
An Art of Blindness

Kierkegaard and the Nature of Pictures

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Visible and Invisible

It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner the outer. (III: 3)

With this simple sentence Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* (Enten-Eller) from 1843 opens, and it contains the outline of what I am to sketch in the following: Kierkegaard's apprehension of the nature and existence of paintings and mental images. The frozen picture represents the quintessence of the medium of externalization, whereas the mental image lives an organic inner life.

At the same time the opening words point to Kierkegaard's existence-philosophical object and his theory of the picture and its ontology. In his reflections on pictures he follows in the footsteps of the contemporary, primarily German, discussion of the boundaries of visibility. For instance, he enters into a dialogue with Hegel, who in his lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s questions the ability of the beautiful pictures of the age to (still) create a harmony between spiritual contents and material form. The (world)spirit is by Hegel referred to find its own expression in the flood of words and becomes pictureless.

Kierkegaard's thoughts on the picture are, however, not wreckage from contemporary aesthetics. On the contrary, they are driftage from his own thinking and sense perception. Like the beaver, Kierkegaard uses his timber to build a bulwark, a bulwark against the beautiful pictures of the age. And the bulwark has its own Kierkegaardian tectonics—what holds it together is the relation between picture and movement.

Kierkegaard has not alone entered into a dialogue with the soaring German thoughts, he addresses questions which preoccupied the Danish aesthetic and artistic milieu. *Either-Or's* reflections on the relation between the outer and the inner, between mind and phenomenon, enters—not least—into the Danish discussion which takes its starting point in the core problem of idealistic aesthetics:

How does the idea stand out in the phenomenon? And in relation to art: How does one render visible that which is invisible?

In the aesthetic discussion in Denmark, sight and visibility had for decades been regarded as privileged areas which gave direct access to "the truth". One saw to gain insight. The thing to do was "to find by seeing",¹ as Adam Oehlenschläger wrote in a letter to H. C. Ørsted in 1807. The philosopher and psychologist F. C. Sibbern, who was Kierkegaard's teacher, friend and to some extent also his judge, expresses a view on "the beautiful picture" which is characteristic of the time—despite the different schools of thought. Without any hesitation, Sibbern voices the opinion that one can see the inner in the outer. The beautiful picture works by presenting "the spirituality of objects"² before the eye in the same way as the physiognomy of our face reflects our inner life (and on this subject he wrote a psychology).

Finally, one must not forget that Kierkegaard writes about the beautiful pictures of his time and the expectations with which they were met: mimetic, harmonized and harmonizing, idealized and distilled pictures resembling nature and composed according to the rules of perspective, paintings, which are appraised for whether "they resemble", purify and point upwards. This universe of pictures has two roots: The notion of the experience of art as pleasure without interest and the idea of metaphysical presence of the time which believes in the appearance of the all-validity in the beautiful picture.

To get an idea of Kierkegaard's notion, one may compare J. Th. Lundbye's *Hill of Hanke* (Hankehøj) from 1846–47 with the sketch for the painting from 1846 (fig. 1 and 2). The "private" and anything but appropriate for exhibition sketch is unsettled, troubled and disturbing. At the same time, the sketch shows us the inner self that is no longer calmed by the thought of all-validity and its guarantees and an outer scenery that is cleansed of metaphysical under- and overtones. The finished painting, the one that was exhibited and applauded, shows us the sketch after it has been submerged into the elevating and educative developer of idealism (and national romanticism). The disquiet has been put to rest by that organizing idea which runs through every detail of the painting. Without the perspec-

1. H. A. Paludan, Daniel Preisz og Morten Borup, eds., *Breve til og fra A. Oehlenschläger* [Letters to and from A. Oehlenschläger], vol. 2 (København, 1945), 276.

2. F. C. Sibbern, *Om Poesie og Kunst i Almindelighed, med Hensyn til alle Arter deraf, dog især Digte-, Maler-, Billedbugger- og Skuespilkonst* [On poetry and art generally, with references to all kinds, yet in particular to the art of poetry, the art of painting, the art of sculpture and dramatic art], vol. 1 (København: Eget Forlag, 1834), 25.

tive of (art) history, and without the contemporary aesthetics and controversy in mind, Kierkegaard's statements about pictures may seem like a fight against self-created windmills.

