

## IDEOLOGY, TRANSCENDENT VALUES AND FLYING SAINTS<sup>1</sup>

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: *Ideologia, valori trascendenti e santi volanti*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay starts with a theoretical reflection about ideology and the proposal of an analytic method applied to narrative texts. It then focuses on a case study connected to a category of values inspired by an idea of *transcendence* that often finds figurative expression in the theme of flight. This theme and its underlying values are explored first in the Christian–Catholic hagiographic–mystical literature and then in a sample of contemporary artworks that re–elaborate the religious theme of levitation or mystical flight from a secularized perspective. The transcendent values identified in the narratives under consideration are then contextualized in a more universal human quest for *lightness*, intended as a value underlying a widespread utopia based on the ideal to break free from the weight of the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Utopia, Value, Transcendence, Levitation, Saints.

### 1. Introduction

The notion of ideology is often burdened with stereotypical and reductive connotations that prevent it from being considered a useful concept for any serious analysis of texts and cultural phenomena. However, if the notion of ideology is considered from a semiotic perspective, it does prove an effective analytical tool. This essay starts with a theoretical reflection about ideology and the proposal of an analytic method applied to narrative texts. It then focuses on a case study connected to a category of values inspired by an idea of *transcendence* that often finds figurative expression in the theme of flight. Two analytical sections

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explore this theme and its underlying values first in the Christian–Catholic hagiographic–mystical literature and then in a sample of contemporary artworks that re–elaborate the religious theme of levitation or mystical flight from a secularized perspective. The transcendent values identified in the narratives under consideration are then contextualized in a more universal human quest for *lightness*, a value that gives rise to utopias involving alternative perspectives on reality and the opportunity to break free from the oppressive weight of the world.

## 2. A semiotic approach to ideology and values in narrative texts

In Ponzio (2015) I proposed a method for studying systems of values that find figurative expression in recurring thematic roles in a wide corpus of novels engaging the same theme (namely, Italian national unification). The starting point for developing this method was a reflection on the notion of *ideology*, from which I was able to identify a set of values, ranging from material to transcendent, which were taken up by different thematic roles.

One significant contribution to my understanding of ideology came from Ricoeur (1989), where ideology is defined as a symbolic structure that plays a fundamental role in conferring meaning on social life, thus making integration possible. While the Marxist current of thought labeled ideology as a distortion of reality, Ricoeur affirms that it plays a more primitive and wider symbolic function, preceding (possible) distortion. Ricoeur also distinguishes between ideology and utopia. While the first aims at legitimizing an existing structure of power by gaining the trust and belief of society, utopia works as a rival ideology imagining and proposing an alternative system of authority and society. It is well known that a substantial segment of European structuralist semiotics of the 1960s and 1970s influenced by Marxism<sup>2</sup> took as a key task the unveiling of ideologies hidden in texts, and that the discipline quite quickly moved beyond this specific mission, although not before it had contributed to forming a reductive and sometimes detrimental stereotype about this field of study. However, reflecting on ideology still proves fruitful if re–formulated in the framework of an updated semiotic method of textual analysis. In my case, it was useful to consider a

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2. In relation to this point, see Rossi–Landi (1972) and Fabbri (1998).

broader notion of ideology à la Ricoeur as a starting point for re-reading the Greimasian structuralist approach to this subject.

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 149), an “ideology belongs to the level of surface semiotic structures, and thus ... can be defined as an actantial structure which actualizes the values that it selects within axiological systems...”. Therefore, following the idea of *generative trajectory*, we can say that at the deepest level there is an *axiology* organizing *abstract values* which are *actualized* in *ideological models*, and these models in turn give rise to an *actantial structure* so that values are taken up by *an individual or collective subject acting to realize them*.

Based on these premises, it was possible to develop an analytical method not centered on the classic reconstruction of the canonic *narrative schema* (*ibid.*, 1982, pp. 203–06), but rather focused on reconstructing the figurative trajectory and therefore considering narrative structures especially in relation to discursive structures. In particular, it proved to be effective to take into consideration the actants’ assumption of thematic roles. This perspective led me to formulate a set of parameters to classify both the values and the style of action displayed by the characters in my corpus of novels<sup>3</sup>.

