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### A Mimetic Psyche

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# Ray David

## A Mimetic Psyche

### Abstract

*Apollo come dance with me* untersucht, durch meine Interpretation und Kunstpraxis, den Ausdruck von Chaos und Ordnung als kreatives Paradigma im (tragischen) Theater des antiken Griechenland, der (schwarzfigurigen) Vasenmalerei des antiken Griechenland sowie in meiner Malerei. Das Projekt beinhaltet drei Folgen von Gemälden sowie eine Interpretation, welche den mimetischen, metaphorischen und metamorphen Ausdruck, der diesen drei Kunstformen anhaftet, untersucht. Diese Ausführungen beinhalten detailliert Methoden, Methodologie, Philosophie und Psychologie des visuellen Ausdrucks dieser Kunstformen.

Die Beschäftigung mit dem kreativen Paradigma von Chaos und Ordnung im tragischen Theater entstand aus der Verwendung von Portraits meiner Familie und mir, um Charaktere der thebanischen Stücke Sophokles' darzustellen. Dadurch veranschaulicht meine zeitgenössische Kunst das Individuum und die Gesellschaft im Hinblick auf die Untersuchung des menschlichen Erlebens im tragischen Theater: die sozialen, psychologischen und kognitiven Beziehungen der Charaktere untereinander und mit der externen Welt.

Ich benutze in meiner Kunst die Technik der Überlagerung, um Verbund, Schichtung, Vielfältigkeit, Dualität und Dichotomie als Mittel künstlerischer Untersuchung zu erforschen. Umgekehrt vollzieht sich im Zuge des Prozesses zur Herstellung von Vielfalt und Abweichung eine Verwandlung und in meiner Malerei entsteht ein Kampf mit Kräften von Chaos und Ordnung. Philosophisch wird Überlagerung genutzt, um ein rhizomatisches System der Erwägung und Ausführung einzusetzen – wie es der Philosoph Deleuze und der Psychologe Guattari beschreiben. Dieser rhizomatische Vorgang versetzt mich in die Lage, eine visuelle Repräsentation von Hegels dialektisch philosophischem System der Erhebung in einen philosophischen

Ausdruck von Bestätigung durch Vielfalt und Chancen zu transformieren – ähnlich Nietzsches Gedanke zum selbigen.

The Nutzung und Repräsentation eines kreativen Paradigmas von Chaos und Ordnung in meiner Malerei wird durch die überragende und nachhaltigste Form des visuellen Ausdrucks – die Gestaltung – ermöglicht. Meine Kunst verbindet sich – in einem weiten Verständnis – mit den kreativen Kräften, die in künstlerischer Wahrnehmung und dem Kosmos gebraucht werden und in einem spezifischeren Sinne mit Form und Fläche, genauso wie mit Linie und Farbe. Somit beschreibt dieses Projekt ausführlich mein Verständnis von Physik und Psychologie der Veränderung, Chance und Verwandlung als Kräften der Schöpfung.

*Apollo come dance with me* explores, through my exegesis and art practice, the expression of chaos and order as a creative paradigm in Ancient Greek Attic (tragic) theatre, Ancient Greek Attic (black-figure) vase painting as well as my painting art practice. The project is comprised of three suites of paintings and an exegesis that examines the mimetic, metaphoric and metamorphic expression inherent in these three forms of art practice. The exegesis details the methods, methodology, philosophy and psychology of their visual expression.

The point of engagement with tragic theatre's chaos-and-order creative paradigm in my art practice is through my utilisation of portraits of myself and my family members to represent characters from the Theban plays by Sophocles. In so doing, my contemporary art practice depicts the individual and society in terms of tragic theatre's exploration of human experience: the social, psychological and cognitive relationships of the characters with each other and with the external world.

I use the technique of superimposition in my art practice to explore assemblage, layering, multiplicity, duality and dichotomies as vehicles of artistic enquiry. The process of creating multiplicity and difference in turn generates metamorphosis and precipitates an engagement with forces of chaos and order in my paintings. Philosophically, superimposition is used to employ a rhizomatic system of consideration and construction, as described by the philosopher Deleuze and psychoanalyst Guattari. This rhizomatic process enables me to transform a visual representation of Hegel's dialectic philosophical system of enquiry into a philosophical expression of affirmation through multiplicity and chance—akin to Nietzsche's notion of the same.

The utilisation and representation of a chaos-and-order creative paradigm in my painting art practice is facilitated by the pre-eminent, and most enduring form of visual expression—that of figuration. My art practice engages, in the broadest sense, with the creative forces utilised in artistic cognition and the cosmos and in a more specific sense with form and space, as well as line and colour. In so doing, the project details my understanding of the physics and psychology of change, chance and metamorphoses as forces of creation.



