SETAREH

Gregor Gleiwitz
Dis-Appearance
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The Night of the Painter Gregor Gleiwitz
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Pandemonium is the abode of all demons and evil spirits, and, figuratively speaking, represents a place of horror, chaos, or wild turmoil. John Milton coined the term in his epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) as the name for the capital of Hell. While it originally referred only to Milton's Hell, over time, it evolved into a synonym for tumult, chaos, and ugliness – concepts later relevant to 'Pathos Realism' in art history. This refers to a movement within 'Early Neo-Expressionism', often called 'New Figuration', that emerged in 1960s Germany as a reaction to the prevailing informal abstraction. The movement was spearheaded by Eugen Schönebeck (born 1936) and Georg Baselitz (born Hans-Georg Kern, 1938) in Berlin, who outlined their objectives in the '1st Pandämonium' (Pandemonium) programme for their 1961 Berlin show. In 1962, the 'Pandämonium Manifesto' (or '2nd Pandämonium') further showcased a visionary, pathos-laden expressive language. This vision also shaped 'Pathos Realism.' Abstract art, seen as formally rigid, would yield to a figurative painting – more sensual, subjective, expressive, and existential.

The powerful, painterly, and often sombre art of Pathos Realism often explored provocative or sexualised themes and body-related subjects. It used a fleshy, raw visual style and an impulsive approach, setting the stage for Neo-Expressionism in the 1980s, known as 'Les Nouveaux Fauves' or 'Neue Wilde' (New Wild Ones). Pathos Realism was influenced by Expressionism and the 'unknown' artists mentioned in Pandämonien, such as Dado, Chaim Soutine, and Mikhail Vrubel. 'Art Brut' or outsider art, as well as the writings of Samuel Beckett and Antonin Artaud, also contributed to the emergence of Pathos Realism.

Gregor Gleiwitz comes to mind among these Pandämonium connections, although he was born in Poland ironically about 15 years later, during the turbulent Neue Wilde and Neue Deutsche Welle movements. Ironically, because his Pandämonium colleagues Baselitz and Schönebeck also hail from the east and their names also evoke cities: Schönebeck on the Elbe and Deutschbaselitz (Sorbian *Němske Pazlicy*) in Saxony's Bautzen district – the latter

being Georg Baselitz's birthplace. Gregor Gleiwitz, born in 1977 in Gleiwitz (now Gliwice, Poland), creates paintings that exemplify Neo-Realism, infused with pathos and a sense of pandemonium. Hallmarks of his work include an unrestrained, powerful application of paint; a gestural and impulsive visual language; and subject matter that can be emotional and often provocative. One can at least identify a formula leading to these outcomes. Like the Berlin art scene of the early 1960s, his work balances figuration and abstraction. Gleiwitz often paints dynamic shapes that share a single space and defy clear definition. These painterly eruptions suggest animals, people, or combinations of both – such as a horseman. Trees sometimes appear as well. From abstraction, figures take shape and create tension within oil paint streaks. In darkness, certain concrete forms come into view.

> "The human being is this Night, the empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity, a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present. This [is] the Night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here– pure self–[and] in phantasmagoric representations it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying. [For from his eyes] the night of the world hangs out towards us."[1]

These lines were written by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) in his famous Jena Address of 1804, and remain impressive to this day. *Die Nacht des Malers* (The Painter's Night) from 1961 is Eugen Schönebeck's first mature painting, expressing his struggle to find artistic and human identity. Schönebeck depicts faces he encountered with painterly seriousness, such as the introverted, troubled face of the *Junge Frau* (Young Woman, 1962), creating a gateway between (anxious) dreams and wakefulness. Similarly, Gregor Gleiwitz's "first oil painting", exhibited in Münster in 2002 and titled *Nachtkneipe* (Night Bar), shows bodies and faces emerging from paint into vague forms before dissolving. In both Schönebeck's and Gleiwitz's works, these faces can seem menacing, destructive, or tormenting, but can also display a desperate energy as they fight to assert themselves. The act of painting generates this energy, as the focus shifts from the finished product to the painting process itself. Figuration in painting is marked by a sense of time – it shows both the end result (the figure) and the ongoing process of creation. This raises the question: how can something finished exist alongside its creation? Here, psychological actions become visual, producing formal cues and gestures that suggest figures. These can be seen as records of experience or the formation (morphogenesis) of the paintings.

