

The Visual Monad: Leibniz’s Ontological Aesthetics and Its Artistic Implications in the Paintings of Henrikas Čerapas

Kristijona Čerapaitė 

Vilnius University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Philosophy
Vilniaus universitetas, Filosofijos fakultetas, Filosofijos institutas
kristijona.cerapaitė@fsf.stud.vu.lt

Abstract. This article proposes to look at artwork as visual externalisation of monads, thus establishing a profound link between the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of Leibniz’s philosophy. By framing the paintings of Henrikas Čerapas as an extension of Leibnizian metaphysics, the article explores the functioning of artwork not merely as representation but as integral component of nature. Čerapas’s paintings disclose an underlying system of internal relations that structure the body of work, thereby challenging the conventional view of the artist as a creator *ex nihilo*. Rather than inventing from nothing, the artist uncovers and makes visible the latent structures of a monadic reality—each painting presents a distinct perspective on the harmony, order, and expressive intensity that lie at the heart of Leibniz’s metaphysical vision. This reinforces the idea of ontological aesthetics and provides an innovative framework for engaging with visual art through key Leibnizian concepts, such as expression, perception, and unity in variety. This perspective underscores that aesthetic inquiry is not separate from Leibniz’s broader philosophical system but is embedded within his understanding of reality.

Keywords: Leibniz, monadology, ontological aesthetics, expression, minute perceptions, unity in variety, painting, Henrikas Čerapas.

Vaizdiška monada: Leibnizo ontologinė estetika ir jos meninės implikacijos Henriko Čerapo tapyboje

Santrauka. Straipsnyje siūloma meno kūrinius suprasti kaip vaizdiškas monadų eksternalizacijas, taip susiejant metafizinius ir estetinius Gottfriedo Wilhelmo Leibnizo filosofijos aspektus. Henriko Čerapo tapybą aptariant G. W. Leibnizo filosofijos kontekste, meno kūriniai nagrinėjami ne tik kaip reprezentacijos, bet ir kaip neatsiejami gamtos komponentai. H. Čerapo paveikslai atskleidžia kūrinius struktūruojančią vidinę santykių sistemą, prieštaraudami menininko kaip kūrėjo *ex nihilo* supratimui. Užuoat „išrasdamas“ iš nieko, H. Čerapas savo kūriniuose atskleidžia ir išryškina paslėptos monadinės tikrovės struktūras – kiekvienas paveikslas savitai perteikia harmoniją, tvarką ir išraiškos intensyvumą, glūdinčius G. W. Leibnizo metafizinės vizijos šerdyje. Tai pabrėžia ontologinės estetikos idėją ir leidžia vizualųjį meną nagrinėti pasitelkiant esmines G. W. Leibnizo sąvokas – pavyzdžiui, išraišką, suvokimą ar vienovę įvairovėje. Tokia perspektyva rodo, kad estetiniai klausimai nėra atskirti nuo G. W. Leibnizo filosofinės sistemos ir kartu yra tikrovės supratimo dalis.

Raktiniai žodžiai: Leibnizas, monadologija, ontologinė estetika, išraiškingumas, smulkūs suvokimai, vienybė įvairovėje, tapyba, Henrikas Čerapas.

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Introduction

*This universality in my rules is confirmed by a great facility in explanation, since the uniformity which I believe is observed in the whole of nature makes us say that everywhere, at every time, and in every place things are just as they are here, almost to the very degree of grandeur and perfection, so that the most remote and most hidden things can be explained perfectly by analogy to what is visible and near unto us.*¹

G. W. Leibniz. *Éclaircissement sur les Natures Plastiques
et les Principes de Vie et de Mouvement,
par l'Auteur du Systeme de l'Harmonie préétablie*

The philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) has not been applied broadly to the arts. Leibniz showed little interest in these questions, and any clues we find within his corpus are usually mere comments relating to the experience of certain senses. Thus, any question concerning the field of art in its contemporary sense is not a genuinely Leibnizian problem. Despite not having a concrete theory of aesthetics, Leibniz played an influential role in shaping the discipline, mainly through the notions of harmony, taste, or beauty, as well as eighteenth-century thought and Alexander Baumgarten, who first introduced the term.²

Although Leibniz's impact on aesthetics has been historically acknowledged, the question of distinctly Leibnizian aesthetics remains unclear. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognised his engagement with aesthetic issues. As one scholar notes,

*Works of art and their making ... are often used by Leibniz to throw light on metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical problems; he makes aesthetic experience a specific kind of knowing, he relates this kind of knowing to other kinds of knowing under the relationship of the one and the many, and he deals with the problem of the combined presence of originality and intelligibility in the work of art.*³

Leibniz's broader metaphysical framework suggests a deeper relation to aesthetics. For Leibniz, nature is an interconnected system in which every part corresponds to the whole. This principle allows one to move “from the model to the machine”—from the smallest components of nature to their representation in artistic forms, for instance, from a monad to a painting. This perspective provides a basis for reconsidering the relationship between Leibnizian thought and the arts.

