Rudolf Steiner’s engagement with contemporary artists’ groups: art-theoretical discourse in the anthroposophical milieu in Germany in the early 20th century

Spyros Petritakis

‘Or you will see a formless fire, from which a voice is sent forth, or you will see a sumptuous light, rushing like a spiral around the field’. Proclus¹

Anthroposophy and art historiography

In the aftermath of the anthroposophical conference that took place in Darmstadt in the summer of 1921, organized through the initiative of the Union of Anthroposophical College Work [Bund für anthroposophische Hochschularbeit], Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) published in the Frankfurter Zeitung an extensive essay, in which he contended that ‘the anthroposophical movement, whose influence had grown noticeably over the last few years, has recently cast a spell on the academic youth, who have been easily seduced by propagandistic sermons of that kind.’² Undeniably, Kracauer addresses his scathing critique to the founder of

¹ ‘[…] ἢ καὶ πῦρ ἀτύπωτον, οὗν φωνήν προθέουσαν- ἣ φῶς πλούσιον ἀμφι γύην φοίξαιον ἐλιχθέν’; see Proclus (In rem p., I, 111, 1–12), quoted in Ruth Majercik, The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary, Leiden/New York: Brill, 1989, 104–105. I would like to express my warmest gratitude to my supervisor Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos, who, some years ago, drew my attention to Steiner’s lecture on Nikolaos Gyzis and encouraged me to research further the links between theosophy and the arts. I would also like to thank Marilena Kassimati, Konstantinos Didaskalou and Reinhold Fäth, who generously assisted me in my fieldwork. A great deal of my research has been conducted at the archives of the Rudolf Steiner House in Berlin and Munich (Anthroposophische Gesellschaft in Deutschland e. V. Arbeitszentrum Berlin/Munich) and especially at the Rudolf Steiner Archives as well as at the Goetheanum (Documentation Goetheanum) in Dornach, Basel.

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Anthroposophical Society, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), whose esoteric message the German critic subjects to stringent scrutiny. Deeply astonished by the large audience of young artists and students that attended this series of lectures, Kracauer went so far as to refer to Steiner as a ‘modern magician’ who, ‘through dangerous clouds of opium smoke’, ensnared his victims with rhetorical tricks and lured them into his lair, replete with bewildering synaesthetic shows and phantasmagorias of coloured lighting.3 This place of ‘daemonic barbarity’ has even a name; it is called Goetheanum, a temple of ‘unbridled wilderness of ornamentation’, which ‘somehow recalls the pagan Mexican temples and leaves the worst aberrations of Jugendstil far behind’.4

However, despite the fact that Kracauer resolutely dismissed the anthroposophical teaching as unworthy of being taken seriously, he emphatically stated at the conclusion of his text that it would not be necessary to ignore the positive suggestions that occasionally emanate from it. It could only be useful, for example, if one started to seriously deal with Goethe’s view of nature and sought to gain clarity about the actual foundations of mathematical modern science.5 Kracauer concludes that if the academic youth that is now entering Steiner’s sphere of influence could absorb the few useful insights that he conveyed and at the same time leave behind the anthroposophical nonsense to itself, then, this would cause certainly no harm.6 Thus, Kracauer’s more or less positive assessment ensued from a firm belief that in the core of Steiner’s teaching body lies Goethe’s scientific thought.

Some years later, Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) remarks on the subject carry a completely negative nuance. In his biting review of Hans Liebstoeckl’s book The Leese’s book Moderne Theosophie. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der geistigen Strömungen der Gegenwart, (Berlin: Furche, 1921); see Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 417–418. The following years, several relevant articles appeared in the Frankfurter Zeitung; among them the ‘Neue Literatur zur Anthroposophie’, published on 11 March 1923; see Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 627–629; or the ‘Anthroposophie und Christentum’, published on 28 October 1923; see Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 718–720.

3 ‘[…] dieser moderne Magier’, ‘jenem gefährlichen Opiumrausch’; see Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 263–264. Kracauer’s harsh stance towards anthroposophy was foreshadowed by Ernst Bloch’s (1885–1977) short comment on Rudolf Steiner in his seminal book The Spirit of Utopia, where he observes that for the German scholar ‘old connections that have long since been broken and lying dead, seem to revive and join together’; ‘[…] es gibt bei diesem sonst kaum erträglichem Mann einen Punkt, von dem aus gesehen alte, seit langem gebrochen und tot daliegende Verbindungen wieder aufzuleben und sich zusammenzufügen scheinen’; see Ernst Bloch, Geist der Utopie, Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918, 238–243, here 239.

4 ‘[…] dämonischer Barbarei’, ‘die teilweise ungezügelte Wildheit der Ornamentik […]’ erinnert irgendwie an mexikanische Götzentempel und lässt jedenfalls die schlimmsten Verirrungen des Jugendstils weit hinter sich’; see Inka Mülder-Bach and Ingrid Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 262. Kracauer saw the first building of the Goetheanum, which was made of wood and destroyed by fire in 1922. From 1924 to 1928, a second building was erected, this time of concrete, and Steiner played a significant role in its construction. The building still remains the centre of Anthroposophical Society across the world.

5 Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 263.
6 Mülder-Bach and Belke, eds, Siegfried Kracauer Werke, 263.
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Occlut Sciences on the Light of Our Age (1932), which was then favourably received by the followers of R. Steiner, Benjamin cautiously reflected on how this kind of literature found its way from the ‘anonymous obscurity into the brightly lit window displays of more expensive shops’.7 This improvement in status was, according to Benjamin, contingent upon a wider shift in middle class taste towards products of knowledge that not only assured of an exclusive reality of the spirit but also ascertained the ineffectiveness of class struggle. In Benjamin’s view, the occult trend has greatly profited from the collapse of general education and from people’s loss of faith in it. Hence, although Anthroposophy presupposes, as Benjamin remarks, a higher level of education than do straightforward spiritualists, it is, nevertheless, a product resulting from the withering of the humanities and the collapse of knowledge of the classical languages.8 According to him, the ‘oleaginous gibberish’ of the adherents of anthroposophy, by far the most ambitious among the false prophets, can easily be understood as ‘a residue of the great philosophy of humanism that had formerly constituted an integral part of general education, along with the hard sciences’.9 Thus, general education’s dissolution leaves a void, which is to be filled with the anthroposophists’ claims upon enlisting ‘the whole of world history as a marketing devise’.10

However, the notion that the manifold forms of esoteric knowledge, promulgated by theosophical and anthroposophical movements, represent an eruption of irrational forces in the society, mainly by steering the psycho-intellectual needs of middle-class layers and enabling them to resort to escapist tendencies, becomes a dominant motif in Theodor Adorno’s (1903–1969) Minima Moralia.11 In one of his famous theses against occultism, Adorno asserts that ‘the offal of the world of appearance becomes a mundus intelligibilis for the sick consciousness’, which now regresses as it loses the power to ‘think the unconditional and to bear the conditional’.12 In the course of the twentieth century, the opprobrious litany

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associating anthroposophists’ claim for knowledge with an ineluctable cultural regression became the standard rehash of Marxist ideology, not least because anthroposophists’ unpolitical stance was often considered to betray ambiguous links to Nazism.13

From the 1970s onwards, the contribution of some sociologists, as well as the emergence of a new field of academic research devoted to Western esotericism, have contributed to the illumination of different aspects of what could be described as ‘occult revival’, which until then remained at the margins of academic and cultural discourse.14 Instead of regarding esoteric movements as breakdowns of modernization or as flights into the irrational, the sociologist Edward Tiryakian argued that the flourishing of those social phaenomena could be viewed as a harbinger of a new cultural paradigm. In other words, they could become in certain historical moments major vehicles of new models of reality, replacing traditional institutionalized paradigms and offering new value orientations.15 Thus, under this light, a spate of exhibitions, articles and scholarly works that appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s tried to demonstrate how the occult revival triggered a reconceptualization of traditional painting.16 Therefore, the general tendency to


belittle the role of occultism in the early theoretical texts on abstraction has been largely reassessed, as indicates, for example, the treatment of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) by the Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1935-1992). However, although much scholarly attention has been directed toward the impact of theosophy or anthroposophy on painters such as Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Paul Klee (1879–1940),— who at the beginning of the 20th century were grappling with abstract tendencies—the dynamic interaction between Steiner and contemporary artists still remains a desideratum for the art historian. When the modern occult revival crystallized in


18 On 25 February 1921, Mondrian sent to R. Steiner a copy of his recently published book Le Néo-Plasticism (1917–1918), together with a brief note, in which he argued that Neo-Plasticism ‘is the art of the foreseeable future for all true anthroposophists and theosophists’. Nevertheless, the letter remained unanswered, which made Mondrian embittered towards theosophists or anthroposophists; see on that, Carel Blotkamp, Mondrian: The Art of Destruction, London: Reaktion Books, 2001 (1st. edn. 1994), 182–183; For Mondrian’s spiritual peregrinations, see Massimo Introvigne, ‘Pieter Cornelis “Piet” Mondrian’, entry in the online encyclopedia World Religions and Spirituality Project, Virginia Commonwealth University, 26 December 2016 (https://wrldrels.org/2016/12/25/mondrian/).

