



# **LE RETOUR DES TÉNÈBRES**

L'IMAGINAIRE GOTHIQUE DEPUIS FRANKENSTEIN

# **NIGHTFALL**

GOTHIC IMAGINATION SINCE FRANKENSTEIN

# SPASMODIC LINES AND DEAD FORM: GOTHIC ANGST IN ABSTRACT ART

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**PRIMUM IN MUNDO FECIT DEUS TIMOR**

TIBULLUS / WILHELM WORRINGER <sup>N01</sup>

**IS IT NOT THE CASE THAT ART, WHETHER IT GIVES AN ACCOUNT OF THINGS AS THEY EXIST OR DEPENDS ESSENTIALLY ON THE PLAY OF THE IMAGINATION, HAS, AS ITS ULTIMATE FUNCTION, TO SAVE US FROM DISASTER BY CREATING, ALONGSIDE THE EVERYDAY WORLD, ANOTHER REALM, FASHIONED ACCORDING TO THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT AND IN KEEPING WITH AN INNER ORDER WHICH, BY ITS VERY NATURE, IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THE UNBELIEVABLE MUDDLE OF THE REALITY AROUND US?**

MICHEL LEIRIS <sup>N02</sup>

In art history, the study of the Gothic traditionally did not include such tropes of gothic literature as darkness, ruins, revenants, etc. In conjunction with the so-called Gothic Revival in architecture, art, and design in the nineteenth century, a scholarly mapping of the Gothic era focused first and foremost on architecture, and in particular the cathedral.<sup>N03</sup> Attention then shifted from historicist description to a search for the “essence” or “soul” of the Gothic style. This ahistorical approach—ahistorical because the Gothic was no longer seen as a feature of the Middle Ages alone—was introduced by British architecture historian John Ruskin (“The Nature of Gothic,” 1853), and reached its peak in the early twentieth century in the curious theories of German “style psychologist” Wilhelm Worringer.<sup>N04</sup> Although it has been said that Worringer’s

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**N01** Borrowing a formula from the Roman poet Tibullus, Wilhelm Worringer explicated primordial fear (*Urangst*) in *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 15. This American edition of Worringer’s text includes an introduction by Hilton Kramer.

**N02** Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 5.

**N03** On the Gothic Revival and tapestry, see Cindy Kang’s essay “The Gothic Aesthetic and Tapestry in Late-Nineteenth-Century France and England” in this catalogue. On the history of the study of the Gothic, see Paul Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960).

**N04** Worringer defined his approach as “psychology of style,” and more generally as “psychology of humankind” (*Menschheitspsychologie*).

book *Form in Gothic* (*Formprobleme der Gotik*, 1911) contains nothing useful for our understanding of the Gothic, this holds true only from an art-historical perspective.<sup>N05</sup> With their emphasis on emotions and primordial fear as the initial impulse for the creation of art, Worringer's theories do, to a certain extent, bridge a gap between formalist art history and the literary genre of gothic fiction. They also teach us a few things about the proliferation of neo-Gothicism in modern and abstract art: Worringer is best known for his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (*Abstraktion und Empathie: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*), which was well received in the artistic circles around Kandinsky and Die Brücke group. This 1908 book does not discuss modern art directly, but focuses on abstraction in the Gothic style, developed further in *Form in Gothic*. Worringer's reading of Gothic forms as examples of *Ausdrucks-kunst* (art that is expressive of specific feelings) was an important source for the ahistorical interpretation of the Gothic "spirit" (*Geist*) in modern (especially expressionist) artistic circles.<sup>N06</sup> German expressionists took the supposedly unspoiled and direct "primitive" art of the late Middle Ages as a point of reference. Medieval media such as woodcut print and wooden sculpture were revived, and artists like Dürer and Grünewald were seen as forerunners to a typically German modern art.<sup>N07</sup> This essay will explore how Worringer's two key formal concepts, the Gothic line and the crystalline, have woven their path through abstract art in Expressionism and beyond. Our central question will be how these concepts were related to fear—be it primordial (*Urangst*), fear of empty space (*horror vacui*, or, in German, *Raumscheu*), anxiety about the world (*Weltangst*), or chronophobia (the fear of time passing, a fear of the future).

**N05** Wolfgang Kemp, "Der Über-Stil: Zu Worringers Gotik," in *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte*, eds. Hannes Böhringer and Beate Söntgen (Munich: Fink, 2002), 11.

**N06** Although Worringer published a pamphlet pronouncing the failure and death of Expressionism in 1919, he was regarded as "a theoretical forerunner and founder" of German expressionist art. See Georg Lukács, "Expressionism: its Significance and Decline" (1934), in *Essays on Realism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), 76; Wilhelm Worringer, "Kritische Gedanken zur neuen Kunst," *Genius*, no. 1 (1919): 221–236.

**N07** Magdalena Bushart, *Die Geist der Gotik und die expressionistische Kunst: Kunstgeschichte und Kunststheorie 1911–1925* (Munich: Schreiber, 1990).

