

# Max Dvořák's Michelangelo<sup>1</sup>

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*Dedicated to the memory of Ivo Hlobil*



Figure 1 Max Dvořák and his second wife Rosa Marie and daughters Hermina and Gisela from Dvořák's first marriage, ca. 1915. Photo: Archive of the Institute of Art History of the CAS, the estate of Jaromír Pečírka.

At the end of 1920 Max Dvořák [fig.1] gave his famous lecture on the art of El Greco at the *Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie* in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> He called El Greco's work one of the high points of late sixteenth-century art, and this was evident in how El Greco overcame the objective structures of the external world through the internal intentions he expressed in his art. With this Dvořák showed

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a talk I gave at the conference *The Influence of the Vienna School of Art History II: The 100th Anniversary of Max Dvořák's Death*, organized by the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences on 15th–16th April 2021. For further reading on the problematic discussed in this essay see the article from 2021 published in the *RIHA Journal* under the title 'Moderner Inhalt in manieristischer Form. Max Dvořák unter dem Einfluss Georg Simmels', and a paper titled 'Die Tragik in der Kunst Michelangelos als Max Dvořáks Vermächtnis in der Kunstgeschichte Hans Sedlmayrs' that will be published in 2022 in *Folia Historiae Artium*. The paper is a part of my research project titled *The Vienna School of Art History and the Art of Michelangelo Buonarroti: Max Dvořák and His Students Jaromír Pečírka, Charles de Tolnay, Hans Sedlmayr* which is being conducted at the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Max Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', in: Karl Maria Swoboda and Johannes Wilde (eds), *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, München: Piper Verlag, 1924, 261–276.

that El Greco's art was not a misstep in the development of art history, which is how his art was seen until the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> and that it was rather a necessary dynamic of art towards securing its continued existence despite the transformation of social structures that was occurring simultaneously: Dvořák described the confrontation of the Renaissance tradition, represented in the sixteenth century by the Roman papacy, with Luther's Reformation and interpreted this collision as a rupture in Renaissance objectivity, with its construction of 'one' world dominated by the Catholic Church. This led to the dematerialisation of the experience of reality, which was similar to the uncertainty that characterised society in the early twentieth century: 'The roads which had [...] led men to knowledge and helped them to create a spiritual culture were abandoned, the result being an apparent chaos, similar to that with which we are confronted today.'<sup>4</sup> Dvořák pointed out that this radical change in the relationship of individuals to the world that is evident in El Greco's art – and close to the experience of the early twentieth century – was first voiced by Michelangelo in his late art: 'what we find expressed in the work of Michelangelo [...] is not something limited to art but the very criterion of [his] age'.<sup>5</sup> [fig. 2]

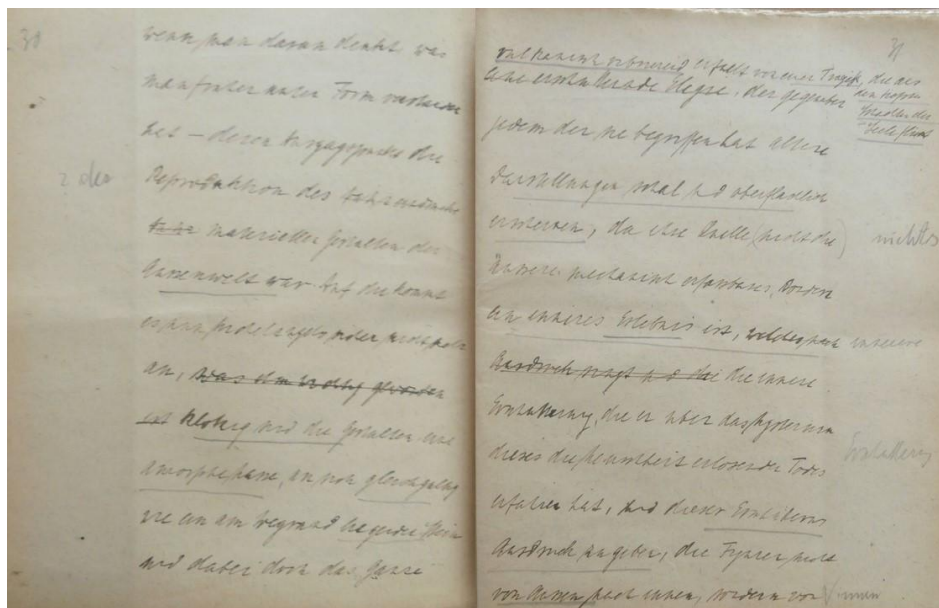


Figure 2 Max Dvořák's manuscript of his lecture on El Greco, 1920. Photo: Archive of the Institute of Art History of the Vienna University, the estate of Max Dvořák.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter K. Klein, 'El Greco's Burial of the Count of Orgaz and the Concept of Mannerism of the Vienna School, or: Max Dvořák and the Occult', in: Nikos Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *El Greco of Crete*, Iraklion: Municipality of Iraklion, 1995, 507–532.

<sup>4</sup> Max Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', in: *The History of Art as the History of Ideas*, transl. by John Hardy, London: Routledge, 1984, 97–108, here 104; Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 270: 'Die Wege, die bis [...] zur Erkenntnis und zum Aufbau einer geistigen Kultur führten, wurden verlassen, und das Ergebnis war ein scheinbares Chaos, wie uns unsere Zeit als ein Chaos erscheint.'