Fig. 1  
*Human Nature*, 2009, Oil on Polycarbonate.

*Human Nature* displays the male and female psyche described by the Ancient Greeks. The young girl (Antigone) is connected to the Ancient Greek image of a young woman and to the male figure who is Oedipus, her father. The male figure is connected to Paul Klee's sea monsters (chaos) as well as the human figure that is slaying them (order).



Fig. 2  
*Jocasta and Antigone*, 2007, oil on polycarbonate.

The woman is Jocasta, a mother capable of killing her own child. The girl is Antigone, who sacrifices her own life for the love of her brother. They are both strong women.

### 1. A Mimetic Psyche

After submitting my project, *Apollo come dance with me* for examination I found a journal article by Paul M. Laporte, dated Dec. 1947 entitled *Attic Vase Painting and Pre-Socratic Philosophy*. In the article, Laporte states that the colour dichotomy of Attic pottery's black-figure painting style is a philosophical expression in images of space and form as chaos and cosmos (ordered whole). This understanding of Attic black-figure vase painting is the one I had adopted. This in turn became the rationale for using black-figure images to depict a chaos-and-order dichotomy and to transform that dichotomy in my own black-figure images in order to explore the forces of chaos and order as a creative paradigm. The shift from Attic vase paintings' depiction of entities in space, within a picture space, to the superimposition and cropped figures within my paintings elucidates and makes explicit an engagement with multiplicity and chance. The purpose of this is to enact a type of metamorphic creativity that demonstrates becoming by engages with the simultaneous use of

forces of chaos and order. Mimetic images are used and distorted by superimposition to produce metaphoric images and to demonstrate a creative process that entails what Deleuze and Guattari describe as »forces of chaos, territorial forces, [and] cosmic forces« (DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004: 312).

My aim was to depict, utilise and demonstrate the forces of chaos and order as a creative paradigm, while simultaneously engaging with the visual methods and methodology used in Attic tragic theatres to depict these same forces. At the start of the project my work was informed by Nietzsche's birth of tragic theatre (1993) that describes the conception and expression of tragedy in Ancient Greece. Nietzsche depicts the two deities, Apollo and Dionysus, as a chaos and order creative duality. My use of figurative superimposition in my paintings is designed to illustrate the type of *legein*<sup>1</sup> (deliberation and consideration) and *teukhein*<sup>2</sup> (assembling, adjusting, fabricating and constructing) that utilised a chaos and order, Apollo and Dionysus, duality. Attic theatre's portrayal of human psychology in Sophocles's Theban plays and its depiction of Oedipus and his family provides the mimetic content of tragic theatre.

In Apollo come dance with me, as:

[I]n a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow of these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and ruptures. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an assemblage. (DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004: 3f.)

My creative practice employs the assemblage and layering processes in pictorial superimposition to engage with mimesis, to develop metaphors and to enact metamorphosis. The metamorphosis of my figurative portraits through superimposition demonstrates an evolutionary creative practice and details the project's philosophical and artistic enquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> *Legein* is a verb that carries the sense of »to deliberate« and »to consider«.

<sup>2</sup> *Teukhein* signifies: assembling-adjusting-fabricating-constructing. It is, therefore, making (something) be as ... starting from ... in a manner appropriate ...



Fig. 3  
*Godwin as Cronus*, 2005, oil on canvas.

A portrait of a man (Cronus) who only realises his idiotic adherence to rules and control when it is too late.

## 2. Figuration

By taking Aristotle's (cf. GEBAUER/WULF 1995) perspective with respect to mimetic expression to provide an overview of figurative expression in the Theban plays by Sophocles, I therefore define mimesis as the imitation, interpretation and expression of the human subject from the real world into a symbolically produced world. Mimetic expression defines the classic Greek arts' (cf. GOMBRICH 1972) discourse regarding the natural world. Attic pottery and theatre are two examples of Ancient Greek explorations regarding the human form and psyche as part of, and living within, the natural world. In Attic pottery's depiction of the natural world, there is a pre-Socratic expression of the ancient Greek creation myth which is represented by the colour dichotomy of Attic black-figure pottery (cf. LAPORTE 1947).

An exploration of Ancient Greek pottery colour and form, and in particular the black-figure painted images of Oedipus and Antigone, initiated an investigation that uncovered the expression of a chaos-and-order dichotomy in form rather than content. »[T]he antithesis between black and white, or darkness and light« (GAGE 1993: 12) described in the poetry of Alcmaeon of Croton (early fifth century BC) alludes to a connection between black-figure pottery and the creation myth of Ancient Greece as does Democrates's description of ›*chloron*‹ as being ›composed of the solid and the void‹ (GAGE 1993). Chaos and order, cosmos and the void, are re-presented by forms in

black (the cosmos) and space as white (the void). This colour dichotomy in Attic black-figure pottery demonstrates a philosophical concept regarding what Laporte describes as Pythagoras's »consistent concept of opposites[:] the Limit and the Unlimited, and Light and Darkness« (LAPORTE 1947: 148). Attic vase painting, through form and colour, rather than through content/subject depicts space and form, chaos and order, void and cosmos: dichotomies inherent in dialectics. In Attic theatre, according to Nietzsche, both technique and narrative were used to express a paradigm for creativity and existence, namely a chaos-and-order duality.



