the epiphany of translucence, two other types emerged in opposition to Romanticism: Baudelaire's epiphany of counter-nature and Schopenhauer's epiphany of amoral will, fallen nature. When Taylor claims that an artwork as an epiphany is "a revelation of the real face of things",[14] what he has in mind is not some universal truth revealed in a variety of ways, since the real face of things is contextual; in this particular case, he means the banality of life, as demonstrated by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. Modernism, on the other hand, rejected the epiphany of being: nature, devastated and subjected to technologization, is no longer liberating. Therefore, it turned inside, towards internal life with its subjectivity and temporality, while epiphanies assumed an indirect form: "The epiphany is of something only indirectly available, something the visible object can't say itself but only nudges us towards".[15] Taylor maintains that this is the form assumed by non-figurative art, which might imply that he sees it as a reduction, or in other words, impoverishment of representational art. Such an assertion can be problematic and it requires further examination of the directness of symbolic representations and the indirectness of abstract ones. In the conclusion Taylor identifies three spiritual orientations of modernism: the affirmation of the power of imagination (futurism, surrealism), a new type of epiphanies deriving from criticism (Proust, Pound, Joyce, Eliot, Mann) and epiphanies seeking means of expression for what is devastated.[16] Taylor's position seems to suggest that what is at stake in epiphanic art is neither a fight nor an attempt to introduce a specific spiritual and moral order (Christian, Manichean ...) into the world of art, but merely an evocation of such an order. And the closer it gets to our times, with each subsequent orientation, the theoretical coherence defining the character of spirituality noticeably declines.

13 Ibid., p. 427.
14 Ibid., p. 431.
15 Ibid., p. 469.
16 Ibid., p. 489.

Kandinsky, as it appears, proposes another type of epiphanic art: he seeks to strip an artwork and a creative art of their subjective components which stem from an artist's personality, he minimizes egocentrism, for which Romantics were heavily criticized, and strives to conceptualize primary qualities and the relationships between them in a methodical way. The internal necessities unveiled by an artist belong to art itself, they constitute this everlasting component, entirely distinct from an artist's personality and from his or her social and historical background. The psychological and sociological aspects are transcended and, having achieved this *epoché*, the artist stands before pure sounds, colours and lines and extends "far beyond the confines of art" so as to express the synthesis of "the 'oneness' of the 'human' and the 'divine'" in his or her work.[17]

In *Point and Line to Plane* we find the description of how a busy street observed through the windowpane is perceived. The sight is devoid of sound and the movement seems *phantom-like*, unreal. Another reality is exposed, *pulsating as if 'beyond'*. And this is the same pulsation of the noise, the tempo, the whirls which we take in with all our senses while standing in an actual street. We experience something similar when we are looking at a play of horizontal and vertical lines and colour patches on a painting.[18] The element shared by these three corresponding realities is the pulsation of lines and colours. This pulsation invests material reality with a spiritual element, which is by no means exclusive to nature but also present in the world of human artefacts. A painting "fixes" this pulsation, a distillate of reality, on the canvas, and it can assume a variety of forms. Spirituality understood in such a way can be perceived in a superficial manner with our consciousness taking in the lines and colours but only for a short time. However, if our perception is deep, more valuable, which Kandinsky refers to as a primal energy of art, we can experience the vibration in an active, multisensory manner, since rather than keeping our distance we become its part. Sixten Ringbom argues that the effect of lines and colour patches pulsating, which Kandinsky mentions a number of times, corresponds to Steiner's observation: "Steiner had maintained that to inner perception the objects begin to 'speak about their inner essence' and that the forces active in the things manifest themselves as 'spiritual line and figures'".[19]

The spiritual nature of a work of art is determined by means of expression (line, colour), which are autonomous,[20] as they refer to nothing else, they are entirely for themselves, they are self-contained, independent from the subject and qualitatively unique. Hence Kandinsky attributes a cosmic, universal dimension

17 W. Kandinsky *Point and Line to Plane* p. 21. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6033439M/Point_and_line_to_plane retrieved 18/07/2017

18 Ibid. p. 17.

19 S. Ringbom, pp. 192-193.

20 More on the subject, see: Andrzej Turowski, *Wielka utopia Awangardy. Artystyczne i społeczne utopie w sztuce rosyjskiej 1910-1930*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, pp. 75-90.

