

SEEING THE UNSEEN IN VISIONARY PAINTING

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In accordance with Seerveld's cartographic methodology 'visionary optics' is defined in terms of a recurrent set of connections between a certain type of pictorial representation and visual perceptions of mythical meaning. A perennial typiconic format stems from the tradition of painting historically associated with 'mythologising' thought patterns and worldviews. The cases examined to trace the development of the visionary format include examples of Bushman rock art, mural decoration from Roman antiquity, medieval altar painting, history painting from the Renaissance, Romantic landscape painting and modern abstract painting.

In aansluiting by die kartografiese metodologie van Seerveld word 'visioenêre optiek' gedefinieer in terme van blywende verbande tussen 'n besondere tipe van pikurale uitbeelding en visuele persepsies van mitiese betekenis. 'n Tipikoniese formaat stam uit 'n tradisie in die skilderkuns wat histories met 'mitologiserende' denkpattone en wêreldbeskouings geassosieer word. Voorbeelde van Boesman rotsskildering, Romeinse wandskildering, middeleeuse altaarskildering, historieskilderkuns uit die Renaissance, landskapskilderye uit die Duitse Romantiek en moderne abstrakte skilderkuns word ondersoek ter illustrasie van die ontwikkeling van die visioenêre formaat.

Seeing the unseen properly belongs to an experiential domain described in terms of 'visionary optics'.¹ In this investigation the notion of 'visionary painting' primarily designates one of a number of enduring traditions in the history of the visual arts. Commentators on artistic phenomena associated with the tradition in question frequently resort to critical terms like 'mystical', 'hermetic', 'mythical', 'mysterious', 'cryptic', 'occult' or 'visionary'. On the assumption that 'visionary optics' involves an abiding complex of relations between peculiar varieties of visual art and a set of closely related types of worldview, five significant events will be examined in the historical emergence of an extremely rich 'mythologising' tradition in the visual, literary and performing arts.

An illustrative selection of artists associated with 'mythologising' worldviews is summarised in the appended Scheme. It provisionally charts some outstanding landmarks in the 'perchronic' neighbourhood² of the five exemplary cases to be explored in this paper. Together with a number of additional instances from the other arts, the Scheme relates these to the schematic outline of recurrent positions from the history of mythologising thought discussed by Seerveld (1992). The latter exhaustive exposition as well as certain well-known names included in the outline should be sufficient to convey at least an initial impression of the terminological import of the notion of a 'mythologising' tradition.

1. PERCHRONIC HISTORY

In the first art-historical exposition of his 'cartographic methodology' Seerveld (1980) introduced a number of perchronic categories for mapping the 'typiconic' traces of traditions in the visual arts.³ His approach to the historiographer's task assumes that the rudimentary

ideological positions of a limited number of typical worldviews recur under changing diachronic conditions and amid the competing cultural dynamics of various historical periods (Bril 1986, Van den Berg 1990a, Seerveld 1991 & 1993). At any particular juncture in the histories of evolving kinds of arts and changing socio-cultural conditions ('diachrony') diverse interactions transpire between traditional types of worldview and the imaginative typiconic formats associated with each of them (including intermeshing dialogues between these recurrent positions) on the one hand ('perchrony'), and, on the other hand, the rival life-styles, mentalities and dispositions operative in the cultural dynamic of historical periods ('synchrony').

Worldviews are global constellations of committed, communally held positions about fundamental life-and-death issues such as ontic order, human nature, societal system and historical meaning. These positions count amongst the chief sources of conflicting disciplinary frames, ideological master-narratives and tropics of historical discourse. Viewed in the partial perspective of one such position – in this case, the 'mythologising' or 'visionary' conception of history – the history of any kind of art would assume an all-over shape that differs substantially from alternate versions adopting the typical positions of, for instance, the 'picaresque', 'idyllic', 'scenic' or 'heroic' traditions.

Persons living and working in the mythologising tradition (whether they are called 'mythologisers', 'mystics', 'occultists' or 'visionaries') usually represent an alternative to the mainstream. Thus they often devise 'counter-histories' in opposition to received opinion in areas as diverse as theology, science, politics, literature and the arts. The 'world turned inside

out' (Cooper 1990) is one of a number of framing *topoi* of the mythologising tradition.⁴ It involves protean schemes of origin and fall, creation and destruction, transfiguration and corruption which inform works of art associated with 'visionary optics'. Chiliastic premonitions and prophecies of rupture and speculations about 'eternal return' in cyclical orders of history⁵ frequently frame mythologising thought and generate a distinctive historical posture towards works of art from the past or the present (cf. note 12). By contrast, the 'cartographic methodology' frames history as structured genesis and historical change as *ephapaxic* (once only) and *eschatonic* (towards something last) (cf. Seerveld 1992: 34-5).

2. SEEING AND BELIEVING

The notion of the 'unseen' in the title requires an explanatory observation about the links between seeing and believing. An anthropological constant, the human commitment to the ultimates of cultural ways of life and allied historical worldviews primarily motivates communal, imaginative acts of seeing and believing (Seerveld 1987). Many visual artifacts, especially those considered worthy of the name 'art' thus communicate imaginary nuances of meaning, including committed stances on the meaning-dimensions of an unseen, occluded and 'parergonal' nature. In this, merely functional, sense of the term the epithet 'visionary' could thus be applied, with some justice, to any work of visual art.

In the cases under discussion however, the sense of the term 'visionary' is deliberately adjusted to single out a certain set of artistic qualities fitting a more narrowly delimited per-chronic frame or typiconic format. Thus the 'unseen' will be taken to refer chiefly to the immediate visual presence of the ultimates of occult ways of life, hidden world orders, primordial events of history and chiliastic eschatologies – structural positions regularly presumed in mythologising thought and concomitant political stances and actions. More specifically, I will examine the desired, though contested means of 'picturing' or, at least, of rhetorically engaging these ultimate imponderables in functional or pictorial terms.

The central problem can be stated in the form of a question: Do mythologising worldviews display a generally recognisable 'face' in the history of the visual arts? A number of imaginative qualities resonating between the names of artists included in the Scheme seem to suggest an affirmative, if impromptu, answer to the question. When the art-historical identity of this tradition is provisionally granted, a further question becomes unavoidable: Would this rare constellation of 'visionary' qualities and the strange presentiments they convey be intelligible to viewers in general, to spectators belonging to other traditions, to beholders situated beyond the immediate, closed circles of initiates in some arcane knowledge of the unseen?

The probing of these issues should not be confused with either the more conventional pursuits of art-historiography or the decidedly eccentric mystification of works of art on non-

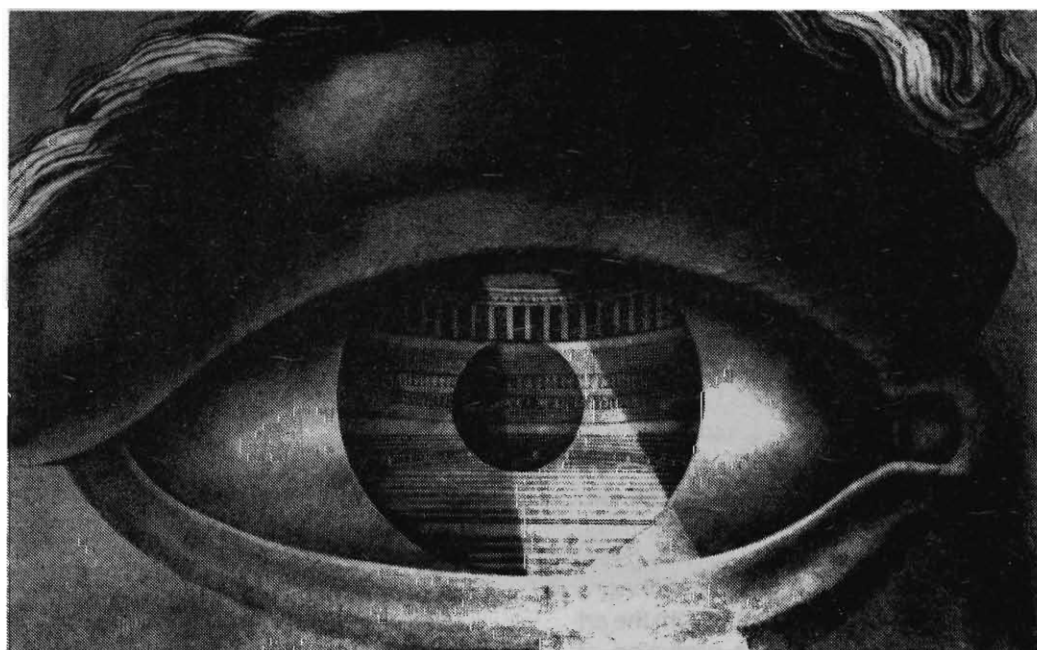


Figure 1: Emblem of the gnostic eye – Ledoux (ca 1780)

rational grounds. Thus 'typiconic interpretation' must be distinguished from ordinary iconographical analysis of paintings on mythological subjects or paintings with mythological symbolism, and also from the confessional or meditational exegesis of the mythic symbols favoured in the cult images of certain mystical creeds – for example, Gnostics, Manichees, Bogomiles, Kathars, Adammites, Rosicrucians, Freemasons and some Green movements or New Age circles. It involves more than a routine unearthing of visual illustrations and graphic expositions of mythologising thought in obscure and rare Boehmian, Swedenborgian or theosophic publications, or the hunting down of arcane, allegorical references to cabalistic and other hermetic systems of thought or belief in certain works of art.⁶ However, one need not be a cabalist nor become one, nor is it necessary to rationally demythologise or iconoclastically desecrate a cabalist work or text in order to recognise its occult properties and to appreciate their significance, whether positive or negative.

