CHIAROSCURI DELLA BELLEZZA
Sguardi sul processo artistico e terapeutico

A cura di Roberto Boccalon

PSICOART

Indice

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Chiaroscuro – A Psycho-Esthetic Category?

Basically, the keyword of this conference "chiaroscuro" constitutes the subject of my essay, both as a term and as a visual phenomenon. It is my interest to investigate the question whether "chiaroscuro" might serve as an esthetic category of theoretical and practical relevance in the art-therapeutic and expressive-analytic work. My intention is to develop my thoughts along a number of "pictorial tableaus" which assemble images, objects, and sketches due to the evidence of esthetic equivalences.
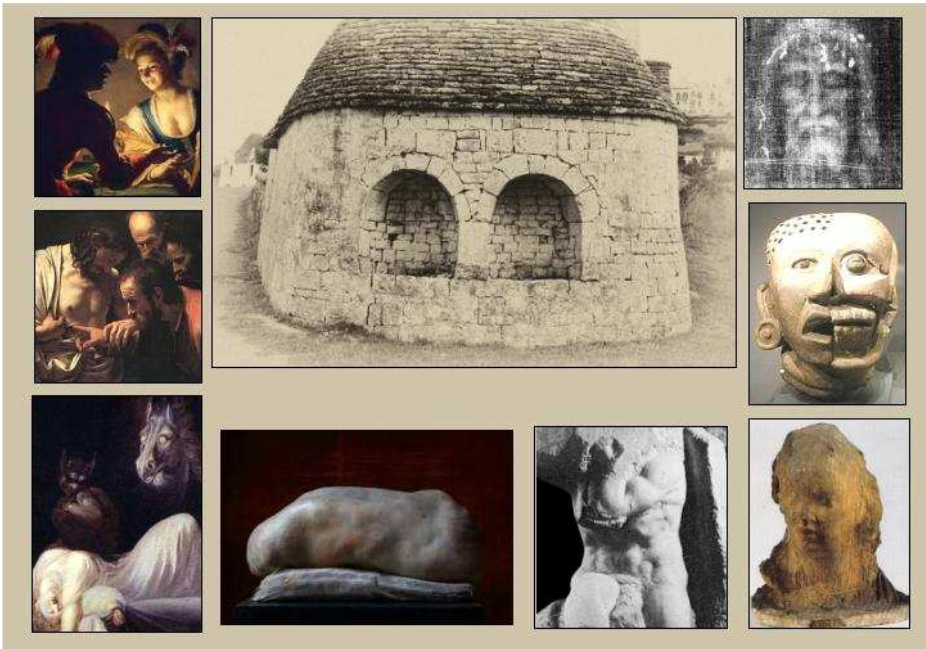

Fig. 1 - Chiaroscuro opens a wide esthetic and anthropological field.

Throughout, the reader will be asked to imagine, whenever demanded by the material, a three-dimensional space.
In the first part of my investigations I will analyze the different meanings of the term "chiaroscuro".[1] I would like to show that we

have to make an epistemological choice how to approach the complex phenomenon. It is my conviction, in accordance with Gottfried Boehm and others, that in order to gain a deeper understanding of such complex esthetic phenomena and to likewise consider what we cannot know, we have to move beyond our asking "what is it?" and "what do we see?". Rather, we have to take a dialectical, local and temporal or transversal perspective, approached by the questions "where does light-dark take place?" and "how does it happen and affect" our senses. Throughout, I will make connections to mythological imagery and psychological themes.

In part two (the main part) I want to focus on chiaro-oscuro as a visual phenomenon from an anthropological perspective. For doing so, I will first investigate conditions for light and dark to emerge visually and to be perceived by a human subject. Furthermore, I will analyze aspects of topology, morphology and temporality of the morphogenetic space and the spatial, visual and temporal structure of the media from which light-dark originates and describe the relation between the elements involved. To exemplify how everything is connected, I will consecutively discuss the human face, the niche (la *nicchia*), and the artwork *Atlante* by Michelangelo. I will single out two possible standpoints vis-à-vis the object: the "standpoint of visibility" and the "standpoint of visuality". The approach to artwork and to clinical material, based on my experience both as artist and as analyst, focuses – apart from psychodynamics – on material and local/relational aspects of the medium and on the dynamics of plasticity and a "visual symptomatic" that has got its (best) theoretical foundation in recent literature in the research and publications by Georges Didi-Huberman, whose approach is likewise rooted in art historical, philosophical and profoundly psychoanalytical thinking.

Concluding my essay, I will connect the findings with my understanding of the psycho-esthetic work within the psychotherapeutic scene. Through this, I intend to show that chiaro-oscuro has a fundamental function in the presentability and figurability of existential themes. A visual symptom indicating a fissure which serves both as reason and abyss of visibility, incarnation of the subject and consciousness.

1 - *"Il chiaroscuro"* or *"chiaro-oscuro"*?

From the very start, the development and findings of our investigations will depend on the decision whether to write chiaroscuro in one word, with one o or in two words, two o's plus a hyphen: chiaro-oscuro. What do I mean by this and why does it matter?

Choosing the word *il chiaroscuro* as a full entity, a noun, we refer to an art historical term referring to a style element and a technique. The term describes the use of tonal contrasts modeling a plasticity of bodies and creating dramatic sceneries predominantly in two-dimensional art.

Fig. 2 - Chiaroscuro stile, technique and *topoi* in drawing, painting and printing.

Historically, the function has been mostly mimetic in the sense that its aim was to re-present nature by depicting alighted parts as well as the shadows produced by the depicted scene. *Chiaroscuro* made a big impact on the visual arts from the Renaissance up to the 17th

