

## REVIEW

# The Multi-layered Patterns of a Conversation

Manfred Milz (ed.), *Facing Mental Landscapes: Self-Reflections in the Mirror of Nature*. Hildesheim, Zürich and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2011. 383 pp, ISBN 978-3-487-14658-4

Reading the essay-collection edited by Manfred Milz, one has the experience of not only hearing many well-prepared specialists' opinions on a certain subject, but of directly entering amongst the multi-layered patterns of their conversation. It is not by chance that I have chosen a somewhat synesthetic title – in fact, it is the book itself that inspires me to do so. The essays are different in subject, style and methodology, but are strongly connected to each other through a solid editorial concept, thus the polyphonic analyses of the scholars constitute a precisely organised ensemble. The pattern of the authors' dialogue is complex; however, even though it is made of different motifs, forms, colours and tones, it results in a multi-layered harmony.

The main motifs in this pattern are the arts of Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism. The critical contributions aim to analyse different forms of art in the twentieth century through their cultural origins, or, to use the editor's expression, through their "common denominators" (p. 11), i.e. the Idealist origins in the Age of Enlightenment and the Romantic thought. Accordingly, the investigation is mainly directed towards the historical linkages between the main concepts of art and art philosophy around 1800 and the arts of the 20th and 21st centuries. Naturally, we all know that the arts of different centuries are not separated but quite the contrary: they are complicatedly and inspiringly interrelated through the system of influences and interpretations – where influence shows a forward connection, the earlier inspiring the later, while interpretation can be "interpreted" as a backward one where the latter helps us to understand the former's achievements and expression. There are well-known volumes, already considered classics, that concentrate on the mapping of the influences of 18-19<sup>th</sup> century's art and philosophy on the visual and philosophical culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, many of those books concentrate either on a particular branch of the arts, or on critical theory. Relative to those very significant volumes, the novelty of

the book “Facing Mental Landscapes” is that it tries to examine this complex system of references through the parallel investigation of different forms and expressions of visual arts, literature and philosophy – thus art and thought are bound together.

Therefore the “pattern” of the book evolves in many “betweens”: between the authors, between two time-periods (around 1800 and the 20–21st century) between the different forms of art and between the arts and philosophy, since it is the philosophy (of art) of the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries, especially that of German Idealism and Romanticism, whose long-lasting effect is examined in the analyses.

*“Not just the object of art and its representation; art itself had become doubtful around 1800”* – writes the editor in his essay (p. 275), and this sentence can be viewed as an expression of a key concept for the book’s discourses, i.e. putting in focus the Idealist and Romantic point of view, the radical change of paradigm after the Age of Enlightenment, when – inspired, among others, by Kant’s and Schelling’s theories – art started to question itself. Artists initiated a conscious investigation of their consciousness, and as a result, the formerly evident – or at least seemingly evident – unity of object and subject came into doubt. “Facing Mental Landscape”, as the title of the book suggests, thus clearly refers to the complex phenomenon and at the same time to the difficult responsibility of the artist in Romanticism and thereafter. The Romantic artists’ and theoreticians’ experience of the outside world, Nature as “unnatural”, strange and in opposition to man had important consequences. Not only was the idea of the domestication and domination of Nature, a long-held wish yet a never-achieved goal of the Enlightenment given up, but Nature’s inaccessibility made artists turn towards “inner nature”. However, the attempt to understand inner nature was equally dubious, since it was exactly Romanticism that discovered the parallel infinities of inner and outer Nature. Still, even if discovery and understanding of real Nature fails – both full cognition and the unity of the world perceived only in fragments remains a wish –, the artist’s responsibility is still to “face” it. Encountering the fragmentariness of the incomplete world becomes the artist’s obligation, thus we can understand why the representation of “mental landscape” or “self-reflection” as opposed to Nature became the key issue in Romantic and in many later works of art.

