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QUESTIONING THE UNIVERSAL

with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dada and surrealism

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INTRODUCTION: FROM THE CRITIQUE OF UNIVERSALISM TO THE CRITIQUE OF THE UNIVERSAL

Since 1948, the world or, at least, a very large part of its inhabitants is supposed to live according to the principles established in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR]*. This text can be considered as the pure expression of political universalism, based on the idea that all human beings, no matter where or when they live, have to be treated equally: as explained by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, these "are not country-specific, or particular to a certain era or social group. They are the inalienable entitlements of all people, at all times, and in all places – people of every colour, from every race and ethnic group; whether or not they are disabled; citizens or migrants; no matter their sex, their class, their caste, their creed, their age or sexual orientation"¹. This long enumeration shows explicitly a will to include absolutely all humanity, without any exception, under this universal legislation. It is not an easy task to find the origin of such an idea – if, of course, we consider universalism as the result of a historical development. It is sometimes presented as a Christian invention²– etymologically, the word "Catholic" actually comes from the Greek expression *καθόλου*, translated as "universally"³ – or, more generally, as a principle on which are based most monotheistic religions; but from a political point of view, we usually believe that universalism such as we still know it today is a creation of Western modernity and was born in Europe during the XVIIIth century, as a consequence of the Enlightenment.

This self-centered conception of the history of universalism, against which we could of course raise a number of objections, is nevertheless broadly shared in France, where the

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- 1 Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, "Introduction", *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations, 2015, p. V-VI.
 - 2 See for instance Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the foundation of universalism*, translated by Ray Brassier, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2003 [1997].
 - 3 "Catholic " in the online etymological dictionary: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/catholic> [03/12/2017].

UDHR is precisely often considered to have taken its roots in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, published in 1789 at the beginning of the French Revolution. This genealogy explains for instance the peculiar French translation of the title of the UDHR, "Déclaration universelle des droits de l'Homme" [*Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man*], which according to Christine Delphy illustrates the "paradoxical relationship that this country has with the universal"⁴. Universalism is indeed constantly evoked in the French public debate as a French specificity: "France has invented universalism [...]. As it has been explained to us by a young woman while debating on the 'scandalous' islamic veil, that which belongs 'to us' is universalism. The universal is what distinguishes us from others, it is the [ultimate] French specificity"⁵. This obvious paradox might explain why every single month – if not every single week – arises in France a new controversy that has to do, to some extent, with an opposition between universalism and particularism. On the one hand, universalism is considered by most French politicians as the very definition of the Republic, and any kind of political action – generally coming from radical feminist or anti-racist movements – that seems to question it provokes an almost unanimous condemnation: as an example, we can mention the organisation of a non-mixed afro-feminist festival in Paris during summer 2017, condemned by the socialist mayor of Paris as well as by other political parties for being "anti-republican"⁶. On the other hand, this claim for universalism sometimes can be seen as hypocritical, as far as it does not seem to cover every situation: the universality of Human Rights, for instance, recently showed its limits when, despite evidences of acts of torture and

4 Christine Delphy, "Droits humains ou droits de l'homme", *Un universalisme si particulier, Féminisme et exception française (1980 – 2010)*, Paris: Syllepses, 2010, p. 195 – 198 [if no other translator is mentioned, I translate and give the original version of the text in the footnotes].

5 *Ibid.*, p. 9. « La France a inventé l'universalisme [...]. Comme une jeune femme nous l'a expliqué un jour de débat sur le « scandaleux » foulard islamique, ce qui « est à nous », c'est l'universalisme. L'universel, c'est ce qui nous distingue des autres, c'est la spécificité de la France. »

6 See a summary of the political reactions to this event online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/29/paris-mayor-demands-black-feminist-festival-prohibits-white-people-banned-nyansapo> [09/11/2017].

political repression in Egypt since 2014, French President received in Paris Egyptian President and explicitly refused to "lecture" his geopolitical partner on civil liberties⁷. We could certainly argue that this declaration takes into account the idea that Western countries have no right to patronize Southern countries, and especially former European dependencies, in the name of the universal right to self-determination; but at the same time, it also strengthens the idea that not every people is ready for freedom and democracy and threatens, to that extent, the basis of universalism. These two examples – among many others – reveal the gap between the claim for universalism and its difficult application (not to mention, of course, the constant violations of human rights all around the world): paradoxically, what is supposed to apply to everyone, always and everywhere is both considered as a national exception and subject to concrete variations and specific adaptations.

It might seem twice as much paradoxical to begin a research paper on universality with such particular examples, taken from a very personal experience as a French citizen, and assembled here according to an even more personal intuition, *id est*, that the question of universalism is probably the main political issue of our time (and, of course, not only in France). From a strictly historical point of view, one could say that the current critique of universalism is, at least to some extent, the result of both colonization and decolonization. It is now almost a common place, which is nevertheless worth mentioning, to say that the faith in Progress, Civilization and Reason was precisely what led to the cruel exploitation and murder of millions of people, despite, or even in the name of universalism, and that "the principle of domination potentially at work in that of the universal expands with an unprecedented force in the great Western misadventure of colonization"⁸. Universalism thus seems to be, in fact, at

7 See online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/macron-avoids-lecturing-sisi-human-rights-issues-171025093253023.html> [10/11/2017].