and 18th century (Leonardo, Caravaggio, Rembrandt), but has kept its place throughout art history up to today. It likewise appears in sculpture, vocal art, music, low-key photography and film (film noir).
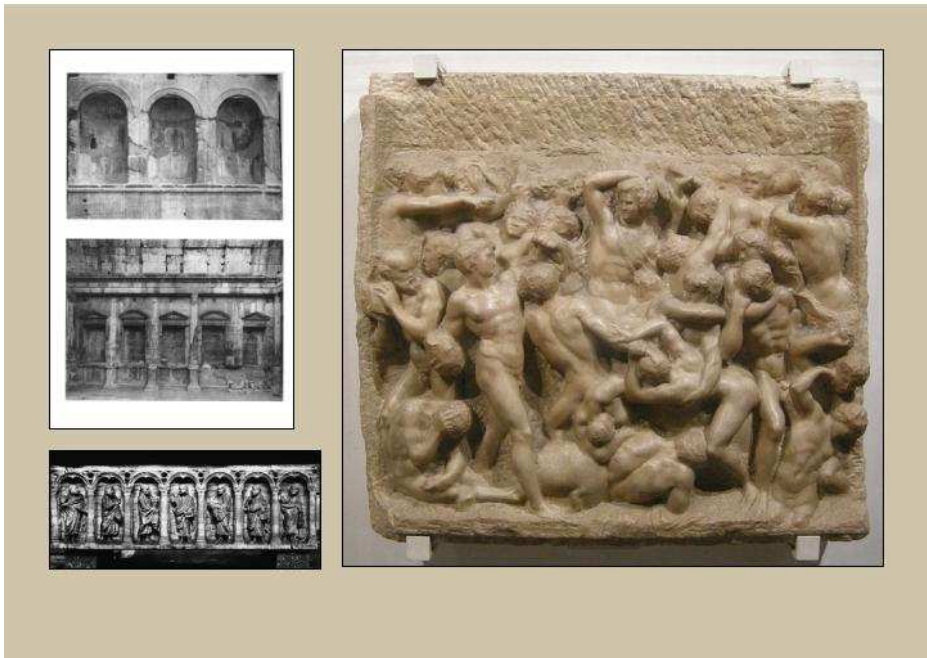
Fig. 3 - Chiaroscuro in architecture and sculpture; complementarity of order and chaos.

Understanding chiaroscuro as a noun, then, is implying an approach that is highly factual. It leads us to positivistic canonic knowledge, providing answers to the question "what do we see?". Choosing this approach equals readability, addressing objectification, re-cognition, implicitly supposing attainable knowledge and a given (past) reality.

If, however, we instead choose the constellation of two-words, *chiaro-oscuro* (in French *claire-obscure*), we detect a totally different structure: now there is heterogeneity and complementary that can no longer serve as answers to questions like "what is it?".

Above all, this constellation of two contradicting terms opens up a complex field or dynamic phenomenon – this is not least accentuated by the placement of the hyphen in an intermediate position: an ambiguous, amorphous sign, unoriented, senseless if isolated. Such a hyphen (also called "copula" in grammar) simultaneously connects and separates. At the same time as it indicates incommensurability, an edge or break, it opens a passage in the middle of two poles. Possibly the best term to use for this intermediate sign and edge is the Italian word "tra" or Latin "trans" (to traverse, cross, pass through, pass over; athwart; Italian: *attraverso*) . The hyphen is a medium and an event. Now the questions forced upon us are "where?" and "how?", "in which temporality?" does it take place and happen (in the double sense of the French *avoir lieu*). Now we are in the temporal mode of the presence and (potential) future.

This second kind of "obscure" choice (*chiaro-oscuro*) fundamentally transforms our object of interest: now it is no longer a noun, a thing of visibility and readability, now it has become the subject of a dialectic sensual, i.e. visual process. The change requires abstaining from our power of knowing. It demands tolerating contradictions and multiplicity in our perception and to accept fuzz, void and the unknowable. We are asked to perform a visual work that includes "considerations of representability" (Sigmund Freud) and the work of our memory and therefore we are also confronted with the involved psychic forces and regulations. This means to be engaged with the phenomenon immediately as an active subject, involved in a recursive, never-ending work of phenomenological approaching and hermeneutic interpretation. This is basically the expressive-analytical approach I am following.

When we look at the verbal field we opened up in more detail, we encounter a plethora of meanings of *chiaro* and *oscuro*.

Chiaro	Oscuro
light, luminous, illuminated, white toned	dark, shadow, dimmed, black toned
clear, obvious, lucid, transparent, conscious	blurred, opaque, vague, doubtful, weird, unconscious, uncanny
visible, evident, proximate	invisible, hidden, distant

According to a first associative line of thinking, chiaro-oscuro refers to the physical opposition of light and darkness, luminosity and shadow, white and black tonalities. In a second dimension, though, chiaro-oscuro insinuates clarity, lucidity versus blurriness, vagueness, unclearness unconnected to physical light or color. It is the threshold between clear-consciousness and the obscure, the unknown, the uncanny, the unconscious "dark continent". Incidentally, among hunters, "seeing the lights" translates into seeing the eyes of the animals during the night: the gaze of tremendous darkness! It exemplifies the paradox folding between light and dark: fascination, desire and fear of the unknown. In a third related dimension, light-dark relates to the incommensurability between the visible and the invisible, the obvious and the hidden. Through these examples, we are reminded that there exists a mutual relation between the histories of light and of consciousness, knowledge and the mystic experience of spirituality.

As expressed in examples taken from mythological imagery, we enter the tragic and existential fields of Orpheo and Euridice in the depths of Hades, of Perseo fending off of the traumatic, petrifying gaze of Medusa, and of Ulysses confronting the seductive powers of the Sirens.

Fig. 4 - Mythological equivalences: Orpheo and Euridice (t.l.), Ulysses and the Sirens (b.l.), Perseo and Medusa (r).

It designates the abyss and turmoil between the cultured "enlightened islands of consciousness" (P. v. Matt) and the dark deep sea of desire, the unconscious and death. A detailed esthetic analysis of the mythological narration and the related imagery – which I cannot carry out here – would produce findings that support our understanding of the expressive value and significance of chiaroscuro. Furthermore we could demonstrate an esthetically and therapeutically most intriguing fact that in order to succeed in, or better survive the confrontation with the conflictuous forces, the mythological subject is introducing and using a medium (wax, musical instrument, music, mirror-shield, the ship "Argos") between himself and his counterparts. A medium with the capacity for flexibility, adjustment, attunement and attachment as well as separation, with the power of reflection and absorption, storage and memory as well as expressive figurability: qualities that coincide in what is called plasticity.

Fig. 5 - "Tra": Plasticity of the medium (copula) embodying simultaneously engagement, protection and survival: wax, mirror-shield, music, ship Argos. Contemporary example: M. Ying Lin, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial,* Washington.

In order to understand this complexity and mediality more profoundly, I would like to move beyond the linguistic level of metaphoric meaning and pictorial re-presentation of chiaro-oscuro by approaching the morphogenetic place from which the phenomena light and darkness originate: emerging and affecting our senses immediately, making sense even before gaining access to words or symbolic meaning.