19 Judging by the correspondence preserved in Dornach (Rudolf Steiner Archives) we come to the conclusion that Hilma Af Klint sought to meet R. Steiner for the first time in 1908 in Christiana (Oslo), in order to show him her works. Later, in 1920 she joined the Anthroposophical Society and began to visit Dornach more regularly; see Iris Müller-Westermann, ‘Bilder für die Zukunft: Hilma af Klint. Eine Pionierin der Abstraktion im Verbogenen’, in Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widoff, eds, Hilma af Klint – Eine Pionierin der Abstraktion, exh. cat. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Stockholm: Hatje Cantz, 2013, 41–42.

20 On 10 October 1917, Klee mentioned that he had been reading a book by Steiner; see Felix Klee, Paul Klee: Tagebücher, Cologne: M. DuMont, 1957, 386; Later, however, he denies any connection to the anthroposophical movement; see, Ringbom, ‘Art in “The Epoch of the Great Spiritual”’, 412–413.

21 The art-historical bibliography for Steiner is still very limited; see the recently published catalogue from the exhibition Aenigma: A hundred years of anthroposophic art, which offers a
1875, with the foundation of the Theosophical Society in the United States by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), theosophists were very conscious of the great diversity of artists they had attracted and their aim was not so much directed towards the homogenization of a specific style but towards the harmonization of omnifarious cultural trends. Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), for example, sought to create artistic homogeneity by means of restriction or subject-matter relationship and interconnectedness. On the other hand, Steiner aimed to manipulate, direct, forge links between his attendees, or create strategic plots. In other words, while theosophists were passive in their incorporation of artistic elements, Steiner was active. More importantly, in sharp contrast to the monastic fashion that prevailed in the Rose-Croix Salons, according to which women were excluded from practitioners, Steiner promoted woman creativity, since through his lectures he was addressing young art students of both sexes. Overall, Steiner’s involvement in the artistic production must be read as an attempt to create new spaces of synergic collaboration between scholars and practitioners, where established patterns of knowledge and practice are questioned, whereas new, alternative forms of perception and representation are produced and conceptualized.

The main arguments of this essay emerge from what I consider to be a key event for the unfolding of Steiner’s art theoretical pursuits. This concerns a lecture that Steiner delivered on the Greek academic painter Nikolaos Gyzis (1842-1901) in Munich on 25 August 1910. The lecture on Gyzis is important and worthy of study for two reasons. Firstly, Steiner’s predilection for the Greek painter stands out since Gyzis was the only contemporary artist (he died only nine years earlier) that occupied a pivotal position in Steiner’s body of lectures. Until 1910, and even after that date, one would encounter in Steiner’s talks only extensive references to the great masters of painting, more importantly Michelangelo and Raphael, and only some fleeting mentions to contemporary artists, as is the case with the Swedish painter Frank Heymann, whose ‘prismatic figures’ were called upon by Steiner in the course of the Theosophical Conference in Budapest in 1909. Secondly, the lecture on Gyzis occurred at a time when the tensions had just begun to grow between the German section of the Theosophical Society and the theosophical leaders, Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934). That means that Steiner’s lectures, from 1909 onwards, laid emphasis on the so-called called comprehensive insight into the subject; Reinhold Fäth and David Voda, eds, _Aenigma. Hundert Jahre anthroposophische Kunst_, exh. cat., Olomouc, Kunstmuseum Olmütz, Révnice: Arbor Vitae, 2015; However, a further survey on the networks of patrons or supporters that underpinned the production and circulation of the so-called ‘anthroposophic works of art’, as well as on their critical reception is yet to be done. Even the rubric ‘anthroposophic art’ should be seen and examined in its historical dynamic perspective and context.


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‘Christian esotericism’, which stood in sharp contrast to the comparative religious teachings that Blavatsky’s adherents promulgated.²⁴ In my contribution, I would like, thus, to argue that Steiner’s encounter with Gyzis’s images prompted him to externalize or visualize his art-theoretical and historical ideas, rooted mainly in Goethe’s legacy, and communicate them to his contemporary art scene, in a crucial period when he endeavoured to jump off Annie Besant’s aesthetic bandwagon and better adapt to the historical transformations of German society.

Steiner’s ‘Goetheanism’ and esoteric Christology

As Helmut Zander remarks, ‘Theosophy in Germany, as far as it originated under Steiner’s aegis, is so closely linked to Goethe’s work that anthroposophy sometimes appears today as a variant of Goetheanism’.²⁵ From 1884 to 1897, Rudolf Steiner, as a Goethe scholar, scientist and philosopher, edited the five-volume edition of Goethe’s scientific writings in Joseph Kürschners (1853–1902) ‘Deutsche National-Litteratur’. At the same time, he was involved in the editing of Goethe’s scientific writings for the Weimar ‘Sophien-Ausgabe’ (1891-1896) as well as in the publication of a large number of articles on the German philosopher.²⁶ The most important among these appeared in 1886 under the title *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception*, followed, in 1897, by *Goethe’s Worldview*, in which Steiner elaborated on the two driving wheels of nature, the concepts of polarity and enhancement [Steigerung].²⁷ In spite of the fact that Steiner’s outlook at that time was heavily indebted to Goethe’s aesthetics, soon theosophical ideas began to permeate his philosophical creed, especially after 1902, when Steiner joined the branch of the German Theosophical Society and became its General Secretary, a post he held for ten years until the split between the Theosophical and Anthroposophical Society occurred. By conflating different aspects of German idealism and theosophical doctrines, Steiner soon developed an eclectically jumbled philosophical system, in which he systematically wove together mainstream theosophical assertions — such as that of the impoverishment of man’s original involvement with the spiritual world by the focus on materialist culture — with elaborate mytho-cosmologies and Christian messianic theology.

However, despite the fact that Steiner amalgamated many aspects of Blavatsky’s theosophical doctrine that were in line with his own worldview, he soon saw with reservation Blavatsky’s proclivity towards Oriental religions. It is a topos


²⁶ For a detailed presentation of Steiner’s interpretation of Goethe’s aesthetics, see Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 435-501.

that the strains between the Theosophical Society centred in Adyar, India, and its
German section, especially after Steiner’s appointment by Besant to the leadership of
an Esoteric School in 1907, as well as the escalation of events, since 1909, that led to
the preparation of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1896) as the ‘vehicle’ of the expected
World Teacher, could be regarded as break points in the history of the
anthroposophical movement. Yet, as Zander contends, the inner development of
Steiner’s Christology partially precedes these symbolic caesuras and partly follows
them. Moreover, it appears that Steiner’s indication of a Christian way encountered
an already formative field of discussion, in which theosophists had for some time
tried to interpret the Christian tradition under a theosophical light and assign
Christianity a hegemonic role in the discourse of religious comparativism.

This dynamic relationship between Steiner and an audience yearning for an
esoteric interpretation of Christianity may be enhanced by an additional aspect.
Contrary to other esoteric ideas circulating in fin-de-siècle Europe, according to
which scientific thought was regarded as an anathema for the modern human,
Steiner tried to embed technology into a larger evolutionary pattern that he often
called spiritual science. This idea owes much of its development to Goethe’s scientific
work. In his chapter entitled ‘Goethe and the Platonic World View’ from Goethe’s
Worldview, Steiner discusses the interwovenness between art and science, namely,
how the artistic creation is a heightened creation of nature. By drawing heavily on
Goethe’s philosophical ideas, Steiner lays emphasis on the importance of bridging
the gap between natural sciences and artistic creation: ‘the philosopher shows how
nature presents itself to thinking contemplation; the artist shows how nature would
look if it openly brought the forces working in it not merely to meet thinking but also
to meet perception’. The artist, thus, could raise the world into the ‘sphere of the
divine’ by divulging the hidden laws of nature that would remain otherwise
unknown to the contemplative mind. This aspect of Goethe’s work is very
important in order to understand Steiner’s focus on artistic expression.