to lines and colours and sees the relationships between them as divine, being torn out rather than designed. They do not symbolize something other than themselves, they do not refer to something beyond them, they elude interpretation, whether accurate or erroneous, they are the emanation of quality. Painting qualities, rhythm and particularly colour, have a direct impact on the soul. Feelings are spiritual, since they relate to no external cause, nor do they suggest any personal content: rather they are qualities (they sting, they have weight, they are hot) and they impose on the artist in a most peremptory manner while affecting the recipient with no distortions. The epiphany is the vibration of pure qualities, the pulsation of lines and colours, similar to poetry, which focuses all attention on words alone, as Taylor points out citing Jakobson. It is worth noting that Taylor never mentions Kandinsky, even though in the context of the classifications he proposes, it would be the only epiphany of being in modernism directly descended from Romantics. Kandinsky's abstraction is not an indirect epiphany but a self-presentation of being in a way allowed by painting techniques as well as an artist's personality.

Although Kandinsky's writings contain no specific account of spiritual life, he clearly distinguishes between the psychic organism (mental activities) responding to sensual stimuli and the soul sensitive to the "inner voice", to the spiritual meaning of the components of the outside world. The soul experiences "a nonobjective vibration".[21] These two distinct fields, corporeal-mental and spiritual-emotional, correspond to what Maria Rzepińska writes on the perception of colour and two different functions attributed to it by the artist: iconic and archetypical-symbolic.[22] And although all people are potentially capable of grasping necessary connections, it is but a few who actually do show this ability, this asceticism of looking, of listening imbued with feeling.

According to Kandinsky, forms and colours which superficial, sensual percep tion enables us to take in, in turn, activate deep perception. And these two processes take place simultaneously not sequentially with the form and the colour affecting us directly and triggering an emotional response. Interestingly, the directness of emotional response has been proved scientifically by neuroscience. Neurobiologists are especially interested in the arrangement of perpendicular and vertical lines in Mondrian's works and Malevich's squares, as geometric forms stimulate a particularly strong emotional response of the viewer, and this process has evolved as an adaptation. Semir Zeki claims that "non-objective sensation and non-objective art of Malevich and his followers is in fact the introspective art of a brain already well acquainted with the visual word, with the objective world".[23] Specific parts of the

21 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual* ... p. 147.

22 M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1983, p. 589.

23 S. Zeki, *Visual Art and the Visual Brain*, "The Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain" Vol. 68. 1997, p. 46.

human brain respond very strongly to an arrangement of figures and colours, and abstract painting attaches the utmost importance to learning about forms rather than appearances of things. Therefore, the education of humanity, to go back to utopian themes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, is not achieved through intentionally designed politics, but is a result of common processes helping an individual to adapt to the changing reality. In this context, the first abstractionists' universal language of painting acquires a new interpretation, from the perspective of neuroaesthetics. However, the neuroaesthetical interpretation requires further consideration and more extensive exploration, also in the light of Plato's thought, cited by Zeki, who, not without satisfaction, finds the conclusions of his own research in philosophers' and artists' writings. From the perspective of neurobiological research, spirituality is the reality of the brain, which seems to make the differences between philosophical, theological and artistic viewpoints somewhat less relevant.

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, the humanities have witnessed a shift towards philosophical-theological reflection in place of religion in modernity. At the same time, sociological publications show that religious movements have been enjoying a revival, traditional religions have been on their way back, while syncretic religions have been on the rise. Both artists and exhibition curators take interest in the subject of spirituality and religiousness.[24] It might as well be the case that the same reality is identified and explained by means of different categories: once spirituality constituted an aspect, a facet, or the background of metaphysical beauty, the beauty of art, then the sublime, also of form, whereas now in the notion of spirituality and religiousness theoreticians find an expression of the nature of selected, by no means all, works of art. Although Kandinsky's views are frequently referred to in a number of publications, it is to support quite different tendencies in art. It is generally accepted that Kandinsky's ideas and works anticipated American abstractionism: Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Sill. John Golding, having thoroughly analyzed his works, comes to the conclusion that the artist was a Romantic and his painting represented mystical symbolism.[25] Mark C. Taylor, on the other hand, refers to Kandinsky in order to demonstrate the continuation of the ideas of spirituality in Beuys', Barney's, Turrell's and Goldsworthy's works.[26] Also Kandinsky's conception of spirituality features in the debates centred on secular spiritual art, in contrast to religious art. The meaning of the notion of spirituality in art is somewhat problematic, as is its range or

24 D.A Siedell., *God in Gallery (Cultural Exegesis): A Christian Embrace of Moder Art*, Baker Academic, Michigan 2008, pp. 75-109.