2 - *Incarnation of the subject*

In an anthropological perspective – which must serve as the basic point of view in our field – we find that in order to be perceived, the visual phenomena we are interested in (light and dark) necessarily need to be placed in a locatable and material context. It demands a

matrix or medium (Italian: *mezzo*) which is touchable, affected or unaffected by light. It is the texture and surface of things that matter, as they affect the ways in which the light gets reflected or absorbed, whether it becomes present or excluded (causing shadows or dark-ness). Light-dark can be only perceived with help of the other senses, when a medium can transform light into other forms of en-ergy (caloric, chemical or electrical).

In fact, we can differentiate three types of media involved in the performance of chiaro-oscuro; two of which are opposed to one an-other and yet mutually "engaged" in a shared space:

1. On the one hand, it is the matter, materials and objects of our ex-terior environment with their surfaces and physical qualities. We can call it (external) "world".

Fig. 6 - Medium 1. external physical "world" affected by light and dark.

2. On the other hand, it is me, the perceiver, and "the matter of which I consist": the substrates of our sense organs (eyes, skin, etc.), of the nervous system and the senso-motoric functions. My body in its entirety matters, including its powers to move, to connect, differentiate and mediate inside and outside. This is what traditionally (since Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, etc.) has been labeled as the German *der Leib*, Italian "*il corpo proprio*"; corporeity in the sense of the "body that I am", me, an incorporated subject.
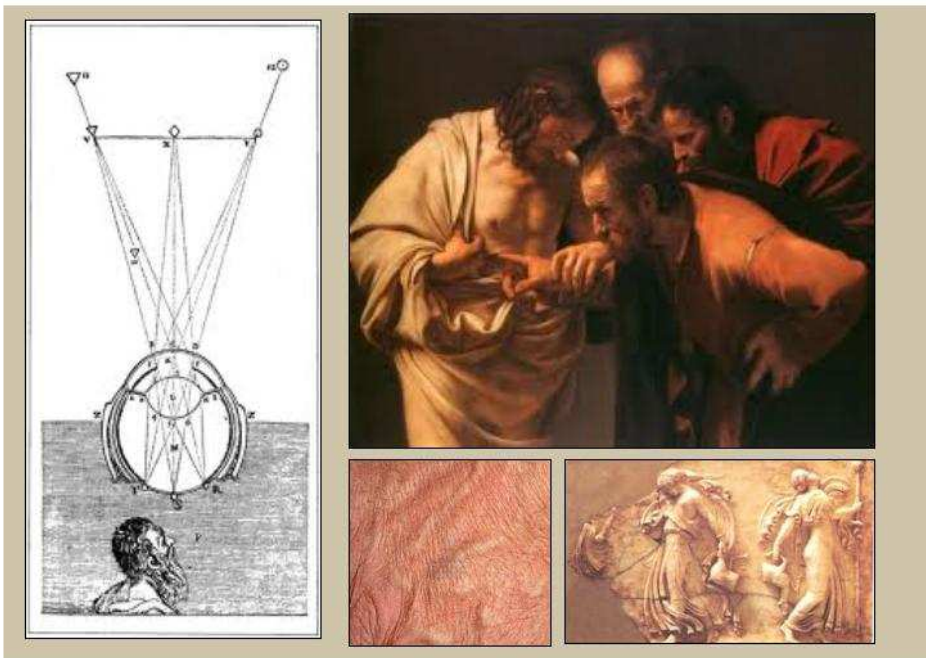

Fig. 7 - Medium 2. *Leib (corpo proprio)* affected by light and dark.

3. The third category of media, a sort of communion of "world" and *Leib*, originating in the face, as understood by Emmanuel Levinas: the epiphany of the other in the "face to face" situation and in the artwork as an externalized or extended *Leib.* Both face and artwork constitute a medium *par excellence*: "the outside of the inside and the inside of the outside" as Merleau-Ponty describes it. In the recent work of Marina Abramovic *The artist is present* (USA, 2012), face and artwork coincide in a unique way.
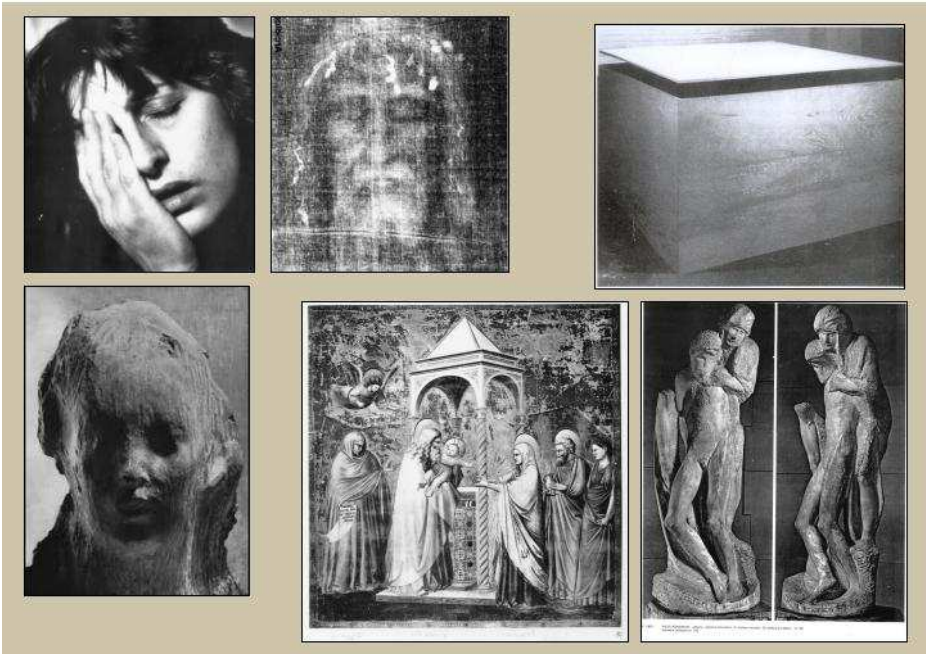
Fig. 8 - Medium par excellence: The face of the Other (l.) and the artwork (r.): the inside of the outside - the outside of the inside.