### Conjuring Primordial Fear: The Crystalline

Worringer's attempt to read the psychology of entire historic groups of people (*Völkerpsychologie*) from their artistic production was based on the assumption that one of humanity's central drives is a *Kunstwollen*: a will to art or artistic volition. This notion was borrowed from the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, who had in turn based his concept on Arthur Schopenhauer's "will to life."<sup>N08</sup> The very first will to art in the history of mankind, according to Worringer, was aroused by primordial fear. Faced with the inability to grasp a profoundly uncertain and hostile outside world guided by arbitrariness and chance, "primitive man" was estranged and fearful, deprived of connection and coherence, and subject to feelings of helplessness.<sup>N09</sup> This situation provoked the need for "life-denying inorganic" forms that could provide "joy," and "appeasement" of the inner unrest provoked by the indeterminate appearances of the exterior world.<sup>N10</sup> Worringer saw an absolute will to form at work throughout the history of art, producing abstract geometric forms that separated objects from their arbitrary context by purifying them of all temporality and opacity—in short, from their dependence on "life." Abstraction was thus a way of overcoming fear and chaos by elevating the accidental into absolute and immutable "laws" through symbols and forms derived solely from the inner world, or *Geist*. The artistic tendency in opposition to abstraction was defined by Worringer as the "empathetic." With Greek and Renaissance art as its epitome, it comprised all naturalist art tracing organic life, and produced a sensualist art based on impression. Empathy's precondition was a relationship of trust between man and exterior phenomena.<sup>N11</sup> Conversely, abstraction derived from the spiritual, from expression (*Ausdruck*), and from character.

**N08** Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1819); Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome: Bretschneider, 1984), a reprint of Riegl's 1901 text. Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power" is another derivative of this line of thinking.

**N09** Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich: Piper, 1911), 14. See Claudia Ohlschläger, *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und die Geist der Moderne* (Munich: Fink, 2005), 15–22.

**N10** Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 4, 15–17.

**N11** Ibid., 45, 128.



FIG-1 AUGUST STRINDBERG, PHOTOGRAM OF CRYSTALLISATION, CIRCA. 1892-1896

In his very first description of these two diverging tendencies of the “will to form,” Worringer introduced the image that guided his understanding of abstract geometric form as anorganic: the crystalline.<sup>N12</sup> For him, the crystalline was the articulation of an attitude of self- and life-denial in complete dedication to “dead” form (crystals) that follows a logic not directed by organic life<sup>FIG-1</sup>. As such, the will to abstraction is comparable to a death drive (*Todestrieb*).<sup>N13</sup> Although by no means the inventor of the notion of the crystalline,<sup>N14</sup> Worringer was the first theorist to connect it to abstraction. He formulated two main formal characteristics of the crystalline based on abstract-geometric Egyptian and Oriental art’s “need for anorganicism,” expressed through an undoing of—or distancing from—the body and space.<sup>N15</sup> The psycho-stylistic process of the purification of the object from the arbitrariness of

N12 Worringer: “Just as the urge to empathy as a pre-assumption of aesthetic experience finds its gratification in the beauty of the organic, so the urge to abstraction finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity.” *Ibid.*, 4.

N13 Öhlschläger, *Abstraktionsdrang*, 26–27.

N14 Regine Prange, *Das Kristalline als Kunstsymbol: Bruno Taut und Paul Klee* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1991).

N15 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 62–63. Although the official English translations of Worringer have opted for “inorganic” or “non-organic,” I will stay close to Worringer’s original notion “anorganic,” which expresses his dualist, antithetic thinking: the anorganic is the absolute opposite of the organic.

nature implied a two-dimensionality of the image and a transfer of the natural model to rigidly geometric crystalline lines.<sup>N16</sup>

Bearing in mind that the “invention” of abstract art postdates Worringer’s writings by only a few years (1912–1915), it is easy to see parallels between Worringer’s psychology of abstraction and slightly later discourses on abstract art. Mondrian, for example, described his geometric abstractions as expressing serenity. A more telling example is the crisis of abstract form that occurred in the work of Jean Arp in the early 1930s. Whereas until then Arp had favored organic abstraction,<sup>N17</sup> the organic now became a hyperbolic object of temporality, and thus decay:

Around 1930 I did my first *papiers déchirés* <sup>FIG-2</sup>. A human opus now struck me as being inferior even to disconnected work, as being totally removed from life. Everything is approximate, even less than approximate, for if you peer more sharply and closely, even the most perfect painting is a filthy, wart-infested approximation, a dried-up pap, a desolate landscape of lunar craters. What arrogance is concealed in perfection. Why strive for accuracy and purity if they can never be attained? I now welcomed the decomposition that always sets in once a work is ended. A dirty man puts his dirty finger on a subtle detail in a painting to point it out. That place is now marked with sweat and grease. He bursts into enthusiasm and the painting is sprayed with saliva. A delicate picture on paper, a watercolor is thus lost. Dust and insects are also efficient destroyers. Light makes colors fade. Sunshine and warmth create blisters, loosen the paper, leave cracks in the paint and make it chip. Moisture creates mildew. The work decomposes and dies. Now, the death of a painting no longer devastated me. I had come to terms with its ephemeralness and its

N16 *Ibid.* See also Öhlschläger, 21.

N17 Ralph Uhl, “Wilhelm Worringer, Hans Arp und Max Ernst bei den Muttern: Überlegungen zum Primitivismus der deutschen Avantgarde,” in *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte*, 119–140.

death, and included them in the painting. Death, however, grew and devoured the painting and life. This decomposition ought to have been followed by the negation of all action. Form had turned into formlessness, the finite into infinity, the individual into totality.<sup>N18</sup>



FIG-2 JEAN ARP, PAPIERS  
DÉCHIRÉS, 1933



FIG-3 SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP,  
KOMPOSITION AUBETTE, 1928

If the inclusion of decomposition in Arp's work at first seemed to find resolve in the complete dissolution of form flowing back into an organic "totality" (the arbitrary exterior world), the crisis of dying form, in the end, found its solution in a form that was already dead and purely spiritual: the crystalline. "It was Sophie Taeuber," he wrote, "who through the example of her clear work and her clear life showed me the right path, the road to beauty. In this world, up and down, light and darkness, eternity and ephemeralness are in perfect balance."<sup>N19</sup> Arp directly qualified Taeuber-Arp's "clear world" as crystalline when he specified that "Sophie Taeuber-Arp embroiders her canvases to encourage crystals."<sup>N20</sup> FIG-3. Arp's

N18 Jean Arp (1948), in Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking, 1972), 246–247.