25 J. Golding, *Paths to the Absolute. Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 82.

26 M.C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual. Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012, pp. 188-190.

determining who is competent to authoritatively assign art to this category, since an aesthetician, an art historian, and a theologian will see it from very different perspectives. The question of whether a work fits the definition of spiritual or religious art is pretty much irresolvable. Those discourses are to a great extent untranslatable and have quite different objectives. Furthermore, works of art, mysterious, vulnerable objects, cannot be easily rationalized. What seems far more productive intellectually is establishing the kind of polemics in which the notion of spirituality appears, the categories with which it co-occurs, the changes in the sense of the spiritual in art, and, finally, the kind of social tasks art is supposed to fulfil.

Adorno, speaking about the spirit of art from the aesthetic perspective, maintains that "The aesthetic concept of spirit has been severely compromised not only by idealism but also by writings dating from the nascence of radical modernism, among them those of Kandinsky".[27] Thereby he argues the existence of the aesthetic conception of spirit, quite distinct from the religious one, which determines different objectives of these two kinds of art. Secular spiritual art demystifies mythologies and myths in social life; a work is a response to social constructs and calls them into question. On the other hand, religious art, in this context, serves to preserve the myth. Therefore, "The metaphysics of art requires its complete separation from the religion in which art originated. Artworks are not the absolute, nor is the absolute immediately present in them". In another passage he claims that there is no "spirit's serving to guarantee an absolute to art".[28] Kandinsky's conception of spirituality is interpreted by Adorno as a manifestation of totality, accompanied by the experience of being an element of a pre-existing whole, given to an artist rather than created by him or her. However, Adorno believes that the spiritual is inherent in a work, but far from arising from the universal principle of the world, as works of arts "produce their own transcendence",[29] that is to say, they are hermeneutic objects and their spiritual aspect involves something more, something that requires interpretation. Works of art are spiritual in that they cannot be reduced to objects or facts: the spirit constitutes the objective content of an artwork. Yet this spirit is different from the spirit of the creator, guided by particular intentions and inspiration. The spirit of an artwork is "evoked through the artefact",[30] it is firmly located in it, in the configuration of everything that manifests in it. The spirit shapes a phenomenon and is shaped by it. It can be construed as a certain quality which determines the strength of the message conveyed by the work, which follows directly from its composition. Spirituality is an anthropological notion and as such can only be ascribed to a human being while the spirit of a work

27 Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 87 www.heathwoodpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/aesthetictheory.pdf retrieved 18/07/2017
28 Ibid, pp. 133, 89.
29 Ibid., p. 78.
30 Ibid., p. 87.

of art is a theoretical construct and serves to assess a surplus of meaning requiring interpretation.

Hegel's philosophy of spirit is frequently invoked, not only in the interpretations of Kandinsky's work but also when a spiritual element requires justification.[31] Although Hegelian motifs can be found in Kandinsky's writing, it was Kojève who in his Paris lectures completed, as it were, the interpretation of Kandinsky's views and works, proclaiming that they were the realization of Hegel's teachings, that they constitute *total and absolute painting*. Kandinsky's paintings eradicate the difference between the image and reality. It is significant, however, that Kojève holds onto the notion of the beauty, in his words: "The Beautiful of the tableau "Circle-Triangle" exists nowhere outside of that tableau. Just the tableau "represents" nothing external to it, its Beautiful is also purely immanent, it is the Beautiful of the tableau that exists only in the tableau. ... The circle-triangle does not exist in the real, nonartistic world; it does not exist before, outside of, or apart from the tableau; it was created in and by-or as-the tableau. And it is only in and for this creation of the circle-triangle that the Beautiful incarnating it was created. That Beautiful too did not exist before the tableau, and it does not exist outside of it, independent of it".[32] Lisa Florman, who has thoroughly examined the correspondences between Hegel's, Kandinsky's and Kojève's thought, insists that the most important, if not the only possible, reference point for Kandinsky's writing is Hegel's aesthetics, rather than mysticism or occultism, and that Kandinsky's intention was to take up and follow the idea of art as the Absolute.[33] The belief of Kojève, Hegel's follower, in the absolute beauty made manifest, which has heavily influenced the subsequent reception of Kandinsky's works, was sufficiently convincing for Lyotard, who sees Kandinsky's paintings from the concrete period as objective, while holding in higher regard Newman's monochromatic paintings, deeply rooted in subjectivity, and capable of conveying the dread of the sublime.[34]

