

VISUALIZING THE TRANSCENDENTAL: IRAKLI PARJIANI'S METAPHYSICAL LANDSCAPES

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ABSTRACT

According to contemporary philosophic-aesthetic reflection, the transcendent dimension is essential for human existence and manifests itself in aesthetic experience (Bryl, 1995: 104). Art is by necessity metaphoric and symbolic in nature allowing possibilities for expressing certain kinds of internal experiences not amenable to conceptual explanation. Artistic experience "as well as the identity of the picture" is by no means transcendental; it reaches beyond the thought, into the extra-ordinary reality that is signified by the picture. The paper explores the concept of transcending in relation to the work of art and examines the ways transcending is realized in the artwork. To elucidate the above issues and illustrate the argument, the paper explores metaphysical landscapes by a Georgian painter Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991).

KEYWORDS

20th Century Georgian Art | Abstract Art | Visual Representation | Transcending | Irakli Parjiani

Transcending has not often been an objective of systematic studies in the realm of art history. For the founder of existential-hermeneutical science of art Michael Brötje, this means that the history of art is practically at its dawn (Bryl, 1995: 102). The concept of transcending is crucial for both creating and interpreting art. Visual metaphors and symbols provide a conceptual framework for the work of art to manifest something other than itself; the artwork as an allegory, presenting an alternative reality, transcends the realm of the ordinary and emerges as a projection of a certain meaning. During the creative process, the artist goes beyond himself for the work to emerge. The viewer also breaks the accustomed boundaries to gain access to the artwork. These complex acts of creation and reception necessarily imply the continuous processes of transmitting and transcending.

This paper aims to explore the concept of transcending in relation to the artwork and examine the ways transcending is realized in the work of art, i.e. to observe the means that the artist applies to overcome materiality and convey transcendental meaning. In the attempt to elucidate the above issues and illustrate the argument, the paper explores metaphysical landscapes by a Georgian painter Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991).

The transcendent dimension manifests itself in aesthetic experience in the sense that art has the ability to express the indescribable and evoke a certain sense of understanding and realization in a viewer. Martin Heidegger defines the essence of art as "the truth of beings setting itself to work" (Heidegger, 2008: 162) and art, as "a becoming and happening of truth [...] which happens only when the openness that makes its advent in thrownness is projected" (Heidegger: 196); and what is projected by poetic projection is "only the withheld determination of the historical Dasein itself" (Heidegger, 2008: 200). In his existential-hermeneutical science of art, modifying Heidegger's concept, Michael Brötje introduces the idea of Absolute as the purpose of Dasein and a human being as essentially and existentially disposed to direct oneself towards Absolute. The artwork is understood as a project of Absolute coming from the viewer and the Absolute is viewed as the inner human potential which is actualized by the artwork (Bryl, 1995: 101). Both understandings comprehend the origin of art as a certain dimension of being; it is this dimension that is projected and actualized through the artwork. Artistic experience originates

from this ineffable domain and when the artist manages to release the work to its "pure self-subsistence" (Heidegger, 2008: 165-166), a work becomes a kind of mediating openness that implicitly exhibits its unseen source resounding with the same source in the viewer. This projection, in turn, essentially implies the preceding process of creation but at the same time eliminates the subject-object relation as long as we take into account Heidegger's view of art as the openness of beings into which both the artist and the viewer allow themselves to be transported. Heidegger provides a very clear description of this process: "the more purely the work is itself transported into the openness of beings – an openness opened by itself – the more simply does it transport us into this openness and thus at the same time transport us out of the realm of the ordinary" (Heidegger, 2008: 191).

Hence, we can understand a work of art as a field of projection where the transition from concealment to disclosure happens. It renders visible what has been unseen. Therefore, artistic experience, as well as the identity of the picture, is necessarily transcendental; it reaches beyond the thought, into the extra-ordinary reality that is signified by the artwork.

Considering the above reasoning, we can state that the creative and perceptual processes imply a kind of tacit knowledge that is not conceptually explicable. According to Michael Polanyi all knowledge is established in relation to tacit thought. Reconsidering human knowledge and establishing the structure of tacit knowing, Polanyi noted that "we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 1966: 4). While closely linking his analysis of knowledge to Gestalt psychology, Polanyi sees Gestalt as the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating is held to be "the great and indispensable tacit power, by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true" (Polanyi, 1966: 6). Kant's concept of a priori cognition and the notions of determining and reflective judgment also suggest tacit processes. Acquired independently of any kind of empirical content or experience, a priori knowledge is immanent and transcendental and confers validity on any experience. These processes of shaping and validation are crucial in the creative process.