<sup>5</sup> Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', 104; Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 270: 'was wir bei Michelangelo [...] auf dem begrenzten Gebiete der künstlerischen Problemstellung beobachten konnten, war das Kriterium der ganzen Zeit'

Dvořák therefore devoted an extensive part of the El Greco lecture to describing the change in Michelangelo's late art, which brought an 'end' to the Renaissance by surpassing its rationally constructed concepts in order to amplify a new spiritual need to comprehend the impaired world. According to Dvořák, in Michelangelo's late work figures resembled 'block-like amorphous masses, as indifferent in themselves as stones by the roadside, yet vibrant throughout, volcanic and filled with a tragic element that springs from the very depths of the human soul'.<sup>6</sup> This treatment of figures was radically different from the approach Michelangelo used in his earlier work, where human figures were presented in idealised forms,<sup>7</sup> and according to Dvořák this change occurred because Michelangelo sought to 'build his figures not, as it were, upwards from externals but outwards from inner depths, as if the body were possessed by the spirit'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Michelangelo fundamentally altered his style of artistic expression in his late work because, Dvořák argued, it was no longer determined by the evolution of artistic forms in the sense of capturing and representing the world within the confines of its objectivity. Rather by breaching and 'rupturing' its limits Michelangelo created in his art an experience of the world where it is perceived in its subjective existence, in the here and now. According to Dvořák, Michelangelo's late work thus did not show (art) form as idealization of the world, but he rather captured in their hiatus the meaning of the world that emerges in the act of creation, where the inner relationship of the artist to the world is communicated through the external concept of the art's form.<sup>9</sup> Dvořák demonstrated this change in Michelangelo's art in the lectures on Italian art that he gave in the winter semesters of 1918–1920 at the University of Vienna, which started with the art of Giotto and was supposed to end with the art of Bernini.<sup>10</sup> After a lecture on the Quattrocento in 1919, in which Dvořák also discussed Michelangelo's early art, in 1920 he centred his interest on the change in Michelangelo's art that could be seen in the *Last Judgement* [fig. 3].<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', 100–101; Dvořák 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 266: 'Kloztig sind die Gestalten, eine amorphe Masse, an sich gleichgültig, wie ein am Wegrand liegender Stein und dabei doch das Ganze vulkanisch vibrierend, erfüllt von einer Tragik, die aus den tiefsten Schächten der Seele fließt'.

<sup>7</sup> Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 265–266.

<sup>8</sup> Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', 100–101; Dvořák 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 266: 'die Figuren nicht von außen nach innen, sondern von innen nach außen aufzubauen, wie sich die Seele ihrer bemächtigt'.

<sup>9</sup> Dvořák 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 265.

<sup>10</sup> The notes to these lectures are stored at Dvořák's estate in the Archive of the Institute of Art History of Vienna University, Nachlaß Max Dvořák, Karton 6, Faszikel 4: *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance 1918/1919 (Manuskript zur Vorlesung)*; Karton 8, Faszikel 4: *Die Kunst der Hochrenaissance 1919/20 (Manuskript zur Vorlesung)*; Karton 8, Faszikel 1: *Entwicklung der Barockkunst 1920/21 (Manuskript zur Vorlesung)*.

<sup>11</sup> Max Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, München: Piper Verlag, 1928, 127–143.



Figure 3 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Last Judgement*, 1536–1541. From Max Dvořák's *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, München: Piper Verlag, 1928.

Dvořák argued that Michelangelo diverged from the classical elements that dominated his earlier work, because in the early 1540s these formal roots were too strict for him to be able to express what he was newly pursuing. This departure from Michelangelo's earlier work was, according to Dvořák, evident in the transformation of the compositional relationship between the figures and the background. After the *Last Judgement* the background began to play only a secondary role in Michelangelo's art, because he began to use it as a platform against which to amplify the expressiveness of the figures that actually defined the meaning of the painting.<sup>12</sup> Perspective, which dominated the compositions of the Quattrocento,<sup>13</sup> was abandoned, because the space was filled by the figure, which controlled its surroundings. This had the effect of 'overcoming of the temporal or local constraints' of a composition in a work,<sup>14</sup> as the background was no longer descriptive and used to define the figure but was instead made to support the meaning given to the composition by the figure. As a result of this, the *Last*

<sup>12</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 127–129.

<sup>13</sup> Max Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, München: Piper Verlag, 1927, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 127.

*Judgement* and subsequent works by Michelangelo existed only in themselves, in their own dimension, detached from the 'real', objective world. In Dvořák's words what was going on here was something *sub specie aeternitatis*, seen and represented in time and eternity.<sup>15</sup>

According to Dvořák, these changes – abandonment of the classical and Renaissance approaches to the construction of the figure and its background – were the result of the last and most important change in Michelangelo's art – namely, his effort to express a new conception of the human fate that governs all lives.<sup>16</sup> Michelangelo conceptualised fate as 'tragic', at least in the sense that Dvořák described the overall meaning of the *Last Judgement* as the everlasting tragedy of the humankind here represented in one event.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, in Dvořák's interpretation, the tragedy of human fate prompted a formal change in Michelangelo's art. In order to express the tragic fate of humankind, the descriptive character of idealised forms influenced by Antiquity had to be abandoned because it did not express the inner truth of life. It was this inner life that defined the outer world, and Michelangelo therefore started to conceive of his figures as possessed by their spiritual – inner – being. In his lecture on El Greco, Dvořák described this inner being as saturated with tragedy – '*erfüllt von einer Tragik*' – as we have seen above. This realisation led Michelangelo to 'turn away' from the art of the Renaissance, based on the imitation and formal idealisation of nature,<sup>18</sup> because he believed life was directed by inner being and its tragic determination, and not by outer existence. Tragedy, as the human fate, therefore determined the outer form of the world, and this led to a change in Michelangelo's art. What signified this tragedy in Michelangelo's art Dvořák then captured in his interpretation of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* in the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican [fig. 4].

Dvořák felt the main protagonist of the painting was not Saint Peter or the hangmen, but that it was rather a figure able to contemplate life by witnessing its end in inevitable death, and according to Dvořák that figure was the 'Sprecher', the young man in the middle of the painting among the witnesses of the martyrdom. He was the main hero of the whole painting,<sup>19</sup> because he was depicted along the line of the raised cross with Saint Peter, and as a result it was he rather than Saint Peter who controlled the painting's compositional arrangement. The '*Sprecher*' separates the approaching soldiers on the left from the group on the right, which is made up of the witnesses of the crucifixion, in relation to which he is in a subordinate

<sup>15</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 128: 'was hier vorgeht, ist sub specie aeternitatis, in Zeit und Ewigkeit gesehen und dargestellt'.