James Elkins also opts for the differentiation between secular art and religious art; the conclusions he draws, however, are different than Adorno's. He calls into question the spiritual and religious aspects of not only abstract art but of art in general in the name of methodological purity. The separation between fine art and religious art has institutional grounds: universities have separate departments studying art, with history of art departments examining art from a wide range

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31 On Rothko cf. J. Sh. Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit. From Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel*, Peter Lang, New York 2005, p. 117.

32 A. Kojève, *The Concrete Paintings of Kandinsky*, transl. L. Florman, in: L. Florman, *The Concrete in Kandinsky's Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, p.163.

33 L. Florman, *The Concrete in Kandinsky's Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014.

34 On Lyotard's interpretation of Kojève and the political implications of the sublime cf. Th.L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age. The Challenge of The Postmodern Age*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore&London 1992, pp. 21-26 and following.

of perspectives, including political, gender as well as religious, whereas theology departments are concerned with the spiritual qualities of art.[35] Additionally, in philosophy departments art is the subject of aesthetical interpretations. Elkins acknowledges that at private homes religious pictures and works of art are not separated, but he maintains that private homes are not part of the world of art. The conclusion leads to the assertion that, artists, theoreticians and curators seeking the spirituality (religiousness) of modern art notwithstanding,[36] modern fine art is non-religious.

Elkins claims that although the first signs of art and spirituality splitting up can be seen during Renaissance, it was in Romanticism when the division was effectively concluded by the symbolists such as Friedrich, Rung and William Blake, whose paintings, despite being born of visionary or religious impulses, are vague and should rather be seen as a testimony to their authors' eccentricity. Elkins points out that "Painting, from a theosophical perspective, is a remnant of a lost communication with the spiritual world beyond ordinary vision".[37] As far as abstract art is concerned, Elkins considers the matter from a historical point of view and contends that spirituality is only present in the works of the first generation of abstractionists, due to the theosophical atmosphere prevalent at the turn of centuries. He points out the existence of a secularized conception of abstraction offered by the art historians concerned with analyzing a medium and an artist's minimal self-reflection. Thus abstract art cannot be labelled as spiritual or as referring to spirituality, since many abstract artists do not regard it as such. Elkins cites Kevin Maginnis, the curator of *The Non-Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1985- ????* exhibition saying that "if spiritual abstraction works its magic by "silence and alchemy" this alternate abstraction would make use of >words and science<".[38] The difference between hot abstraction (Abstract Expressionism) and cold abstraction (Geometrical Abstraction) corresponds to this distinction. Calling into doubt the spirituality of Kandinsky's works Elkins does not contest his theory of painting, but argues that nobody actually responds to his paintings in a way described by the artist himself. At the same time he shows a number of ways allowing artists to depict sacredness outside the realm of religious art, the illustration of which he finds in the Dutch painting showing the spiritual nature of

35 J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York 2004, pp. 16-17.

36 Elkins points to six areas related to the problem of religiousness in modern, that is, secular art: "The discourse of the sublime ... . The concept of art history as a melancholy discipline ... . The concept of aura ... . The concept of iconophilia, iconoclasm, idolatry, and iconophobia ... . The concept of the unrepresentable ... . Talk of materiality, matter, medium, and substance ... . "Cf. James Elkins, *Iconoclasm and the Sublime: Two Implicit Religious Discourses in Art History*, in: J. Ellenbogen, A. Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011 p. 134.

37 J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place* p. 79.

38 Ibid., pp. 79-80.

domestic life.[39] Like Charles Taylor Elkins also believes that representation is an adequate expression of spirituality in secular spiritual as well as in religious art.