A cautionary note is also required about the limitations of photographic reproductions of works of visual art. Printed black-and-white reproductions of reduced size documenting comparative detail, or the magnified projection of colour slides, whether of inferior or superior quality, always both inform and mislead the reader/viewer about the issues at stake. But 'visionary optics' totally confounds the built-in 'panoptic instrumentalism' of standard art-historiographical practice (Preziosi 1989: 54-79). Generally speaking, 'visionary' qualities belong to the auratic dimensions of works of art and thus cannot be reproduced.

Pertinent to my inquiry, moreover, are the strangely transient objects of an 'Ästhetik des Verschwindens' (Jauslin 1989), involving dynamic tropics of sublimity and related spiritual modes of 'Bildlosigkeit' (Ringbom 1970), Derridian 'immateriality' and 'blindness' as well as a particular species of visual art projecting an *imageless presence*⁷ – uncannily masking, negatively veiling, yet emphatically emanating transcendent meaning in unmediated modes of communication or negative rhetorical strategies of hidden persuasion. Reproductions by nature attenuate the supplemental or parergonal dimensions of art, serving only as visual reminders of the works in question. This condition presents a special problem in the case of visionary painting. Though this paper is based on a colour-slide presentation at a conference, I will therefore abstain from the art historian's habit of providing a profusion of illustrations. They are restricted to the barest minimum required for identifying the examples.

3. ROCK PAINTINGS AND ABSTRACT ART: HIDDEN CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PREHISTORY AND MODERNISM?

Two quite divergent cases of 'mythical origins' from the literature on the history of painting – one from distant prehistory and the other from the historical proximity of modernism – prompted my interest in visionary painting.⁸ Both concern the genesis of paintings from hallucinatory imagery and the attendant belief that human consciousness is somehow altered by the perception of the iconic power of these pictures. Both implicate notions of shamanistic artistry in the production and the induction of rapture, ecstasy or seizure, – like Nietzsche's Dionysian *Rausch* (Badt 1956) – in spectators during the reception of paintings.

The first case of 'mythical origins' concerns the neuropathology of entoptic phenomena during hallucinatory experiences of altered consciousness. David Lewis-Williams and fellow archeologists enlist entoptics when explaining the shamanistic origins of San or southern African Bushman rock paintings. Entoptic patterns such as lines, grids, spirals and zig-zags as well as phosphenes and eidetic imagery are universally generated in the eyes by certain chemical changes on neurological level – whether artificially induced by the use of hallucinogenic drugs, by collective spells cast during prolonged participation in ritual dancing or by individual acts of cultic withdrawal, hypnotic concentration and mantric meditation. Archeologists believe that typical features of Bushman iconography evolved from visual construals and pictorial iconics on the basis of the experience of entoptic patterns. Elements of the latter supposedly correspond with certain marks discernible in the schematic detail of some rock paintings (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988 & 1989, Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1993).

Lewis-Williams *cum suis* further believe that certain imagery in the Bushman legends and myths recorded by nineteenth-century ethnographers – such as being 'spoilt', being 'underwater' or even 'dying' – are metaphors referring to states of altered consciousness experienced by shamans during ecstatic 'trance dances' performed on ritual occasions of healing, hunting, rainmaking or initiation ceremonies. Possession of the dancers by magical potency involves painful physiological changes that match the Bushman hunters' observations about the behaviour of the dying eland. Besides trembling, perspiring, goose-pimpling, erection of body hair, hyperventilating, muscles cramping, nasal bleeding and eventual loss of consciousness, medicine men

and women also visually hallucinated entoptic phenomena. Presumably the latter were primary sources for imagery in their rock paintings (Lewis-Williams 1980 & 1981).

The second case of 'mythical origins' is related to a quite different historical age and social context – that of early twentieth-century, European modernism. It concerns references to astral and occult imagery (such as 'body auras', 'thought-forms' and related parapsychological phenomena) in the spiritualist, theosophist and anthroposophist writings of *fin-de-siècle* authors like Édouard Schuré, Madame HP Blavatsky, CW Leadbeater, Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner. Some art-historians argue that such auratic and mediumistic imagery clearly influenced the thought and the art of, amongst others, the spiritualistic expressionist Wassily Kandinsky (Fingeston 1961, Ringbom 1966, 1970a, 1970b & 1986, Clark 1981), the practicing medium Frantisek Kupka (Spate 1979: 85-195), the wayward theosophist Piet Mondrian (Welsh 1966, 1971 & 1973, Henderson 1983), the Orphic cubist Robert Delaunay (Spate 1979: 187-203) and the nihilistic cabbalist Kazimir Malevich (Fischer 1977: 367-370, Douglas 1980, Kern 1980, Wietemeier-Steckel 1980), especially at the time when they independently were conducting their first experiments with abstract painting.

Conservative art-historians disparage such dubious associations of canonic works from high modernism with questionable phenomena – for example, occult superstition, mediumistic practices, supernatural sectarianism, parapsychological phenomena, Jungian depth psychology, secret societies and the so-called Inner Tradition – from the mindset lately parodied by Umberto Eco in his novel *Foucault's pendulum* (1988). The following selection from the interpretive literature by respectable art-historians, however, hints at a rising tide of awareness, even a growing consensus about a gradually unfolding, common problematic: Karl Lankheit's (1951) thesis that abstract artists radicalised and exploited the ramifications for twentieth-century autonomous painting of basic positions first formulated in the idealist art theories of some early romantics; Robert Rosenblum's (1975) ground-breaking text on the continuity of this artistic tradition, *Modern art and the northern romantic tradition*; the major travelling exhibition of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art curated by Maurice Tuchman (1986), *The spiritual in abstract painting 1890-1985*; and especially its critical reception in Holland (Kolthoff 1988) concurrently

with the polemic emanating from Evert van Uiter's (1987a, 1987b) aptly titled inaugural lecture in the chair for art-history at the Amsterdam Gemeentelijke Universiteit, *Het geloof in de moderne kunst*.

The notion that a spiritualist tradition influenced modernist painting thus seems to be gaining respectability. The historical trajectory of this problematic must next be imaginatively transposed into ocular terms to arrive at a more precise, typiconic definition of 'visionary optics' that would be able to establish 'perchronic' connections with the 'shamanist origins' of art.

4. VISIONARY OPTICS

Imagery devised by Theodore Adorno to suggest certain affinities between dated, subjective responses to general, structural conditions furnish clues for initiating a typiconic comparison of the two exemplary cases from prehistory and modernism cited in the preceding paragraphs. Adorno's (1984: 142) Kantian statement, "[a]rt is a vision of the non-visual; it is similar to a concept without actually being one", immediately brings to mind the historical project of pictorial abstraction in non-figurative painting. But his concern is primarily with the universal conditions of art. Thus, in terms of the fleeting, subjective, sensory experiences

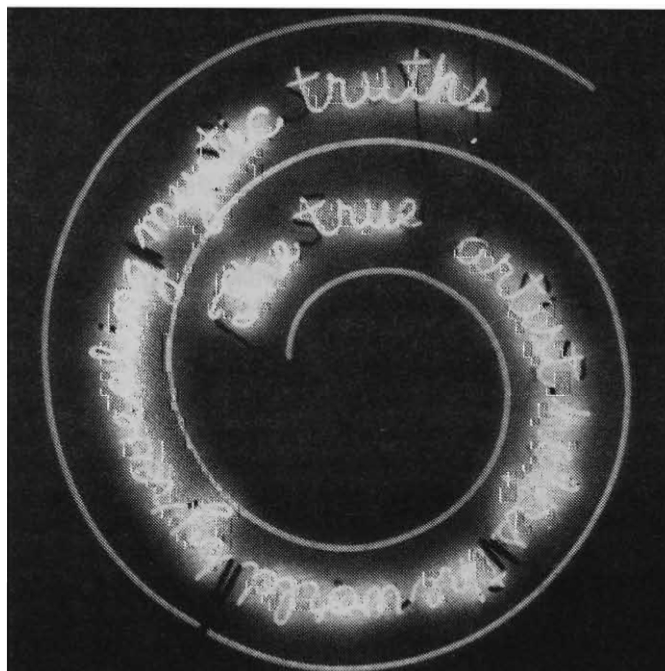


Figure 2: The artist reveals mystic truths – Nauman (1967)

taken to be typical of modernity since Baudelaire, “[t]he phenomenon of fireworks can be viewed as a prototype of art” (Adorno 1984: 119). On the other hand, when discussing the prehistorical origins of art, Adorno (1984: 455) describes this prototypical aesthetic experience in singularly somatic terms: “In the final analysis aesthetic behaviour might be defined as the ability to be horrified, and goose-pimples as a primordial aesthetic image.”

Unlike the mythologising views of some philosophers connected with the circle of the Frankfurt neo-marxists, such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch or Gershom Scholem, Adorno’s negative dialectics do not belong in the immediate neighbourhood of this tradition (Zuidervaart 1991). Yet these clues seem to suggest that the mythologising tradition’s ‘visionary face’ might comprise apparently opposing qualities like incandescence, cauterisation and revulsion, transcendence and disenchantment, provoking fleeting moments of transfigurative ecstasy yet deeply grounded in revulsive shuddering, thus engraving hidden knowledge about fateful primordial experiences – visual qualities, artistic themes and aesthetic effects strongly reminiscent of the powerful canvases of a disturbing painter like Francis Bacon (Van Alphen 1993).