<sup>16</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 128: 'eine neue Auffassung des Fatums, dem hier alles Sein unterworfen ist'

<sup>17</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 128: 'als die zu einem einzigen dramatischen Geschehnis zusammengefaßte ewige Tragödie der Menschheit'.

<sup>18</sup> Dvořák 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 266.

<sup>19</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 135: 'der eigentliche Held der ganzen Darstellung'.

position. As we have seen above, in Dvořák's interpretation of Michelangelo's late art the formal determination of compositional space was controlled by the

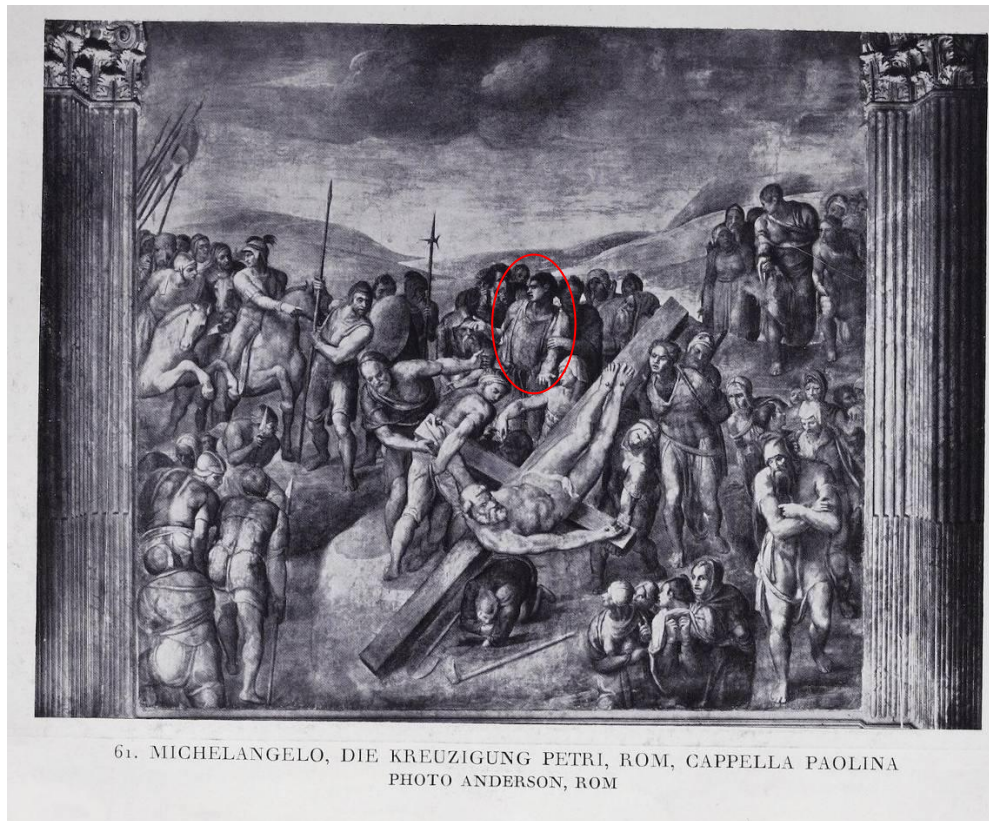


Fig. 4: Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Crucifixion of the Saint Peter, 1542–1549. From Max Dvořák's *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, München: Piper Verlag, 1928.

expressivity of the figures that gave the painting its meaning. The interpretation applies here and thus instead of the external – objective – truth was the painting determined by an inner experience of such an objective world.<sup>20</sup>

That shows that Dvořák believed that the meaning of the painting rested on the '*Sprecher*' because of his role as a witness to both the reality and the potentiality of death, a division rendered visible between the martyrdom of Saint Peter and *Sprecher*'s contemplation of this death.<sup>21</sup> Dvořák argued that the placement of the *Sprecher* between these two scenes, which determined the spatial construction of the painting, meant that the painting is an expression of the inevitability of death as the ultimate truth of life as the *Sprecher* sees it: he is aware of the inevitability of death even though it is not his own death. In the painting death is thus expressed as

<sup>20</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 133: 'an Stelle der äußeren Wahrheit tritt eine innere, das innerlich Erlebte'.

<sup>21</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 134: 'der geistige Mittelpunkt liegt hier, und zwar merkwürdigerweise nicht im Petrus – er hat bereits mit dem Leben abgeschlossen und ist nur der Anlaß dessen, was hier geistig geschieht – sondern in jenem Jüngling, den wir den "Sprecher" nannten'.

something 'allgemein Menschliches',<sup>22</sup> thus as something 'universally human': the painting's main motif is that the ultimate truth of life is the tragedy of life's loss even though life is apparent in the here and now. As Dvořák pointed out, the painting does not deal with a particular life of any individual: 'it is not about this or that person, but about an idea that will triumph like the dawn that rises on the horizon.'<sup>23</sup>

### Mannerism as Michelangelesque Transformation of Life

Since Michelangelo's late art enabled other artists to move beyond the no-longer-palpable objectivity of the Renaissance and showed how to create new art forms within the actual state of reality, it unveiled the tragedy of life that had hitherto remained latent. Thus Dvořák formulated Mannerism as an independent style of art. This interpretation of Mannerism – as connected to Michelangelo's revelation of the tragedy of life – is evident in Dvořák's study on Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which he wrote in 1920 and which was first published in 1921.<sup>24</sup> At the opening of the study we read that 'what has been written about Michelangelo's tragic end of life also applies to the whole age into which Michelangelo's life has entered.'<sup>25</sup> Dvořák thus stated at the very opening of his Bruegel study that Michelangelo's conceptualisation of the tragedy of life was consistent with the cultural mood of the later sixteenth century that allowed Bruegel – as well as El Greco – to express his era in a truthful fashion, and without the restrictions of the Renaissance relating to the construction of space and the idealisation of figures. That Dvořák understood Bruegel's art as a Michelangelesque transformation of the tragedy of life is evident in his interpretation of Bruegel's painting of *The Blind Leading the Blind* from 1568 as an expression of the conception of human fate that Michelangelo had articulated in his *Last Judgement*. [fig. 5]