After 1950 American abstract artists (Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Still) brought up the subject of spirituality in art. Mondrian's, Malevich's and Kandinsky's abstraction found its continuation in the conception of a painting reduced to a plane of colour and shape, with the spirituality of art acquiring a unique form and interpretation. Roger Lipsey identifies spirituality with the sublime, tragedy and religious experience.[40] Harold Rosenberg regards Barnett Newman's painting as metaphysical, whereas Rothko's works, in his view, "constituted the theological sector of Abstract Expressionism",[41] but far removed from Kandinsky's. Yet the definitions of such notions as metaphysics, theology or religiousness are not easy to find, their meaning remaining vague, and possible to understand only in the context of a particular artist's position. No one appears to express a desire to construct a universal code of painting based on the language of the form, similar to Kandinsky's in *Point and Line to Plane*. Harold Rosenberg underlines the fact that Rothko was not ">really abstract<, in the sense of cancelling subjective qualities in favour of his idea",[42] the idea of absolute art. The vitality of colours in his works, their intensity and strength, rather than allowing the artist to express himself, express the artist's absence in the work.[43] Rosenberg sees the *ritual of self-purification* in Rothko's painting and he concludes, referring to the artist's suicide, "Like his painting, his act of self-annihilation is a deeply affecting blank".[44] The difference between the first generation of abstract artists' optimistic attitude and Abstract Expressionism artists' pessimism cannot be more striking.

Georg Pattison's contribution to the debate seems particularly interesting, as he interprets modern art from the position of a lay theologian from Oxford. In Mark Rothko's monumental monochromatic paintings, displayed in museums as though they were some sacred artefacts, he recognizes silent anticipation.[45] Those pictures do not impose themselves on us, they say nothing and, in doing so, they place all the burden of establishing the relationship on the viewer. The work and the viewer share the space between them, which offers us the possibility to co-create the image. Rothko never insisted that his works should be viewed in a specific way, it is theoreticians who emphasize their spiritual message. As the criterion

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39 Ibid., p. 87.
40 Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, DOVER PUBLICATIONS, Mineola, New York 1988. p. 229.
41 H. Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago&London, p. 100.
42 Ibid., p. 104.
43 *I don't Express myself in my painting. I express my not-self*. Quote ibidem. p. 105.
44 Ibid., pp. 106-107.
45 G. Pattison, *Crucifixions and Resurrection of the Image. Christian Reflection on Art and Modernity*, scm press, Norwich 2009, pp. 88-89.

to determine whether art is modern or not, Pattison takes Charles Baudelaire's assertion that a modern artist praises the present, the randomness of events as opposed to artists in the old days who were more concerned with the past. From the standpoint of a Christian theologian he asks: what is the purpose of art focused on the fleeting now? Does it exacerbate human helplessness or does it give us strength and consolation? And his answer is: modern artists' works are the art of the death of God, the art after the death of God, in the Nietzschean sense. Art no longer possesses artistic formulas which would enable artists to depict eternity or transcendence, which for him indicate spirituality. Pattison appreciates the artistic value of Rothko's painting and maintains that they invite us to experience the work as a spiritual journey undertaken on secular terms and with complete freedom.[46] Rothko's paintings by not imposing representation on the viewer "give expression to the great Universal truths which lay behind the pagan and Christian myths".[47]

Interestingly, Donald Kuspit places Rothko's and Newman's painting in the context of Jewish tradition, namely the commandment against making images or likenesses, and claims that "Their abstract art is quintessentially Jewish".[48] Situating them against the background of a non-European tradition and rejecting their modernist lineage enables Rothko's works to function in the context of postsecularism, the intellectual orientation which constitutes the shift towards theological and religious reflection. Postsecularism brings together thinkers from diverse backgrounds who share the aversion to politically or religiously dogmatized thinking and seek to re-examine the relationship between the religious and the secular and to establish the presence of religion in the postmodern world.[49] Postsecular thinking is to a great extent an heir of Romanticism, it can be considered the spirituality of modernity, since, as Agata Bielik-Robson argues, it preserves spirituality protecting it from the devastating progress, from the consumerist lifestyle and the decline of institutional religions. The philosopher differentiates between religiousness in a narrow sense of a belief in a deity and religiousness defined broadly as "reflection on the place of a human being in the universe and his or her sense of existential orientation and meaning".[50]