Rudolf Steiner’s lectures on theory and history of art

Steiner travelled extensively throughout Europe delivering over five thousand
lectures on subjects as varied as ‘spiritual science’, medicine, economics, aesthetics,
architecture and agriculture. He succeeded in spreading his ideas by means of a
wide-ranging lecture circuit and his adherents would actually follow him from one
city to another. For example, the International Theosophical Congress Steiner
organized in Munich in 1907 (between 18 and 21 May) was attended by 600 people,

Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, 786.
Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, 781.
‘Der Philosoph zeigt, wie sich die Natur der denkenden Betrachtung darstellt; der Künstler
zeigt, wie die Natur aussehen würde, wenn sie ihre wirkenden Kräfte nicht bloß dem
Denken, sondern auch der Wahrnehmung offen entgegenbrächte’. Steiner, Goethes
Weltanschauung, 50.
30: 23–46, here, 19–20; see also the discussion in Ringbom, ‘Art in “The Epoch of the Great
Spiritual”’, 389–392.
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most of whom were coming from German-speaking countries, England, France, America but also from Russia and Scandinavia [Fig. 1].

It may be argued that Steiner’s art educational system was modelled on the paradigm set by the Dutch Theosophical Society. In 1896, the art teacher, designer and architect Johannes Ludovicus Mathieu Lauweriks (1864-1932), a member of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands since 1894, together with the architect Charles Peter Cornelis de Bazel (1869-1923), founded the Vahana Lodge, whose members were mainly architects, artisans and painters. The Vahana Lodge also ran


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a school, in which drawing, art history, and aesthetics were taught. Availing themselves of a library comprising 250 books and covering a wide range of interests, the participants in the course would have the opportunity to bolster their artistic ideas with theoretical knowledge, retaining nevertheless their artistic autonomy. Lauwerik’s art theory was largely shaped within the context of late-nineteenth-century Dutch Symbolism, in whose bosoms mysticism and esotericism played a significant role. Under Lauweriks motto ‘Diversity in Unity’ the courses would offer the art student the opportunity to learn theory as well as history of art and architecture, providing him with a leading way of thinking, largely based on proportional systems inspired by Theosophy. The activity of the Vahana Lodge, and, in particular, Lauweriks’ ambitions must have inspired Steiner to invent a similar organizational pattern for his own lectures, and especially for the Munich conference in 1907.

Steiner met Lauweriks during the Theosophical Congress in Amsterdam in 1904, in the course of which Lauweriks organized an art exhibition and accomplished many sketches intended for Theosophical buildings. Steiner’s contribution to the conference was on ‘Mathematics and Occultism’, a theme that must have rung a familiar chord to Dutch Theosophists. More interestingly, an ‘art section’ has been included in the same conference, during which the Belgian symbolist painter and theosophist Jean Delville (1867-1953) presented his manifesto on art entitled La Mission de l’Art (1900), derived from his titular book on that subject, and the German theosophist and later anthroposophist Ludwig Deinhard (1847–1918) presented a treatise by the German painter Fidus (Hugo Höppener) (1868–1948), in which the painter expressed his theosophical view of art’s secrets. One may, thus, argue that Steiner not only met Delville at the conference but that he was also inspired by his vision on art’s role in the society, as well as by his vigorous polemic against materialistic culture.

34 For the Vahana Lodge, see Marty Bax, ‘Die Theosophische Gesellschaft’, in Okkultismus und Avantgarde, 32-37.
35 The Amsterdam Congress of the European Sections took place between the 19th and 21st of June. See Rudolf Steiner, ‘Der Theosophische Kongress in Amsterdam (1904)’, Lucifer-Gnosis, June 1904, GA 34, 539–552.
36 Steiner, ‘Der Theosophische Kongress in Amsterdam (1904)’, 549.
37 Delville is justly regarded as a very figure in bringing together artistic networks with theosophical ones. Delville’s vacillations between different viewpoints of the theosophical doctrine are thoroughly examined by Introvigne Massimo; see Introvigne Massimo, ‘Zöllner’s Knot: Theosophy, Jean Delville (1867-1953), and the Fourth Dimension’, Theosophical History, 17:3, 2014, 84–134; Delville followed Steiner in 1913 (p. 95).
38 Jean Delville, La Mission de l’art, introduction by Édouard Schuré, Brussels: Georges Balat, 1900.
39 Zander casts doubts on Santomasso’s hypothesis that Delville’s art theory had a great impact on Steiner’s aesthetic formation; see Eugene Anthony Santomasso, Origins and Aims of German Expressionist Architecture. An Essay into the Expressionist Frame of Mind in Germany, especially as Typified in the Work of Rudolf Steiner, Diss., Columbia University 1972; Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, 1067. I believe that apart from Delville’s and Steiner’s common strategy, which was the triumph over the ‘lethal epidemics of materialism’ (‘mortelles epidemies du matérialisme’, see Delville, La Mission de l’art, 176), there are no other common
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Although an institutionalization of artistic education occurred much later, in 1919, with the formation of the pedagogical program of the now widely established Waldorf School system, one may assume that Steiner began associating himself with contemporary art groups shortly after the Munich Congress of 1907. Steiner tried to differentiate himself from the previous theosophical congresses, which were scholarly simulated lectures and to give the Munich event an emotional and cultic note. In Steiner’s view, the purpose of the congress should be the harmonization of ‘spiritual sciences’ [Geisteswissenschaften] within an artistic environment that would eventually embrace larger parts of the society. Apart from a large number of paintings exhibited in the surroundings of the congress, various art performances and musical soirées took place in the course of the congress. Of course, the quality of the exhibited works did not always meet the public’s expectation, as shows the case of Clara Rettich (1860-1906), whose Apocalyptic Sigils received much critical disapproval. Soon, the branch of the Theosophical Society in Munich became a hub for cultural activities that attracted various artists: actors, dancers, painters, musicians, set designers and architects who worked for the scenic decorations in the Mystery Plays in Munich and later for the first Goetheanum in Dornach (1908–1925). Such were the cases of the artists Hermann Linde (1863–1923), Richard Pollak-Karlin (1867–1942) and his wife Hilde Pollak (1874–1942), who after having enjoyed academic education in Munich or Vienne, decided to follow Steiner and unite with him in his mission. Two years later Steiner was eager to introduce his ideas on art to young art-students and thereby to find a way to legitimize his activities within the German society. In 1911, he founded the Gesellschaft für theosophische Art und Kunst in guiding principles in their thinking. Delville’s idealism was prominently shaped by Neoplatonic and Neopythagorean doctrines, such as Alexandre Saint-Yves d’Alveydre’s (1842-1909) aesthetic theories, whereas, Steiner, as already indicated, was heading towards a colour theory, based on Goethe’s paradigm; see Rudolf Steiner, The Arts and Their Mission, trans. Lisa D. Monges and Virginia Moore, from lectures given in Dornach, Switzerland, 27 May – 9 June, 1923, and in Oslo, Norway, 18-20 May, 1923, GA 276, Spring Valley, New York: The Anthroposophical Press, 1964.


41 Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, 1067.

42 Kugler and Wendtland, eds, Rudolf Steiner – das malerische Werk, 30–33.

43 H. Linde was very famous for the illustration of Goethe’s tale The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily, which constituted the basis for the formation of Steiner’s Mystery Plays; see J. W. Goethe, Das Märchen von der grünen Schlange und der schönen Lilie, Basel: Zbinden, 1972; R. Pollak-Karlin and Hilde Pollak were members of the Theosophical Society since 1906. They later helped at the painting of the dome of the first Goetheanum. In 1920 they settled down in Prague, where they contributed in the fruition of anthroposophical activities; see Fäth and Voda, eds, Aenigma, 256–259.
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an attempt to institutionalize the multifarious artistic initiatives that were surrounding the Theosophical Society in Munich at the time.

Steiner’s art theoretical and historical ideas are better demonstrated in a series of lectures he gave to young artists of the Anthroposophical community in Dornach between 1916 and 1923. In his art history lectures, Steiner culled from a variety of sources, including Goethe, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), Robert von Zimmermann (1824–1898), and more notably, Hermann Grimm (1828–1901), with whom Steiner co-worked in the Goethe archives in Weimar in 1891. 44 Grimm had endorsed the use of lantern slides, predicting the revolutionary impact they would have upon the study and teaching of art history. 45 Steiner followed suit and integrated in his lectures more than 700 images of art works. Both Steiner and Grimm viewed themselves as Goethe’s intellectual successors, they were in agreement on the importance of Michelangelo in Western Art and shared the conviction that art has a moral message which, in order to be understood by the contemporaries, has to be experienced emotionally as well as aesthetically.