The parameter most relevant for the subject of this essay is the one assessing the values’ *level of abstraction*, on the basis of which three types of values can be identified. The first type is constituted by immanent values (material values to be realized “here and now”, generally based on individualism, e.g. wealth, power); the second by civic–humanitarian values (positioned on an immanent but universal plane, abstract but to be realized in the concrete world, such as freedom and social justice); the third by transcendent values. The latter are positioned on a plane that transcends social and concrete reality, and can be of different kinds, such as spiritual–religious values (e.g. Christian values that can only be perfectly realized in the afterlife) and intellectual values (e.g. the value of science conceived as a pure abstraction, detached from human imperfection and bodily weaknesses).

In Western culture and in Christian theological discourse, the notion of transcendence entails an idea of discontinuity, a border between the “here and now” and an immaterial dimension that exists apart

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3. See Ponzio (2015, tome I, pp. 90–3).

from the world. This idea is often connected to a spatial imagery that associates the quest for transcendence to an ascending, vertical movement<sup>4</sup>. This imagery operates as an efficacious and pervasive semi-symbolic system: two opposing values (immanence and transcendence) are placed at the two poles of an axiology that attributes transcendence more positive connotations and a clear-cut superiority over materiality.

An instance of this kind of imagery can be found in *Il Gattopardo* (Tomasi di Lampedusa 2007, first published in 1958), a famous and significant novel of the Italian literary landscape. In this novel, the tension toward transcendence of the protagonist, the prince Fabrizio, finds figurative expression through focalization. The prince's ideal is to reach ataraxia and cultivate pure reason: although he is caught up in the problems of material life, his utopia, his true aspiration, is to live as pure intellect, not stained by worldly, human accidents. Science, and in particular the study of astronomy, is the means by which he tries to reach this blissful state. He also imagines life after death as pure intellect freed from the weight of the body and free to fly in the sky among the stars:

Don Fabrizio's soul soared towards them, towards the intangible, the unattainable, those who give joy without being able to expect anything in return, those who do not barter; as in so many other occasions he fantasized about soon finding himself in those icy expanses, pure intellect armed with a notebook for calculations; for calculations that were extremely difficult but would always reappear. (Tomasi di Lampedusa 2007, pp. 96–7, transl. mine)

Thanks to his capacity for abstraction, for observing *from above*, the prince is able to gain an exceptional insight into human things and detect what is mean and impure in them. In the main episodes in which the prince gains such a deep understanding of the world, he is actually standing in high places (such as the tower he uses as an astronomical observatory, the terrace of his mansion dominating the valley below, or the top of a mountain) so that his gaze takes in the landscape from above and, at the same time, is closer to the sky and able to perceive it

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4. For a discussion of the theological notion of transcendence, see Boulnois (2005, p. 27) and Gendreau (2003, p. 141). For an overview of semiotic approaches to the notion of transcendence, see Leone and Parmentier (2014), Yelle and Ponzio (2021). On the semi-symbolic system opposing body and spirit, high and low, see also Marschiani (2012) and Stano (2022).

more clearly. This peculiar focalization constitutes an effective strategy for reinforcing the figurativization of the prince's system of values<sup>5</sup>. As Orlando (1988, p. 73, transl. mine) notes, for this character the stars play the function of "a transcendence purged of religious fantasies and made accessible to a secular imagination". This move of taking the semi-symbolic system traditionally characterizing religious transcendence and applying it to a partially or totally secularized imagery is typical of contemporary culture.

For instance, in the Christian–Catholic tradition, representative figurativizations of transcendent values can be found in hagiography, the textual genre narrating the lives of saints<sup>6</sup>: traditionally, saints devote their lives to achieving spiritual perfection, detaching themselves from the weaknesses of the material body and the corruption of the world with its deceptive immanent values. These features are especially evident in the thematic role of the mystics, figures for whom renouncing the material dimension coincides with a spiritual ascent leading to ecstatic experiences and to the communion with the deity<sup>7</sup>. However, several 20<sup>th</sup>–century Italian novels featuring religious (mainly Catholic) themes display a set of transcendent values entailing three fundamental narrative programs: self-transcendence (sacrifice), the breaking of the contingent, material order, and fulfillment in an otherworldly dimension. Even though these ideas are potentially coherent with the traditional value of transcendence, the protagonists of the novels are different from the saints described in the hagiographies, because they seek unconventional, individual pathways to transcendence, sometimes radically reversing the principles promoted by the Church (Ponzo 2019a, pp. 121–66; Ponzo 2021).