8 Corina Crainic, « Critique de l'universel chez les écrivains contemporains des Antilles françaises », in Mourad Ali-Khodja, *Des apories de l'universalisme aux promesses de l'universel*, Laval: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2013, p. 88. « Le principe de domination potentiellement à l'œuvre dans celui de l'universel se déploie avec une force inouïe dans la grande mésaventure occidentale de la colonisation ».

best useless, at worst dangerous – which leads a number of post-colonial thinkers to question its validity by right. Édouard Glissant, for instance, deduces from the failures of universalism that "we might have to leave the idea of the universal behind", because "the universal is a deception, a misleading dream"⁹. These sentences explicitly refer to the universal, and not to universalism: even though the distinction may not fully apply in this particular case, we should avoid the confusion between the two words and try to draw a precise link between them. Universalism, as a political principle, belongs to the field of practical philosophy, whereas the concept of the universal belongs to theoretical philosophy. This apparent and probably caricatured opposition does not necessarily mean that these two concepts do not communicate at all: to some extent, one could say that universalism derives from a more general conception of the universal. Interestingly enough, the violent controversies mentioned above, that have to do with very concrete aspects of our contemporary societies – even though they are also a legacy from the past – actually echo what Étienne Balibar calls a "new quarrel"¹⁰ among contemporary philosophers, and that precisely has to do with the definition of the universal. If we put the problem the other way around, it is therefore possible to believe, like Balibar, that a critical approach "of our conception of the universal" could be helpful "in order to contribute to the clarification of the debates about the meaning and the value of universalism"¹¹. Yet, however new and current these questions may seem, they already have quite a long history: according to Alain Renaut, they thus have become a "common place of philosophy for two centuries", since "they were born, for the least, at the end of the XVIIIth century" and can already be seen in the romantic reaction to a kantian

9 Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à la poétique du divers*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p. 136. « Je crois qu'il nous faut abandonner l'idée d'universel. L'universel est un leurre, un rêve trompeur. »

10 Étienne Balibar, *Des universels : essais et conférences*, Paris: Galilée, 2016, p. 145. « Une nouvelle querelle ».

11 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

idealism, to be later on "developed and philosophically radicalized, particularly by Nietzsche and Heidegger"¹².

These observations invite us to consider the contemporary debates on universalism or on the universal from some theoretical and historical distance. Our purpose is thus not to address them directly and from a political point of view – which seems to lead, most of the time, to a violent opposition between universalism and particularism that we of course do not pretend to solve, even if we believe that none of these two options is satisfactory as such; but we want to take the philosophical objections raised against the concept of the universal seriously, and use them as tools to avoid this too sharp distinction. In order to do so, we will essentially use Nietzsche's and Heidegger's writings, not only because, as mentioned above, they probably challenged more violently than anyone else before the concept of the universal, but also because they did so without actually being, at least explicitly, political thinkers: they might thus help us to understand that questioning the universal also has to do with a more general critique of all metaphysical constructions. This critique can of course be seen as dangerously destructive and lead to nihilism, that makes every community or communication definitely impossible. Once again, we are facing an aporia: but interestingly enough, both Nietzsche and Heidegger also seem to suggest that there is a way out of this apparently complete disenchantment, and that it is to be found in art. This philosophical hypothesis resonates in artistic experimentations, that seem to question radically every universal value, and yet try to convey some kind of experience that can be shared out. To illustrate this idea, we will use as examples two *avant-garde* movements that were born in the first half of the XXth century: dadaism and surrealism. The manifestoes and some of the works produced by

12 Alain Renaut, « Les conditions d'un universalisme ouvert à la diversité », *Revue électronique internationale Sens Public*, n°6, 2007, p. 3. See online: www.sens-public.org/article.php3?id_article=455 [30/11/2017]. « [Les critiques de l'universalisme sont] un lieu commun de la philosophie depuis deux siècles. Elles naquirent, pour le moins, à la fin du 18^e siècle [...]. [Elles se] déploy[èrent] pleinement avec le romantisme, puis [furent] prolongée[s] et radicalisée[s] philosophiquement, notamment par Nietzsche et Heidegger. »

artists who claimed to belong to one or other of these two movements can indeed offer a model to think the tensions between the universal and the particular, without accepting a merely destructive nihilism.

We will thus study the concept of the universal through the objections raised against it both in philosophical writings and in art theories and artistic productions. The material used in order to question the concept of the universal will be deliberately heterogeneous, but belongs generally to what we could call critical modernity: critical meaning that this is both a period of historical crisis and a moment that gave birth to an intense reflexion on the basis of Western philosophical tradition. We will first study the critique of the universal as a metaphysical illusion through Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. We will then explore its possible nihilistic consequences, illustrated in their philosophy as well as in the dadaist and, to some extent, the surrealist theories. However, we would like to show that questioning the universal does not necessarily lead to a mere destructive attitude, and that we can find precisely in Nietzsche's and Heidegger's art theories, as exposed in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, but also in dadaist works (Duchamp's *Fountain*) as well as in surrealist fictions (Breton's *Nadja*) a new and creative way to approach the universal. This detour through metaphysics and aesthetics might provide us with a model to think critically about (but not necessarily against) political universalism.

QUESTIONING THE UNIVERSAL: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND METAPHYSICAL REVOLUTION

The critique of the universal as formulated by Nietzsche and, later on, by Heidegger, appears as a major philosophical breakthrough that shakes the very basis of the philosophical tradition, and can therefore lead to a great sense of disorientation in every field of human thought and experience.

The universal: a fundamental philosophical concept

Indeed, from a theoretical point of view, the universal appears as one of the most important and fundamental concepts of philosophy. We could say with Balibar that "philosophy is this discipline that tries to say the universal", or, at least, that tries to speak "*sub specie universitatis*"¹³. That means that both the object and the method of the philosophical speech has to do with the universal, as opposed to the particular: philosophy, that speaks through concepts, produces abstractions that necessarily erase the diversity and the multiplicity of our particular perceptions or opinions. This idea appears in the Latin translation of the Greek adverbial locution *καθόλου*, that was transposed as *universus*, literally turned towards unity; but it can already be found in the major texts of Greek philosophy, from which derives most of the Western tradition: for Plato, this capacity of abstraction is precisely what defines the philosopher: "philosophers are those who are able to grasp what is always the same in all respects, while those who are not able to do so but wonder among what is many and varies in all ways are not philosophers"¹⁴ (*Republic*, 484b). This requirement is also that of any scientific speech: as stated by Aristotle in his *Posterior Analytics*, the only possible

13 Étienne Balibar, *op. cit.*, p. 37. « On pourrait même se demander si ce ne sont pas les questions philosophiques par excellence, puisque la philosophie est cette discipline qui tente de dire l'universel ».