N19 Ibid., 247. Arp and Sophie Taeuber married in 1922.

N20 Ibid., 229.

crystalline salvation resonates with Herbert Read's summary of Worringer's theories: "Abstraction is the reaction of man confronted with the abyss of nothingness, the expression of an Angst which distrusts or renounces the organic principle."<sup>N21</sup>

Although the crystalline clarity described by Arp seems to offer a peaceful retreat for the spirit, we should bear in mind that this decisive turn from the violent passions inspired by existential fear invited a potentially equally violent process of "purification" of objects separated from their natural context.<sup>N22</sup> This "aesthetic of destruction" found its dystopian epitome in Albert Speer's *Lichtdom* FIG-4, a "cathedral" of crystalline clarity and rigidity produced by 152 upward-pointing anti-aircraft searchlights surrounding the crowds at Nazi Party rallies in Nuremberg from 1933 onward. Its unmistakable symbolism of light overcoming darkness was doubtless inspired by the Gothic cathedral, biblical narratives, and romantic neo-Gothic art FIG-5.

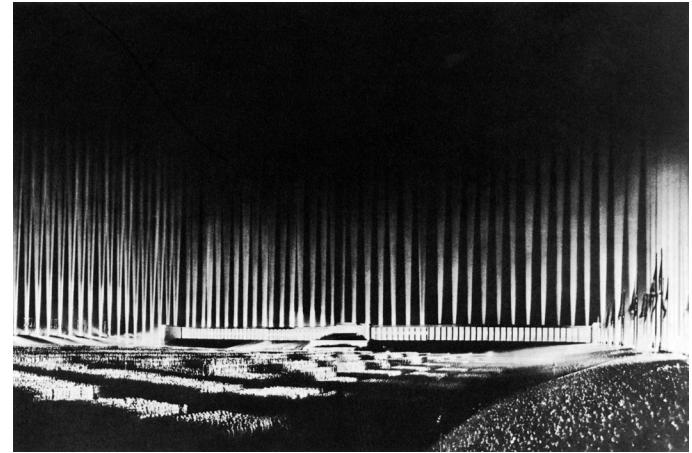


FIG-4 ALBERT SPEER, LICHTDOM (SEPTEMBER 11, 1937)

N21 Herbert Read, quoted in Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991), 171.

N22 Michael W. Jennings, "Against Expressionism," in *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, ed. Neil H. Donahue (University Park: Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1995), 99.



FIG-5 JOHN MARTIN, *THE ANGELS GUARDING PARADISE AT NIGHT*, 1824–1825

### Sublime Hysteria of the Gothic Line

If geometric abstraction allowed its practitioners to sidestep a confrontation with “the abyss of nothingness,” the question remains how the anorganic principle of the crystalline was connected to the apparently less geometric Gothic style. For Worringer, the Gothic will to form (which he also saw at work in northern Baroque art) represented the last great spiritual era in the history of art. This is one explanation for the interest in the Gothic in German abstract art circles—as demonstrated, for example, by Lyonel Feininger’s crystalline-abstract cathedral in the first Bauhaus manifesto  FIG-6. Nevertheless, by dedicating his 1911 book to *problems of form*, Worringer suggested that something was not quite “right” with the Gothic style. Like Goethe, he saw the Gothic era as the adolescence of Europe, characterized by sickly variability, spiritual homelessness, and extreme passions.<sup>N23</sup> Arguing that the Gothic had been an era of struggle between the organic and the anorganic principle, Worringer coined the term “expressive abstraction” to indicate an artistic process that had not yet reached the highest possible form of expression: the spiritual. Abjuring crystalline self-denial, Gothic abstraction was characterized by an ecstatic expression of the agitated self in the quivering movement of the “northern,” or Gothic, line, which was defined as

N23 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 115.

the quintessential Gothic form  FIG-7.<sup>N24</sup> Originating in early medieval ornament in northern Europe, where its two-dimensional plenitude could be explained as a reaction to *horror vacui*, the Gothic line also defined the cathedral as the incarnation of the northern style  FIG-8. Here, its upward palpitation sought to overcome an organic incarceration in stone. The “infinite melody” of the line corresponded to an “inner pressure,” a yearning for transcendence and metaphysical comfort.<sup>N25</sup> The Gothic line did not express appeasement (*Beruhigung*) or liberation from existential fear; all it could offer was a “satisfaction” of the longing for self-denying spiritual expression in “stupefaction” and “intoxication,” obtained in a “confused mania of ecstasy.”<sup>N26</sup> The unnatural, exaggerated activity of this “convulsive yearning to be merged into a super-sensual rapture” was of a “non-sensual, spiritual kind.”<sup>N27</sup> This dynamic was diagnosed as “sublime hysteria.”<sup>N28</sup>



FIG-6 LYONEL FEININGER, KATHEDRALE, ILLUSTRATION FOR THE FIRST BAUHAUS MANIFESTO PROGRAM, 1919

N24 Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, 36–38: “Die unendliche Melodie der nordischen Linie.”

N25 Ibid., 34, 36–38, 51.

N26 Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, ed. and trans. Herbert Read (London: Tiranti, 1957), 70.

N27 Ibid., 79, 45.

N28 Ibid., 50. Herbert Read preferred “exalted hysteria,” 79.



FIG-7 BIRD ORNAMENT IN  
WILHELM WORRINGER,  
FORMPROBLEME DER GOTIK,  
1918



FIG-8 COLUMN, ABBEY CHURCH  
OF COULOMBS, IN WILHELM  
WORRINGER, FORMPROBLEME  
DER GOTIK, 1918



FIG-9 FRANZ MARC, TIERSCHICKSALE (DIE BÄUME ZEIGTEN IHRE RINGE,  
DIE TIERE IHRE ADERN), 1913.