Three studies provide the groundwork for exploring this connection. The first, *Leibniz's Monadological Positive Aesthetics* by Pauline Phemister and Lloyd Strickland, argues that Leibniz professed a sort of positive aesthetics of nature that was governed by rationality, perfection, and harmony. In this sense, all nature is beautiful precisely because it is harmonious.⁴ The second, *Du mariage des hétérogènes* by Mony Elkaïm and Isabelle Stengers, introduces the concept of ontological aesthetics, situating Leibniz's notion of monads within the realm of the arts. It suggests that the monad might as well be visual since it presents

¹ Leibniz, G. W. Considerations on vital principles and plastic natures, by the author of the system of pre-established harmony, 1705. In: Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters / A Selection Translated and Edited, with an Introduction by L. E. Loemker*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, p. 590. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* / Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. Hildesheim: Olms, 1885, Vol. VI, p. 546.

² See Åhlberg, L. O. The Invention of Modern Aesthetics: From Leibniz to Kant. In: Åhlberg, L. O. *Notions of the Aesthetic and of Aesthetics: Essays on Art, Aesthetics, and Culture*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2014, p. 34.

³ Brown, C. Leibniz and Aesthetic. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1967, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105324>.

⁴ See more Phemister, P.; Strickland, L. Leibniz's Monadological Positive Aesthetics. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 2015, Vol. 23, No. 6, p. 1214–1234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1089834>.

a particular point of view of the world, thus raising aesthetics to ontology.⁵ The third, *Göttliche und menschliche Kreativität in Leibniz' (Denk-) Universum. Erschaffung-Kombinatorik und Analogie* by Constanze Peres, explores the role of divine and human creativity within the seemingly deterministic framework of Leibniz's philosophy and delves into the meaning of novelty in a pre-established system.⁶ Collectively, all three studies provide a foundation for assessing the possibility of Leibniz's metaphysical aesthetics.

These considerations raise a key question: If monads structure reality through their unique perceptions, could their visual analogues be traced in artistic representation? In order to answer this question, the works of the contemporary Lithuanian painter Henrikas Čerapas (born in 1952) are examined. Čerapas's paintings as such have no philosophical inclinations; however, when put into the context of Leibniz's writings, they express similar themes, i.e., what makes up a unity, what kind of system is proposed, and how it communicates or interconnects.

The author of the article argues that, while Leibniz did not explicitly formulate an aesthetic theory, a meaningful foundation for exploring aesthetic themes can be employed by making use of his monadological framework. By using the paintings of Čerapas as an illustrative example, the author demonstrates how his works embody monadic qualities through their structure and perceptual diversity, thereby providing a way to expand certain aspects of Leibniz's philosophy into a framework for understanding artistic representation and the relationship between reality and its visual expression.

The similarities were previously addressed by the author of the article in two non-academic studies: "Mąstymo slenksčiai ir vaizduotės kaskados"⁷ and "Monados ir jų įvairovė: variacinis žaismas Henriko Čerapo tapyboje."⁸ The former proposed a Leibnizian reading of an exhibition of Čerapas that had taken place the previous year.⁹ The latter expanded Leibniz's monadological principles regarding creative play and suggested guidelines for expanding Čerapas's methodology. The articles loosely interpreted Leibniz's philosophy in terms of painting and proposed a contemporary reading of Čerapas's creative practice.

This study does not seek to establish a comprehensive Leibnizian aesthetic theory. Instead, it examines whether certain key notions, such as perception and expression, can be meaningfully associated with the visual arts, in particular, painting. The article outlines Leibniz's monadological framework and explicates the understanding of a self-contained monad. Furthermore, the turn towards the arts is grounded through Leibniz's notions of perception and expression. Finally, the monadological implications of Čerapas's paintings are described within Leibniz's philosophical system. To this end, the conception of artistic creation is expanded through the aspect of epistemological creativity.

