

# GOETHE AND THE CULTURAL PROJECT OF GERMAN MODERNISM: STEINER, KANDINSKY, FRIEDLAENDER, SCHWITTERS AND BENJAMIN

By Andreas Kramer

IN 1931, the year before the centenary of Goethe's death, the young literary scholar Max Kommerell published a pamphlet entitled *Jugend ohne Goethe*. The title underlines Kommerell's belief that Goethe had ceased to be a 'lebendige Macht' among the younger generation: 'Es geht nicht an, es ist ein Lebensschaden, wenn der größte Deutsche im eigentlichen Empfinden der Jugend nur noch Geschichte ist.'<sup>1</sup> For Kommerell, making good this loss entailed a new form of aesthetic education which would re-unite modern society and re-establish a sense of purpose based on classical Goethean values and the belief in 'Bildung als Gipfel des Menschlichen' (p. 36). Written at a time when Germany was deeply divided about its identity, and political extremism and violence threatened to undo the fragile Weimar Republic, Kommerell's pamphlet seems curiously out of touch with its time. However, his plea to re-enlist Goethe in contemporary Germany assumes a political urgency. The disciple of Gundolf and associate of the George circle expressed his fear that without Goethe altogether, or with Goethe being consigned to history, there was a risk 'daß der Deutsche sich wieder in die blutstarke und blutgierige blonde Bestie zurückverwandle' (p. 37). In 1928 Kommerell had elevated Goethe to the *Dichter als Führer im Reich der deutschen Klassik*, three years on he used Goethe to warn the Germans against another 'Führer' altogether.

Kommerell's pamphlet is remarkable because it assembles, as if in a prism, the major elements that contributed to the different images of Goethe in early twentieth-century Germany.<sup>2</sup> Kommerell shares the vitalist stance of a long line of writers and thinkers that includes Nietzsche and Simmel, and views Goethe's aesthetic thought, with its emphasis on 'Anschauung' and 'Entwicklung', as an alternative to the rationalism of science and positivism. Moreover, Kommerell argues against an historicist interpretation of the past, and as a result, is highly critical of the idea of Goethe as an object purely for philologists or historians. Like many of his generation, Kommerell also rejects the often nationalistic 'Goethekult', which characterized much of the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The youth that grew up in the Wilhelmine Empire, in particular the generation of Expressionist artists and writers, questioned the reality and values which they found associated with Goethe and which they felt were being invalidated by the experience of modernity. However, rather than rejecting Goethe or declaring him dead once and for all, Kommerell wished to turn him into a 'lebendiges Vorbild' (p. 5) for the present generation of young Germans, of which he himself was a part. This generation, he wrote, set out to

<sup>1</sup> Max Kommerell, *Jugend ohne Goethe*, Frankfurt am Main, 1931, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> The major history of the various strands of Goethe reception in Germany is Karl Robert Mandelkow's *Goethe in Deutschland. Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Klassikers*, 2 vols, Munich, 1980/1983. For the context of modernism, see in particular the chapters 'Goetherezeption im Kaiserreich' and 'Weimarer Republik'.

challenge 'bürgerliche Lebensformen und Lebenswerte' (p. 5) and to create alternative cultures. In concentrated form, Kommerell's pamphlet reflects the experience of social and political modernity and proposes to re-insert Goethe into the modernist cultural project initiated by Germany's youth. Thus, Kommerell's Goethe is meant to become a weapon in the fight for the spiritual and intellectual renewal of modern society. That way, Kommerell hopes, the perceived ills and wrongs of the present age can be cured, and Germany's path through modernity, following the traumas of war and revolution, somehow normalized.

In establishing an explicit link between Goethe and contemporary German politics, Kommerell joins a line of writers and commentators who stressed the political function of the 'Goethekult'.<sup>3</sup> The title of his pamphlet is a riposte to Carl Sternheim, whose essay *Tasso oder Kunst des juste milieu* (1921) bore the subtitle 'Ein Wink für die Jugend'. In this fierce polemic, Sternheim identified an unholy alliance between classicist aesthetics and conservative politics, which according to him had paralysed German culture for a century and half. He called for the Expressionist generation to break out from under Goethe's shadow and establish an overtly political, activist literature. It is worth recalling that at the time of Sternheim's writing, the Weimar Republic was, after all, a republic whose elected political leaders were fond of invoking the liberal-humanist 'Geist von Weimar' — avowedly to mark the break with the Prussian-militaristic 'Geist von Potsdam'. In criticizing Goethe's appropriation by the new representatives of Weimar, Sternheim and other writers and intellectuals were really making a point about the continuities of power and influence in the supposedly new republic. In marked contrast, ten years later, Kommerell pointed towards a conservative revolution, in which a revalued Goethe is to ensure liberal, humanistic, aesthetic values against the totalitarian threat from both right and left. Interestingly, there is a hint of a dialectical twist here, too, which may perhaps explain why Walter Benjamin, while opposed to the conservative politics of the George circle, was so fascinated by Kommerell's position. Kommerell exhorted the reader not to try to reduce the modern age's distance from Goethe, but to appreciate Goethe precisely 'um des Gegensatzes willen. Erst Ferne vermag Nähe herzustellen, immer neue Nähe, wo man sie kaum vermutete' (p. 35).

What I will be arguing in this essay is that, *pace* Kommerell, Goethe always was a powerful presence among German modernists, who can justly be described, to some extent at least, as a 'Jugend mit Goethe', as it were. Goethe had never really been marginal to or indeed excluded from what might be called the cultural project of modernism. While breaking with classicism as an inherited or prescribed 'Lebensform', the modernists I will be discussing did indeed seek to integrate Goethean ideas into their modernizing cultural and artistic agenda. Their project was aimed to reform and rejuvenate culture in accordance with a vitalist, modernizing aesthetic. Aware of their progressive cultural identity, the modernists shared beliefs and ideas about art's potential to redeem modernity, its potential to release creative and productive forces that might serve as a social palliative or help towards revolutionary social reconstruction. An integral part of this project, the work of art now implied a radical rupture

<sup>3</sup> An important and influential example of this is Heinrich Mann's essay 'Französischer Geist' (1911) (subsequently known as 'Voltaire—Goethe'), in which he played off French Enlightenment against German Classicism, privileging an activist and interventionist criticism over the classicist striving for harmony and affirmation of the status quo.

with nature and its representation, and, largely divorced from subservience to external reality, it came to be seen as an activating force to impact on the totality of 'Leben'. The influential critic Hermann Bahr said as much in 1914, using a Goethe reference to describe Expressionism's insistence on the primacy of art. "Die Malerei", sagt Goethe, "stellt auf, was der Mensch sehen möchte und sollte, nicht was er gewöhnlich sieht." Wenn man schon durchaus ein "Programm" des Expressionismus will, dann ist es dies.<sup>4</sup> The modernists I will focus on read Goethe primarily as someone who offered astoundingly modern ideas in his writings on art and nature. Specifically, I wish to explore the extent to which some German practitioners of a radical modernism employed Goethe to formulate an avant-garde aesthetic they felt was designed to reflect some of the paradoxes of modernity.