The lectures’ historical scope covered a period from Greek antiquity to Rembrandt, with an emphasis on Giotto (c. 1270–1337), Raphael (1483–1520), Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). It is also notable that Steiner entirely ostracized French and Spanish art from his aesthetic canon. In general, Steiner’s art historical approach lacks the objectivity and validity as well as an overarching theoretical framework that could support a rational understanding of cultural phenomena. Indeed, Steiner’s assertion that history does not take its course as a perpetual succession of causes and events, but rather as an evolution of human consciousness in correspondence to the Spiritual Soul’s involvement in the historical procedures, underlines the above statement. 46 In fact, Steiner’s understanding of historical processes hinges on transcendentalism. According to Steiner’s mythopoetic thought, following the destruction of Atlantis by man’s misuse of occult powers, human civilisation entered into a series of epochs, the course of which was marked by man’s loss of divinity and by the eventual predominance of individualism. During the Fourth-Atlantean epoch, the apparition of Christ counterbalanced this tendency to materialism and pointed towards the reunification of spirit and matter. A recurring idea in these lectures is that of the transition from Italian Quattrocento to Cinquecento art, which corresponds to the transition from the Fourth post-Atlantean epoch to the Fifth post-Atlantean one. For example, Cimabue’s (ca. 1240-1302) art works reflect the spiritual condition of the Fourth post-Atlantean epoch, whereas

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44 The art history lectures were delivered between 8 October 1916 and 29 October 1917 in Dornach; see Rudolf Steiner, Kunstgeschichte als Abbild innerer geistiger Impulse, Dreizehn Lichtbildervorträge, gehalten in Dornach zwischen dem 8. Oktober 1916 und dem 29. Oktober 1917 mit über 700 Bildwiedergaben, Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1981.
Giotto’s (1267-1337) mark the transition to a new spiritual beginning, that of the Fifth post-Atlantean epoch, which began in the fifteenth century and extends to the present. However, Steiner condemned the latter for it inaugurated a tendency towards naturalistic representation and spatial illusionism, both of which he considered responsible for the degradation of civilisation to the level of the ape. In this context, Steiner argued that the peculiarity of working from the model is a characteristic of the Fifth post-Atlantean epoch. Steiner believed that all these artistic innovations induced the stultification of human’s ability to intuit other’s emotions and feelings and thus cultural elements tended to be merely understood as products rather us manifestations of a greater spiritual world. Furthermore, a reassessment of dominant, academic discourses is evident in the context of the discussion on Laocoon. Steiner believed that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) had misunderstood the meaning of the famous sculpture and he, instead, interpreted the scene of Laocoon’s torment as a peculiar moment, in which his body is being fragmented into two parts, namely the physical that will eventually be devoured by the massive snakes, and the etheric that will ascend to the astral field.

In the whole, Steiner launched a scathing attack towards materialistic values, commercial ethos and scientific rationalism. Seen in this light, Steiner’s intransigent stance towards modernity is a typical reactionary device in order to avoid both materialistic debasement on the one hand and academic obsolescence on the other. By asserting his difference and otherness he struggled to cultivate a market for his anthroposophical works and create a seedbed for an impending cultural revival and re-spiritualization of art and society.

Nevertheless, Steiner’s engagement in artistic production is more evident through his lectures on colour theory. These lectures, which were also stenographed, had for Steiner a twofold strategic purpose: to give recommendations and advices to artists and on the other hand to co-create new synergies and relations between them. The painter Maria Strakosch-Giesler (1877–1970), a former student of Kandinsky, provides a detailed account of how, after the conclusion of the lecture, the artists would assemble to discuss their findings, compare their notes or seek to obtain clarification on particular issues. As becomes clear from Giesler’s notes, Steiner’s main focus was on the elucidation of the so-called ‘colour issue’. For Steiner, the painter’s capability to paint the spiritual Mysteries out of the inner virtues of the world of colour has irrevocably been lost, since the colours artists learned to receive

47 Steiner, Kunstgeschichte als Abbild innerer geistiger Impulse, see lecture no. I, ‘Cimabue, Giotto und andere italienische Maler’, Dornach, 8 October 1916, 15.
48 Steiner, Kunstgeschichte als Abbild innerer geistiger Impulse, lecture no. IX, ‘Griechische und Römische Plastik, Renaissance-Plastik’, 140.
49 Steiner, Kunstgeschichte als Abbild innerer geistiger Impulse, lecture no. IX, ‘Griechische und Römische Plastik, Renaissance-Plastik’, Dornach, on 24 January 1917,
50 For a compilation, see Rudolf Steiner, Farberkenntnis: Ergänzungen zu dem Band “Das Wesen der Farben”, Hella Wiesberger and Heinrich O. Proskauer, eds, Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1990.
with their senses are already lifeless.\textsuperscript{52} Hence, Steiner proposed meditation practices, by means of which the art student could obtain some colour experience in other dimensions. Strakosch-Giesler recounts that, in 1908, when she was attending Steiner’s lectures in Berlin, received by him meditation exercises in order to surpass the barrier imposed by figurative art and eventually abandon the impressionist style of painting.\textsuperscript{53}

In a lecture in Stuttgart in 1922, Steiner was discussing the importance of the experience of perspective through colour. He even called on Strakosch-Giesler to count the light and dark nuances in Dürer’s \textit{Melancholia} and to transfer the work in colour, carefully taking into account every nuance to be translated into a different colour tone. The purpose of this study in light and dark was to teach the way ‘form must come from colour’ and, on a broader sense, to reveal the mysteries of light over minerals, plants, animals and human beings.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, in the context of the two rival aesthetic approaches to painting, couched in the two Italian words \textit{colore} and \textit{disegno}, Steiner is staunchly in favour of the prior; he concludes: ‘in the act of painting all must be pulled through the colour; if it were possible not to draw, for drawing means lying’.\textsuperscript{55}

The blackboard drawings

One important aspect of Steiner’s lectures was the use of a blackboard \([\textit{Wandtafelzeichnung}]\), by means of which Steiner sought to enhance the audience’s understanding by visualizing complicated ideas, concepts and thinking processes. According to the graphic designer Assja Turgenieff (1890–1966), who together with her husband, the Russian symbolist writer Andrei Bely (1880–1934) lived and worked at the first Goetheanum in Dornach, Steiner, in the course of his lectures, used to draw or write with a white or coloured chalk on a blackboard, ‘either to emphasize a term, a name, a year, or to break down a complex issue by means of a scheme, or just to enliven a thought by a drawn gesture’.\textsuperscript{56} Over the course of the lecture, Steiner would modify these initially unsophisticated sketches by adding and working over the visual information, a practice that would eventually result in more elaborate sketches depicting floating wavelets, intersecting circles and colourful parallel or interwoven lines that quiver up and down \([\text{fig. 2}]\). However, after the conclusion of the talk, the blackboard was erased in order to be used for the following lecture. The reason that more than 1,000 blackboard drawings have been preserved is due to the initiative of Emma Stolle (1871–1956), Steiner’s colleague and attendee of his lectures, who, from 1916 onwards, began covering the blackboard

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Strakosch-Giesler, \textit{Die Erlöste Sphinx}, 10. Steiner urges his students to ‘see through the colour’s soul’ [Die Farbe muss daher \textit{durchseelt} warden] (emphasis by Steiner).
\item[53] Strakosch-Giesler, \textit{Die Erlöste Sphinx}, 17.
\item[55] Strakosch-Giesler, \textit{Die Erlöste Sphinx}, 12.
\item[56] ‘[…] entweder um einen Begriff, einen Namen, eine Jahreszahl hervorzuheben, oder um einen komplexen Sachverhalt anhand eines Schemas aufzuschlüsseln, oder auch nur, um einen Gedanken wie durch eine Geste zu beleben’. Assja Turgenieff, quoted in \textit{Berichte - Dokumente Beiträge zur Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe}, 103: 1989, 63.
\end{footnotes}
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surfaces that Steiner used in his lectures with sheets of black paper, and then dating and storing the resulting drawings. Sometimes, two or three blackboards were prepared in this way and remained at Steiner’s disposal. Despite the number of artists that attended Steiner’s lectures, no commentaries on the sketches that Steiner made on the blackboards are preserved. However, we may surmise that it would be likely that some artists copied the images during or after the conclusion of the lectures, even if the blackboard drawings were not intended to be regarded as artworks.

Figure 2 Rudolf Steiner, Blackboard Drawing from the lecture ‘Das Anschauungserlebnis der Denktätigkeit und der Sprachtätigkeit’, delivered in Dornach, Basel, on 20 April, 1923, GA 84. Rudolf Steiner Archives, Goetheanum, Dornach.

