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0521619351 - Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Sites of Imaginary Space

Dee Reynolds

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This book presents an innovative analysis of the role of imagination as a central concept in both literary and art criticism. Dee Reynolds brings this approach to bear on works by Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kandinsky and Mondrian. It allows her to redefine the relationship between Symbolism and abstract art, and to contribute new methodological perspectives to comparative studies of poetry and painting.

The late nineteenth/early twentieth century is a crucial period in the emergence of new modes of representation, and is currently at the forefront of critical enquiry. This is the first book to examine Symbolism and abstraction in this way, and the first to treat these poets and painters together. It is an original contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship in art history, literary history and comparative aesthetics.

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AND EARLY
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Sites of imaginary space

DEE REYNOLDS

Lecturer in French, University of Bristol



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Preface

The initial impetus for this book was my reaction to what I judged to be reductionist accounts, based on structuralist premisses, of Rimbaud's and Mallarmé's poetry. I was seduced by the suggestive power of the extraordinary language of their poetry and by the writings of phenomenologically inspired critics such as Jean-Pierre Richard, which espoused its imagery and heightened its impact. Structuralist accounts, on the other hand, insisted on the self-contained nature of these texts, which were held to 'refer' only to themselves. When I subsequently became interested in non-figurative images in painting, which, like the poetry, opened up new and unexplored worlds, I was both intrigued and irritated to find in art criticism similar affirmations of the 'self-referential' character of these images.

Although the endless search for models and formulas within structuralist and semiotic approaches held a certain appeal, I was keenly aware of the issues which they left out of account, particularly the role of the receiver's imagination in reading the text/looking at the picture. This 'receiver factor' meant that content could never be equated with allegedly 'objective', quantifiable properties of the poetic/pictorial medium. However, structuralism's *mise en cause* of the mediation of coded meanings/lived experience by verbal and visual signs drew my attention to the problematic nature of this relationship, which had not been addressed by phenomenological criticism. Later, my encounters with poststructuralism and deconstruction confirmed my suspicion that a 'naïve' approach to the analysis of signifying processes and the position of the subject within them was no longer possible. Moreover, it had become apparent to me that the discourses of structuralism and in turn of poststructuralism themselves had close links with and were directly derived from radical experimentation in literature, in particular the writing of Mallarmé, and, to a lesser extent, Rimbaud.

It was precisely when analysing such 'disruptive' texts, which

upset accepted codes of communication and relationships to reality and lived experience, that the claims of post/structuralist critics concerning self-referentiality became most extreme. However, I remained convinced that while these claims might be true of certain texts, there was a crucial category of avant-garde poetry and painting where this disruption served a different purpose. Its function here was to appeal to the reader's/spectator's imagination, using sensory, and especially visual imagery (through words in the poetry, through forms and colours in the painting) to challenge the limits of conceptual logic. This invitation to the receiver to unlock and activate the imaginary space within the medium was being occluded by the 'self-referential' school. Such art does not reflect reality, but neither does it reflect itself: it sets itself the task of producing and proposing new models for experience. In so doing, it transforms the status of the poetic/pictorial medium. In a Mallarmé sonnet or a Kandinsky canvas, the substance of words and of colours and forms itself becomes the starting point for constructing new imaginary spaces.

The poems and paintings which take this process to its furthest extreme are those which inaugurate movement away from previous communicative norms, but without becoming purely formalistic, experimenting with the medium for its own sake. Kandinsky and Mondrian appeared very close to Rimbaud and Mallarmé in this respect, and I was excited to discover, on reading their theoretical writings, many significant points of contact with Symbolist poetics. These connections became the starting point for my exploration of the role of imagination in the reception of semantically disruptive poems and paintings.

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My interest in the field of comparative aesthetics was nurtured in its early stages by David Scott, for whose intellectual stimulus and enthusiastic encouragement I will always be grateful. Clive Scott provided valuable guidance when I was writing my Ph.D. thesis. I am most grateful to the editor of this series, Malcolm Bowie, for his constructive and diplomatic comments on the manuscript. I would also like to thank those friends and colleagues who have contributed their critiques, in particular Christine Battersby and Roger McLure. Neil Crawford provided valuable information on typography. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my parents, whose encouragement and practical support were crucial in enabling me to develop the interests which led to this book, and my husband Stephen, for his continuing generosity and wizardry.

Abbreviations

BAUDELAIRE

BOC *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols.; ed. Cl. Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–6.)

KANDINSKY

KCWA *Complete Writings on Art*, 2 vols., ed. K. Lindsay and P. Vergo. (London: Faber and Faber, 1982.)

KANT

CJ *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard. (New York: Hafner Press, 1951.)

CPR *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith. (London: Macmillan, 1989.)

LIPPS

AS *Asthetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Leopold Voss, 1923, 1920; first pub. 1903 and 1906.)

MALLARMÉ

MOC *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. (Paris: Gallimard, 1945.)

MONDRIAN

MCWA *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. H. Holtzman and M. S. James. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987.)

RIMBAUD

RO *Oeuvres*, ed. S. Bernard and A. Guyaux. (Paris: Gallimard, 1981.)

SARTRE

IM *L'Imaginaire, psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1940.)