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*NUBES CUM FIGURIS:*  
THE INTERPRETATION OF CLOUDS AS A MODERN  
PARADIGM OF ARTISTIC PERCEPTION AND CREATION\*

One may assume that since clouds and human beings – or even pre-humans – have existed, the latter have seen images in the former. The blurry and ambiguous contours of clouds make of them “weak forms” (in the sense of Gestalt psychology) *par excellence*, all the more as they are subject to constant motion and change. The fact that they appear in the sky predisposes them to be interpreted as the images, the disguises (as in the myth of Ixion and Iuno) or the messengers of heavenly beings. Victor Hugo wrote on one of his drawings the words *Homo lapides, nubes deus*<sup>1</sup>, which may point to the frailty of human endeavour but can also read: God creates shapes with clouds just as man does with stones. Already in late Antiquity, the interpretation of clouds could be regarded as an expression of the imaginative dimension of human perception. In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., Philostratus wrote that cloud-pictures were not divine creations but the product of the natural inclination of men to imitate (*mimesis*); when not only the spirit but also the hand was involved, this activity was called art<sup>2</sup>. This understanding reappeared during the Renaissance, as seen in Mantegna’s paintings of anthropomorphic rocks and clouds, in Dürer’s depictions of his pillow suggesting faces, or in Leonardo’s advice for his colleagues to use stained walls, multicoloured stones or clouds to foster their inventive powers<sup>3</sup>.

When Nature ceased to be seen as an artist capable of imitating itself, a

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Dessins de Victor Hugo, gravés par Paul Chenay, texte par Théophile Gauti-*

naturalistic conception of artistic imitation was bound to marginalize the representation of cloud images. In his *Introduction to Painting*, the Dutchman Samuel van Hoogstraeten wrote in 1678 that although one can see remarkable things in clouds, «to make an animal or ship from them is a stupid illusion of the rabble, who, ignorant of our art, are deceived by illusions; a painter has an eye better adapted for this; he knows both colour and outline, as well as the light, and judges with more accurate vision»<sup>4</sup>. However, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, imagination came to be regarded as a higher form of knowledge and the Romantics gave to the artists the liberating task of creating like Nature instead of after Nature<sup>5</sup>. Novalis thus mentioned clouds among the bearers of «the great coded writing» of Nature, in which we see «strange figures forming», and Wordsworth described the apparition of a mighty city in the clouds, which became a model for Thomas De Quincey's visions<sup>6</sup>. In Goethe's *Cloud Poems* (*Wolkengedichte*) of 1817, Luke Howard's scientific analysis of clouds is praised not in opposition to, but by analogy with the approach of «one's own creative power»: both «determine the indeterminate» while the deity «delights in the fluctuation of forms»<sup>7</sup>. This conception of images seen in clouds as natural signs *and* products of human imagination survived the rise of Realism, if only in a marginal way. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Charles Meryon drew in the Parisian sky clouds (fig. 1) in which, from left to right, superhuman figures come forth or vanish into insignificance. Baudelaire praised Meryon in his *Salon de 1859*, in which he defended the «imaginative artist» in general against the Realist or Positivist who, he said, sought to «depict things as they are, or as they would be without [him] existing»<sup>8</sup>. For the poet, cloud images were a manifestation of the human yearning for the divine, as in his prose poem *The Soup and the Clouds*, where contemplation of the «marvellous buildings of the intangible» momentarily frees the narrator from an oppressive reality<sup>9</sup>.

Baudelaire pointed the way to a conception that became dominant at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still influential today. The visual arts lost and abandoned the task of depicting the optical appearance of the visual

*er*, Paris 1863, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, II.22 (quoted after Philostratus, *In Honour of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. by J.S. Phillimore, Oxford 1912, vol. II, pp. 75-76).

<sup>3</sup> See A. Hauser, «Andreas Mantegnas ‚Wolkenreiter‘. Manifestation von kunstloser Natur oder Ursprung von vexierbildhafter Kunst?», in: *Die Unvermeidlichkeit der Bilder*, ed. by G. v. Graevenitz, S. Rieger & F. Thürlemann, Tübingen 2001, pp. 147-172; D.

world. Regarding clouds, the representation of exterior objectivity was better served by photography, especially aerial photography. In 1896 an international cloud atlas was published, edited among others by Professor Albert Riggenbach of Basel (fig. 2), while the International Meteorological Committee declared 1896-97 to be the «year of the cloud». Philosophers, psychologists as well as psychophysicists emphasized the active, interpretive dimension of perception. Hippolyte Taine defined exterior perception as an inner dream corresponding with external things, while Ernst Mach counted «the projection of phantasms into what is seen unclearly» among the «manifestations of the imagination and of memory within sensory perception»<sup>10</sup>. Aestheticians used such ideas in their analyses of artistic production and reception: Paul Souriau, for example, wrote in 1893 that «to look at a drawing is to see chimeras in clouds»<sup>11</sup>.