For Adorno, authentic works of art are inscrutable ‘apparitions’, dark and troubling visions resisting the exploiting gazes of spectators. Powerless in the face of such sphinx-like artistic monads, the frustrated but persevering beholder may yet be subjected to revelatory flashes of visionary insight that impart an ‘initiation’ of sorts into a depth knowledge that transcends rational discourse or analytic concepts. Though mortally wounded by the ‘bestimmte Negation’ of their formal or art-technical articulation of social conflict, administrative power and the collective evil of human oppression artworks can, nevertheless, unexpectedly ignite like fireworks ephemerally flaring and expiring in the darkness of social domination (Holländer 1984).

Like his culture-hero, the composer Arnold Schönberg, the young Adorno apparently had ties with *Der Blaue Reiter*, the avant-garde movement spearheaded by Wassily Kandinsky. Unlike his subsequent penchant for synaesthetic *Klänge*, the latter on occasion also resorted to pyrotechnical imagery. In his *Rückblick* of 1913, Kandinsky thus uses the image of an exploding rocket to explain his Joachimite belief about an impending ‘third revelation’ of the Holy Spirit, the ‘epoch of the great spiritual’ which, according to him, heralds the appearance of abstract painting:

Die Kunst ist in vielen der Religion ähnlich. Ihre Entwicklung besteht nicht

aus neuen Entdeckungen, die die alten Wahrheiten streichen und zu Verirrungen stempeln (wie es scheinbar in der Wissenschaft ist). Ihre Entwicklung besteht aus plötzlichem Aufleuchten, das dem Blitz ähnlich ist, aus Explosionen, die wie die Feuerwerkskugel im Himmel platzen, um ein ganzes ‘Bukett’ verschieden leuchtender Sterne um sich zu streuen. Diese Aufleuchten zeigt mit blendendem Licht neue Perspektiven, neue Wahrheiten, die im Grunde nichts anderes sind, als organische Weiterwachsen der früheren Weisheit, die durch diese letzte nicht annulliert wird, sondern als Weisheit und Wahrheit weiter lebt und erzeugt. Ich bemerkte, daß sie zu derselben Zeit die nötigen Elemente zum Empfang der ‘dritten’ Offenbarung, der Offenbarung des Geistes, in sich birgt (Hofmann 1987: 175, note 3).⁹

A configurative format of ‘apparitional’ or ‘volatile’ qualities that precipitate viewer ‘Erschütterung’, as described above in metaphoric terms by Kandinsky and Adorno, is further elaborated in Walter Benjamin’s concept of *Aura* – a metaphor for the momentary dialectics of distance and proximity, presence and absence, sacred and profane, blindness and insight (Kemp 1978: 228-54, cf. also several contributions to Berndt *et al.* 1992). Whether of natural or impersonal origin, auratic phenomena resist our scrutiny. Moreover, these non-human objects are endowed with the mythic power of subjecting us in turn to a questionable and anthropomorphic regard: “Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt sie mit dem Vermögen beehren, den Blick aufzuschlagen” (Benjamin 1961: 234).¹⁰

The root meaning of Benjamin’s concept of *Aura* derives from his mythologising concept of history. Auratic experiences of the cultural ruins of history – such as the emblematic ruins of the German *Trauerspiel*, the Parisian *flâneur*’s urban maze of nineteenth-century arcades or the hellish mouths to the subterranean tunnels of the Métro in his *Facades Projekt*, or the *montage* constructions of modernist visual artists – trigger fateful recollections of primordial sites and events. Embedded in the ritual fabric of local traditions, so-called ‘primitive art’ once possessed a cultic *Aura* of magic and trancelike possession, eventually supplanted in the bourgeois cult of exhibition values by the secular *Aura* of aesthetic uniqueness. Though presently existing under the post-auratic condition of mechanical reproducibility of photogenic values, individual art-

works may still become well-nigh magical vehicles for historical eruptions of Messianic truth, according to Benjamin.¹¹

Obscure hermeticism and unmediated transcendence of visionary power – this striking fusion of opposing expectations recurs in various junctures in the history of painting. Mythologising philosophers such as Benjamin and Bloch as well as paintings of the ‘visionary’ kind share a common ‘perchronic’ history

truths in their works, as playfully suggested by Bruce Nauman (Figure 2).

De Chapeaurouge’s (1983) persuasive title, ‘*Das Auge ist ein Herr, das Ohr ein Knecht*’ *Der Weg von der mittelalterlichen zur abstrakten Malerei*, suggests the thematic constellation represented by the ocular figure of the gnostic eye. It recurs perchronically – rather than by means of direct contact or through historical influence – in vastly dissimilar socio-

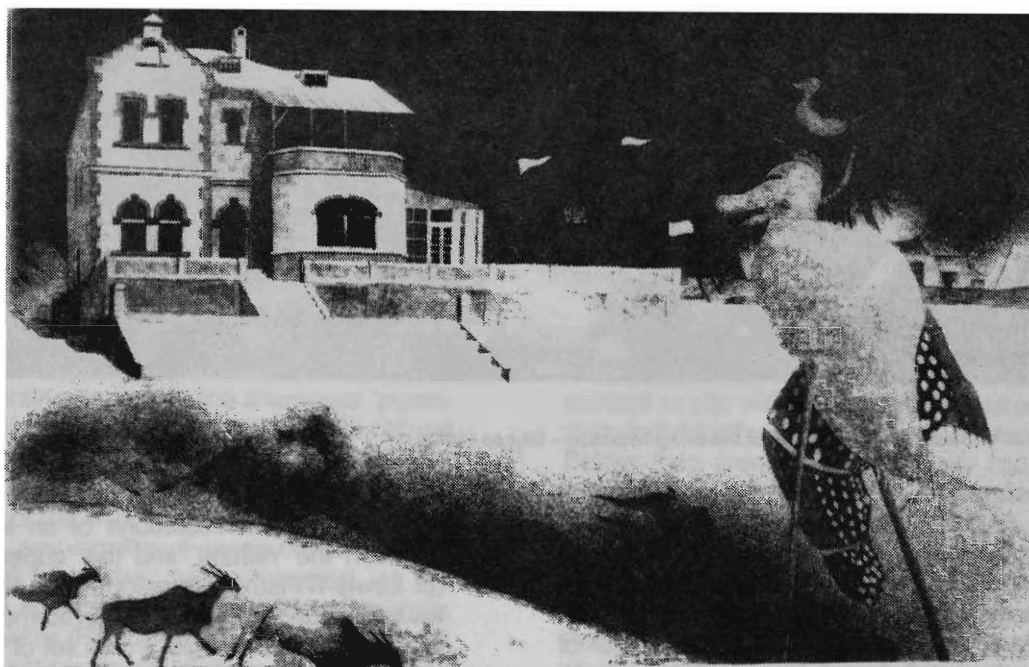


Figure 3: The uncanny return of the shaman – Skotnes (1987)

rooted in esoteric traditions. Like Peterfreund (1990) and Rookmaaker (1973), I am curious about a ‘gnostic moment’ in art history, specifically the ‘perchronic’ history of a *mythical* or *gnostic eye* able to uncover the obscure Baudelairean *correspondences* of a hidden, metaphoric language of things, uttered in the silent, Orphic language of the world (Bruns 1974). The gigantic eye in one of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s architectural designs for the Theatre of Besançon (Figure 1) can perhaps serve as a guiding emblem of the gnostic eye.

Sometimes labelled an alternative *third eye* (Huxley 1990), this ocular figure represents a tradition of beholders believing themselves to be the chosen members of spiritual communities of initiates, fatefully alienated in extreme climates of moral decadence yet glimpsing, despite all negative forces, the ineffable meanings of the unseen (Flam 1968, Rookmaaker 1973, Fontijn 1986, Januszczak 1987, Fontier 1989, Reuterswärd 1990). In these circles, artists are considered to be extraordinary visionaries or inspired seers serving as prophets, sages or augurers who reveal mystic

historical conditions and cultural dynamics, both preceding and succeeding the eighteenth-century establishment of the modern, aesthetic concept of art (Miles 1985). The five, apparently isolated, cases selected for scrutiny in the following sections of this paper exemplify the enduring presence of the mythologising legacy from prehistory to modernity and trace the development of a typiconic format for the visionary painters of our time.

5. ENTOPTIC PHENOMENA AND THE ROCKFACE

Neurologists grant entoptics the status of physiological universals. For phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, these phenomena represent the utterly subjective pole in visual experience. A world of difference separates either physiological universals or private hallucinatory imagery from the appropriate visual perception of rock art. The latter experience entails seeing and believing mythopoeic representations of sacred figures and events from collective myths transposed into ‘images of power’ on