Dvořák showed that the subject matter of both works is human coping with the deepest issues of life, and thus with the forces that overwhelm the singularity of one's being and that inevitably determine the meaning of one's being by revealing its ultimate truth in the death. Dvořák knew that *The Blind Leading the Blind* differed from the *Last Judgement* in its treatment of human life: Michelangelo set life in another dimension, the 'übermenschliches' dimension, while Bruegel portrayed life as 'alltägliche' and thus as an insignificant event.<sup>26</sup> However, Dvořák also explained that despite these differences,

<sup>22</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 135: 'es handelt sich nicht um diesen oder jenen Menschen, sondern um eine Idee, welche siegen wird wie die Morgenröte, die am Horizont aufsteigt'.

<sup>24</sup> Max Dvořák, 'Einleitung', in: *P. Bruegel d. Ä. Siebenunddreißig Farbenlichtdrucke nach seinen Hauptwerken in Wien*, Wien: Anton Schroll, 1921, 5–36.

<sup>25</sup> Dvořák, 'Einleitung', 5: 'was über Michelangelos tragischen Lebensabschluß geschrieben wurde, gilt auch für das ganze Zeitalter, in das Michelangelos Leben hineinragt'

<sup>26</sup> Max Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', in: Karl Maria Swoboda and Johannes Wilde (eds), *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, München: Piper Verlag, 1924, 216–257, here 248–249.

'at the heart of both works there is a coming to terms with man's deepest existential problems and in both works we find those forces which determine the fate of the individual centred upon a terrifying event. Furthermore, both



Figure 5 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, 1568. From Max Dvořák's *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, München: Piper Verlag, 1924.

paintings contain a personal confession and perfectly express the artistic and intellectual ideas of their age'.<sup>27</sup>

Dvořák thus showed that in Bruegel's art the tragedy of Michelangelo's late art was rendered as the impulse to overcome the art as an objective form in order to fill it with the inner meaning of life that gave a new content to the problem of form.<sup>28</sup> The Bruegel study is also the key source for understanding the origins of Dvořák's concept of tragedy. In the collection of Dvořák's essays published posthumously in 1924, and in which the Bruegel study was published for the second time, we find a slightly altered version of the above-mentioned quotation: 'Simmel's words regarding the tragic end of Michelangelo's life could well be applied to this whole

<sup>27</sup> Max Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder', in: *The History of Art as the History of Ideas*, transl. by John Hardy, London: Routledge, 1984, 70–96, here 90; Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', 248: 'Beiden Werken liegt eine Auseinandersetzung mit den tiefsten Daseinsfragen zugrunde, bei beiden sind die Gewalten, die über dem Einzelschicksal stehen, im Brennpunkte eines schauerlichen Ereignisses zusammengefaßt, und beiden liegt ein persönliches Bekenntnis zugrunde, welches zugleich die künstlerischen, geistigen und ethischen Ideale des Zeitalters zum höchsten Ausdruck bringt'

<sup>28</sup> Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im Zeitalter der Renaissance. Das 16. Jahrhundert*, 135: 'neue Erkenntnis mußte [...] dem Problem der Form einen neuen Inhalt geben'



period.<sup>29</sup> We find here a direct reference to Georg Simmel's *Philosophische Kultur* from 1911, which included his text on Michelangelo and his study on the concept and tragedy of culture.<sup>30</sup> In Dvořák's study there is a reference on page 181 to Simmel's book, where we find Simmel's definition of the tragedy expressed in Michelangelo's art as follows. [fig. 6]

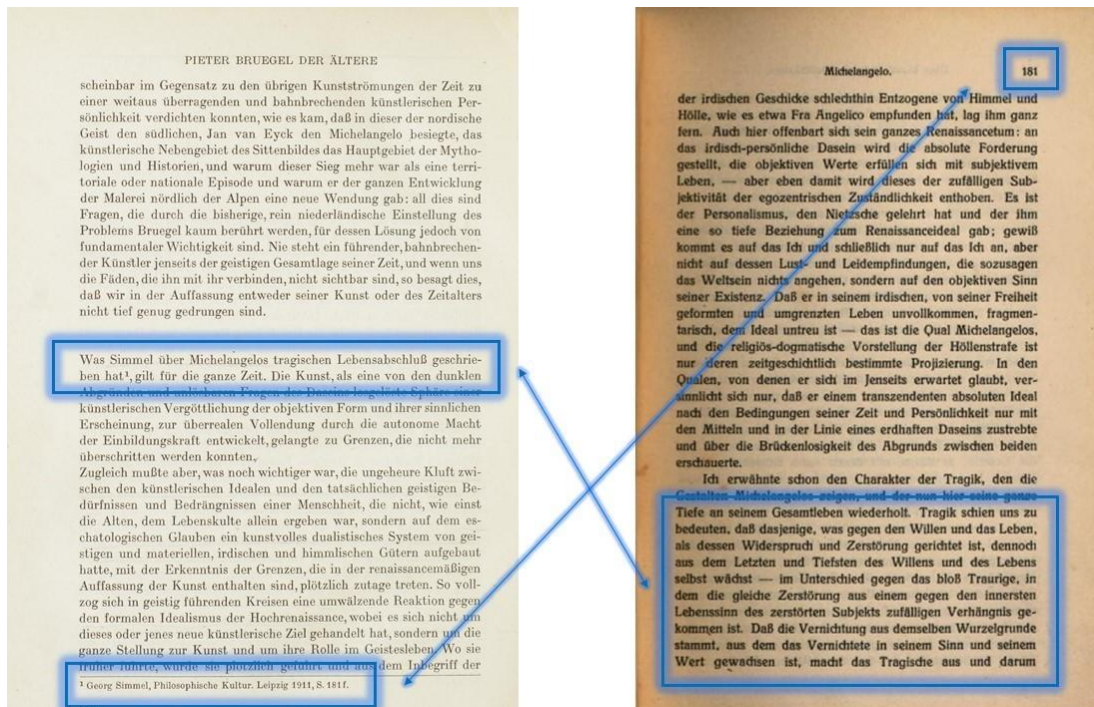


Figure 6 Max Dvořák's study on Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1924) and Georg Simmel's study on Michelangelo (1911).