It is that self-referential and gnoseological perspective on Romantic philosophy of art that organises the essays; therefore, instead of delineating the texts one by one, I would rather show one particular aspect of the essays briefly: the ways in which the authors connect their re-

search to that leitmotif in the philosophy of art. As a consistent base for the further analyses, *Karl Hepfer* investigates the history and the role of imagination, and the path from the absolute notion of knowledge to epistemic relativism, the latter being fundamental for Romantic thought. *László Földényi* analyses the Romantic rapture in the tradition of representation, where, again, painting reflects philosophy's doubts about the possibility of direct access to the object. The problem of representation is the focus of *Jale Erzen's* essay too, which posits that modern art's exaggerated aim to present feelings has resulted in kitsch-like solutions, and that in contemporary art, the wish to represent the "thing itself" can thus become a case of "sophisticated kitsch". In his pioneering text (originally in German, 1951), *Klaus Lankheit* examines the parallels between early Romantic and Expressionist painting in the search for the origins of non-figurative painting, where, again, Kant's and Schelling's philosophy becomes crucial. *Anett Lütteken* uses a very narrow territory, authors' catalogues (enumerating names) around 1880 to demonstrate how traditions, canons and preferences changed in the literary discourse. *Christiane Heibach* develops a meta-critique in her analysis of the similarities in the structure of two media debates: one on the aesthetic potential of film and cinema after 1900, and the other on the role of theatre around 1800. *Jörg Traeger's* text, originally published in German in 1987, enters into a conversation with Klaus Lankheit, when examining Philipp Otto Runge's revolutionary pictorial and philosophical programme and its significance for classical avant-garde artists. *Wieland Schmied* also focuses on notable similarities between Caspar David Friedrich's working process when creating "inner landscapes" – its infinity in parallel with Schelling's idea – and the collage technique of the early 20th century. Mood, mediated by quasi-monochrome pictures, creates the connection between the images of Friedrich and some representatives of the later period, up to Gerhard Richter, as *Ulrich Pfarr* argues. Emotion and introspection, as well as anti-realist tendencies link Gustave Courbet both to his Romantic predecessors and Symbolist and Surrealist successors, as we learn from *Klaus Herding's* essay. *Manfred Milz* shows how echoes of the Romantic alienation from Nature, in particular that of Caspar David Friedrich, can be traced in the works of Samuel Beckett and René Magritte. Beckett is also the protagonist of *James Knowlson's* analyses, showing the influence of the discourse of self-consciousness through Beckett's reading of Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theatre". *Tanehisa Otabe* invites the reader to discover the (mental) landscape through an aesthetic-historical examination of "wandering" as a literary topic.

*Christopher Wilson* concentrates on the understanding of Frank Lloyd Wright's relationship to Nature, which has its roots in the 19th century, although Wright developed the Romantic concept further. In the closing essay, *Ursula Franke* interprets the writings of Andreas Maier and Robert Menasse again from the perspective of the romantic self-referentiality, and the destruction of the subject, to arrive at the critique of rationalism.

In this way, the multi-layered pattern of the contributor's conversation shows the main crossing points: self-referentiality, parallels between inner and outer nature, alienation and dissociation, the doubtfulness of art and the development of new modes of expression (non-figurative art, forms of avant-garde and later Postmodern), and naturally, many philosophers and artists also serve as "capstones" in this discourse, among others Kant, Shelling, the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich, Runge, Hölderlin and Nietzsche, to mention just a few. Not only visual arts, but also literature, theatre, film, architecture and music come into consideration, therefore the book is highly recommended to anybody interested in cultural interconnections and in understanding the long-lasting impact of Romanticism better. Reading the critical dialogue between the experts, we can also find very good examples of the work of the critic when writing critiques, in the sense of Walter Benjamin's 1919 dissertation entitled "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism", where he explains: "*Thus, in complete antithesis to the present-day conception of its nature, criticism in its central intention is not judgment but, on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute.*"<sup>1</sup>

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### Note

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism", in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 1996), 159.