

A POST-HISTORICAL QUERY ON DWELLING:

The Human Life-Form between Darkness and Light (Chair: Paul Bouissac)

PRESENTATION—Bern (30')

PREAMBLE—when I use the term ‘post-historical’ it is not in the sense of postmodern theory, but in the sense of Fredrik Barth (my mentor in fieldwork) who made the conspicuous claim that historians have more to learn from anthropology, than anthropologists have from history (since anthropological knowledge is a bit ‘out of kilter’).

I have presently moved on the assumption that the relation between archaeology and history might be evoked along similar lines. Mostly owing to the fact that archaeology, like anthropology, is a fieldwork-based science. Meaning that what is claimed as knowledge should at least partly be rooted in fieldwork. But then including *artefacts*.

Moving from anthropology to archaeology has—for me—is based on three lines of query: **1)** what does it mean to do fieldwork on *books*? **2)** how to understand the gaps between a book as *written*, as *made* and as *read*? **3)** how can we understand the spatial orientation in a book as a space unto itself (that contains its own reality)?

In sum: can we understand the space *within* a book and the space *beyond* it, as a semiotic boundary, where the formation of *memes* can be studied, and foster a more sensorial readability of authors like Gilbert Simondon. I am thinking of the Mediaeval precedent that he gives to his notion of ‘information’ (i.e., with a formative impact).

In this paper a way of diagramming the relationship between light, darkness and colour is proposed; in which some difficulties in Goethe’s Theory of Colour (1810) are being tentatively sorted out through the study of space (cf, brief for session #366): the study of the *Book of Kells* in the wake of a learning theatre with the *Darkness Group* at KHiO.

“Recasting in evolutionary biological terms the questions that gave rise in the first place to early semiotic theories would allow Semioticians to significantly better interface with the most advanced frontiers of knowledge (such as research on memory); and avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism and intellectual isolation.” (Paul Bouissac, Semiotics as the science of memory)

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I will start by carefully attempting to delimit the scope of this intervention. It proposes a research scenario in which two case-studies are experimentally juxtaposed, in order to explore the memetic potential of joining them. The two cases are from **1)** a session with the *darkness group* at Oslo National Academy of the Arts [KHiO]; **2)** a *didactic study* of some illuminations in the Irish 9th century manuscript of the Christian Gospels—*The Book of Kells*.

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The term ‘memetic’ comes from *meme* which I am attempting to develop beyond the scope of Richard Dawkins *Selfish Gene* (2004), in the objective of understanding how the *body* learns in the wake of the Internet; or, how the body learns as it crosses the semiotic border between nature/culture, event/code. At a symposium on *belonging* at the Academy of Sciences in Budapest (1998) Witoszek defined memes as the ‘erogenous zones of culture’.

That is, relocating and rebooting the concept of meme within the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics (w/key figures as Yuri Lotman). My rationale for wanting to see how *interlocking* notions of space—Mediaeval and present—as though they were contemporaries (Agamben), is to ask if the programming of our senses spills over our studies of ancient materials in ways that can be productive in a scientific query, and may not be something we can avoid.

The selection of the Book of Kells for this case-based *research scenario* is motivated by two factors: **1)** the illuminated manuscript lends itself to the description and analysis of *spatial presentation* of the book as an *expanse* with *locations* and *sites*; **2)** the ‘visual grammar’ of the illuminations yield a *signage* for way-finding in the manuscript, as a “timescape”, that can be seen to operate both in how the illuminations are *composed* and *distributed*.

Architecture	“ornaments”	Illuminations as <i>singular</i> shapes	Illuminations <i>growing</i> from dark-pools
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To the first point—the description and analysis of how space is *presented*. Since the illuminations, understood as drawings, are not illustrations (in the sense that they *do not* pertain to communicate the contents of the manuscript in display), they are *not* functionally defined as ‘representations’. They present the text in aspects that relate to its *material existence*—manuscript on parchment (*velum*)—by the intermedium of *tactile organs as paws and claws*.

