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Landscape in Baroque and Abstract Art: Interrelations as a Reference to the Metaphysical Realm

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Abstract. The article examines the relationship between abstraction and the representation of nature and seeks to answer why and how the work of contemporary abstract artists is interpreted as a representation of nature. The paintings of Henrikas Čerapas serve as case study. The article suggests that abstraction should be understood as an expression of a deeper layer of meaning. The juxtaposition of the Late Baroque and abstract art in an unconventional way, allows us to recognize the continuation of the pre-modern tradition of metaphysical thinking about nature in contemporary abstraction. In the pre-modern period, before the genre of landscape painting became popular as primarily an aesthetic representation of nature, the depiction of nature was linked to the metaphysical dimension. This principle is evident in Late Baroque painting, which reflects the influence of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s philosophy of nature, emphasising the harmony between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ relationships. The abstract representation of nature as a connection between various elements is also close to twentieth- and twenty-first-century painting—in both Late Baroque and abstract painting, it points to a transcendent layer.

Keywords: landscape, representation, Baroque art, abstract art, Enlightenment crisis, natural philosophy, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Franz Anton Maulbertsch, Henrikas Čerapas.

Kraštovaizdis baroko dailėje ir abstrakcionizme: sąryšiai kaip metafizinės plotmės nuoroda

Santrauka. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama tema – ryšys tarp abstrakcijos ir gamtos vaizdo reprezentacijos. Siekiama atsakyti į klausimus, kodėl ir kaip šiuolaikinių dailininkų abstrakcionistų kūryba interpretuojama kaip gamtos reprezentacija. Atvejo analizei pasirinkta Henriko Čerapo tapyba. Straipsnyje siūloma abstrakciją vertinti kaip gilesnio prasminio sluoksnio išraišką. Taikoma netradicinė prieiga – nekonvenciškai gretinama vėlyvojo baroko ir abstrakčioji dailė. Tai leidžia atpažinti šiuolaikiniame abstrakcionizme tęsiamą ikimodernią metafizinio mąstymo apie gamtą tradiciją. Ikimoderniu laikotarpiu, prieš išpopuliarėjant peizažo, kaip, pirmiausia, estetiško gamtos vaizdo, žanrui, gamtos vaizdavimas buvo itin susijęs su metafizine plotme. Šis principas skleidžiasi vėlyvojo baroko tapyboje, kurioje galima atpažinti Gottfriedo Wilhelmo Leibnico filosofijos veikiamą gamtos sampratą su jai būdinga harmonija tarp „vertikalių“ ir „horizontalių“ sąryšių. Abstrahuotas gamtos, kaip sąryšio tarp įvarių elementų, vaizdavimas artimas ir XX–XXI a. tapybai – tiek vėlyvojo baroko, tiek ir dailininkų abstrakcionistų kūryboje abstraktus gamtos vaizdavimas nurodo į transcendentinį sluoksnį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kraštovaizdis, reprezentacija, baroko dailė, abstrakčioji dailė, Apšvietos krizė, gamtos filosofija, Gottfriedas Wilhelmas Leibnizas, Franzas Antonas Maulbertschas, Henrikas Čerapas.

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Introduction

In 2017, the National Art Museum of China in Beijing hosted the first, and so far only, exhibition of Lithuanian art of this scale in the country. The exhibition, Lithuanian Art: Thinking through Landscape, curated by Milda Žvirblytė, was notable for its role in disseminating art and cultural policy, as well as for its artistic quality and the cohesive integration of works from various artistic periods and of different techniques. The kaleidoscope of Lithuanian landscape painting (broadly interpreted) from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries was represented by the painting "Exile in the Country / Christ in a Meadow" (2013) by Henrikas Čerapas (born in 1952). The large-format canvas took centre stage in the museum's exhibition space, and its reproduction was selected for the exhibition poster. Čerapas's canvas depicts a meadow landscape rendered in broad, dotted brushstrokes of lush green (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Henrikas Čerapas. *Exile in the Country / Christ in a Meadow*, 2013 at the National Art Museum of China, 2017. Photo by Kostas Biliūnas.

The motif of nature is conveyed through the techniques of abstract painting. This combination raises fundamental questions about the distinction between abstract and figurative art. It can be assumed that Čerapas's painting was chosen as the titular work of the exhibition because it appears to synthesise traditional landscape, modern landscape interpretation, and abstractionism, thereby offering a unifying thread for this retrospective and diverse exhibition. However, the painter's artistic context, as well as the implications of the title allow for an interpretation that extends beyond the visible: a reference to the experience of the transcendent realm.[1]

The paper explores the connections between landscape, abstract art, and the perception of the transcendental. It addresses the question of why the brushstrokes in Čerapas's painting are perceived as a representation of nature, and how the painting retains its association with the image of a meadow. It compares abstracted landscapes from two distant epochs: the Baroque period and the present day. The tendency towards abstraction in early modern Western painting was discernible in formalist art criticism.[2] Nevertheless, a broader analysis of this tendency has remained marginal, largely due to an academic inclination to focus on strictly delineated historical periods. A more expansive perspective on art history—particularly one attentive to the long-term causes and consequences of the Enlightenment-era transformations—is characteristic of the phenomenological tradition. The article draws on the art theory of the American philosopher Karsten Harries,[3] whose phenomenologically informed approach has inspired to extend the present analysis into the realm of metaphysical context. The novelty of this article

[1] In 2020, two paintings on this theme were exhibited at the Triennial of Sacred Art in Częstochowa, Poland.

[2] See above all, Greenberg, C. Modernist Painting. In: *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* / Eds. F. Frascina and Ch. Harrison; with the assistance of D. Paul. New York: Harper & Row, 1982, p. 5–10. See also Leščinskaitė, I. *XX a. abstrakčiojo ekspresionizmo sąsajos su baroko tapyba*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2011.