2.1 - *"White wall – black hole"*

An example of how the three media coincide is provided by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Via the formula "white wall – black hole" ("*parete bianca – buco nero*"), they postulate a general scheme defining the face in cinema. The formula describes the "object" face ("white wall") as a screen for general projections crossed out or opened up through the "black holes" of subjectivity, a singular gaze of the foreign . The face provides a *lieu*, as well as an act, where seeing and being seen coincide in spite of their incommensurability, alienating and mediating self and other, familiarity and the unknown, inside and outside. The "black holes" in the face ("white wall") first and foremost either are a responsive or a blind, negative space ("*buco oscuro*") expressing the presence or absence of affects and feelings. If we slightly modify the formula to fit our context and say: "light wall – dark hole" ("*parete chiara–buco oscuro*"), we easily

recognize that this scheme is not merely defining a face but, in addition, a sculptural/architectonic constellation called niche, recess, (Italian: *nicchia*) (see also Figg. 1, 9, 13). Let us follow and deepen this aspect for a moment.

2.2 - *The niche as act*

The niche can be defined either as an excavation or recess in a wall or an extension of the space into a wall (apse). It might take the shape of a shell. Furthermore, it belongs to the same class as natural grottos, caves or the bird's nest (French: *le nid*).
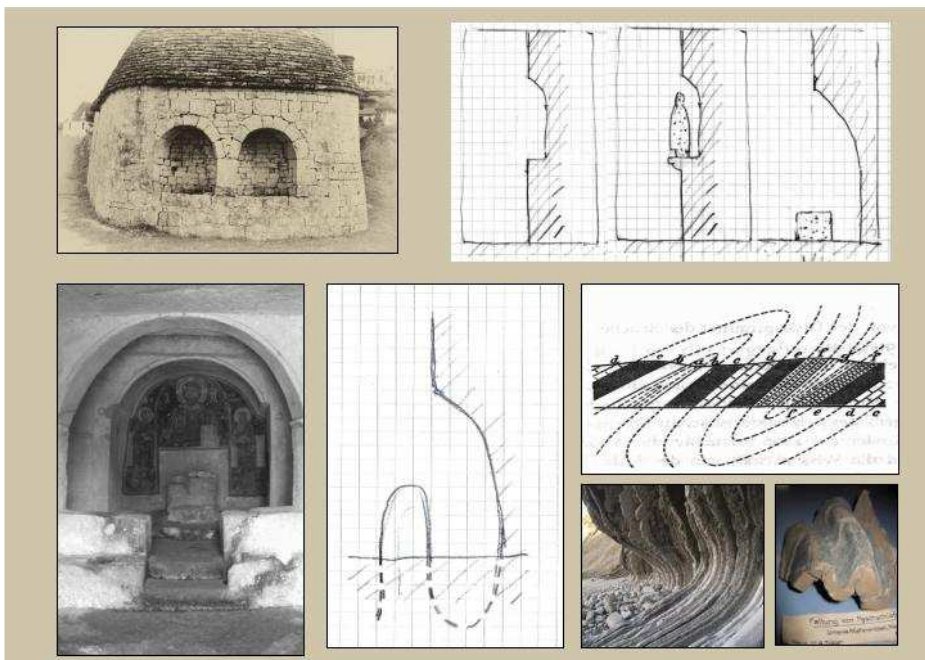

Fig. 9 - Topology of the niche. Fold, excavation, incorporation and stratification.

In ecology, the definition of the term "niche" is not static, but instead, dynamic, spatial and relational. It describes a particular area within a habitat, occupied by an organism including the functions and relationships this organism has within the niche. This meets my

understanding of an artwork in general, and the sculptural niche in particular, as a "microworld" (U. Moser), with traces of the lived engagement between the interior and exterior world. Not surprisingly, we apply "niche" to situations especially fitted to a person's interests, needs and abilities.

The niche is a *lieu* which deeply interlinks the field of anthropology with a broad range of morphological as well as functional equations. It starts on a most basic level with the womb giving birth, ending with the grave containing the dead body.
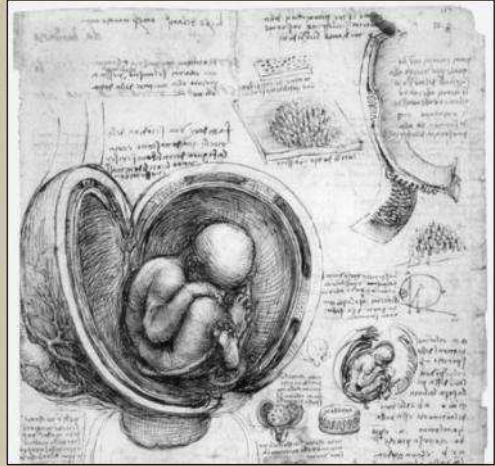
Fig. 10 - Anthropological dimensions: impregnation, birth and death.

Likewise, it structures our environment in the form of natural excavations as well as niches in architecture and arts. It offers places of dramatic or ritual activity: the apses in churches and the theater stage. And, last but not least, it resurfaces in the shapes of the scull or the stone churches, *chiese rupestri*, in Apulia (see Fig. 14). The complex topology of a niche always implies a rupture, a threshold

and passage between opposites and counterparts: inside and out-
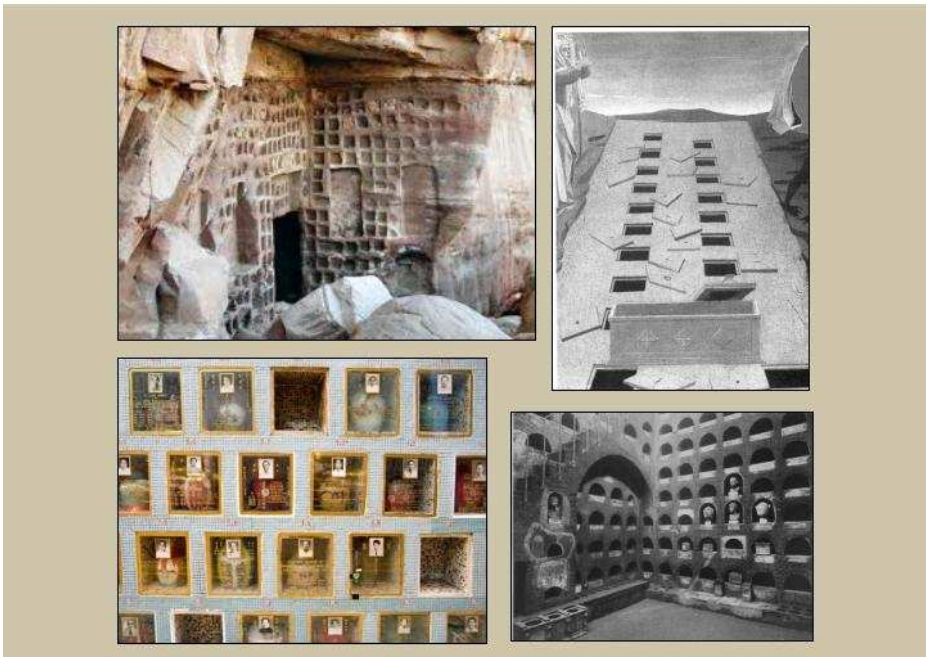side, openness and closure, connection and disconnection.

