

The Wounded Body

Comments on the narrative of the European art's body representation*

„These frequent occasions of observing nature, taught the Greeks to go on still farther. They began to form certain general ideas of beauty, with regard to the proportions of the inferior parts, as well as of the whole frame: these they raised above the reach of mortality, according to the superior model of some ideal nature” – writes Winckelmann when meditating on Greek art.¹ He believes that beauty arising from nature and the sense of beauty, could be reflected simultaneously in the Greek body form, without all unpleasant features (obesity, sickness, disproportion), and thus could serve as a model for the ideal which fundamentally defined the concept of body image and the concept of beauty in the European culture.

This physical ideal was not questioned for centuries – apart from the period of the “Dark Middle Ages”, a new human ideal of which can be understood from the world order assumed by Christianity. Although art history today shows that the Middle Ages was an organic continuation of Greek art and that in the period of the proto- and early Renaissance the very concept of “Dark Ages” was created for the sake of humanist ideals, we have to understand that the image of the human body today is substantially different from that of the earlier and subsequent depiction ideals. Thanks to Winckelmann, among others, the paradigm of human representation, as defined by the Greek beauty ideal, remained valid until the 20th century and neither the medieval, nor any other depiction models characterising shorter periods, could overcome it. There is no doubt that the various art history periods can be captured and described along the currently dominant body image paradigms, and the needs and desires related to this, have barely changed over time; at least seemingly. If we look beyond the surface, we see that the body ideal representing human ideas has undergone a substantial transformation, by accepting the eroticism of pain and blending the radiance of invisibility, absenteeism and non-existence into the glaze of gracefulness.

In Ancient Greece, the human body was free of any decadence. Not that they did not know ugliness: Greek mythology is full of horror and distortion, but the human world itself – at least according to Greek sculpture – is dominated by beauty: the Greeks saw the main models of beauty,

* The first author's research was supported by the grant EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001 (“Complex improvement of research capacities and services at Eszterhazy Karoly University”).

¹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann: *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and the Art of Sculpture*. Translated by David Carter. In: *Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*. Camden House, Boydell & Brewer, 2013. 37. (31-56.)

that penetrate earthly existence, in the gods, which is most perfectly expressed in the proportions of the human body, as Winckelmann puts it. Christianity turns this around: the divine creation, the universe as a whole is beauty, while the earthly universe of the man is full of ugliness, illness and death, for which only Jesus Christ can offer salvation. Beautiful, accordingly, is the overflow of supernatural beauty: God is the source of harmony and the radiation of all things. Medieval authors and artists have adapted the image of the universe to this pancaustic view, in which the Whole and its order represent the two peripheral values of the Beautiful and the Good, and particular parts within the Whole can even be ugly. St. Augustine in *On Order* suggests that ugliness contributes to the order of the world in which, even though God created it, the Bad and the Evil are both present. „What could be defined as more foul, devoid of dignity and obscene than prostitutes, pimps, and the other plagues of this kind? Take away prostitutes from a society and all will be overturned as a consequence of disordered passions. Put them in the place of honest women, and you will dishonour every single thing with guilt and shamelessness [...]” (On Order, IV, 12-13) In the Middle Ages, it was assumed that ugliness present in the earthly world is not against God, but it is only acceptable if it fits into the Whole.

The culture of the “Dark Ages” was able to attribute physical vulnerability and evanescence to the concept of the man. But here, we must note that we are talking about a period of history in which epidemics and infections were common and fires and wars were taking their toll. Sickness and death were everyday experiences. Christian theories were able to frighten people genuinely with these real experiences and they offered the idea of eternity instead. However, art trying to represent reality did not only frighten, it pointed to the man, more precisely to the frail human body, which was covered not only by wounds but also fear, through factual, visually and easily comprehensible, figurative signs: the visible body was surrounded by the invisible monster figures of its dreads and sinful desires, as shown on the canvases of Hieronymus Bosch.

In Christian art, offering salvation and afterlife as a counterpoint to the sinful and ugly earthly life, the stories of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ become a prominent narrative. In the identity model written by visual narratives, the concept of the human body now becomes definitive through suffering and death.

However, when we look at the picture sequences offered by art history, we are confronted with the process of the body being deprived of the ugliness that is made visible, the signs of human peccability, while it takes on idealised beauty again, reintroducing the Greek body ideal. But this can only be done through the euphemism of the suffering body.