In postsecularly-oriented art the notions of spirit and spirituality appear less frequently whereas the notions of religiousness and religious experience assume greater importance; thus the emphasis shifts from an inner experience to the com-

46 Ibid., p. 87.
47 Pattison cites Peter Fuller's comments on Rothko's exhibition in Tate Gallery in 1987, ibid., p. 84.
48 D. Kuspit after M.L. Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness*, Intellect Book/University of Chicago Press, Bristol, Chicago, 2011, p. 118.
49 More on the subject: *Drzewo poznania. Postsekularyzm w przekładach i komentarzach*, eds. P. Bogalecki, A. Mitek-Dzięba, FA-art, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 2012.
50 A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, p. 297.

munal one. A religious position is assumed to be common to all people, with the special significance attached to the moral dimension. Many artists are involved in building a community through art, the example of which is Jordi Savall's music combining diverse musical traditions.[51] Bill Viola's video works are also worthy of note. Roland R. Bernier labels them visual theology and sees them as part of post-secular thinking, which harks back to negative theology, also known as apophatic theology, a trend in Christian thought, as well as the theological shift initiated by Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Mavion.[52] Bernier argues that Viola's works trigger the sublime, which offers access to the experience of transcendence. Viola draws on the traditions of the European religious painting; it can even be said that he purposefully chooses to be its continuator, as suggested by the settings of the exhibitions and publications where the works of Old Masters are juxtaposed with the video installations.[53] He draws inspiration from a wide range of religions, including Christianity, Sufism, D.T. Suzuki's writings, and Zen Buddhism, to tell a story of death, suffering and birth, in both physical and spiritual sense.[54] Viola's video images are realistic and highly evocative, the artist employs intensive colours, confronts a human figure with the energy of water or fire to compose visually impressive scenes.

The installation *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), shown during the Biennale in Venice in the church of San Gallo, consisted of three large video screens placed on the stone altars. Entering the dark interior viewers are confronted with the figures emerging from the grey background, stretching out their arms towards them, breaking through the screen of, previously invisible, water and passing through the glistening spray of water to finally stand before the viewer in full colour. The actors portray the souls of the dead, the middle-aged woman in a red dress, the elderly man with shaking hands, who arrive at this place to testify to the existence of immortality through art. The ocean from the title, the symbol of eternity, has but one shore: the thin sheet of water marking the boundary of the two worlds.

In 2014 Viola displayed the installation entitled *Martyrs. Earth, Air, Fire, Water* on one of the walls of the side aisle in St Paul's Cathedral in London. It consisted of four plasma screens, resembling altar panel paintings. The screens showed three men and a woman. One of the men is being pulled up from the earth mound, the woman in a white dress is hanging above the ground with her hands bound above

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51 R. Illman, *Art and Belief: Artists engaged into interreligious Dialogue*, Routledge, New York 2014.

52 R.R. Bernier, *The Unspeakable Art of Bill Viola. A Visual Theology*, Pickwick!Publications, Eugene 2014, p. 5. (the interview from 2013).

53 During the Electronik Renessans 2017 exhibition in Florence Renaissance masters' works are juxtaposed with Viola's.

54 D.A. Ross, P. Sellars, *Bill Viola*, Cantz, New York 1998, p. 143. The issue of death and birth links Viola's works with Hans Belting's thought; their conversation places the emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the video images which show emotions, cf. *Bill Viola*, ed. John Walsh, The J. Paul Getty Museum, The National Gallery Los Angeles–London 2003, p. 199.

her head, the second man is sitting on the chair being engulfed by fire and another is hanging upside down in the stream of flowing water. The pure scenes show, as if beyond time, the vertical workings of the elements and the people immersed in them in the situation of passage. What we see is not corpses but people waiting for the passage, the nature of which is unclear. And the man being pulled up from the earth mound and through earth upwards is also being born from earth. The theme of death and birth is given a cosmic dimension: the elements are eternal, a human being is not, while spirituality originates on juncture of these worlds.