Veronica's Sudarium
—Or, *The Boundaries of the Beautiful Picture*

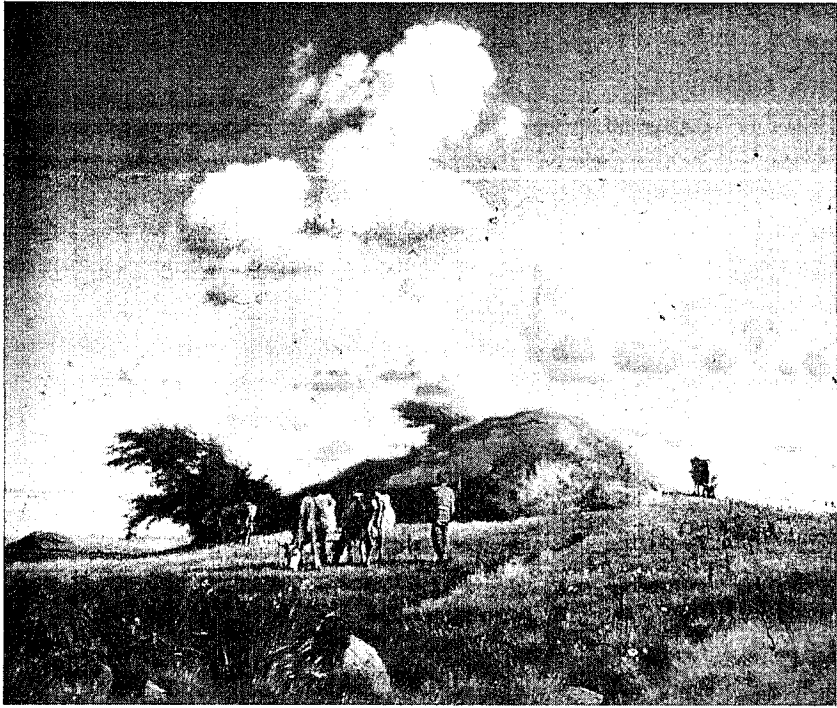
Nowhere has Kierkegaard left us a complete theory of pictures. There is, however, one text that most unusually focuses on the visual arts. I am referring to "Shadowgraphs" (Skyggerids)—one of the many small studies in *Either-Or*. As early as in "Shadowgraphs", Kierkegaard gives us an outline of his theory of the visual arts: How the picture relates to time and space, to presence and absence, to fervour and spirit (which is in the category of time) and to existence (which is motion). The impenetrable and opaque skin which this text places between the inner life (which is in the category of time) and the external world (whether this is a surface of a painting or the physiognomy of a person's face), this skin stays through the remainder of Kierkegaard's works. Fervour is "incommensurable with the external world". Or in other words: the beautiful picture cannot contain the inner life.

"Shadowgraphs" deals with the sorrow of three women and the difference between a immediate sorrow that simply is, and a reflective sorrow that questions its own *raison d'être*, as well as dealing with the question why this reflective sorrow cannot be portrayed within the scope of the art of painting. The argument runs along the lines of Lessing and Hegel. Lessing is used as the authority on the relation of pictorial art to time and space: the pictorial arts are limited to the *stasis* of space and therefore cannot frame reflection and the reflective sorrow which takes place over time.

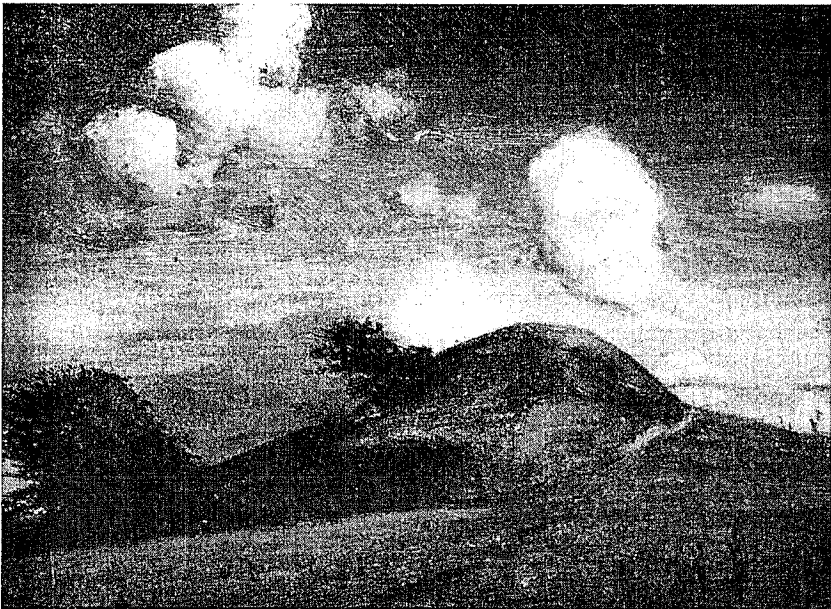
Since the time when Lessing defined the boundaries between poetry and art in his celebrated treatise *Laokoon*, it no doubt may be regarded as a conclusion unanimously recognized by all estheticians that the distinction between them is that art is in the category of space, poetry in the category of time, that art depicts repose, poetry motion. For this reason, the subject for artistic portrayal must have a quiet transparency so that the interior rests in the corresponding exterior. (III: 169)

The point is that the beautiful picture feeds on this externalization of inner life.