Thus representations of cloud images became more frequent, albeit in very different forms. Sometimes the beholder has to assume responsibility for the interpretation of the cloud as an image, and therefore for doubting his or her own “objectivity”. Tina Grütter has recently suggested to see a bird in the conspicuous cloud landing on the mountain – resembling itself the foreshortened face of the drawing *Dead Hero* – in Giovanni Segantini’s late picture *Death* (1898-99, Segantini-Museum, St. Moritz)<sup>12</sup>. Cloud images are less ambiguous when they assume in a traditional way narrative, allegorical or commercial functions, for instance in Richard Riemerschmid’s *Cloud Ghosts* (fig. 4), in Charles Giron’s *Clouds* (fig. 5), or in an advertisement for the Lloyd passenger ship line (fig. 6). The original title of Giron’s picture is *Nuées*, a French word that has accompanied or expressed numerous anthropomorphic and often erotic interpretations of clouds because of its resemblance to *nu/nue* (naked or nude). At the time, Giron was busy decorating the Swiss parliament with an enormous landscape painting. This mural includes, floating above the «cradle of the confederacy», clouds in which a female personification can be discerned, so that Switzerland must be one of the few states in which cloud images are part of an official iconographic programme<sup>13</sup>.

Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, pp. 27-37.

<sup>4</sup> S. van Hoogstraeten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: Anders de zichtbare Werelt*, Rotterdam 1678, p. 9; see also C. Esmeijer, «Cloudscapes in Theory and Practice», in: *Simiolus*, IX, 1977, pp. 123-148.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, Cam-

Symbolist cloud images sometimes possess esoteric or occultist dimensions, as with the Swedish playwright, painter and photographer August Strindberg, who described in his autobiographical novel *Inferno* (1897) all kinds of images made by chance, which he progressively attributed to supernatural powers<sup>14</sup>. But Symbolist artists also gave such images a self-reflexive character commenting upon perception, representation and art. Thanks to its Synthetist “abstract-decorative” formal vocabulary, Gauguin’s watercolour *The Black Rocks* (fig. 7) creates continuity between clouds and foam. Perhaps this was meant to evoke the natural cycle of mist and rain, but it was probably also intended to visualise the human and artistic process of the creation and disappearance of images, as exemplified also in the face visible in the large rock on the left. In Odilon Redon’s writings and visual works, clouds stand for the intrinsic nature of perception, artistic creation, and the contemplation of art. Already in his first etchings (fig. 8), fantastic clouds appear above a lonely rider, alluding implicitly to Goethe’s *Erl King*<sup>15</sup>. Attempting at the age of fifty to explain his art, he recalled how, during his childhood, his father had showed him the clouds and asked if he also saw therein the changing shapes of «strange, chimerical and wonderful beings»<sup>16</sup>. In the same years, he reworked the copper plate of his old print, turning it on its side and extracting from the clouds the hair of a nude woman (fig. 9) – an exemplary metamorphosis in both art theoretical and autobiographical terms.

At the turn of the century, the connection between childhood and imaginative perception was beautifully staged by Lyonel Feininger in a comic strip representing the world as it appeared to a boy, Wee Willy Winkie. On one page (fig. 10), he literally points to the author the fanciful figures that the draughtsman should see and depict in the clouds and the cliffs. In a reversal of Redon’s childhood memory and of the usual pedagogical situation, the child has become here a teacher for the adult and the artist. Feininger meant this seriously, as shows his later painting *Bird Cloud* (fig. 11), a homage to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea*. Children were generally attributed a native faculty, as yet unspoiled by

bridge/MA 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Gedichte. Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, ed. by J. Mahr, Stuttgart 1984, p. 62; T. De Quincey, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, ed. by A. Hayter, Harmondsworth 1971, pp. 106-107, 214-15 (Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book II).

<sup>15</sup> K. Badt, *Wolkenbilder und Wolkengedichte der Romantik*, Berlin 1960, p. 20 (Goethe, *Howards Ehrengedächtnis*).

tradition and schooling, which was also recognized to “primitive” people and the mentally ill. The German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn thus saw an «urge towards interpretation» (*Deutungsdrang*) at the source of all artistic activity, and he compared prehistoric and folk art with the game played by all, looking at «the slowly gliding clouds bestowing upon us, almost without any effort on our part, a rich profusion of lifelike or fantastic figures». According to him, the «imagery of the mentally ill» that he analysed allowed to study the «primary process of the creation of forms» (*primärer Gestaltungsvorgang*) under the best conditions<sup>17</sup>. In one of the most important cases that he presented, a «paranoiac system of delusion» had developed from a hallucinatory experience seen in the clouds. The works deriving from this experience (fig. 12) depict the visions that appeared to their author in the sky as on a board, a canvas, a stage, or on a cinema screen<sup>18</sup>. During the same years, the significance of the «interpretive urge» for general psychology was brought to the fore by the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach in his «experiment in the diagnosis of perception», which became the most important “projective test” and a symbol of the psychology of perception. For Rorschach, interpretation was «only a special case of perception» and the interpretation of accidental forms represented a «perception accompanied by the conscience of an adjustment effort» between sensation and memory<sup>19</sup>.