In what follows, I focus on a further recurring figurativization of transcendent values that consists in the theme of flight and, more specifically, the miraculous gift of the levitation. This theme appears frequently in traditional hagiography, and is borrowed from hagiography to be re-formulated in contemporary secularized literature and art.

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5. For a more thorough analysis of this character, see Ponzo (2015, tome II, pp. 568–78).

6. I use the term hagiography in a broad sense, to include the lives of the saints and mystical literature.

7. For a wide corpus of semiotic reflections about ecstasy, see Leone (2014).

### 3. Levitation in hagiography

*Levitation* is the suspension of the body in the air without support in violation of the law of gravity. It can be found in a number of religious traditions, but in stories of Christian mystics this phenomenon is interpreted as “a foretaste of glorious life in the dimension of the resurrection of bodies” (Di Muro 2014, p. 81, transl. mine) and generally takes place as part of ecstatic experiences. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), Rita da Cascia (1381–1457)<sup>8</sup>, Francis Xavier (1506–1552), John of the Cross (1542–1591), Theresa of Avila (1515–1582), Joseph of Copertino (1603–1663), Gerard Majella (1726–1755), Clelia Barbieri (1847–1870) are some of the saints to whom this charisma is attributed.

For instance, Raymond of Capua, the most authoritative hagiographer of Catherine of Siena, reports several episodes of levitation. When Catherine was a child and taking the first steps down her spiritual path, “very often, indeed almost always, as she climbed or descended the stairs of her father’s house, she was lifted high; her feet did not touch the steps, leading her mother to say she often feared that she [Catherine] would fall, seeing her climb so quickly” (Capua 2013, p. 56, transl. mine). Once, the young Catherine runs away from home because she wants to live as a hermit; she finds a cavern and starts to pray fervently, when she “was lifted up from the ground. She was raised as high as the height of the cave would allow and remained so until the ninth hour. ... [Finally] Catherine was lowered to the ground, in the same way in which she had first been lifted up” (*ibid.*, p. 57). When night falls, the girl understands that she is too young to leave home, so she decides to return. However, when she starts to realize how far away she is, “lifting her into the air, the Lord laid her safe and sound just outside the gates of the city” (*ibid.*, p. 58). One day, after having received the Eucharist, “It seemed to her that ... her soul entered God and God entered her. She felt completely immersed in God. With difficulty she was able to return to her room, and remained there for a long time, immobile, on her usual bed of wooden boards. But at length her body rose into the air and remained suspended. This was witnessed by three of her com-

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8. Cf. Scaraffia (2014), especially concerning the devotion of Yves Klein (1928–1962) for Saint Rita, with particular reference to the theme of the mystical flight, which fascinated the artist.

panions. When she descended again onto her bed, she began to utter penetrating words of life under her breath ...” (*ibid.*, p. 220).

In her autobiography, Theresa of Avila writes that mystical raptures “sometimes left my body so light that I was deprived of its weight, and I did not understand whether or not I touched the ground with my feet. During rapture, the body remains almost dead, unable to move, and then finds itself in the same posture ... It is rare to lose your senses, but at times, briefly and rarely, I did lose them altogether ...; And even if you do not have outward control of yourself, you do feel and hear as if from a distance” (Avila 2018, pp. 296–97, transl. mine). In the beginning this situation causes the mystic to fear, because she sees herself lifted up “without knowing from where or where to” (*ibid.* 2018, pp. 282–83): a great force “took my soul away and raised my head, or even my whole body, until it was lifted clear off the ground” (*ibidem*). These incidents, taking place during liturgy and especially after receiving the Eucharist, occur in public and this fact makes the saint very uncomfortable; however, she cannot resist: “In these cases, it seemed to me, just when I was trying to resist, that from under my feet came forces so great that I did not know what to compare them to, with a greater impetus than other spiritual things, and I hung there like a rag. Efforts against the lord are great and utterly without effect; there is no power that can oppose his” (*ibid.*, pp. 284–85).