'Tragedy, I have said, signifies that what runs against a will and a life as its contradiction and destruction nevertheless evolves from the deepest last foundations of this will and this life itself [...] Tragedy consists in a character's being annihilated by the same roots from which it grows in meaning and value. In this sense, Michelangelo is a tragic personality through and through.'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder', 71; Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', 220: 'Was Simmel über Michelangelos tragischen Lebensabschluß geschrieben hat, gilt für die ganze Zeit.'

<sup>30</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Michelangelo', in: *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*, Leipzig: Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, 1911, 157–184; Georg Simmel, 'Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur', in: *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*, Leipzig: Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, 1911, 245–277. Originally published as Georg Simmel, 'Michelangelo. Ein Kapitel zur Metaphysik der Kultur', *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, 1, 1910, 207–227; Georg Simmel, 'Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur', *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, 2, 1911, 1–25.

<sup>31</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Michelangelo and the Metaphysics of Culture', in: *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, transl. by Austin Harrington, Chicago, IL, and London: Chicago University Press, 2020, 279–297, here 295, translation altered; Simmel, 'Michelangelo', 181–182: 'Tragik schien uns zu bedeuten, daß dasjenige, was gegen den Willen und das Leben als deren

That Dvořák deliberately worked with Simmel's notion of tragedy, even though Simmel's name is missing from the 1921 edition of Dvořák's study on Bruegel, can be observed in the manuscript of Dvořák's Bruegel study in the Archive of the Institute of Art History at the Vienna University,<sup>32</sup> where we find Simmel's name mentioned as well. [fig. 7]

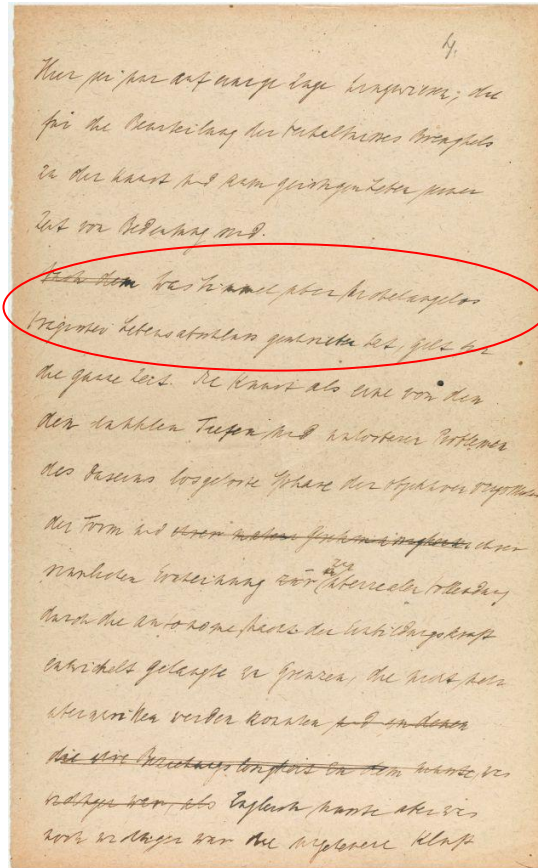


Figure 7 Max Dvořák's manuscript of his study on Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1920. Photo: Archive of the Institute of Art History of the Vienna University, the estate of Max Dvořák.

In 1911 Simmel showed that culture is created out of various forms of life and that the art that is created by the individual (as an artist) is assimilated into cultural production according to the way in which his or her forms are identified as something more than the individual's life out of which it emerged. Thus, as Simmel showed, the expression of individual life in culture is something more than life itself because it exists as part of the cultural structure of the given society, and thus newly reacts not to the needs of its originator, but to the needs of the given social

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Widerspruch und Zerstörung gerichtet ist, dennoch aus dem Letzten und Tiefsten des Willens und des Lebens selbst wächst [...] Daß die Vernichtung aus demselben Wurzelgrunde stammt, aus dem das Vernichtete in seinem Sinn und seinem Wert gewachsen ist, macht das Tragische aus und darum ist Michelangelo die ganz und gar tragische Persönlichkeit.'

<sup>32</sup> I cordially thank to Dr. Friedrich Polleroß for allowing me to work in Max Dvořák's estate at the Institute of Art History of the Vienna University.

structures, and thus satisfies the needs of society, not the needs of the life from which it originated. Life therefore produces culture, but the individual life itself remains just a productive element, with no way of capturing its own meaning, because that meaning exists only outside itself in a culturally identified process and thus does not express the essence of life, but rather the needs of the given culture of the particular society.<sup>33</sup> According to Simmel, in culture that is realised in this way, art only exists within the social structure and its demands. However, according to Simmel and his study from *Philosophische Kultur*, Michelangelo, instead of participating in the objective-cultural meaning of art, worked with the meaning of art in an effort to capture life in its subjectivity, rather than objectively idealising life in cultural forms. Because he was interested in expressing life regardless of the cultural dimensions of its formation, the tragedy of life ultimately became the subject of his art, because that was the only given structure inherent to life itself.<sup>34</sup> According to Simmel, this realisation that life is ultimately tragic is the meaning of Michelangelo's late art and is why it lost its heaviness and started to be formless,<sup>35</sup> a view that is not too remote from Dvořák's consideration of Michelangelo's late figures 'as block-like amorphous masses, as indifferent in themselves as stones by the roadside, yet vibrant throughout, volcanic and filled with a tragic element'. Dvořák's interpretation of Michelangelo's late art as suffused with the tragic element of life is thus close to Simmel's consideration that 'the idea to which Michelangelo martyred himself seems to belong to humanity's unending problems: to find life's redemptive completion in life itself – to fashion the absolute in the form of the finite'.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

