

Paul Klee: “Astrale Automaten” (Astral Automatons) 1918 Watercolor and pen on paper, mounted on cardboard, 22.5 x 20.3 cm (S. 143)

“Astrale Automaten – Klee in the cosmos of spirituality and technique

The small sized work *Astrale Automaten* is one of Klee’s early painting shortly after or in the last year of the first World War: 1918. What makes this work so interesting is that in its title as well as in the picture itself some of the most crucial motives and concepts of Klee’s art and the art of the early Modernism in Germany can be traced.

First we have a look at the picture itself: It depicts a room with several humanoid figures. The room and the figures are both formed and crossed by geometrical shapes. Some of the architectural forms might be pillars, reminding one of a church or a temple. Because the shapes and lines of humans and architecture are overlapping the fusion of both parts is evident. The space and their inhabitants are somehow melting together; the room consists of human beings and vice versa. The colours are filling out some forms some of them are multilayered. Looking at the title we might be irritated that it consists of two parts: a cosmic adjective and the noun “Automaten”. While cosmic or astral issues are normally related to fields of astrology, esoteric or the world of religion or spiritual believe “Automaten” is just a word the most progressive technology. What is an automaton? An automaton is a machine following certain schemes not influenced by other things than that the inventor intended. This makes an automaton on one side a very reliable tool. Because of the fact that an automaton is just working with no human factor it is also evoking other ambiguous feelings: Either it is the triumph of the progressive inventor or a possible way to produce effects beyond control and use of human being. An automaton is eclipsing the human factor of production – a specifically rational industrial goal¹ (today called “*lean production*”). If you consider the context of Klee’s vita in 1918 there are interesting interpretations one can relate to this picture. Paul Klee was drafted into military duty from 1916 until December of 1918. His last place to work as a soldier was on an airbase. We can say that he was directly in contact with one branch of the most progressive military technique: the airforce. Although he was not fighting in the trenches he suffered from the war – some of his friends including Franz Mark died in service. Klee was artistically influenced by the war, which was described as the first high tech war and the first war using tanks, Airforce and new chemical weapons. Klee did not

¹ To some extent an automaton has of course a mystical character because the exclusion of human intelligence has always been spoken of with terms like “wonder” or “mystic” also. The rational character is dominating despite these first effects.

painted the war in an expressionistic or realistic way but in a symbolic way. Within the war years he developed the serie of war pictures with a symbolic substitution of planes as darts.² The concept of an automaton can therefore be linked to the automatism of war technology in the same way expressionist's paintings and poem were. Here we can have also a commentary of the human/inhuman results of progress – a sword cutting both ways. But is the “Automaten” a critical approach to new progressive technology? We will see later that there are some arguments against this interpretation. But first lets draw some attention to the other concept – the concept of cosmic sphere. Here the adjective “Astrale” points out that this picture is showing a world behind rational perspective. Maybe the pillar forms are pillars of a temple (a place of metaphysical function) or just a quotation of antique/medieval models of the orbit which would give the picture a very global perspective. “Astral” was a vocabulary taken up by the esoteric alternative movements of the early 20th century in Germany in many way – but it surely meant nothing related to industrial products or automatons. It is very difficult to interpret this picture because it seem to fuse two oppositional concepts together. How can we decide for the correct concept?

Not at all! Klee himself helps us out of this cliché oppositional structure in his notebook-essays. In his 1920 essay *Toward a theory of form-production* he says:

“A concept is not thinkable without its opposite. The concept stands apart from its opposite. No concept is effective without its opposite.

On contrasting concepts (pairs of concepts):

Chaos ←-----→ *Cosmos*
Disorder *Order* “³

First Paul Klee believes that the cosmos is not at all chaotic – it is the realm of order as the automaton is. The human beings in his picture - could they be seen (positively) as automatons in service of the laws of a cosmic order or is the cosmic order destroyed by the machine? It seems unusual to us because we tend to identify Automation first of all with manipulation machines or manipulated human beings and – especially in the context of World War I. – with the automation of killing. Another picture *Kosmisch-Revolutionär* (Cosmic Revolutionary) is interpreted by O.K. Werckmeister as a personal response to the troubles of the 1918/19 Munich Revolution which Klee and his family was opposed to. Werckmeister points out that even when the revolutionary execution took place in early 1919 Klee was even stronger

² You can see this for example in the pen/watercolourpainting *Ansicht der schwer bedrohten Stadt Pinz* of 1915.

³ Paul Klee: *Notebooks. Volume 1. The thinking eye*. Lund Humphries London 1961; page 15

drawing in a cryptical way⁴. This argument can weaken our interpretation on the background of the vita of Klee and can make our picture even more ambiguous, we can not trace actual political influences or personal experiences that much directly because of Klee's escapism from his personal situation into art. Therefore it is also problematic to interpret the "Automaten" as a critical approach by the artist towards sophisticated killing techniques of the war. *Astrale Automaten* is a small picture but obviously contains Klee's artistical concepts. More than that it is also showing the interest of Klee as an artist of the German Modernism in technical and metaphysical ideas. Although Paul Klee's ideas were not yet published in 1918, Klee began to teach them two years later in the Bauhaus and the ambiguous tension of rational technique and spiritual concepts formed the multiple ideology of the Bauhaus. The rationalism of technical skill in forming an economic and functional design (what the Bauhaus is famous for) in the early years not at all eclipse artist's interest in metaphysics – among them Klee. The art historian Sixten Ringblom said to this phenomenon: "*Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, van Doesburg, and other abstract pioneers made claims to supernatural knowledge in stating that they had penetrated the outer shell of nature while still upholding the connection with the cosmos and its laws.*"⁵ In "Astrale Automaten" we have already both the antagonistic interest in irrational and rational concepts which later dominated the teaching and artistic outcome of the Bauhaus. Klee was one of the most influential artists because they were interested in spreading their concepts in the seminars as well as the publication of their theoretical texts among their students⁶.

[1116 words]

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⁴ O.K. Werckmeister: *From Revolution to exile*. in: Paul Klee: *Notebooks. Volume 1. The thinking eye*. Lund Humphries London 1961; p. 45-46

⁵ Sixten Ringblom: *Transcending the visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers*. in: *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Los Angeles 1986; page 150

⁶ With Itten and Kandinsky Klee was one of the most influential teachers at the early Bauhaus.