14 Plato, *Republic*, translated by Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1968, p. 163.

object of science is the universal, defined as "that which obtains always and everywhere"¹⁵ (I, 31); philosophy and science must thus try to produce universal judgments that are supposed to be true without depending on time and space. Human experience, as demonstrated by Kant in his first *Critique*, is of course necessarily framed by those two categories, that are its conditions of possibility: they thus contribute to define the features of the transcendental Subject, who cannot ever access reality itself, but can nevertheless produce objective statements thanks to the different faculties of human thought. All of them are characterized, to some extent, by their different relations to the universal: understanding is defined as the power to know the universal; reason, as the power to derive the particular from the universal; and judgment, as the power to subsume the particular under the universal¹⁶.

This (of course oversimplified) summary of the place of the universal in part of the philosophical tradition can at least show us how central this concept is for philosophy, and how it expanded, as illustrated by this Kantian tripartition, from epistemology and theory of knowledge to every other field of this discipline, such as ethics and aesthetics. In spite of his critique of metaphysics that led him to question our capacity to access reality, it might seem that Kant actually reinforces the philosophical pretension to produce universally accepted statements about universally recognized objects. This pretension to approach the universal that seems to characterize most of the Western tradition is precisely what Nietzsche and Heidegger criticize, explicitly or not. To escape from metaphysics, it thus seems necessary to question the concept of the universal; reciprocally, the critique of the universal that we can deduce from their texts can be seen as the consequence of a more general suspicion towards metaphysics. Even if Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critique of the universal is not necessarily explicit, it is therefore possible to derive it from their global distancing from metaphysics,

15 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics. Topica.*, translated by Hugh Tredennick, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 157.

16 Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la faculté de juger*, translated by Alain Renaut, Paris: Flammarion, 1995, p. 93.

that allows us to use their texts in order to understand the objections that we can raise against the concept in which we are interested here. It is possible to hierarchize these different objections, that seem to denounce the claim for the universal not only as an abstraction, but also as an illusion and, more importantly, as a contradiction.

Heidegger's Dasein and being-in-the-world: the universal as a metaphysical abstraction

Despite the chronological order, which is not necessarily helpful nor relevant to approach conceptual and theoretical definitions, we should first try and see how Heidegger's *Being and Time* can be considered as a critique of the metaphysical pretension to the universal, especially through the notions of *Dasein* and of Being-in-the-world. In order to understand those, we will also use Mark Wrathall's analyses in the first chapters of his introduction to Heidegger's philosophy¹⁷. How do these two notions challenge the universal? Apparently, they before all convey a new conception of human existence, and do not obviously approach the question of the universal as defined above; and yet, by doing so, they also show how inaccurate and irrelevant such an abstract concept is to describe what it is like to be human – whereas this is precisely the question that Kant was trying to solve through that of the universal: he believed that the central philosophical question was indeed the question of humanity, but developed it in different fields that are all based on an assumption about the universal¹⁸. There is, first of all, a major contradiction between the definition of the universal as what can be identified without consideration of time and space and the way Heidegger defines human life as *Dasein*: "*Dasein* is an entity which, in its very being, comports itself understandingly towards that being. In saying this, we are calling attention to the formal

17 Mark Wrathall, *How to read Heidegger*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

18 See Claude Obadia, "L'universel ou le déploiement de la question de l'Homme", *Le Philosophoire*, n°31, cairn.fr for Vrin, 2009, p. 5.

concept of existence. *Dasein* exists"¹⁹. In this apparently obscure definition of *Dasein*, that ends up with what seems to be a tautological statement, since, "in colloquial German, 'Dasein' means 'existence'"²⁰, Heidegger actually takes more seriously than his predecessors – including Kant – did the inherent spatiotemporal dimension of every human experience. From a morphological point of view, *Dasein* is the combination of the adverb "da" and of the verb "sein", that can respectively be translated as "there" and "being": if we take it literally, as Heidegger does, this German word for "existence" thus always inscribes us in a "there", a precise place in which we necessarily evolve as human beings²¹. As far as time is concerned, Heidegger's choice to define humanity through the concept of existence can be read as an anti-Platonic (and, more generally, anti-metaphysical) statement: what we should focus on is not the – always abstract – essence of beings, but the very fact that these beings are "coming into being and passing away"²² (*Republic*, 508d) – that they were born and that they will die. The limits given to *Dasein* by the time and the place it lives in are constantly understood and experienced by *Dasein*, that "comports itself understandingly towards that being". That is why abstraction, that is a condition of possibility of the universal, is also, logically, what prevents it from offering an accurate description of our experience, defined by the combination of the always particular place and the always particular time that "contribute to making up [the] particular situation"²³ that we experience.

All these characteristics "must be seen and understood *a priori* as grounded upon that state of being which [Heidegger has] called 'being-in-the-world'"²⁴: the fundamental condition of *Dasein*, the particular situation into which it is thrown constitutes the world in

19 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962, p. 78.

20 Mark Wrathall, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

22 Plato, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

23 Mark Wrathall, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

24 Martin Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

which it lives, and without which it cannot exist by itself, as shown by the formulation "being-in-the-world" that implies a solidarity between both entities. This idea that *Dasein* has to be understood as a part of the world has little to do with the modern philosophical idea, notably expressed by Spinoza, that man is not "a kingdom within a kingdom"²⁵ (*Ethics*, part III, preface) and is thus subject to the same laws as every other being in the physical world. Actually, we could even wonder whether the expression "physical world" makes any sense at all for Heidegger, as what he calls a "world" has hardly anything to do with what physicists focus on, and for which "universe"²⁶ would be a better name. This distinction is also based on the opposition between, on the one hand, what can be the object of concrete experience and understanding, and, on the other hand, what can be the object of science and abstract explanation. In order to illustrate the difference between these two entities and the different attitudes that they require, Wrathall uses the example of a walk in a park²⁷: during this apparently trivial experience, I see trees, benches, people, etc. around me that I can respectively observe as aesthetic objects or avoid as obstacles, ignore or use to sit and have a break, consider as potential friends or fear as enemies, etc., according to my understanding of the world. Nevertheless, for a physicist, all these visual perceptions can be reduced to and formalized as "light waves bouncing off the reflective surfaces of physical bodies"²⁸, which has nothing to do with how it is actually like to see this or that object and to interact with it. We could say that this explanation of the various phenomena that I encounter while I am walking in a park takes into account the universal laws of physics that apply, indeed, to every perception in the physical universe, but that it does not in any way describe my experience of

25 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, translated by Jonathan Bennett, available online: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/spinoza1665.pdf>, 2017, p. 50.

