

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.

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.