Had he followed his own logic, Worringer would have called the intensified movement of the Gothic line from the organic toward the anorganic dead form *spasmodic*. Instead, he chose to call it "orgiastic" and "hysterical," thus inscribing the line within a larger bio-vitalist discourse that analyzed society in terms of "masculine" and "feminine" principles—hysteria, supposedly, a feminine condition.<sup>N29</sup> It will come as no surprise that the masculine principle was that of the self-denying spirit, or *Geist*. What is a surprise is that Worringer's Gothic contained *masculine* hysteria.<sup>N30</sup> Best understood (according to the diagnosis formulated by Otto Weininger in 1903) as a hysteria consequent to the repression of one's inner being,<sup>N31</sup> the hysterical Gothic line had "masculine" agency through its "orgiastic power." And by raising hysteria to the level of the sublime, at least a tendency toward "masculine" spirituality was foreseen. Moreover, the infinite movement of the line itself was abstract (i.e. "masculine"): "spiritual," "non-sensual," and "mechanical."<sup>N32</sup> In this way, the Gothic line expressed both a yearning (*Sehnsucht*) for the spiritual world, and, at its best (in Dürer's drawings, for example), a controlled, spiritual abstraction.

Worringer's identification of the early French Gothic as "hysteria" to be overcome by an essentially abstract Germanic Gothic contained a clear element of *Völkerpsychologie*. A larger discourse at the time held that Europe had fallen victim to the decadence of cultural feminization, of which "hysterical" France was the apotheosis and exponent. Many Germans welcomed World War I as a means

N29 On the consequences of this kind of gender-specific discourse in abstract art, see *Die Weibliche und die Männliche Linie: Das imaginäre Geschlecht der modernen Kunst von Klimt bis Mondrian*, ed. Susanne Deicher (Berlin: Reimer, 1993). The spasm, an involuntary muscular movement, was considered one of the symptoms of hysteria. The convulsive movement was also linked to death and to orgasms. The combination of "orgiastic" and "hysterical" doubtless points to the fear of sex in bourgeois society around 1900.

N30 On male hysteria in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, see Michelle Witten's essay "From Passion to Mania" herein.

N31 "Man kann aber seine Natur, sei es auch die physische, nicht unterdrücken ohne Folgen. Die hygienische Züchtigung für die Verleugnung der eigentlichen Natur des Weibes ist die Hysterie." Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1980), 357, a reprint of Weininger's 1903 text. Also see Cordula Hufnagel, "Die hysterische Linie der Gotik" in *Wilhelm Worringer's Kunstgeschichte*, 45–54. Weininger's theories on sexual differentiation influenced a number of avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century, among them Gustav Klimt and Paul Klee.

N32 Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, 36, 38, 61, 104.

to purify Europe of this effeminate ailment—among them Franz Marc, whose compositions around 1913 were distinctly crystalline **FIG-9.**, and who was an avid reader of Worringer. **N33** It may seem odd that during the Franco-German art-historical squabble over who owned the Gothic, **N34** within France *itself* Gothic cathedrals were thought to be “feminine.” French Symbolist writer and art critic Charles Morice believed that the Gothic was a “*culte universel de la femme*” by virtue of the fact that most Gothic cathedrals in France were dedicated to the Holy Virgin. In the early Gothic, Morice wrote, “ce caractère féminin a autant de force et de grandeur que de douceur; il exalte, parmi les sentiments chrétiens, celui qui les somme tous, l’amour.” **FIG-10** **N35** But the later Gothic, he conceded, was “flamboyant,” and the cathedral a “femme folle.” **N36** This terminology is not far removed from Worringer’s hysteria, even if French art historians blamed the flamboyance on British influence. **N37**

Morice’s quotes are from his preface to the only book written by Auguste Rodin, *Les Cathédrales de France* (1914). Toward the end of his career, Rodin discovered the Gothic as an eminently French model for his work, whereas before he had looked to Greek and Italian Renaissance sculpture. Rodin’s book is the record of a road trip across the country, and contains his impressions of Gothic cathedrals, accompanied by sketches of their façades and archi-

**N33** On November 16, 1914, not long after the start of the War, Marc wrote a postcard to Kandinsky from the front: “Mein Herz ist dem Krieg nicht böse, sondern aus tiefem Herzen dankbar, es gab keinen anderen Durchgang zur Zeit des Geistes, der Stall des Augias, das alte Europa konnte nur so gereinigt werden.” *Franz Marc–Paul Klee: Ein Dialog in Bildern*, exh. cat., ed. Michael Baumgartner (Wädenswil: Nimbus, 2010), 125.

**N34** Chateaubriand had introduced the idea that the Gothic cathedral was inspired by the spatial experience in ancient French forests. On the quibble over the “ownership” of the Gothic, see Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l’art national: Le nationalisme et les origines de l’histoire de l’art en France et en Allemagne, 1870–1933* (Paris: Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2013).

**N35** Charles Morice, “Introduction,” in Auguste Rodin, *Les Cathédrales de France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1914), Ivii.

**N36** Ibid.

**N37** Ibid., lxxii. Morice refers his readers to the works of art historian André Michel, according to whom this influence dominated French Gothic in the fifteenth century. The reproach of a British “flamboyance” might simply be ahistorical: it is a category in Ruskin’s writings on Gothic architecture. Ruskin, as we have seen, was not describing British Gothic architecture but attempting to dissect the “essence” of the Gothic—moreover, he wrote his treatise on the Gothic in Venice.