26 Mark Wrathall, *op. cit.*, p. 20. This distinction is previously established in Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by A. Hofstadter, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 165.

27 Mark Wrathall, *op. cit.*, pp. 9 – 10.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the world as such. This detour through abstraction to convey the cause of the phenomena may well be legitimate in the case of natural sciences; the problem is that philosophy also seems to take their results and their method for granted, which is why "philosophers have struggled in vain to explain how light waves bouncing around can get converted into an experience of a park bench"²⁹. The phenomenologist refusal to reconstruct abstractly and formally such an experience is thus also a refusal to convert philosophy into a scientific speech, that it has tried to become not only since Descartes and the modern ages, but also, as mentioned above, since it has decided to speak universally, according to a scientific criterion. The heideggerian notion of universe as the object of science, not only for the sake of a play on words, actually emphasizes this tendency of philosophy to search abstractly for the universal to the detriment of the meaning of human life.

Nietzsche's Gay Science: the universal as an illusion and as a contradiction

If the concepts of *Dasein* and being-in-the-world as well as the opposition between world and universe in Heidegger's thought can help us to understand one of the possible objections to the hegemonic use of the concept of the universal in philosophy, that is to say its inherent abstraction that makes it of little help in order to depict human existence, the critique of the universal appears as even more radical in Nietzsche's thought. Especially in his *Gay Science*, Nietzsche's critique of every construction of the human mind can make us see the universal not only as an abstraction, but also as an illusion – which implies that it is inaccurate not only to describe human experience, but also to explain anything at all, and that it is made even worse by the fact that we are not even able to see or admit it. We usually believe that we are able to explain the phenomena that we see in the physical universe, thanks to the universal

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

language of science that is merely quantitative, but in the aphorism 112 of the *Gay Science* Nietzsche shows how erroneous our faith in "cause and effect" is:

we reason, 'this and that must precede for that to follow' – but we haven't thereby *understood* anything. The specifically qualitative aspect for example of every chemical process, still appears to be a 'miracle', as does every locomotion; no one has 'explained' the push. And how could we explain! We are operating only with things that do not exist – with lines, surfaces, bodies, atoms, divisible times, divisible spaces.³⁰

To Nietzsche, our failure not only in understanding the world, but also in explaining the universe can precisely be explained by the abstractions we use in order to produce universal statements about them. Questioning the universal thus also leads to question any kind of necessity that would be accessible to us – which destroys at the same time the two main criteria of science, which, according to Nietzsche, is nothing but one of the many "anthropomorphisms"³¹ that we use to organize the world. We have used above the expression "laws of the universe" – and precisely, in the aphorism 109 of the same book, "let us beware", Nietzsche invites us to avoid this expression that only reveals and illustrates the anthropomorphic nature of science³², that projects human realities on the universe.

However, by the same token, he also seems to question every other universal value that we have invented: if whatever we say about the universe is only a projection of our imagination (litteraly, our power to "turn everything into a *picture*"³³) on the outside world, there is no reason why this illusion wouldn't also cover our ideas about ourselves. Once again, there is a link between the critique of the universal and that of the totality of metaphysics, that can be read in the famous Nietzschean statement: "God is dead", that we can find both in

30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 113. Available online: <http://www.holybooks.com/the-gay-science-friedrich-nietzsche/> [03/12/2017].

31 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

aphorism 108, "new battles"³⁴, and in aphorism 125, "the madman"³⁵. In the latter, we can see that this statement has nothing to do with the affirmation of some kind of atheism, because even those "who [don't] believe in God"³⁶ are unable to understand the importance of the event. The word "God", here, can of course be read, literally, as the incarnation of the Christian deity, but not only: this concept also refers to all kind of universal principle of explanation that can be found not only in religion, but also in science, in metaphysics, and in morality as well. Skepticism towards religion is thus not enough to destroy this illusion, that can be thought globally as the illusion of the universal at work in all of these productions of the human mind. In the two aphorisms, we can see that the death of God as a religious principle is not, by itself, sufficient for humanity to give it up: the madman says that "[his] time is not yet"³⁷, because men are unable to accept the consequences of the death of God. "There [are] still caves in which they show his shadow"³⁸, explicitly identified with all our scientific and metaphysical illusions, as we understand through this enumeration, "order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called"³⁹, followed by these two questions: "When will all these shadows of god no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature?"⁴⁰. Science and metaphysics are nothing but the traces of the illusion of the universal, that usually takes the name of God.

This illusion, nevertheless, has a function for men, which is why they don't want to leave it behind. The invention of identity in spite of the diversity of our experience, the unity deduced from the multiplicity of our perceptions, and the assumption of universality that

34 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

allow us to deny the infinity of particular objects in the world are in fact a strategy of survival, as explained in the aphorism 111, "the origin of logical":

He, for instance, who did not know how to find 'identity' often enough, both with regard to nourishment and to hostile animals – that is, he who subsumed too slowly and was too cautious in subsumption – had a slighter probability of survival than he who in all cases of similarity immediately guessed that they were identical.⁴¹

The search for the universal is thus not essentially an abstract and theoretical tool meant to give us access to the essence of all beings or to produce true statements: it is also, and before all, the result of our will to survive. The illusion of the universal is thus also based on an inherent contradiction: what is thought to be logical and theoretical is in fact illogical and meant to achieve practical ends. There is no such thing as identity, and thus nothing is universal – everything changes, every situation is implacably different from the other; and yet, to be able to survive in a world that is "for all eternity chaos"⁴², we have to erase these differences and create abstract, inaccurate and even illogical universal entities that in fact depend on our particular situation in the world. Nietzsche's *Gay Science* thus invite us to invert the relation between the universal and the particular: what comes first, not only chronologically, but also logically, is the latter, and not the former.