At the end of his El Greco lecture, Dvořák famously noted:

'We have seen how both in literature and art there has been a turning towards a spirituality freed from all dependence on naturalism, a tendency similar to that of Middle Ages and the mannerist period. And, finally, one can observe in all cultural sectors a certain unity of events which is apparently directed, by some mysterious law of human destiny towards new, spiritual, anti-materialistic age. In the eternal rivalry between spirit and matter, the scales now seem to be balanced in favor of the spirit. It is thanks to this turn of events that we have come to recognize in El Greco a great artist and a prophetic spirit, one whose fame is assured for all time.'<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Landmann, 'Konflikt und Tragödie. Zur Philosophie Georg Simmels', *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 6, 1951, 115–133.

<sup>34</sup> See Stéphane Symons, *More than Life. Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin on Art*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017, 36–39.

<sup>35</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Michelangelo. Ein Kapitel zur Metaphysik der Kultur', in: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909–1918*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, 111–136, here 117.

<sup>36</sup> Simmel, 'Michelangelo and the Metaphysics of Culture', 295–296.

<sup>37</sup> Dvořák, 'On El Greco and Mannerism', 108; Dvořák 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', 276: '[...] in der Literatur und Kunst, die sich wie im Mittelalter und in der Zeit des Manierismus dem geistig Absoluten, von der sinnlichen Naturtreue Unabhängigen

Taking the concept of tragedy in Michelangelo's late art as the impulse that led Mannerism to endeavour to express the ultimate truth of life, Dvořák's conception of an 'anti-materialistic' world after World War I does not necessarily mean materiality in the way it has been commonly assumed in connection with Expressionism as it is understood in Dvořák's text on Oskar Kokoschka's drawings,<sup>38</sup> but means rather the need of a given society to be provided with a creative impulse similar to that which Michelangelo gave to the sixteenth century. In 1920 Dvořák showed that Michelangelo approached the tragedy of life not as something that should be overcome, but as a prerequisite for a new meaning of life. This means that it was only thanks to an awareness of its own tragedy that Mannerism was able to embrace its creative impulse, which directed it away from the Renaissance. This in turn means that Mannerism was also indebted to Michelangelo and his search for a different (cultural) life. By conceptualising Michelangelo's late art as the creative influence behind the emergence of Mannerism – by showing the tragedy of life in Michelangelo's late work as the creative impulse of the whole period of Mannerism – suggests that Dvořák, by interpreting Michelangelo's art as an expression of the 'apparent chaos', created a quasi-paradigm through which to understand the early twentieth century. In other words, the tragedy that Michelangelo made visible in his late art represented an opportunity to initiate a cultural restart and thereby grasp the tragedy of life as a way of creatively overcoming the materiality of the world not only for Mannerism, but for modernism as well. Evidence of this is Dvořák's need in 1920 to stress the concept of tragedy in Michelangelo's art as a way of potentially pointing towards an interpretation of culture as sovereignly tragic, which is to say as sovereignly creative, and thus as 'anti-materialistic', without there being one fixed way of comprehending reality or one fixed formula for creating art forms within a given social structure. Michelangelo was the perfect example with which to illustrate this cultural restart because,

'the first person to become aware of this immense inner transformation was Michelangelo and he did so with far greater depth of understanding than anyone else; inspired by new ideas, Michelangelo turned away from

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zugewendet haben, und schließlich in jener Übereinstimmung aller Ereignisse, die das geheimnisvolle Gesetz des menschlichen Schicksals alle nach der Richtung eines neuen, geistigen, antimaterialistischen Weltalters zu lenken scheint. In dem ewigen Ringen zwischen Materie und Geist neigt sich die Wage zum Siege des Geistes, - und dieser Wendung haben wir es zu verdanken, daß wir in Greco einen großen Künstler und einen prophetischen Geist erkannt haben, dessen Ruhm auch in der Folgezeit in hellem Lichte erstrahlen wird.'

<sup>38</sup> See Hans H. Aurenhammer, 'Max Dvořák über Oskar Kokoschka. Eine handschriftliche Fassung zu 'Variationen über ein Thema' (1920/1921)', in: Patrick Werkner (ed.), *Oskar Kokoschka. Aktuelle Perspektiven*, Wien: Hochschule für angewandte Kunst, 1998, 34–40; Hans H. Aurenhammer, 'Inventing "Mannerist Expressionism": Max Dvořák and the History of Art History of the Spirit', in: Kimberly A. Smith (ed.), *The Expressionist Turn in Art History*, London: Routledge, 2014, 187–208.

everything that had constituted the basis of his fame and, though an old man, gave art an entirely new direction'.<sup>39</sup>

Dvořák's reading of Michelangelo's late art can be thus understood as the antithesis of the 'impossibility' of tragedy that was proffered as the result of the crisis of the early twentieth century,<sup>40</sup> as it can be incarnated in Ludwig Wittgenstein's eloquent expression of the cultural status of (post)war Vienna.<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein strongly disagreed with the concept of the progress of modernity as a rational explanation of the world, because, like language, this concept brings only superficial meaning to the world. The actuality of reality was in Wittgenstein's view not penetrable in any way other than by language, which at the same time is what renders it impossible to reveal the world as it is. To grasp the meaning of the world, the very world that produces the language that veils the world, language would have to change: in order to unveil the world, language would have to uncover its limits. This, however, was something that modernity could not do because modernity was dependent on the rationality constructed by language: 'Wittgenstein's disengagement from the idea of progress represents a disengagement from the reason behind it: from its essential constructivity and productivity.'<sup>42</sup>

Given this construction of reality by language, the tragedy became impossible, because the essence of tragedy lay in its possibility to transcend life, which is considered to be circumscribed by forces that are not comprehensible to here-and-now being.<sup>43</sup> When this here-and-now being was constructed by the here-and-now language, tragedy lost its ability to transcend life, because life and tragedy were both constructed by the same language. As Massimo Cacciari argued, in Wittgenstein's thinking this process revealed a concept of tragedy as incapable of transcending life, except in the actual here and now, because it was veiled in its own incomprehensible structures. These structures created only the 'impression' that there is 'something beyond' because they did not express their meaning but rather the configurations in which they were constructed.