Rudolf Steiner was one of the many modernist reformers who sought to recuperate a harmony, communality and spirituality that modern society had supposedly undermined. His cultural ambition is very closely connected with Goethe. Steiner had prepared editions of Goethe's scientific writings between 1883–98, with some volumes appearing in Kürschner's highly regarded series *Deutsche Nationalliteratur* before he joined the editorial team preparing the *Weimar Sophienausgabe*. In the 1890s, he joined the Theosophists and went on to become the founder of Anthroposophy. Goethe's colour theory, his ideas on metamorphosis and his views of nature in general were to have a profound and lasting influence on Steiner's world-view. In fact, Goethe provided the main impetus to Steiner's Anthroposophy, a spiritual doctrine combining ideas and cues from nature, the arts and the sciences. Referring to Goethe, Steiner coined the term 'Geheimwissenschaft': 'Man wird dem hier gemeinten Wortgebrauche gerecht werden, wenn man an dasjenige denkt, was Goethe im Sinne hat, wenn er von den "offenbaren Geheimnissen" in den Welterscheinungen spricht.'<sup>5</sup> In numerous books, pamphlets and public lectures, Steiner continued to cite Goethe as the founding father of this new holistic world-view, casting him as the exact opposite to what he perceived as the specialization and one-sidedness of modern science.<sup>6</sup> For Steiner, nature was of physical and spiritual significance. He believed that through nature, higher worlds and spiritual states behind physical reality could be perceived. In Steiner's view, art could make visible objective spiritual processes and cosmic laws, which, if heeded and observed, in turn would inform practical living. It is instructive to note that this represents a form of critique of art's autonomy and a call for the merging of art and life. However sketchy, circumspect, or vague Steiner may have been in his wording, these concerns were to become central for contemporary avant-garde movements, as Peter Bürger has pointed out.<sup>7</sup>

Like many modernist reformers, Steiner worked in several media. In addition to being a writer, artist, composer, choreographer, dramaturge and stage designer, he made a unique contribution to Expressionistic architecture, based on Goethean ideas.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Bahr, 'Expressionismus und Goethe', *Neue Rundschau*, xxv (1914), vol. 2, 913–26 (p. 914).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Walter Kugler, 'Wenn der Labortisch zum Altar wird. Die Erweiterung des Kunstbegriffs durch Rudolf Steiner', in: *Okkultismus und Avantgarde: Von Munich bis Mondrian, 1900–1915*. Ausstellung und Katalog, Veit Loers unter Mitarbeit von Pia Witzmann; Gesamtedaktion: Ingrid Ehrhardt. Ostfildern, 1995, pp. 46–59 (p. 47).

<sup>6</sup> Steiner's 'aesthetic' turn is marked in particular by the lecture: *Goethe als Vater einer neuen Ästhetik*, Vienna, 1889 (originally a paper given to the Vienna 'Goetheverein' in 1888). It is more fully elaborated in his *Goethes Weltanschauung*, Weimar, 1897.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main, 1974, esp. pp. 63–73.

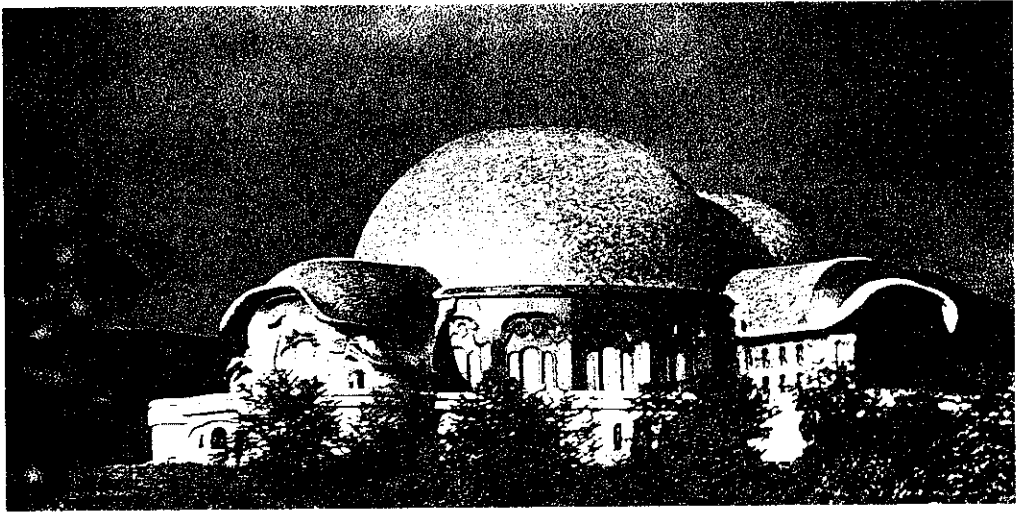


FIGURE 1 Rudolf Steiner; [First] *Goetheanum* (1913). Taken from Wolfgang Pehnt: *Expressionist Architecture*. Trans. by J. A. Underwood and Edith Küstner, London, 1973, p. 142.

In Dornach near Basel, the Anthroposophists built their own spiritual centre, beginning in 1913, designed by Steiner. Dornach was to become a learning and living community, the spiritual and religious centre of the movement. The development of the community was also certainly inspired by the contemporary garden city movement, although it aimed at a more holistic lifestyle. The site, which comprises a range of buildings and edifices, each with a range of purposes, is dominated by the 'Goetheanum', a twin-domed festival theatre built between 1913 and 1920 on a plateau overlooking the Jura landscape (Figure 1).

Steiner's Goethean view of nature informed his theory of architecture as well. He considered man-made buildings to be no different from living organisms. Their architectural form and detail were to be the result of a natural growth, 'so wie die Erde Pflanzen aus sich herauswachsen läßt'.<sup>8</sup> The 'Goetheanum' became the testing ground for Steiner's aesthetic ideas, colour symbolism and occult iconography, and it represented Steiner's core belief in the symbiosis of architectural space and spiritual activity. In this context, the 'Goetheanum' must also be seen as part of the fashion for temple architecture, perhaps also with a nod to Goethe's *Märchen*. The undulating forms of the 'Goetheanum' are reminiscent of the organic forms of the *Jugendstil* in that they express or closely resemble nature.<sup>9</sup> The lower part of the building was built in reinforced concrete. The upper part was a timber-framed construction which allowed the Dornach builders to work with natural, non-industrial materials. Conceptually, the building was characterized by a tension between two poles, signified

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Steiner, Lecture given on 29 December 1914; cited in: Hagen Biesantz and Arne Klingborg, *Das Goetheanum. Der Bauimpuls Rudolf Steiners*, Dornach, 1978, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> For photographs of the building and some plan drawings, see Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, trans. by J. A. Underwood and Edith Küstner, London, 1973, pp. 141–43. Pehnt is also the author of a recent monograph on the subject: *Rudolf Steiner, Goetheanum, Dornach*. Text in German and English. Photographs by Thomas Dix, Berlin, 1991 (Opus. 1).

by the two domes. Every architectural form and element used was designed to embody a Goethean metamorphosis, and symbolized the idea of development through transformation. This guiding principle can be seen, for example, in the capitals and in the bases of columns, which are made from different types of wood, or in the way that the shapes of doors and windows, and door frames and window frames relate to each other.<sup>10</sup> The material used to fill the windows conforms to this idea as well. Each window consists of very thick single panes of coloured glass; the windows on either side of the auditorium, passing from West to East, are green, blue, purple and rose-coloured in succession. When describing the different coloured light coming in from different directions and playing on the natural uncoloured surface of the interior wood, Steiner referred to Goethe's idea of colours as the 'Taten des Lichts' (HA, XIII, 315), which he thought were artistically realized in infinite variety in the 'Goetheanum'. One dome overarches the auditorium, the other, the stage. Like parts of the contemporary avant-garde, Steiner promoted the idea and practice of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', bringing together the latest tendencies in music, dance, word and stage-design. The larger section of the building, accommodating the audience, was to express the 'physical', while the smaller was to express the 'spiritual'. The points of intersection and the radii of the two circles, as well as the inner semi-circles of columns, were worked out on the basis of a pentagram construction, underlining the mystical dimension Steiner hoped to achieve. There is additional symbolism in terms of numerical proportion and absolute distances. As a result, the building can be seen to embody reconciliation between two polar principles, and to enable those who attend performances in it, to experience 'spiritual' reality. Using Goethe's terms, Steiner claimed that architectural and aesthetic 'Polarität' was designed to foster spiritual 'Steigerung' and ultimately, 'Höherentwicklung'.<sup>11</sup> In his Anthroposophy in general, and in his 'Goetheanum' in particular, Steiner enlisted Goethean ideas to form a modernist religion and engineer a social experiment designed to recuperate the spirituality and sacralized totality that modernity had allegedly destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