1. Leibniz's Monadological Framework: The Self-Contained Monad and Unity in Variety

It is helpful to consider the first few principles of Leibniz's most famous work, *La Monadologie*, written in 1714. A brief 90-theses résumé of his philosophy is mainly known for proposing a system of simple substances that make up the world. Within its lines, the text establishes the relations of monads, the construction of things, and the world's creation.

⁵ See more Elkaïm, M.; Stengers, I. Du mariage des hétérogènes. *Chimères. Revue des schizoanalyses* / Ed. F. Guattari, 1994, Vol. 1, No. 21, p. 143–163, <https://doi.org/10.3406/chime.1994.1938>.

⁶ See more Peres, C. *Göttliche und menschliche Kreativität in Leibniz' (Denk-) Universum. Erschaffung – Kombinatorik und Analogie*. In: *Le présent est plein de l'avenir, et chargé du passé: Vorträge des XI Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses. Bnd. 4* / Eds. W. Li, Ch. Wahl, S. Erdner, B. C. Schwarze, and Y. Dan. Hannover: Verlag Walter De Gruyter, 2024, p. 411–427.

⁷ Čerapaitė, K. Mąstymo slenksčiai ir vaizduotės kaskados. *Naujas Židinys-Aidai*, 2023, No. 4, p. 26–31. Retrieved from <https://nzdinys.lt/kristijona-cerapaitė-masty-mo-slenksčiai-ir-vaizduotės-kaskados-nz-a-nr-4/> [accessed 01/03/2025].

⁸ Čerapaitė, K. Monados ir jų įvairovė: variacinis žaismas Henriko Čerapo tapyboje. *Dailė*, 2023, No. 93 / 94, p. 13–19.

⁹ See Henriko Čerapo paroda „Ventos dainos. Slenksčiai ir kaskados“ galerijoje TSEKH / parodos kuratorės – K. Čerapaitė, A. Kulbytė. *Artnews.lt*, 5 May, 2022. Retrieved from <https://artnews.lt/renginys/geguzes-5-d-ketvirtadieni-18-val-galerijoje-tsekh-vyte-nio-g-6-vilnius-atidaroma-henriko-cerapo-personaline-tapybos-darbu-paroda-ventos-dainos-slenksčiai-ir-kaskados> [accessed 01/03/2025].

At the beginning, Leibniz states,

*The monad which we are to discuss here is nothing but a simple substance which enters into compounds. Simple means without parts (§1). ... The monads are the true atoms of nature; in a word, they are the elements of things (§3).*¹⁰

Understood as the “true atoms of nature,” monads serve as the fundamental building blocks of reality, indivisible and irreducible units from which all things are composed. Unlike the physical atoms, monads are metaphysical entities, each possessing unique qualities and internal principles of action.

Expanding on this, Leibniz emphasises the necessity of differentiation among monads,

*For there are never two things in nature which are perfectly alike and in which it is impossible to find a difference that is internal or founded on an intrinsic denomination (§9).*¹¹

The principle, known as the identity of indiscernibles, asserts that no two monads are identical, as each embodies a unique perspective on the universe. The rejection of perfect similarity reinforces the idea that variety is not an incidental feature of reality but a fundamental necessity.

In this sense, the diverse universe is ordered by the principle of harmony between its parts. According to Phemister and Strickland, this harmony is not merely an aesthetic ideal but an ontological principle. Even though the world is infinitely variegated, it is unified and harmonious:

*Leibniz held that the true perfection and beauty of the universe resides in its being a harmoniously ordered and infinitely varied plurality of individual living substances.*¹²

In this way, Leibniz offers a vision of reality as richly differentiated and integrally connected, a cosmos, in which difference does not imply disorder but is essential to the fabric of unity itself.

The relationship between variety and unity becomes even more complex when considering the intrinsic properties of monads. Although all monads are interconnected within the larger order of the universe, Leibniz asserts,

*[There is—K. Č.] no way of explaining how a monad can be altered or changed internally by any other creature, since nothing can be transposed in it, and we cannot conceive in it, as we can in composite things among whose parts there may be changes, that any internal motion can be excited, directed, increased, or diminished from without. Monads have no windows through which anything could enter or depart (§7). ... Yet it is necessary for monads to have some qualities; otherwise they would not even be beings ... and monads, if they were without qualities, could not be distinguished from each other, especially since they do not differ in quantity (§8).*¹³

The statement highlights a fundamental paradox in Leibniz's philosophy—although monads collectively constitute reality, they remain unaffected by external influences. Unlike material substances that change due to external forces, monads operate solely according to their internal principles. Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony addresses this apparent contradiction between the separation of monads and their unified existence. In this view, each monad follows its internal program, perfectly mirroring the others, as if reflecting a divine order. Variety and unity coexist as two facets of a single cosmic structure, with monads remaining distinct yet collectively contributing to an overarching harmony.