**FIG-10** SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS, DESIGN FOR A GOTHIC ARCH WITH THE ARTIST AND EFFIE RUSKIN EMBRACING, 1853



**FIG-11** AUGUSTE RODIN, ÉTUDE DE MOULURES, 1914



**FIG-12** EDWARD STEICHEN, BALZAC, THE OPEN SKY–11 P.M., 1908



**FIG-13** GERHARD MARCKS, WELTANGST, 1919

tectural details. In the last group, *Études de moulures*  FIG-11, Gothic architecture is abstracted into sets of frail parallel vertical lines cut by a singular ornamental horizontal line seemingly representing the contour of a more baroque architectural detail. The movement in the vertical sets of lines (are they the abstraction of an entire cathedral?) can be read in terms of Worringer's Gothic line: they flow upward, and express, if not orgiastic power, then at least a hesitant tremor. In another strange coincidence, Morice's description of Rodin's *Balzac*  FIG-12 as Gothic in its tension between movement and stasis, "combinant les qualités expressives du mouvement avec les qualités décoratives de la puissance statique, cubique, de la volonté qui s'évade de l'éphémère," can be applied almost verbatim to the expressive movement of the Gothic line: away from the "ephemeral," and toward a spiritual decorative-geometric abstraction. <sup>N38</sup>

A similar tension can be observed in expressionist sculpture such as Gerhard Marcks' *Weltangst*  FIG-13. According to Worringer, the Gothic tendency towards the crystalline was translated in the cathedral as a will to spiritually transcend the material world (stone) in freely moving abstract form or line, and a similar procedure guided Marcks' imposition of vertical lines and geometric forms on his thinly cut material (wood). The title of the work reveals that this association was intentional. *Weltangst* is a concept introduced by Oswald Spengler in his widely read book *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918), and is similar to Worringer's *Urangst*: an existential fear caused by the sheer fact of existence in space and time, by the "direct feeling of thralldom to reality."<sup>N39</sup> Both authors saw this angst—along with a *Sehnsucht* for the light (Spengler) or the crystalline (Worringer)—as the basic impulses for all human striving, and the most creative of all feelings. If, in theory, *Weltangst* and *Urangst* were not directly related to catastrophe, these notions of existential fear must have had a particular appeal directly after World War I.

N38 Ibid., cix. Art Nouveau, the vanguard style at the turn of the twentieth century, can be seen as a return of the Gothic as anti-classicism.

N39 Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, 45; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

## Gothic Abstraction Machines

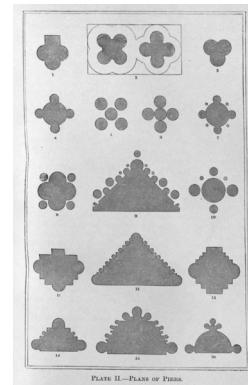


FIG-14 JOHN RUSKIN PLANS OF PIERS, REPRODUCED IN THE STONES OF VENICE

We have seen how for Worringer the movement of the Gothic line detached itself from life to become "unsensual" and "mechanical" in its tendency towards the spiritual. He described this denaturalized liveliness as an "uncanny pathos."<sup>N40</sup> Indeed, as Johannes von Müller describes it in his contribution to this catalogue, "Frankenstein's Fragments," the uncanny or "unhomely" (*unheimlich*) implies a process of dehumanization—of which the mechanical mannequin is the clearest example. (Also herein, see Markus Rath's essay on Frankenstein's creature as mannequin, and Éric Michaud's text on the modern fascination for mechanical men.) It is this anorganic "mechanical" or "machine" logic which defines the Gothic line's abstraction and similarity to the geometric crystalline.<sup>N41</sup> This logic is connected to an essential feature of the Gothic that stands in diametrical opposition to classical art and architecture's emphasis on symmetry: variability. The best way to explain the Gothic as a line of *mechanical* variation is by looking at Gothic architecture, in particular the rib in Gothic vaults  CAT-P.204+P.207. As a structural imperative, the rib is a useless element.

N40 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 77; *Formprobleme der Gotik*, 31.

N41 For Worringer, the Gothic cathedral displays mechanical life. On machine abstraction, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Yet it appears everywhere in Gothic architecture. In the words of architecture theorist Lars Spuybroek, the rib “forms the heart of the Gothic, that is, a world obsessed by linearity and figuration: drawing and materiality, design and craft are of the same order.”<sup>N42</sup> Thus, the rib’s logic exemplifies the “crystalline” aspect of Gothic geometry:

When we look at Ruskin’s table of piers  FIG-14, it is almost like you are looking at snow crystals. All are different, different in size, yes, but also different combinations of ribs and combinations of different amounts of ribs. The same can be seen in tracery windows... It is the invention of the rib that allows the Gothic to make all windows different, and new each time they occur. More importantly, it is not merely the combination of ribs that is constantly different, but every time the ribs combine they themselves are changing. In short, the ribs are not moved by an external force (which makes them combine), but they move internally, which is another way of saying that they change. Therefore, the rib is the vehicle of changefulness...<sup>N43</sup>

Spuybroek prefers to speak of a “digital” rather than “mechanical” logic characterizing Gothic variability.<sup>N44</sup> Each of these “unsensual” denominations for the logic of the Gothic line—mechanical, machine, digital—describes a system generating a potentially *infinite* movement of non-symmetrical repetition. Examples of this kind of linear movement are found in Rodin’s Gothic sketches, but also Lee Krasner’s *Gothic Landscape*  FIG-15 and Mike Kelley’s *Infinite Expansion*  FIG-16. All of these works (especially Kelley’s) demonstrate the relationship between the Gothic line and the Baroque: both are guided by a hall-of-mirrors logic of endless duplication.