It is perhaps somewhat unorthodox today to discuss Steiner in the context of Expressionism, but he was widely known in artistic circles through his numerous public lectures, and had a number of friends among Expressionist writers and artists. Having studied Paul Scheerbart's visionary glass architecture, Steiner maintained a correspondence with the author, and his ideas influenced Expressionist architects such as Paul Goesch, Hermann Finsterlin and Erich Mendelsohn. He had an impact on art education and performances in a range of artists' colonies, such as Hellerau near Dresden. During the 1910s, Steiner was clearly seen as part of the modern, and specifically Expressionist movement. In his 1919 monograph, Paul Fechter discussed Anthroposophy in the context of Expressionist thought.<sup>13</sup> Three years earlier,

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of the ideas behind the first 'Goetheanum', see Konrad Oberhuber, 'Rudolf Steiner. Das Erste Goetheanum', in: *Okkultismus und Avantgarde*, pp. 713–29, and photographs, pp. 730–57.

<sup>11</sup> Steiner developed these ideas in numerous public lectures on the 'Goetheanum'. See, e.g. his 'Der Dornacher Bau als Zeichen geschichtlichen Werdens und künstlerischer Umwandlungsimpulse', of October 1914, cited in Pehnt, *Das Goetheanum*, p. 8 and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Using his 'Goetheanum', after 1918 Steiner developed an explicit critique of contemporary culture. See Steiner, *Goetheanumgedanke inmitten der Kulturkrise der Gegenwart. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1921–1925*, Dornach, 1961 (Gesamtausgabe, vol. 36).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, 3rd edn, Munich, 1919, p. 59.

Hermann Bahr had already drawn a parallel between Expressionist art and literature and the philosophy of Steiner.<sup>14</sup> Some of Steiner's disciples suggested such links as well.<sup>15</sup>

There is also an especially strong link between Steiner and the artists of the *Blauer Reiter* group in Munich, and particularly Wassily Kandinsky. The fact that Kandinsky developed an interest in theosophy, Anthroposophy and occultism is well documented. For many years, he and his partner Gabriele Münter subscribed to Steiner's journal, *Luzifer-Gnosis*, and they owned a copy of Steiner's *Theosophie* (1904).<sup>16</sup> In March 1908 Kandinsky went to Berlin to hear Steiner lecture in the 'Architektenhaus'. In his lecture, Steiner used some motifs from Goethe's *Faust* and offered a cosmological interpretation of these and of Goethe's theory of colour. He ended his remarks quoting the final verses of *Faust II*. Inspired by this lecture, and in particular by Steiner's remarks on the symbolism of 'Licht' and 'Abglanz der Sonne', Kandinsky painted his 'Ariel-Szene: Faust im Magiermantel mit den sieben Knöpfen'.<sup>17</sup> Goethe's colour theory also underlies the final sections v and vi of Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912). Works by and on Goethe, some heavily annotated, featured prominently in Kandinsky's library. Kandinsky's interest in Goethe's *Farbenlehre* was probably triggered by Steiner's 1898 edition. Like Steiner, Kandinsky hoped to conserve spirituality in a materialistic and secular age. And like Steiner, he thought that modernity involved some kind of a Fall and was in need of redemption by art. In the context of early Expressionism, Kandinsky wanted the 'new art' to be expressly spiritual, without, however, seeking spirituality in nature in a Goethean or Steinerian sense. It was in the years following his encounter with Steiner and Steiner's reading of Goethe, that Kandinsky developed a pioneering aesthetic, which became crucial to the development of abstract art in the twentieth century.

One of the first comprehensive expressions of this new aesthetic was the *Almanach der blauen Reiter* (1912), jointly edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc. An encyclopaedia of modernism and its precursors, ranging across art forms and genres, from theatre, literature, music and the various visual arts to primitive, folk and popular forms, the *Almanach* is in itself a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', a creation of fellow artists longing for the spiritual in art. In the *Almanach*, Kandinsky printed Goethe's remark to Riemer to the effect that painting lacked any knowledge of the 'Generalbaß', i.e. of any accepted, approved theory such as has long existed in music. Kandinsky's aesthetic project can be described as an attempt to arrive at what Goethe in this remark claimed music had done: identify an underlying order and structure. In his essay *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Kandinsky described this remark by Goethe as prophetic,<sup>18</sup> and he set out to put forward a set of theoretical precepts according to which the artist may paint a purely abstract composition out of form, line and colour. Abstract art is indebted to Goethean 'Weltanschauung', as propagated by Steiner, and the theosophical mysticism. Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and Wassily Kandinsky all were

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus*, Munich, 1916, pp. 22–23 and passim. This was a widely read book, which went through numerous printings, and greatly influenced public opinion about Expressionism.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Ernst Uehli, *Rudolf Steiner als Künstler*, Stuttgart, 1921 (Goetheanum Bücherei).

<sup>16</sup> The most in-depth study of Kandinsky and Münter's interest in Steiner and Theosophy remains Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Abo/Finland, 1970.

<sup>17</sup> See Kugler, pp. 49–50.

<sup>18</sup> *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Munich, 1912, p. 51.

familiar with Steiner's ideas. To these artists, the theosophical notion of higher levels of nature proved a major motivation for abandoning representation in painting. On these higher planes, form was no longer defined by physical resemblance to visible objects, but formless. Like Occultism, abstract painting is preoccupied with the objectless world and the alleged insight into hidden laws of the universe.

In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Kandinsky sought to provide just such a 'Generalbaß' to the new spiritual abstract art. Using Goethe's remarks on the 'Urpflanze' (HA, XI, 324 and 375), Kandinsky described the practice of contemporary art as born out of 'innere Notwendigkeit'.<sup>19</sup> He deals at length with the metaphorical values of colour and puts forward a theory that colour and line correlate directly to emotions. The book contains tables outlining pairs of opposites and its colour equivalencies, which are largely based on Goethe's *Farbenlehre*. Goethe derived the two pure colours, yellow and blue, from the 'Urgegensatz' between light and dark. Green, red and other colours are the result of 'Vermischung', 'Verdichtung und Verdunkelung' (HA, XIII, 494, 496) of the two basic colours. In his six-part 'Farbenkreis', Goethe placed yellow to the left, attributing to it qualities such as 'Licht. Hell. Kraft. Wärme. Nähe. Abstoßen'. Blue is placed on the right of the circle and has qualities such as 'Beraubung. Schatten. Dunkel. Schwäche. Kälte' (HA, XIII, 478). Kandinsky's chart detailing the polarity between yellow and blue represents the clearest link between his *Farbenlehre* and that of Goethe. However, Kandinsky added a variation in that yellow, being an eccentric form, pro-actively seeks the physical world, whereas blue, being a concentric form, tends to flee from it and points towards the infinite and the spiritual. Other members of the Blue Rider group, such as Franz Marc, who had conducted experiments with the prism and resulting colours as early as 1910, and August Macke, endorsed Kandinsky's theories.