[3] See above all, Harries, K. *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983; Harries K. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997.

thus lies in its exploration of the transcendental concept of nature, shared by distinct—and in many respects, opposing—epochs.

The paper begins with a reflection on the problematic development of the term and genre of landscape. It then examines the transcendental concept of nature that characterised the eighteenth-century worldview. By comparing the Late Baroque depictions of nature with Leibniz's natural philosophy, the significance of abstracted image is analysed, and possible parallels with contemporary painting are drawn.

1. The Transformation of Landscape into an Aesthetic Image

Abstract painting represents one of the foundational elements of coherent transformation of Western art, or a consequence of the 'liberation' of art initiated during the Enlightenment. Harries continued the paradigm initiated by Edmund Husserl and Hans Sedlmayr, viewing the Enlightenment as the great crisis of the Western world—and, by extension, of art. According to him, the Enlightenment marked a turning point, bringing about a radical shift in humanity's relationship with the world, comparable to a war-destroyed city. The disintegration of the world as a meaningful whole into subjective fragments ultimately led to a nihilistic relationship with the environment, which, he argued, is clearly reflected in modern art.[4] Enlightenment art, which theoretical basis Harries derives from Kant's philosophy of aesthetics, became separated from truth, goodness, and spirituality, emerging as a creation rooted in freedom. Kant's aesthetic theory emphasises the notion of free beauty, placing it above adherent beauty.[5] The most important condition for art, according to this theory, is free creation.[6] This concept outlines the dominant aesthetic trajectory of the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. Harries contends that in modern art, the ontological approach was replaced by an aesthetic one, leaving no room for the question of meaning.[7] Unable to unify nature and spirit, subject and object into a harmonious whole, modern art became fragmented and disintegrated.[8]

In this context, Harries turned to the last pre-modern period. Through the examination of Rococo church architecture, and, more specifically, the development of ornament as a medium synthesising different forms of arts, he analysed the final stage of the evolution of Western European art, which culminated in crisis. This final stage involved the stratification of the arts, transforming the architectural whole into a pictorial image. Nevertheless, Rococo art retained a dimension of meaning.[9] An ornament of rocaille marks the shift towards 'art for art's sake,' increasingly distinguishing it from art 'for God's sake.'[10] In the eighteenth century, two parallel trends persisted: the aestheticisation of form and the desire to preserve the representation of meaningful content. Similarly, in Late Baroque painting, colour and form became increasingly autonomous, thus gradually resembling abstract painting while retaining their connection to the depicted narrative.[11] As Rococo art reached a point of no return, the separation of the image from its invisible layer of meaning became inevitable. The aesthetic philosophies of Baumgarten and Kant only reinforced and underpinned it.

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4 See more Harries, K. *In a Strange Land: An Exploration of Nihilism*: *[A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate Yale University]*. New Haven: Yale University, 1962. Retrieved from https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/8/1250/files/2011/10/in-a-strange-land_an-exploration-of-nihilism-1zusd5v.pdf [accessed 01/03/2025].

5 Kant, I. *Critique of the Power of Judgment* / Edited and translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, § 16, p. 43, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804656.

6 Cf. Plečkaitis, R. Grožis ir menas Imauelio Kanto žvilgsniu. In: Kantas, I. *Sprendimo galios kritika* / iš vokiečių k. vertė, įvadinį straipsnį ir paaiškinimus parašė R. Plečkaitis. Vilnius: Mintis, 1991, p. 14.

7 More on the layer of meaning in pre-modern art see Biliūnas, K. Prasmingos ikimoderniosios architektūros samprata fenomenologų Harrio, Veselio ir Pérezo-Gómezo teorijose. *Logos*, 2023, Vol. 115, p. 205–214, https://doi.org/10.24101/logos.2023.44.

8 See Harries, K. Hegel and the Future of Art. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 1974, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 690. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/20126528 [accessed 01/03/2025].

9 See more Harries, K. *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*, p. 17–21.

10 Harries, K. Beauty, Nostalgia, Hope: The Pulpit in Oppolding. In: *The Living Tradition of Architecture* / Edited with an introduction by J. de Paiva. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 101, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315636573.

11 See Leščinskaitė, I. *XX a. abstrakčiojo ekspresionizmo sąsajos su baroko tapyba*, p. 50.

Before the 'disintegration' brought about by the Enlightenment, the aesthetic value of painting, sculpture, architecture, and other arts was not assessed in isolation but understood as an expression of a broader cultural, religious, and philosophical worldview. The genre of landscape painting was no exception. Until the nineteenth century, the period, which Kenneth Clark describes as the heyday of spiritual culture, landscape did not exist as independent artistic genre.[12] In the Middle Ages and prior to the Enlightenment, the depictions of nature were created not as aesthetic objects but as a means to contemplate God's creation.[13]

The flourishing of landscape painting in the nineteenth century—it is suffice to mention artists such as Turner, Friedrich, Shishkin, Dahl, or Cézanne—can be analysed through the lens of French geographer and philosopher Augustin Berque's concept of landscape. Berque highlights a paradox: aesthetically more coherent and attractive landscapes were created before the concept of landscape was fully established.[14] The identification and perception of landscape as a valuable phenomenon not only failed to sustain a harmonious relationship with the environment but also was accompanied by the increasingly drastic transformation of natural landscapes due to urbanisation, industrial development, and railway construction. The nineteenth-century yearning for pre-modern landscapes found expression in the rise of mass tourism, the exploration of ancient cultures, the creation of parks that imitated past eras, and the apex of landscape painting.