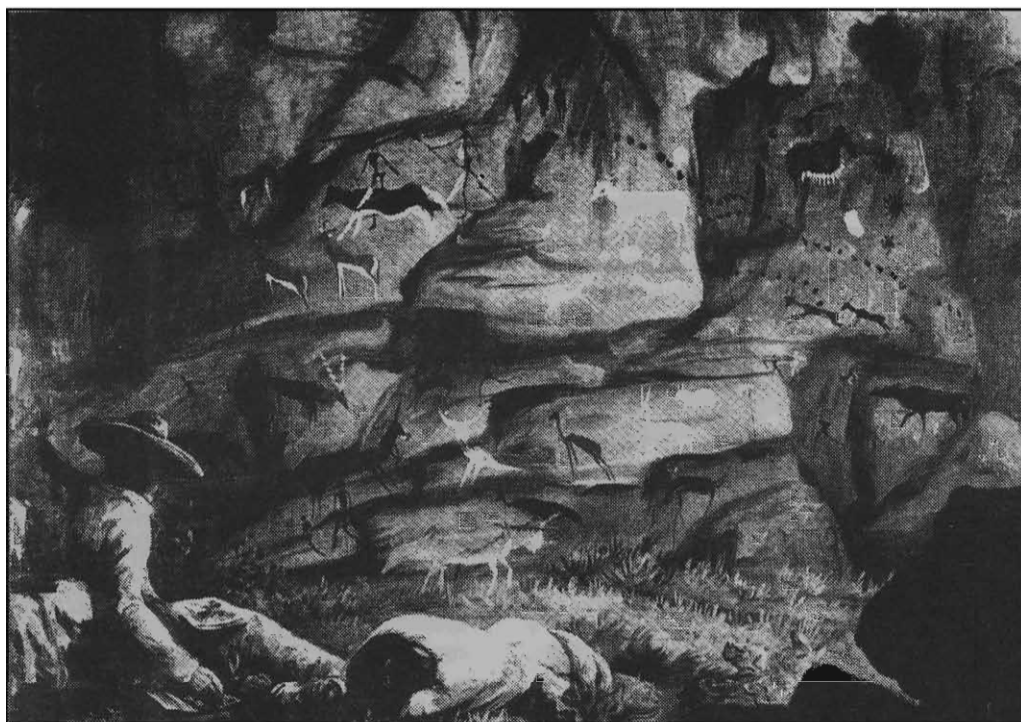


Figure 4: Unaware of the potency of the living rockface – Baines (1849)

natural rockfaces (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989 & 1990). Like other mythical 'powers' from prehistory (such as the 'mana' surrounding extraordinary natural forms or the 'taboos' protecting special locations, occasions, institutions or persons), the special 'power of images' cannot, apparently, be identified with specific objective qualities understood in the art-historical sense as the formal properties of visual artifacts (Freedberg 1989).

Thus the analysis of the 'visionary' nature of Bushman rock paintings offers a singularly challenging enterprise, both to archeologists and non-archeologists. An indirect, but perhaps less arduous route for the art historian would be to look for clues in the interpretations of rock paintings by artists of more recent date. Various formal elements of the rock paintings have been incorporated into the styles of modern, South African painters, but some of the interpretations seem more germane than others. Pippa Skotnes' fascinating prints on themes from the San heritage, for example, were inspired by the uncanny qualities of Bushman paintings (Figure 3). As a historian of art, furthermore, she has taken archeologists to task for ignoring the visual qualities of the rockfaces bearing painterly markings. She objects to their practice of recording rock paintings by means of tracings and photographs. In particular she rejects their habit of interpreting isolated detail from such tracings or photographs (Skotnes 1991).

Conceding the significance of the visual texture of stone surfaces in rock shelters, Lewis-

Williams (1990) of late interprets the painted rockfaces as manifestations of an interface between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' (cf. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). No doubt the latter, speculative distinction stems primarily from the archeologist's own set of pre-theoretical suppositions, rather than from established distinctions between worlds 'above' or 'below' in any authentic 'Bushman worldview'. Differentiations between 'natural' and 'supernatural' are apparently unknown in the largely cyclical world orders of so-called 'prehistoric cosmologies'. Mythic worldviews lack elaborate structural contrasts between sacred and profane, or time and eternity (Lützel 1952, Eliade 1974). The undifferentiated confluence of immanence and transcendence survived the secularising and colonising onslaughts of modernisation. Moreover, this feature remains of special and perennial significance in mythologising thought, even in our time.

In rock art, the pictorial marks of the human hand transform the natural outcrops, planes, ridges, grooves and cracks of the living rockface into spiritual force fields populated by mythical creatures. Visually the effect is perhaps comparable to the vibrant fields of energy and the dynamic pictorial vectors found, for example, in Karel Nel's drawings (cf. Doepel 1992). Discovered in nature, this power is harnessed ritually or shamanistically, rather than created aesthetically by autonomous painterly means. The rays of magical potency emanating from and penetrating into the irregularities of the painted rock surfaces can perhaps be

connected with underground travel – one of the legendary, out-of-body exploits of Bushman shamans – or with the forging of reservoirs of potency to be tapped by trancing shamans (cf. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990).

The physical state of conservation of the rock paintings is of significance to the contemporary observer. Some of the more fugitive pigments are extremely sensitive to dampness and soon become diluted with a resultant fading of pictorial colours; other pigments, especially the reds, are more durable. They are absorbed into the sandstone pores, sometimes becoming covered by silica deposits, physically embedding them in the sandstone (Loubser 1992). Rock paintings are thus at once extremely vulnerable and almost permanently fossilised. They are witnesses to the fragility of human existence and the enduring permanence of nature.

Ideologically motivated concepts of environmental totality inevitably determine the reading of paintings thus indelibly integrated into nature. A glimpse of the living unity of rock and painting, including the shamanist 'potentialising' or magical 'energising' of the natural rockface by painterly marks can be caught in Thomas Baines' depiction of 19th-century explorers of the wild frontiers peering, evidently without any significant measure of appreciation of what they are witnessing, at the painted surface while resting in a Bushman rock-shelter (Figure 4). In modern conditions the natural environment of rock paintings take many shapes. It could be colonised or conquered territory, a farmer's private property, vistas of free nature to be enjoyed at leisure by

hikers, frail cultural legacies and scarce natural resources claiming conservationists' protection, or the demarcated sites of geological, paleontological and archeological research.

The uncanny pictorial qualities of rock paintings, suggestively conveyed by Pippa Skotnes' prints, belong to a very different, alien yet familiar world. Being at once part of the natural environment, yet able to cast magical spells on the forces and creatures of nature, rock paintings recall the mythical deeds of Kaggen, the polymorphous trickster-god of the Bushmen. This mythopoeic aura cannot be described functionally in deeds of land-ownership, marked on maps of hiking trails, identified in the proclamations of cultural monuments or the regulations governing natural resources, nor, finally, can any of this be reproduced on archeologists' film, whether photographed or painstakingly traced by hand.

The authentic, historical meanings of rock paintings remain invisible to human eyes not in direct, full-bodied, imaginatively guided, contact *in situ* with the paintings sheltered in their individually contextualised landscapes. Rather than entoptic data, a lively historical imagination, coupled with a 'perchronic' awareness, is indispensable for guiding discerning contemporary eyes into empathy with these curious traces of prehistoric humankind's experiences of the 'massivity' of nature. Rock paintings can, at least partly, be understood as cases of, in Adorno's terminology, the mythical *mimesis* of the ageless, chthonic powers governing this 'bezauberte Welt' – generously spawning seasonal life yet relent-



Figure 5: In the crimson mirrors of the Villa dei Misterii – Pompeii (first century B.C.)

lessly menacing all individual survival like Anaximander's *to apeiron* – pitiless conditions of human existence, in other words, here acquiring a superhuman 'face of stone' in painted rocks.

In this figurative sense of the term, the primitive *rockface* regulates the emerging discourse on 'visionary optics'. Ultimate meanings transcending visuality yet preternaturally represented in the visible traces left by human hands are common features of our historical heritage – a basic given in the material also of art-historical research. But the 'gnostic eye' divines unspeakable revelations of mythical significance in such absent yet present, hidden yet potent meanings.¹² With time, the contours of a recognisable 'face' or typiconic 'format' of specific painterly qualities condensed from this transcending visuality – its path can be traced in the labyrinth of the many histories of painting.

Like Pippa Skotnes' prints, Sir Laurens van der Post's sympathetic literary response to Bushman culture demonstrates the operations of the 'gnostic eye'. Though appropriate in 'visionary' terms to the 'perchronic' demands of rock paintings, the Jungian mythologising about hidden psycho-historical laws and impending revelations of human fate devised by this modern guru from the Orange Free State – mentor to a Freemason crown prince with homeopathic sympathies and homely opinions on architecture – ultimately impedes the advance of serious research on the subject. Without a 'perchronic' awareness of the ideological position from which committed interpretations spring both of these approaches to rock paintings yield unsatisfactory results – either shrouding them imaginatively behind veils of mystification or demythologising them by resorting to the supposedly universal neuropathology of entoptics.¹³

6. 'CRIMSON MIRRORS': DIONYSAIN MYSTERY CULT

The next object for speculation by the 'gnostic eye' comes from Roman antiquity – the mural frieze from the first century B.C., covering the four walls of the antechamber in the Villa dei Misterii near Pompeii (figure 5). It concerns the mysterious case of 'crimson mirrors'. With this descriptive yet curiously evocative terminology a German archeologist (Herbig 1958: 51) once appraised the spell-binding, numinous impact of the darkly gleaming crimson ground of the fresco frieze eerily bearing a specular series of ghostly scenes from the mythical ritual or *hieros gamos* of a Dionysian-Orphic mystery cult.¹⁴

The successive scenes of the frieze depict a number of haunted human figures involved

in sacred actions of a ritual order. The cycle of redemption in this liturgical drama comprises scenes of instruction and sacrificial offering, terror and panic, mantic divination, atonement and flagellation, *enthousiasmos* and ecstatic dancing. But the actual and ineffable Dionysian *mysterium* itself, the *sacramentalia* revealed only to the initiated *epoptia* of the mystery cult – those who have undergone the shattering experience of witnessing the unseen – are not represented. Their absence in the painting probably correlates with their hidden presence elsewhere in the Villa dei Misterii.

Decorating an antechamber, the frieze was apparently meant to authorise the sacred rites and prepare the neophytes for mystical participation in the arcane theophany in the secret sanctuary located in an adjacent room. For those already initiated in occult knowledge or *gnosis*, like the sitting figure of the pensive *matrona* of the villa depicted at the entrance to the room, the painted scenes offered only *memoria* of past events. Melancholic remembrance is the meditative form of participation of the *epoptia* in the fateful conviction that all had been done, all will be redone and all shall be endured *sub speci Dionysi* (Brandon 1975: 277).

