

A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Fear and Terror

Federico Baronello, Willie Doherty, Diango Hernandez, Olaf Metzler, Gregor Schneider e Erwin Wurm.

Curated by Helmut Friedel e Giovanni Iovane.

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According to Plato and Aristotle, philosophy came into being with Thaumata. Usually this Greek word (and its verb, thaumazein) is translated as 'wonder', but it has various different meanings, and Plato himself made reference to them. Thaumata is also speechless wonder, shock and also, finally, fear and terror.

Philosophy started with wonder (the shock but also the fear), which is a pathos, and ends up being speechless, beyond words. Commenting on this initial fear-wonder of philosophy, Kierkegaard said that what was involved was an experience of 'no-thing': essentially an experience of nothingness.

A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) by Edmund Burke talks of the 'beautiful' and of the 'sublime'. This important 'physiological' treatise (as Kant described it) also, indeed above all, 'speaks' of 'fear' and 'terror' as speechless wonder. Burke (and subsequently all the writers on aesthetics) offers us an artistic visualization of this experience (pathos) of fear. With the historic avant-garde movements and with modernism, which shifted the geography of art from the beautiful to the sublime, fear became a central aspect of artistic language. Fear (terror) became a linguistic element of artistic experience; an experience of nothingness.

The 20th century and the contemporary age thus 'adopted' fear (and terror), both as structural elements of 'practicing and thinking art' and as a 'reflection' of a general psychological, social and political condition (general intellect).

In another psychic-physiological treatise, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Freud describes three types of 'fear': fright (Schreck), fear (Furcht) and anguish (Angst). If anguish constitutes a kind of protection and preparation in the face of danger, fear and fright describe a condition of 'wonder' in the presence or absence of the object that causes apprehension. In this case psychoanalysis is a parallel world to the philosophical and artistic one, in which fear is, in the final analysis, an experience of 'no-thing'. From a social and political point of view, one only has to think of the various derivatives of the word 'terror', including 'terrorism'.

The aim of the exhibition Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Fear and Terror is to show how fear is 'an expressive form' of the language of contemporary art (starting with modernism and modernity), and, at the same time, how this specific language engages with that of society nowadays, in which 'fear' and 'terror' (and their manipulations) are key aspects of our being in the world today.