Dvořák's concept of tragedy in Michelangelo's late art may have been built on the same premise: the impossibility of the transcendence of life is evident in Michelangelo's deviation from idealisation and subsequent effort to express life from within, which caused a change in the relationship between the figure in a composition and its background. However, this realisation should not simply be

<sup>39</sup> Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder', 71; Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', 221: 'Niemand hat diesen inneren Zusammenbruch des stolzen Gebäudes früher und tiefer begriffen als Michelangelo, niemand ergreifender als er, der sich im Alter von dem abgewendet hat, was der Ruhm seines Leben war, um aus dem neuen geistigen Bewußtsein der Kunst einen neuen Inhalt zu geben.'

<sup>40</sup> This attempt to contextualise Dvořák within the 20th century 'crisis' was made by Matthew Rampley, 'Max Dvořák. Art History and the Crisis of Modernity', *Art History*, 26, 2003, 214–237.

<sup>41</sup> This was the interpretation proposed by Massimo Cacciari, *Posthumous People. Vienna at the Turning Point*, transl. by Rodger Friedman, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Cacciari, *Posthumous People*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Cacciari, *Posthumous People*, 33.

taken as a concept that is similar to the more widespread post-war notion of the impossibility of tragedy as being an expression of the intellectual 'crisis' of the early twentieth-century world, a notion that could be applied to Wittgenstein as well as back in time to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter*, or forward towards Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, because for Dvořák the 'tragedy' of Michelangelo's late art was just the first step towards coping with this crisis. This is evident in the fact that Dvořák was interested in Michelangelo's late art only in terms of the part of it that led to the emergence of Mannerism, as it is apparent in the above-mentioned lectures he gave on Italian art at the Vienna University and in his texts on El Greco and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In conceptualising tragedy, Michelangelo was only revealing the 'spirit' of the age as the key element that transcends the art form. Mannerism took this hint and worked with 'spirit' as its notion of creativity wherein then the transcendence was achieved in the overcoming of the materiality of cultural forms by transforming them according the actual tragedy of life.

What is more, with the notion of tragedy in Dvořák's art history as one of the key concepts of his 'Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte', formulated during World War I,<sup>44</sup> we can compare it with other contemporary notions of tragedy that are assumed to be a reaction to the war, such as Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* from 1920. In the foreword to the 1967 German edition of that book, Lukács noted that he wrote it in order to understand the twentieth-century crisis and as his own response to the Great War.<sup>45</sup> Comparing his *Theory of the Novel* with Dvořák's art-historical thinking from the same time is also important because in the 1967 foreword Lukács mentioned that when he met with Max Dvořák in Vienna in 1920, Dvořák told him that he considered his *Theory of the Novel* the most important publication in the *Geisteswissenschaften*.<sup>46</sup> Dvořák thus knew Lukács work and it is more than certain that Lukács knew Dvořák's work.<sup>47</sup> In addition, as Csilla Markója pointed out, the person who mediated the meeting between Lukács and Dvořák in

<sup>44</sup> Hans Aurenhammer tracked down the change in Dvořák's art history to around the year 1914, and the change was expressed by Dvořák in its fullest for the first time in 1918 in *Idealismus und Naturalismus in der gotischen Skulptur und Malerei*. This change also determined Dvořák's view of early modern Italian art, between the Renaissance and the Baroque, and how he lectured on this topic at the University of Vienna between 1918 and 1920. See Hans H. Aurenhammer, 'Max Dvořák (1874–1921). Von der historischen Quellenkritik zur Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte', in: Karel Hruza (ed.), *Österreichische Historiker. Lebensläufe und Karrieren 1900–1945*, Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau, 2012, 169–200, here 194–200.

<sup>45</sup> The book was also translated into Czech in the same year. See Georg Lukács, 'Teorie románu. Dějinně filosofický pokus o formách veliké epiky', in: *Metafyzika tragédie*, transl. by Eva Hartlová, Praha 1967, 95–187. The original preface was translated as well, see 7–23.

<sup>46</sup> This important connection was pointed out by Csilla Markója in her Prague conference paper from 2021 titled as *Everyday Life at the Dvořák Seminar Based on Contemporary Sources*. See also Lukács, 'Teorie románu. Dějinně filosofický pokus o formách veliké epiky', 15.

<sup>47</sup> Lukács also admitted his dependence on Simmel's philosophy. See Lukács, 'Teorie románu. Dějinně filosofický pokus o formách veliké epiky', 8–9. See also Anna Wessely, 'Simmel's Influence on Lukács's Conception of the Sociology of Art', in: Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips and Robert S. Cohen (eds.), *Georg Simmel and the Contemporary Sociology*, Berlin: Springer, 1990, 357–373.