¹⁰ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 643. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1965, Vol. VI, p. 607.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Phemister, P.; Strickland, L. *Leibniz's Monadological Positive Aesthetics*, p. 1223.

¹³ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 643. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1885, Vol. VI, p. 607.

Thus, monads possess distinct qualities—variations that allow them to undergo specific changes while maintaining a certain form of correspondence. This raises the question of how change occurs within monads if they are self-contained. Leibniz addresses this by stating,

*It follows from what I have said that the natural changes in monads come from an internal principle, since an external cause could not influence their interior (§11).*¹⁴

This assertion reinforces Leibniz's rejection of external causation, emphasising that all transformations within a monad arise from its intrinsic nature rather than external forces.

This idea yet again underscores the pre-established relationships between monads. Even though each monad is isolated, its internal changes unfold in perfect harmony with all others, as if reflecting a synchronised cosmic order. The doctrine of pre-established harmony resolves the apparent paradox of monads mirroring one another despite their lack of direct interaction. Each monad follows its predetermined course of development, yet because all monads were created in perfect coordination by God, their changes align seamlessly, giving rise to the illusion of causal interaction in the physical world. This framework not only preserves the autonomy of monads but also maintains the unity of the cosmos without requiring direct causal exchanges. It affirms the central Leibnizian notion that variety and unity coexist in a world governed by rational harmony. Leibniz explains,

*Besides the principle of change there must be some distinguishing detail in that which changes, which constitutes the specific nature and the variety, so to speak, of simple substances (§12). This detail must enfold a multitude in the unity or the simple. For every natural change takes place by degrees—something changes and something remains—and as a result there must be a plurality of affections and of relations in the simple substance, even though it has no parts (§13).*¹⁵

The correspondence of change and stasis might highlight the processes present in artistic action, although it is unclear whether the artist is rationally aware of this. Yet this highlights the influence of accumulative perception, which is responsible for artistic expression. In that regard, the specific perceptual state influences the exact expression of monads, represented by the artist on the canvas. This corresponds to Leibniz's definition that

*The passing state which enfolds and represents a multitude in unity or in the simple substance is merely what is called perception (§14).*¹⁶

In this manner, the representation and expression of a monad—the multitude in unity—is the moment of perception for the artists, when they can perceive and precisely express the perception through art. In this instance, the artwork and the monad are in correspondence. This view further suggests that any other slight changes in perception would result in newly acquired knowledge and, thus, new expressions on the canvas. In other words, since there would be a constant expressive relationship between monads and something that expresses them, for example, artwork, the changes—even the slightest ones—in one would result in changes in the other.

2. Monadic Perception and Expression in Leibniz's Philosophy

The turn towards *La Monadologie* was greatly inspired by Elkaïm and Stengers. In the article “Du mariage des hétérogènes” (1994), they state,

¹⁴ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 643. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1885, Vol. VI, p. 607.

¹⁵ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 644. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1885, Vol. VI, p. 608.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

One could say that Leibnizian philosophy elevates aesthetics to the level of ontology itself. Each existent (monad) can be understood as a 'point of view' on the world, though this point of view is, of course, in no way reducible to a clear and distinct visual perception. On the contrary, it incorporates ... an innumerable host of 'minute perceptions' of all kinds, most of which do not reach the threshold of consciousness. Perception, insofar as it can be expressed in words, does not resemble that from which it emerges. It is, by definition, unstable—like the meaning of all words in natural language—a more or less distinct relief taking shape within the shifting and dense mass of what has no words to express itself. The aesthetic work, in this context, does not fit into any particular category because it serves as a general model. The monad brings itself into being through perception; it is at once action and passion, spontaneity and product, creator and work.¹⁷

Elkaïm and Stengers argue that Leibniz had a type of ontological aesthetics, where the monad as the primary particle of reality proposes a particular point of view, each suggesting a different yet homogeneous perspective. Realistically speaking, it would not be easy to find a physical example of such a difference between monads, as the monad is much more ideal than material. The crossover to the field of art provides the material aspect, by which, to use the analogy between the monad and the painting, it becomes possible to raise the question concerning the relationships between monads. In this sense, the analysis and comparison of the artworks enable us to conclude their differences and similarities as specific points of view of the world.