Hegel in *Lectures on Aesthetics* says: „you cannot use the forms of Greek beauty to portray Christ scourged, crowned with thorns, dying on the cross.”² Early Christian art never depicted the crucifixion of Christ, but rather substituted it with references, while Early Byzantine works showed him alive on the cross as the conqueror of death, thus getting around the issue of the dual (divine and human) nature of Christ. The representation of Christ’s death became authentic from the VIII–IX. centuries onwards. Nonetheless, the dead Christ is mostly painted in an elegiac manner: reconciliation and tranquility characterises it. In the Early Christian art, the idea of salvation – since crucifixion was not considered as an iconographically recognised theme – was referred to by the abstract image of the cross. „It is only in the late Middle Ages that the Man on the cross begins to be seen as a real man, beaten, bloodied, disfigured by pain, while the portrayal both of the crucifixion and of the various phases of the Passion becomes dramatically realistic as it celebrates the humanity of Christ through his sufferings.”³ From this point on, on the one hand, the body was depicted in a realistic way, on the other hand, suffering was emphasised by the exaggerated emotions of the people sitting next to the dead body of the Son of God. As Umberto Eco writes: „In this way the image of a suffering Christ was handed down to Renaissance and Baroque culture in a crescendo of the eroticism of suffering, where the insistence on the divine face and body tormented by pain became a play verging on a

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Lectures on Aesthetics on Fine Art*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975. 112.

³ Umberto Eco (ed.): *On ugliness*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. London, Harwill Secker, 2007. 49.

complacency and ambiguity [...]”⁴ The image of the suffering of Christ is based on the messianic vision of Isaiah the prophet: „He had no stately form or majesty to attract us, no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Like one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.” (Isaiah 53, 2-7) in the interpretation of St. Augustine: „the deformity of Christ forms you, for had he not wiles to be deformed, you would not have regained the form that you lost. Therefore, he hung deformed on the cross. But his deformity was our beauty.” (*Sermon 27, 6*)

Hans Memling: *Christ at the Column*

How is the ugly and suffering Christ depicted in the late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance? With a crown of thorns and a bleeding body. There is a tradition of depiction that draws attention to wounds, the sight of blood, and the biological phenomena of the dead. Parallel to this, however, the iconographic type that lets the wound be seen but not as a physiological injury, not as the destruction of the body, but something that beautifies and spiritualises the body, interpreting it as a stigma and covering it with the aura of holiness, is born. Stigmatisation is of paramount importance in Christian ideology, but in this essay, I do not analyse the concept of stigma because I believe that it gains ground primarily in religious discourse and that it blocks the way from the philosophical approach of the phenomena of the wound. Instead of sublimating the wound to a sacrament, that is to say a stigma, I intend to draw attention to the “flesh and blood” reality of the wound and the phenomena of injury, both biologically and ontologically.

There have been numerous dissertations on the biomedical approach of Jesus’ suffering over the past decades about the traumas that appeared on the Saviour’s body, based on the resources of evangelists and ancient historians but interpreted with the help of modern medicine.⁵ For instance, the phenomenon of sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane – of which we know from Luke, who was a physician – is identified as hematidrosis, an extremely rare disease caused by severe stress, such as the fear of death. The disease is the result of thinning skin – it can be assumed that whipping caused particularly serious pain in such cases. By the time Jesus was crucified, the skin was already in a damaged condition and the muscle tissues contracted as much as in the case of a completely burnt body. Crucifixion as a method of execution originated in Persia but the Romans transformed it to trigger the most intense pain and the longest-lasting agony, by using a scientific approach. It is no coincidence that both Cicero and Seneca write about the Roman method of crucifixion as the most terrible way of death among capital punishments. The hammering of three nails into the body, in

⁴ Eco (ed.): *On ugliness*. 49.

⁵ See: Pierre Barbet: *A Doctor at Calvary*. New York, P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1955; A. Lebec: A Physiological Study of the Passion of Our- Lord Jesus Christ, *The Catholic Medical Guardian*, 1925.; Robert Bucklin: The legal and medical aspects of the trial and death of Christ. *Science and the Law*, 1970. January, 197/10. 14-26. <http://www.shroud.com/bucklin2.htm>



order to hold the weight of it, was done in areas that caused the most severe pain, as a result of nerve damage creating “burning neuralgia”, but the breaking of bones in the wrist and the foot was also used. However, these were not deadly wounds and produced only a slight loss of blood. With the Persian method, death on the cross was caused by suffocation, since the victim was only able to inhale but not exhale in the crucified state. The Romans, on the other hand, nailed the convict to the cross in a bent position so that he could move up and down trying to catch his breath, making the agony last even longer. In the case of Jesus, moving up and down on the cross led to further bruising of the back skin and resulted in his body turning into “living flesh”. Eventually, his death was not