Yet the concept of landscape, once defined, became inherently problematic. A major influence on this ambiguous process was the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt, whose seminal work *Cosmos* (1845–1862) offers a dualistic view of the world. The first part of his work provides a scientific-geographical description of the physical world, whereas the second part focuses on the aesthetic dimension, examining the literary representation of nature and the evolution of landscape painting.[15] By dividing the perception of landscape into the analytical and the aesthetic, Humboldt reveals a crisis in humanity's understanding of natural environment.[16] This crisis, seen as a consequence of the Enlightenment, reflects a process of stratification: the natural environment came to be perceived exclusively through either analytical or aesthetic lens.

The perception of landscape as an image, a snapshot of the surrounding natural world, is the result of transformation in worldview that can be traced back to the science of optics. Optical science played a significant role in the development of scientific knowledge of nature during the modern era, as exemplified by Johannes Kepler's book *Supplement to Witelo, in Which Is Expounded the Optical Part of Astronomy* (1604). Kepler likened the eye to a camera obscura mechanism, arguing that artificial instruments such as telescopes could be more reliable than human vision. This idea was later expanded by René Descartes, who established the concept of mind-body dualism. In Scholastic philosophy, vision was understood as a unity between the object and its perception; however, in the modern era, these elements became separated, eventually leading to the objectification of the natural image.[17] Berque's landscape paradox illustrates the opposition between modern and traditional notions of environment. The pre-Enlightenment relationship to the environment, which Berque terms cosmophany, is still characteristic of contemporary autochthonous cultures and is recognisable in ethnographic research.[18] Landscape

[12] Clark, K. *Landscape into Art*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1949, p. xvii.

[13] Cf. Zumthor, P. *La misura del mondo: La rappresentazione dello spazio nel Medio Evo* / Translated by S. Varvaro. Bologna: IL Mulino, 1995, p. 84–85.

[14] Berque, A. *Thinking through Landscape* / Translated by A.-M. Feenberg-Dibon. London: Routledge, 2013, p. 46, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203568507.

[15] See also Vidugirytė, I. Literatūrinio peizažo vizualumas. *Dailės istorijos studijos*, 2016, Vol. 7: Vaizdų tekstai – tekstų vaizdai / sudarytojos L. Balaišytė, E. Grigoravičienė, p. 90–91, https://doi.org/10.53631/DIS/2016.7.3.

[16] Cf. Farinelli, F. L'arguzia del paesaggio. *Casabella*, 1991, Vol. 575-576, p. 11. Retrieved from https://landscapebuiltheritage.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/casabella-575-6_larguzia-del-paesaggio.pdf [accessed 01/03/2025].

[17] See more Gal, O.; Chen-Morris, R. *Baroque Science*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 48, https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226923994.001.0001.

[18] See above all, Hirsch, E. Landscape: Between Place and Space. In: *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* / Eds. E. Hirsch and M. O'Hanlon. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198278801.003.0001.

thinking[19] (French: *pensée paysagère*) in traditional communities is marked by a deep and harmonious relationship with the environment, most evident in vernacular art and architecture.[20] The introduction of the concept of landscape in the mid-nineteenth century—its appreciation as a phenomenon, its scientific study, aesthetic qualities, and the cultivation of admiration for the natural world (alongside the flourishing of landscape painting as an expression of this admiration)—also led to a detachment from the natural world as an existential space essential to human life. In many respects, nature has been reduced to an aesthetic image increasingly removed from human experience.

2. Nature as *Grazia* in Eighteenth-Century Painting

Pre-modern European art expressed adherent beauty: each work of art served a specific purpose and conveyed an invisible layer of meaning. One element in which a degree of liberation began to manifest itself in the mid-eighteenth century—foreshadowing the nineteenth-century concept of 'art for art's sake'—was ornament. This is particularly evident in the rocaille, which, as a representation of natural structures, simultaneously exhibited a high degree of abstraction, teetering on the boundary between natural forms and fantasy. Influential French creators and promoters of rocaille, such as Jacques de Lajoüe and Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, transformed the shell motif into an almost abstract and infinitely flexible medium, sculpting it into landscapes and imaginative architectural forms.[21] However, in the eighteenth century, there was still no room for fully abstract forms: rocaille motifs were designed to resemble fantastical formations of earth, rock, or wood[22] (Figure 2).