In this sense, perception is essential, particularly the minute perceptions (French: *petites perceptions*). Although the mind is always active and perceiving, it cannot comprehend everything around it. Therefore, as many minute perceptions reach the mind at any given time, it is impossible to be conscious of all of them, thus, some perceptions slip in without notice:

For Leibniz there can be perceptions that come and go completely unnoticed ... because they are too weak or too confused to be conscious. There is also the possibility of even a strong clear perception passing completely unnoticed, either because the subject is habituated to it or because it is drowned out by quantities of other perceptions.¹⁸

The broader notion of perception is also important in this context. Generally, for Leibniz, “perception is the expression of many things in one, or in simple substance,”¹⁹ i.e., in the monad. Generally, Leibniz’s use of the concepts is tricky—perception is an expression²⁰ but also representation; for example, “expression or perception” and “representation or expression” are sometimes used interchangeably in correspondence with Antoine Arnauld of 1686–1687.²¹ Although it could be argued that the concepts are not precisely alike for Leibniz, they all relate to the same problem: how variety can be expressed in unity. For that, it is necessary to have expression, that is, to have something that represents something else; in the sense of the monad—the world or other monads. In turn, the need for representation arises, as by expressing something, it is represented. In a 1710 letter to Rudolph Christian Wagner, Leibniz writes,

Broadly, the soul is the same as what is alive or a vital principle, namely, a principle of internal action existing in a simple thing or monad, to which external action corresponds. And that correspondence

¹⁷ Elkaïm, M.; Stengers, I. *Du mariage des hétérogènes*, p. 147.

¹⁸ Thomas, J. *The Minds of the Moderns: Rationalism, Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 120.

¹⁹ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 91. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* / Ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der W., Akademie der W. zu Göttingen. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923–, s. VI, Vol. I, p. 286, revision note Z. 2—8 D.

²⁰ Concerning the comprehensive study of Leibniz’s notion of expression, see Debuiche, V. *Leibniz et l’expression*. Aix Marseille: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2021.

²¹ See Leibniz’s letter to Arnauld, 9 October 1687, Hanover. In: Leibniz, G. W. *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence* / Edited and Translated by H. T. Mason. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967, p. 144–146.

*of internal and external, or representation of the external in the internal, of the composite in the simple, of a multitude in a unity, in fact, constitutes perception.*²²

Within the context of monads, the principle constituted by perception–expression–representation is fundamental. The monad expresses the world and, in turn, is expressed by other monads. Similarly, a soul expresses a body, or a representation of a thing expresses the thing itself if the relations between its parts correspond. This principle was established in *Quid sit idea* (circa 1677). Leibniz writes,

*That is said to express a thing in which there are relations [habitudines] which correspond to the relations of the thing expressed. But there are various kinds of expression; for example, the model of a machine expresses the machine itself, the projective delineation on a plane expresses a solid, speech expresses thoughts and truths, characters express numbers, and an algebraic equation expresses a circle or some other figure. What is common to all these expressions is that we can pass from a consideration of the relations in the expression to a knowledge of the corresponding properties of the thing expressed. Hence it is clearly not necessary for that which expresses to be similar to the thing expressed, if only a certain analogy is maintained between the relations.*²³

If the correlation between the parts is established, an analogy can be made between “the model and the machine” and, for example, the artwork and the monad. In this regard, the artwork can be understood and analysed as an externalisation of the monad, while recognising that the relationships inherent to the monad should remain preserved within the artwork. The laid-out implications of Leibniz’s monadology create a basis for the application of Leibniz’s philosophical framework to Čerapas’s paintings through an artwork–monad comparison, and form a contemporary understanding of Čerapas’s creative practice.²⁴

3. Monadological Implications of Čerapas’s Creative Practice

The contemporary Lithuanian artist Henrikas Čerapas is known for his distinct approach to painting. By utilising grandiose formats (usually ranging from two to five meters) and experimenting with the potential of the colour black, his canvases showcase an adaptation of landscape painting. Although inspired by autobiographical places, Čerapas’s paintings are abstracted from any “real” objects—the artist uses the motive of a brush stroke to illustrate the fundamental nature of his reality.