Fig. 4  
*Brothers* (Etiocles, Polynices and Antigone), 2005, oil on polycarbonate

Antigone, Atiocles and Polinices sit together as children oblivious of their future, which is displayed behind them in Paul Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon*. The two brothers become the epitome of good and evil and fight to their deaths with each other, all witnessed by the chorus.

### 3. Narrative

The Theban plays use mimetic images as signs and symbols to signify the human psychology of reflection, representation and construction encapsulated in experience. This narrative is metaphoric, and according to Hermine Feinstein, »the power of the metaphor lies in its potential to further our un-



derstanding of the meaning of experience, which in turn defines reality« (FEINSTEIN 1982: 45). The philosopher Suzanne Langer (cf. LANGER 1976; FEINSTEIN 1985) states, »metaphor is not only essential to thought, but also that art (visual, performing, literary), as a developed product of thought, is metaphor« (FEINSTEIN 1982: 45). How metaphor uses and expresses experience is, according to the linguist Eva Feder Kittay (1984) and art theorist John M. Kennedy (2008), through a process of deviation and/or distortion of literal representation that produces non-literal/metaphoric interpretation and expression.

The metaphoric narrative in the Theban plays demonstrates a psychology of visual thinking (cf. ARNHEIM 1974) derived from, and expressive of, experience. Here the figurative images provide what Rudolf Arnheim describes as »visual thinking [...] the ability to see visual shapes as images of the patterns of forces that underlie our existence—the function of minds, of bodies or machines, the structure of societies or ideas« (ARNHEIM 1974: 315). The distortion of realistic depiction by superimposing figurative images in my paintings provides metaphors, demonstrates »patterns of forces«, describes »the function of minds« and elucidates the artist's and viewer's ability to understand mimetic and metaphorical thinking.



Fig. 5  
*The Riddle of the sphinx*, 2005, oil on polycarbonate.

The geometric shapes symbolise the human intellect. The figure is Oedipus, the man who had the ability to answer the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus reveals nature's secrets to humanity and is punished for his action until his death.

#### 4. Superimposition

Pre-historic man (cf. LEROI-GOURHAN 2010) depicted his mimetic, metaphoric and metamorphic psyche by superimposing figurative images on cave walls of Europe. The archaeologist Leroi-Gourhan states that the layering of figurative images by pre-historic people of Europe »suggest that superimposition can be synchronically imposed, being perceived as a specific form of representation« (LEROI-GOURHAN 2010: 24). Leroi-Gourhan maintains that

[t]he complexity of the links between the figures, the game with superimposition and oblique perspective have led us to assume the existence of an organisation for the assemblages of figures which makes of them ideologically pertinent entities. (LEROI-GOURHAN 2010: 43)

Leroi-Gourhan saw »ideologically pertinent entities« in figurative superimposition. I see examples of a psychology that can produce and recognise mimetic, metaphoric and metamorphic expression.



Fig. 6  
*Antigone, Ismene and the chorus*, 2008, oil on polycarbonate.

Antigone and Ismene cannot watch their brothers fight to the death. The chorus of Theban women look on in horror.

## 5. Cosmic Forces

Deleuze and the psychologist Guattari (2004) describe the forces of chaos, territorial forces and cosmic forces in creative practice;

[s]ometimes chaos is an immense black hole in which one endeavours to fix a fragile point as a centre. Sometimes one organizes around that point a calm and stable ›space‹ (rather than a form): the black hole becomes a home. Sometimes one grafts onto that space a breakaway from the black hole. (DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004: 312)

These three aspects of creativity encompass my project's philosophical and artistic enquiry with respect to how Attic theatre and Attic pottery function. My project is applied philosophy, so rather than communicating chaos and order to the viewer through depiction of chaos and order I have used figurative superimposition as a technique to explore the forces of chaos, territorial forces and cosmic forces in order to demonstrate the chaos-and-order creative duality as described by Friedrich Nietzsche (1993).