Through these colour-woven networks of polyvalence, Steiner sought to graphically explain to his audience complex concepts and ideas, in other words, to

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abstractly animate the very process of thinking. In that sense, Steiner’s aim was not to present fixed images, to which one could attach specific meanings, but rather to indicate that concepts are always in the process of becoming, namely, temporary solidifications that can be activated, neutralized, brought to a rest and again back to motion. Rather than evoking a combination of image and text perceived intellectually, Steiner denotes that it is the very movement of thinking that is materialized over the blackboards’ surface. This again recalls Goethe’s reception by Steiner, namely the notion that an idea, in the Platonic sense, does not appear through a sensory phaenomenon, but the sensory phenomenon in the form of an idea. Therefore, Beauty is not the divine in a sensually real garment but the opposite, the sensually real in a divine garment. In other words, the artist’s mission consists in achieving a synthesis between science and art, by means of which abstract concepts would be brought to life in a fluid form of rhythmically animated image making, analogous to the flow of thoughts and concepts that are engendered in a philosopher’s mind. It is quite evident from the above, how pointing towards a tangible understanding, through intuition, of abstract phaenomena, Steiner has been undermining not only the very foundations of traditional academic painting—sowing the ground for a subsequent fruitful and rewarding harvest—but also reevaluating hierarchical orders, notions and doctrines of both scientific and religious origins.

Steiner’s lecture on Nikolaos Gyzis in 1910

In 1910, Rudolf Steiner presented before the members of the Theosophical Society in Munich the mystery drama by French Theosophist Édouard Schuré (1841–1929), The Children of Lucifer [Les Enfants de Lucifer], as well as his own Rosicrucian play The Portal of Initiation [Die Pforte der Einweihung]. During that time, from the 16th to the 26th of August, Steiner delivered a series of lectures on the Secrets of the Bible Story of Creation [Die Geheimnisse der biblischen Schöpfungsgeschichte], and on 25 August he added to his program a smaller speech on the painter Nikolaos Gyzis. On 26

58 Steiner, ‘Goethe als Vater einer neuen Ästhetik’, 22; Steiner, Goethes Weltanschauung, 26; this conforms to what is discussed above in regard to Delville and Steiner; see footnote no. 37.
59 ‘Es ist eine und dieselbe Wahrheit, die der Philosoph im Form des Gedankens, der Künstler in Form des Bildes darstellt’; see Steiner, Goethes Weltanschauung, 26.
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August 1910, a day after the speech, four members of the Theosophical Society founded the Theosophical and Artistic Fund (Theosophisch-künstlerischer Fonds), aiming at subsidizing Steiner’s theatrical performances and more importantly at finding a place to house them.62

Figure 3 Nikolaos Gyzis, Behold, the Bridegroom Cometh (1899-1900). Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, Athens, National Gallery, inv. Π.641.

Rudolf Steiner’s lecture referred to a well-known painting by Gyzis, the Behold the Bridegroom Cometh (1899–1900), which is now preserved in the National Gallery of Athens, but, at that time, was kept by his family in the artist’s studio in Munich [fig. 3]. Steiner dedicated his lecture on this painting, which he named “Through the light, the love” [Aus dem Lichte, die Liebe].63 For the purposes of the


62 Zander, Anthroposophie in Deutschland, 1081.
63 Rudolf Steiner, ‘Aus dem Lichte die Liebe’, Blätter für Anthroposophie 3:12, 1951, 421–26. The lecture was preserved by the anthroposophist Carlo Septimus Picht (1887-1954), a fervent adherent and editor of Rudolf Steiner’s oeuvre; Carlo Septimus Picht, ‘Nikolaus Gysis. Zum
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lecture, Steiner commissioned a photographic reproduction of the painting to be made in smaller format, which is now preserved in the Rudolf Steiner Archives in the Goetheanum, in Dornach [fig. 4].

Gyzis was a prominent painter who spent his entire life in Munich, initially studying there before becoming a professor at the local Academy of Fine Arts from 1888 until his death in 1901. Steiner’s admiration for the painter chimes with the fact that Gyzis, at the meridian of his artistic life, left behind the traditional genre


The commission was given to the firm C. Kuhn in Munich. The proportions of the painting were 42.5 x 42.5 cm. See Steiner, ‘Aus dem Lichte die Liebe’, 424.

Among his students in the Academy were Alfred Kubin (1877–1959), the German graphic artist, August Heitmüller (1873-1935), the set designer Ernst Julian Stern (1876-1954), the Romanian painter, Ştefan Popescu (1872-1948), and Tadeusz Rychter (1873–1943), who would eventually become an anthroposophist. The painter and theosophist Fidus, who joined Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach’s (1851–1913) commune of Hölriegelskreuth in Munich in the summer 1887, and later met Rudolf Steiner in the German Theosophical Society, is frequently mentioned as Gyzis’s student; see Jost Hermand and Gregory Mason, ‘Meister Fidus: Jugend–Hippie to Aryan Faddist’, Comparative Literature Studies, vol. 12, 3, 1975: 288–307 (here, 291); Massimo Introvigne, ‘Fidus (1868–1948). A German Artist from Theosophy to Nazism’, Aries – Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism, 17, 2017, 215-242 (here, 225). The original source mentioning Fidus as Gyzis’s student is actually an alleged autobiographical note written by Fidus and published by the art critic Rudolf Klein in 1896; see Rudolf Klein, ‘Fidus’, Die Gesellschaft, 3, 1896: 1004–1009; There, Fidus mentions that Gyzis warmly responded to his inclination to depict things not as they appear to be in their ‘absolute and transient form’, but as they should be ideally (p. 1004); However, Fidus’s name does not appear in the register books of the Munich Academy of Fine Arts under Gyzis’s professorship. Considering that Fidus enrolled in the Academy on 30 April 1887, only to leave it and return later, one could assume that on his comeback he was more an attendee of Gyzis’s lectures in the Academy rather than a registered student.
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scenes that were typical for a professor in the Academy and orientated towards a more spiritual painting, comprised of strange angelic beings of apocalyptic imagery [fig. 5]. As it might be inferred from his correspondence, by the early 1890s onward, Gyzis underwent a kind of religious crisis and embraced aspects of the theosophical doctrine that coincided with his own worldview.

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In 1979, during a conversation with Greek art historian and curator Marilena Kassimati in Munich, Ewald Petritschek (1917–1997, Gyzis’s grandson and Penelope Gyzis’s son) stated that, at the twilight of his life, the painter had been acquainted with theosophical literature; Marilena Kassimati, ‘Η καλλιτεχνική προσωπικότητα του Νικολάου Γύζη μέσα από το ημερολόγιο, τις επιστολές του και τις καταγραφές άλλων καλλιτεχνών: μια νέα ανάγνωση της “Ελληνικότητας”’ [*The Artistic Personality of Nikolaos Gyzis as seen through his journal, his letters and the other artists’ testimonies: a new reading of Gyzis’s “Greekness”*], Kostas Danousis, ed., *Νικόλαος Γύζης: Ο Τήνιος εθνικός ζωγράφος* [*Nikolaos Gyzis: The National Painter of Tinos*], conference proceedings, Athens: Study Society of Tinos, 2002, 37–70, here 45–46.
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Gyzis must have been aware of the spiritual activities and researches that took place in Munich in the late nineteenth century. During that period Munich, Germany’s Kunstadt, became a flourishing centre for the theory and practice of occultism, spiritualism and parapsychology, all of which constituted the seedbed for political and especially artistic ebullition. The allurement of spiritualism as a battering ram against the impregnable fortress of science and its ideological medium, positivism, was shared by many artists and intellectuals at that time, most prominently among them the Munich Secessionists Albert von Keller (1844-1920) and Gabriel von Max (1840-1915).

Thus, apart from the secularization of religious themes which triggered enormous resistance on the part of the Catholic Church, there has evolved a wider spiritual upheaval that led to profound changes in the field of visual arts, since the invalidation of dogmas meant that traditional iconographies were no more binding. This deeper understanding of religious sentiments has often been filtered through theosophical doctrines, as many researchers have recently indicated, and has been canalized to the visual arts, leading gradually to the dematerialization of subject matter.

Steiner’s lecture on Gyzis is divided into two parts. In the first part, Steiner discusses the aspirations of the theosophical movement and the hurdles that are raised on the theosophist’s path towards spiritual enlightenment. In this context, he draws on Goethe’s Song for Mohammed [Mahomets Gesang] as well as on his own Mystery Play, The Portal of Initiation. In the second part, however, Steiner lays emphasis on the esoteric and cosmological aspect of Gyzis’s painting.