THE TEMPTATION OF NIHILISM?

Once it has been said that the claim for the universal, however useful it may be, is nothing but an abstraction, an illusion and a contradiction, arises the temptation to leave it behind, as well as everything that has to do with it. If the universal has come from science to expand in all fields of human thought, then, once it has proved to be irrelevant even in the scientific search for truth, it should also be destroyed everywhere else. We would like to show

41 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

that this nihilistic tendency can be found not only in the philosophical texts that we have mentioned, but also in artistic movements that seem to echo this loss of faith in the universal.

Nihilism as the consequence of the critique of the universal

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger seem to invite philosophy to abandon this metaphysical illusion on which it is based, but as already shown above, this does not only have epistemological and methodological consequences. Nietzsche seems to explicitly accept these consequences: after identifying, in aphorism 115, "the four errors" that men have made about themselves – and that consist, for the most part, in thinking of themselves as rational beings –, he concludes that "if one discounts the effect of these four errors, one has also discounted humanity, humaneness, and 'human dignity'"⁴³. Thus, questioning the possibility of stating any universal truth about the world also has consequences on our conception of humanity: if we go back to the Kantian fundamental question, we understand that the universal is not only an inaccurate abstraction from which we try to derive humanity, or, oppositely, that human thought always strives to achieve, but also that if the universal is given as an illusion, then humanity also becomes one. If, through the universal, the very basis of the idea of humanity is destroyed, hardly any values are left to us: this is precisely what we call nihilism, that indirectly derives from the negation of the universal. Particularism and relativism seem, to that extent, to lead to nihilism: from the idea that nothing exists without having any relation to a particular time and a particular place, it is easy to conclude that all that which we associate with human values – rationality and morality, for instance – has precisely no value at all.

We usually associate Nietzsche's philosophy with nihilism and thus some kind of anti-humanism, but Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and of its erroneously abstract and universal conception of both the world and humanity in *Being and Time* also seemed to some

43 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

of his readers to carry out the risk of a nihilistic destruction of all values. In his *Letter on Humanism*⁴⁴, written in 1947 as an answer to a question asked by Jean Beaufret on the meaning of humanism, but also to the objections raised against the concept of *Dasein*, he confirms that his opposition to metaphysics is necessarily also an opposition to an abstract universal humanism:

The first humanism, Roman humanism, and every kind that has emerged from that time to the present, has presupposed the most universal "essence" of the human being to be obvious. The human being is considered to be an *animal rationale*. This definition is not simply the Latin translation of the Greek ζῷον λόγον ἔχον but rather a metaphysical interpretation of it. This essential definition of the human being is not false. But it is conditioned by metaphysics. The essential provenance of metaphysics, and not just its limits, became questionable in *Being and Time*⁴⁵.

Heidegger explicitly questions the metaphysical humanism inherited from Antiquity that universally defines humanity through reason, which does not mean that he rejects rationality as such, but as a metaphysical invention. It is of course tempting to think that this opposition to metaphysics necessarily lead him to some kind of skepticism, and, in the end, to nihilism. Later on in the same text, Heidegger ironically refers to these objections that, nevertheless, could certainly derive "logically" from his position: a definition that sharply opposes what is positive to what is negative, and always sees the negation as a necessarily destructive nihilism⁴⁶. Even though Heidegger refuses to be seen as a nihilist, the mere fact that he has been considered so tells us something about what a logical thought can conclude from the critique of the universal, and shows how easy it is to consider that this critique necessarily leads to its destruction. Nihilism, in fact, probably comes from the aporias of positivism itself, and not from an authentic and dialectic critique of the latter.

44 Martin Heidegger, *Lettre sur l'humanisme*, translated by Roger Munier, Paris: Aubier, 1964. For the English translation, we will use the version of the text translated by Frank A. Capuzzi available online: http://pacificinstitute.org/pdf/Letter_on_%20Humanism.pdf [03/12/2017].

45 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 121 – 127.

Some expressions of this nihilism: dadaism and surrealism

It seems to me that at least at first sight, the avant-garde movements that were born during and after World War I give an example of this destructive attitude towards the universal, and can be seen as the direct consequences of the aporias of this concept. Historically, all the universal values were of course confronted to the absurdity and atrocity of World War I – and not only from a strictly moral point of view, but also as far as science was concerned, since reason was precisely used in a very destructive way during the conflict: "Science herself has lost her passionless impartiality; her deeply embittered servants seek for weapons from her with which to contribute towards the struggle with the enemy"⁴⁷, writes Freud in a text significantly entitled "The disillusionment of the War". There is an attested and direct genealogy from these events to dadaism, as well as from Freud to surrealism; but we would like to study more precisely to what extent these two movements can also be read, from a more theoretical point of view, as echoes of the critique of the universal, found both in Nietzsche and Heidegger (and, once again, without necessarily taking the chronology into account, since *Being and Time* was for instance only published in 1927). The series of manifestos published by Tzara and Breton both illustrate and theorize an apparently violent opposition to, and even a negation of the claim for the universal, that indeed proved to be an inaccurate abstraction, since it did not prevent the unbearable reality of the war, a pure illusion, which explains precisely this feeling of disillusionment, and a contradiction, that led them to leave reason and logic behind. This negation of logic and of the possibility of any universal statement can be found in a very radical way in Tristan Tzara's 1918 "Dada Manifesto"⁴⁸:

47 Sigmund Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 1915, available online: <http://www.panarchy.org/freud/war.1915.html>, p. 1.