Given the strength and beauty of spiritual experiences, it is difficult to return to earthly life: “Oh, what is it for a soul that has reached this state to have to talk to anyone again, to look on and behold the face of this so badly lived life, and to waste time satisfying the body, sleeping and eating! Everything tires her, she does not know how to escape, she feels chained and imprisoned. It is then that she feels even more keenly the captivity of having a body and the misery of life. She understands why St. Paul begged God to free him” (*ibid.*, pp. 312–13). In light of this latter consideration and the interpretation of ecstatic experience as a foretaste of otherworldly bliss, it is not surprising that death is sometimes described as a flight into the sky in the hagiographic literature. For instance, Claire of Assisi’s biographer describes her passing away as flight: “The day after the feast of Blessed Lawrence, that most holy soul left to be crowned with the eternal prize; loosed from the temple of the flesh, the spirit happily migrated up into the stars” (Celano 2015, p. 177, transl. mine).

The saint whose name and story is most directly connected to the charisma of levitation, however, is probably Joseph of Copertino. He is said to have experienced more than 150 flights in the years between 1630 and 1663 (Sebasti 2003, p. 89)<sup>9</sup>. Many of these experiences took place during public celebrations of the Mass, and therefore in this case as well they were a source of shame and humiliation for the friar. Indeed, Joseph of Copertino was subjected to an inquisitorial trial for simulated sanctity and abuse of popular credulity, a trial that ended by absolving him but ordering him to live segregated in a monastery. The flights generally begin with a scream by the saint, then his body becomes as rigid as a statue and is lifted up in ecstasy, sometimes reaching a height of many meters, to the great fear and the wonder of bystanders (Chiappinelli 2008, pp. 63, 65–8, 102–4). For instance, the Inquisition judges ask him to celebrate a Mass in their presence and, on this occasion,

All was proceeding peacefully, when, at the end of the celebration, a cry broke the silence. The friar, with open arms, flew to the altar and hung there, motionless, suspended above the flowers and burning candles. The frightened nuns tried to pull him down, for fear that he would be burned by the flames. A moment later Joseph had already descended to the ground and, on his knees, was singing and dancing, praising the Blessed Virgin. (*ibid.*, p. 80, transl. mine)

The theme of levitation should be considered in the context of other phenomena described in mystic and hagiographic literature concerning flight. Indeed, there are at least three other themes connected to flight beside levitations, ranging from major to minor involvement of the body. Levitation is surely the one that involves the body most intensely: as the above–quoted narrations show, the rapture of the soul is so strong as to carry the whole body with it, physically lifting it up toward the sky.

The second type of flight is related to *bilocation*, a term which in the mystic vocabulary indicates the mystic's ability to be seen and actually be located in two different places at the same time. For instance, Joseph of Copertino is reported to have experienced bilocation on two occasions: he was in his cellar, but at the same time he returned to his native village to keep his mother and a friend company at the moment of their

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9. Besides narrating and commenting on some of the saint's main experiences of levitation, Sebasti (2003) also provides an anthology of testimonies about Saint Joseph's flights taken from the proceedings of his cause for canonization.



death (Chiappinelli 2008, pp. 86, 100). Sometimes bilocation is connected to flight. This is the case with Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (1887–1968): the acts of his cause for canonization include witness statements reporting that he appeared to the Allied pilots, floating in the air, so as to save the town of San Giovanni Rotondo from bombing<sup>10</sup>.