The scene depicts the figure of Christ seated on an altar-shaped throne while various rings of fire are coiling vehemently in vorticose motions up to the margins of the picture, where the angelic hosts genuflect waiting for the Revelation. This magical chamber resembles the interior of a cathedral, but, at the same time, gives the impression of an impending end of the world by a huge conflagration, or, as Proclus would say, of ‘a formless fire, from which a voice is sent forth, a sumptuous light, rushing like a spiral around the field’. Gyzis began working on this large

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69 On this subject, see Veit Loers and Pia Witzmann, ‘Münchens okkultistisches Netzwerk’, in Okkultismus und Avantgarde, 238–244.
70 For a detailed analysis of the lecture’s content, see Spyros Petritakis, “‘Through the Light, the Love’: The Late Religious Work of Nikolaos Gyzis (1842–1901) under the Light of the Theosophical Doctrine in Munich in the 1890s’. A paper presented at the conference ‘Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy and the Arts in the Modern World’, Amsterdam, 25–27 September 2013.
71 See footnote 1.
A series of preparatory sketches, drafts and studies of the painting exist in National Gallery of Athens that demonstrate that the idea of this religious work germinated in Gyzis’s mind in the early 1890s and preoccupied him for the largest part of the decade. The work, however, remained unfinished, though the separate drafts stand on their own as individual works of art and they were exhibited as such. See Kalligas, Νικόλαος Γύζης, 176-188; Missirli, Νικόλαος Γύζης, 288-305.
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reading of the painting brings forth two key aspects that will underlie as a leitmotiv his future lectures. The first aspect concerns the typology of the angelic ranks and is linked with esoteric Christology, while the second relates to the stylistic vocabulary and is associated with Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* (1810).

Since the German Theosophists’ aesthetic predilections were leaning more towards the Madonnas of Raphael (1483–1520), Steiner, at the beginning of his lecture, admonished his audience not to be taken aback by the sketch-like, vaporous colouring of the painting. He then urged it to pay greater attention to the iconographic details. According to Steiner’s mytho-cosmogony, planetary entities that traverse the epochs work with their forces on the formation of the universe. Every single physical phenomenon, such as light and warmth, is a manifestation of the activity of those spiritual beings. Steiner borrows the angelic nomenclature by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*De Coelesti Hierarchia*) in order to arrange these beings in higher or lower ranks. Hence, Steiner maintains that Gyzis’ painting depicts earth’s evolutionary stages, during which the angelic ranks, the Hierarchies, bestow humanity with potentialities. More interestingly, he lays emphasis on the depiction of the Thrones, the most powerful celestial beings, which are subtly painted as fire-wheels in a symmetrical order around the seated figure of the Bridegroom. These fire-wheels are associated with Earth’s first stage of evolution, which is known as the Saturn-condition. In a lecture preceding that on Gyzis, Steiner had elaborated more on that issue. During this Saturn-stage, a huge ‘weaving warmth’ emanating from the Thrones reached as far as the orbit of the present planet Saturn. The Thrones are thus carriers of a condensed energy, the direct expression of God’s Will, that is going to be worked upon by the other angelic orders. Steiner imagined the scene of creation as a fiery circle, in which the choir of angels participate in a kind of spiritual waltz—with the Thrones, the highest spiritual order, constituting the nucleus and the other Hierarchies radiating their own luminous nature from it. Finally, he argued that the gradual unravelling of colours from yellow and yellow-red to indigo-blue corresponded to the various stages of human evolution.

However, it’s not clear whether Steiner configured the above cosmological schema after seeing Gyzis’ painting or whether he had already been familiar with a more traditional iconography related to the Empyrean, as is the case of Gustave Doré’s (1832-1883) famous illustration of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Yet, the emphasis that Steiner laid on the Thrones suggests that there has not been any other iconographic source which he may have used other than that by Gyzis. Later, in his

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76 For this rare iconographic theme, see Petritakis, “Through the Light, the Love”.
77 ‘Wärmewebens’, see Steiner, *Die Geheimnisse der biblischen Schöpfungsgeschichte*; lecture on 24 August 1910, 142.
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series of lectures on colour that he delivered in Dornach from 1921 to 1924, Steiner, by returning perhaps to Gyzis, directly linked colours with angelic beings. For the purposes of the lecture Steiner even made a drawing (perhaps on a blackboard) showing a swirling coloured circle, where, supposedly, the angelic beings emerge in red-yellow and disappear in blue-violet.78

In his lecture on Gyzis, Steiner also drew the audience’s attention to the two cosmic spheres that glow at the upper part of Gyzis’s scene, aptly correlating them

Figure 10 Nikolaos Gyzis, Behold, the Bridegroom Cometh (1899-1900). Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, Athens, National Gallery, inv. Π.641 (photographic reproduction); Michelangelo, The Creation of the Sun, Moon and Vegetation, fresco, Sistine Chapel ceiling (photographic reproduction), published in Rudolf Steiner, ‘Aus dem Lichte die Liebe’, Blätter für Anthroposophie, vol. 3, 12, 1951 (plate).

with the genesis scene by Michelangelo (1475-1564) in the Cappella Sistina in Rome [fig. 10]. Furthermore, he argued that the scene echoes the moment at which the new God hovers above to create the world, whereas the old God departs leaving behind

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demolished shells of the old realm. As Max Gümbel-Seiling (1879-1967), a member of the German Theosophical Society and later of the Anthroposophical Society who had contributed to the preparation of the Mystery Plays in Munich during that summer, recalled, Steiner imbued the two spheres of the painting with a further cosmological meaning. He argued that, in Blavatskyan terms, the ancient planet on the left of the scene echoes the astronomical period of Manvantara (manifestation) and the new one on the right, the period of Pralaya (retraction). Most of the Theosophists were deeply acquainted with the above terms, which denoted, according to the Theosophical Ontology, the eternal manifestation of the cyclic procession of derivations and retractions. Whereas Manvantara denotes the periods of universe’s manifestation, Pralaya stands for the ‘sleep stage’, during which each cyclic universe submerges. Two identical drawings made, the one by Danish painter and Anthroposophist Arild Rosenkrantz (1870-1964) and the other by Futurist artist Arnaldo Ginna (Arnaldo Ginanni Corradini, 1890-1982), suggest that this notion of astronomical periods has also been associated with certain colour theories. Each drawing represents two coloured circles, perhaps the two stages of Manvantara and Pralaya, the one in orange-red and the other in indigo-blue. At the same time, the circles act as electrical poles that regulate energetic waves rendered in various colours. In his lecture on Gyzis, Steiner had correlated indigo-blue colour with rapt devotion and humility whereas red with chastity. Later, in his art lectures in Dornach, Steiner will elaborate further on this relationship between indigo-blue that exhibits a centrifugal quality and yellow-orange which exhibits a centripetal one. The artist Maria Strakosch-Giesler provides a good account of how Steiner demonstrated the use of the above colours in a series of examples, from Cimabue and Giotto to Filippo Lippi (1406-1469). It is evident that the above comments on colour derive from Goethe’s Farbenlehre, where the German philosopher examined the impact of colours on emotions. At the same period, Kandinsky was delving into Goethe’s colour theory for a depiction, see Kugler and Wendtland, eds, Rudolf Steiner – das malerische Werk, 13; Mario Verdone, ‘Abstraktion, Futurismus und Okkultismus – Ginna, Corra und Rosà’, in Okkultismus und Avantgarde, 477–496 (image, 492).

82 A. Rosenkrantz, who met Steiner in 1912, had also written a treatise on colours; see Arild Rosenkrantz, Fruits of Anthroposophy – an Introduction to The Work of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, London: The Threefold Commonwealth, 1922. A. Ginna was a Theosophist and was registered as a member in the registers of the International Theosophical Society in Adyar on February 19, 1913 (Theosophical Society General Register, no. 50, 611 – available through the web site: https://tsmembers.org/, operated by the Dutch-Canadian art historian, Marty Bax).
85 Goethe also remarks that blue has the tendency to ‘flee from us’ whether red ‘gives an impression of seriousness and dignity’; see Matthaei, ed., Goethes Farbenlehre, 170–172.
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under the influence of Rudolf Steiner.\(^6\) In 1910, Kandinsky painted his first abstract watercolour and completed the manuscript of On the Spiritual in Art [Über das Geistige in der Kunst], the first edition of which bears the date 1912, although it was printed in December 1911.\(^7\) Since 1908, Kandinsky, together with Gabriele Münter (1877–1962), had settled down in Murnau, Munich, and thus had abundant opportunity to cultivate his interests in the teachings of Steiner, whose lectures he had attended the same year in Berlin.\(^8\) To what extent Kandinsky availed himself of this opportunity and attended the lecture Steiner gave on Gysis, remains yet uncertain. Since the On the Spiritual in Art was written in 1910 and published later in 1911-1912, it remains a crucial question, whether Kandinsky was aware of the lecture on Gysis and Steiner’s discussion on colours and angelic forces. Gyzis’s application of warm-cold colouring together with its spiritual connotations as read by Steiner — the red draws on life, the indigo draws it away— allows us to read in the artist’s œuvre the prefiguration of imminent cultural phenomena.