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[1] *Hegel and the Human Spirit, A translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of the Spirit (1805-6)*, trans. Leo Rauch, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1983, p. 87

The 'as if' situation created by the painter – especially in Gleiwitz's case – arises from the logic of progress, which he mistrusts and rejects based on a profound understanding. Even so, it tempts him, in Guston's sense, to speak with two voices. This 'two-voiced' language is skeptical of art history, yet it still employs its means to express something new. In this respect, his shift from the German notion of pathos – that sense of powerlessness – towards the question of the purpose of existence or life is undeniable. His figures, as masses of paint and states of malaise, are a wordless yet eloquent expression of this image of suffering, misery, death and grief, in whose eyes the night of the world appears, this cold nothingness, and in whose surroundings colour belongs to the theatrical pathos of atonement, which, however, does not grant absolution from shame. The world has many such ghoulish faces. In Gregor's painting, it is always a struggle, a tenacious cutting through of the flesh.

Let us take a closer look and bring the images to life with inadequate descriptions and flawed adjectives. With a joy that is nothing short of sublime, Gregor Gleiwitz animates his pictorial worlds, shaped by the mythical-surreal creations of the Expressionist era. Like magical incantations, he arranges pictorial compositions into a tragic inferno of everyday and perpetual bitterness, which possesses an aggressive essence that is purely intrinsic to art. However effective it appears, visual destruction serves as a means of producing the materially stable. A line is a lexical sign. Expressionism is creation, even though in the figurative realm, as in nature and in art, it was about the destruction of the delicately constructed (predecessor) edifice, an irony and critique of the present. One extravagance after another trembles under his crude machinations, and it is fascinating how he leaps off the bandwagon of bourgeois conservatism and, true to his forebears, gives us a taste of our own medicine right in our faces.

From the luminous colour matter of Asger Jorn and the black-brown hues of Schönebeck and Baselitz in the early 1960s, we recognise in Gregor Gleiwitz a dark matter that interacts with the great Böcklin or the profound Goya, extending even to the masters of sfumato and light, Titian and Rembrandt. All these, mindful of the painterly, the theatre of the absurd or cruelty, return to Antonin Artaud or Samuel Beckett, or stumble over to Gregor Gleiwitz, who derives from this a foothold that challenges our connoisseurship intellectually and, even more so, visually, in a grisaille-like manner. Moving towards Philip Guston, the master of the reinterpretation of grotesque imagery, he develops a melancholic mannerism of the most delightfully self-critical kind. For the artists mentioned here, painting has always been a deeply personal and often agonising process of self-examination and questioning of the image. The 'magic of Medusa' has always emerged in the aftermath of cultural delusions of omnipotence, drawing fantastical inspiration from the figures themselves or visions of the end of the world and its rebirth. Her gaze turns to stone, yet from her severed head springs Pegasus, the symbol of poetry and exaltation. It is pitch-black chaos theory with art-

historical magic hats everywhere, at least in the artificially white cells: the most beautiful salivation and tangible failure!

I would argue that the purpose of Gregor Gleiwitz's thesis is to provide a vocabulary that subjects the craft of painting to scrutiny and value judgment. In my view, this involves bringing forth negative values and the ugly within the beautiful, as well as reassessing the noble, which remains unattained according to Adorno: When the beauty of the world falls into the cruelty of human time. Something is rediscovered, not sought, that has long been, and remains, a reality without ever having been clearly marked by a signature or glorified. At times, it is the figurative, problematic in both form and content, that determines the symbolic origin without offering us a coherent explanation. Perhaps the end of glory is the fame of the new, which we see in images of abominably (therefore positively) enlightened old new wild heroes. This fame lies invisible behind the images in Gregor Gleiwitz's work. One might call it a speech without tongues: a stammering of contemporary myths; a drooling of historical visual facts, and an idyll of perverse figments of the imagination. User interfaces beyond hedonism and far removed from mere superficial beauty, yet more immediate than any abstract vision of life. This is all wondrously beautiful, rendered in an almost magical, sculptural manner in swampy scenes of grey, blue, orange, red and violet. We become participants in the clearest formalism – a borrowed one, mind you – in which we see the dawn of a new beginning of an old negative dialectic before it becomes an eternal, daylight-bright night. Before we get to that, let us read the following passage from a magnificent review by Slavoj Žižek: *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2014):