Kandinsky never excluded representational art from the realm of spiritual art and the shifts of light, colour and dominantly vertical lines can easily be seen in the fluid frames of the four images. However, Viola's digital pictures affect the viewer in a different manner: they are entirely rooted in corporeality in that through artistic suggestion they evoke the memory recorded in every person's body, the memory of the sensual experience of water, fire, earth and air. Showing the elements at work Viola provokes not fear but certain reassurance, which arises from a sense of belonging to the cycles of nature. Tranquillity rather than dread emanates from many of Viola's works presenting the subject of death and birth (*The Messenger* (1996), *The Crossing* (1996), *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983)). In his conversation with Gaston Bachelard, Bill Viola expounded the primal community of a human being and the cosmos on the basis of the four elements residing in the depths of the transcendental self. Here, however, we touch upon a very different theory of spirituality, linked to the original nature of the internal image, which requires its own consideration. The spirituality of Viola's video images lies not in an experience of an anonymous person's subjectless emotions, like it is the case of Kandinsky's works, but stems directly from the existence of people with their own bodies and lives. Nevertheless, Viola's works, contrary to Kandinsky's elitist abstractions, reveal the spirituality of a global person, one who visits art exhibitions all over the world, who is accustomed to the sophisticated imagery of Hollywood movies, to the high-resolution images capable of putting us into a trance with the languid movement of scenes suggestive of sleepiness, dreaming, the unreal.

The reconnaissance undertaken here of the selected points of Kandinsky's, Rothko's and Viola's artistic positions and the interpretations of their works has brought to light a number of issues calling for more thorough and deeper exploration. Nonetheless, it can be safely assumed that in the post-aesthetic times the spirituality of art is becoming its highest value. From Charles Taylor's philosophical perspective, abstraction, along with Futurism and Surrealism, represents epiphanic art and continues Romantic trends, albeit by different means. The spirituality of art is believed to be a remedy for the technological focus of modernity. In the art historian's interpretation it is a historical affliction. Rosenberg's analysis points to an artist's own spirituality and argues that although an artist's experiences are not directly reflected in painting, since the viewer is merely confronted with

planes of colour, stepping outside an artist's experience completely is not quite justified either. The theological view, theoesthetics, in its turn, examines secular spirituality from theocentric angle and sees Kandinsky's thought as an attempt to build a divine kingdom on earth.[55] In the case of Rothko's works secular spirituality proposes the position of anticipation solipsistically centred on the viewer's activity. Viola takes us back to representational art and encourages reinterpretation of mimesis and reconsideration of the status of the digital image. As it seems, an aesthetician can choose the road offered by Adorno and seek to develop autotelic categories critical towards philosophical and theological traditions and distanced from artists' positions. Another option is to follow Kojčve in exploiting traditional philosophical theories and subjecting art to philosophical interpretation. An aesthetician, however, never losing sight of works of art themselves, can pick yet another path through and across those various interpretations and bringing to light the differences between them search for new incarnations for old aesthetical categories.

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DUCHOWOŚĆ SZTUKI PO KANDINSKY'M (streszczenie)

Celem artykułu jest konfrontacja wybranych interpretacji pojęcia „duchowość sztuki" Wasyla Kandyńskiego oraz pokazanie dwóch odmiennych podejść do duchowości sztuki: abstrakcji Rothko i video instalacji Billa Violi. W świetle myśli Charlesa Taylora można przyjąć, że pojęcie duchowości zastępuje pojęcie piękna, a duchowość abstrakcji stanowi jedną z odpowiedzi artystów awangardy na instrumentalizm stechnicyzowanej rzeczywistości. W interpretacji Kojčva, idącego za Heglem, duchowość sztuki jest tożsama z pięknem, natomiast Adorno niechętny podejściom Kandyńskiego i Hegla postuluje krytyczny model duchowości sztuki. W drugiej połowie XX wieku istnieje wiele nawiązań do Kaudyńskiego. Duchowy plan dzieł sztuki, pojęty jako kosmiczny pierwiastek rzeczywistości, staje się ich uzasadnieniem, w pewnym sensie zastępuje wartości estetyczne. Równolegle pojawiają się alternatywne podejścia, duchowość zostaje utożsamiona z procesem tworzenie (Marek Rothko) lub przynależy integralnie do przedstawienia, co zbliża sztukę świecką do religijnej (Bill Viola). Dla estetyka interesujące, w tej konfrontacji, jest wydobycie przesunięć w obrębie starych kategorii estetycznych, jak również odnotowanie ich nowych manifestacji w sztuce.

Słowa kluczowe: duchowość, sztuka nowoczesna, epifania, religijność, Kandinsky, Rothko, Viola.