Taking these strands together, it becomes clear that Steiner saw in Gyzis’s Bridegroom two major traditions that he regarded as essential for the formation of an aesthetic paradigm. By weaving together esoteric Christianity with Goethe’s colour theory and projecting them into an art historical narrative that he aptly anchored on an esoteric dogma, Steiner was ready to inform and reinvent artistic practice.

**Rudolf Steiner’s aesthetic horizon of expectations**

In order to reconstruct Steiner’s aesthetic horizon of expectations, one should primarily take into account Steiner’s engagement with works by contemporary artists before the foundation of the Anthroposophical Society in 1913, at a point very crucial for the understanding not only of the formation of his aesthetics but also for the configuration of art-historical discourse. Steiner was deeply impressed by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), who by that time had reached the acme of his reputation, not without receiving much critical opprobrium, though.\(^9\) Steiner extolled in Böcklin’s paintings the use of vivid and glowing colour and saluted Böcklin’s denial to paint from nature or to use models for his paintings. Steiner lauded the painter precisely for breaking away from the traditional model painting, which he judged to be an artistic aberration engendered by the materialistic worldview. Thus, Böcklin’s approach forebode Steiner’s stance towards traditional painting practices.

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\(^6\) On this subject, see Ringbom, ‘Art in “The Epoch of the Great Spiritual”’.


\(^9\) Steiner saw Böcklin’s paintings for the first time in an art exhibition in Vienna (in Tuchlauben), presumably in 1882; see, Steiner, *Farbenkenntnis*, 501; See also the famous scathing critique uttered by Julius Meier Graefe (1867-1935); Julius Meier Graefe, *Der Fall Böcklin und die Lehre von den Einheiten*, Stuttgart, Julius Hoffmann, 1905.
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Later, on his first two visits to London, in the summers of 1902 and 1903, Steiner was fascinated by the colour creations of Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), whom he named ‘a magnificent painter’ [herrlichen Maler] and whose treatment of light and darkness in his paintings, he acclaimed. While Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, a post he took up in 1807 and held until 1837, Turner took issue with Moses Harris’s (1730–1788) colour system, based on Isaac Newton’s (1642–1726) prismatic colour theory, and regarded light and darkness as the actual poles of colour experience. Defying the representational norms of the Academy and focusing on a different aesthetic basis of pictorial theory, Turner was heading towards a more immaterial painting. Indeed, the two renowned paintings, Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge (1843) and Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis (1843) disclose Turner’s attempt to articulate a theory based on Goethe’s Farbenlehre according to which the different gradations of colour are identified with the various modifications of light. The latter painting, in fact, echoes the two poles that are discussed in Goethe’s Farbenlehre (1810). The central scene is occupied by a yellow light that gradually develops to a white yellow as it reaches its peak. On the other hand, it becomes darker, namely bluer, as it moves close to the edges of the picture. In other words, the impression of depth is given by the weaving of light and dark tones, or to recall Goethe, by the different modifications of colour.

One could easily notice that the weaving of light and darkness by dint of swirls of tones is indeed common in both Turner’s painting and Gysis’s Bridegroom. Following St. Augustine’s dictum that ‘God is light’, Gyzis literally depicts God Himself in the middle of the scene as pure yellow, while the fire rings surrounding him vary from yellow-orange to red until they end up to indigo-blue at the margins of the image. Moreover, delicate threads of golden tones spread throughout the scene lending overall a sense of unity. In one of his preparatory drawings on Bridegroom, Gyzis explored this warm-cold antithesis by constructing some kind of colour wheel

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90 In Steiner’s view, Turner seemed now more significant than Böcklin. See, Edwin and Paul G. Bellmann Froböse, eds, Rudolf Steiner, Briefe, vol. II, 1890-1925, Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1987, 432; Steiner, Farberkenntnis, 244. On his return journey from London, in 1902, Steiner visited the Wiertz Museum in Brussels (Antoine Joseph Wiertz, 1806-1865). Back in Berlin, he gave a private lecture on Wiertz’s painting Things of the present in front of the people of the future (1855, oil on canvas, 180 x 234, Wiertz Museum), in which he praised the painter’s prophetic idea that the achievements of our culture will appear tiny to the spiritual giants of the future; See, Steiner, Farberkenntnis, 245; moreover, Steiner must have sensed that the painting’s formal and iconographic elements derive from a careful study on Michelangelo. Besides, it is stated that ‘Wiertz (...) dreamed only of producing works which should excel those of Raphael and Michelangelo’; see, Clara Erskine Clement, ‘Antoine Joseph Wiertz. I. The Biography of the Artist’, The American Art Review, vol. 2, 1, 1880: 13–18, here, 16.

91 Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge, 1843, oil on canvas, 78,7 x 78,1 cm, Tate Britain, London; Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis, 1843, oil on canvas, 78,5 x 78,5 cm, Tate Britain, London; Martin Kemp, The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 299-303.

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[fig. 11]. Goethe also has observed that “Yellow is the colour nearest to light,” in contrast to the other pole, blue, while gold is the purest and brightest state of yellow.93

This distinction between aerial and material colours, as well as the polarity of darkness and light may have rung a familiar chord in Steiner. After seeing Turner in London, Steiner must have espoused Turner’s method of painting with swirling brushstrokes and avoiding a strict, preparatory sketch. He must have recognized in those paintings the hypostatization of Goethe’s aesthetic creed, namely, the predominance of a dynamic colour-tone congruence that refuted the well-established Newtonian tradition.94 This duality between light and darkness, with colour being the mixture of the two, is also reminiscent of Aristotle colour theory, as it appears in the Περὶ αἰσθητῶν καὶ αἰσθήσεως (De sensu et sensibilibus), a work which was well known to both Goethe and Steiner.95 In a more esoteric context, the Manichaeans had

93 It may have been that Gysis was also aware of the German Edition of Goethe’s Farbenlehre (1890-1), which included an introduction by Steiner; Matthaei, ed., Goethes Farbenlehre, 169; for an English trans. see, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Theory of Colours, trans., Charles Lock Eastlake, London: J. Murray, 1840, 307.
95 Steiner, Goethes Weltanschauung, 14.
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set forth similar doctrines, with which Steiner was equally acquainted.\(^9^6\) Turner’s link with spirituality should not strike us as irrelevant and remote to the issue; it was Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006) who placed Turner among the eccentric Northern route that runs the gamut of history of modern painting without stopping at Paris, that is to say, from Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), through Kandinsky and Mondrian, up to Mark Rothko (1903-1970).\(^9^7\)

**Steiner and the ‘Aenigma Group’**

Gyzis’s work was also very well known to the artists’ group *Aenigma*, which was mainly steered by Steiner and whose members were attendants of his lectures and advocates of his ideas. Through archival research I drew the conclusion that Steiner familiarized himself with Gyzis’s work after meeting Anna May Rychter (born Kerpen, 1864-1954), a student of the painter, whose father, Heinrich May, was Gyzis’s personal doctor.\(^8^8\) Margarita Hauschka, Anna May-Rychter’s niece, recounts that in the Atelier of Gyzis’s young student in Adalbertsstrasse in Munich, in the vicinity of the Theosophical Branch, a picture was hanging, supposedly with the title *The Majesty of God [Majestät Gottes]*, perhaps a variation or a lost sketch of the *Bridegroom*.\(^9^9\) As Tadeusz Rychter (1873-1943), a young painter from Poland and also Gyzis’s student, formerly associated with the cultural modernist Milieu of the political cabaret *Kleiner grüner Ballon* [Small Green Balloon] in Krakow, came to rent the atelier, recognized Gyzis’s painting at once and solicited to keep it together with the apartment. Since Anna May rejected the naive offer, Rychter sufficed to make a small replica of the original work and after that the two artists came into a relationship. It was through Rychter that Anna May acquainted herself with Rudolf Steiner in 1905-1906 and perhaps through her that Rudolf Steiner familiarized himself with the work of the painter. It seems also that Steiner had assigned to May


