

## Fuseli- a visual counterpoint

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The painter Heinrich Füssli, or Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), was born in Zurich and spent much of his life in England. In this talk I'll approach his painted and written works in reverse chronological order, starting with his late aphorisms written in English and ending with his early drawing, in order to show how a political rivalry between France and England finds an aesthetic echo in the works of an anglophile Swiss painter.

The multitalented Fuseli was strongly influenced in Zurich by two literature professors, Bodmer and Breitinger who promoted English sensualism against, and this is important, against the ideals of French classicism. The translation of Milton and mostly forgotten medieval literature made strong impressions on the young Fuseli. Shakespeare's plays were staged in Zurich, where 21 performances were held from 1757 until 1760. The translation of Shakespeare into German provoked harsh critique, also from Füssli who wrote about Wielands translation (I quote): I wished Wieland would be consumed by a Swabian flame, before he touches on Shakespeare with unholy hands.” Also, the way of presenting Shakespeare on stage made Füssli rather unhappy. In contrast to English interpretations of Shakespearean plays, the European mainland adapted them quite massively to the French ideal of classicism. There were of course content-based adaptations, and also more pragmatic ones. The Elizabethan theatre allowed quick scene changes, which wasn't possible in theaters with heavy backdrops. Fuseli, who learned English early, which was quite rare in this period, had therefore good reason to be unhappy with the European interpretation of Shakespeare. His works show to what extent those misinterpretations of Shakespeare were an aesthetic trauma Fuseli had to process throughout his artistic career, in all the artforms he practiced.

To this esthetic background should be added the political one. During the Seven-Years War, in which the French and the English fought each other from 1756-1763 in Europe and the colonies, Shakespeare's plays became a counterpoint classic dramatic unities (time, place, action) as well as the French rules of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance*, which one could translate as ‘plausibility’ and ‘decorum’. According to the tradition of the Horatian precept *ut pictura poesis*, those rules were also applied to painting. In the context of rivalry, fans of Shakespeare would logically question those rules and naturally turn into opponents of political and literary absolutism. Shakespeares' plays became a key element of the new English national identity. We

will explore this dimension in the oeuvre of Fuseli, a big fan of Shakespeare, who was called “Shakespeare’s painter” by Lavater in a letter to Herder as early as in 1772.

**The personal distance towards the classical rules caused by the misinterpretations of Shakespeare, combined with the political Anglo-French rivalry seem to me two important contexts. In considering Fuseli’s oeuvre as the processing of an aesthetic trauma, we can see several dimensions of aesthetic subversion. Or to put it differently: Fuseli’s works deconstruct the French ideal of the classical unities in way that we could consider it as an aesthetic subversion.** We will see to what extent some of his aphorisms explore the analogy of esthetics and politics against the foreseeable, calculated and academic effects of art. In his paintings and in his drawings a deconstruction of the classical three unities, as well as of the concepts of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* is taking place.

#### Fuseli aphorisms as a way to express the relation between art and nation

According to the twentieth century Fuseli scholar Eudo C. Mason, Fuseli’s aphorisms are very classic and conventional, in the art historical tradition of Winckelmann, Mengs, and Reynolds. The main concepts use the esthetic terminology of the Enlightenment. Mason points out the lack of more radical, dynamic, romantic ways of speaking about art, like it had been practiced since the 1750s in Germany and later in England even though the first edition of the aphorisms was published in 1788, and a second extended version in 1818. In the intervening thirty years, Fuseli continued working on the aphorisms and they became his favorite writing project. Mason presents Fuseli as an old-fashioned classicist, in a period where new words and concepts were already circulating.

It is possible to nuance Mason’s claim by taking a closer look at some of Fuseli’s aphorisms in the version published in 1818. Aphorism 110 for example shows how critical Fuseli was when it comes to artistic rules:

“The epoch of rules, of theories, poetics, criticisms in a nation, will add to their stock of authors in the same proportion as it diminishes their stock of genius: their productions will bear the stamp of study, not of nature; they will adopt, not generate”.

The clear link between poetics and nation show that such a conception of literature can lead to cultural chauvinism. Fuseli claims that less theory means more artistic freedom for the individual. The French, who are so attached to poetical theory as dictated by Boileau in his *Art poétique*, are implicitly characterized as incapable of producing artists of genius, as it is hinted by saying “It diminishes their stock of genius”.

Aphorism 151 states the superiority of observation over academic precepts:

“The rules of art are either immediately supplied by Nature herself, or selected from the compendiums of her students who are called masters and founders of schools. The imitation of Nature herself leads to style, that of the schools to manner.”

Superficially objective, the aphorism ranks a nature-based art production above academic training. Observe the capital letter in nature, used two times, opposed to “manner”, as an antithesis to the word “style”.

The emphasis on the difference between national poetics, turns into an analogy in aphorism 130. Fuseli finds a way to express those differences by means of political analogy. Fuseli uses moments in Roman History to illustrate the importance of knowing when to stop working on a piece of art:

(130) “He is a prince of artists and of men who knows the moment when his work is done. On this Apelles founded his superiority over his contemporaries; the knowledge when to stop, left Sylla nothing to fear, though disarmed; the want of knowing this, exposed Cæsar to the dagger of Brutus.”

The phrase “prince of artists and of men” establishes the analogy between art and politics, between the Greek painter Apelles and the Roman general Sylla. This is not the only aphorism to use examples from ancient history to illustrate an aesthetic observation. Number 147 puts the analogy of society and art into a concise form: “Antient art was the tyrant of Egypt, the mistress of Greece, and the servant of Rome.” The personification of art is a way to illustrate the dependency of art and nation. In Fuseli’s point of view, the artistic phenomenon in all its aspects tells something about the society producing it.