48 The series of manifestos written by Tzara can be found in Tristan Tzara, *Dada est tatou, tout est Dada*, Paris: Flammarion, 1996. For the English translation by Ralph Mannheim, we will also use the text edited in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900 – 2000, An anthology of Changing Ideas*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 252 sq.

I write a manifesto but I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am also against principles (half-pints to measure the moral value of every phrase too too convenient; approximation was invented by the impressionists). I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense⁴⁹.

This succession of contradictory statements all seem to go against the genre of the manifesto itself, that is generally a firmly programmatic and even dogmatic text: from this metatextual perspective, Tzara is even more nihilistic than he seems, because he undermines his own speech and his own movement from the inside. Even though dadaism is supposed to be an artistic movement, it also explicitly negates all the assumptions that make art possible and valuable – such as the (once again, Kantian) idea that there should be any universally recognizable beauty in it: "A work of art should not be beauty in itself, for beauty is dead [...]. A work of art is never beautiful by decree, objectively and for all. Hence criticism is useless, it exists only subjectively, for each man separately, without the slightest character of universality. Does anyone think he has found a psychic base common to all mankind?"⁵⁰. We understand through this last rhetorical question that there is an obvious link between the critique of the universal in art and the critique of metaphysics in general, and that the dadaist attitude can therefore be read not only as a merely aesthetic experimentation but as a continuation of this general disillusionment – or "disgust"⁵¹, to use Tzara's word – towards all these so-called universal values that are nothing but "words with the pretension of creating agreement among all"⁵².

49 Tristan Tzara, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 269. Translation available online: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html> [04/12/2017].

We can find in surrealism as defined by Breton in his two manifestos⁵³, even though in a slightly less explicit and radical way, the same suspicion and apparently destructive critique of logic and universal truth such as they have been claimed by scientists and philosophers through the authority of rationality for many centuries. In the first manifesto, published in 1924, Breton laments for us "still living under the reign of logic"⁵⁴, and tries to avoid reducing our psychic life to the state of consciousness and of reason: he proposes, in his definition of surrealism, to let thought express itself "in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern"⁵⁵. Of course, this definition is inspired by Breton's reflexion on the dreaming life, that he explicitly derives from Freud's works; but the logic, aesthetic and moral rules from which Breton wants to escape are precisely those that philosophy and especially metaphysics define as the essential values of humanity. Even if surrealism is less radically negative as dadaism as far as it presents itself as a solution to the destruction of these values ("[Surrealism] tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life"⁵⁶), Breton appears to be at least as violently offensive as Tzara towards every kind of definite order, whether logical or moral, especially in the second manifesto:

It is in fact from the disgusting cauldron of these meaningless mental images that the desire to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil, is born and sustained. [...] one can understand why Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence⁵⁷.

53 André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1985. For the first manifesto, we will once again use the English version of the text by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, edited in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 447 sq. For the second manifesto, we will use the English version of Breton's theoretical texts, also by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, available online: <http://new-territories.com/blog/2013GSAPP-UPENN/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Pages-de-manifesto2.pdf>

54 André Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

To that extent, the surrealist program can also appear as an essentially destructive one. The confrontation of two major artistic movements of the beginning of the XXth century with the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger seems to confirm that the critique of the universal as a metaphysical illusion can somehow contaminate every sphere of human life and lead to nihilism.

ART THEORY AND ARTISTIC CREATION: TOWARDS A DIFFERENT CONCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSAL?

However, the confrontation of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's thoughts with art can also offer other perspectives: not only does art echo the nihilistic tendencies at work in their critique of the universal, but it also provides us with a new model to think the universal and escape from the logical and abstract paradigm from which it derives, as we have seen from the beginning of this study. It seems that the aporias of nihilism are in fact the direct consequences of a certain way of conceptualizing the universal, coming from a scientific model that metaphysics tries to imitate. Of course, questioning science and metaphysics leads to question, by the same token, the concept of the universal, and this is obviously what Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as Tzara and Breton, each one in their own way, did; but if we reverse the perspective and chose another paradigm, it might be possible to avoid the aporias mentioned above.

The Dionysiac versus the Socratic conception of the universal

Interestingly enough, both Nietzsche and Heidegger actually produced a philosophy of art that can contribute, at least to some extent and even implicitly, to create a different

conception of the universal. Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*⁵⁸, towards which he later on took some distance, can nevertheless be used as a stimulating material to discuss the links between science and art, and indirectly the relation of these two productions of human thought with the universal. The book begins with a foreword to Richard Wagner and what seems to be in contradiction with Nietzsche's general rejection of metaphysics: this foreword ends with the affirmation of his "conviction that art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life"⁵⁹. However paradoxical this praise of art through metaphysics might seem, it has to be understood in relation to what appears to Nietzsche as a false metaphysical activity, embodied, in the history of Western philosophy and civilization, by the figure of Socrates. This figure thus gives its name to the Socratic – or theoretical – view of the world, that Nietzsche opposes to the tragic view of the world, in which are mingled in a perfect equilibrium two other both natural and artistic drives that he calls the Apolline and, more importantly, the Dionysiac. Even though the "duality" between these two drives appears as fundamental to the "science of aesthetics"⁶⁰ theorized by Nietzsche, we will, just as he does, leave the Apolline behind, and focus on "the new opposition" that appears after the third term of his typology has been introduced: "the Dionysiac versus the Socratic"⁶¹ (that, to the some extent, covers the Greek division between *μῦθος* and *λόγος*). According to Nietzsche, the latter has won over the former in the Vth century B.C., which led to the destruction of Greek tragedy and gave birth to the optimistic spirit of science, still at work in the modern ages. This theoretical – or dialectic, or scientific... – view of the world even corrupt artistic productions, who have to obey the rule of the "aesthetic Socratism": "In order to be beautiful, everything must be reasonable"⁶². The Greek tragedy has thus been replaced