The drawn elements vary from *tangled creatures*—caught in text or in themselves—to *architectural edifices* and *ornaments*. The creatures include both animals and humans, but also creatures that *only* belong to the world of this book: “book-worms”. I have concentrated my attention of the illuminations of this set, that by far outnumber the other previously mentioned sets. So, let me pursue the point of selecting this set, or multiple, for study.

Which is to see what might be the impact from working with a multidisciplinary group devoted to the subject of darkness—i.e. the Darkness Group—on the presentational aspects of The Book of Kells, relating more directly to space

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than shape, by adapting to the subject matter. The group-session that I am referring to here included a scenographer, a student in light design, a choreographer, an interior designer, a philosopher and myself (an anthropologist).

We convened in a rehearsal room at KHiO. The space has a window-row by the ceiling equipped with blinds. We conducted the work in the group in semi-obscure. The intention was to contain the subject matter—darkness—in such a way that sharing the track record of experiences amongst the group members, could be combined with experiments in real time, which the scenographer, the choreographer and the interior designer did. While for the remainder the obscurity had a contextual function of mobilising the subject.

These two functions—contextual and experimental—unfolded different facets of a broader tendency that aggregated from the session, across the different professional interventions and activities: namely, that *neither* of us really conceived of *darkness* at the *opposite end* of *light*. In Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810) darkness is not the mere absence of light, but rather the *agent* in his broader understanding of *colour as the acts of light*.

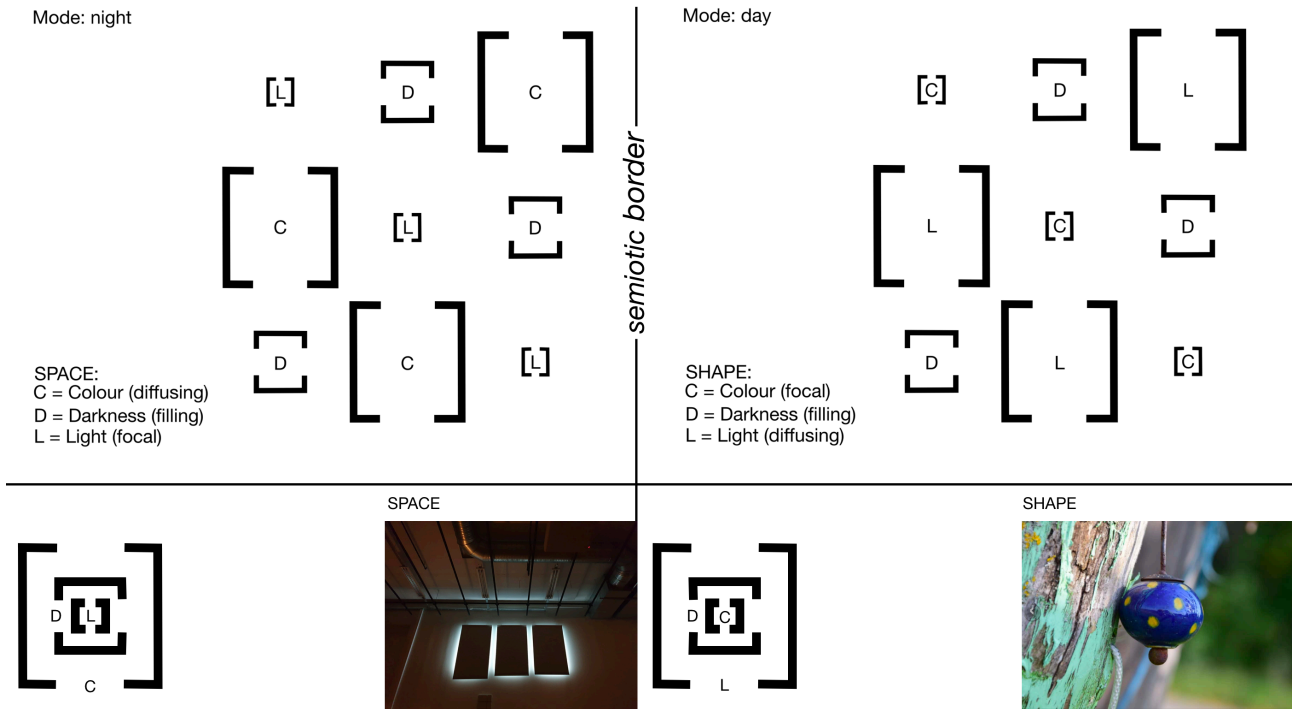
That is, an agent in which the refractory, chemical, physiological and educational aspects of colour are *bundled*: the education of the human eye—expanded through experience and produced through experiment—partake of the acts of light. Hence *darkness* can articulate the *intermedium* between *light* and *colour*: where colour is partaking of *shape* in daylight—when darkness hides in the shadows—while partaking of *space* under nocturnal conditions.

