

## Artist's essay

### ART AND REVELATION

**Abstract:** The paper reflects on attempts to achieve revelation, epiphany, or enlightenment in the modern world. Sometimes the hope of reaching this state accompanies dangerous mountain trekking expeditions. However, it is believed that revelation can be achieved more quickly through drug use, practiced by artists from the nineteenth century onwards. Seeking visions in this way is part of the cultural tradition of the North and South American Indians. In the twentieth century, such artists as Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell and others alluded to these practices. The Russian tradition had a different way of achieving illumination. Avant-garde artists (such as Malevich or Kandinsky) drew inspiration from it, seeking sudden revelation combined with surprise. The paper concludes with the author's reflections on the possibility of personal experience today that would exceed the cognitive limits through contact with certain works of art, ancient and modern.

**Keywords:** revelation – mountain climbing expedition – drugs – modern art.

Revelation, epiphany, enlightenment – these experiences all take place in our consciousness. They come as a great surprise and discovery, as a sudden disclosure of the “sacred”. They come as moments of unforeseen clarity, when mental limitations and barriers seem to be lifted away.

At all times there have been men and women seeking revelation and enlightenment, willing to pay a high price to attain it. For some, it would cost forty days of fasting and praying in the desert, or even a lifetime of saintly living on the top of a pillar. For others, years of starving and freezing in the mountains of Himalaya.

Mountains seem to have been especially appropriate for the seekers of enlightenment. Is this because one is far away from cities and villages and

closer to the sky? It was on a mountain that Moses encountered the burning bush and received the Law. From mountains the prophets have come down to preach to the people.

The Italian philosopher Julius Evola, himself an enthusiastic alpinist, has written a book on the role of the mountain as a threshold of initiation, and included a case study of the persons who survived the falls from high altitudes<sup>1</sup>. They might have been carried away by an avalanche. A loose stone, a moment of distraction, and they would have lost their foothold and fallen hundreds of meters. But instead of meeting inevitable death, these people miraculously survived, perhaps landing on a mound of soft snow. These survivors all shared the same experience, an experience of incredible clarity and a synthetic recollection of their past. They also all entered into a period of euphoria and bliss, only to sink down into deepest depression as the memory of their experiences faded away. It took them time to recover, if that is the right word, and they had difficulties to return to so-called normal life, to live the rest of their lives with a sense of loss. This example is not about art, but it gives a hint on how to understand what revelation or a transcendent experience might be.

Many people in our own time, not the least people in the artistic field, have searched for a quicker way of experiencing revelations, and thus turned to the use of drugs in order to expand their consciousness and to get great visions. Thomas de Quincy, Samuel Coleridge and Baudelaire were their forerunners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In our own time, some famous examples would be Aldous Huxley, William Burroughs, Carlos Castaneda and Henri Michaux. But the use of opium, mescaline and other drugs has often been a detriment, more harmful than beneficial. The doors of revelation are not easily opened! Revelation comes more as a gift than as a reward for suffering and meditation.

It might have been easier for those who grew up among the native peoples of North America, those for whom a "vision quest" was an established tradition. Before adolescents would be admitted as grown-up members of the community, they had to stay alone in the wilderness, without supplies, surviving on what they could find, staying there to search and wait for a vision, a revelation, or a dream experience with a symbolic impact. Having experienced such a revelation, only then would they return to their people. Depending on the nature and details of their spiritual journey they would get a new name, such as Standing Bear, Red Cloud, Yellowtail, Spotted Eagle, Sitting Bull. Their names would serve for the rest of their lives as a reminder

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Hulin, *Sur la chute en montagne*, in: Julius Evola, *Méditations du haut des cimes*, Pardes-Guy Trédaniel, Paris 1986, pp. 159-176 *passim*.

of the revelation, of an exceptional spiritual journey they once had made. Like a thread linking them to a state of being beyond the banalities of ordinary life.

With the Kuna Indians in Panama and northern Colombia it was not the names that functioned as reminders, but the *molos*. The Kunas also had the tradition of a “vision quest”, experiencing and earning a personal symbol, which, before the coming of the European missionaries, was tattooed on their chest/breasts. When the Christian culture forced them to cover their breasts, the young girls began to cut and embroider their totems on layers of multi-coloured cloth, the so-called *molos*. The tradition of the *molos* has given us examples of great geometric art. Still, let us remember that what appears to us to be works of art are strictly speaking not “pictures”, but something else – signs and symbols pointing towards spiritual experiences.

The traditions of the native peoples of America were a source of inspiration and were eagerly studied by the generation of the Abstract Expressionists in the USA, for instance Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and others<sup>2</sup>.