The third type is constituted by flight involving only the soul. In this case, the soul is momentarily freed from the body and carried up to visit earthly or heavenly places. In some occasions, however, at the end of the experience the body displays visible signs of the soul's journey. The hagiography of Lydwine of Shiedam (1380–1443), written by Thomas Kempis (1380–1471), narrates that, even though she spent long years in bed due to paralysis and in the dark because of an intolerance to the light, she had frequent ecstatic experiences in which an angel took her to visit “the gardens of Paradise” (Kempis 2012, p.124) and far-away earthly places; several times, on her return, her body mysteriously showed wounds connected to her ecstatic experience. For instance:

... she was once rapt to the sacred places of the city of Rome. And while she was going between some of the chief churches, and was proceeding with outstretched arms between shrubs and thorn bushes, from the same bushes she received a thorn in her fingers and brought it back with her, from the pain of which ... she suffered not a little for nearly two days. (*ibid.*, p. 115)

Another time, after being carried to Purgatory Lydwine's soul was lifted up to Heaven where she received a veil from the Virgin. When her soul returned, she still had the veil with her (*ibid.*, pp. 128–33).

Of course there is overlap between these kinds of experience, and the lines dividing them are not always well-defined. Undoubtedly they are to be interpreted in relation to the distinction between body and soul that characterizes Christian thought (Eco 2014; Galimberti 2020, chapters 2–3, 43–4) and the consequent distinction between bodily and spiritual senses (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012; Lingua 2006, part 1) according to which body and soul often act as two different sensing

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10. I received this information from my colleague Francesco Galofaro, who is carrying out an in-depth study of Saint Pio's cause for canonization. The report of this miraculous flight by the saint in bilocation is also mentioned at <https://m.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/padre-pio-miracolo-parlano-i-piloti-alleati-non-riuscimmo-a-bombardare-ci-fermo-lui.htm>.

subjects. The typology I propose distinguishes among the mystical phenomena connected to flight on the basis of decreasing bodily agency: while in the first and second types the body has a more active role and the mystic appears as a unified subject composed of body and soul, in the third type the body's role is more passive, with the soul prevailing and the body mainly serving to testify to the spiritual experience.

The contrast between the weight of the body and the lightness of the soul can also be related to a recurring *topos*: in several cases, levitation is connected to food. For instance, Theresa of Avila once experiences levitation in the kitchen, while she is cooking (see below), and Gerard Majella in the refectory, where the contemplation of a sacred image makes him soar with the fork in one hand and the napkin in the other (cf. Papasidero 2022). These episodes provide an effective figurative representation of the prevalence of the transcendent values of the soul over the material value of the bodily needs.

In mystical hagiographic discourse, therefore, transcendence can be achieved through different narrative programs leading to the partial, temporary fulfilment of the promised good awaiting the subject after death. This ideology, based on the actualization of a transcendent value, significantly changes in the re-elaborations of these themes in secularized arts.

#### 4. Levitation from hagiography to secularized arts

While mystical levitation has quite often been represented in sacred iconography over the centuries (and especially in relation to Saint Joseph of Copertino, in baroque art<sup>11</sup>), this theme also appears in the contemporary secularized arts. In this context, however, mystical levitation is reinterpreted and attributed new and unconventional characteristics. Here I consider two cases, the reinterpretation of Saint Joseph of Copertino's flights in the novel *Nostra Signora dei turchi* by Carmelo Bene (2018, first published in 1966) and the performance *The Kitchen: homage to Saint Therese* by Marina Abramovic (2009).

The protagonist of Bene's novel is an actor who perpetually observes himself playing different roles and undergoing a process of self-destruction. His aspiration is to "become an idiot" (Bene 2018, p. 20, transl.

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11. A small gallery of the saint's iconography is available at <https://sangiuseppedacopertino.net/san-giuseppe-nellarte/>.

mine), and one of the models he tries to imitate to achieve this goal is that of Joseph of Copertino. Indeed, the saint's hagiographies report that he was exceptionally clumsy and that his first attempts to enter a religious order failed because his superiors judged him "ignorant" and "idiotic" (see Sebasti 2003, p. 11). Bene's character longs to be able to fly like Joseph of Copertino, but attributes a specific and unconventional meaning to the saint's propensity for flight:

St. Joseph of Cupertino, keeper of swine, earned his wings consorting with his own clumsiness and at night, in prayer, he would reach the altars of the Virgin, open-mouthed, by flying. The idiots who see Our Lady have impromptu wings, they are even able to fly and rest on the ground like a feather. The idiots who do not see Our Lady, do not have wings, they are denied flight but fly all the same, and instead of resting they fall back ... But those who see that they do not see what they see, those who fly are themselves the flight. ... Such a miracle annihilates them: rather than seeing Our Lady, they are the Madonna they see. Ecstasy is this paradoxical, demented identity that sucks the subject out of the praying person and, in return, deludes him into objectifying himself within another object. ... This is how a saint loses himself, through uncontrolled idiocy. ... The idiots who see, see themselves in a vision with all the variations faith brings: if they are worms, they see butterflies, if puddles, clouds, if the sea, the sky. And they kneel before this alter ego as if they were kneeling before God. ... The idiots who have not seen Our Lady are horrified by themselves ... rather than bringing God to others to gain themselves, they bring themselves and others to gain God. (Bene 2018, pp. 43–5, transl. mine)

The figurative representation of these principles lies in the protagonist's irresistible impulse to throw himself from his balcony and other high places, an act he attempts several times. Each time, however, he falls and hurts himself badly (*ibid.*, pp. 32, 38, 42). This flight, therefore, is the reverse of mystical flight not only in its meaning, but also in its trajectory and final destination. The radical reversal of mystical discourse is an important feature of Bene's thought, as the very title of his autobiography shows: *Sono apparso alla Madonna* (Bene 2017), suggesting that it is not the Madonna who appears to the human being, as in the classic ecstatic experience, but the contrary<sup>12</sup>.

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12. For a further discussion of Bene (2018), see Ponzo (2019b).

Marina Abramovic's *The Kitchen: homage to Saint Therese* (2009) is an artwork composed of a set of photographs and videos portraying the artist in the kitchen of a Spanish monastery. One of the videos is entitled *The Kitchen I: Levitation of Saint Theresa* and indeed it shows Marina Abramovic "levitating". Commenting on her own work<sup>13</sup>, the artist explains that it is intensely autobiographical, connected to her nostalgia for her childhood kitchen and the figure of her grandmother. The levitation performance was inspired by a passage she read in the diaries of Saint Theresa of Avila that touched her deeply. In this passage, the saint describes having once had an ecstatic experience during Mass and that, when she had returned home, she tried to cook a soup but was unable to do so because she continued to levitate and this made her angry at the divine force she could not control. Abramovic interprets this episode as an ironic reference to the fact that being possessed of gift is sometimes an obstacle to carrying out the normal acts of daily life. On the figurative level, the artwork contains several references to religious iconography, such as the performer's long, sober black dress reminiscent of monastic robes and her pose with her arms stretched wide, besides the setting itself and the explicit reference to levitation. The system of values underlying this figurative apparatus, however, differs from the one identified in mystical–hagiographic texts. Indeed, in this case levitation is understood not as the figurative representation of a momentary fulfillment of transcendent values, but rather as the actualization of a personal memory, the figurativization of something belonging to the artist's individual past positioned in a specific time and space and not evocative of a universal, utopic afterworld. Therefore, transcendence in the religious sense becomes marginal; it is presented as the heritage of a time–worn common imaginary derived from the Catholic tradition, and it is substituted by the positive valorization of individuality and earthly experience. This reduction of transcendent values to values to be achieved in the here and now, such as self–realization, is even more clear in an interview conducted with the artist by Sara Ricotta Voza<sup>14</sup>:

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13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37GtB4hMINY>.

14. <https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2017/10/08/news/cibo-e-spiritualita-un-duello-artistico-1.34428131> (transl. mine).

Q: Teresa had extraordinary experiences, such as levitation, but she tried to fight them and struggled to keep them from happening in public. You, on the other hand, display them to the world. What is the message?

A: To help visitors understand that if I do it, they can do it too. I show that there are no insurmountable obstacles, on the contrary, as the title of my autobiography says, I invite you to Walk through the walls, because if you don't walk through them you don't know what's behind them. So my message is "Come on! Let's go!"

Q: Do you find any other similarities with St. Teresa? Do you consider yourself a mystic?

A: No, I am neither mystical nor special. I am an artist and my job is to convey a message.