The point that renders the pictorial reproduction impossible lies exactly in the transition between the immediate and the reflective sorrow. The immediate sor-



1. J. Th. Lundbye: *Hankebjerg* (The Hill of Hanke), 1846–47, Den Hirschsprungske Samling.
2. J. Th. Lundbye: Sketch for Hankehøj, 1846, Den Hirschsprungske Samling.



row may still become "the subject of artistic portrayal" (III: 172). That is to say, it is "the immediate imprint and expression of the sorrow's impression, which, just like the picture Veronica preserved on her linen cloth, is perfectly congruous, and sorrow's sacred lettering is stamped on the exterior, beautiful and clear and legible to all" (ibid.). Whereas the immediate sorrow moves outwards as blood running to the skin (or sweat flowing into the cloth), the reflective sorrow takes flight inwards as blood fleeing from the surface: "The exterior pallor is, as it were, the interior's good-bye" (III: 169). Another reason why the reflective sorrow cannot be depicted is because its substance is time: "In yet another respect it cannot be depicted artistically, for it does not have inner stillness but is constantly in motion" (III: 170), it is "continually in the process of becoming" (III: 172) and therefore "in the regulation of time". Hegel's pictureless contemporary horizon where fervour is so outspoken that it cannot be contained within the framework of the pictorial arts lies right behind Kierkegaard's statement.

My assertion is that the image of Veronica's sudarium, an image of "the beautiful picture", is the key to "Shadowgraphs" as well as to Kierkegaard's view on pictures. The image of the sudarium derives its meaning from the idealistic conception of the fine pictorial arts which as the symbol, without contraction, combine the inner and the outer into one. The depiction is the external impression of the inner life. The image of Veronica's sudarium is—if one is to make merry with the aesthetics of beauty—well-chosen: the sudarium bears a sweaty imprint of the inner, namely the suffering which makes Christ perspire. The sweat flows from inside the body out into the exterior of the cloth. And we may go further still: the Latin verb for perspiration is to *trans(s)pire* derived from *trans*: through, and *spirare*: to breathe (or from *spiritus*: spirit). It is not farfetched to imagine that Kierkegaard as he wrote had the association: to breathe through. Literally the sudarium absorbs the spirit. The image of the sudarium may be seen as a metaphorical image of how the canvases of the fine arts "render the idea transparent", to use a phrase of the time.

At the same time the image of Veronica's sudarium comments on another notion of the contemporary theory of art: that the mimetic presentation "resembles" the outer world. The picture in the sudarium bears the likeness of Christ, and not alone that: it bears his picture, i.e. his imprint. Along with this notion of the fine mimetical art, another idea followed, namely the belief in the ability of mimetical representations to render that which is depicted present. The traces of sweat on the cloth tell us, so as to leave no room for doubt, that "He was here". While at the same time saying "Here he is". The trust in the ability of the picture to render

its objects present is quickly substituted by the feeling that the picture "is alive". This was a notion which preoccupied many people of the time and it is among other things this idea he wants to explode.

With irony Kierkegaard plays with the picture and its well-established roots in history. Medieval legends have connected the name Veronica with "vera icona" (the true picture), while the sudarium itself, the-non-man-made-icon, occupies an important position among the icons of Christ in the orthodox church. The imprint on the sudarium is viewed as a sign of the invisible becoming visible in the portrait of man. Thus the orthodox church has expressed its dogmatics long before Kierkegaard (fig. 3). By using exactly this image as a symbol of "the beautiful picture", Kierkegaard draws the aesthetics of beauty over into a sphere of magic, superstition and resurrection. In the primitive Church, they also said of the sudarium that it was *acheiropoietos*, painted by angelic hand. The picture in Veronica's sudarium transcends death. Christ is resurrected before our very eyes. But Kierkegaard is double-tongued. One tongue expresses itself uncritically in a symbol-aesthetical vocabulary where the visual arts are seen in the light of the eternal objective ideas. The other tongue hisses in a low and ironic voice that today this criterion can only be met by Veronica's sudarium.