Being enclosed within the walls of the villa and situated just outside the urban precinct of Pompeii, the context of situation of the frieze signals a momentous contribution by Roman law to the development of Western cultures: the juridical division between *res privata* and *res publica*. Unknown to the 'primitive cultures' of earlier antiquity, the historical differentiation and subsequent transformation of private and public societal spheres were diachronic changes of vital historical importance, influential also in the history of the visual arts (Habermas 1982). In this particular case the need for privacy and secrecy was additionally enforced by an act of the Roman Senate which, after orgiastic scandals in 186 B.C., prohibited the activities of mystery sects within the public sphere of the Roman empire.

The mystery cults and their cultic arts of ritual privacy opposed the official state mythology and the imperial iconography reigning supreme in the public sphere of the Roman empire. Formally, the human figures in the frieze follow the classicist style and iconography of the Augustan age. But the iconic power of the 'crimson mirrors' in or upon which they are projected transposes the actions of the depicted figures – firstly, into the private sphere of a cultic community; secondly, into the occult ambience of a mystery religion; and thirdly, the glowing colour field immediately engages anagogic levels of meaning, bypassing the moralistic and demythologising effect of Hellenistic allegory typical of the historical

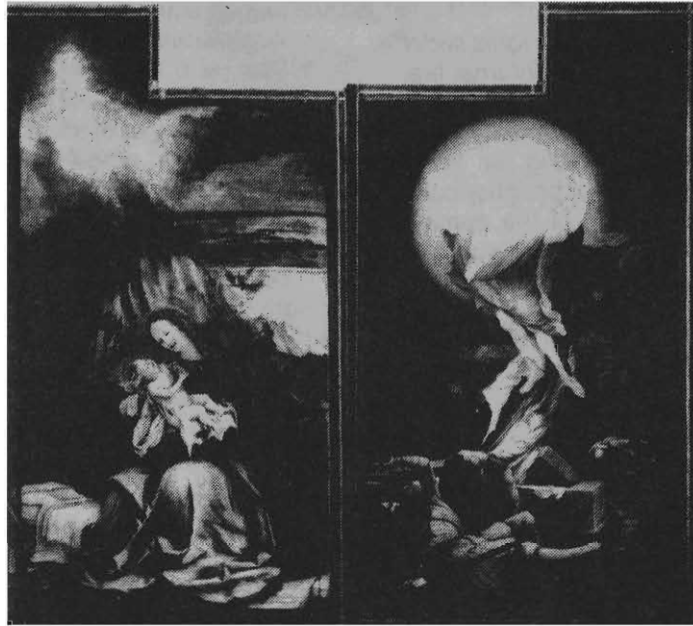


Figure 6: Corruption and redemption at Isenheim – Grünewald (1510/5)

turn from mimetic to signfic art in late antiquity (Meier 1988).

In the case of the Villa dei Misterii frieze, ultimate participation in the *unio mystica* is achieved within the cultic context of the *dromenon*, those mythic actions done and ritually redone according to arcane formulas and rites of initiation (Brandon 1975), rather than by any means which can be described as primarily painterly or in any way approximating modern concepts of the aesthetic. Yet, when regarded in 'perchronic' fashion, from the mythologising perspective of a 'gnostic' eye, the mysterious aura of the 'crimson mirrors' can be appreciated as a decisive augmentation of the primitive uncanniness of painted rockfaces. 'Visionary optics' here has been established historically and organised socially as the *locus* of an alternative mode of seeing and believing the unseen. Also, the luster of the unseen is gradually being manifested in a definite set of painterly qualities.

The members of this mystery cult deliberately chose for an alternate but private, indeed, occult way of life. Subsequently the Romans, and most later or secular democracies in modern states, attempted similarly to confine the established christian religion within the ambit of a private, cultic sphere. Since the reign of Constantine, official christianity was partly transformed into and then became wholly identified with the public *status quo* of a so-called 'holy' Roman empire. Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern era occult

ways of life would remain hidden alternatives to established societal orders. Their spiritual opposition to temporal authorities and reigning social conditions was restricted to isolated communities of heretics, on occasion erupting in anarchic and iconoclastic revolts under the leadership of charismatic visionaries such as Thomas Münzer, Gerard Winstanley or George Fox (Freedberg 1982). The next example is taken from the late medieval flowering of mystical and chiliastic movements.

7. INFERNAL VISIONS OF EVIL AND HEALING COUNTER-VISIONS

Transposed to the altar liturgy of a monastic order within the medieval church (Brandon 1966, Belting 1981 & 1990), the social condition of a cultic context of situation still prevails in the sixteenth-century *Gnadenbild* in the St. Mary chapel of the hospital monastery of St. Anthony at Isenheim – Matthias Grünewald's famous *Isenheim altarpiece* (Figure 6) depicting infernal visions of evil and corruption and healing counter-visions of mystical redemption.

The monastery at Isenheim was a haven for poor wretches suffering from a disease that one might well describe as approximating a medieval version of AIDS, the epidemic plague of cold fire known as *Antonius-Feuer*. The victims suffered from gangrenous putrefaction of the bodily extremities and experienced nightmarish, hallucinatory visions. St. Anthony's Fire was an incurable disease: Penitent victims

petitioned St. Anthony for miraculous healing and went on pilgrimage to his shrine to acquire St. Anthony's Balm (oil brought in contact with his relics). Amputation of the rotting members of the body was the only effective remedy.

The disease was known as both *ignis sacer* and *ignis gehennae* – holy and infernal fire. The victims were considered both blessed and damned, chosen to suffer final hellish punishments on earth already. Serving as 'living icons' of St. Anthony, they prophetically warned fellow human beings of the coming final judgement. At Isenheim, a lay surgeon performed amputations and took care of the bodily needs of patients. The order's ecclesiastical ministry of supernatural grace was augmented by the therapeutic function of the altarpiece and by a small number of crippled patients who were witnesses to the power of St. Anthony. These lay brothers were supported by the monastery as 'living relics' of their vengeful patron saint (Hayum 1974, 1977 & 1990, Mellinkoff 1988).

Only in the eighteenth century the disease was finally diagnosed as a form of ergotism. Caused by the eating of bread contaminated with toxic wheat and rye, healing followed on a simple dietary change. Ergot is a hallucinogenic fungus related chemically to lysergic acid diethylamide (or LSD). Experts are of the opinion that patients undoubtedly crossed certain thresholds of ordinary perception to arrive at altered states of awareness (Hayum 1990). Infernal visions of the kind Grünewald so graphically portrayed in the altarpiece, especially in the grotesque and monstrous detail of the panel with the Temptation of St. Anthony, accompanied the experience of corporeal decay (Bauer 1973).

The appalling conditions of communal health in which Grünewald was commissioned to paint the wings for Nikolaus Hagenauer's shrine of St. Anthony evidently demanded drastic social reform. Elsewhere, many changes were initiated in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, but at Isenheim the traditional practices prevailed until the secularisation of the monastery during the French Revolution. Grünewald's response to the diachronic conditions can be explained by a spiritualist mentality of ascetic quietism. This posture of withdrawal and resignation is related to the contrasting but paired option of charismatic anarchy, a recurrent chiliastic feature of social action in the mythologising tradition. The altarpiece brought no miraculous healing of the gangrene, no cure for the hallucinations. Resignation in a fate sealed beyond human ken and the confines of this world replaced any promise of restored good health to the patients (Kayser 1940, Saran 1972).

Apparently patients exposed to the altarpiece initially identified bodily with the horrendous figure of the crucified Christ, the suffering *forma servi* of the Son of Man, visible in the closed state of the altarpiece. Their empathy was guided by the depictions of the *agonia* of Mary and the *compassio* of the Magdalene. The inscription next to the figure of the huge, pointing finger of the Baptist, 'He must grow, I must shrink', amounts to an empathetic imperative addressed to patient-beholders. When the wings of the predella at the bottom are opened, the legs of the dead Christ in the Deposition scene are literally amputated like the limbs of victims of St. Anthony's Fire. Complete identification with the passion of Christ prepares the way for mystical participation in his transfiguration in the Resurrection scene, depicted in the middle state which is only revealed to patients during the mass liturgy on Sundays.

In the words of a recent study, "this middle state, through light and color, provokes the kind of visual fixation precedent to a trancelike state. This effect is a perceptual equivalent to the content, where occult beliefs and magical means are marshalled to combat the evil spirits associated with [the] disease" (Hayum 1990: 49). Apparently drawn from visionary imagery in the mystical writings of Brigitta of Sweden¹⁵ (Benz 1934, Benesch 1965), the middle state of the altarpiece with its unfolding scenes of Annunciation to Resurrection presents Grünewald's healing counter-visions.

Though still contained and determined by cultic functions within the liturgical context, the painterly means which Grünewald exploited to suggest the gradual transfiguration, spiritualisation, even transubstantiation of the figure of the risen Christ, inaugurates a powerful array of shimmering, transmuting, radiant, phosphorescent, incandescent colours (Scheja 1969, Benz 1972). Visitors to the secularised abbey church, the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar, where these panels are presently being exhibited can testify to the moving, if merely aesthetic, experience of viewing the play of unearthly colours in this painting. Also found in El Greco's late paintings (Florissoone 1957), this cast of visionary qualities in the *Farbgestalt* would remain a typical painterly configuration of the occult tradition in modern painting.