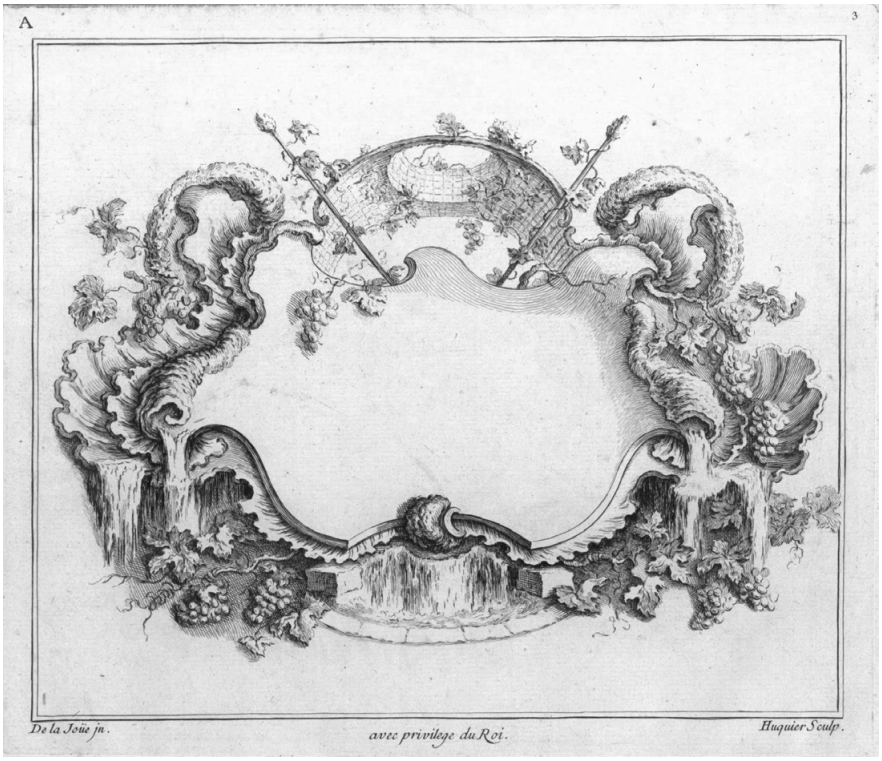

Figure 2. Jacques de Lajoüe, engraved by Jacques Gabriel Huquier, *Cartouche*, 18th century. *Lithuanian National Museum of Art*, LNDM G 15090/21.

[19] Berque's book *Thinking through Landscape* paradoxically has an almost opposite meaning to the exhibition of the same title mentioned in the introduction. Berque's concept refers to a primordial relationship with the landscape, before it was perceived as a separate image that can be immortalized in painting.

[20] See more Berque, A. *Thinking through Landscape*, p. 29–46.

[21] See Harries, K. *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*, p. 10.

[22] See more *ibidem*, p. 215–216.

A similar ambiguity between the concrete representation of nature and a fantasy-like abstraction also characterised Late Baroque painting.[23] The American scholar Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann contends that eighteenth-century painting cannot be considered abstract and argues for separating modern interpretations from a hermeneutic understanding of the period. This issue is particularly relevant in the work of the Austrian painter Franz Anton Maulbertsch, a representative of the final stage of the style. His most notable works include ceiling frescoes in churches and palaces. As is typical of the Late Baroque art, these frescoes emphasise the connection between the earthly and the divine, the physical and the metaphysical worlds, as seen in depictions of the glorification of saints or the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Maulbertsch's use of colour and seemingly free modelling of shapes create an impression of abstraction and unrestrained creativity. However, the source of these fantastical visions lies not in free creation but in the analysis of nature, as Maulbertsch remained firmly rooted in the long tradition of Western painting.[24]

One of the first and most significant of Maulbertsch's cycles was painted in 1752–1753 in Vienna's Piarist Church. Adjacent to the central vault fresco of the "Assumption of the Virgin," the fresco in one of the side chapels depicts a scene from the *Book of Genesis*, popular in Baroque art, in which Jacob meets Rachel (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Franz Anton Maulbertsch. *Jacob Rolling the Stone from the Well*, 1752–1753. *Vienna Piarist Church*. Retrieved from https://www.atkultur.at/maulbertsch-ausstellung-eroeffnet/.

[23] See Levey, M. *Painting and Sculpture in France, 1700–1789*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 173.

[24] See more Kaufmann, T. D. *Painterly Enlightenment: The Art of Franz Anton Maulbertsch, 1724–1796*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 102.

When observing the fresco, one can see that the two figures are not isolated. Their encounter is not merely the beginning of a romantic story between the two individuals. It is impossible to separate the figures from the environment from which they emerge and to which they belong. Jacob rises from his earthly surroundings, while Rachel appears to him as a divine vision. However, both figures remain integral to the earthly world. They are extended by nature, which at first glance may seem abstract but is, in fact, composed of human, animal, plant, terrestrial, and celestial motifs. The contrast between Jacob and Rachel is a metaphorical vision, a play of light, and *trompe l'œil*. Actually, they are both children of the earth. The world to which they belong transitions seamlessly from one form to another, from one colour to another—from earthly greys, greens, and ochres to heavenly blues, whites, and pinks. In Maulbertsch's paintings, nature is less a realistic portrayal of individual physical objects and more an evocative representation of nature as a whole: earth, trees, and clouds often merge into a unified entity that may resemble an abstraction but is not. The influential art historian and philosopher Paul Milton Laporte described this aspiration to capture the whole in the following words:

> *Baroque painting deals no longer with objects as such, not even with objects in space, but with the unitary visual image of a world which is potentially infinite and in which objects are but shifting, moving instances of variations of light.*[25]

In Poland–Lithuania, this depiction of nature was most clearly recognisable in the paintings of Jean-Pierre Norblin, French artist who worked in the region during the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Jean Pierre Norblin de la Gourdaine. *Kermis in the Park*, 1785.
The National Museum in Krakow, MNK XII-443.

[25] Laporte, P. M. Painting and Mathematics from the Middle Ages to the Baroque. *The Centennial Review of Arts & Science*, 1958, Vol. 2, p. 209. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/23737531 [accessed 01/03/2025].

Norblin signifies the conclusion of an era, as he painted both rococo-fantasized landscapes and those of topographical accuracy.[26] Both landscape painting of the late eighteenth century and natural philosophy of the time reflect a shift from the universal to the particular, from the allegorical to the naturalistic.[27] The Baroque preoccupation with representing the whole was replaced by a detailed analysis of specific natural objects. This focus on reality, shaped by Cartesian doubt, gradually left less and less room for the metaphysical dimension of nature.

The eighteenth century was a period where nature dominated science, philosophy, and art, culminating in ideas of harmonious coexistence with nature by its end.[28] The Italian philosopher Paolo D'Angelo argues that the interest in nature was a 'compensatory' reaction to the world that was becoming increasingly mechanistic and quantifiable. Rococo aesthetics and sensuality embraced the qualitative dimension of nature. In the art forms of the Late Baroque, nature expressed both sensory experience and the Christian meaning of the world surrounding humanity. It can be argued that, in the eighteenth-century understanding of nature, divine grace is seen for the last time as a unified force operating within nature. Following this view, any experience of nature speaks through individual phenomena and provides direct evidence of divine providence.[29]

The Late Baroque art represents a concept of nature as it existed just before losing its profound connection to the sacred and metaphysical. Another Italian philosopher, Rosario Assunto, observes that the concept of nature in the Late Baroque period was strongly influenced by the philosophy of the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the Baroque concept of nature with the Romantic ideal of the sublime, which aligns more closely with the modern aesthetic concept of landscape, where the beauty of nature is judged according to the intensity of the emotions it evokes, for example, through phenomena such as nature photography and film, or travel to the most awe-inspiring natural sites.