In both Bene and Abramovic, therefore, the traditional theme of mystic levitation is reinterpreted in light of an idea of secularized transcendence that is deprived of its metaphysical, otherworldly component but nevertheless directed at overcoming human limits.

## 5. Conclusion

What do all these formulations of the theme of flight and its associated values have in common? An answer to this question can be found in Italo Calvino's lecture about *lightness*. Calvino (2020 [1995], p. 7) defines lightness as a *value*, one that he himself tries to achieve in his literary works. As a model, Calvino looks to the mythological hero Perseus who defeated the Gorgon and her power to petrify by flying and avoiding looking directly at her. Bene and Abramovic similarly use their art as a protective filter for looking at the weight of reality and propose, as an alternative, a way of gazing on it from above. This alternative perspective is what Calvino identifies as the "existential function of literature" — and, we might add, of the arts in general — consisting in "searching for lightness as a reaction to the weight of life" (*ibid.*, p. 30). This yearning for lightness can not only be found in Western literature (of which Calvino provides a representative sample from Antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> century), it also appears as a universal human feature:

The shaman responded to the precariousness of the tribe's existence — drought, disease, evil influences — by cancelling the weight of his body, transporting himself in flight to another world, another level of perception, where he could find the strength to modify reality. In centuries of civilization nearer to our own, in the villages where women bore the heaviest burden of a life of constraints, witches flew at night on broom handles and even lighter vehicles such as ... plaits of straw. ... I believe this link between yearned-for levitation and suffered deprivation is an anthropological constant. And literature perpetuates this anthropological device. First, oral literature: in fairy tales, flight into another world is a frequently repeated situation. Among the “functions” catalogued by Propp ... [there are] various examples of the occurrence “the hero flies through the air” ... (*ibidem*, transl. mine)

From this perspective, the theme of flight in the cases under consideration, albeit specifically connected to the Christian–Catholic idea of transcendence, can be related to a utopia that crosses many religious cultures (for instance shamanic traditions in general, Buddhism, and Hinduism), which connect the value of lightness to values of transcendence (Yelle and Ponzo 2021, p. 2; Eliade 1954, chapter VIII)<sup>15</sup>. The contemporary artistic re–formulation can be interpreted as a move to overcome religious transcendence in the name of a value of lightness that finds realization in the artwork itself: the arts propose themselves as a substitute for religion in the human quest for lightness, understood in the specific cases we considered as a secularized form of transcendence that is characterized by the absence of a properly metaphysical dimension and conceives the “beyond” only as freedom from the burdens and limits of human life and bodies.

Of course, both of these systems of values, religious and secular alike, are *utopic* in that they propose a perspective alternative to constituted reality and prevailing ideologies proposing material values. What is somehow paradoxical in both of them is the role of the body itself. Indeed, bodies play a key role in the acts of flight analyzed here, as an indispensable component of the experience of transcending their

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15. The theme of lightness is of course diffused beyond the specific religious and artistic cultures considered here. According to Marsciani (2022, p. 123), for instance, the virtualization of experience desired and experimented in contemporary societies is based precisely on the value of lightness, on the desire to overcome the weight and the limits of the body and to reach infinity.

materiality<sup>16</sup>. These bodies are a good example of what Foucault defines as *utopic bodies*, which “allow all the space of the religious, of the sacred, ... of the other world” to enter into their own materiality and flesh (Foucault 2019, p. 17, transl. mine). The topological imaginary connected to the theme of flight is characterized by a vertical orientation. In many cultures, included the Catholic one, the vertical metaphor is frequently used in the imagination and representation of hierarchic structures (Schwartz 1981). However, the imaginary of the flight seems to be in contrast with this kind of metaphor and the subjacent ideology, mainly based on what I called “immanent” values and regulating a concrete social, political and economic system. The transcendent value underlying the theme of flight, from this perspective, challenges the vertical hierarchic imagery, thus proving to be part of a utopic discourse, in the Ricoeurian sense, namely an alternative ideology challenging the existing structures and imagining a different reality, in this case above and beyond.

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16. For further reflection on this subject, see Ponzo (2022).

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