Let’s come to Fuseli’s main activity as a painter. Here also we state how Anglo-French rivalry affects his art. Fuseli deconstructs the major concepts of French classicism, which are the three unities of time, place and action, as well as the concepts of *vraisemblance*, and *bienséance*.

How does his oeuvre challenge the unity of time? Fuseli wrote in Aphorism 239 that the climax of the pictorial arts is reached (I quote): “when they give wings to marble or canvas and from the present moment radiate back into the past and into the future.” This is undermining the unity of time.

(let us examine this on this one painting of the three witches from the Shakespeare play Macbeth)

In his representations of the three witches in **Macbeth**, Fuseli chose a supernatural and mystic moment. It is a major moment in the first act of the play corresponds as what he qualifies to be a “middle moment”. The witches predict that Macbeth will become king. He is gripped by the desire for power and glory. The three witches and their prophecy are putting mischief into operation. Lady Macbeth contributes to this fatal dynamic; she pushes Macbeth to kill King Duncan. Even his friend Banquo gets killed. Macbeth visits the witches a second time in the 3<sup>rd</sup> act. Tyranny, madness and suicide are the consequences. How does Fuseli transpose those elements in his painting?

We observe the indexes, also the gazes, which unanimously point at the future assassin and illegitimate king. The two warriors are confronted by an instance which is between the worlds. The gesture of putting a finger to their mouth, shared by all three witches, symbolizes their shared opinion, and the parallelism of what a painting is for the spectators, a mute code calling for an interpretation. There are two paintings of this scene. The first one, painted in 1783, is a close-up to the profiles : the pointing indexes and the other fingers to their mouth. Here the light comes from the front: the witches’ gestures and facial expressions are perfectly high lightened. The death-heads hawkmoth flies in the direction pointed, materializing the unfaithful prediction of the witches. The painter depicts the foreshadowing of future events through gazes, indexes and the direction in which flies the insect. The parallels between gazes, gestures and light emphasize that the scene is treating the future, we could call it a pictorial foreshadowing or with Genette a prolepsis. By this kind of pictorial strategies Fuseli paints time by challenging the precept that a play or a painting should depict a limited portion of time.

#### Briefly on the other classic unities.

The other two classical unities of place and action are transgressed in the representations of dreams, particularly nightmares, as Fuseli does in his most famous paintings like “The Shepherd’s Dream” and “The Nightmare”. The frame holds together the representation of the sleeper in his posture, in a bucolic surrounding, above his head another space configuration takes place; it is the representation of what the Shepherd dreams, the painting brings together two scenes out of two different spaces. The different figures represented, belong to different spaces and actions which are only linked in the space of one canvas.

Another principle linked to these two is what the French call *vraisemblance*, in English we could translate it as “likelihood” or plausibility meaning that a representation should be

believable, intelligible, sticking to the real world, and should be comprehensible within the shared cultural background of the spectators.

The transgression of this principle is evident. The most striking in the interpretations of Shakespearean plays by Fuseli is his preference for the supernatural, ghosts, witches, fairies. According to Knowles, Fuseli's friend and biographer, the painter tried to put on the canvas what was missing in the text. And since his first sketches Fuseli loves ghosts; especially in combination with classic elements which are challenged by the supernatural. Let's have a look at one of his early drawings, called "The apparition appears to Dion wielding a broom" or less repetitive "Spectrum Dioneum". The drawing clearly indicates the classical source; from his reading of Plutarch's "Life of Dion" Fuseli chooses the supernatural part. The apparition itself is a fury, in the truest sense of the word, a creature from Greek mythology. Fuseli drew this woman vigorously wielding a broom, her hair resembling to flames. In fact, the supernatural is everywhere in this image, in the monstrous snail whose head emerges at the foot of the fury, Dion is surrounded by neo-Roman furniture that gives place to monsters and chimeras: the dolphin at the corner of the table, the boar (sanglier, Wildschwein) at the base of the rhyton (vase) in the background, and here the pillow (coussin) supporting Dion's right foot, which seems to be transformed into an enormous paw (Pfote, Pranke) ending in three fingers. The clash of supernatural and classical elements creates a new aesthetic space of transgression, where objects are about to be transformed, in an unexpected way.

And the last classical principle is *bienséance*, in which the rules of polite society are expressing the respect for morality and norms shared by a part of the society. Fuseli also transgresses this ideal, especially in his early sketches of dominant female bodies with extravagant hairstyles. Those early drawings and sketches were exposed this year at Kunsthau Zurich. There are no idealized, graceful bodies, with the proportions of Greek statues; but women in corsets, in ribbons, wearing dresses with ornamented sleeves and pointed shoes, their heads topped with complex hairstyles. I quote the curators of the exhibition: "Contrasting the submissive, eroticized naked female bodies represented by painters such as Boucher, Fragonard and Ingres, Fuseli shows socially provocative female figures." Boucher and Fragonard the rococo and libertin painters show coquette women exposed to male gazes, Ingres more classical from coming from the cercle of David, female portraits and also Odalisques by the way and an conventional manner. This is not what Füssli does in the same period. The flamboyant

hairstyles, the challenging gazes are showing confidence, either they face the spectators or ignore them artistically; those women are in control of this erotical and mystical ambiance.

### Conclusion

One might argue that the classical rules had little impact in England. And in fact, theorists like Samuel Johnson and John Dryden judged them rather unessential for drama. Nonetheless, the fact that a Swiss artist, transgressed those rules in all his productions, shows how his self-identification to an English national character is linked to a rejection of the French ideals. All Fuseli's forms of artistic expression, from his early drawings to his late aphorisms, display the will to transgress the limits of classical principles.

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