

Caspar David Friedrich's "Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer"

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When I suggested talking about this famous German painting, Simon pointed me to a YouTube clip by the comedian Stewart Lee. Lee rails against consumerist attitudes to culture, especially the constant use of selfies in front of great art works, and ends by stepping solemnly into a projection of Friedrich's picture, back to the audience – only to turn around with a grin and repurpose his walking stick to take a selfie!

The 'instant recognition factor' of great art makes it an easy 'trophy' or popular meme, and these 'adapted' images can be clever. Mary Beard in yesterday's *Guardian* thinks we shouldn't be 'sniffy' about selfies as a way of engaging with art, but for me, to do that seriously means questioning the artwork and ourselves.

Friedrich was born in 1774 in Greifswald, N. Germany. His work is often simply classed as Romantic, and this image (from around 1818) of an apparently rapt solo figure might suggest just that. Or it's taken as an example of 'the sublime', i.e. that which creates both 'awe and terror' according to Edmund Burke, and the vast panorama with its luminous colouring does suggest symbolic readings like 'contemplating the infinite'.

But the picture also coincides with the 19c. move from religious art to realistic landscape depiction. Clouds and mountains were often favoured for close study (cf. Constable, Turner), and the peaks here are easily identifiable as sandstone outcrops in Saxony (near Dresden) – yet also some in Bohemia: so this is a *composite* image, not strictly 'realistic'. Nor was Friedrich interested in clouds per se, for he even refused to do studies of clouds for his great contemporary Goethe. So it's not a fantasy world here, but equally there is no simple pictorial intent – so what else?

History might help. The figure's frockcoat is quite specifically "altdeutsch", from pre-Napoleonic times - a style consciously adopted by German nationalists. Some think the picture commemorates a particular officer who fought in the Wars of Liberation, but Friedrich too was known to have patriotic feelings, in an age before "Germany" existed. The only defence against the widespread disruption caused by Napoleon was Germanic culture: literature, music, language and art all had to represent the German 'nation' and substitute for political unity, so this could be a self-portrait of the artist as cultural 'hero': art playing a socio-political role.

Robert Macfarlane takes a rather different heroic view in his first major book *Mountains of the Mind*, where he refers to the picture as "*Traveller above a sea of fog*" but sees it as "the archetypal image of the mountain-climbing visionary, a figure ubiquitous in Romantic art...now implausible, ridiculous even...his absurdly clichéd stature – one foot raised, the big-game hunter with his foot upon the cavernous ribcage of his dead beast. But as crystallisation of a concept – that standing atop a mountain...confers nobility on a person - Friedrich's painting has carried enormous symbolic power down the years in terms of Western self-perception." I admire Macfarlane's work, but profoundly disagree here. I don't see the absurdity: Friedrich was a great walker himself, and the stance is that of any climber positioned on a narrow peak, one foot forward for balance. It is certainly true that for

centuries high places have been symbolically associated with heroism, physical or spiritual (I've even written about that myself), but association isn't necessarily the same as intent. What matters most is the composition. Why make the figure the prime focus when we see nothing of his *response* to what he sees? When artists like Constable or Turner included a lone figure in a landscape it was either tiny, to emphasise nature's grandeur, or shown mastering the scene artistically by drawing it. Here the figure is ambiguous; he may seem to dominate the view 'heroically' but is also separated from it by scale, definition and colour, and actually more transient than the eternal play of insubstantial mists, more precarious than the rock on which he stands.

The figure also hides the focal point of the painting, so we cannot see where the perspective sightlines come together; we have no clear view of the landscape, we can only see it through the figure, as it were; his viewpoint is perforce ours too, and so he models the physical act of our observing – for where are we as viewers located otherwise? This is not an image of conquest, or of nature as mere backdrop to human life: it's an image of the separation between man and nature. It doesn't offer us nature as spectacle but draws attention to the act of seeing. We grasp reality only as mediated by our physicality: which brings us perhaps, given the date of the painting, to Kant and his 'Ding an sich' - the belief that we have no direct access to the inner essence of reality, but can comprehend only via our physical senses and Reason. Friedrich seems to me to be dramatising a tension between the beauty and infinite mystery of nature, veiled in mist, resisting us, and the capacity of humans to comprehend it.

If that sounds fanciful I'd like to come back to the title, *pace* Macfarlane: the word 'Wanderer' can indeed mean 'traveller' or 'hiker', but bears particular cultural and metaphysical weight in German. Goethe had used it in several popular poems whose subject is man's uncertain place on earth (e.g. *Wanderers Nachtlied*, *Wanderers Sturmlied*). Schubert would also soon use the image of the wanderer for his song-cycle about unresolved longing, *Winterreise* (1827/8), Wagner applied it later to the thwarted, questing figure of Wotan in his Ring Cycle. And Friedrich's title has the definite article – not 'a sea', as Macfarlane has it but 'above *the* sea of fog': it's the difference between a specific event, and a generalised symbol. This picture is not only about what is seen: it's also about the effort required to see beyond ourselves, to make sense of our place in the world. As John Berger put it in his seminal book *Ways of Seeing*, it is 'seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world', and art helps us to reflect on just that.

So Stewart Lee was pretty right. Art at its best is a prompt to look outward at the world rather than only at ourselves: ironic, then, that precisely Friedrich's painting is often adapted for tattoos, the ultimate form of self-regard! For this image more than most asks us to be conscious exercisers of sight, vis-à-vis an external reality, an 'Other', that challenges and eludes us in the mist even if – or especially if – we imagine we stand securely above it.

Yet before long, with the scientific advances of the later 19th century, many did hubristically come to believe they were all-knowing, in control. Perhaps their fitting image is a painting of 1893 that references and reworks Friedrich's: Eduard Munch's "The Scream", where suddenly that manageable world has become threatening, unreadable background for a figure turned away in self-enclosure – and where is it looking? Straight at us.

For a picture of the painting, please click, [here](#).

For the Youtube video mentioned in the first paragraph, please click, [here](#).