In the Realm of Death

Lessing's theory of art is a gift for Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard the conception of time is the essence of the matter. Everywhere in his works he poses the question: what does it mean for man that life is a life in time. Kierkegaard, however, bends the Lessingian conclusions in a most personal manner. Lessing says that the concrete picture stands outside time, and—Kierkegaard adds—therefore it cannot contain the inner life which is folded up in time: the self and life itself being in a state of nonconcluded making, growth and movement. This is Kierkegaard's main complaint against the contemporary "academic" pictorial art which surrounds him.

In other words Kierkegaard transposes Lessing's theory of the timeless picture into the existential categories: life and death. That Kierkegaard combines the picture with death is already suggested by the image of Veronica's sudarium. Moreover, a sudarium is the scarf that the Jews used to cover the face of the deceased in order to absorb the perspiration of the body. But Kierkegaard intensifies this image: the picture's interruption of the continuous movement in an artistically prolonged moment has a fatal effect. When time stops, we die.



3. "Svededugen" ("The sudarium"),
Russia, late 17th. century,
private collection.

The Absence of the Present

The title of the essay that so far has been my point of departure, "Shadowgraphs", points to another hidden and polemic connection between Kierkegaard's thoughts on the picture and his time. A shadow graph, a sketch of the shadow of a facial profile, may in another word be called a silhouette. Kierkegaard's choice of this very heading, which may seem confusing, draws in another story over the "Shadowgraphs", namely the myth of how the art of drawing saw the light of day.

The myth from Plinius the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* tells the story of the potter Butades' daughter of Corinth who has to part from her beloved that has to leave on a journey the following day. When she sees the contour of his profile in the glow from an oil lamp, she draws the outline so as to have a visible memento of him: a picture of remembrance. The profile sketch is an attempt to secure a picture of something which is disappearing, and it becomes an image of the essence of artistic representation. One might also say that the legend describes how man in the figures of his pictures tries to bring about the body which no longer is or is disappearing or, in other words: tries to represent that which is lost.

The story is (re)told again and again. I shall limit myself to a couple of Danish examples of pictorial art taken from Kierkegaard's age: C. W. Eckersberg tried his hand at it in 1811 with *The Invention of the Art of Drawing* (Tegnekunstens opfindelse) and Heinrich Eddelien did it with greater success in 1830 with *The Origin of Pictorial Art* (Malerkunstens oprindelse) (fig. 4).

While these accounts emphasize those aspects of the myth that relate to the birth of pictorial art with its sensuous, erotic excitement, Kierkegaard's view on the nuptials of sensuousness, love, memory, and the picture is negative. On the contrary, he stresses the fact that the picture, just as the legend has it, points to the absence, that it represents the lost body and that the image formation basically is nostalgic in its substance. Debutades sketches out her *skiagrafia* without being able to see her model (but only his shadow) and is already in the present image formatting moment back in memory. Kierkegaard turns the contemporary interpretation of the myth inside out and uses it to support his point of view: that pictorial art is the art of blindness and that the eye when looking at a picture only



4. Heinrich Eddelien:
Malerkunstens oprindelse
(The origin of pictorial
art), 1830, Statens Museum
for Kunst.

sees the image of what the picture represents, which is indeed not present, but absent. The picture itself denies the presence it suggestionizes.³

The Space of (Systems) Thinking

Not alone did Lessing lift the picture out of time, he also placed it in space. Space organized in depth, i.e. the space of linear perspective, is just as essential for Kierkegaard's theory of art as the question of time is. In the following, I shall look into Kierkegaard's reactions to the space of the academic landscape painting.

The confrontation with the Hegelian desire for a unified whole, for the "total view" in an all-embracing gaze, is at the crux of Kierkegaard's view on "the beautiful picture" of the time, which to the extent that it wants to be beautiful must fit itself into the (systems) space of perspective. The central perspective brings the all-embracing gaze into the picture, indeed it has it as its basis. Kierkegaard uses the construction of perspective to show a certain (and obviously wrong) way of observing the world, namely with a gaze of objectivity. According to Kierkegaard, the systems thinking as well as the mathematized picture of the world of perspectival systems space are reflections of an existence of thought, which has nothing to do with existence. On the contrary, in both instances everything just finds its place in the system and its axioms.