Kandinsky remained indebted to Goethe in his teaching at the Bauhaus between 1922 and 1933. During this time, he synthesized a range of diverse sources and ideas into a theory of abstract art, but the link with the pre-war years remains Goethe. Kandinsky's writings during this period, can be seen as a continuation of what he had begun in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. In Bauhaus lecture courses, Kandinsky quoted extensively from the *Farbenlehre*.<sup>20</sup> Elaborating on colour harmonies, he maintained his polar conception of colour and effectively used the same set of attributes as Goethe to describe the greatest opposition within the fundamental pair, yellow and blue.<sup>21</sup> Kandinsky also followed Goethe in the practice of presenting his material in series from the simplest phenomenon to the most complex, progressively deriving the latter from the former.<sup>22</sup> In Weimar, Kandinsky and Paul Klee were generally known, partly on account of their aloofness, as an austere duo, from the school's daily life, as 'Goethe' and 'Schiller'. The affinities are documented in a humorous photograph of 1929 which

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81. See also Rose Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Artistic Style*, Oxford, 1980,

p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> For details, see Clark V. Poling, *Kandinsky's Teaching at the Bauhaus: Color Theory and Architectural Drawing*, New York, 1986, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Poling, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Poling, p. 32. See also Britta Kaiser-Schuster, 'Farbunterricht und Farbenlehren am Bauhaus', in: *Endlich in dieser Hauptstadt der Welt angelangt! Goethe in Rom: Publikation zur Eröffnung der Casa di Goethe in Rom*, edited by Konrad Scheurmann and Ursula Bongaerts-Schomer, Mainz, 1997, pp. 148-57, esp. pp. 155-57.

shows the two standing in front of the well-known memorial in Weimar, imitating the poses of Goethe and Schiller on the pedestal.<sup>23</sup>

What Kandinsky learned from Steiner and Goethe was that the *Farbenlehre* entailed a specifically aesthetic programme which he adapted to suit his world-view of Fall and redemption. Goethe applied the concepts of 'Polarität' and 'Steigerung' to colour; they were derived, however, from his theory of metamorphosis, which itself can be read in terms of an aesthetic theory. Although it is problematic to establish a direct correspondence between aesthetic theory and artistic practice in Modernism, it can be argued that Kandinsky developed a visual language which corresponded to his spiritual vision and gives expression to his larger cultural project.

The series of *Kompositionen*, which Kandinsky painted between 1910 and 1939 are an important example, and the early 'Komposition IV' (1911) is particularly instructive about Kandinsky's artistic and spiritual concerns at the time (Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> The composition is split in two, enhanced by two black vertical lines in the middle, which may be lances belonging to horse-riders in the foreground. According to Kandinsky, the composition depends on contrasts between masses, colours and lines, and entangled colours and lines. However, although the elements contrast, they also form a composite whole and are of equal pictorial value. Only once that whole has been registered does Kandinsky want the viewer to apply to the composition a more specific reading of the subject matter. He provided a clue by describing the angular sharp movement in the upper left as 'battle' and by identifying the colours in the lower right as 'hell-kalt-süße Farben', which must refer to the reclining couple.<sup>25</sup> In terms of subject matter, then, there is a counterbalance between the forces of conflict, and those of peaceful harmony. Kandinsky expressed his belief that unencumbered by a narrative quality, the compositions would speak directly to the soul of the viewer. His dissolving of the objects was to give rise to the inner feeling conveyed by the dynamism of the painting's elements. Modernity is here treated in terms of apocalyptic violence, which threatens the last strongholds of spirituality, but also in terms of forms, lines and colours virtually freed from the need to serve representation.

A later example, *Gelb-Rot-Blau* (1925), which Kandinsky painted during his time at the Bauhaus, takes this idea further (Figure 3). While circles, squares, triangles, lines have here become part of the abstract vocabulary, the painting still explores a wide range of colour interactions. However, colours are apparently more strictly assigned to certain areas of the painting; the title indicates the movement from left to right, from yellow via red to blue. It has been suggested that the very theme of the painting is the 'Steigerung ins Rote' of yellow and blue, as elaborated by Goethe in a short series of paragraphs in his *Farbenlehre* (HA, XIII, 478–79).<sup>26</sup> In addition, Kandinsky employed two further devices. The painting establishes a number of colour/shape correspondences. Whereas angular forms are predominantly yellow, or warm, round forms tend

<sup>23</sup> Reproduced in: Becke Sell Tower, *Klee and Kandinsky in Munich and at the Bauhaus*, Ann Arbor, 1981 (Studies in the Fine Arts — The Avant-Garde, 16), p. [vi]. In contrast, Will Grohmann likened Kandinsky to Schiller on account of their shared idealist and speculative stance, and Klee to Goethe, both being realist and intuitive. 'Paul Klee und die Anfänge einer Harmonielehre in der Kunst', *Neue Deutsche Hefte*, xxxix (October 1957), 632.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky: Compositions*, New York, 1995, pp. 31–37.

<sup>25</sup> Kandinsky, 'Komposition 4', *Kandinsky 1901–1913*, Berlin, 1913, pp. xxiii–xxiv. Cited in Dabrowski, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. John Gage, 'Mood Indigo: From the Blue Flower to the Blue Rider', in: *The Romantic Spirit in German Art*, edited by Keith Hartley et al., Edinburgh, London, Stuttgart, 1994, pp. 122–30 (p. 128).





FIGURE 2 Wassily Kandinsky: *Komposition IV* (1911). Taken from Magdalena Dabrowski: *Kandinsky: Compositions*, New York, 1995, p. 33.

to be blue, or dark, a device Kandinsky already commented on in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* with reference to Goethe. While the yellow rectangle on the left balances the blue circle, there are within these areas, accenting spots of opposing colour: for example, the blue rectangle overlaps the yellow; blue partially encircles the yellow area; the yellow circle in the large blue or surrounding a smaller blue circle. The same colour/shape modulations can be found in the other contrasting pairs in the Goethean sense, red and green; yellow and violet. Another instance of polarity and intensification at once is Kandinsky's use of modulated colour, where, yellow, for example, is made greenish (colder) in outer areas on the left and on the right, while blue is made violet and purple (warmer). Finally, this abstract composition exhibits a certain dynamism in that it plays upon the effects of irradiation and movement: whereas yellow streams outward, blue contracts inwards; whereas yellow seems to be advancing, blue seems to be receding; and whereas yellow (and black) apparently expand, blue contracts. It was Goethe who observed and indicated these phenomena in the 'Farbtafeln'.<sup>27</sup>

Kandinsky applied some of Goethe's insights into colour effects to form part of a highly abstract, pared-down aesthetic. Colour appears independent of concrete form. Pictorial elements and colour are used for inner purposes, rather than for representation of nature. It is perhaps instructive to consider a passage from the *Farbenlehre* on the 'mystical use of colour':

Wenn man erst das Auseinandergehen des Gelben und Blauen wird recht gefaßt, besonders aber die Steigerung ins Rote genugsam betrachtet haben, wodurch das Entgegengesetzte

<sup>27</sup> This link is made by Paul Overy, *Kandinsky: the Language of the Eye*, London, 1969, p. 84.