<sup>N42</sup> Lars Spuybroek, “Gothic Ontology and Sympathy: Moving Away from the Fold,” in *Speculative Art Histories*, ed. Sjoerd van Tuinen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, forthcoming), [www.academia.edu/15681061/Gothic\\_Ontology\\_and\\_Sympathy\\_Moving\\_Away\\_from\\_the\\_Fold](http://www.academia.edu/15681061/Gothic_Ontology_and_Sympathy_Moving_Away_from_the_Fold) (accessed August 26, 2016).

<sup>N43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>N44</sup> Spuybroek, “The Digital Nature of Gothic,” in *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

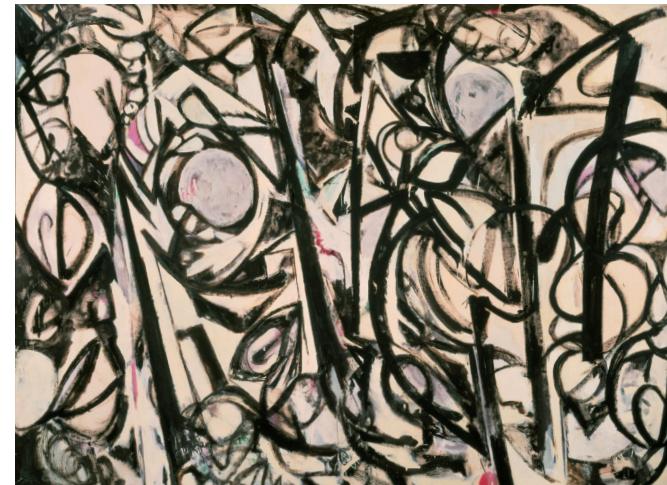


FIG-15 LEE KRASNER, GOTHIC LANDSCAPE, 1961



FIG-16 MIKE KELLEY, INFINITE EXPANSION, 1983

## Afterlife of the Gothic Line

We could reformulate Worringer's "uncanny pathos" and say that the Gothic line emancipates itself from its natural model and develops an abstract "life" of its own. This is a process that can also be observed in the history of Modernism, where the term abstraction was first used to describe an extrication of forms and lines from nature to accord them a language of their own, independent of any natural model. In France, the synthetists in Gauguin and Van Gogh's circles were the first to embrace this procedure in which forms and lines became "directly expressive signs."<sup>N45</sup> Synthetist painting is characterized by thick contour lines that can be said to live a decorative life of their own on the painting's surface  FIG-17+  CAT-P.240+P.303, and it is not a coincidence that Worringer explicitly mentioned Synthetism on one of the rare occasions when he spoke of modern art.<sup>N46</sup>

Throughout the history of modern art, this line appears in paintings that hover between figuration and abstraction, indeed often enhancing the uncanny effect of works like Marlene Dumas' *Losing (Her Meaning)*  FIG-18 or Eva Hesse's "spectre" paintings  FIG-19. The thick contour lines of Dumas' floating figure indicate impending decay of organic form and its dissolution into the darkness of the surrounding water/paint. In Hesse's work, unsteady and exaggerated lines do not delineate clear contours but seem to "undo" the figures in a nightmarish movement of dehumanization. Or, inversely, these silhouettes might be linked to Gilles Deleuze's description of Francis Bacon's work as depicting a moment where "the human visage has not yet found its face."<sup>N47</sup>  FIG-20 Distortion

N45 "Caractères directement significateurs": G.-Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin", *Mercure de France*, March 1891, 162.

N46 In 1911, Worringer singled out the "young Parisian syntheticists and expressionists" (referring to post-impressionist painters) as examples of contemporary artists giving expression to the new spiritual strivings. Worringer, "Entwicklungsgeschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst" in *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den "Protest deutscher Künstler"* (Munich: Piper, 1911) 92–99. See Magdalena Bushart, "Changing Times, Changing Styles: Wilhelm Worringer and the Art of His Epoch," in *Invisible Cathedrals*, 96–85.

N47 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), 33.

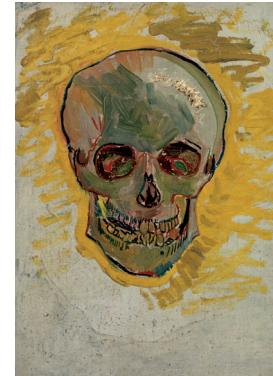


FIG-17 VINCENT VAN GOGH, SKULL, 1887



FIG-18 MARLENE DUMAS, LOSING (HER MEANING), 1988



FIG-19 EVA HESSE, NO TITLE, 1960

of human features, of course, is also what made the visage of Frankenstein's creature so horrendous.



FIG-20 FRANCIS BACON, HEAD VI, 1949

The liminal quality of the Gothic line in modern art became the central feature of the "nomadic" line in the work of philosophers Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which has Worriinger's uncanny Gothic pathos as its starting point.<sup>N48</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the true abstract line is the Gothic line (not the crystalline), and only "a line that delimits nothing, that describes no contour" (including of abstract forms) is abstract and nomadic.<sup>N49</sup> This line of becoming or force exceeds its material existence, and forms the "hidden modernity" of the Gothic: "This streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation liberates a power of life that human beings had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter now expresses as the trait, flow, or impulse traversing it. If everything is alive, it is not because everything is organic or organized but, on the contrary, because... the life in question is

N48 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 551–582. See Carolin Meister and Wilhelm Roskamm, "Deleuze meets Worriinger, ou du gothique au nomade," in *Regards croisés: Revue franco-allemande*, no. 2 (2014): 91–103; Joseph Vogl, "Anorganismus. Worriinger und Deleuze," in *Wilhelm Worriinger's Kunstgeschichte*, 181–192.