> The subject – *Descartes'* cogito and *Kant's* 'I think' – originates from madness. Hegel referred to this as the 'night of the world'. The animal is embedded in its environment. It has instincts. But how does the animal become human? According to *Žižek*, this process is not continuous (as evolutionary biologists claim). However, humanity is not the result of a spirit being breathed into it from outside, as the traditional religious view holds. Humanity emerges from a profound crisis. The instincts of animals become obsolete. Humans are thrown into chaos as they no longer have access to instinctive patterns of order. This intermediate stage is the Night when everything sinks into chaos. Humans create symbolic order and habits to stabilise themselves and become capable of action. However, this order is always fragile. The Big Other (the cultural and institutional order) is unstable. Ultimately, humans must establish their own moral code (Kantian morality, or the categorical imperative). Yet even this remains ultimately opaque. If humans depended entirely on a transcendent moral order or recognised it in its entirety, they would be puppets of that order. If we knew everything definitively, there would be no scope left for our freedom. We would be confronted directly with the burning core of the world, faring like the man who looks at the sun in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Thus, the blind spot is constitutive of human existence.

> It is inscribed within us as an essential feature. The self, as 'I think', cannot encompass the 'I think' in the act of thinking. The universal cannot become part of the universal.[2]

This question, ever-present in art history, concerning the infusion of an external spirit as the aura of the artwork, along with the critique of sensory deception and the failure to experience the real as the imaginary and the symbolic, can be situated within the works of Gregor Gleiwitz as a contemporary development of Abstract Expressionism and European Informel. Above all, his painting is characterised by a radical processuality. As most of the paintings are created within a single day and night, the act of painting itself becomes a central tenet, an order within freedom. Here, the canvas functions as the setting for the physical and time-bound release of energy, caught in the eternal tension between abstraction and figuration. Gleiwitz exploits the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia, whereby the human eye instinctively recognises familiar shapes, such as faces or body parts, within abstract structures. This 'amorphous quality' is reminiscent of the tradition of artists depicting the human body in states of deformation or dissolution. It is a reflection on society that began with Goya and Wrubel, and which became a substantial theme in Modernism through fragmentation and the rejection of beauty.

From a technical perspective, Gleiwitz works with a strong material presence of paint, which is in stark contrast to the flat surfaces of his paintings. Through layering, scraping and scratching, translucent surfaces emerge on the smoothed ground, reminiscent of organic processes or geological formations. These surfaces are inspired by glossy photo prints, in which the material is likewise not directly visible, yet possesses a specific mass in relation to the colour. At the beginning of his studies, his artistic practice centred on his preoccupation with photography and Henri Cartier-Bresson, his fascination with capturing a moment or a fleeting instant, and the chemistry of time as duration and momentum. This was not a celebration of the plasticity of colour as a material or of massive expressiveness, but rather an appreciation of the cool smoothness of Renaissance painting and a quiet immersion in colour as a perceptually sensitive material. The surfaces of his paintings capture the moment and the momentum of the painter himself; the fine surface structure stores memories and perceptual processes, and thus the act of seeing itself.

Thus, the focus is not on a static image, but on visualising time, transformation and the process of becoming. The organic creature is born through a visceral, physical process of taking shape. Often, a central, amorphous form takes centre stage, evoking associations with organic tissue or a fleshy mass. Supported by colour symbolism employing flesh tones, pink and violet, the impression is of something living and vulnerable. The dark, almost black

[2] Madness: Levinas, Slavoj Žižek: Less Than Nothing (Hegel – Dialectical Materialism). Reviewed by Prof. Dr Anton Schlittmaier, 27 May 2015; see https://www.socialnet.de/rezensionen/18066.php

inclusions resemble body cavities or eyes, underscoring the uncanny presence of the 'creature'. The flowing movements resulting from the painting process contrast with the static background, creating psychological tension. The image does not depict a fixed state, but rather a luminous moment of biological transformation.