Pictorial Space and Self-Control or Aesthetic Anaesthetics

In *Stages on Life's Way* (*Stadier paa Livets Vei*) from 1845 Kierkegaard uses Goethe, as he portrays himself in the autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, as an example of somebody who needs such a system. Goethe has fallen in love, but discovers that he was mistaken and draws back. At this point Kierkegaard's writing is filled up with nouns, adjectives and verbs, which all contain the movement "away from". Goethe "leaps off" in all directions, he "beats about the bush" and keeps "far away" from the matter, he "moves away" and "escapes" (SV 7: 134-139). Which instruments does the sensible Goethe make use of in order to get over his predicament? First of all the theory of perspective: "By means of a half year and with the aid of a theory of perspective, the fact of falling in love has become a happening [...]" (XI: 149). And secondly, the theory of distance which Goethe ac-

3. This part of the paper has been inspired by Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). The dialogue between Kierkegaard and Derrida on the topic representation and presentation could be taken much further and will be at some other time and place.

ording to Kierkegaard masters to perfection. The interesting aspect for us is in the first place that Kierkegaard uses the theory of perspective as a synonym for PICTURE (which Goethe himself does not do). In the second place, he (in the name of Goethe) interprets the theory of perspective as a theory of distance.

Goethe's autobiography is saturated with the tension between nearness and distance to the female sex. The more insistent an experience with women is, the more necessary the distance becomes. "Habitually, I took flight behind a picture."⁴ He gets over his first unhappy love affair with Grete by drawing, first in the depths of the wood, pictures of old oak trees with knotty roots halfway in moist shade—simple, unpretentious motifs—and later on, entire landscapes seen from above, from vantage points seen in perspective with foreground, middle distance and background. Thus he gets Grete at a distance.

With his drawing block the young Goethe walks from worship of emotions and motifs founded off by that which is elevated and its formless and shadowy forms, to a delight in the clear, sober and beautiful space of perspective. To be able to arrange the world in perspective becomes a mark of the process of formation which is all about learning how to master oneself, the inner chaos and the world by means of the objectiveness of perspective. With his theory of distance and his ability to turn situations of real life into pictures, Goethe has—as Kierkegaard puts it—acquired a lightning conductor, a pleasant and effective optical byway: "Indeed, if one has a lightning conductor such as that in one's pocket, no wonder that one is safe in the storm!" (XI: 155).

Space in Time, Time in Space, Movement

Kierkegaard's entry of the picture into the categories time and space has a strong art historian tradition as its background. Thus it is not the least bit surprising that Kierkegaard's contemplations on the time of the picture brings him to a series of reflections on the space of the picture. But yet again: what he is actually speaking about is a rather commonplace space, our own space, namely the space that surrounds us and is within us. For Kierkegaard time is *per se*, and space *per se* abstractions. Therefore he takes his starting point in time and space as we experience them by the body, as one, as motion. When Kierkegaard speaks of the time of the picture, he focuses on the standstill of the picture, which also brings his gazing eyes to a halt. When he speaks of the space of the picture, his eyes set the legs in

4. Per Øhrgaard, *Goethe: Et essay* [Goethe: An essay] (København: Gyldendal, 1999), 36 and *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe (Hamburg, 1949 ff.), vol. 10, 176.

motion. At the very centre of Kierkegaard's philosophy stands motion. "Existence is" he writes "motion" (SV 10:18).⁵

The Space of Self-Forgetting

Kierkegaard's notion that his contemporaries use the drawing and the painting of perspective as a safeguard against the imminent inner chaos is carried on in a more morose form in *Practice in Christianity* (Indøvelse i Christendom) from 1850. Here it is made clear that Kierkegaard's thoughts on "the beautiful picture" are closely connected to his diagnose of the phenomenology of self-forgetting. Yet again we see how his philosophy of movement enters into the contemporary world of perspective, for example in the landscape paintings.

In a passage in *Practice in Christianity*, he describes the viewing of art as a self-forgetting act.

But "to observe" can mean in one sense to come very close to something, namely, to what one wishes to observe; in another sense, it signifies keeping very distant, infinitely distant, that is, personally. When one shows a painting to a person and asks him to observe it, [...] he steps very close to the object, [...] — in short, he comes as close to the object as possible, but in this very same movement he in another sense leaves himself entirely, goes away from himself, forgets himself, [...] and nothing reminds him of himself, since it is he, after all, who is observing the painting [...], not the painting [...] that [is] observing him. In other words, by observing I go into the object (I become objective) but I leave myself or go away from myself (I cease to be subjective). (XX:233–234)

While contemplating the painting the spectator goes into the picture, but according to Kierkegaard this means that he simultaneously goes away from or leaves himself.