8. COSMOGRAPHIC VISION OF ATAVISM

Dating less than two decades after Grünewald's altarpiece, Albrecht Altdorfer's stunning painting, commonly known as the *Alexanderschlacht* (Figure 7), is an eminent example of learned Renaissance history painting. Ordinarily paintings belonging to this early modern

genre were based on humanist art theories and executed for a secular patron – Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria in this case (Benesch 1965: 44-60). The dated connections between this instance of visionary painting and the philosophical worldviews from occult traditions evolved in the rarified intellectual atmosphere of the Renaissance hermeticism of early modern occultists like Johann Reuchlin, Agrippa von Netelshelm and Paracelsus von Hohenheim (Gombrich 1948, Wind 1980, Janzen 1980: 77-90).

Altdorfer executed this interpretation of the decisive victory of the Greek army of Alexander the Great over the Persian army of Darius at the battle of Issus, at a time when the Turkish army was again laying siege to Vienna, threatening the supremacy of the Holy Roman Empire. The court historian at Regensburg, Aventinus, provided Altdorfer with narrative material from the historical sources, for example, the lore that Alexander's army gained the upper hand over the Persians when the sun was setting on that fateful day in 333 B.C. The painting suitably depicts a sixteenth-century battle scene set in a fantastic panorama of the Danube Alps. But Altdorfer turns this conventional means of drawing moral *exempla* from key events in the classical or biblical past into an innovative and visionary manifestation of an occult worldview.

Instead of real events from the past decisively changing the course of history, or down-to-earth, contemporary conditions urgently calling for immediate historical action, Altdorfer offers an atavistic vision of the macro-microcosmic recapulation of primordial events under an unknown, transcendent God. The cosmogonic strife of rising sun vanquishing the declining moon pits *Abendland* against *Morgenland*, christian against heathen, culture against barbarism, Greek against Persian, German against Turk – an unceasing conflict beyond the reach of time and history.

The collective movements of the engaging armies writhing in a life-and-death struggle, undulate monstrously and snakelike over the topographic face of the earth. The armies are supra-individual organisms rather than massed troops. Nor are they governed or directed by human command. Altdorfer renders the swarming troops of soldiers like the wind-



Figure 7: Cosmogonic strife at Issus – Altdorfer (1592)

blown motion of leaves and trees in the forest scene landscape paintings by the so-called Danube school, of which he was a key member. Myriad details accumulate towards the overall shapes of collective, shimmering movements – of supernatural, natural or human bodies – in which Paracelsian chiromancy divines the governing spirits of nature.

Centuries later, Friedrich Schlegel saw a representation of a 'cosmic ocean' in Altdorfer's *Alexanderschlacht*. His famous commentary on the painting lauded its vision of medieval chivalry as a source of inspiration for the painters of German Romanticism (Janzen 1980). Based on idealist philosophy, this nineteenth-century movement radically subjectivised the pantheistic concept of the 'spirit of nature', transforming it into the natural genius' unconscious, creative power for experiencing and expressing autonomous artistic visions.¹⁶ Proceeding from these new historical conditions, a number of Romantic painters responded in surprising ways to Schlegel's call.

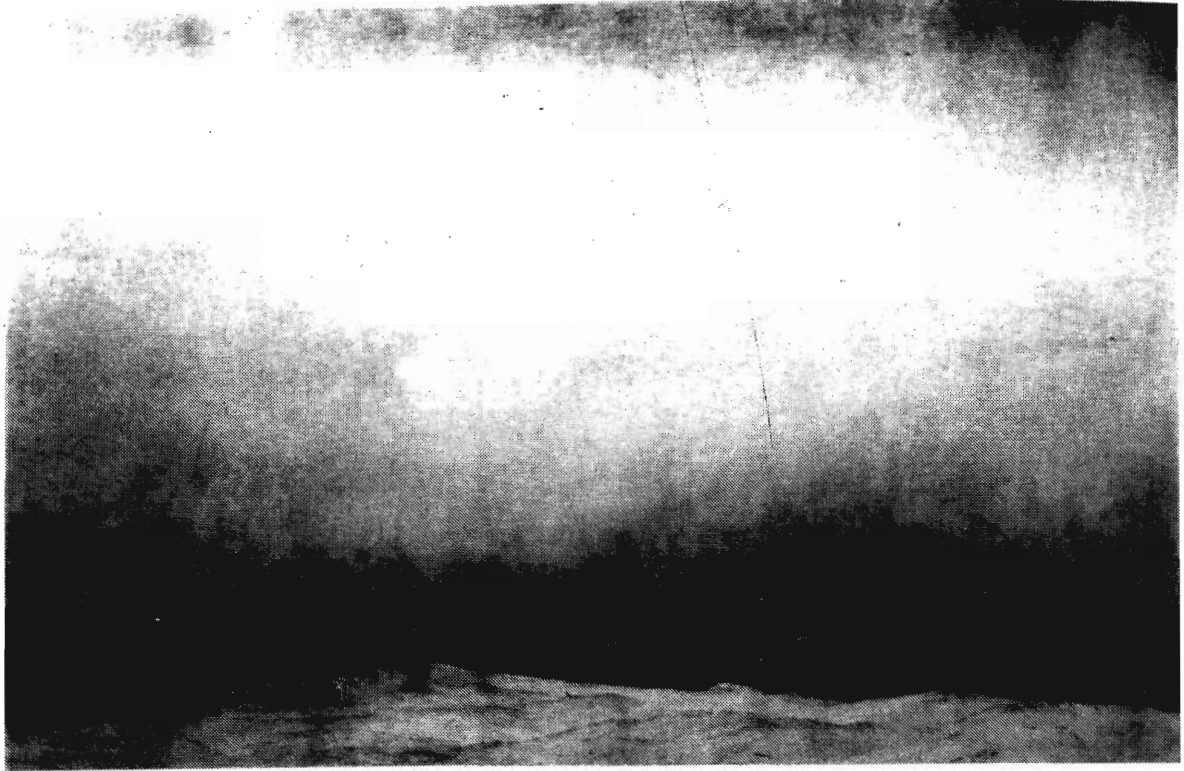


Figure 8: Absorption by the cosmic ocean – Friedrich (1808/10)

9. ROMANTIC VISIONARIES: RUNGE AND FRIEDRICH

According to a recent study by Jonathan Crary (1990: 67-96) the modern discipline of optics was born at the significant moment first announced in the *Farbenlehre* (1810) of Goethe with the words: “Man schließe darauf die Öffnung”. Goethe is describing the coloured images engendered in the darkness by the stimulated eye of an observer who closes the small aperture through which light is admitted into a Newtonian *camera obscura*:

The hole being then closed, let him look towards the darkest part of the room; a circular image will now be seen to float before him. The middle of the circle will appear bright, colourless, or somewhat yellow, but the border will appear red. After a time this red, increasing toward the centre, covers the whole circle, and at last the bright central point. No sooner, however, is the whole circle red than the edge begins to be blue, and the blue gradually encroaches inward on the red. When the whole is blue the edge becomes dark and colourless. The darker edge again slowly encroaches on the blue till the whole circle appears colourless [...] (Crary 1990: 68).

Crary views Goethe's discoveries in terms of the modern separation of the senses, the subjectification of vision and the technologising of observation. These historical changes in sensory perception created the optical conditions for experiencing after-images in irritated eyes or – of special significance for our theme – the stimulation of entoptic phenomena in hallucinating eyes (Burwick 1990). The modern artistic ideal of expressing the artist's individual and subjective experience of inner visions in autonomous painterly terms arose under these conditions. Diachronic changes in the optical conditions of modernity thus offered new possibilities for manifesting the occult tradition in visionary paintings.

The new conditions correspond exactly to the anti-mimetic, optical tenor of a well-known aphorism of the pietist romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich: “Schließe dein leibliches Auge, damit du mit dem geistigen Auge zuerst siehest dein Bild.”¹⁷ Friedrich's painting *The monk on the seashore* (Figure 8), for example, translates the inner visions created by a spiritual eye in a dark night of the soul into the powerful, medium-specific or autonomous impact of modern painting.¹⁸

Clemens Brentano's famous commentary on the painting – especially the crucial phrase ‘it is as if the eyelids were amputated’ (Traeger 1980) – conveys the trancelike state of utter fascination and absorption (Flax 1984) and, implicitly, the iconoclastic violence (Van den Berg 1990b: 171-89) resulting from visual fixa-

tion on the sublime 'cosmic ocean' of this vibrantly configured colour field (Boime 1989, Dyrness 1985). According to the opinion of Begemann (1990), an epoch-making "Umbruch in der Geschichte der Wahrnehmung" occurred with the reception of this painting.¹⁹

Opposing Newton's theory of prismatic colours, Philipp Otto Runge developed a colour sphere – indeed, a spheric model which fashions a cosmogonic worldview by means of colour relations – on the basis of Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (Matile 1979). Spiritualisation of Goethe's *Urfarben* (the primary colours, for example, symbolised the Trinity) provided him with an optical order of visionary colour contrasts, tonal nuances and painterly means – he calls it the discipline of a painterly language – for transforming the art of painting into a visual kind of negative theology. Like Friedrich, Runge was a romantic prophet of the nineteenth-century *Kunstreligion*. On occasion they intentionally adopted a quasi-cultic format and status for their paintings. A case in point is Runge's *Der große Morgen* of 1809 (Figure 10). It was reconstructed, on the basis of the preparatory study *Der kleine Morgen* of 1808 (Figure 9), from nine fragments left after the painting was destroyed in accordance with instructions left in the last will of the painter (Traeger 1975).