caused by suffocation, but by high fever, blood loss, extreme sweating, thirst, circulatory problems, finally followed by a drop in blood pressure and heart failure. From a medical point of view, his last words („My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) could be attributed to the shock that the physiological and the consequential psychological states triggered. The neurological shock caused by the pain is capable of triggering the most serious emotional and psychic reactions, people with conditions of psychosis, schizophrenia and depression, who went through a comparable degree of physical suffering, describe spiritual experiences that reveal a similar rejection from God. From a theological point of view, however, there is a completely different interpretation of the desperate words of Jesus Christ: for the validity of the atoning sufferer, it is necessary for God to turn away from the man and his sins. The fact that after this exclamation, Jesus died immediately and became unconscious right after a state of being able to talk, even though the other crucified next to him died only at dusk, suggests, or at least a tradition of its interpretation emerged from it, that it was ultimately his own decision to die just then – supernaturally.⁶

The narratives created from all these medical aspects reinforce the image which Isaiah the prophet described as Jesus „a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief”, and from a philosophical

⁶ Cf. Ruff Tibor – Dr. Galántai Orsolya: *Fájdalmak férfia és betegség ismerője. Jézus szenvedése orvosi szemmel.* http://www.hetek.hu/hit_es_ertekek/200010/fajdalmak_ferfia_es_betegseg_ismeroje

point of view we can interpret it as the following: the wound was not a symbolic event but the realisation of the *real body* into flesh.

In the Middle Ages, the wounded flesh was still present, and even the 14th and 15th century Dutch masters insisted on the images of suffering.⁷ Italian iconography, however, ecstatic about the rediscovery of the Greek beauty ideal, breaks with the interpretative tradition of depicting pain: it ennoble the face of the tortured Christ, beautifies his body, and depicts it, even though the wounds remain visible, without agony and free of any actual suffering. Bellini's crucifixion depictions show, for instance, that the great master of the Italian Renaissance is no longer interested in wounds: he masks them, makes them non-existent, replaces the suffering body that exposes flesh and blood, with an inspirited human figure, showing a marble statue like, intact skin surface, and focuses on the proportionality of the body.⁸ Mantegna also makes the outer figure, the "shell", seem intact on the *Lamentation of Christ* (1490), but at the same time, with the perspectival distortion of the body, he is somehow able to counteract the harmony-based beauty ideal. But, for example, Matthias Grünewald and Hans Holbein, as dominant artists of the early German renaissance, agree with the realist representation of death and go as far with their depictions as maybe no one else since then: the body experiencing pain and the face free of idealisation take on morbid forms of expressions.

⁷ A perfect example of this is *Pieta* by Rogier van der Weyden (1441); *Christ at the Column* by Hans Memling (1485-90) or *Man of Sorrows* by Aelbrecht Bouts (1490).

⁸ Bellini: *Dead Christ supported by two angels* (1470); Bellini: *Pieta* (1465)



Grünewald's *Iseheim Altarpiece* (around 1515) shows the entombment of Christ on the predella, with his body full of wounds and the flesh almost vibrating around the cuts, while his limbs are writhing in pain. We can virtually see his suffering and the death kicks right in front of us, extremely close, although the body's tissues have already started decomposing in the damp stone coffin. Here, the wounds, just like openings invading existence itself, become accentuated and in this nature, turn into symptoms that are dangerous to the whole organism of the body. In the intrigue against the whole of existence, the impossibility is expressed by the wound in its ontological sense: namely that the wound is the disgusting protrusion of the body's "symbolic reality" (totality) or – with the Lacanian Concept – "his Real little piece".

Lacan calls the frightening marker (the presence of the Thing) that serves as the unseen in the symbolic marking practice, as a symptom: something that is fossilised and which blocks the possibility of self-revelation as a materialistic remnant standing in the way of vision. The symptom maintains itself in an eternal shift, „memory works according to changing principles”: „it leaves it's place ready to circulate once again” – therefore moving on a diffracted trail with the peculiarity of