The Italian word *grazia*, which has multiple meanings—gracefulness, elegance, charm, and at the same time, divine grace, favour, generosity—captures the Late Baroque ideal of nature. In this period, nature embodied all of these aspects.[30] The Italian *grazia*, as well as the French *grâce* used by Leibniz, refer to both divine grace and beauty, encompassing theological as well as aesthetic dimensions.[31] As the medieval mystic Hugh of Saint-Victor argued, visible beauty is a reflection of invisible beauty. The theological interpretation of natural beauty was well known in the Middle Ages and was reactivated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the philosophy of Leibniz being one of the key inspirations for this metaphysical concept of nature.[32]

The theory of the beauty of nature and of nature as an expression of divine grace takes on a concrete sensory form in the Late Baroque and Rococo art, closely linked to joy. In popular pastoral genre, nature is depicted as lively and full of energy, no longer just a quiet backdrop to human life.[33] The ideal of nature as beautiful is not easily defined, as it is shaped by the complexity inherent in Baroque thought. The pleasure derived from nature (and, by extension, from art) is determined by beauty; beauty is

[26] See Leszczyńska, E. *Pejzaż w malarstwie polskim = Landscape in Polish Painting*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 2017, p. 79

[27] For more on this, see Cheetham, M. A. *Revision and Exploration: German Landscape Depiction and Theory in the Late 18th Century: [Ph.D. Thesis History of Art University College London]*. London: University of London, 1982. Retrieved from https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1317505/ [accessed 01/03/2025].

[28] See more Mackevičiūtė, J. Žmogaus ir gamtos santykio problema: ekocentrinės pasaulėžiūros ištakos. *Inter-studia humanitatis*, 2012, Vol. 14: Kūrybiškumo galimybės kintančio socialumo kontekste, p. 89–103. Retrieved from https://etalpykla.lituanistika.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2012~1367187858929/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content [accessed 01/03/2025].

[29] For more on this, see D'Angelo, P. *Estetica della natura: Bellezza naturale, paesaggio, arte ambientale*. Bari & Roma: Editori Laterza, 2005, p. 25–26.

[30] See Assunto, R. *Il Paesaggio e L'estetica*. Palermo: Novecento, 2005, p. 202.

[31] See Assunto, R. Un filosofo nelle capitali d'Europa. La filosofia di Leibniz tra Barocco e Rococo. *Storia dell'arte*, 1969, No. 3, p. 334.

[32] For more on this, see D'Angelo, P. *Il paesaggio: teorie, storie, luoghi*. Bari & Roma: Editori Laterza, 2021.

[33] Cf. Cafritz, R. C. Rococo Restoration of the Venetian Landscape and Watteau's Creation of the Fête Galante. In: Cafritz, R. C.; Gowing, L.; Rosand, D. *Places of Delight: The Pastoral Landscape*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1988, p. 167.

determined by spiritual joy; and joy is determined by the contemplation of Creation as a manifestation of divine grace. In one of his final treatises, *Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason* (1718), Leibniz argues that the same system of pre-established harmony operates in both the kingdom of nature and the kingdom of grace in the fulfilment of the will of God as architect and as supreme monarch. The physical and metaphysical worlds are inseparable: nature leads humanity towards grace, and grace, in turn, perfects nature.[34]

3. Leibnizian Philosophy and the Late Baroque Perception of Nature

A number of art historians have linked Baroque art to Leibniz's philosophy, typically viewing it as a reflection of aesthetic principles that characterised the period. Some of the most profound analyses of this connection have been made by twentieth-century philosophers such as Hans Barth,[35] Assunto,[36] Gilles Deleuze,[37] and others. Leibniz, who was born in Saxony, travelled extensively throughout Europe and lived for a time in Paris and Rome—the two most important capitals of the High Baroque art. Thus, on the one hand, his philosophy can be seen as a reflection or synthesis of the ideas of the late seventeenth century. On the other hand, Leibniz held considerable authority across various parts of Europe, prompting one to consider his own influence on Baroque art and culture. He corresponded with the electors of Mainz, Hanover, and Brandenburg, as well as the monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire and Russia, along with many of the most eminent scholars, philosophers, and theologians of the time. Leibniz also contributed directly to the shaping of Baroque art, particularly architecture. His advice was instrumental in the realisation of a few buildings that had a profound impact on the development of the Late Baroque, such as the Karlskirche in Vienna and the Duke Augustus Library in Wolfenbüttel.[38]

His influence spread even more widely across Europe through his works in Latin and French after his death in 1716. Traditionally, art has been understood as a reflection of the world, a mimesis, and it was Leibniz's natural philosophy, widely taught in European universities and schools, that may have shaped the European worldview, thus becoming an indirect factor in shaping the art of the Late Baroque. Leibniz stands out as one of the last polymaths who endeavoured to preserve the old metaphysical concept of nature. In the seventeenth century, the scholastic system began to encounter the rapid development of the natural sciences, leading to sharp contradictions. At the epicentre of the debate was the question of the relationship between God, man, and the world. The philosophical system proposed by Leibniz was seen as an appropriate and relatively moderate transition from Scholasticism to early modern thinking.