It is not difficult to imitate the movement of the thought as well as of the body in this quotation by Kierkegaard. For instance by confronting Kierkegaard's description with J. Th. Lundbye's painting of *Zealandic Countryside: Open Area in the North of Zealand* (Sjællandsk landskab: Åben egn i det nordlige Sjælland) from 1842

5. Gilles Deleuze's description (in *Difference and Repetition* [London: Athlone, 1997]) of how movement is at issue in Kierkegaard's philosophy is very much to the point: "it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of intervening vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind". It is a question of substituting an abstract movement of concepts for "a movement of the *Physis* and the *Psyche*" (pp. 8 and 10).

(fig. 5). As I shall return to later, it takes rather a naive reading of the picture to follow Kierkegaard's path.

In condensed form the quotation gives us Kierkegaard's experience of the unfortunate interaction between the picture of perspective and the angst of the individual of "becoming himself", standing by himself. He who contemplates the beautiful pictures of the time with empathy will be sucked in by the well-planned suck of the pictorial fiction of perspective, and he disappears behind the canvas which closes behind him. He forgets himself literally on the way into the picture.

Kierkegaard uses space when he has to show how we make excursions from ourselves. Even though I do not like to entertain Kierkegaard's notion of suffering and especially not of its edifying nature—a notion I find unhealthy to say the least—I cannot avoid it altogether here. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift) Kierkegaard creates an image of movement which ties well up with the self-forgetting walk into the picture in *Practice in Christianity*. This passage is about standing by oneself and one's suffering. The movement takes place concretely, as the physical movement of the body. It is crucial

5. J. Th. Lundbye: *Sjællandsk landskab: Åben egn i det nordlige Sjælland* (Zealandic countryside: Open area in the north of Zealand), 1842, Statens Museum for Kunst.



“that suffering is not deceitfully drawn back, or the individual goes beyond it. The continuation of suffering [is] the security for the individual keeps his place and keeps himself in place” (SV 10:129).

In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand) he repeats the diverting figure from Goethe, this time in order to point to its opposite: eternity which seeks the individual. Eternity here becomes the place where the realization of the conditions of the self takes place: “[In] eternity [...] there is no place to escape [...] because in the infinite there is no place; the individual himself is the place” (XV:129). Here space has been reduced to a point in the spiritual life of the individual. Eternity is a nowhere, whereas the individual himself is the place.

The spaciousness of the construction of perspective which frames, marginalizes, objectivizes and controls is in Kierkegaard’s work an image of the self that is led astray. If his work is about movement then the picture of perspective gives him the model for “a wrong movement”, namely a movement where you walk away from yourself and down a path already laid down by someone else. However, when we are put into existence, we all spiritually go down separate paths eventhough the way is the same.

To Turn the Movement

Thus Kierkegaard’s object is to turn the wrong movement outwards, so as to make it turn the right way, seen from his point of view: inwards, towards the self. Therefore his text clutches at that which—as it says in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—turns “the observer’s gaze inward into himself” (XII.1:359). He speaks of “the form of possibility” (XII.1:358), which is like the cloud which again is an image of the thought. In the form register of possibility nothing is developed in order to be terminated. Everything is merely set and points to creation, openness and constant renewal. To see, Kierkegaard says, is “not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth” (V:59).

The beautiful harmonized picture, on the other hand, painted in the academic matrices of the time, pacifies, absorbs and manipulates the spectator’s gaze and resists internalization. Lex Kierkegaard that is. Kierkegaard, however, has an eye for that other kinds of pictures may create a reversed, inward movement, where the unfinished picture is pushed back into the spectator’s body and, folded in time, is finished before his or her active mind’s eye. These images which serve as midwives for the reader’s own imaginative scope, we find here and there in Kierkegaard’s works: popular, unmimetic picture printings without perspective which

schematize and abstract and leave it to us to add a body to the picture; trick pictures with a special ability to point out what they may also be and with gaps and empty, raw spaces playing an important part; fragments, an unfinishable form which in the world of pictures comes to expression in many ways, for example, the sketch or a study of detached details, outline-sketches or “Umrise”, and finally a permanently temporary picture expression like the arabesque. All these different kinds of pictures have in common that they highlight the reception of pictures and the after-images generated by the picture.⁶

And finally there is the “word image”, the metaphor. In his figurative language, Kierkegaard literally goes under the skin of his readers. In Kierkegaard’s works imagery is a kind of Braille, a current in the present which may only be deciphered when the fingertips of the individual runs over it. Imagery—the images the self acquires while creating it—situates the messages in the reader’s own inner universe. It is a Kierkegaardian strategy turning the reader into the author. The word image subjectivizes the text, invites the reader/the listener to interested participation and has no “essence” as is expected of the beautiful picture. Imagery is put into existence.