Fig. 11 - Columbarium; urn niches; *Last Judgment*, Fra Angelico.

The niche can both expose and protect, contain and set in the open.
It enacts the opposition and dialectic relatedness between genera-
tive development, birth and death, between the corporeal and the
immaterial and the spiritual. Topologically, a sculptural niche can
be understood as a fold (see Figs. 9, 10). A fold is a paradox topo-
logical structure where at least two contradictious elements meet:
convexity and concavity; continuity and discontinuity; connected-
ness and separation; inside and outside; openness and closure.
Temporally, it must be experienced both as succession and simulta-
neity. A sculpture within a niche is dialectically corresponding both
to the wall and to the open space. The sculpture constitutes a me-
dium in an intermediate space and with a mediating function.
This leads us back to the preposition "*tra*" as well as to the hyphen
as a morpheme: spatial, temporal and transferred, located between

the material and the immaterial world, transubstantiating matter into meaning and vice versa.
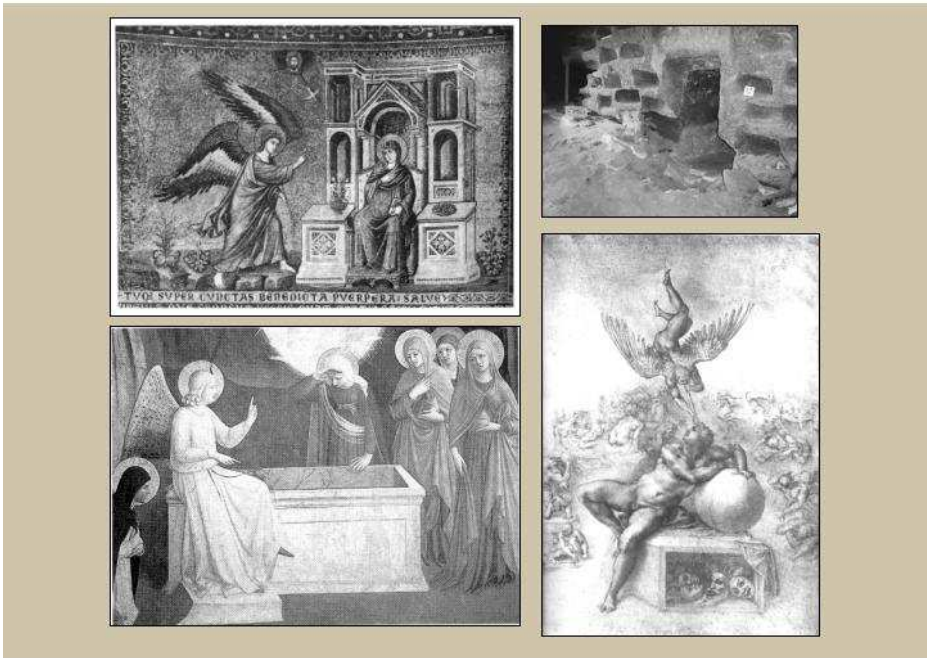

Fig. 12 - Reciprocal transformation between material / corporeal and immaterial: annunciation, immaculate conception, death, resurrection, inspiration.

Realizing the privileged relation the niche takes to light and dark, we can recognize it to be a model for the morphogenetic space from where the dialectic of chiaro-oscuro originates and takes place (*a lieu*). But we also have to confront the paradox that the presented, enlightened sculpture is causing shade and blindness (Italian: *acce-care*) or, put differently, that there inevitably is a dark hidden backside to the sculpture (see Figg. 13, 15).

Referring back to the scheme "white wall - black hole", we recognize how in cinema the switch in the complementary relation between opaqueness and transparency, dark room and illuminated screen and dark spots, film negative and positive image, continuously changes. Furthermore, dark holes in a white wall invariably evoke experiencing the "niches" of the eyes (eyehole, *orbita*) in the

scull as a three-dimensional object, where our seeing gets lost in the dark – and wherefrom the skull is responding by looking back at us. Wherefrom the gaze of death is striking us forcefully.

Anatomically, the *orbita* is the place where holes and crevasses (*foraminae* and *fissurae*) penetrate the skull, vanishing into the interior of the "black box" (G. Didi-Huberman), i.e. where the polarity between corporeal/matter and significance is overcome, where *soma* and *sema* coincide in the activation of neuronal networks. This passage marks the threshold and the abyss between memory and presence, between imagination and expression, between self and other. Before proceeding to the psychotherapeutic scene, we will test our previous thoughts with help of an exemplary artwork.
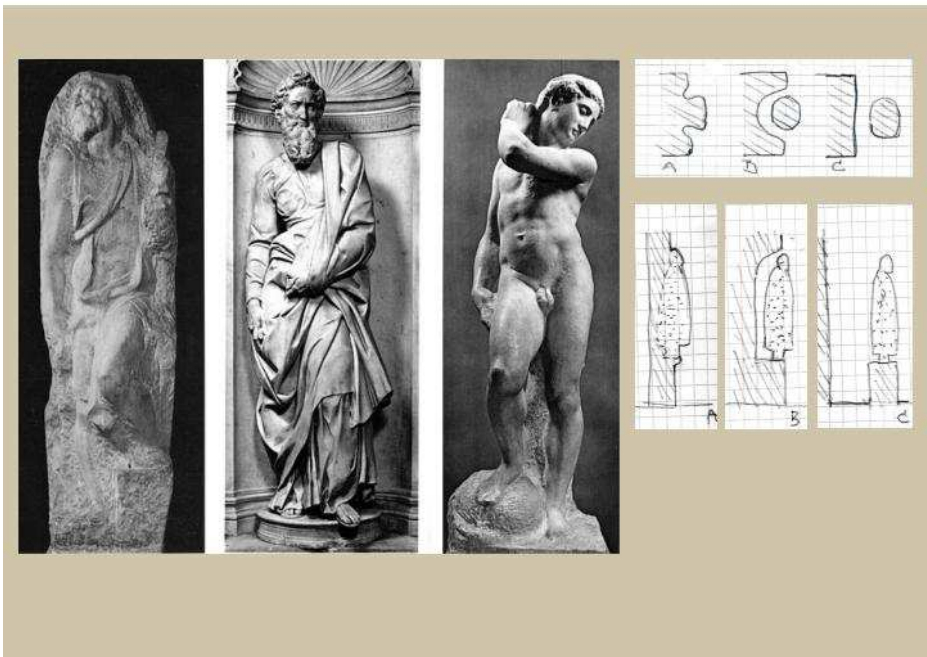