N49 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 578.

inorganic, germinal, and intensive"—in other words, uncanny.<sup>N50</sup> For Deleuze, Bacon's painting exemplifies such intensive nonorganic life, the figures being "bodies without organs....beyond the organism, but also at the limit of the lived body."<sup>N51</sup> In place of an organic principle, "sensation is [replaced with] vibration."<sup>N52</sup> We can see how closely this interpretation is linked to Worriinger's writings—even more so when Deleuze examines "nonorganic becoming" in terms of hysteria.<sup>N53</sup>

What can be retained from the comparison between these authors is the idea that the abstract Gothic line is not going anywhere, even if it might be directed toward a transcendent realm. For Deleuze, it does not unlock a higher truth about anything other than its own movement as a (painterly) trait,<sup>N54</sup> becoming "a geometry [or a decoration] no longer in the service of the essential and eternal, but a geometry in the service of 'problems' or 'accidents,' ablation, adjunction, projection, intersection. It is thus a line that never ceases to change direction, that is broken, split, diverted, turned in on itself, coiled up, or even extended beyond the natural limits, dying away in a 'disordered convulsion.'"<sup>N55</sup> Because this line, when it appears in modern painting such as Bacon's, is not concerned with the representation of objects or situations from the natural world, the locus of horror is transferred to the painting itself, the materiality of which is traversed by an intensive nonorganic impulse.<sup>N56</sup>

This horrific quality of the emancipated line in art is what connects it to the romantic category of the sublime. In terms similar to Deleuze and Guattari's, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy focuses on the liminal quality of the traced line within the thought-system

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N50 Ibid., 579.

N51 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 32. The term "body without organs" is from Antonin Artaud.

N52 Ibid.

N53 Ibid., chapter "Hysteria," 32–39.

N54 "Trait" means the art of line drawing, be it on paper or canvas, or carved in wood or stone. "L'art du trait" is a Gothic invention.

N55 Ibid., 33.

N56 Ibid.

of the sublime: It is a contour line or a frame that “refers to nothing other than itself,” continually trembling in spasmodic pulsation on the verge of an unpresentable limitlessness. “In beauty, it is a matter of accord; in the sublime, it is a matter of the syncopated rhythm of the trace of the accord, spasmodic vanishing of the limit all along itself, into unlimitedness, that is, into nothing.”<sup>N57</sup>

### From Gothic Sublime to Modern Entropy

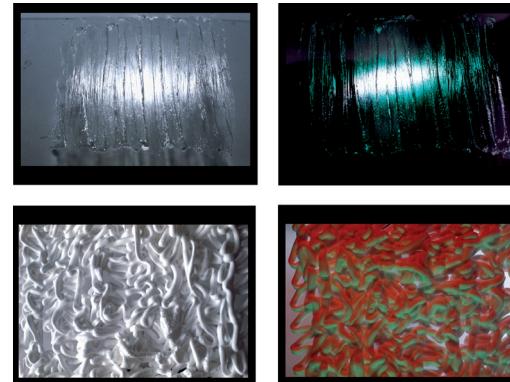
Following the erstwhile “sublimely hysterical” Gothic line, the transcendental potential of the “nomadic” line was, comparatively, scaled down. A similar situation pertained in the 1960s, as belief in the sublime potential of art diminished. For Lygia Clark, art was still a (crystalline) means to “communicate... absolute time” through the participation of the spectator in a “transcendent act,” albeit on a tiny, “organic” scale.<sup>N58</sup> In *Caminhando (Walking)*, 1963, the beholder-participant could experience “expressive time” by creating a Möbius strip—the abstract symbol of infinity—from a band of paper and then tracing/cutting the movement of the strip in parallel lines with a pair of scissors.<sup>N59</sup> We can imagine the artist Aiko Tezuka performing similar actions of making and unmaking while working on her textile pieces  CAT-P.420, which refer so ostensibly to time (in their potentially infinite repetition of weaving and unraveling), as well as to space: the work expands in the process of its making, exceeding its boundaries and bleeding into the gallery space.

<sup>N57</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>N58</sup> Lygia Clark, quoted in 1963, in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 161–162. For Woringer, the absolute and the organic were mutually exclusive.

<sup>N59</sup> “Si j’utilise une bande de Moebius pour cette expérience, c'est qu'elle tranche sur nos habitudes spatiales: droite – gauche; envers – endroit, etc... Elle nous fait vivre l’expérience d'un temps sans limites et d'un espace continu.” Clark, *Robho*, no. 4 (1968): 15, and reprinted in *Lygia Clark: De l’œuvre à l’événement*, exh. cat. (Nantes: Musée des Beaux-Arts / Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2005), 45.

Since the 1960s, the belief in the transcendent power of art has eroded further. Like Clark’s *Caminhando*, Mel Bochner’s 1968 photographic series *Transparent and Opaque* marries the organic with the potentially infinite variability of the line  FIG-21. But here the use of everyday materials—Vaseline and shaving cream—seems to mock the sublime take on infinity. Kelley’s *Infinite Expansion* aims at a total *desublimation* of art. The work was made in the context of Kelley’s performance *The Sublime* (1984), whose topic was art’s *inability* to generate spiritual transcendence. If the painting seen from afar could fit the description of a “spasmodic vanishing of the limit into nothing,” the work seen from close up is not abstract at all: in its center is a suburban home nestled in a small, nostalgic mountain scene. The choice of this imagery as the starting point for an “infinite expansion” of quivering lines is a critique of both the bourgeois ideology behind the bygone romantic aesthetic, and the nostalgia for such a view on art.<sup>N60</sup>