This approach necessitates a corresponding level of reduction of elements. This means that by removing all the additional details from the view of interest, the strokes left on the canvases are monadic in the sense that they correspond to the qualities attributed to the monad; for example, the monads make up a particular reality (§3), are closed off and not influenced from the outside, have no windows (§7), and are guided by a certain inner principle (§11) or appetite (§15).²⁵ Moreover, the brush strokes capture the monad at a particular moment, as frequently noted by the painter. Approximately, since 2019, Čerapas has started including the exact painting date in the title of his paintings. The bigger ones bear a name, for example, *Parsifal. Divine Forest. 2024.10.-11* (Figure 1) or *The Wall of the Dying Dog. 2023.09.(15-23-24-30)-10.(2-8-10)* (Figure 2). The smaller formats, usually bearing physical similarities, have the date as the title, suggesting that the importance of the date relates to the specific changes in the nature of reality at that exact time.

²² Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1890, Vol. VII, p. 529. Translated by Rutherford, D. Leibniz, Letter to Rudolph Christian Wagner, 4 June 1710 (English Translation). *The Leibniz Review*, 2022, Vol. 32, p. 107, <https://doi.org/10.5840/leibniz2022325>.

²³ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 1989, p. 207. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 1923–, s. VI, Vol. 4, p. 1370.

²⁴ Cf. Čerapaitė, K. *Mąstymo slenksčiai ir vaizduotės kaskados*, p. 26–31; Čerapaitė, K. *Monados ir jų įvairovė: variacinis žaismas Henriko Čerapo tapyboje*, p. 13–19.

²⁵ Cf. Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 643. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1885, Vol. VI, p. 607.



Figure 1. Henrikas Čerapas. *Parsifal. Divine Forest*. 2024.10.11. Oil and Offset Paint on Canvas. 240 x 510 cm. Picture from the studio by H. Čerapas.



Figure 2. Henrikas Čerapas. *The Wall of the Dying Dog*. 2023.09.(15-23-24-30)-10.(2-8-10). Oil and Offset Paint on Canvas. 240 x 510 cm. Reproduction by V. Ilčiukas.

Furthermore, the paintings resemble one another, either through the time of painting or through the brush strokes or colours. The canvases are mirror-like and have a synonymy that is hard to distinguish to an untrained eye. In this sense, each painting exhibits variations of the monadic reality. Additionally, since the canvases differ in the count of brush strokes or the exact darkness of the colours, they differ on the perceptual level. It can be said that perception, which to Leibniz is one of the essential notions, is

Susceptible to degrees, conceived by means of the distinction between sensible and insensible perceptions, between obscure and clear, between confused and distinct. Considered in this way, perception

*allows us to think about the degrees of expression, between substances and within a single substance.*²⁶

In this case, Čerapas's paintings exhibit the difference between different kinds of perception and display an example of monadic variations in reality in the form of artworks.

The creative programme of Čerapas does not follow the nuances of Leibniz's philosophy on purpose. It is not the case of an informed decision; instead, this could be attributed to a similar outlook towards nature. Čerapas says,

*There is still something else I cannot put into words. That something makes me—unconsciously, as if I had a program installed—search for or strive for a strong, structured, powerful emotional expression in a work of painting.*²⁷

Oddly enough, this relatively intuitive approach resonates with Leibniz's view. In the famous *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1684), he says,

*Likewise we sometimes see painters and other artists correctly judge what has been done well or done badly; yet they are often unable to give a reason for their judgment but tell the inquirer that the work which displeases them lacks 'something, I know not what'.*²⁸

"I know not what" (French: *Je ne sais quoi*) is directly related to and arises from a particular accumulation of minute perceptions that act as minuscule, unnoticeable impressions on the mind. Both Čerapas and Leibniz talk about these particular unknown qualities, using "something" and "I know not what" to indicate some mental grasp. Commenting on Leibniz, Lars-Olof Åhlberg states that

*The phrase ["I know not what"—K. Č.] refers to the apprehension of qualities, which are clearly perceived although we cannot account for them adequately nor express our perception of them distinctly, i.e. by means of concepts.*²⁹

In the context of painting, this supposes that the artist possesses some incomprehensible knowledge—in Leibnizian terms, the minute perceptions—that are a part of an artistic predisposition. For this reason, the artist is able to convey some aspect of reality without articulating the exact reasons for such portrayal.

Yet again, the aspect of expression³⁰ is important here. It is present when the painter captures this "I know not what" or "something" and expresses it in painting, because in that instance, the "I know not what" is captured conceptually and transformed on the canvas. In other words, at the time, "there is a constant and regulated relationship between what can be said of one and the other,"³¹ an act that constitutes the process of expression for Leibniz. This act, even if carried out intuitively, follows a specific yet unknown knowledge. Čerapas says,

²⁶ Debuiche, V. *Leibniz et l'expression*, p. 167.