On the other side of the globe, Russian folk art and the icon tradition played a similar role as a source of inspiration for artists like Kandinsky, Larionov, Goncharova and Malevich. Certainly the famous black square of Malevich has earned its iconic status on very different merits. It has been described as a black hole that draws all one's light into itself, leaving us with nothing but a blank mind. Or, reversed – as a source of energy which strengthens the viewer's own light.<sup>3</sup>

Mentioning Kandinsky, let us remember the day when he happened to see one of his landscape paintings upside down in his studio, and suddenly had a revelation of something completely new. It has been said that it was in this moment that abstraction in contemporary art was born. What happened to Kandinsky? He had been surprised.

*Surprise*. This simple word contains the whole enigma of sudden revelation. Surprise is a gift! No amount of mental effort can so instantly peel off the layers of banality and grey habitualness that cover our lives and thoughts. Moments of surprise are especially important for artists. Because they are followed by reminiscence, literally a *re-minding*. We are all of a sudden overcoming blockages and limitations in our minds. Something completely new is revealed to us in an unexpected moment of transcendence and revelation. These are the moments that contain the seeds of new creations. An upheaval

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, Dover Publications Mineola, New York 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelations. Glimpses of Reality*, ed. R. S. Lello, Shepard-Walwyn, London 1985, p. 89.

in the mind may be the beginning of fresh, new projects, surprise being not only a gift but also an opportunity.

Thus, certain works of art – inspired works – seem more suited to provoking or awakening the sensations of surprise and revelation in the viewer than others. More people seem to share the experience of wonder and awe in front of the works by Titian and Velasquez, or Matisse and Rothko, than in front of the works by other artists from the same periods. The works of these artists were indeed inspired. Rothko even maintained that his paintings were not pictures. They were something else.

There is an interesting television interview with the British writer Iris Murdoch who testified to such an experience when she saw a late picture by Titian *The Flaying of Marsyas*. She thought about this work as a sort of a religious icon. "I was completely stunned. I didn't know this picture existed. I've seen a great many Titians in different places and I'd never heard of this one. I just went into that room and there it was." After a description of the subject matter and the myth of Marsyas and Apollo, she added: "The intensity of the whole picture is so great, it conveys a deep symbolic impression of human life with all its ambiguity, all its horrors and terrors and miseries – yet, at the same time, it's joyful and beautiful. It is to do with the entry of the spiritual into the human situation and the closeness of the gods"<sup>4</sup>

The impressions of paintings and sculptures are instantly registered. It is different with the performing arts, where the time factor is involved. But even here moments of revelation are apt to occur. When I hear certain themes of Gustav Mahler, I am reminded of the great singer Kathleen Ferrier. During a concert she was performing Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. Although she had performed this music many times, she suddenly stopped singing in the middle of a particularly moving phrase, her eyes full of tears. Her voice just left her. Then, the musicians stopped playing one after another, and the same mood affected the audience. It is almost terrifying even to imagine such a situation, a concert hall with an orchestra and an audience suddenly galvanised by a singer who stops singing. As if all the beauty and all the energy of Mahler's music was concentrated in this one single moment, the singer's bursting into tears.

Similar examples could be multiplied. It was already Plato who gave us a description of a similar collective revelation in his shortest dialogue, *Ion*.

Let me end with a quotation, probably by Alice Bailey, written down in my notebook years ago:

Revelation is the revelation of that which is ever present. It is in reality not the revelation of something new and hitherto unknown. We may eventually

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

discover that we can perceive more than we ever knew was existent or perceptible but, at the same time, that we only perceive something that has always been there. The limitation is within us, and the way of revelation is through the discovery and the discarding of our own individual limitations.

*Anders Lidén*  
*anders.a.liden@telia.com*

### **SZTUKA I OBJAWIENIE** **(streszczenie)**

Tekst stanowi refleksję nad próbami osiągnięcia objawienia, epifanii lub oświecenia występującymi we współczesnym świecie. Niekiedy nadzieja na uzyskanie tego stanu towarzyszy niebezpiecznym wyprawom w góry. Za szybszą drogę uzyskania objawienia uważa się jednak zażywanie narkotyków, uprawiane przez artystów od XIX wieku. Poszukiwanie w ten sposób wizji należy do tradycji kulturowych Indian północno- i południowoamerykańskich. W XX wieku nawiązywali do nich Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell i inni malarze. Odmienne sposoby osiągania iluminacji właściwy był dla tradycji rosyjskiej. Artyści awangardowi (np. Malewicz, Kandnsky) inspirowali się nią poszukując nagłego objawienia połączonego z zaskoczeniem. Tekst kończą refleksje autora dotyczące możliwości doznania dziś indywidualnego odczucia przekroczenia granic poznawczych poprzez kontakt z niektórymi dziełami sztuki dawnej i nowoczesnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** objawienie – wyprawy w góry – narkotyki – sztuka nowoczesna.