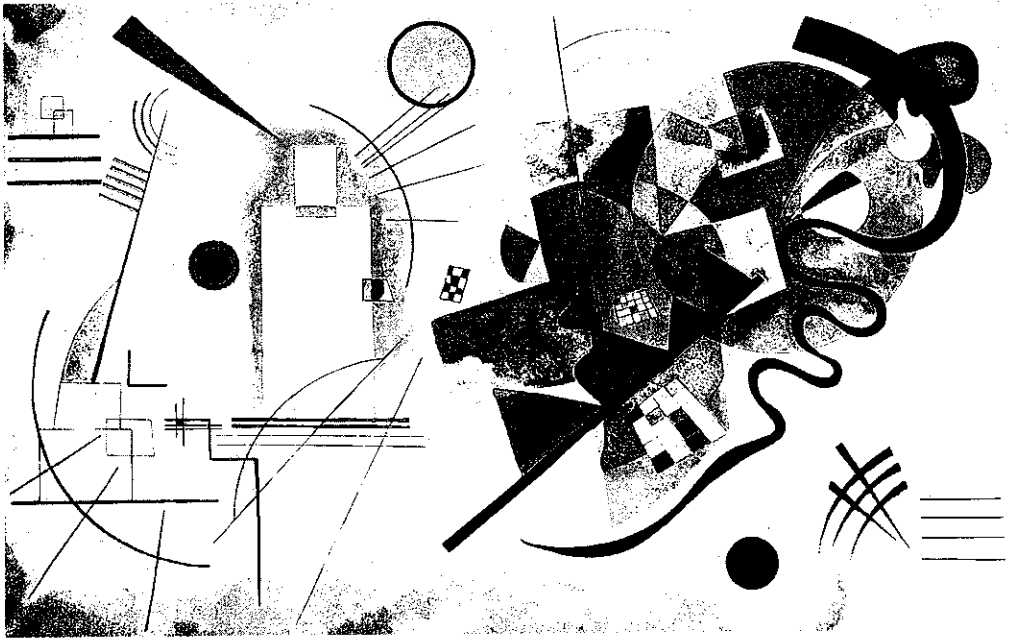


FIGURE 3 Wassily Kandinsky: *Gelb-Rot-Blau* (1925). Taken from Clark V. Poling: *Kandinsky's Teaching at the Bauhaus*, New York, 1986, fig. 79.

sich gegeneinanderneigt und sich in einem Dritten vereinigt, dann wird gewiß eine besondere geheimnisvolle Anschauung eintreten, daß man diesen beiden getrennten, einander entgegengesetzten Wesen eine geistige Bedeutung unterlegen könne. (HA, XIII, 521)

In contradistinction to *Komposition IV*, this work makes it virtually impossible to construct a narrative of Fall and redemption, chaos and conflict. Instead *Gelb-Rot-Blau* might be an example of just what modern art adds to the ideas of 'Polarität' and 'Steigerung'. While the two can be identified as the painting's subject matter, the painting itself places these polarities in a new whole, the work of art, without establishing preferences or hierarchies among its elements, forms and colours. The modernist work of art becomes the medium with which to create, literally, an 'Anschauung' of the process of metamorphosis itself, far removed from any connection with nature or burdened with the task to imitate it. It is precisely Kandinsky's practice of a 'freiheitliches Prinzip der inneren Notwendigkeit' that Hugo Ball emphasized in a lecture to fellow Dadaists in Zurich.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Hugo Ball, 'Kandinsky' (lecture given on 7 April 1917); Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit: Ausgewählte Schriften*, edited by Hans Burkhard Schlichting, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 41–54 (p. 50). — On the day he gave that lecture, Ball approvingly entered into his diary excerpts from Baader and Goethe that are poles apart from Dada's proclaimed foolery and nihilistic anarchism. With Kandinsky et al., Ball had before 1914 drawn up plans for, and publicized, a festival theatre based, inter alia, on Steiner's 'Goetheanum'. Other Dadaists, in particular those associated with Friedlaender, also declared their sympathies with Goethe, while publicly often denouncing him and what he had come to stand for. Raoul Hausmann for instance writes in a letter to Doris Hahn: 'Ich war mit Friedlaender ein eifriger Verfechter der Farbenlehre Goethes' (17 June 1965; STURM Archiv, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin). In 1920, Ernst Ullrich circulated a pamphlet entitled *Goethe als Dadaist*, which in tone and style is reminiscent of Friedlaender. The pamphlet can be found in Karl Riha, *Da Dada da war, ist Dada da: Aufsätze und Dokumente*, Munich/Vienna, 1980, pp. 82–86.

Goethe's colour theory was a powerful presence among the German modernists. The writer and philosopher Salomo Friedlaender who was an influential figure in Expressionist and Dadaist circles, exhibited an unwavering fascination with Goethe throughout his life. His early writings on Goethe, which include essays on his life and work and a philosophical poem entitled 'Goethes Farbenlehre',<sup>29</sup> are characterized by a romantic admiration for the writer and scientist whom Friedlaender casts as an alternative to contemporary positivism.

It was in particular the *Farbenlehre* that Friedlaender regarded as Goethe's lasting contribution. Not only does he mention it time and again in his work, he also, according to Hans Blüher, always carried a prism in his coat pocket, 'das er jedesmal zückte, wenn Zweifel an der Richtigkeit der Goetheschen Farbenlehre aufkam'.<sup>30</sup> Friedlaender shared Goethe's fascination with the prism and the powerful effect of colour contrasts. With regards to colour theory, however, Friedlaender abandoned the role of romantic admirer and mounted a sustained campaign to outline the relevance of Goethe's ideas for the modern age. He channelled Goethe's colour theory into a much wider context, developing a philosophy that he based on the principle of polarity or difference. Writing in Herwarth Walden's *Sturm*, Friedlaender argued that colour-polarity was the greatest of Goethe's discoveries, tantamount to a revolution of knowledge and, by extension, of life.

Goethes Kampf gegen Newton ist der Kampf eines tieferen Monismus, der noch mit entgegengesetzten Größen zu rechnen versteht, gegen einen seichteren, bequemeren. . . Daher ist die Farbenlehre Goethes fruchtbarstes, folgenschwerstes, unermesslich vorbedeutungsvolles Werk. Der Licht- oder Farbengegensatz ist so wesentlich wie der magnetische, der elektrische, der sexuelle, der akustische — wie die Differenz überhaupt.<sup>31</sup>

For Goethe, the idea of 'Polarität' (HA, XIII, 477) was a heuristic assumption to make possible intuitive knowledge of nature, and in the same passage in his *Farbenlehre*, polarity is used to demonstrate the emergence of colours from light and darkness. In Friedlaender's writings, there is an awareness that Goethe's idea of polarity does not necessarily lead to harmony and totality, and that it conceals a rather more unstable and potentially volatile relationship between man and nature, and within the self. As a result, Friedlaender took the concept of polarity further than Goethe and came to advocate a 'Prinzip der infinitesimalen, also polaren Identität'.<sup>32</sup> This formulation, based admittedly on a selective reading of Goethe, hints at the dilemma of the modern individual seeking to construct and realize an 'identity' out of a never-ending series of differences.

Further arguing the links between his own philosophy of polarity and Goethe's colour theory, Friedlaender wrote extensively on modern art, developing a unique approach to it. Friedlaender credits Goethe with the discovery of colour effects that are analogous to what Expressionist painting aims to achieve. The Expressionists' experimentation with colour and colour contrast in their paintings was seen as part of a practice inaugurated by Goethe in his *Farbenlehre*. In Friedlaender's view, the

<sup>29</sup> Salomo Friedlaender, 'Goethes Farbenlehre', *Charon*, IV (1907), no. 1, p. 27. Cited in Lisbeth Exner, *Fashioning als Logik: Über Salomo Friedlaender/Allysona*, Munich, 1996, p. 222.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Exner, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> S. Friedlaender, 'Das Prisma und Goethes Farbenlehre', *Der Sturm*, VIII, no. 9 (December 1917), 141–42 (p. 142).

<sup>32</sup> S. Friedlaender, 'Goethe contra Newton', *Die Aktion*, I (1911), 721–23 (col. 723).

Expressionists, and the *Blaue Reiter* painters in particular, uncovered and implemented nothing less than a revolutionary artistic device which derived from Goethe.