Thus, experiencing art "as well as creating art", inevitably involves the concept of intangible; that which

cannot be confined by the boundaries of the visible and the experiential. A work of art as a creative complex, like every other "autonomous complex" (Jung), although certainly perceived, cannot be subjected to conscious control. According to Jung, the poet's conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom is an illusion: "he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along" (Jung, 2003: 86). Merleau-Ponty provides a similar account of artistic creation. He declares that the painter's vision is not a merely "physical-optical" relation with the outside world; the world does not stand before the painter through representation; rather it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 181).

All of the above remarks suggest the intermingled processes and the symbiotic interrelation between the surrounding world and human perception; between external influences and internal movements. Through the intuitive dimension the artist reaches deeper levels of reality and gives a shape to his experience manifesting an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 149), establishing contact with which implies, as stated by Merleau-Ponty, "not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated"... [This dimension is] "the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151).

In these processes of mediation and the 'polemics' with the artwork, rational judgment and conceptual analysis disrupt direct communication and hamper establishing contact between the viewer and the artwork. The immediate process of communication and active comprehension as well as the creative processes such as intuition and inspiration, occur prior to rational thought, beyond cognition, provided the viewer does not stick to previously acquired conceptual knowledge. Only moving to the pre-conceptual stage creates the possibility of immediate experience, of encountering "the other in its condition of freedom" (Steiner, 1989: 4). Freedom is another crucial concept in relation to the problem of transcending, since art as a creative process and also as a certain form of knowledge (different from scientific knowledge) necessarily implies spontaneity and a free play of imagination. Kant's notion of freedom in the

cognitive faculties suggests freedom of imagination and judgment from their subservience to reason and the understanding - that is, freed from the constraints of propositional discourse (Kant, 1994: 94). On this level of comprehension, the access to the work of art is only gained when it is being removed from all relations; when it stands on its own. Then, a different kind of understanding, a deeper comprehension emerges. "In order to hear a bare sound [noted Heidegger] we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly" (Heidegger, 2008: 152). Gaining a pure understanding of the work requires seeing away from or beyond things much like this kind of abstract listening.

However, the transcendent reality can only be mentioned but not expressed completely due to the difference between the mediums of the object of interpretation and its critical reflection. The problem lies in the substantial difference between the modes of experience; it implies the infeasibility of rationalization of certain kinds of internal experience. In Ludwig Wittgenstein's system of language games, where the language is incapable of functioning one must be silent. The same is true for artistic expression. However, because unlike cognition (cognitive understanding and interpretation), art as a process of creation allows "not seeing" and "not understanding" (and thus staying close to the "living mystery" (Jung, 2003: 90), it provides more possibilities to challenge the limits of representation, the specific means of which are being explored in the following interpretation of Irakli Parjiani's metaphysical landscapes.

Irakli Parjiani's work is characterized by systematic scrutiny of spiritual motives. Parjiani's unique visual aesthetic was defined by the merging of different cultural information: fresco paintings from the mountainous region of Svaneti where he was born and raised, inspirations from manuscript illuminations, Eastern Christian murals, and contemporary western art on the one hand, and his interest in esoteric teachings of anthroposophy on the other hand. Parjiani's interest in picturing the spiritual was revealed very early, when he copied and illustrated the gospel and later on as well, in his series of Annunciation, Crucifixion and Last Supper - the themes he continuously explored over the decades. The recurrence of the themes and meditative contemplation, concentrating on the same motif led to its profound perception. Each motif undergoes several changes reflecting the artist's constant quest for the equivalence

between visual expression and conceptual content. This process was fulfilled in the final stage of Parjiani's work, in his series of paintings called the Berlin cycle which he created in Berlin in 1989-1990, the year before his death. It includes religious compositions, landscapes, and abstractions and summarizes all the characteristics of Parjiani's artistic work. Many of his metaphysical landscapes were created in this period.