The painting was inspired by the pietist, Protestant revival in the wake of the French Revolution. The unseen sun in the inaccessible depth of the painting symbolises an unknown transcendent God as a hidden source of power, withdrawn behind assorted painterly manifestations of divine revelation, each bathed in a different light and brilliantly executed in accordance with the tonal system of his colour sphere – the newborn babe in the foreground, the dawn landscape, the allegorical figure of Aurora, the lily of the daybreak, the morning star, the compositional format of a painting within the painting and the planned revival of the ancient technique of painting on a goldleaf ground (Bisanz 1970, Van den Berg 1990b: 106-7).

Yet, the beholders of this carefully constructed and tonally nuanced *Farbgestalt* are ultimately left unsatisfied by the encounter with such visionary paintings. In spite of the sensuous richness of the surface values of finely differentiated local colours, the effects of the resultant

mystical experience only occur beyond history and external to corporeal experience. This awareness of the futility of his project probably explains Runge's instructions for the posthumous destruction of the painting. The negativity of aesthetic procedure signals a major impasse for visionary, quasi-mediumistic and quasi-shamanist painters in the twentieth century. The abstract painters of high modernism discussed earlier in this inquiry (cf. section 3) attempted in vain to reach beyond this impasse. The conclusions to be drawn from these examples thus have a largely negative tenor.

10. EPILOGUE

Quite a number of twentieth-century artists were orthodox occultists bound to the closed community and secrecy of the so-called Inner Tradition. Their art is unknown to the art public in general and seldomly published in mainstream art historical journals. Their predeces-

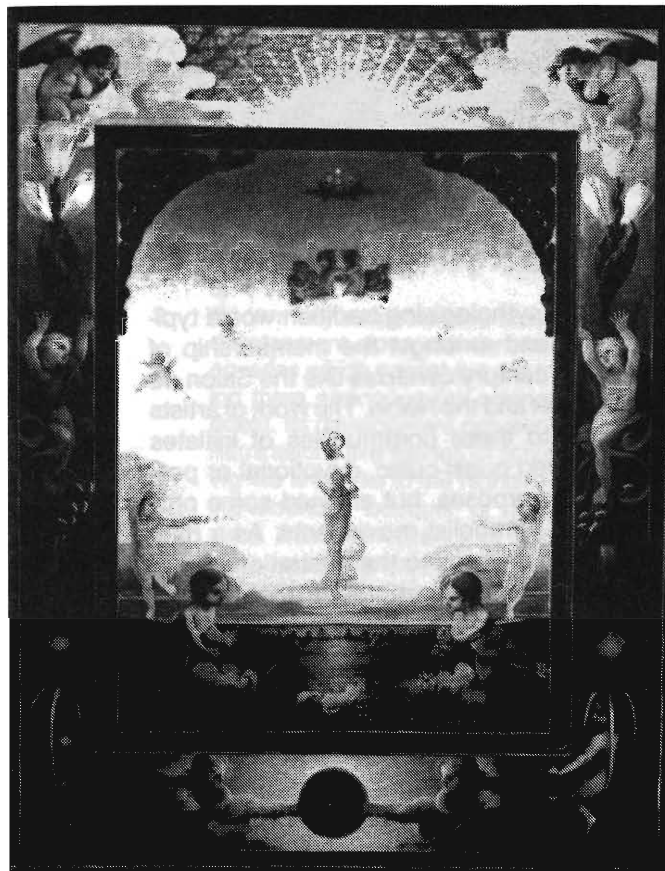


Figure 9: The hidden source of mystical revelation – Runge (1808)



Figure 10: Visual fragments of a negative theology – Runge (1809)

sors in the mythologising tradition would typically be found amongst the membership of nineteenth-century *cénacles* like the *Salon de Rose + Croix* and the *Nabis*. The work of artists belonging to these communities of initiates mainly served quasi-cultic, devotional or programmatic purposes, but attained some prominence in Symbolist movements. As a rule, their work is devoted to the illustration of thematic ideas from the arcane mythologies of spiritualist literature.

The broad movement of the historical avant-garde matured from many such local and short-lived instances of sectarian cultural creeds or secessions and quasi-confessional 'brotherhoods' of loyal followers and prophetic leaders. Strains of this esoteric spirituality also became integrated into the communal mindset of avant-gardism. A dominant article of the modernist faith – the belief that artistic autonomy must serve the *Kunstreligion* of enlightened humankind in general – effected a gradual secularisation of this mentality. Thus some of the most famous artists in the tradition of

visionary painting – William Blake or Marcel Duchamp for example – can be described as 'heretical' individuals who, like some of their latter-day counterparts in deconstructionist philosophy (Handelman 1983), belong to the 'perchronic' neighbourhood or community of the mythologising tradition. These individuals work out their own cultural salvation and personal mythologies without necessarily being members of specific occult circles.

Whether working in the mainstream art-world or for closed communities, all artists in the occult tradition aim at resacralising or re-enchanting (Gablik 1991) the extraordinary (*contra* Danto 1981). As a rule, it seems that they initially elect to follow a route of closure. For some, closure is provided by initiation into the discipline and codes of a secret society. The 'heretical' individual (Handelman 1983), on the other hand, may adopt extreme measures of aesthetic discipline to achieve a self-imposed ascetic control of the creative imagination. The aesthetic negativity of the typiconic format or rhetorical strategy of the resulting works of art implies individual self-mastery by the artist and domination over the beholders of their paintings.

Concurrently, visionary artists also desire to attain for themselves personally, and to perform spiritual disclosure for kindred spirits through their works. Their aim is to unleash aesthetic power by hidden shortcuts to uncontrolled communication and unmediated revelation of ultimate meaning. The irrationalist and deconstructive potential of the resulting oceanic decentralisation of the ego in discursive depths of infinite meaning-potential forcefully attracts neo-dadaist and neo-shamanist exponents of postmodernism (cf. Tucker 1992).

In the idioms of various cultural dynamics – ranging from Symbolism (Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon) to Expressionism (Franz Marc and Paul Klee), from Surrealism (Max Ernst and André Masson) to abstract Expressionism (Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock), even from Constructionism (Kasimir Malevich and Oskar Schlemmer) to Pop art (Yves Klein and Joe Tilson) – visionary artists respond to inhuman social conditions and to particular historical crises. Whether modernist or post-modernist, they have had to endure negative reactions to their work. Their best efforts are generally judged to be merely 'contemplative' or 'meditational' and consequently 'unpolitical', without real ramifications in society or effective repercussions in history. The real import of such works and performances remain closed, not only to formalist critics, but more

importantly, also to beholders at large, not being members of the spiritual minority initiated in occult knowledge. Visionary artists of the present, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer for example, therefore attempt to mobilise innovative and deconstructive strategies for the effective engagement of burning issues from social history.

On the basis of visual clues volunteered by art works, one's provisional conjectures about the presence of enduring traditions generate working hypotheses for initiating more profound confrontations with 'obscure' works of art and with artists whose intentions are otherwise difficult to grasp. I believe that beholders who have been sensitised about the recurrent presence of visionary qualities in human perception and their typical configurations in the history of painting will be able to discern the 'visionary face' of the mythologising tradition as a common ideological neighbourhood shared by many branches of art, thought and belief. Experience in 'visionary optics' enables one to distinguish its manifestations from other traditions in which the unseen 'parergonal' dimensions of works of art are perhaps less immediately apparent. Like a number of abstract painters from high modernism, several pioneers of postmodernism are drawing from the ancient but rich source of the 'visionary tradition'.

NOTES

1. This article is an expanded version, illustrated with reproductions of the main examples, of a paper entitled 'Visionary optics: Seeing the unseen in art history' originally presented at the conference, *Myth and interdisciplinary studies*, UNISA, 4-5 May 1992 (cf. Clasquin *et al.* 1993: 195-228). It stems in part from a research project undertaken with the financial support of the CSD (HSRC, South Africa). The opinions expressed and conclusions drawn are my own and should not necessarily be attributed to the HSRC.
2. Distinct from the diachrony of significant historical changes and from the cultural dynamics in the synchrony of alternate historical periods, 'perchronic neighbourhoods' refer to typical environments of recurrent worldviews and their historical trajectories as continuous or perennial traditions in specific cultural areas – for example, 'typiconic' formats in the case of visual art, and typical collective actions, dispositional stances or ontological patterns in the case of politics, ethics or philosophy (Seerveld 1991 & 1993).
3. In his most recent publication on the subject of 'typiconic' categories, Seerveld (1993: 60) describes 'typiconic format' as the basic way 'the artist frames his or her artistic production to be imaginatively received', 'the framing typiconic format gives artwork focus, like specially filtered eye glasses, to configure the playing field on which and in which things

happen, are depicted, heard, habituated, followed, and then presented by the artist. Again, typiconic format is not conceptual, not semantic in nature, but is an imaginative apriori which gives a specific cast, a typical cast, to an artist's work.'