Friedlaender's modernist agenda becomes particularly clear in his post-1918 writings. Having identified Goethe's *Farbenlehre* as a revolution whose potential needed to be fully unlocked, Friedlaender prescribed it as a specific cure for the ills of modernity. In a 1923 article 'Prismatische Malerei als Frucht der Goetheschen Farbenlehre', he wrote that 'Goethes Farbenlehre enthält in lauterer Symbolik das Vorbild unserer Heilung. Sie ist die Chiffre und Hieroglyphe eines neuen Aesthetizismus.'<sup>33</sup> Viewing the history of painting as 'den Fortschritt in der Emanzipation des rein Optischen von den Naturobjekten', he described modern abstract painting as 'Lichtkunst, reine Optik' (p. 6). He had particular praise for the paintings by his friend Artur Segal, who, like Friedlaender, was fascinated by the prism. Segal had experimented with prismatic effects in his paintings in order to achieve the polar interaction of light and darkness.<sup>34</sup> Friedlaender commented: 'Prismatische Malerei ist Synthese aus Licht, Farbe, Form in puren Lichtgebilden. Diese lebendig unterschiedenen Elemente sind von ihrer gemeinsamen Identität lebendig wiederum durchdrungen. Wie sehr dies symbolisch ins Ethische hinausdeutet, ist unverkennbar' (p. 6).

Here, Friedlaender articulated the cultural project of modernism in a nutshell. He believed in the primacy of art as well as in the cognitive and moral function art has in society. Writing in a Germany rocked by political and economic crises, he called for art to reconcile 'Unterschiedenes' and to engender 'Versöhnung des sonst zerrissenen Lebens': 'In der Kunst gattet sich das Licht des Geistes mit dem Mysterium der blinden Natur zum ästhetischen Leben' (p. 6). What is even more, for Friedlaender, as for Kandinsky and, to some extent, Steiner, art was to take over functions previously assigned to philosophy or nature: 'Denn was weder der Vernunft allein noch der Natur allein gelingt, vollzieht sich durch beider inniges Zusammen in der Kunst' (p. 6).

Friedlaender also wrote numerous satires under the pseudonym Mynona (an anagram of the German 'anonym') as though he wished to apply the idea of polarity to his own persona. His collection of 'Grotesken' with the title *Schwarz-Weiss-Rot* was published by Kurt Wolff, the leading publisher of Expressionism, as part of the *Jüngste Tag* series, in September 1916. The illustration on the title page, by the Expressionist artist Ludwig Meidner, shows a domineering Goethe holding a black/white/red banner, sternly facing an intimidated Newton (Figure 4). The title story, 'Schwarz-Weiss-Rot, oder: Deutschlands Sieg über England in Goethes Farben', is a clever piece of 'Rollenprosa'. The narrator, ostensibly a German scientist or scholar, sets out to demonstrate why Newton's colour theory is wrong, and why Goethe's is right. He stresses that the colour-blind Newton had retreated to the island of Mathematics from where he had brutalized the world of colour in a despotic manner for over 200 years. Whereas this Englishman teaches how to measure and how to count, Goethe teaches

<sup>33</sup> In: *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, No. 233, 20 May 1923, 5–6 (p. 6). The publication of the article coincided with the opening of the 'Große Berliner Kunstausstellung', where paintings by Artur Segal were exhibited. Friedlaender rephrased some of the ideas expressed in this piece in his 'Goethes Farbenlehre und die moderne Malerei', in: *Sammlung Gabrielsen Göteborg. Erwerbungen 1922–1923*, Berlin, n.d. [early 1924], n.p. [9]–[12].

<sup>34</sup> Artur Segal, 'Das Lichtproblem in der Malerei', in: Segal and Nikolaus Braun, *Lichtprobleme in der modernen Malerei*, Berlin, 1925, n.p. Segal's essay is dedicated to Friedlaender.

# MYNONA

## SCHWARZ-WEISS-ROT



---

DER JÜNGSTE TAG \* 31

---

KURT WOLFF VERLAG · LEIPZIG

1 9 1 7

[1153]

FIGURE 4 Mynona: *Schwarz-Weiss-Rot*, title page with an illustration by Ludwig Meidner. From *Der jüngste Tag*, vol. 31, reprinted Frankfurt/M., 1981, p. 1153. The original imprint says '1917' but the book was actually published in September 1916.

how to see. However, time and again, the narrator's nationalistic prejudices, combined with his linguistic clumsiness, destabilize what began as a seemingly reasoned discourse. Ein großer Rechenmeister war dieser Fürst der Geister, Newton. Aber er hat ausgespielt, wenn Deutschland auf preußische Manier und mit Goethes Augen Schwarz-Weiß sehen lernt: es wird sich dann das Rot noch göttlicher herausrechnen, wenn es erst sieht, daß

dieses freudig errötende Grau zwischen Schwarz und Weiß so wenig aus dem Lichte allein stammt wie das preußisch nüchterne, das ja ganz unverkennbar eine Mischung aus Schwarz und Weiß ist.<sup>35</sup>

The narrator calls for the reader not to be deceived by ‘englisch perfekter Rechenkunst . . . , die auf Lug und Trug, auf Augentäuschung beruht’ (p. 6), and hopes for the ‘Sieg deutscher Gründlichkeit unter dem Farben-Generalfeldmarschall Goethe, diesem Über-Hindenburg aller Farbenlehre’ (p. 6). Friedlaender uses the rhetoric and hollow formulae of German war propaganda in order to satirize them. The narrator emphasizes that Goethe’s theory of colour is based on the polarity of black and white, and that red is the result of a combination of the two. It seems therefore a happy coincidence and a miracle that the German national colours should reflect Goethe’s theory, which will guarantee victory for Germany in the present conflict. Given the restrictions of wartime censorship, Mynona’s story is a tongue-in-cheek satire on prevailing nationalist attitudes and on the misappropriation of Goethe’s thinking for political purposes.<sup>36</sup>

After the First World War, the Hanover multimedia artist and writer Kurt Schwitters channelled these diverse responses to Goethe into yet another radically modernist aesthetic. As an art student in 1910, while he was discovering the new contemporary theories of art by Kandinsky and others, Schwitters had an interest in Goethe’s theory of colour, although it is unclear which prompted which.<sup>37</sup> Like Kandinsky and Friedlaender, Schwitters had been a contributor to Herwarth Walden’s *Der Sturm* and had links with Berlin Expressionism and Dada, before setting up his own one-man avant-garde movement called ‘Merz’. As the name — the last syllable of ‘Kommerz’ — indicates, Schwitters’s approach to art is through the fragment. In his works he combines all conceivable materials for artistic purposes. His ‘Merzbilder’ are collages made from waste materials picked up randomly in the streets and parks of Hanover. Similarly, his poetry and prose is composed from linguistic *objets trouvés*. What set him apart from contemporary movements, was that he insisted on ‘natural’, quasi-organic forms as the basis for his visual language, and that he rejected Dada’s politics as well as Constructivism’s preoccupation with technology and geometricism. Schwitters also rejected the aesthetic and spiritual concerns of Expressionism. A few verses of his best-known poem ‘An Anna Blume’ (c.1919) can be seen as deconstructing Kandinsky’s Goethean colour mythology: ‘Preisfrage: / 1. Anna Blume hat ein Vogel, / 2. Anna Blume ist rot. / 3. Welche Farbe hat der Vogel. // Blau ist die Farbe Deines gelben Haares, / Rot ist die Farbe Deines grünen Vogels.’<sup>38</sup> But it is not primarily in his poetry, much of which represents a parody of classical forms and themes, that Schwitters is interesting in our context.

His most extraordinary project between the wars was his ‘Merzbau’, a vast construction, which he built in his studio and home from 1923 and had to leave

<sup>35</sup> Mynona, *Schwarz-weiß-rot. Grottesken*, Leipzig, 1916, pp. 5–8 (p. 6).

<sup>36</sup> A subversive strategy can perhaps also be seen in the use of ‘=’ in the title, instead of simple hyphenation. This usage, although not uncommon at the time, suggests a black and white view of the world. — For a useful discussion of Friedlaender and Goethe, drawing on a wider range of sources than here, see Exner, pp. 219–28. Less useful is Manfred Kuxdorf, ‘Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona and Goethe: A Chapter in the Goethe Reception of German Expressionism’, in: *Goethe in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Alexej Ugrinsky, New York, Westport/Ct., London, 1987, pp. 55–60.