58 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and other writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

60 *Ibid.* p. 14.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

by works in which "we may observe the victory of the phenomenal over the universal" and through which "we are breathing the air of a theoretical world where scientific understanding is more highly prized than the artistic reflection of a universal rule"⁶³. However, this situation might change "when the spirit of science has been carried to its limits and its claim to universal validity negated by the demonstration of these limits"⁶⁴ – a task to which Nietzsche precisely dedicated most of his writings. We can thus understand that the destruction of the scientific pretension to the universal does not consist in the negation of the universal as such nor in that of all values, but in a will to restore another possible formulation of the universal – that, for Nietzsche, takes the form of a Dionysiac and tragic art, in front of which "we are to recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction; we are forced to gaze into the terrors of individual existence – and yet we are not to freeze in horror: its metaphysical solace tears us momentarily out of our turmoil of changing figures"⁶⁵. We do not reach the universal through the scientific illusion of abstract eternal essences, but precisely by acknowledging the tragic finitude of every being. There is thus at least two paradoxes in this new possible conception of the universal: first, it is based on the expression of our necessarily ephemeral existence in the world, and second, this expression is only possible through the irrational language of art and not through the abstractions of logic and science.

Art as an access to a universal truth

This paradoxical definition of art as a possibility to access a universal truth, whereas science appears as a misleading illusion, can also be understood through the reading of

63 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Heidegger's *Origin of the work of art*⁶⁶. In this essay, Heidegger also questions the traditional articulation of the different fields of philosophy, and especially the division between aesthetics and logic: "until now art presumably has had to do with the beautiful and beauty, and not with truth. [...] Truth, in contrast, belongs to logic. Beauty, however, is reserved for aesthetics"⁶⁷. Heidegger does not really try to invert this thematic distribution, but completely challenges it by working on art through the prism of truth, and – maybe more importantly – *vice versa*. This gesture leads him to convey an even more paradoxical definition of truth, that once again questions quite radically the universal, and at the same time is to some extent a strong affirmation of its possibility. Indeed Heidegger refuses to see and define truth – in art especially, but also in language in general – as a faithful "imitation and depiction of something actual" or of "some particular entity that happens to be at end"⁶⁸. Truth in art has thus nothing to do with a correct representation of any particular object, or situation, or even feeling; but it does not mean that Heidegger reintroduces here the metaphysical faith in any general and abstract essence that could be expressed, if not by philosophy and science, at least by art. To prove that point, Heidegger uses the example of a poem by C. F. Meyer entitled "Roman Fountain", and concludes that "this is neither a poetic painting of a fountain actually present nor a reproduction of the general essence of a Roman fountain"⁶⁹. If truth does not consist of a relation of adequacy, neither with a particular object nor with a general and abstract one, it is then something "that is happening in the work": this is where Heidegger's thought appears as more paradoxical than ever, since this definition of truth as something that happens is in direct contradiction with the idea that truth, just like the universal, "is something timeless and supertemporal"⁷⁰. In this text, we understand that Heidegger confronts directly

66 Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the work of art, in Basic writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper San Francisco, 1993, pp. 143 – 203.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

the concept of truth with what is it not supposed to be, with something that is definitely and radically different, if not a complete other: first, he defines it through a study on art and not through logic, and second, he gives to it a historical dimension – but, surprisingly, even though he recreates it in a highly paradoxical way, he does not leave the idea of truth behind.

Our aim is not to study this definition of truth for itself, and not even to study the evolution of the relationship between truth and art in the history of aesthetics, but it seems that Heidegger's position towards truth can be applied to the concept of the universal (not to mention that it is necessarily at work in all definitions of truth). It first helps us to understand that, just like Nietzsche's radical critique of science and logic does not lead to a complete giving up of the universal, Heidegger's critique of the abstractions of metaphysics does not have to be followed by a destructive nihilism. In both cases, the reintroduction of the universal requires to take into account what is not universal from a rational and logical point of view, that is what is grounded into a certain time and a certain place. What we learn from these two art theories, directly or indirectly, is that the universal does not belong exclusively to the field of science, and that it does not have to be an abstraction that is never confronted with a certain time and a certain place, but that it should be thought through the model of artistic creation that inherently has to do, precisely, with the possibility to make something happen that was not here before – or, to use Heideggerian words, to open up a world – and has not existed for all eternity just by an arbitrary and misleading decision of science.

Dadaism and surrealism: recreations of the universal?

Since the nihilistic tendencies at work both in Nietzsche's and in Heidegger's philosophy seem to be redeemed, to some extent, by their art theories, we can wonder if the artistic movements mentioned above, that first seemed to radicalize the critique of the

universal in their provocative manifestoes, cannot also provide us with new forms of creation that escape from the abstractions of rationality and objectivity – for instance, in the definitions of beauty – but contribute to renew the conception of the universal. The inclusion of what does not belong, at first sight, to the field of artistic representation, the liberation of Dionysiac elements in the works produced by the dadaist and surrealist movements might indeed shaken the rationalist certainties about the universe, about art and about humanity, but also, by the same token, open up new possibilities of creation and, perhaps, of life – since both movements defined themselves not as aesthetic schools, but as global visions of the world.

We have seen before that the most radical contestation of any kind of universal value was to be found in the dadaist movement, as defined notably in Tzara's manifestoes. This destructive tendency apparently goes even further than that of Nietzsche or Heidegger, as it also questions art itself and drastically reduces its value:

Art is not the most precious manifestation of life. Art has not the celestial and universal value that people like to attribute to it. Life is far more interesting. Dada knows the correct measure that should be given to art: with subtle, perfidious methods, Dada introduces it into daily life. And vice versa. In art, Dada reduces everything to an initial simplicity, growing always more relative. It mingles its caprices with the chaotic wind of creation and the barbaric dances of savage tribes. It wants logic reduced to a personal minimum [...] The Beautiful and the True in art do not exist⁷¹.