Gregor Gleiwitz celebrates the principle of instability in his images. He employs gesture as a medium to explore the dissolution of form, its subsequent metamorphosis into the organic, and extends an invitation to the viewer to actively fill the voids of abstraction with their own associations (pareidolia). He engages in a profound dialogue with art history, his influences ranging from Renaissance masters to modern icons of figurative abstraction, particularly those who experimented with transforming forms. For example, from Hieronymus Bosch, he takes an interest in hybrid, almost monstrous beings that elude clear interpretation, and from Giuseppe Arcimboldo, he takes the principle of forming a new whole (in this case, a face) from individual objects (such as plants or animals), with swathes of colour suddenly appearing like body parts. Francis Bacon's depictions of bodies in states of disintegration or deformation and his intense engagement with human flesh and isolation lead to Schönebeck and Baselitz. Their raw, expressive painterly gestures shatter form. Nevertheless, Adrian Ghenie and depth psychology must also be mentioned. Here, history and memory blur, as is ultimately the case with Cecily Brown's highly dynamic use of paint, in which figures emerge from the chaos only in the eye of the beholder. The metamorphosis – the transformation of physical presence through deformation and layering into expressiveness, and the visibility of the painting process – reveals the 'in-between' of abstraction versus figuration: a field of tension in which forms can never be fully defined.

Gleiwitz delves into the depths of existence by working with fabrics and body impressions, using his own body as a tool. Without a brush, the body and its limbs become the tool for modulation, along with their movements. He emphasises the idea of leaping into the canvas and constructing a new space within it that serves as a mirror of our times. Like all of us, Gleiwitz is a product of his era, imbued with its collective memory and his own perceptions of our daily lives. Whether it's fires, wars, the destruction of nature, or the question of authenticity against the backdrop of the flood of AI images and associated 'self-destruction', art history is automatically integrated into this, be it a body, an equestrian figure, or a portrait by Bosch or Francis Bacon. However, what is important is holding on to something that is not arbitrary, but which becomes visible as an action or event within the temporal dimension in which he paints and forms a counterpart. Only then does he stop painting:

> "Of course, it doesn't always work out. If the night turns out to be a washout, I simply wipe everything away and start again the next day. There are no preliminary sketches

> or pre-determined subjects. It's a reaction to the present moment and its consequences."[3]

This reaction is like looking inside a building – a factory or a hospital, for example – and seeing everything inside: the innards, the brain, the entire interior. It allows us to see, discover and recognise the driving forces and underlying causes. It is particularly at night that this curiosity about the reality lying behind the mirrors of our time comes to the fore; Gregor Gleiwitz brings this phenomenon to life before our very eyes. In his paintings, this act of looking inside emerges – the energy of the invisible world, which is not dark, but hidden from us; the world's glistening, hot core.

Finally, we should mention Michael Wrubel, the Symbolist master whose crystalline brushstrokes and oscillating forms blur the boundary between the physical world and a mystical vision. There is a visual affinity between the two in the way the canvas is worked: the dense, almost fleshy or vegetal textures that Gleiwitz creates through layering and dynamic brushstrokes. Both artists achieve a high level of visual energy and a 'restless' surface that keeps the viewer's gaze constantly in motion. Both bodies of work can also be understood as studies of nature in terms of identity; they are not representations of nature, but rather explorations of its inner, pulsating forces. During periods of cultural chaos, whether old or new, when old narratives crumble, new fantastical visual worlds emerge, ranging from surrealist dreamscapes to post-apocalyptic narratives in painting. The 'artificially white cells' of our systems are sterile, controlled cultural spaces – such as galleries, museums, laboratories and digital platforms – in which the primordial slime of the imagination occasionally bubbles up. This conjures up apocalypses and new creations, serving as a creative reaction to the compulsion to impose order.

While Wrubel sought the 'demonic' or the spiritual in nature and myth, Gregor Gleiwitz explores the pandemonic as something atavistic or archaic, reminiscent of the unconscious as evoked in John Milton's Paradise Lost. Let us hold fast to this!

Gregor Jansen

[3] This paragraph and the quote from an email sent to the author on 25 February 2026.