\(^8^8\) From 1897 onwards, Gyzis kept orderly correspondence with Anna May which is now preserved at the national Gallery of Athens. In these letters we find out that Gyzis thought highly of Anna and trusted her many of his future plans, asked her advice, and shared with her the pathos of music.

the task of painting various works depicting Archangels [fig. 12]. At the same time, it is recorded that a copy of the Bridegroom decorated the theosophical Branch of Munich in 1910 and it was especially known to its members.\(^{100}\)

Anna May, who worked as a stage decorator for the Mystery plays in Munich in 1910, that is to say, at the time when the lecture on Gyzis was given, received from Steiner an analytical commission for a painting which was intended to decorate the Johannesbau in Munich and should depict the different stages of Christianity, from Solomon through the Holy Grail and up to the Rosicrucianism.\(^{101}\) Steiner, in particular, was heavily involved in the creation process. This threefold painting, named as The Grail Triptychon, reminiscent in many ways Gyzis’s late paintings, is preserved today through a transparency by May’s niece [fig. 13], since the original was destroyed during the bombings at the Second World War in the Hamburger Waldorfschule, where it was kept.\(^{102}\) Under Steiner’s guidance, May-Rychter included a detailed written description of the work when she exhibited it in Glaspalast in February 1918 [fig. 14], some months after the Aenigma exhibition that took place in the Gallery The Kingdom [Das Reich], run by writer and alchemist Alexander von Bernus (1880-1965) [fig. 15].\(^{103}\)

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102 Her husband’s traces were lost soon after he was commissioned to paint a church in Poland in 1939. Anna May cultivated in Palestine narrow contacts with other anthroposophists; see, Gottlieb, “Anna von Rychter-May,” 128-129; Hauschka, “Das Triptychon ‘Gral’,” 188-189.
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Figure 13 Anna May Rychter, *The Triptych of Grail*, 1912-1914 (now lost), 4 x 2.5 m. Transparency preserved by May-Rychter’s niece, Margarethe Hauschka, Rudolf Steiner Archives, Goetheanum, Dornach.

Figure 14 Anna May Rychter, *The Triptych of Grail*, 1912-1914 (Detail, Central Panel), 1912-1914, photographic reproduction, Münchener Kunstaustellung, exh. cat., Glaspalast, Munich, 1918, 43. 

Figure 15 *Aenigma, Gruppe bildender Künstler, Gemälde – Plastik*, exh. cat., Kunsthaus Das Reich, Munich, 5 February – 15 March 1918.

Before departing with Rychter to Palestine, where after her husband’s disappearance, she lived as a kind of recluse, Anna-May was tightly associated with the ‘Künstlergruppe Aenigma’, to which both May and Rychter adhered. This group, which exhibited collectively between 1918–1932, was founded by Maria Strakosch—
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Giesler (1877–1970) and Irma von Duczyńska (1869–1932), who both had received an academic art education and were ardent feminists with avant-garde tendencies.\(^{104}\) Irma von Duczyńska had been a member of the Vienna Secession since 1901 and since 1904 a member of the artist group *Hagebund*.\(^{105}\) In 1925 she published a series of woodcuts that dealt with the theme of Parsifal [figs 16, 17].\(^{106}\) On the other hand, Strakosch-Giesler had acquainted herself with Steiner much earlier during a lecture delivered in the house of Architecture in Berlin, in 1908.\(^{107}\)

![Figure 16. Irma von Duczyńska, ‘The Good Friday’ [Karfreitag], no. 14, from *Parcival*, 1925, coloured woodcut, 25 x 25 cm, Private Collection.](image)

![Figure 17. Irma von Duczyńska, ‘Concealed Words’ [Verborgene Worte], no. 20, from *Parcival*, 1925, coloured woodcut, 25 x 25 cm, Private Collection.](image)

During the first exhibition in 1918, the group counted twelve members, of which eight were women.\(^{108}\) This aspect needs further elucidation. Occult movements had, indeed, a special appeal to women with feminist proclivities, partly because of their dissatisfaction towards institutional religion.\(^{109}\) This consonance of

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\(^{105}\) She has exhibited her work in Munich, Dresden, Krakow and Paris, see, *Ver Sacrum*, 1, 1903, where several woodcuts by her have been published.

\(^{106}\) The coloured woodcuts, 23 in total, were carved in pear wood. A. W. ‘Eine Parzivalfolge von Irma von Duczyńska’, *Die Graphischen Künste*, 49, 1926: 75–78.

\(^{107}\) Fäth, ‘Disdefinierte anthroposophische Kunst’, 82–85.

\(^{108}\) Members were the following: Maria Strakosch-Giesler, Irma von Duczyńska, O. von Kraszewska, Jesa d’Ouckh, Cecile Peipers, Adelheid Petersen (1878–1966), Anna May-Ryhter, Tadeusz von Ryhter, Karl H. W. Stockmeyer (1858–1930), Stanislas Stückgold (1868–1933), Hans Wildermann (1884–1954), H. Wolf-Blume. There has been a revival of the group between 1975 and 1986 under the title *Aenigma – Basler Galerie der Sektion für Bildende Künste am Goetheanum, Dornach*, see Fäth, ‘Disdefinierte anthroposophische Kunst’, 30.

\(^{109}\) For Steiner’s stance towards women see, Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 391–397.
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occultism with contemporary feminism had undoubtedly been prepared by the prominence women had already enjoyed in the spiritualist movement, where feminist ideas were widespread enough. Hence, spiritualism was considered by those women with an interest in the new emancipatory movements to offer a crucial counterpart to the validation of their claim for individual fulfilment. In this light, mediumship and trance-related alterations of consciousness enabled women to voice their inner experiences and to be heard in a male-dominated world. In fact, one should not forget that, at the time, women’s access to universities and art academies was still very limited, if it was possible at all.111 It was on 6 August 1920, two years after Aenigma’s inaugural exhibition that the German Ministry of Culture decreed that women should be allowed to study in the Art Academy under the same conditions as men.112 Seen in this light, the Aenigma Exhibition, with all this leaning towards esoteric Christianity, stands out not only as an effort to reconceptualise traditional Christian imagery but furthermore as a critique to the image of conventional womanhood and rhetoric of male supremacy. Rudolf Steiner, who welcomed the inclusion of women in the group played an important role in its formation.113

Conclusion

As indicated, Steiner’s approach of Gyzis’s Bridegroom through Goethe’s aesthetic universe points to the importance of Goethe’s reception in German Theosophical circles and more specifically sheds light not only to the ideological appropriations of Goethe’s colour theory, but also to the fermentation process of abstraction at the turn of the century. Steiner projects here his experience with Turner and Goethe on Gyzis and, in doing so, he actualizes Goethe’s Farbenlehre on the horizons of younger artists that attended his lectures. In conclusion, Steiner interpreted Goethe’s aesthetics at several occasions and by 1904 was ready to combine the great German philosopher with Theosophy. In this context I would like to contend that Steiner, in his quest for a ‘theology of colours’ that would embrace the Goethe legacy, ran around 1907 into


113 Steiner also gave the name to the group; see, Maria Strakosch-Giesler, ‘Künstlergruppe “Aenigma”’, Was in der anthroposophischen Gesellschaft vorgeht, vol. 20, 1943, 59-60. We may assume that Steiner encountered the term after reading the second edition of Franz Brentano’s Neue Räthsel, in which the famous philosopher signs under the pseudonym Aenigmatias, that is Rätselschmied, creator of riddles. Franz Brentano, Neue Räthsel, (veröfﬁncht unter dem Pseudonym Aenigmatias), Wien: Verlag von Gerold’s Sohn, 1879. Steiner consulted the second edition of 1909 (Munich); see Rudolf Steiner, “Der Philosoph als Rätselschmied,” in Das Goetheanum, GA 36, 2:48, 1923, 162–165.
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Gyzis’s painting, in which he saw the different strands of his philosophic thought—the German idealistic tradition and the esoteric–Rosicrucian knowledge—becoming, eventually, congruously interlaced. The reactualization of Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* as a ‘historical necessity’ for young artists, as indicates, for example, the case of Wassily Kandinsky, coincided with the revival of esoteric Christianity promoted by the future founder of Anthroposophy. The extent of appropriation of these ideas is yet to be documented.

**Spyros Petritakis** is currently finishing his PhD in Art History at the University of Crete, Greece. His research interests and publications include the convergence between painting and music, German and East European Symbolist art, as well as the correspondences between theosophical movements and the arts. He has also studied music theory, piano and attended lessons on composition.

spyros.petritakis@gmail.com

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