In the Talmud (Chagigah 12b¹) daylight is conceived as a sheath that prevents us from seeing the heavens. At night the sheath is removed and we see the celestial bodies. I use this here as a didactic image to convey a sense that darkness is not pitch black. 3 members of the group are professionally interested in the impact of light-pollution on the current human's ability to conceive the heavens (as it is being replaced by the "Cristal Palace" of the Internet).

The border-crossing between the cultural *contents* of the gospels and the chromatic illuminations on velum—the *container*—yields both shapes *and* space; depending on whether darkness is seen as a *background* condition (of light), and shape is *amplified*, **or** darkness is a *fill* that makes coloured elements appear as *modulations* of space (from darkness); here the *written* types of the manuscript are turned into *containers* (not coloured shapes).

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Hence the *reading-act* features *sensorially* as one of border-crossing. And what C.G. Jung coined the secret path of individuation (Miller, 2013)² allied with *darkness*—rather than *code*—in its relation to colour, shape and space. It affords a stepwise introduction of a *visual grammar* for the illuminations in the Book of Kells: from the elementary to the complex, hence indicating that shape can be derived from space, when darkness *doesn't* hide but *fills*.

I have categorised the set of illuminations—defined above—by proceeding from darkness: starting with what I have called dark-pools (1), then going to juxtaposed colour fields—that are adjacent/juxtaposed to the dark-pools (2)—then going to what I have called border-crossing spaces (3)—where the emphasis on the outline brings the illumination closer to *type*—shapes that are border-crossing unto the manuscript, often featuring paws and claws (4).

These creatures are typically enfolded—tangled—unto themselves, while transgressing their own borders and unfolding into the space of the manuscript. The there are creatures (5)—or “book-worms”—that are brought to witness the tangles enfolded and unfolding (often with an apparent

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surprise). And in **(6)** there are letters drawn into drawings, drawings tangled with letter-types. In this category I have also included holes in the velum.

On the journey from darkness to light, a greater variety of border-crossings: each crossing incorporates its own event into a category of shape that is multiplied in the manuscript, and *thus* encoded. The type of companionship featuring in this sort of inter-connection between layers added: each layer is *with* the others *without* being *as* the others. In the journey from darkness to light, the expanse of the velum is crowded with *choreographic* creatures.

Going through the book with an eye for the distribution of illuminations, I have grouped those relating to **architecture**—which usually cover the entire spread, or full sheet of velum—to **ornament** (what catches the eye if we let the decorative function prevail on us), then illumination as **singular shapes** that could lend themselves to the clever eye of an art-historian, and the obscure seeds of the **dark-pools** that sometimes proliferate on entire sheets.

With the type of crowding that occurs in these multiples, features a perhaps surprising affordance: namely, to incorporate elements that were not originally intended: such as *holes*—the work of time. They also include a few creations that appear to be marginally intended, which—*anomalies* that specifically do not call for categorisation—that remain spurious and uncoded. From this end the sense of the volume as a life-endowed growing fabrication is conveyed.