One of the earliest examples is a metaphysical landscape with uncertain shapes placed against a background represented by the complex luminous spots (fig. 01). The foreground that looks like a water bank leads into a vast landscape with black cliffs on the left forming a bay, where a radiant surface of the water is seen. A depiction of a red cube-like shape on the water surface immediately grabs a viewer's attention, that, besides its central location and a deep, intense shade of red, is a result of the contrast between relatively dark, low intensity colors and the intense, luminous spots. The radiance of bright blue and white colors

representing the surface of the water is developed further and intensifies in the background of the sky. The foreground with depictions of geometrical shapes (such as a triangle, an object that looks like a cage and two white oblong cylindrical shapes) is represented from a very close view, as though cut off sharply, creating the impression of abruptly stepping into a different, distant world. This section of the picture with the depictions of concrete forms is suggestive of the objective, material world that gradually becomes less substantial. A wide area "behind" this plane, composed of different tones of purple and blue, directs our gaze deeper, towards a more conditional, abstract landscape. The mystical elusiveness of the deep non-local color spot representing the object in the center plays an important role in creating the illusion of depth and functions as a transition from already abstract to even less concrete space. While the form loses its concreteness, disappearing gradually, the radiance of overlapping layers of bright blue and white on the water surface intensifies as if in accordance with stepping out of a tactile space and



Fig. 01 Metaphysical Landscape, 1986, Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991); mixed media on paper; 28.7X39.5cm; Tbilisi (Photo: Contemporary Art Archive-Tbilisi. <https://archive.propaganda.network/en/>).

strengthening the sense of a different, more intangible reality that is eventually fully unveiled by applying visual metaphors of light and the sky. The light disseminating from the colors of the sky in the background creates a sense of boundless depth and immensity introducing the concept of the infinite. Transcending the boundaries of materiality is realized by applying a visual metaphor of the transformation of matter into light.

Another representation of the metaphysical landscape painted three years later, in 1989 (fig. 02), discloses a different approach. It might seem to be a depiction of an ordinary landscape at first sight, but further examination of the picture reveals the complexity of its formal and conceptual structure. It is rather difficult to "read" the composition and identify pictorial surfaces. What we see here is a landscape formed by obscure shapes of hills, trees, and water. The modifications of the intensity of color and light divide the composition into two unequal parts; the dripping white paint and luminous spaciousness of the white areas on the left gradually evolve into greyish tones on the right. Thus

the right part looks as if covered by a thin mist veil or glass. However, the picture is not divided only into the brighter left and relatively darker right sides, or the upper objective, concrete and the lower - more illusory surfaces, but the whole compositional structure can also be perceived as four independent sections, each of which functions as the continuation of the other and still retains its autonomous finished structure. The middle section of the painting is perceived as a shore which separates a vague silhouette of the mountain and the deep luminous white of the sky in the background from the depiction of the water with reflections of trees and thin lines that are perceived as wires. It is hard to define which surfaces are actually "real" and which of them are reflections of the actual objects; on the right side of the picture, we see the reflections of trees on the surface of water while the trees are not depicted. Similarly, only the reflections of the thin wires are represented on the left. Due to such elusive boundaries and uncertainties, the compositional logics would still work if the painting was turned upside down. The allusion to mirror as a reflecting surface that shows another, different world,



Fig. 02 Metaphysical Landscape, 1989, Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991); oil on canvas; 156X230cm; Berlin (Photo: Baia Gallery. <https://www.baiagallery.ge/en/project/irakli-parjiani/>).

serves as a reference to the illusiveness of reality. Contemplating the image, the eye notices all these slippery boundaries between the real (material) and illusory (reflected) worlds in the entire complex structure of the picture. All the discrepancies and illogical visual and conceptual linkages lead to the overcoming of the ordi-

nary logic and allude to what is beyond this ordinary reality in order to reach the extraordinary one.