As far as I can make out, the notion is to make the conception active by lowering the eyes, to make “the downcast eyes seeing” (SV 14:187). Kierkegaard’s application of imagery is closely connected to his understanding of phantasy. Phantasy is linked to the eye and for Kierkegaard the ability *instar omnium*. Ultimately, emotions, realization and will depend on our phantasy. Phantasy makes it possible for us to see different possibilities. Without phantasy we would not develop as human beings. Kierkegaard says it with emphasis. “Phantasy is the possibility of reflection [...] the intensity [of phantasy] is the possibility of the intensity of the self” (SV 15:89).

In imagery it is not the existing circumstances that are confirmed, but in fact the possibilities of the existing circumstances that pictures by duplicating do not see. Making it concrete is a case for the individual and his or her associations. Imagery evades fixation, cessation, closure.⁷

6. This preference for pictorial expression reveals the Schlegian trait in Kierkegaard’s theory of how pictures work, at least if one reads Friedrich Schlegel through the lenses of Maurice Blanchot. See his “Athenæum”, in Maurice Blanchot, *Orfeus blik og andre essays* [Orpheus’ gaze and other essays] (København: Gyldendal, 1994). However, one should not neglect the fact that Kierkegaard’s use of an aesthetics of the fragment is ambivalent. It is part and parcel of his strategy of indirect communication, but it is also bound up with his critique of Jena Romanticism.

7. It should come as no surprise that Kierkegaard’s reflections on pictures, images and image-

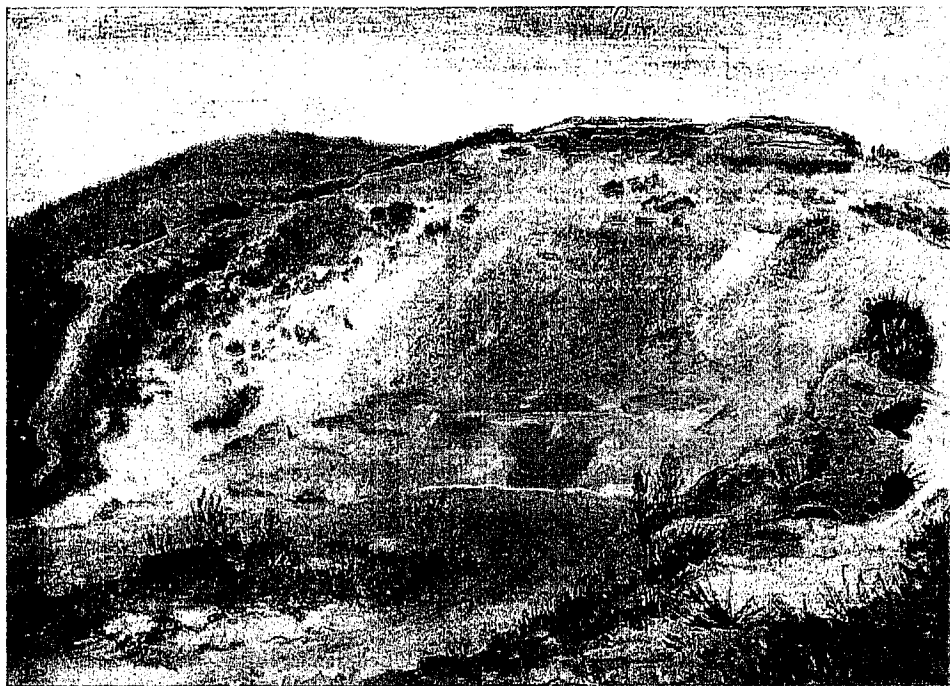


6. Letter from Søren Kierkegaard to his fiancé Regine Olsen, January 1841, Det kongelige Bibliotek.

*Does One Assault
Kierkegaard's Thinking by Exposing His Pictures?*

The answer to this question has to be no—and yes, because as most of you know Kierkegaard's text is pictureless. Kierkegaard holds tight when it comes to his pictures. He never shows his pictures, he does not publish them as illustrations and often he disguises them as literary images. When he is most generous in regard to the source of his images, it sounds like this: "Somewhere in the country there is a church, by the altar a work of art representing the angel handing Christ the Chalice of suffering" (SV 13: 102). He invites us to look at the picture-images, but leaves us the work of making them concrete. From his description, we must work out which altarpiece—if any. A few pictures he identifies in his papers, but in the work itself they appear *incognito*.

ry, on the one hand, and ethics, fantasy and freedom, on the other, is carried on (without Kierkegaard's name being mentioned) by the avid Kierkegaard reader Jean-Paul Sartre in e.g. *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1995). It is eye-opening to read Sartre with Kierkegaard and Kierkegaard with Sartre. One big difference though remains and should not be underestimated: the gnostic, mystic and biblical underpinning which characterize much of Kierkegaard's thought about different kinds of image formation.