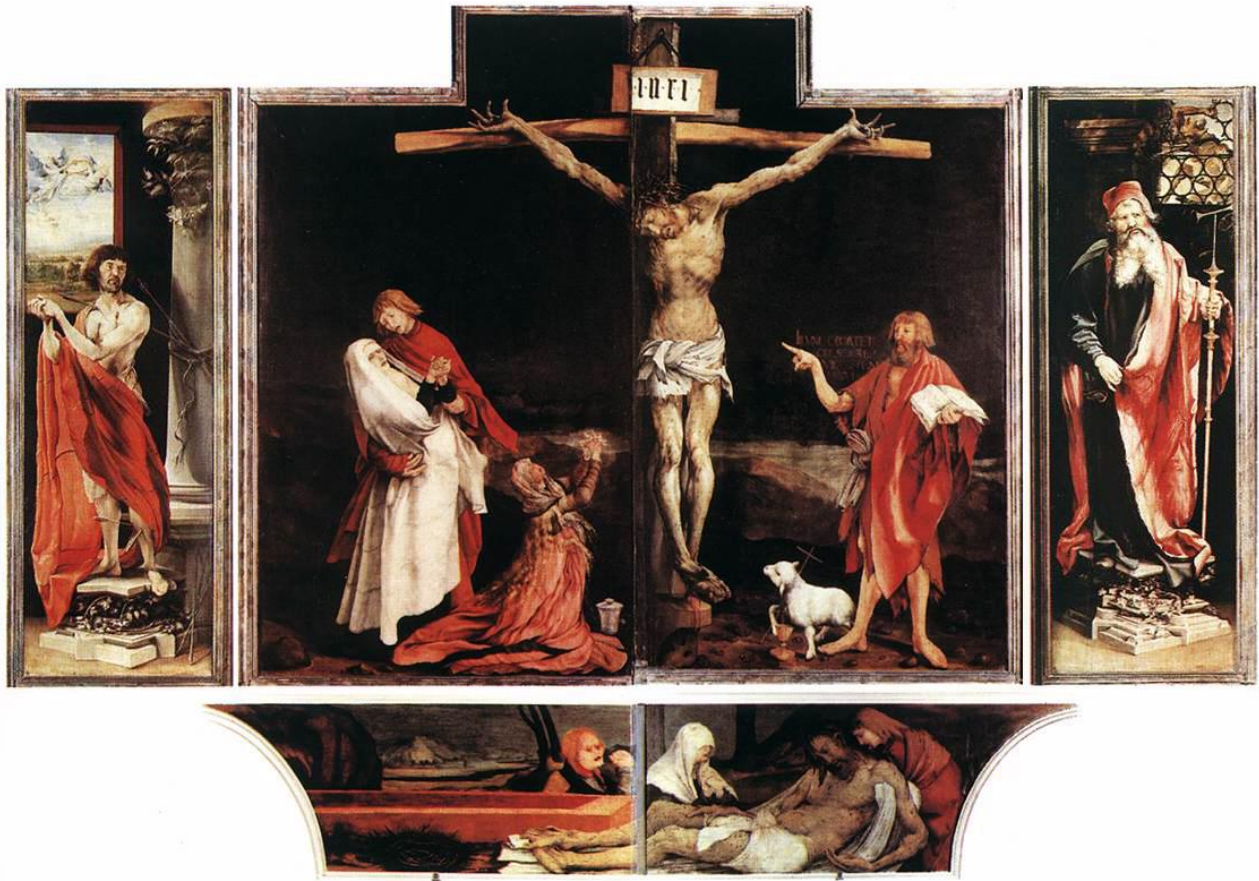
the diffraction being the „feature in which it's potential markings are confirmed?”⁹ The trail closes a gap: it points to the missing. The impossible stain and the blurred meaning that is still „our only substance, our only real support for our being, the only point that ensures the subject's permanence”¹⁰ This so-called symptom has a radical ontological status: it works as a sinthome. As a crumb of comfort, as a protection against psychosis that does not show anything to the subject in absentia, but the minimal consistency upon which the symbolic formation can be set.¹¹

In Lacani's reading, we can perceive the wound as a symptom of the body's existence which makes the decomposition of the body visible, and the “disgusting sight” of which the man, defined by his existential anxiety, is only capable of recognising the existence of danger threatening his existence, which is why he considers it repulsive. Through disgust, does he obscure the other, more inherent meaning, sinthome, which follows from the transgression of the invaded body: although the event of being wounded pulls the vulnerable subject towards the boundary and beyond, the wound is still the death-hole which is proof for being alive – indeed, through pain. On the one hand, the wound makes it possible to experience the revelative power of life, and on the other hand, there is an overview to the other world, which opens up through the experience of death. The body is raised to an ontological status by its potential of destruction, opening the subject (or the Presence) to the understanding of existence, in a Heideggerian sense.

⁹ Cf. Jacques Lacan: *Seminar on the purloined letter*. Translated by Gábor Gángó. In: Kiss Attila Atilla – Kovács Sándor sk. – Odorics Ferenc: *Testes könyv II*. Ictus–Jate, Szeged, 1996. 27.