The treatise *Theodicy* (1710)[39] can be viewed as a response to the worldview crisis of the seventeenth century, which arose from significant contradictions resulting from the rapid development of empirical scientific knowledge during the early modern period.[40] Leibniz's natural philosophy, while incorporating the latest discoveries in physics, stands in firm opposition to materialism, Gassendi's atomism, and Descartes' dualism.[41] According to Leibniz, the physical world is God's creation, and its harmony arises from

[34] Leibniz, G. W. Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason (1714). In: Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Texts* / Translated and edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, § 15 [p. 264–265].

[35] Barth, H. Das Zeitalter des Barock und die Philosophie von Leibniz. In: *Die Kunstformen des Barockzeitalters* / Ed. R. Stamm. Berne: Francke Verlag, 1956, p. 413–434.

[36] Assunto, R. *Un filosofo nelle capitali d'Europa. La filosofia di Leibniz tra Barocco e Rococo*, p. 296–337.

[37] Deleuze, G. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* / Translated by T. Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

[38] See more Tyack, G. Round Reading Rooms: The Architectural History of the Herzog August Bibliothek and the Radcliffe Camera. *German Manuscripts Collection*, 2 July, 2019. Retrieved from hab.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/en/blog/blog-post-9 [accessed 01/03/2025].

[39] Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* / Edited with an Introduction by A. Farrer; Translated by E. M. Huggard. Chicago & La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1985.

[40] Cf. Cantelli, G. Introduzione. In: Leibniz, G. W. *Saggi di Teodicea: Sulla bontà di Dio, la libertà dell'uomo e l'origine del male* / Translator M. Marilli. Milano: Fabri, 1993, p. 5–6.

[41] See Grosholz, E. Plato and Leibniz against the Materialists. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1996, Vol. 57, No. 2, p. 267, https://doi.org/10.2307/3654098.

the interaction of God's three attributes—goodness, wisdom, and power.[42] Leibniz resolves the conflict between the perfect, geometrical image of the world and the new scientific discoveries, which no longer aligned with this view, by introducing two categories of truths of reason. Eternal truths, which are independent of human reasoning, are based on principles of logic, metaphysics, and geometry. Positive truths, revealed through observation and experimentation in nature, depend on God's free will and are related to moral necessity rather than geometrical perfection; therefore, the laws of nature are not absolutely immutable but rather a manifestation of God's will and a subject to change.[43] The movement of bodies on Earth follows the laws of natural science, but Leibniz emphasised that these laws are entirely dependent on the Creator's will. Even the principles of physics discovered by Newton, while acknowledged by Leibniz, are not considered independent, as God can alter or suspend them at any time.[44] Leibniz's philosophy can be characterised as Baroque, primarily due to his grand ambition to explain the workings of the world by reconciling the seemingly contradictory principles inherent in this model, particularly the idealism of Scholastic philosophy and the concrete nature of new scientific discoveries, grounded within theological categories.

Leibniz's entire natural philosophy is permeated by God's love for humanity. The mystery of the Incarnation is the primary expression of the relationship between the Creator and his creation.[45] God cares not only for human beings but also for all elements of nature, both animate and inanimate.[46] Leibniz's philosophy underscores the desire to reconcile physics and metaphysics. The philosopher rigorously rejected Descartes's separation of soul and body, developing a system in which these two dimensions are interconnected.[47] He criticised the purely mechanical interpretation of nature and stressed that the laws of nature cannot be fully understood without metaphysics.[48]

The harmony between the physical and spiritual realms stems from divine order, seen as the foundation for the rules of nature. This means that nature not only serves as evidence of God's grace but can also be a means of retribution or punishment for sin.[49] The world operates according to a pre-established harmony, where everything is interconnected and has its cause. God's will has determined that everything is as it is.[50] This system of harmony functions in such a way that every living and non-living object has its place in the universe and plays its role. Monads are central to the philosophy, serving as the primary, indivisible units of the universe while retaining scholastic categories like matter and form. Leibnizian philosophy links natural phenomena to metaphysical principles, arguing that physical processes arise from interaction of imperfect elements, but that their ultimate cause is the monad, with God as the primordial source.[51]

Leibniz's philosophy emphasises the coherence between both physical nature and the metaphysical monads that determine it, and between various bodies that constitute nature. The world is the best system, and such system cannot be composed of perfect parts (for if they were perfect, they would all

42 Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, § 116 [p. 187].

43 See *ibidem*, Preliminary Dissertation, § 2–3 [p. 74–75].

44 See *ibidem*, Preliminary Dissertation, § 20 [p. 86].

45 See *ibidem*, Preliminary Dissertation, § 50 [p. 101].

46 See *ibidem*, § 246 [p. 278–279].

47 See more Leibniz, G. W. Apie pirmosios filosofijos tobulinimą ir substancijos sąvoką / iš lotynų k. vertė, įvadinį komentarą ir pastabas parašė K. Čerapaitė. *Problemos*, 2022, Vol. 101, p. 143–146, https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.101.13. See also Leibniz, G. W. New System of the Nature of Substances and their Communication, and of the Union which Exists between the Soul and the Body (1694). In: Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Texts* / Translated and edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 143–152.

48 See Leibniz, G. W. *New System of the Nature of Substances and Their Communication, and of the Union which Exists between the Soul and the Body (1694)*, § 2 [p. 144–145].

49 See Leibniz, G. W. Monadology (1714). In: Leibniz, G. W. *Philosophical Texts* / Translated and edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, § 87–90 [p. 280–281].

50 See Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, § 352 [p. 336].

51 See Leibniz, G. W. *Monadology (1714)*, § 68 [p. 277]. See also Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, § 7 [p. 127].

be uniform), but rather of *imperfect* bodies, subject to time and space, and the spirits that correspond to them.[52] The harmony between the kingdom of nature and the kingdom of grace, or between the physical world and divine morality is emphasised. In other words, Leibniz's concept of nature is characterised by the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' interrelation of the world. To put it simply, the horizontal relationship between imperfect bodies depends on the vertical.