²⁷ Go Back to Your River: Agnė Kulbytė in Conversation with Henrikas Čerapas. In: *Aftermath: Henrikas Čerapas: [parodos katalogas / Exhibition Catalogue, 2019, Kaunas] / sudarymas / Composing of texts A. Kulbytė*. Vilnius: Standartų spaustuvė, 2019, p. 32.

²⁸ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 291. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1880, Vol. IV, p. 422.

²⁹ Åhlberg, L. O. *The Invention of Modern Aesthetics: From Leibniz to Kant*, p. 38.

³⁰ It must be noted that the notion of expression within Leibniz's thought is commonly known to be related to mathematics and logic. On the three definitions of expression, see Debuiche, V. *Leibniz et l'expression*. On the aesthetical interpretation of expression, see Grall, H. Pour une analyse esthétique du concept d'expression. In: *Le présent est plein de l'avenir, et chargé du passé: Vorträge des XI Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses, 31. Juli – 4. August 2023, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Deutschland*. Bnd. 2 / Eds. W. Li, Ch. Wahl, S. Erdner, B. C. Schwarze, Y. Dan. Hannover: Verlag Walter De Gruyter, 2023, p. 11–24, <https://doi.org/10.15488/14329>.

³¹ Leibniz, G. W. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 1923–, s. II, Vol. 2, p. 240–241. Translated by Leibniz, G. W. *The Leibniz-Arnould Correspondence*, p. 144.

*All the parts are born from the confrontations of the experiences within the process of painting, but the “sound” of painting, or the paintings’ timbre, is recorded during the action, when the paintings’ substance, its swampiness and gravity, depth of its colour tone and all the marks of scratches, touches and smears create a timbre tension in the plane.*³²

Here, the significance of action³³ is profoundly highlighted, emphasising that the very essence of the painting is most effectively conveyed through an act.

4. Epistemologically Relative Creativity

Another aspect of Čerapas’s creative practice should be addressed, namely, the variations of his paintings. Since the canvases resemble and mirror each other, one has to ask why the changes happen. The painter says,

*I paint out of inertia, and it forms the basic constructive parameters of my existence, so I integrate them into the act of painting: an inert attitude, a mechanical stroke, no illustrations, no visual narration. But this is just a surface. For me, the space of canvas is an opportunity and a tool for unravelling and confession.*³⁴

This approach emphasises a paradoxical mode of creativity. There is no striving for novelty in a traditional sense but rather, an aim to reveal latent structures that are already present. In this sense, the process of painting functions as an act of excavation, where each brush stroke uncovers a deeper order embedded within the act itself. This process, thus, aligns with Leibniz’s view of reality as pre-determined and harmonious, suggesting that the artistic creation mirrors the process of discovery.

Similarly, the simile of unravelling the canvas parallels the discovery of the qualities of the monad, which is generally closed off and unbreachable and guided by its inner principles. In a 2024 article “Göttliche und menschliche Kreativität in Leibniz’ (Denk-) Universum,” Peres comments on one of the qualities of the monad, i.e., its existing yet hidden determination. For Leibniz, the world exists in a pre-established manner, meaning that all of its monads are already determined, and all of its states are already contained within itself. Peres notes,

*If there are new states of perception in the monadic world relative to what came before, then there are also new results of perception in the world thus constituted, i.e., new knowledge. What is “new for us” in science, art and technology is generated by humans in their phenomenal world, and these new cognitive phenomena are ‘well-founded’ in the monadic structures of perception.*³⁵

In other words, everything already exists within the pre-established system of the monads, and only “on the outside” things are novel. Similarly, the change of the world is discovered rather than invented. Peres calls it “epistemologically relative creativity,”³⁶ which suggests that creativity and what is discovered in the process is somewhat relative. It is not about producing something entirely new but about discovering or revealing something already present in an implicit way. What appears as creation is a process of unveiling previously hidden structures or relationships. In the context of arts, this suggests that artworks are merely discovered, unearthed, or unravelled. Peres says,

³² Go Back to Your River: Agnė Kulbytė in Conversation with Henrikas Čerapas, p. 33–34.

³³ In the context of arts, it is usually called action painting, or abstract expressionism, and highlights the prominence of instinctual movement, unexpected change and painting “with the whole body.”

³⁴ Go Back to Your River: Agnė Kulbytė in Conversation with Henrikas Čerapas, p. 32.

³⁵ Peres, C. Göttliche und menschliche Kreativität in Leibniz’ (Denk-) Universum. Erschaffung—Kombinatorik und Analogie, p. 416.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 417.