<sup>37</sup> Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters. A Biographical Study*, Cardiff, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> In: Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk*, vol. 1: *Lyrik*, edited by Friedhelm Lach, Cologne, 1973, p. 58.

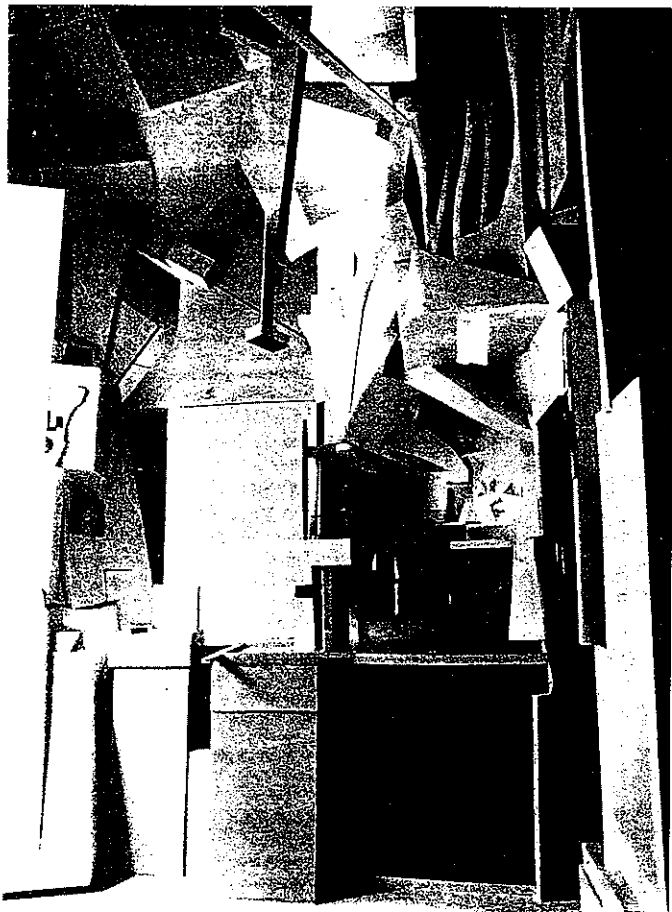


FIGURE 5 Kurt Schwitters:  
*Merzbau*. Taken from Elizabeth  
Burns Gamard. *Kurt Schwitters'  
Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic  
Misery*, New York, 2000, p. 199.

unfinished when he left Germany in 1937 (Figure 5). Combining the elements of sculpture and architecture, the 'Merzbau' is extraordinarily rich in themes and allusions. Made around and within a basic structure of wire, wood and plaster, the 'Merzbau' consisted of a series of interconnecting 'grottos', in which various and often bizarre keepsakes and memorabilia referring to political events and to the private life of the artist were stored. Every addition, however, demanded a readjustment of the whole to accommodate the new. An alternative name proposed by Schwitters was 'Kathedrale des erotischen Elends', a parody of Expressionist attempts from Steiner's 'Goetheanum' to Lionel Feininger's 'Kathedrale des Sozialismus', the Bauhaus emblem, to re-invest architecture with new spiritual and social significance. In Schwitters, the entire structure remained always in flux, embodying the idea of constant transformation. It also collapses the distinctions between art and non-art, the public and the private, found and made, part and whole, design and chance. And it draws on the possibilities of collage and assemblage to comment on the experience of modern fragmentation and discontinuity.

In our context, the 'Merzbau' is of interest because it includes a group of caves and grottos that refer to historical and mythological models of German national culture. Each grotto was given a name, and the material stored in them was thereby elevated from mere junk to cultural signifier. This section included a 'Goethegrotte', whose context and content Schwitters described as follows: 'Da gibt es den Nibelungenhort mit dem glänzenden Schatz, den Kyffhäuser mit dem steinernen Tisch, die Götthegrotte mit einem Bein Göthes als Reliquie und den vielen fast zu Ende gedichteten Bleistiften'.<sup>39</sup> All these mythological models were being floated and propagated in Weimar Germany, to help boost national identity and self-worth. Fritz Lang's Nibelungen films are but one example. References to the Kyffhäuser, the mythical final resting place of the medieval Emperor Friedrich I, or Barbarossa, who was expected to wake up again one day and resume his glorious reign over Germany, were particularly poignant in a republic that large parts of the population detested and sought to destroy. Following his triumph at the presidential elections in 1925, Reichspräsident Hindenburg, to whom another part of the 'Merzbau' alludes, was often referred to as a substitute Kaiser.

In the 'Merzbau', Schwitters inverts and parodies signification and shows a willingness to play with general concepts and assumptions. In Schwitters's work, Goethe clearly no longer stands for self-sufficient harmonious artistic form, but is associated with the fragment and the scraps of everyday life. In the 'Merzbau' context, the Goethe grotto has to be seen as a playfully ambiguous signifier of 'Kultur'. On the one hand, it is part of the various mythologies that were mobilized in the Weimar Republic to restore German national pride and self-worth. On the other hand, Goethe can be said to refer to an alternative, positive, if often abused model of an identity based on culture, learning, and civilization.<sup>40</sup> As such, this implication would counteract the nationalistic tendencies associated with the Nibelungen and Kaiser Barbarossa, which Schwitters identified in a 1924 text entitled 'Nationalitätsgefühl'. Looking at the objects within the grotto, Goethe's leg, which Schwitters describes as a 'Reliquie', is of course not the real thing but a doll's leg. As a fragment of a child's toy, Goethe's leg is associated with Lionel Feininger's wooden-toy set depicting Weimar's half-timbered houses which the artist had designed for the Bauhaus and which Schwitters stores in another part of his 'Merzbau'. The many pencil stubs in the Goethe grotto may pay homage to the prolific nature of Goethe's writings in a wide range of fields. They are imbued with the patina of personal use, but might also be Freudian symbols, just as the leg torn from a doll might refer to a symbolic act of violation. Schwitters's odd characterization of these pencils as 'fast zu Ende gedichtet' could be read as implying that the significance of Goethe's work, and perhaps that of poetry in the modern age, faced with unprecedented political and social demands, is diminishing. However, it is the pencils that are said to be 'fast zu Ende gedichtet', and not the *œuvre* or an individual text, as one might expect. This may suggest the self-referentiality of writing. Similarly, the assemblage of pencils is sufficiently open and plural to include the possibility of artistic collaboration that Schwitters hints at in the

<sup>39</sup> Kurt Schwitters, 'Ich und meine Ziele' (dated 27 December 1930), *Das literarische Werk*, vol. 5: *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, edited by Friedhelm Lach, Cologne, 1981, pp. 340–48 (p. 344).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Dietmar Elger, 'Kurt Schwitters: Merzbau in Hanover', in: *Dada Cologne Hanover*, edited by Charlotte Stokes and Stephen C. Foster, New York, 1998, pp. 193–205 (pp. 201–02).



so-called friendship grottos, which evoke his association with other avant-garde artists such as Hannah Höch. Overall, the grotto plays on Goethe's status as a national 'Reliquie', a status that was propagated with renewed vigour in the early years of the Weimar Republic. At the same time, it undermines the genre of the religious shrine, and debunks any notion of a totalizing tradition.<sup>41</sup>

In his 'Merzbau', Schwitters has taken the cultural project of modernism to its extreme. The 'Merzbau' is a building with fragments, but in building with fragments, Schwitters attempts to overcome the very process of fragmentation. Just as the grottos and their content disappear into the 'Merzbau', becoming building stones within its dynamic shell, so Schwitters hoped the various fragments could be playfully and constructively reorganized to form a new way of looking at reality. An avant-garde 'Gesamtkunstwerk', the 'Merzbau' is a project of organic transformation beyond narrow political causes.