7. J. Th. Lundbye: *Borgens Bakke*
(Borgen's Hill), 1841, private
collection.



8. *Napoleon vandrende på sin grav*
(Napoleon wandering on his
grave), about 1820, Det
kongelige Bibliotek.

vandrende paa sin grav



9. "Wellenmädchen" (Wave girls), from W. Vollmer: *Vollständiges Wörterbuch der Mythologie aller Nationen*, Stuttgart 1836.

The relation between the concrete picture, the image and imagery is in the exphatic thinking of Kierkegaard extremely complex. That he himself was very much aware of the difference may be seen in his papers in which he in one passage pokes fun at a direct translation of a pietistic metaphor into the form of a picture. Here Kierkegaard points to the difference between telling and showing.⁸

And yet again: no. Here are but a few examples of how important it is to show the pictures and figurations that fascinated his eye even though he takes the side of the invisible, the transparent and the unintelligible image.

Kierkegaard uses the academic and pseudo-academic painting of the age as an image of a certain—and to him dull and illusory—way of life: the aesthetic. Kierkegaard's aesthete incarnate is the domineering Johannes the Seducer from "The Seducer's Diary" in *Either-Or*. He creates images of everything and forms them in his own image: "[S]ee this is my image, my thought, my will" (SV 12:260) is Johannes' credo. Johannes even describes himself as an image. It adds immensely

8. Isak Winkel Holm, *Tanken i billedet: Søren Kierkegaards poetik* [The thought in the image: The poetics of Søren Kierkegaard] (København: Gyldendal, 1998).

to the comprehension of Kierkegaard's analysis of the aesthetical way of life to know the world of pictures he describes it as (fig. 6), even though he in this corner of his production reduces the aesthetic experience *in absurdum*, and—in order to drive home his point—chooses to fall behind the contemporary art scene itself. If one follows the road in *Zealandic Countryside: Open Area in the North of Zealand* (fig. 5) all the way to the end, one suddenly discovers that it is mirrored in the sky. The movement is not “away from” as Kierkegaard claimed, but “up into”. The road ends in eternity, which is exactly where the self-relationship is realized according to Kierkegaard. *Borgen's Hill* (Borgens Bakke) also by Lundbye and from 1841 (fig. 7), where the spectator moves along the road through the picture, in order to end up, that much wiser, where he started: standing by himself, illustrates my point as well.

It gives depth to the understanding of for example Kierkegaard's concept of irony to read his definitions, if one is acquainted with the puzzle picture he, apparently fond of the picture, had placed in front of himself, while he wrote, but which he disguised as literary metaphor. The concept of irony is about the difference between the inner and the outer, between substance and phenomenon, and is defined as absolute negativity. The irony, so to speak, “hollows out the core” (SKS 1:106). In one passage he wants to pin down the Socratic irony. Here he makes use of the image of “Napoleon walking on his grave”. The Socratic irony is like the *Napoleon walking on his grave* (Napoleon vandrende på sin grav) of the picture (the empty gap between the trees) (fig. 8), where “‘nothing’ almost becomes visible” (SKS 1:113), a negative image which Kierkegaard describes with the terms visible and invisible.

In his papers he makes use of an engraving of some wave girls shaped in water in order to explain the small child's unfinished and, compared to the surroundings, undelineated personality (fig. 9).⁹ Later on they appear concealed in *Either-Or* where they apply sharpness to the description of the character Don Juan, his demonic always triumphant power of sensuality, his perpetual vanishing and the flowing nature of music.

Kierkegaard's pictures do not only serve as illustrations of thoughts already thought. He thinks in images as well. In my opinion, we have to show his pictures if we want to enter into a discussion with him and touch up his view on the

9. *Søren Kierkegaards papirer* [Søren Kierkegaard, papers], ved Niels Thulstrup (København: Gyldendal, 1968), vol. 1, A 316.

relation between different kinds of image formation, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other.

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Editions

Volume and page references are to Hong and Hong's translation in the Princeton University Press edition of Kierkegaard's writings. A few short quotations are translated directly from the Danish editions. In these cases the reference is either to the Danish edition of Søren Kierkegaard's collected works (Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker* 1–20 [København: Gyldendal, 1991]), indicated by a SV followed by volume and page, e.g. (SV 15:89), or to the ongoing edition Søren Kierkegaard's works (*Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* [København: G. E. C. Gads Forlag/Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, 1997 ff.]) indicated by a SKS, e.g. (SKS 1:113).