Fig. 13 - Unfolding the niche: relief - sculptural niche - freestanding sculpture. The dialectics between lighting and shading, exposing and concealing.
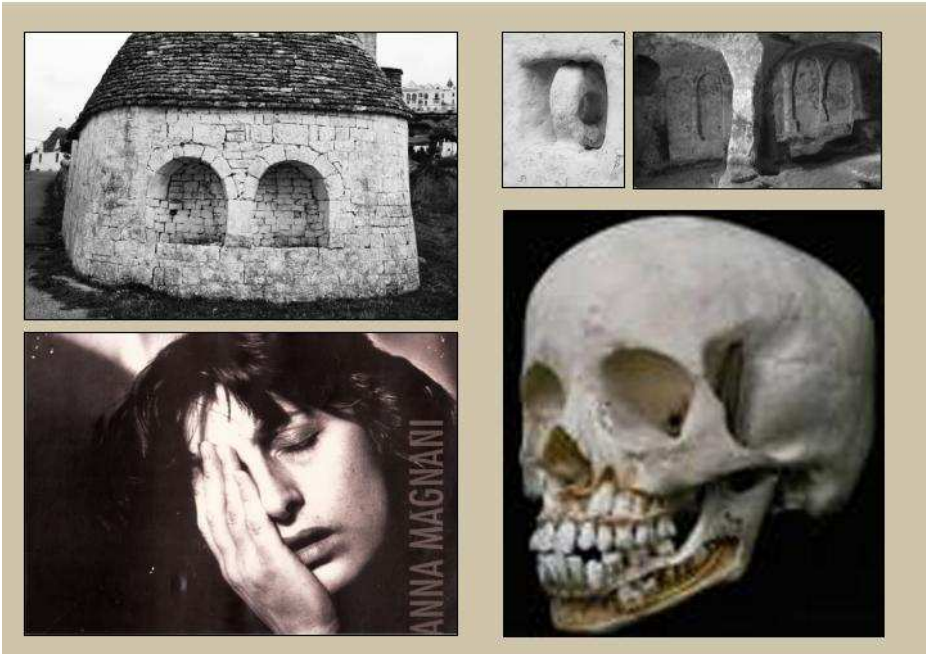
Fig. 14 - "White wall - black hole": the gaze of life and death.

2.3 - "Atlante" or the edge of becoming a subject

If we now direct our attention to the so called "uncompleted" sculpture by Michelangelo, the "slave Atlante", we can exemplify the dialectics between dark and light, between negative and positive space in additional aspects and specific proficiencies of the artwork. The above described phenomenon of the reflection of the gaze ("black hole") striking us from the Other ("white wall") leads us to differentiate two possible perspectives: the perspective of visibility and the perspective of visuality as worked out by G. Didi-Huberman on a mural by Fra Angelico. Following the perspective of visibility we see – on first sight – a big block of marble. Towards the bottom and at its sides we recognize the raw "natural" stone. In its center we can identify processed forms in which we recognize fragments of a male body. In a second structural view, we recognize the aforementioned topological relations typical of a niche, al-

though in this case the elements of a sculptural niche (wall, excavation and sculpture) are not, not yet or even no longer separated.
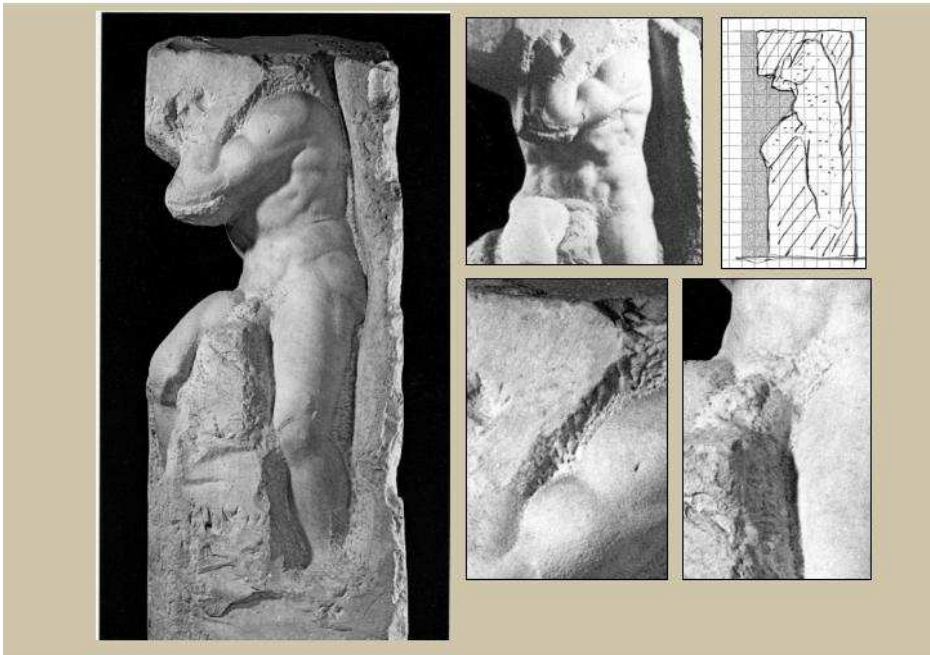

Fig. 15 - *Atlante* by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1525-1530. Chiaro-oscuro as critical moment, esthetic surpass, and "esthetic salvation" (W. Benjamin) of the subject.

Therefore I would propose to look at this piece as a niche *in actu*, or a "still live" of a dialectic movement between captivity, subjugation and delivery of a subject (see also Fig. 13).