¹⁰ About the symptom of the Lacanian dialect (the ability to seize the Real, which of course cannot mean anything on a symbolic level) See: Slavoj Žižek: A szimptomától a sinthome-ig. Translated by Antónia Szabari. *Helikon*, 1995/1-2. 94-114.

¹¹ Cf. Jacques Lacan: *The Sinthome. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. New York, Norton, 1988.



The wound appears on Grünewald's altarpiece, not only on the body of Christ on the predella but also above it, on the Christ of the Crucifixion, resembling a "mouth opening" from which a cry seems to appear: a cry of pain. The wound „as a bleeding and exuding substance cannot be integrated; this is why it becomes less and less portrayable as the representation itself (with the progress of the artistic narrative) becomes more realistic. On the medieval and Early Renaissance canvases however, the wound can still be seen, we could even say that it "demands to be alive". And let's just say that giving life is exactly the essence of it because as long as it exists, it does not let go. In Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), life is no longer pulsating, the wounds are no longer alive, nor are the openings: they have been sewn up. Here, the wounds are only signs, reminders of a mangled, once living body. This is what the whole modality of the body refers to: stiffness, blackened hands and feet, rolled back eyes, a sharpened chin. But close to the viewer, under the ribs, scabs are clearly visible, the red stain of which the painter placed in the imaginary centre of the composition, pointing out that this is the physical symptom that touches upon the essence of existence – here, vouching for non-existence. According to Julia Kristeva, anyone who looks at this painting, may lose faith: no one has ever depicted the dead Christ with such persuasive force as Holbein, but its presentation inevitably carries the image and phantasmagoria of the dead God.¹²

¹² See: Julia Kristeva: *Holbein's dead Christ*. Translated by Zoltán Varga Z.. In: Beáta Thomka (ed.): *Narratívák 1. Képleírás, képi elbeszélés*. Budapest, Kijárat, 1998. 37-58.

The wound can only remain the remnant of existence, thus being the transparency of existence, while it is still throbbing, bleeding, or being dehiscenced. Grünewald's destroyed body of Christ points this out with penetrating force. This, and not the revelation of the sanctity of salvation, has a shocking effect on those kneeling beside the corpse, those who used to love the dead: Mary, Mary Magdalene and John. Their faces do not reflect spirituality, nor relief or happiness, not even compassion: they reflect shock. Shock that is triggered by the fear of the now present death, and which in its transgressive experience opens up the gap of the boundary between life and death. This opening then, in that holy moment, is experienced as the reality of the transgressive wound. The shock itself is an opening too: a living wound. The ones standing next to Christ, together with the freshly dead, fall into this wound, shifting into a state of trance, while losing their minds from the sight of the wounds. In the splitting gap, the essence of the human body, that is otherwise incomprehensible since it cannot be integrated into life, becomes comprehensible for a moment: it is not simply that it serves as the basis of life with its living tissues but also that it allows for the revelation of transcendence, in the form of the dehiscenced, bloody flesh.



The subject of the wounded body becomes open to transcendence through the borderline experience of death. The subject, mourning, hugging, nursing the wounded body or just frightened by its sight, can step over – as a witness to transcendence – beyond the horizon hidden from presence.

We need to re-ask the question that influences the changes in the body depiction narrative in an elemental way: can the Savior's death be depicted? And now, the question is not only about whether suffering can be portrayed according to the rules of the Greek beauty ideal. Hegel's question about the representativeness of physical suffering was based on the fact that in the case of Jesus, the external, physical appearance shows the individual in his own negativity, "the negativity of pain", and that the spirit can achieve its truth and reach heaven, "by sacrificing sensuality and subjective uniqueness", through this negativity. In answer to his own question, Hegel states that this sphere of representation must necessarily be split from the classic, plastic ideals. But as far as the representativeness of the body of Jesus is concerned, we have to ask another question regarding

Corpus Christi and *Imitatio Christi*: can the acceptance of the physical torture to the point of death be equivalent to the body of the son of God and the founder of Christianity?

Corpus Christi triggered an endless debate about definition, which resulted in the body of the religion's founder being regarded as platonic and also the denial of its resemblance to any other human body. As Belting writes: „In the light of this uncertain archetype, the outlines of the general concept of the human body were blurred”¹³ From this, Belting concludes the crisis of body-consciousness and points out that, „In the New Testament, the word corpus, at least in the subject matter, is only once heard from Jesus' mouth. At the last dinner, Jesus breaks the bread with the following words: Hoc est corpus meum, that is »this is my body.”¹⁴ The sacrifice of the antique mysteries puts its stamp on this just as much as the community ritual during a feast. Here, however, the duality and the drama is expressed in the paradox that while he declares the bread a sign of his own body, he is still present as himself. It creates an open gap between his own body and its perception, that is, its symbol. The real presence becomes questionable in the resurrection as well.