4. Guided by the framing *topos* of 'the world turned upside down' the 'transgressive' arts of the picaresque tradition, by contrast, typically combine 'popular culture' as a field of thematic interest with the 'low mode' tropics of discourse from 'comic' genres. Pieter Breugel, Jan Steen, William Hogarth, Karl Spitsweg, Honoré Daumier, Toulouse-Lautrec, Georg Grosz, Otto Dix and Roy Lichtenstein are artists who represent the picaresque tradition in the visual arts.
5. Mythologising thought's structural position on the 'perchronic' dimension of history can be formulated as genetic finality of historical recurrence – a position not to be confused with Seerveld's (cf. 1991) own view of traditions and worldviews.
6. In his impressive exegeses of occult and cabalistic references in works by Joan Miró and Marcel Duchamp, Rory Doepel (1987, 1990 & 1992) extends the well-known methods of iconographical analysis into extraordinary fields, proceeding from the covert references of visual detail, via esoteric texts, to arcane systems of thought. Typiconic interpretation, however, involves such pursuits only in a derivative or supportive manner.
7. George Steiner (1989) would probably prefer to speak of 'real presences' in this connection.
8. On the basis of earlier research (Van den Berg 1984), the 'perchronic' nature of likely historical linkages between these two instances of visual transfiguration was initially broached in speculative fashion at a conference some years ago (Van den Berg 1988: 24, footnote 3).
9. Art in many respects resembles religion. Its development does not consist of new discoveries which cancel out old truths, declaring them erroneous (as science apparently does). Its development proceeds by sudden illuminations like flashes of lightning, exploding like fireworks in the night sky and scattering around a 'bouquet' of variously shining stars. This luminescence of blended light reveals new perspectives, new truths, basically the ongoing organic growth of ancient wisdom which is not nullified by the latter, but which survive and generate as wisdom and truth. I observe that they simultaneously incorporate the elements necessary for the reception of the 'third' revelation, the revelation of the spirit.
10. To experience the aura of an appearance means to endow it with the capability of (opening its eyes and) glancing (at us).
11. In Ernst Bloch's (1988: 141-155) vision of utopian *Vor-Schein*, artistic illusion is similarly empowered to rend the veil or break the vessels by 'visible anticipatory illumination'. In mythologising vein, Levin (1988) exegeted visionary experience for postmodernity with the striking figure of 'lightning opening vision to

- transformative insight'. During high modernism artistic transfiguration (Birringer 1970) already involved more the sublime of Lyotard (1984, cf. also Steinhäuser 1989) than the commonplace of Danto (1981). In the post-modern era artistic practice in the mythologising tradition may even become one of the dominant trends (Bann 1984). After the collapse or failure of modernism (Gablik 1986, 1991), neo-shamanists like Joseph Beuys desire a 're-enchantment of art' (Tisdall 1979, Coetzee 1989, Verspohl 1990). Anselm Kiefer, for example, meditates that *Malen=Verbrennen* (1974), while Jacques Derrida, following the anti-retinal tenor of Marcel Duchamp's dadaist strategies (Krauss 1990), acclaims the unseen parergonality and immateriality of art (Bernstein 1992).
12. As a 'strong' gnostic reader, Harold Bloom (1975: 66-7) experiences poetry in a similar vein: 'The fundamental phenomena of poetic influence have little to do with the borrowings of images or ideas, with sound-patterns, or with other verbal reminders of one poem by another. A poem is a deep misprision of a previous poem when we recognize the later poem as being absent rather than present on the surface of the earlier poem, and yet still being in the earlier poem, implicit or hidden in it, not yet manifest, and yet there.' The historical influence of the recurrent *rockface* figure, thus understood in the mystical or astrological sense of the term 'influence' – contrasting anxiety of influence with the curse of belatedness – which Bloom appropriates for poetry, cannot be restricted to positivist concepts of historical 'sources' and 'influences'. Independent of the question whether later painters had occasion to make physical contact with examples of Bushman rock art, the rockface figure recurs in the imaginative contours of one typiconic format in the 'perchronic' dimension of history.
 13. The imperative of recognising "the religious complexity of the art" is included among the several strategies Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1990: 58) suggest for the exhibition of Bushman rock art: "it speaks of another world, a world of spiritual potency which people today can barely begin to understand, but which can – must – none the less be respected. Thus something of the 'mythic and holy' [...] can be restored." I wholeheartedly endorse this sympathetic position, with the added provision that one should similarly understand the "religious complexity" of the ideological powers operative in the politics of modernity. The spiritual potencies of secularised actuality emanating from contemporary artistic expressions, scientific methods or educational policies also propagate myths and serve idols. Adopting a mythologising worldview is certainly not the only means of attaining an awareness of this dimension.
 14. The pictorial effect of the crimson ground of this mural frieze presages the 'colour field' paintings of twentieth-century, abstract modernists belonging to the 'visionary' tradition such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Mark Tobey, Clyfford Still, Gotthard Graubner and Ad Reinhart (Chave 1989).
 15. Like some Byzantine icon painting imported to the West as Passion images, manuscript illuminations of texts by medieval mystics (Christian, Jewish and Islamic) are important links in the history of 'visionary' painting. The use of gold leaf, jewelry and schemas of meditative mandala's contributed powerfully to the formation of the 'visionary face' of this tradition.
 16. Though not a German responding to Schlegel's call for a revival of medieval chivalry, the poetry and illustrations of the non-conformist, Swedenborgian mythographer, William Blake (1757-1827) are perchronically appropriate, mysticist continuations of early modern occultism in early romanticism (Lindberg 1970, Bindman 1977, Mitchell 1978, Van den Berg 1984: 340-43, Cooper 1990, Peterfreund 1990a).
 17. Close your eyes and paint that which arises in the darkness from within yourself.
 18. The debate following on Von Ramdohr's anti-mysticist critique of Friedrich's *Tetschener Altar* (1808) precisely reflects the spectrum of attitudes to the mythologising tradition at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Lankheit 1978, Hofmann 1982).
 19. The sun-mysticist, John Mallord William Turner's (1775-1851) so-called 'eye-paintings' of the 1840's, such as *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses writing the book of Genesis* and *Shade and Darkness: The Evening of the Deluge* were done in a similar vein (Mitchell 1978).

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806)
Théâtre de Besançon: coup-d'oeil général du théâtre (ca 1780)
Plate 72, *Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation* (1804)
Source: Ledoux 1983: 72.
2. Bruce Nauman (1941-)
Window or wall sign (1967)
Neon lamp, 59 x 55 x 2"
New York: Leo Castelli Gallery
Source: Sculpture 1986: 265.
3. Pippa Skotnes (1957-)
The return (1987)
Etching 41 x 66 cm
Sasol Art Collection
Source: Sasol 1988: 37.
4. Thomas Baines (1820-1875)
Bushman's Krantz (1849)
Oil on canvas
Johannesburg: Africana Museum
Source: *Southern Africa today* Oct 1991 8(8): 31.
5. Near Porta Herculani, Pompeii, Villa dei Misterii, antechamber, mural painting (1st century BC)
Initiation scene
In situ
Source: Hellenistic art 1973: 189
6. Matthias Grünewald (ca 1470/80-1528))
Isenheim altar-piece (1510/5)
Colmar: Musée d'Unterlinden
Source: Hayum 1990: 7.

7. Albrecht Altdorfer (ca 1480-1538)
Alexanderschlacht (1592)
Oil on wood panel, 158,4 x 126,3 cm
Munich, Alte Pinakothek
Source: Steingraber 1985: 65.
8. Caspar David Friedrich (1772-1840)
Der Mönch am Meer (1808/10)
Oil on canvas, 110 x 171 cm
Berlin, Nationalgalerie
Source: Steingraber 1985:105.
9. Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810)
Der kleine Morgen (1808)
Oil on canvas, 109,0 x 85,5 cm
Hamburg, Kunsthalle
Source: Traeger 1975: 85.
10. Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810)
Der große Morgen (1809)
Oil on canvas, 152,2 x 113,0 cm
Hamburg, Kunsthalle
Source: Traeger 1975:95.

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SCHEME: SELECTED FIGURES FROM MYTHOLOGIZING THOUGHT AND ART

Case 1: San rock painting

ANTIQUITY		Pythagoras			Tao	
		Anaximander			Hesiod	
	Mystery cults	Babylonian, Dionysian, Delphic, Orphic cults			Valentinos of Alexander	

Case 2: Villa dei Misterii (60 BC)

MIDDLE AGES		Marcion, Montanus				
	Gnosticism	Manicheism, Bogomiles, Kathars				
	Cabbala	Luria, Cordovero			Abraham ben Ezra	
	Christian 'mysticism'					

Case 3: Matthias Grünewald: Isenheim altarpiece (1510/15)

EARLY MODERN	Occultists I					
	Renaissance hermeticism	J Reuchlin Agrippa v Nettesheim Paracelsus P della Mirandola	Baldung Grien W Huber M Grünewald A Altdorfer El Greco			Bruno

Case 4: Albrecht Altdorfer: Alexanderschlacht (1529)

	classical Rosicrucians	J Dee		Boehme	Fludd	
MODERNITY	Occultists II	Chassidim				
	Aufklärung	Swedenborg		Oetinger	Mandeville	late Goethe
		Freemasons	W Blake	Novalis		

*Case 5: Caspar David Friedrich: Der Mönch am Meer (1808/10)
Philipp Otto Runge: Die kleine/große Morgen (1808/9)*

	Idealism	R Wagner	C D Friedrich P O Runge J A W Turner	late Schelling	'Eliphas Levi' Mallarmé	Hölderlin
	Positivism	H von Stein				

SCHEME: SELECTED FIGURES FROM MYTHOLOGIZING THOUGHT AND ART

	Neo-Idealism	R Steiner Rilke Schuré Leadbeater Blavatsky	Salon de Rose + Croix Nabi G Moreau O Redon	Dostoevsky Solovyov Berdyayev	Péladin Rimbaud	
	Occultists III	Modern Rosicrucians Theosophist movement Anthroposophists	P Mondrian W Kandinsky P Klee M Chagall K Malevich J Miro	Artaud	Spengler Jung	
		late Freud		W Benjamin	Hitler late Heidegger	Nietzsche
POST-MODERNITY			M Duchamp Y Klein M Rothko J Pollock B Newman F Bacon J Beuys A Kiefer	E Bloch	G Steiner	
	New age Counter culture	Roszak Baudrillard		Foucault Derrida		