Within the expectations of visibility and objectivity, the separation and delineation between "stone" and "figure" are blurred and incomplete, both visually and in the morphology of its texture. Many spots do not allow to decide whether what we see can be read as "stone" or "figure". We even have to accept the paradoxical fact that the stone is figurating as figure and the figure is – in fact – petrified. The figure is cut into the block or carved out of the marble in layers, leaving visible traces of the tools. We can read these layers and traces like an anamnesis of material:

the "story" inherent to the stone; the "story" about reciprocal effects of imprinting/impression/impregnating and containment as well as about concretion and conflict of figuration and defiguration. The differentiable esthetic elements within the sculpture are related to one another in a complex reciprocity to an extent that the simple figure-ground relation can no longer sufficiently describe what we are perceiving. Instead, we are simultaneously confronted with a dialectic interrelation and a communion of the involved elements. The sculpture appears as a monad as well as a complex montage. The indifferent, formless parts of the sculpture morphologically build crevasses, folds, transitions, almost geological faults, wave-like structures causing darkness and light. They localize the spots or areas where the plasticity of figuration and defiguration and the pictorial process of visualization and virtualization take place. Furthermore, they constitute the threshold from which the reciprocal transformation of the unformed into form, the transubstantiation of material into meaning, "raw nature" into "fine arts" or "recognitions" and vice versa, can be experienced. Maybe we could understand them to be equivalent to what is called the "erogenous zones" or the "perceptive-expressive zones" (for example the face) on the level of the *Leib*.

2.4 - *"L'oscuro è il chiaro"* – *"La luce è il buio"*

In the framework of deductive language and mimetic imagery – i.e. the standpoint of knowledge – the analyzed areas are senseless, meaningless, illegible. They are neither documentary nor symbolic. Instead, they incorporate the complex temporal and morphologic structure of what, in psychoanalysis, we call the symptom. The symptom understood as the work of memory and presentability, i.e. condensation, displacement, repression and return, a conversion in the "flesh" (M. Merleau-Ponty) of the material. In our examples, it is the gesture of visual indication, understood as a critical moment in an epistemological sense, not as a clinical fact. Seen from the perspective of the visual we as spectators are directly engaged in a aesthetic-poetic process where the dark and obscure forces affect presentability and figurability by surpassing and subverting the solid-

ity of objectivity, knowledge, and consciousness. This turmoil and rupture, though, does neither constitute a lack nor an incompleteness. Rather, it surpasses the limitations of the stone by creating over determination, leading to a surplus of sense. The power of this zone lies in the process of permanent disfiguration and figuration, de- and reconstruction of sense and meaning, with the latent energy and potential for conversions, transfigurations, transformations, transubstantiations and reconciliation of opposites. We participate in a privileged space and moment of permanent beginning and "rebirth" (*rinascimento*). I.e. an enactment of time, space and matter called incarnation or embodiment of the subject. In the terms of Merleau-Ponty we could call this an "indirect ontology". If we reinterpret the artwork *Atlante* from Michelangelo as "dialectic image" (Walter Benjamin) we could understand it as the subject in the process of (just) freeing itself while simultaneously (still and always) being subjected (Latin: *subjectus*). "Esthetic salvation" (*Ästhetik der Erlösung*, Walter Benjamin) then would not mean to "accomplish" the work in the sense of liberating the slave. Instead, deliverance happens through the esthetic implementation of a constellation that puts opposites into a dialogical contrast and keeps complementarities in a floating balance. Facing and reflecting irreconcilable traumatic opposites through the presentation of a sculptural plasticity and a visual transgression. According to Didi-Huberman, the distinction between the visible and the visual is esthetically connected to two poetic expressive principles: "the figurative principle" and "the principle of figuration" (*figurabilità*) or "figural principle". Applying the figurative principle would mean, for example, to paint dark and light tonalities observed in an object in chiaroscuro manner, or to carve a figure or any other motif into the stone, i.e. to represent the visible or invisible as factual facts. Instead, in applying the figural principle (as in our example Fig.15), a figure or motif is expressed as stone, or as the complementarity of chiaro-oscuro. The figural principle presents its motif, the subject, as a visual phenomenon beyond visibility or invisibility, as "actual fact" (Josef Albers) or "act" (Jean-Paul Sartre). Transferring the findings of our investigations concerning the face, the niche and the artwork *Atlante* to psychotherapy, we postulate an esthetic-poetic equivalence

that concerns aspects of the *lieu*, as well as moments of the involved relational process and the chiaro-oscuro as epistemic element. This allows giving sensual and metaphoric evidence not only to different modes of engagement between self and other of the patient (transference), but also to differentiate theoretical and counter-transference positions of the researcher-therapist: the "autistic-contiguous position", the "paranoid-schizoid" and the "depressive position", with all diagnostic and therapeutic implications as described by Thomas Ogden.
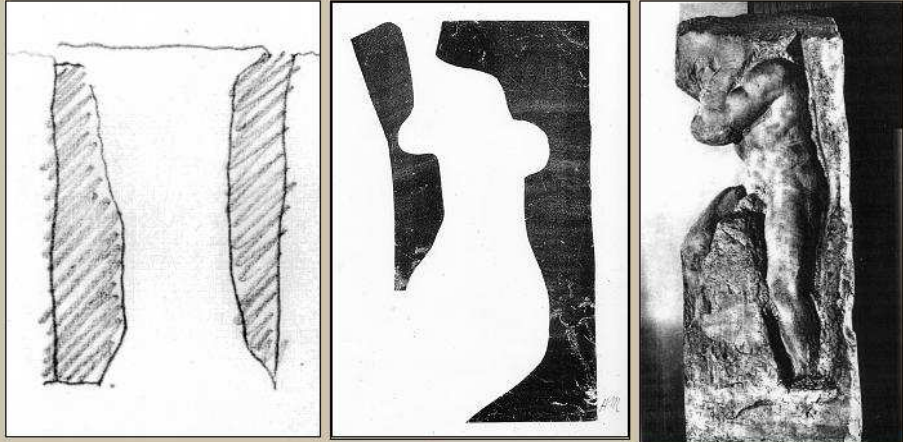

Fig. 16 - Chiaro-oscuro as act of signification. The work and power of the visual symptom: visuality, figuration, incarnation.