The form becomes even more abstract and ungraspable in other landscapes painted in the same period (fig. 03). The Rhythm of weightless, almost transparent shapes and



Fig. 03 Metaphysical Landscape, 1989, Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991); mixed media on canvas; 128X226cm; Berlin (Photo: Baia Gallery. <https://www.baiagallery.ge/en/project/irakli-parjiani/>).

the light disseminating from a cold radiance of white, blue and light shades of purple create an ephemeral atmosphere. Making full use of the potential of color and light to create different textures and contrasts between non-local black spots and light transparent colors leads to the dynamic expression of the image. The delicate movements of light and soft lines evoke a sense of a vibrant atmosphere full of subtle energy, a kind of timelessness. The amorphous shapes and the atmosphere devoid of substantiality of objects serve as a reference to a meta-physical world outside the visible material reality. For the same purpose, similar approach in respect with the technique is applied in another Metaphysical Landscape painted in 1989 (fig. 04). The abstract landscape is composed of the large areas of silver-white light silhouettes and transparencies reminiscent of water and sky, contrasting with darker shades of black, brown

and grey which might be perceived as a depiction of soil, a water bank. However, certain means of representation applied in the picture transgress the laws of logic or even develop a paradoxical logic: firstly, the image is depicted upside down, so that what appears to be a water bank occupies the upper part of the image; correspondingly, a spherical transparent shape also looks like depicted upside down; also paradoxically, the darker colors of the background, because they are composed of non-local spots, rather than displaying the solidity of matter, evoke an impression of a somewhat mystical space, so that again, it is hard to distinguish between the real and the unreal or the familiar and the unknown, the physical and the metaphysical. Here as well, it is obvious that while playing with form, the artist is trying to grasp the elusive boundaries between different dimensions of reality.



Fig. 04 Metaphysical Landscape, 1989, Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991; oil on canvas, 290X290cm; Berlin (Photo: Contemporary Art Archive-Tbilisi. <https://archive.propaganda.network/en/>).

Other than intuitively emphasizing the abrogation of physical laws and suggesting a different logic as a means to refer to the transcendental, incorporating vast sections of water surface serves the same purpose. A visual metaphor of water as a reflecting surface, a world of reflections of things, not the actual things themselves, introduces a concept of the elusive and the immaterial. Color and light have crucial importance in this respect: the contrasting rich colors of Parjiani's earlier works are replaced later by transparent colors that irradiate from within. In his latest works, the concreteness gradually disappears and the surface becomes absorbed in all-embracing radiant

white. The color loses material weight and is transformed into light. By applying radiant transparencies, as well as variable color and texture density creating overlapping layers, the flatness is overcome and the depth is attained leading to the dematerialization of the surface in the picture.

As hinted above, Parjiani's paintings reveal a simultaneous representation of the material world and the intangible dimension of being. Other works, such as *Metaphysical Landscapes* depicting massive rocks, painted in 1991 (fig. 05), evoke a sense of solemn withdrawal and meditative contemplation. This impression



Fig. 05 Metaphysical Landscape, 1991, Irakli Parjiani (1950-1991); pastel on paper; 30X45cm; Tbilisi (Photo: Contemporary Art Archive-Tbilisi. <https://archive.propaganda.network/en/>).

is created not by means of emphasizing the dematerialized form but through the accentuation of substantiality and solidity of matter. Other than relatively concrete shapes and planes, the artist applies certain indications to physical reality such as a shade as a visual equivalent of weight, for instance. However, this does not prevent the painting to evoke a sense of meditative or even mystical experience; the suggestions and visual metaphors created with the symbolic expression of white and black colors intermingle with each other making it difficult to specify whether the indications of substantiality enhance materiality or, on the contrary, denote the spiritual in the picture.

Through paradoxical combinations of the elements of the earthly, physical world and the indications of the transcendental, Parjiani represents the spiritual reality as something tangible. In his letter to a friend he wrote: when "one enters the spiritual realm where nothing interferes, one just becomes more sensitive to the spiritual

and begins to perceive spiritual phenomenon. All this is here, right in front of us, but we are shut here and it is hard for us [to perceive it]" (Parjiani, 2002: 144).

To sum up briefly, Parjiani's artistic expression depends upon making full use of the expressive and symbolic potential of color to create visual metaphors. In his metaphysical landscapes, transcending is realized by applying symbolic and metaphoric expression. A gradual transition from concrete to more abstract forms and their eventual transformation into pure light in his landscapes becomes a metaphor for transcending materiality. Applying intentional discrepancies and abrogation, forming complex structures created by the alternating depictions of actual and reflected surfaces is another means to refer to the transcendental and represent the vibrations of the all-embracing energy undergoing a constant transformation from the form into the non-form and from pure energy to the matter again.

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