What kind of body is one that is able to resurrect? Can it be the same as the human body? The human body may temporarily awaken – but only from apparent death, meaning it is not the true end. We do not know about anyone who managed to return from the other world – Jesus Christ is the only one. The return of Lazarus can be seen as a miracle that occurred only as the result of the supernatural power of Jesus.¹⁵ The outcry and disbelief, which was felt consequently, is made explicit by Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-1602), in which Thomas, the disciple, simply cannot comprehend the nature of a body that can return from death. Christ's being is based on duality. Even on the cross, his dual nature manifested itself – on the one hand, he is the Son of God, who is a pure spirit from the Word, and on the other hand, a man, flesh –, in the resurrected form this will only become more expressive.

¹³ H. Belting: *A hiteles kép. Képviták mint hitviták*. Translated by Zoltán Hidas. Budapest, Atlantisz, 2009. 121.

¹⁴ Belting: *A hiteles kép*. 124.

¹⁵ I analyse the issue of returning from death in more detail: Gerda Széplaky: A tanúsíthatatlan: A tanúsíthatóság problémájáról Esterházy Péter *Hasnyálmirigynapló* című műve kapcsán. *Pannonhalmi Szemle*, XXV/2. (2017), 91-105.



The body of Christ, which serves as a model for the image conceivable of the man in the Christian body representation paradigm, therefore carries a kind of heterogeneity and incomprehensibility that was not present in the Greek body image. Gods, visible and present in the earthly world, served as the model for the Greek body ideal. The Christian representation however, takes the measure of the invisible God. The Christian man's body image, which falls back upon the Greek depiction and beauty ideals starting from the Renaissance, incorporates transcendence and the desire for the missing. The body is soaked with longing and the demand for the non-present. This longing is what is expressed through the eroticism of the painful body. The divine nature, wanting to be shown visually, can be effectively represented in the proportional body figure created by the Greeks, embodying the harmony of the universe. At the same time, the ancient beauty ideal is based on self-saturation and perfection. It was no accident that the Romantics recognised the wholeness in Greek torsos. In contrast, the Christian body image is based on the ethos of invisibility. From the ethos of invisibility, the erotic body figure in which the hiatus is coded, evolves consequently. This is shown on the male body, above all through the body of Jesus Christ.

Mary's depictions, which serves as a model for the female body can only represent the perfectly proportioned and harmonised body in a restricted manner, since the mother of God can not be depicted without clothes. But Christ is naked in the first place, on the cross and even in the grave.

In fact, nakedness is one of his main attributes. But what kind of nakedness is that? Is it the nakedness of the frail man? We know that it is not... As we take a look at the works created after the Early Renaissance, we see more and more marble-made, naked male bodies, which actually hide the truth of human transience, discovered in the Middle Ages. These bodies convey the promise of eternity. What's more, flaws disappear from the flawless marble envelope, they are more accurately transformed: they do not appear to be an integral part of the body but are degraded into aesthetic, tiny dots of the surface. Furthermore, the wounds from the flawless marble shell disappear, more precisely, they transform: they do not appear to be an integrable part of the body instead, they are degraded to aesthetics, tiny dots of the surface. The body, deprived of the ontological meaning of the wound, goes beyond its very essence, obscuring what evidently follows from its living nature. The aestheticised wound is now part of the eroticised body apparatus carrying the promise of afterlife.

The incorporation of the wound into the erotic body apparatus can be followed even more precisely in the paintings depicting Saint Sebastian, overlapping with the Christ representations in many ways, which express erotics more widely.¹⁶ Sebastian's body, tied to a tree and almost shot to death with arrows, is punctured by sharp pointed weapons and marked by wounds, but nevertheless, his face still shows longing and pleasure, even ecstasy in many of the depictions. As we know, Sebastian was saved from death by those women, multiple times, in whom he could awaken temptation through his charming body. He himself became a subject of eroticism through temptation – but erotics in his case indicates not physicality (on the one hand, he does not feel pain in his wounded body, on the other, it is not him, who desires, in fact, he does not desire women) but the longing for God. The *St. Sebastian* depiction of Rubens (1614) created a significant iconographic topos, in which there is no sign of torture, on the contrary, the muscular man of idealised beauty turns into the subject of erotics: the seductive movements of the figure, with slightly opened legs, skittishly moving his hip to the left, continue with his head pointing towards the sky. Sebastian is not looking in the eyes of the viewer, not even in the eyes of another, desired man: he is searching for the eyes of God. The arrows sticking into the flesh do not seem to trigger any psychophysical reaction out of him – his desired body is present in the earthly world but his longing spirit is in heaven.