The Surrealists celebrated the interpretation of accidental forms as visual automatism and as an expression of the unconscious. In his novel *L'amour fou*, André Breton explained the famous scene in which Hamlet gives three successive readings of a cloud as a way to solve the problem of reconciling subjectivity and objectivity: one should direct one's life as one sees in a cloud<sup>20</sup>. When in 1927 Max Ernst reported his invention of the “frottage” technique, he too resorted to a (phantasmatic) childhood memory, in which his father extracted animal figures from a painted panel «representing imitation mahogany» with a pencil-whip evoking a sexual organ<sup>21</sup>. Ernst used the veins of wood to discover the images of his *Histoire naturelle* and perceived in them, among other things, a sky with the moon

<sup>8</sup> C. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by C. Pichois, vol. II, Paris 1976, pp. 627, 666-667.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, 1975, p. 350 (*Le Spleen de Paris*, 1869).

<sup>10</sup> H. Taine, *De l'intelligence*, Paris 1895 [1870], vol. I, pp. 12-13 (I,1); Ernst Mach, *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen*, Jena 1886, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> P. Souriau, *La suggestion dans l'art*, Paris 1893, p. 95 («regarder un dessin, c'est voir

(fig. 13). With reference to psychopathology, Salvador Dalí promoted an intentionally heightened “interpretive urge” to the rank of «paranoiac-critical method». In his autobiography, one finds among various «false childhood memories» a drawing of the young Salvador and his father gazing at a frightening smoke cloud with a human face during a walk in the countryside<sup>22</sup>. Cloud with figures appear frequently in his work, for example with the outline of the couple from Millet’s *Angelus* on a sheet from the *Chants de Maldoror* (fig. 14), where father and son are also to be seen in the landscape below.

Between the two world wars and until the 1960s – or even, occasionally, until the present day in art criticism –, the opposition between “figuration” and “abstraction” (in the non-objective sense) made it impossible to appreciate, understand or even perceive the double mimesis involved in the representation of cloud images. In his lecture of 1968 entitled «Other Criteria», Leo Steinberg rightly rejected this «interdictory stance – the attitude that tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what he ought not to see»<sup>23</sup>. Alfred Steglitz’s famous series of photographs *Equivalent*s (fig. 15) became progressively less remarkable for its “abstraction” than for its all-over ambiguity, coming thus closer to the work of Edward Weston, whose organic-erotic imagination can easily be felt in the picture of a torso-like cloud (fig. 16).

Artists such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, who consistently rejected the antagonism between representation and abstraction, have occasionally used the motif of sky and clouds in their reflection upon the genesis of images. In a humorous illustration of Breton’s dictum, Polke discovered his own name in the constellations<sup>24</sup>. Richter gave shape to the interchangeability of a cloudy sky and an agitated sea in his painting *Seascape (Sea-Sea)* (fig. 17), the subtitle of which (*See-See*) may imply a Anglo-German pun on “sea” and “see”. His *Abstract Paintings* have an effect similar to that of clouds, marble, or Leonardo’s stained wall, and they were clearly created accordingly. Echoing the Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and its conception of art, Richter explained that «using chance

*des chimères dans les nuages*»).

<sup>22</sup> T. Gütter, «Selbstbildnis eines radikalen Pantheisten. Das Gemälde *La Morte* von Giovanni Segantini», in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8-9 May 2004, pp. 65-66.

<sup>23</sup> J. Stückelberger, «Nature et fantasie. Les nuages dans la peinture de paysage en Suisse au XIXe siècle», in: *La peinture suisse entre réalisme et idéal (1848-1906)*, Exhibition catalogue, Genève 1998, pp. 83-101; J. Stückelberger, «Die künstlerische Ausstat-

is painting like Nature» and that when he paints he is «as blind as Nature, who acts as she can, in accordance with the conditions that hinder or help her»<sup>25</sup>. Marcus Raetz, whose work explores the theory of perception with artistic means, chose for one of his three-dimensional anamorphoses a cloud of smoke issuing from a pipe, paying in passing homage to Magritte and Foucault (fig. 18). And in *The Prehistory of Pictures* (fig. 19), Thomas Huber showed five clouds, with structures resembling veined wood, spreading out above the sea like streams of smoke coming from ships beyond the horizon. Huber sees the surface of the water, «meeting-point of two realms», as an image of the origin of images, since they too are «an in-between»<sup>26</sup>; their further metamorphosis is intimated in the gaseous clouds, as in Gauguin's *The Black Rocks* and Richter's *Seascape (See-See)*.