Vienna in 1920 was Johannes Wilde, Dvořák's student and Lukács's friend from the *Sonntagkreis*, a meeting of intellectuals that regularly took place in Budapest before the war. And it was Wilde who alongside Prague-born Karl Maria Swoboda decided to title the first volume of Dvořák's posthumously issued papers from 1924 the *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*. Thus, Dvořák's notion of *Geistesgeschichte* can be viewed as based on the Simmelian influences cultivated by Hungarian art historians connected to Lukács such as Wilde,<sup>48</sup> without whom, as Markója rightly remarked, there would be no Dvořák as 'Geisteshistoriker'.<sup>49</sup>

Support for this hypothesis can also be found in the similarities between Lukács's treatment of sixteenth-century 'Geistes' and Dvořák's interpretation of Mannerism. Lukács understood Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as the most eloquent objectification of the period's inability to transcend reality in any way other than in the here-and-now formulation of aspects of reality, and that here-and-now formulation was represented by forms of art and specifically the novel.<sup>50</sup> Lukács showed that the abstraction of life became possible only in those forms of art that sought the meaning of life and in this they transcended life without actual transcendence, because this transcendence was happening only in the art form in the here-and-now. In Lukács's words:

'These novels are in substance vast fairytales, for in them transcendence is not captured, made immanent and absorbed in the object-creating, transcendental form, but remains in its undiluted transcendence; the shadow of transcendence decoratively fills the cracks of earthly life and turns the matter of life – because of the dynamic homogeneity of every true work of art – into a substance that is likewise woven out of shadows.'<sup>51</sup>

According to Lukács, the idealisation of transcendence as a way of attaining the meaning of life beyond life was completely lost in *Don Quixote*, and thus at first

<sup>48</sup> I thank Csilla Markója, Ivan Gerát and Jonathan Blower for their helpful remarks on this topic. They rightly pointed out that it is necessary to include into this milieu also Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser and Charles Tolnay. See also Csilla Markója, 'The Young Arnold Hauser and the Sunday Circle: the publication of Hauser's estate preserved in Hungary', *Journal of Art Historiography* 21, 2019, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2019/11/markoja.pdf>. Accessed 3 May 2021; Csilla Markója, 'The Tolnay-Panofsky Affair or, Loyalty to the Youth: Max Dvořák, the Vienna School, and the Sunday Circle', *Journal of Art Historiography* 23, 2020, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/markoja.pdf>. Accessed 3 May 2021; Robert Born, 'Die Kunsthistoriographie in Siebenbürgen und die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte von 1850 bis 1945', in: Wojciech Bałus a Joanna Wolańska (eds.), *Die Etablierung und Entwicklung des Faches Kunstgeschichte in Deutschland, Polen und Mitteleuropa*, Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2010, 349–380.

<sup>49</sup> Csilla Markója, 'János (Johannes) Wilde and Max Dvořák, or Can we speak of a Budapest school of art history?', *Journal of Art Historiography* 17, 2017, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/markoja.pdf>. Accessed 3 May 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Lukács, 'Teorie románu. Dějinně filosofický pokus o formách veliké epiky', 147.

<sup>51</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel. A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, transl. by Anna Bostock, London: The Merlin Press, 1971, 102.

sight the work transformed itself into a parody of life embedded in transcendence: the representation of life consisted only of humorous episodes. However, as Lukács pointed out, those episodes also had a 'demonic' meaning: they could not – unlike transcendence without the art form – actually be taken as a part of life.<sup>52</sup> Cervantes's composition of the novel in this way – where the impossibility of transcendence is shown without actually denying transcendence in that it is represented in the novel – led Lukács to consider *Don Quixote*:

'the first great novel of world literature [that] stands at the beginning of the time when the Christian God began to forsake the world; when man became lonely and could find meaning and substance only in his own soul, whose home was nowhere; when the world, released from its paradoxical anchorage in a beyond that is truly present, was abandoned to its immanent meaninglessness'.<sup>53</sup>

This is close to the way in which Dvořák interpreted Michelangelo's notion of tragedy in Mannerism, namely its development by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. As we saw above, Dvořák considered the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* to be the realisation of humankind's tragic fate, which Michelangelo had first conceptualised in the *Last Judgement*, with the difference that the *Blind Leading the Blind* depicted a 'mundane' event that reveals the tragedy of life in the here-and-now. 'Somewhere a group of poor blind men', noted Dvořák in his 1920 study on Bruegel, 'meet with a tragic fate which nobody is there to witness and which almost certainly no one will mourn; both men and nature continue on their course undisturbed'.<sup>54</sup> In the German original we do not find the concept of '*Tragik*' that in English is described as 'tragic fate'; Dvořák spoke about the '*einem Unfall*', thus about 'an accident' of the Blind.<sup>55</sup> This relates to Dvořák's distinct conceptualisation of the notion of tragedy, which is evident in the role played by the absence of the witness – when nobody sees the 'accident', there is no 'tragedy', because there is no notion of death in the life that death determines, as we can see in Michelangelo's painting of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* in the Pauline Chapel. Thus, Bruegel's painting might seem like a humorous episode, and at first sight Don Quixote's episodes might seem so, too. However, we can find in both of these works a demonic concept of life as existing without the possibility of transcendence outside earthly representation. The transcendence of life exists only in the form of the artwork that actually expresses the tragedy of life by showing the impossibility of transcending life. Thus Dvořák, in a manner similar to Lukács, remarked that:

One would have completely failed to understand the historical significance of Bruegel's paintings and engravings if one were to label them popular art and imagine that they were produced simply to entertain the kind of people which they portrayed. [...] From Rabelais and Bruegel, on the one hand, to Cervantes,

<sup>52</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 101–102

<sup>53</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 102.

<sup>54</sup> Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder', 90.

<sup>55</sup> Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', 249.



Shakespeare and Callot, on the other, a new pictorial and poetic realism gradually came to fruition. The essence of this realism was the discovery and artistic expression of those vital truths which emerge when a careful observation is made of the psycho-physical characteristics of ordinary people. [...] This development not only constituted the climax of northern European art during the mannerist period, but also enabled great poets and artists to express their new philosophy of life. In fact, the work of these men created a new artistic style which, notwithstanding pressures from the heroic style of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was to become one of the major elements of modern art.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, when considering Dvořák's late art history, which has so far still been mostly linked to Expressionism because of Dvořák's interpretation of Oskar Kokoschka's drawings, there is a need to comprehend his art history also from within, which means based on the theoretical concepts that he used to formulate his key notions, in this case Mannerism. One such theoretical concept can be taken to be his notion of tragedy in Michelangelo's late art, where tragedy is understood as the starting point for the revelation of the meaning of life in cultural form – both in the sixteenth century and in the twentieth century.

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<sup>56</sup> Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder', 76–77; Dvořák, 'Pieter Bruegel der Ältere', 229.