This concept of nature as a unified system, in which each body is dependent on the other, makes it possible to relate Leibniz's natural philosophy specifically to Late Baroque painting. Its depiction of nature (usually not yet an independent landscape) possesses two significant characteristics: the representation of nature as a whole (combining heaven and earth), and the emphasis on the interrelations of different elements of nature. This is characteristic of drawing and form, as well as of colours and brushstrokes, with a strong focus on transitions, levelling, and the overall impression of infinity. Based on the principles of Leibniz's natural philosophy, it could be argued that in Late Baroque painting, by highlighting the 'horizontal' connection between different elements of nature (earth, vegetation, and sky), there is an implicit reference to the 'vertical' connection. What often evokes an image of abstraction or abstracted nature for the modern viewer, in the works of artists such as Maulbertsch refers to nature as a harmonious interrelation of different bodies, which, in turn, refers to and opens up a metaphysical dimension.

4. The Metaphysical Image of Nature in Contemporary Painting

During the Enlightenment, with the fragmentation of the worldview that once united the physical and metaphysical dimensions, painting also splintered into a myriad of styles, movements, forms, and techniques. This multiplicity accelerated with the realisation of Enlightenment ideals and the complete 'liberation' of art from any dependency or interpretative framework. In this regard, twentieth-century abstract painting can be seen as the culmination of this liberation. However, abstraction remains deeply connected to the experience of the world.

A recent study by empirical aesthetics researchers at the University of Chester has demonstrated that abstract paintings often create even more concrete meanings for viewers than the figurative ones. To understand what is depicted in an abstract work, concrete and familiar objects tend to come to mind first.[53] This is why the work of artists like Hermann Nitsch is primarily perceived as destructive, deconstructing a unified view of the world. In modern art, the lack of a unified concept of nature means that the development of a work from its concept to completion is fully dependent on the artist's vision. Without the application of painting as part of a broader totality, such as in the plastic arts, interiors, or architecture, where a painting serves a specific purpose and conveys a particular message, the context of modern and contemporary painting has become reliant on a singular factor: the free creation of the artist.

Abstraction can be nihilistic, evoking destructured images of the world and humanity,[54] but it can also express harmonious themes of nature and humankind in an abstracted form. One such ambiguous abstractionist, Dutch-American artist Willem de Kooning, created paintings that were both deconstructive and spiritually evocative. In his work, spirituality emerges when the artist focusses on the 'horizontal line' of life experience and earthly emotions.[55] It could be further argued that spirituality emerges

[52] See Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, § 200 [p. 251–252].

[53] Cf. Schepman, A.; Rodway, P. Concreteness of Semantic Interpretations of Abstract and Representational Artworks. *Acta Psychologica*, 2021, Vol. 215, p. 7–9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2021.103269.

[54] Or represent 'other' worlds as in the paintings of Gerhard Richter, see O'Sullivan, S. From Possible Worlds to Future Folds (Following Deleuze): Richter's Abstracts, Situationist Cities, and the Baroque in Art. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 2005, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 311–329, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2005.11006552.

[55] See more Estupinan, L. *The Spiritual and Emotional Sense of the Form: Kandinsky and De Kooning Aesthetic Experience*: *[Master of Arts in Modern Art History, Theory and Criticism]*. California: Azusa Pacific University, 2019.

when abstraction touches upon the abstracted image of nature itself, evoking associations, for instance, with the surface of water.

The theme of physical world opening up to a transcendent experience is relevant in the work of many modern artists, such as Mark Rothko, Zao Wou-Ki, Helen Frankenthaler, or Per Kirkeby, to name just a few. Early in the reception of Rothko's work, it was believed that his paintings represented a form of a landscape; however, it is unclear how Rothko's painting relates to the representation of the world. One way to approach this is by considering it as a disclosure of a self-manifesting life-world, in the sense of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.[56]

The ambiguous theme of representation also plays a key role in the paintings of Čerapas. When observing his abstract work (Figure 1), even without knowledge of its title, one can recognise a representation of nature—a meadow or a similar natural landscape motif. This recognition does not arise from individual elements, which are absent from the painting, but from relationship between them. It is not the bodies of nature that are depicted, but their totality, or rather a fragment of this totality. The brushstrokes that suggest a landscape cannot be perceived in isolation: each stroke depends on the others, creating a harmonious, interconnected whole. In this way, the painting transcends the purely aesthetic reality of the landscape. The visual does not seem to matter so much to Čerapas, because he seeks to reveal the hidden structures of reality.[57]

Art critic Barbara Rose once stated that there is no doubt that Frankenthaler's painting, in terms of feeling and mood, aligns with Watteau's *fête galantes*.[58] What links Frankenthaler's abstractions to Rococo, more than the mood of a picnic, it could be argued, is the deeper theme of unity of nature and man, and the joy that arises from it (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Helen Frankenthaler. *Beyond*, 1963. *The John Berggruen Gallery*. Photographed by Rob Corder in 2019.

[56] For more on this, see Dahl, E. Towards a Phenomenology of Painting: Husserl's Horizon and Rothko's Abstraction. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 2010, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 233–234, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2010.11006716.

[57] See more Čerapaitė, K. The Visual Monad: Leibniz's Ontological Aesthetics and Its Artistic Implications in the Paintings of Henrikas Čerapas. *Aktualu rytoj / Relevant Tomorrow*, 2024, Vol. 4, No. 26, p. 16–19, https://doi.org/10.51740/RT.4.26.2.

[58] See Schwartz, A. *As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings* / with an Essay by Ch. Kee. Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2017, p. 25.