Towards the end of the high modernist era, in fact during the time when Expressionism and other modern movements were branded 'degenerate art', another obsessive collector of the artefacts of modernity reflected on his cultural project. Walter Benjamin's 'Passagen-Werk' was an unfinished effort to write a comprehensive socio-cultural history of nineteenth-century France inspired by the Paris shopping arcades. Benjamin's approach was 'in der Analyse des kleinen Einzelmoments den Kristall des Totalgeschehens zu entdecken',<sup>42</sup> knowing full well that history as a total event was unrepresentable. The 'Passagen-Werk', then, is a montage of these small, particular moments — e.g. images, texts, data, excerpts from contemporary guidebooks and catalogues.

Surprisingly, and certainly puzzling to his Marxist friends, Benjamin framed his project in expressly Goethean terms. In presenting his material, Benjamin intended to adopt the inductive approach Goethe had offered in his morphological writings. Goethe's method, as Benjamin confirmed in an early note that is part of the Arcades project, seemed to be particularly suited because it was a construction solely based on facts, to the complete exclusion of theory (p. 1033). Each of the small pieces of material evidence to be included in the 'Passagen-Werk' was to be identified as an 'anschauliches Urphänomen' (p. 574) of the present, 'indem sie in ihrer selbsteignen Entwicklung — Auswicklung wäre besser gesagt — die Reihe der konkreten historischen Formen der Passagen aus sich hervorgehen lassen, wie das Blatt den ganzen Reichtum der empirischen Pflanzenwelt aus sich hervoraltet' (p. 577).

Like other modernists, Benjamin translated the aesthetic mode of knowledge which he found expressed in Goethe's writings on nature to history. However, this translation did not result in a morphological account of history, as it did for example in the case of Spengler. The Goethean architecture of Benjamin's 'Passagen-Werk' does not imply a teleological master narrative. Instead, Benjamin drew on the avant-garde device of the 'Prinzip der Montage', which he was keen 'in die Geschichte [zu] übernehmen' (p. 575). Benjamin's commentary, in which those historical facts and artefacts were

<sup>41</sup> Recently critics have tended to agree that the 'Goethegrotte' is particularly significant in the 'Merzbau' and for Schwitters himself. Gamard suggests that Schwitters may have viewed himself as the key representative of a Goethean legacy. Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, New York, 2000, p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk. Aufzeichnungen und Materialien; Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. v, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, p. 575.

embedded, was meant to provide the structural support that allowed the individual fragments to cohere on a philosophical representation of history as a 'Totalgeschehen'.<sup>43</sup>

The similarities between the 'Passagen-Werk' and the 'Merzbau' are remarkable. Both display the fragments of modern culture, both speak of the hope that the assemblage of fragments and individual 'Urformen' will lead to a different cultural, social and political optics that smashes contemporary assumptions about 'Entwicklung', and about tradition, history and progress. But whereas Schwitters regarded the individual items as 'Urphänomene' that could simply be inserted into the 'Merzbau', Benjamin theorized the 'Urphänomen' in a way that allowed him to retain the concept's potentiality while rejecting assumptions about linear development. As Benjamin wrote in a note dating from 1918, 'Urphänomene' were best conceived of as Platonic symbols, through which ideal essences appear in sensual form.<sup>44</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss has shown, this argument is very close to that put forward by Georg Simmel, whose monograph on Goethe (1913) provided Benjamin with the framework with which to link the study of nature and that of history.<sup>45</sup>

Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1925) provides another clue as to why Goethe became so significant for his late work. His reading emphasizes the novel's intricate network of clandestine structures and symbolic references, to the extent that Goethe comes across as, not a classicist, but something like the first modernist writer.<sup>46</sup> While assembling his 'Passagen-Werk', Benjamin reflected that his essay on *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* could be regarded as a kind of model for his current project. In a letter to Gershom Scholem of 8 July 1938, he stressed the essay's internal structure, drawing on a wide range of sources, and the 'lange Kette von Reflexionen' prompted by this method, both of which had allowed a gradual unfolding of the subject matter, without ever reaching closure.<sup>47</sup> It is this simultaneous awareness of any text's historical grounding and the open-ended aesthetic possibilities inherent in its construction which fascinated Benjamin in Goethe's method and which came to characterize the 'Passagen-Werk'.

In this essay, I have highlighted instances of Goethe reception in Steiner, Kandinsky, Friedlaender, Schwitters and Benjamin, and linked these with the wider cultural project that they shared. Some of these writers and artists are perhaps peripheral to the major strands of 'Goetherezeption' in Germany in the early twentieth century. But my choice has been deliberate, and I have borne in mind Benjamin's suggestion that one should locate the 'truth' of an epoch not in its proclaimed centre, but in the margins, at the 'entlegenen Extremen, den scheinbaren Exzessen'.<sup>48</sup> In the same breath, he described this marginal territory as the 'farbigen Rand einer kristallinischen

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1991, p. 77.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, *Fragmente, autobiographische Schriften; Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. vi, edited by Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, 1985, p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Buck-Morss, pp. 71–73. Benjamin confirms his debt to Simmel and to a Goethean approach, in the introduction to his book *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928).

<sup>46</sup> See Annette Simonis, "'Eine Miniatur dieser ganzen... vielfach bedrohten Goetheschen Existenz": Goethe-Rezeption und -Kritik in den Schriften Walter Benjamins', *GRM*, L (2000), 443–59 (pp. 446–49, 457).

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *Briefe*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, vol. II, Frankfurt am Main, 1966, p. 765.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, p. 20.

Simultaneität'. That Benjamin should have used a metaphor which alludes to Goethe's colour experiments, seems particularly apt in our context.

The Goethean element in the cultural projects of Steiner, Kandinsky, Friedlaender, Schwitters and Benjamin does not have to do with the anxiety of influence that paralysed so many, perhaps too many, German writers working in Goethe's shadow. In the modernist projects I have discussed, Goethean ideas and concepts have been transformed to reflect the nature of the modern work of art. The focus on colour, form, material, collage and montage emphasizes modern art's autonomy in respect of social expectations and art's emancipation from nature and representation. The works of art themselves are seen as a process, which is invested with transformative power. What Goethe had observed in nature: 'Das Gebildete wird sogleich wieder umgebildet', is true for much of modern art. In being ambiguous, in refusing to be invested with a single meaning, in searching for hidden and underlying laws and in constructing an individually new and complex order, modern art and particularly abstract art essentially preserves Goethe's idea of metamorphosis, but does so in a self-referential mode.

And yet, the cultural project of modernism always aimed to go beyond self-referentiality to encompass the wider culture. A dominant experience of modernity was one of negativity, alienation, fragmentation, chaos, and a rupture with the past. As a result, the modernist project was based on the conviction that art had the potential to redeem the modern world, to release forces that might be usefully channelled towards the transformation of society. The experience of contemporary politics and history, of nationalism, war and revolution, shook and also strangely reinforced this belief, as can be seen in Friedlaender's seemingly optimistic position. While ensuring constant artistic innovation, Goethean ideas about metamorphosis and development are questioned in the light of the modern experience. The emphasis on temporal aspects, on past and present, on history and progress that all the artists and writers discussed here share, is given a specifically modern twist. Goethe's model of permanent 'Höher- und Weiterentwicklung', of a 'fortschreitende Metamorphose' 'auf einer geistigen Leiter' (HA, XIII, 64-65), while perhaps subscribed to by Steiner and the early Kandinsky, is questioned by Friedlaender and radically invalidated by Schwitters and Benjamin. Their response was to develop shocking and disturbing alternative forms of art and writing. Disturbing though they may be, however, they are still part of the cultural project of modernism, because they hint that some kind of transformation through art and thought might just be possible.