Peter Paul Rubens: *St. Sebastian*

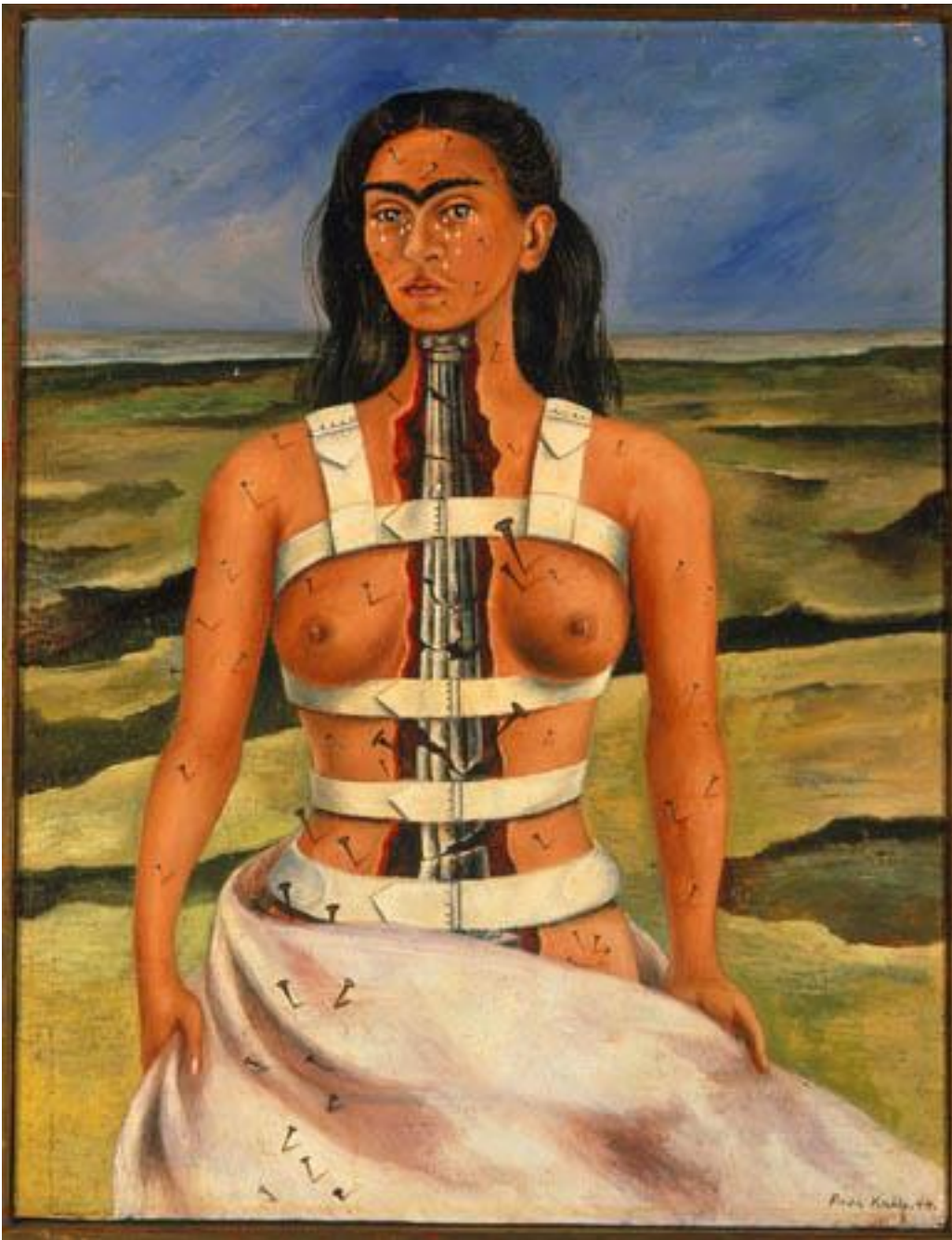
Into the erotics of the painful body, which defines the iconography of the depictions of Christ and hence the body image of the European culture since the Renaissance, the desire for invisibility is encoded. Through erotics, the divine nature, also present in the man, is assimilated in the beauty that