**FIG-21** MEL BOCHNER, TRANSPARENT (VASELINE) AND OPAQUE (SHAVING CREAM): 1 / 2 / 7 / 6, 1968

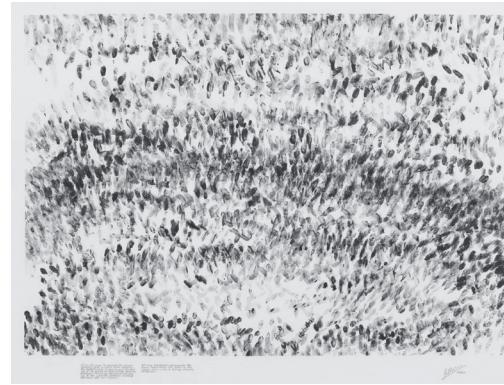
<sup>N60</sup> Martin Myrone discusses the link between the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the Gothic style: “The Gothic was never so much just a genre as a vast and diffuse practical exploration into the nature and value of art in an emerging modern, bourgeois and capitalist society whose primary, structuring values were as yet still not quite formed. In particular, the decisive distinctions between high culture and low, between the grand and the simply grandiose, the tacky and the tasteful, were in a decidedly volatile state.” “Fuseli to Frankenstein: The Visual Arts in the Context of the the Gothic,” in *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2005), 36.

The Kantian sublime experience entails “a moment when reason allows imagination to see in the terrifying, the unrepresentable, the moments of self-annihilation and destruction.”<sup>N61</sup> Goya’s *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*  FIG-22) and Dr. Frankenstein’s creation of a monstrous being are of this order. In its translation into painting, however, the romantic sublime mostly took the form of vast space or impressive meteorological phenomena. In the absence of a biblical frame of reference, the experience of natural phenomena today is framed by science—in particular, for many artists working in the second half of the twentieth century, by the abstract concept of entropy. In physics, entropy represents the degree of disorder in a system: the greater the disorder, the higher the entropy. In nature its primary feature is decay, which brings us back to the fear of nature’s arbitrariness at the center of Worringer’s conception of art. One artist for whom entropy has been a persistent theme is Robert Morris, who early on rejected form as an “anti-entropic and conservative enterprise.”<sup>N62</sup> In his series of drawings entitled *Blind Time* (1973–2009)  FIG-22, Morris explored the relationship between sensory perception and abstract notions of inner (spiritual?) space and (nonorganic?) time, which were also at the center of Worringer’s crystalline withdrawal into a transcendent spiritual realm. Before beginning a *Blind Time* drawing, Morris sets out a number of constraints regarding the space he wants to depict and the time during which he thinks he can do it. The artist then draws with closed eyes. The resulting works suggest the opposite of a “crystalline” inner space: executed in black, the process of groping around in the dark is manifest in the imprint of the artist’s fingers. Although the spatial realm of interiority in these drawings is indeed vast, the pessimistic impression they give is that of profound inner darkness.

**N61** Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 212–213.

**N62** Robert Morris, “Anti Form” (1968), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 45. Other central themes in Morris’ work are process, memory, and death.

The immeasurability of space in Morris’ drawings is also related to their absence of perspective. Paradoxically, it is the flatness of the image that renders the suggestion of infinite space possible—something also suggested, in a different way, in Worringer’s geometric crystalline abstraction. Applying these categories of perception to the phenomenological world, Deleuze and Guattari make a distinction between “smooth” and “striated” spaces.<sup>N63</sup> The latter is a space showing depth, offering itself to the eye and thus, in the logic of art historians Riegl and Worringer, not provoking fear. “Smooth” space, on the other hand, cannot be measured with the eye, which is why Riegl called it “tactile.”<sup>N64</sup> Tactile space is uncontrollable beyond the sphere of immediate bodily reaction—it is the space of fear. Morris’ groping around in the dark demonstrates the relationship between “smooth” space and tactility.



**FIG-22** ROBERT MORRIS, *BLIND TIME XII (GRIEF)*, 2009

**N63** Deleuze and Guattari, “1440: The Smooth and the Striated,” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 551–581.

**N64** Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*.

But things get complicated when smooth spaces of fear double as utopian spaces of sublime transcendence: the smooth space par excellence, the limitless icescape, is also a real space of crystals and a *locus amoenus* of the sublime. (CAT-P.112, P.113, P.115, P.146) It is no coincidence that Mary Shelley mobilized the ambiguity of the icescape in *Frankenstein*. When Victor Frankenstein visits the Sea of Ice near Chamonix, he contemplates his crystalline experience of the glacier: "I remembered the effect that the view of the ever-moving glacier had produced upon my mind when I first saw it. It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy."<sup>N65</sup> But the icescape also becomes the locus for the scientist's fruitless pursuit of his creation, first on the glacier and then on the Arctic Sea. Undoubtedly, Shelley chose this backdrop to underscore the dangerous lure of the romantic sublime, in full awareness of the icescape's "smooth" immeasurability (ensuring that Frankenstein was never be able to reach the creature) and its destructive force—a duality exemplified in Caspar David Friedrich's painting of a shipwreck in a sea of ice  FIG-23.

FIG-23 CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH, *DAS EISMEER*, 1823/24

N65 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2003), 100.

Long before Albert Speer's *Lichtdom* became the incarnation of the destructive force of crystalline "sublime ecstasy," Mary Shelley warned of the danger inherent in the sublime aesthetic of (self-) annihilation. *Frankenstein* opens with a certain Dr. Walton's enthusiastic embarkation on a scientific exploration of the unknown Arctic, and ends with Victor Frankenstein convincing Walton not to pursue his dangerous endeavor. In between, we have been offered more than one glimpse into the unbounded darkness of the gothic imagination. Peter Brooks has marvellously described this trajectory: "We as readers are faced with the consequences of putting our faith in the sublime. We emerge scarred by the experience of our own dissolution, our own regression in the unformed, decreated being incapable of self-transcendence."<sup>N66</sup> Mary Shelley's answer to the lure of the sublime? Stay at home in the picturesque, bourgeois safety that was the starting point for all imagination of infinite expansion. 

N66 Peter Brooks, "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*," *New Literary History* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 605.