As the Frankenthaler describes her work, "anything that has beauty and provides order (rather than chaos or shock alone), anything resolved in a picture (as in nature) gives pleasure ... as in being one with nature."[59] Abstraction can indeed refer to the natural world, emphasizing qualities that photography by its nature cannot capture. By moving away from scientific precision, it also opens up the possibility of a transcendental experience of nature. In a sense, as with Late Baroque painting—albeit without the joyful lightness—a metaphysical dimension unfolds in Čerapas's painting through the theme of the 'horizontal' connection. The artist states that abstraction in his works originates from "reflecting on the construction of the world or its divine structural parameters."[60] In Čerapas's paintings, one can discern a visualisation of nature that transcends the physical realm. What lies between the elements—the interconnection that so fascinated Leibniz, Wolff, and other eighteenth-century thinkers—can also be observed in Čerapas's painting (Figures 6–7).

Figure 6. Henrikas Čerapas. *Landscape*, 2013–2014.

Figure 7. Henrikas Čerapas. *Landscape*, 2013–2014.

A somewhat similar idea is explored by Swiss artist Pierre André Ferrand:

A painter observes the surrounding world, but not to represent it as he sees it with his eyes. A painter examines the existing connection between objects. For example, here a tree, there mountains, as depicts traditional Chinese painter. … Seeing the world through the eyes of a painter, we notice a space beyond a plane or a field which connects horizontally, but distances vertically. Yet when looking at mountains or a forest, we see that, what separates horizontally, connects vertically. A mountain, like a tree, brings us closer to the sky. … Čerapas shows how the land blends with the horizon, how a field can be perceived as a verticality of a cliff.[61]

[59] Carmean, E. A. *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1989, p. 8. Retrieved from https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2126_300062912.pdf [accessed 01/03/2025].

[60] Romantizmas – anapus estetikos?: diskusija po parodos: [pokalbis su Gudrun Benonysdottir, Torild Rødland, Mindaugu Navaku, Krzysztof Klimek, Henriku Čerapu] / kalbino Agnė Kulbytė. *Kultūros barai*, 2017, No. 4, p. 30. Retrieved from http://www.kulturosbarai.lt/uploads/news/id112/KB_2017_WEB.pdf [accessed 01/03/2025].

[61] Ferrand, P. A. The Lonely Path. In: *Aftermath: Henrikas Čerapas: [parodos katalogas / Exhibition Catalogue, 2019, Kaunas]* / sudarymas / Composing of texts A. Kulbytė. Vilnius: Standartų spaustuvė, 2019, p. 22.

The serial nature of his paintings, the large format, rhythmic composition, and the characteristic brushstrokes of Čerapas's work create an impression of art that transcends the boundaries of the canvas.[62] The paintings, which at first glance appear abstract, seem to vibrate with internal connections, as if striving for a fusion with the external world. The canvas "Exile in the Country / Christ in a Meadow," (Figure 1) while does not depict nature in its entirety, conveys an abstract fragment of it—a piece that, though detached from the whole, seems poised to reunite with it at any moment. This natural world is imbued with a transcendent perception of God. Christ, as a symbol of the union between the concrete and the abstract, becomes the key to this interaction: between the material and the divine, between earth and heaven. This closely mirrors the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, a theme central to Leibniz's philosophy, grounded in the mystery of the Incarnation. It can be concluded that the Leibnizian paradigm of harmony between the natural world and transcendent reality remains highly relevant in the context of modern and contemporary abstract painting.

Conclusions

Leibniz's genius had a profound impact on the subsequent development of various fields, including mathematics, physics, law, political thought, and ecology. However, since the Enlightenment, the metaphysical dimension of the natural world, while an essential component of Leibniz's system, has gradually receded from the unified European worldview. It has shifted into the realm of subjective experience and philosophy, becoming increasingly disconnected from the sciences. In contemporary scientific thought, metaphysics, being unprovable, largely holds no place within the dominant Western worldview. Yet art, and specifically, abstract painting, remaining deeply connected to various forms of representation of the physical world through the harmonious interrelations of elements, continues to evoke a transcendent experience.

This experience is undoubtedly more abstract than that of the eighteenth-century context, much like the painted representation itself. In contemporary art, the intermediate state between abstraction and representation is well illustrated by Čerapas's painting. Although the viewer, who searches for something recognisable within the patches of a limited palette, is often left unsatisfied, he or she nevertheless perceives something of the familiar world (rather than something entirely disconnected from reality, as one might assume). This 'something' is to be understood not as a physically recognisable landscape, but as a layer of metaphysical dimension.

Comparing the modern times with the eighteenth century may seem bold and unconventional. Yet this paper seeks to demonstrate some shared qualities in the principles of abstracted landscapes. The common thread discernible in both epochs analysed lies in the perception of natural elements—such as a meadow, a forest, or a body of water—where the harmony of the physical world is dependent upon the invisible yet perceptible metaphysical realm.

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[62] For more on this, see Žvirblytė, M. Henrikas Čerapas. In: *Lithuanian Art: Thinking through Landscape: Exhibition Catalogue, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, 13 May – 2 July, 2017* / Authors of Texts about Artists: J. Augustytė, E. Juocevičiūtė, and M. Žvirblytė. Vilnius: Lithuanian Art Museum: National Gallery of Art, 2017, p. 78; Žvirblytė, M. Peizažo permainos Lietuvos tapyboje. *Lietuvos dailės muziejaus metraštis*, 2012, Vol. 15, p. 9–20. Retrieved from https://etalpykla.lituanistika.lt/fedora/objects/LT-LDB-0001:J.04~2012~1367189364555/datastreams/DS.002.0.01.ARTIC/content [accessed 01/03/2025].

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