Sociologist Cornelius Castoriadis describes these aspects of the natural world in a unique way. He calls chaos and order ›open and closed ontology‹ and details them in the cosmic process of the universe thus:

[t]he living thing possesses as an intrinsic property not simply its capacity for development but for evolving, for organizing itself in a different way; its organization is this very capacity for transforming an accident or a disturbance into a new organization. (CASTORIADIS 2005: 217)

By describing the two derivatives of chaos, the accident and disturbance, as intrinsic properties of living things, Castoriadis highlights chance and deformation as intrinsic to the process of evolution. My painting practice retained a black as form, figuration, order and cosmos, with white as space, the void, chaos and the source of creation. However, two aspects of my paintings deviate from the depiction of a rigid oppositional dichotomy of space and form, black and white.



Fig. 7  
*Oedipus Rex*, 2009, Oil on polycarbonate.

The figure on the right is an animal bone carved into a human male figure. The central figure is Oedipus in the forest (nature). The mask figures are the

chorus, and the cups are the wine from the Christian ritual. This image is man as individual and his relationship with society (chorus).

## 6. Transformation

Figurative superimposition distorts realistic depictions and converts a mimetic image into a mimetic/metaphoric image. In this process, chance metamorphosis occurs, initiating a change in the images. The act of assemblage (placing two or more images together) results in a change in the content and concept of both individual images and produces a third composite image. My superimposition of Attic black-figure mimetic images makes explicit the act of metamorphosis through assemblage and layering. The resulting deformation produced by pictorial superimposition shifts the black-figure's depiction of entities to a depiction of multiplicity. The result is that ›being‹ is now described as ›becoming‹. The thesis (my paintings and exegesis) describes the philosophical and artistic engagement with, and expression of, chance creative forces that transform the physical and psychological representation of an image.

It is Nietzsche's understanding of Ancient Greek philosophy and mythology regarding art, humanity, existence and the cosmos that needs to be stated.

In the Dionysian state [...] the whole affective system is excited and enhanced: so that it discharges all its means of expression at once and drives forth simultaneously the power of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transformation, and every kind of mimicking and acting. The essential feature here remains the ease of metamorphosis, the inability not to react [...]. (NIETZSCHE/HOLLINGDALE/TANNER 2003: 57)

By transforming black-figure images, I have enacted and made explicit the metamorphosis of black-figure images from dialectical oppositional dichotomies to rhizomatic multiplicity in order to demonstrate forces and flows enacted by chance. A philosophical enquiry of creative practice in the form of multiplicity and chance (cf. DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004; NIETZSCHE/HOLLINGDALE/TANNER 2003) is enacted by my superimposition of figurative images. Figurative superimposition is a style (cf. SONTAG 1966) that has the ability to utilise chance (cf. CASTORIADIS 1987) as a creative process for my paintings and to demonstrate visual thinking (cf. ARNHEIM 1974; 1997). The difference between dialectic and rhizomatic (cf. ZAYANI 1999) systems of enquiry that use a mimetic painting is subject to the representation of form that constitutes a style.



Fig. 8  
*The chorus sing*, 2005, oil on polycarbonate.

The chorus, here borrowed from Francisco Goya's *Witches Sabbath*, represents society in all its aspects (›the imaginary institution of society‹). The male is Oedipus, who stands apart from the chorus (society) but is also connected to them. This is a form of visual philosophical enquiry regarding existence within the cosmos. ›Entities‹ and ›multiplicity‹, ›being‹ and ›becoming‹.

## 7. Philosophical Enquiry

Whereas objects and subjects depicted in Attic black-figure style are complete entities within a space, my figures move beyond the picture space. They have an extended presence beyond the picture space. Similarly, my use of superimposition produces a liminal space where form and content are used as entity and essence to depict the Ancient Greek creation myth, while the technique of superimposition is used to express forces and flows intrinsic to the Ancient Greek creation myth. The superimposition of figurative images utilises and distorts the image, its ability to provide realistic (mimetic) content and devalues its role as entity. The emphasis of the images is not content/form, rather phenomena/forces.

My paintings are literally made of lines and philosophically,

made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, change in nature. (DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004: 21)

Whereas the Attic black-figure vase painting style's depiction of entities and essence has a ›matter-form relationship‹ (cf. DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004), whereby paint is used to describe the form of an object, the superimposition, assem-

blage and layering processes describe forces that act upon the ›matters-forms (material)‹ (cf. DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004) used.

The metamorphosis of a pictorial image by superimposition, assemblage and layering depicts a chaos-and-order duality that is capable of engaging and expressing a third force—the creative force of the cosmos. Chance and design, Apollo and Dionysus (cf. NIETZSCHE 2008), evolution and disturbance (cf. CASTORIADIS 1987), territorial forces and chaotic forces (cf. DELEUZE/GUATTARI 2004) are represented in form and phenomena, but also as a third force: creative evolution. My project explores the aesthetic philosophy that engages with mimesis, metaphor and metamorphosis to instigate multiplicity and chance rather than simple oppositional dichotomy dialectics. A philosophical change that constitutes a rebirth of pre-historic artistic enquiry.

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