However, this apparent negativity can also be understood as the expansion of other and new experiences, that tend to be excluded from the so-called universal values imposed by logic or metaphysics (such as the Beautiful and the True, that we even find in Heidegger's theory): the inclusion of daily life in art, and "vice versa", the idea that all kinds of experiences unknown to the aesthetic tradition should be "mingled" together (however problematic might seem the exotic mention of "the barbaric dances of savage tribes" nowadays) can indeed be seen as a

71 Tristan Tzara, *op. cit.*, p. 269. English translation online: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html> [04/12/2017].

way to make life circulate among all human activities. We can thus attribute some kind of universal project even to the most provocative dadaist experimentations. The most famous ready-made by Marcel Duchamp that consists of a porcelain urinal entitled *Fountain* and signed by a certain "R. Mutt" can thus be interpreted simultaneously as a mere destructive and nihilistic statement towards the art institution in order to show how arbitrary and absurd it is (not to mention the scatological provocation itself), and as a way to include in art virtually everything, depending on the decision and creativity of both the artist and his audience⁷². The invention of new forms thus challenges the usual criteria of value and show their relativity, but also open up possibilities of creation and experimentation and, thus, tend to embrace an always larger part of human experience: we could say that the universal is both the assumption that art questions and the horizon towards which it looks.

This artistic tension (as opposed to a scientific pretension?) can also be found in literary fictions, that can question and recreate the universal from a formal as well as from a thematic point of view, since they can perhaps more clearly than any other work create new possible worlds and experiences. As an example, we can mention once again the surrealist ambition to challenge rationality and to include in human experience that of the dream as well as that of madness (and that can thus also be read as Dionysiac to that extent), that finds one of its most accomplished expressions in Breton's probably most famous work, *Nadja*. This heterogeneous text precisely mingles reality, with a number of references to places and people called by their own and real name (especially in the first part of the book, where they are mentioned, sometimes accompanied by pictures, for instance, The Manoir d'Ango in Varengeville-sur-mer⁷³ and the Porte Saint-Denis⁷⁴, or Paul Éluard⁷⁵ and Robert Desnos⁷⁶), as

72 See Marcel Duchamp, "The Richard Mutt Case", in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

73 André Breton, *Nadja*, translated by Richard Howard, New York: Grove Press, 1971, p. 23.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

well as with the photographs included in the text, and fiction, especially with the eponym character, whose identity is obscure and always evasive, but also through the narrative voice itself. Both of them embody and constantly express the experience of otherness. From the very beginning of the text, the narrator defines himself only in relation to others: "Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt'"⁷⁷. At the end of the text, he praises the other kind of alienation that was to be found in Nadja, who turns out to be "mad"⁷⁸, and he offers a striking conclusion about the relationship between reason and madness as well as between the self and the other:

The well-known lack of frontiers between *non-madness* and madness does not induce me to accord a different value to the perceptions and ideas which are the results of one or the other. [...] "Who goes there? Is it you, Nadja? Is it true that the beyond, that everything beyond is here in this life? I can't hear you. Who goes there? Is it only me? Is it myself?"⁷⁹

From the critique of rationality as the only and universal way to relate to the world, Breton derives the equal importance of madness and what he significantly calls non-madness (as if madness were from now on the point of reference), but also, at a different scale, the impossibility to be oneself without relating to some form of otherness or alterity. The fact that he should precisely include, both from a rhematic and from a thematic point of view, this otherness in his work allows us to say that his art creates new ways of conceptualizing what humanity is, and does not only destroy a false universal, but tries to make a new one happen.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

**AS A CONCLUSION: THE CRITIQUE OF THE UNIVERSAL, AN INVITATION TO
(RE)CREATE IT?**

Our long detour through the metaphysical conception of the universal, influenced by scientific criteria, destroyed by the philosophers and the artists of critical modernity, but also recreated, precisely, through art, seems to have led us quite far from our point of departure. The opposition between a logic or scientific and an artistic conception of the universal might appear as a romantic one that does not necessarily answers our contemporary questions.

However, what we want to suggest through this evolution from an abstract and logical universal to the attempt to make it real, which implies including experience – and new experiences in it, is that such an itinerary might also be possible from a political point of view. Our idea is not that we can access a political universalism through art (even though we might believe, like the Greeks did, that politics is definitely more an art than a science), nor that art theory can be applied as such to politics. But through this model, we understand that if the universal, even though and maybe because it can be radically criticized, is not necessarily left behind, but can be projected as an horizon, then it seems that even the most violent contemporary critiques of political universalism actually might offer the same perspective. In order to understand that, we have to take the objections raised against universalism seriously, just like we tried to follow the thought of the authors we have studied in order to show that they could not be reduced to a mere destructive nihilism. If we listen carefully to what those who question universalism have to say, we might be able to save it from this destruction. The universal and more precisely its political expression such as it is often presented today is probably an illusion and a particular construction that can be denounced as such, but once it has been said, there is a way to give another value to this concept, that consists in understanding that it is indeed a construction, to which we might have to bring new elements,

in order, once again, to recreate it and to make it happen. We thus can understand better these words by Christine Delphy:

our point of view [...] is not a point of view that opposes to universalism whether relativism or particularism; these two positions are reactionnary. We believe in universalism, that is, in Human rights: what we don't believe is that they already exist and that universalism has been realized. Universalism is still a project, and in a certain way a utopia for which we have to fight⁸⁰.

80 Christine Delphy, *op. cit.*, p. 307. « Notre point de vue, à *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, n'est pas un point de vue qui oppose à l'universalisme soit le particularisme soit le relativisme ; ces deux positions sont réactionnaires. Nous croyons à l'universalisme, c'est-à-dire aux droits humains ; ce que nous ne croyons pas, c'est qu'ils existent déjà et que l'universalisme soit réalisé. L'universalisme reste un projet, et d'une certaine façon une utopie pour laquelle il faut se battre. »

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