The art of today, in its great variety, has also room for cloud images, all the more as ambiguity and polysemy play a central role in it.

Films, videos and digital images contribute the means of temporal transformation and a potentially endless manipulation. In the digitalized video installations of the South African artist Minette Vári, for example, recognisable and deformed shapes glide into one another like «slowly moving clouds». Fixed images, however, remain capable of creating a fruitful tension between their own temporality and that of the beholder. Vik Muniz, a producer of «meta-illusions» like Raetz, has tackled Stieglitz's *Equivalent*s on several occasions<sup>27</sup>. He used this title in 1993 for a series of photographs of suspended pieces of cotton that look like clouds looking like – among other things – a teapot or a snail. Two years later, he contributed to the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Museum as Muse a new Equivalent* (fig. 20), a photograph of a white painted coin (as the moon) he had laid on the museum's marble floor<sup>28</sup>. The fascination exerted by such a picture lies in the contrast between its highly indirect and reflected origin on the one hand, and, on the other hand, its stupefying and mysterious effect. The murals inspired by a Taoist meteorological manual to the American Jessica Diamond share this combination of cultural layering and spontaneous appearance<sup>29</sup>. Storms were compared with

tung des Bundeshauses in Bern», in: *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, XLII, 1985, pp. 185-234.

<sup>14</sup> A. Strindberg, *Inferno*, Paris 1898; critical edition by A.-C. Gavel Adams in: *August Strindberg Samlade Verk*, vol. 37, Stockholm 1994.

<sup>15</sup> D. Gamboni, «Fiction et vérité: un souvenir d'enfance d'Odilon Redon partagé par d'autres artistes», in: *Genesis*, XXIV, 2004, pp. 181-187.



orgasms in the text: in the manner of Polke, a cloud dragon spitting gas manages to look also like the Western symbol of astonishment (fig. 21).

<sup>16</sup> O. Redon, *A soi-même. Journal (1867-1915). Notes sur la vie, l'art et les artistes*, Paris 1961 [1922], p. 9 («...des apparitions d'êtres bizarre, chimérique et merveilleux», 1898/1909).

<sup>17</sup> H. Prinzhorn, *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken. Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung*, Wien/New York 1994 [1922], pp. 24-25, 350-51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205; I. Jádi & B. Brand-Claussen, *August Natterer. Die Beweiskraft der Bilder. Leben und Werk – Deutungen*, Heidelberg 2001.

<sup>19</sup> H. Rorschach, *Psychodiagnostik. Methodik und Ergebnisse eines wahrnehmungsdiagnostischen Experiments (Deutenlassen von Zufallsformen)*, Bern 1948 [1921], pp. 15-18.

<sup>20</sup> A. Breton, *L'amour fou*, Paris 1997 [1937], pp. 124-129.

<sup>21</sup> M. Ernst, «Trois visions de demi-sommeil», in: *La Révolution surréaliste*, 9-10, October 1927, reprinted in M. Ernst, *Écritures*, Paris 1970, pp. 237-238.

<sup>22</sup> S. Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. by H.M. Chevalier, New York 1993 [1942], p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> L. Steinberg, «Other Criteria», partly published in *Artforum*, March 1972, and reprinted in L. Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York 1972, pp. 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> S. Polke, *Sternenhimmeltuch „Sternenhimmel am 24.6. 24 Uhr zeigt als Sternbild den Namenszug S. Polke“*, 1968, private collection (reproduced in: *Das endlose Rätsel. Dalí und die Mager der Mehrdeutigkeit*, Exhibition catalogue, Ostfildern-Ruit 2003, p. 252).

<sup>25</sup> G. Richter, *Text. Schriften und Interviews*, ed. by H.-U. Obrist, Frankfurt/Leipzig 1993, pp. 112-113.

<sup>26</sup> T. Huber, *Rede in der Schule*, Köln 1986, p. 27, quoted in: *Die Urgeschichte der Bilder / La préhistoire des tableaux*, Exhibition catalogue, Basel 1987, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Vik Muniz: Seeing is Believing*, Exhibition catalogue, Santa Fé 1998, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> K. McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, Exhibition catalogue, New York 1999, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> *Parachute*, 2003, no. 10, p. 3.