¹⁶ In recent years, there have been countless works on the erotic aspects of Jesus' physical nature, which are not only about the issue of nakedness or gender, but also the presumed physical affection – for both men (especially the disciples) and women (especially Mary Magdalene). See: Susannah Cornwall: *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ . Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology*. New York & London, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014. <https://www.amazon.com/Sex-Uncertainty-Body-Christ-Spirituality/dp/1845536681>

is reflected in the painful body. At the same time, this erotics obscures the disease, the decay – it promises an afterlife without presenting the danger of physical demise. The classic renaissance, and even more the Baroque art, sees the tortured body of the wounded Christ unreasonably beautiful in order to enforce immortality through the poetic means of exaltation and exaggeration. However, the ontological meaning of the wound is erased from the eroticised body apparatus. If the wound stays on the almost flawless skin as a visual sign – as a tiny nuance, the allure of immortality –, it cannot point to the man as a trans-human being.

Only in the twentieth century does European art arrive to a point – with the canon-disrupting body depictions of Egon Schiele, the gestures of body art, the bloody rituals of performers turning their own bodies into works of art, the Viennese Actionists, and so on –, that it can divest the man of the body image based on the Greek beauty ideal, as a marble statue escaping from its shell. Modern and contemporary works return to the recognition of medieval art and see the body as the sensitive flesh that exists before the ideological expectations based on eternity existed. There is, however, a fundamental difference: the secularised body image does not refer to the divine origin. The subject of the wounded body no longer has to place the Saviour in front of it as a medium to be able to ritually identify with it – although its culture and artistic tradition forces it to understand its own body image from the wounded figure of Christ. But he bears the sacrifice for himself when he accepts his wounded body as it is: the transparency of transience. One of the earliest and most shocking examples of this is the art of Frida Kahlo, who replaced her own female body – marked by illness, disability and wounds – with the body of the Crucified. The painting *The Broken Column* (1944) points to her split torso as her own lifelong cross, and identifies her own spiked body figure with the body and sacrifices of Jesus Christ. With Kahlo, who questions the redeemability of the man, it is not about *Imitatio Christi* anymore but about pointing out the abandonment of the singular being: the pain penetrating the flesh now haunts the mortal man.¹⁷

¹⁷ I discussed this in detail in one of my studies: Gerda Széplaky: Korom tej. Nőiség és áldozatiság Frida Kahlo festészetében. *Performa* 2018/1.
[http://performativitas.hu/korom_tej_noiseg_es_aldozatisag_frida_kahlo_festeszeteben#epubcfi\(/6/2\[Széplaky\]!4\[Széplaky\]/2/2/2/1:0\)](http://performativitas.hu/korom_tej_noiseg_es_aldozatisag_frida_kahlo_festeszeteben#epubcfi(/6/2[Széplaky]!4[Széplaky]/2/2/2/1:0))



The Morgue series of Andres Serrano (1992) can be interpreted as a radical paraphrase of the “Dead Christ” depictions. The photos, reminiscent of the works of Holbein, were taken of freshly dead people, showing body parts that not only declare the nature of death, through the direct ability to perceive, made possible by the realism of the photos, but also point out the cause of death –making these works horrific and so, in the Barthesian sense, they become pornographic. In addition, they only show body fragments, the disintegrated state of the human body, eliminating the illusion of both idealisation and wholeness. This body depiction paradigm is also determined by the experience of the man’s ontological loneliness – the man whom God has abandoned or who has denied God –, which was pointed out not just by Nietzsche but also, with a similarly vehement force, art as well. The images of the wounded body, repressed in the knowledge of transience, become even more haunting and eerie as a consequence of recognising abandonment. In contemporary art, we increasingly

encounter body images that cross human boundaries, changing into a different kind of nature and form of being. Works that represent the post-human state, fundamentally attack the humanistic ideal of the Greek-Christian culture.



At the same time, the portrayal of being wounded does not imply the identification of a person with a dehumanised body, the profane ideal of rotten flesh and a biological instinct-being deprived of its spirit and soul. On the contrary, through the vulnerability to be wounded, art is able to point to the being who is open to transcendence. For a being capable of understanding the essence of his own existence, by being a living entity, transcendence is not revealed as a metaphysical event, beyond the earthly world, but through its body exposed to transgressive experiences. The symbolic marker of transgressive experiences is the wound. The physical attributes (body fluids, hair clumps, bones, flesh tissues) that are at the centre of the twentieth century human body representations, can be captured through the ontological marker of the wound. The wound, still bleeding and exuding from being alive, is a body surface that is suitable for deconstructing the aestheticised body apparatus; and at the same time, it is a symptomatic body opening that allows the non-present and the inexplicable to be discovered – in the living matter, the (still) living flesh that is exposed to transience.