Epistemologically, this would mean that, for example, nothing was invented or produced, but only previously hidden and undiscovered, yet already existing constellations were found, discovered, and brought to light. However, the latter had always been there in some way, that is, from a metaphysical-ontological perspective, they were not new. What was new was merely the epistemic shift in mode, in that they were now recognised as new and accordingly labelled.³⁷

This points to an interesting shift in understanding creativity. Instead of positioning the artist as a creator *ex nihilo*, this view presents artistic practice as an act of perception and revelation. The painter does not impose external vision onto the canvas but rather allows the canvas to guide the process, uncovering structures that have always been present but previously unseen.

This understanding of creativity as epistemological revelation rather than spontaneous creation suggests a deep resonance between Čerapas's creative practice and Leibniz's philosophy. Čerapas's paintings do not attempt to depict reality external to the artwork. Instead, they function as a self-contained system that unfolds according to its intrinsic logic, much like the reality of the monads. As a result, each painting exists not as an isolated piece but is part of an expansive system of variations, where each work expresses a slightly different perspective on the same underlying reality, a particular point of view.

Moreover, Leibniz underscores the ability to return to the same artwork and uncover new information, thus referencing his famous dictum of "unity in variety." He says,

Look at a very beautiful picture, and cover up except for some small part. What will it look like but some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art; indeed the more we examine it the more it will look that way. But as soon as the covering is removed, and you see the whole surface from an appropriate place, you will understand that what looked like accidental splotches on the canvas were made with consummate skill by the creator of the work. What the eyes discover in the painting, the ears discover in music. Indeed, the most distinguished masters of composition quite often mix dissonances with consonances in order to arouse the listener, and pierce him, as it were, so that, anxious about what is to happen, the listener might feel all the more pleasure when order is soon restored.³⁸

Interestingly enough, Leibniz admits that the misunderstanding of a painting might arise from not seeing the whole picture, both figuratively and literally. The artist is able to do so because of the skill that is required to produce it in the first place. Even within such an unassuming text segment, Leibniz attributes this artistic skill to the ability to mix "dissonances with consonances"; in other words, to create unity in variety. In the case of Čerapas, the constant variations of his paintings give rise to an evolving yet cohesive understanding. Perception gradually attunes to the hidden structures within the work, therefore recognising an underlying unity that was already present. In this sense, Čerapas's art does not merely illustrate Leibnizian ideas but actively embodies them.

Conclusions

Understanding artwork as visual externalisation of the monads establishes a relationship between metaphysical and aesthetical dimensions of Leibniz's philosophy. This approach emphasises the accessibility of Leibniz's theory of monads and the interpretability of the monad as a complex part of nature. Consequently, this enhances the view of ontological aesthetics and supports the idea of a monad as a particular "point of view." This perspective suggests that aesthetic inquiries are not far removed from

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 412.

³⁸ Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Essays* / Edited and Translated by R. Ariew and D. Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989, p. 153. Original citation in Leibniz, G. W. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 1890, Vol. VII, p. 306.

Leibniz's thought and reinforces the connection of artworks as part of nature. The artworks, just like the monads, propose a particular aspect of reality and can be used to unravel certain monadic qualities. This presents an innovative reading of Leibniz's monadological thought, suggesting that the nature of the monad and key notions like expression or perception can be presented in the context of visual arts. Not only does this propose a framework for a Leibnizian approach to the arts but it also expands the aesthetic understanding of the monad.

This inquiry wonders what could be learnt of artworks, considered as monads? In the case of Čerapas's paintings, an underlying system of internal relations is discovered, or rather unearthed. This system explains the connections between the paintings, underscores the laws of their governance, and suggests a distinct alternative to the understanding of the artist as a creator *ex nihilo*. In a Leibnizian view, the artist is a person, possessing the ability to take the incomprehensible "I know not what" and transform it into something visual, breaking apart the invisible structure of a monadic reality. Čerapas's paintings, thus, emerge not merely as aesthetic objects but as visual manifestations of monadic insight, with each canvas offering a singular perspective on the harmony, order, and expressive depth that are at the core of Leibniz's metaphysical vision.

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Notes on contributor

Kristijona Čerapaitė is a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, Vilnius University. Her research centres on Early Modern philosophy, with a focus on the thought of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. She explores the intersections of imagination, knowledge, and the concept of *characteristica universalis* in Leibniz's philosophical system. In addition, she has been engaged in curatorial work and has authored texts on art, focusing on the philosophical dimensions of contemporary artistic practice.

ORCID

Kristijona Čerapaitė  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3558-5590>

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