As Robert Grosseteste wrote in *De Luce* (1225)³: “Corporeity, therefore, is either light itself or the agent which performs the aforementioned operation and introduces dimensions into matter in virtue of its participation in light, and acts through the power of this same light. But the first form cannot introduce dimensions into matter through the power of a subsequent form. Therefore light is not a form subsequent to corporeity, but it is corporeity itself.”

He also stated: “For light of its very nature *diffuses itself in every direction* in such a way that a point of light will produce instantaneously a *sphere of light* of any size whatsoever, unless some opaque object stands in the way.” Here the object is not defined by its shape but only in the aspect that obstructs light—it has no colour—and concomitantly *as an agent*. NB! Goethe’s concept of darkness as an agent may have a precedent in Mediaeval alchemy (Faust)⁴.

However, what interests us here is the possibility that the illuminations in the Book of Kells might be conceived as such obstructive entities: that is, that *do not bring light* to the *subject matter* as illustrations would—as e.g. Gustave

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Dorés illustrations in *La Grande Bible de Tours* centuries later—to bring light to the text as a colourless physical object: using colours in this directive fashion would prove logically to start with darkness as a basic assumption.

Grosseteste's statement in the text *De Luce* could be a verbal representation of spatial practices handed down to him, instantiated e.g. in the Book of Kells. This is conjecture, but, as we have seen, but an array of singular instances can be parsed. And, what is a major point here, the method of *adapting to the topic*—through the intermedium of our work in the Darkness Group—prompted me to connect with a Mediaeval presentational space.

The relevance of a *contemporary* perspective on the Book of Kells—as has been at the basis of this presentation—is clearly indicated by certain facts of the Facsimile version that made in 1990: as the *holes* in the velum, the work of time, are physically reproduced; they are thereby *presented* (not represented). It directs our attention to the fact of the holes—*there are the holes*. In a copy currently sold for over 10.000€ this gives them some importance.

It is tributary of a how contingencies of corporeity—featuring in the illuminations—is paralleled at material level by the Facsimile copy, made about 1000 years *after* the original came into being, but also by the incorporation of the presentational method into the work of the Darkness Group. The point being that space is *not* something pre-existing subsequent to its presentations—determined by cultural technologies—but is a derivative from *orientation*.

This alternative should be considered in view of what can be seen to operate both in how the illuminations are *composed*—from simple to intricate—and how they are *distributed*. How the compositions are agents that obstruct and shape corporeity at the level of the human body, where the distribution conveys orientation: the multiple—featured by the illuminations—relating to the its ability to navigate and classify in the book: as a space in time.

If orientation is understood as *action*—with the corporeity of light as its underlying premise—then we can foresee a concept of *meme* as entity intervening in the extension/reduction of action space. And we can define the 'meme' as the relation between the current border unto the unknown—as defined internally as related to the contents of the manuscript (Gospels), and externally by the illuminations—acquires an unstable equilibrium vectored toward stasis.

The “minting” of memes⁵—when the border-crossing from darkness to light features a journey in a space conveyed by colour—had not come about

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without our ‘adaptation to the subject matter’ in the Darkness Group: the Book of Kells belongs to a more darkly lit world than the one we know. An attempt has thereby been made to explore and exploit the immersive affordances of memes, while maintaining research as discovery and falsification.

I aim at incorporating Alain Badiou’s work on set theory, into the study of memes: i.e., how ‘outgrowths’ and ‘singularities’ (sic) when combined, may bring about *normalisation* in the enterprise of research, immersed into an otherwise murky realm of seduction and authoritarian ideologies. The query into how *percepts* combine with *precepts*—priming bare activity into a power of owning time (Massumi)—in right politics moving from *múthos* to *pathos*⁶.

In Martin Buber’s ethics *normalisation* determines ‘being with the others without being as the others’—which can be read as a pledge for belonging (before identity). It is the mode of belonging and inclusion in a set which brings us to assemblages in layers that we see in the *Book of Kells* (and more broadly in *design*). The kind of compound in which the memory of previous processing stages are preserved, with a protocol of remembrance (*memetic*).