Conclusion

The question I raised at the beginning of my essay was whether chiaro-oscuro can serve as a psycho-esthetic category with theoretical and technical relevance for an approach to arts in psychotherapy. It is likewise the question whether such a category can provide specific epistemological benefits and might have an independent expressive-perceptive value within the therapeutic procedure. My exposition of the linguistic, mythological and particularly of the aesthetic findings analyzing the niche, the face as well as the artwork *Atlante*, offer evidence that by approaching chiaro-oscuro as a dialectic visual and figural phenomenon, we get access to existential human themes and affective states.
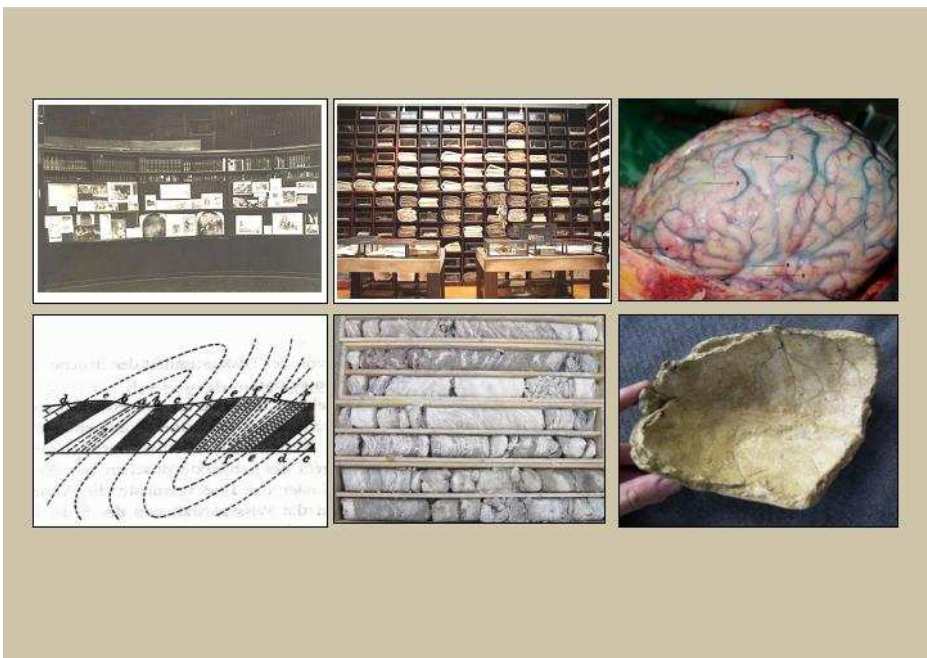

Fig. 17 - *Avoir lieu*: morphogenetic forces and the unconscious of time. Stratifications, storage, anachronism, a-logic, imprints and reminiscences, work of memory, survival.
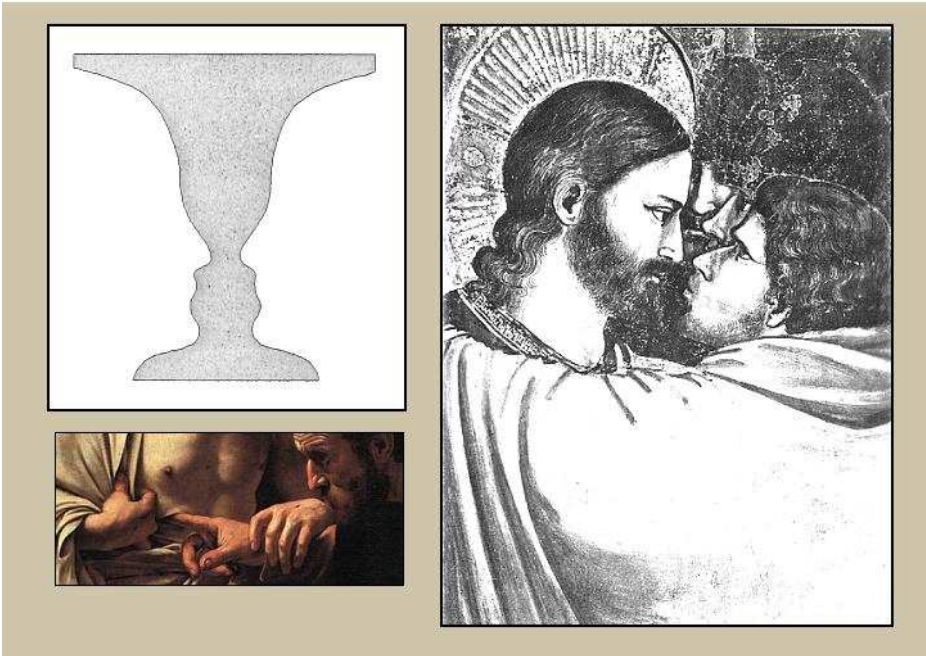
Fig. 18 - "Face to face". The developmental and epistemic power of negative /dark space and the dialectic of the gaze: figurability, visuality and insight. "L'oscuro è il chiaro" – "La luce è il buio".

I understand the visual dialectic of chiaro-oscuro to be a privileged, maybe even unique form of presentability and figurability of early pre-symbolic and preverbal somato-psychic states and situations embodying (*ins-Werk-setzen*) their corporeal and affective conflicts and catastrophes. The analysis of chiaro-oscuro and its morphogenetic ground which we found in the scheme "white wall – black hole", i.e. the face and the niche, offers us a clue which primary scenes can survive or be reenacted in these esthetic constellations. We are referring to early attachments and object relations within the mother-child and child-environmental matrix with the developmental themes of containment, imprinting and impregnation, attunement, mirroring, being one-and-separate, separation, object- and subject-formation. Chiaro-oscuro as effect of the topology of the niche and the face, dialectically enacts and reflects the heterogeneity and relatedness of opposites and the paradox of presentability of

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void and formlessness. The dialectic of chiaro-oscuro is more than a descriptive, mimetic pictorial element and, thereby, is different from a symbol. Instead, it is the *mise-en-scène* of the visual or plastic conversion of immaterial and material, of past and future, of reality and possibility in the matrix ("flesh") of the artwork and *Leib*. Chiaro-oscuro is the symptom of a negativity that builds a *sine qua non* for attunement and attachment on a primary sensual level and for reaching accommodation and understanding on any level of inter-subjective interaction. Last but not least, chiaro-oscuro is a critical esthetic element within subject-formation, questioning the reliability of what I see and know and questioning the solidity of my standpoint as a subject: "*l'oscuro è il chiaro*" – "*la luce è il buio*".

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