In this aspect, the case resonates with what Slavoj Žižek writes on ‘transparency’ in *The Parallax View* (2006), where *transparency*—w/reference to Metzinger—is seen as the systematic amnesia of previous processing stages, and a special class of *darkness*; we don’t see it because we see through it. In this perspective, our inquiry into the illuminations of the Book of Kells delves into the topic of *translucency*: i.e., “through a glass darkly”.

In the language of Deleuze & Guattari (1981)—but also of archaeology—the landscape of memes is a striated space: memory is somehow *made*, and hence also may prompted and parsed by making (Ingold 2013), and features the afore mentioned semiotic boundary (Lotman 2004) as a complex layered space rather than in terms of a sharply drawn line. It affords leaps—folding and traversing—in ways that brings us back to the ideas of Simondon (1964).

According to him, information—in a concept referring to the Mediaeval reception of the term—partakes of formation, as a two-tiered operation involving material process and formal constraints (conceived as half-chains). When the two half-chains start to resonate with each other, communication flows in the entire system (cf, Leach). Here information is a *liminal* entity liberated at this juncture, which also has some *transductive* properties.

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Darkness Group participants (*learning theatre 24.05.2019*): Carle Lange, Helga Iselin Wåseth, Olive Bieringa, Christiann Lysvåg, Nina Tsyboulkaia, Theodor Barth.

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¹ Chagigah 12b—<https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.12b.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>
“Reish Lakish said: There are seven firmaments, and they are as follows: Vilon, Rakia, Sheḥakim, Zevul, Ma'on, Makhon, and Aravot. The Gemara proceeds to explain the role of each firmament: Vilon, curtain, is the firmament that does not contain anything, but enters at morning and departs in the evening, and renews the act of Creation daily, as it is stated: “Who stretches out the heavens as a curtain [Vilon], and spreads them out as a tent to dwell in” ([Isaiah 40:22](#)). Rakia, firmament, is the one in which the sun, moon, stars, and zodiac signs are fixed, as it is stated: “And God set them in the firmament [Rakia] of the heaven” ([Genesis 1:17](#)). Sheḥakim, heights, is the one in which mills stand and grind manna for the righteous, as it is stated: “And He commanded the heights [Shehakim] above, and opened the doors of heaven; and He caused manna to rain upon them for food, and gave them of the corn of heaven” ([Psalms 78:23–24](#)).”

² “‘In a secret way’, according to Jung, the writer’s use of himself would narrate his own “indefinite, because unknown, number of complexes or fragmentary personalities” (Jung, 1968, p. 81). Miller, Ian. *Beckett and Bion: The (Im)Patient Voice in Psychotherapy and Literature* (p. 5). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

³ This reference came to my attention thanks to Irma Salo Jæger, who is nestor among contemporary painters in Norway, who also was a driving force behind the Colour Institute w/ Hillmar Fredriksen (**NB! Her må jeg ha litt hjelp Mette!**).

⁴ A pedagogical example of this can be seen in a video on [Goethe’s Theory of Colours](#), sent to me by Vincent Paladino after the EAA conference, in which a cone is placed into the body of a green light: the shadow appears to be @@@ as long as it is seen relation to the lit areas, while when seen close up it appears grey. Hence corporeity and agency is not the same thing. In a biological organism these two principles are brought together.

⁵ The point of our foray into memes is to assess the relation between value and meaning in semiotics. Here Paul Bouissac’s invitation to re-read the early semiotics—in particular Ferdinand de Saussure (and also the discussion of Saussure that Bourdieu did in developing his diversified notion of capital)—is timely (and explicitly connected, as he argues, to the study of memes).

⁶ Cf, Aby Warburg—
Didi-Huberman, Georges (2002) *L’image survivante. L’histoire de l’art temps de fanômes*, Paris: Minuit.