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The Ink Blot Test, "Psychodiagnostics" and Hermann Rorschach's Aesthetic Views

HERMANN RORSCHACH'S famous Ink-blot Test has been administered, during the past four decades, to European and American subjects of every conceivable age, occupational and socio-economic group, and a large volume of data on the visual associations of these subjects has been accumulated. To a lesser extent, the test has been administered to members of non-European, non-American ethnic groups. Bleuler and Bleuler, for instance, administered the Rorschach Test to Moroccans,[1] while Cook worked with Samoans.[2] A few social psychologists have considered the idea that habits of visual perception may be socially conditioned, since there appears to be some evidence that these habits differ among various ethnic groups.

The aesthetician and art historian often have occasion to refer to Rorschach's findings and tend, while doing so, to accept at face value the traditional interpretations of these findings provided by Rorschach himself or by later Rorschach workers. Hence it seems appropriate to examine, at this point, Rorschach's own aesthetic views in order to understand how they relate to the type of aesthetic views most widely disseminated throughout our own society today. There seems to be, then, some ground for asking whether our own contemporary views on art, aesthetics, and visual phenomena do not differ from those current in Rorschach's day (and from Rorschach's own) nearly as much as they may differ from the views of the Samoans or Moroccans. It is certain, at least, that art has assumed many new forms during the twentieth century, and that these new art forms have led to the gradual emergence of new ways of seeing. Earlier modes of aesthetic response, conditioned by a didactic or mimetic art, have gradually been replaced by more literal habits of response to the visual or perceptual. Contemporary modes of seeing are responsible not only for a new type of post-1920 "formalist" art criticism but also for a related re-evaluation of traditional aesthetic premises and postulations. In short, the twentieth century has seen not only the development of new art forms but the articulation of new ideas—more visually oriented ideas—about the nature of art and the nature of the aesthetic experience. In conjunction with this, earlier attempts by aestheticians and critics to define the nature of a stasis-bound and eternal "Beauty" have given way to more dynamic attempts to de-

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fine the nature of "seeing," with stress upon analyzing and categorizing various types of visual configurations.

Rorschach, of course, provided great impetus to this developing tendency to view art as visual configuration rather than picture (or illusion), and to view art in terms of its form rather than its literary content. In addition, Rorschach is one among several major figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who attempted, in one way or another, to formulate a theoretical basis for a visual aesthetic: A few other figures of note are M. E. Chevreul, Wilhelm Ostwald, A. H. Munsell, Henri Focillon, and painters such as Piet Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, and Wassily Kandinsky. The list might be extended further. In retrospect —the retrospect of a post-Bauhaus era— we must admire the broad range of early attempts to define the laws and modes of visual perception. At the same time we may wonder at some of the labyrinthine paths down which a few of these writers traveled; early theoretical positions tend to incorporate assumptions about the visual world (and its "laws") that today seem both naive and bizarre. The main structure of Chevreul's arguments about color, for instance, still stands; but his attempt to define once and for all the color bonnets which women of a given complexion-tone "ought" to wear seems today irrelevant, as does his discussion of the proper amount of gold leaf to use in decorating the wall moldings of museum rooms. We have rejected, notably, not Chevruel's answers to these questions, but the questions themselves. One of the most peculiar of all early theoretical propositions was put forth by Kandinsky, who believed that a meaningful one-to-one relationship might exist between the connotations of angles, forms, and colors. It is hard to understand, today, the basis on which he posited equivalency for:

(1) acute angles / triangles / the color yellow
(2) right angles / squares / the color red
(3) obtuse angles / circles / the color blue.[3]

Kandinsky's assumption of a psychological connection between "simple shapes" and "simple colors" was tested in the wall-painting workshop of the Bauhaus School (c. 1922), where students were given a sheet of paper bearing a triangle, a square, and a circle. They were asked to color one of these forms solid red, one of them solid yellow, and one of them solid blue. The students were then asked to explain the rationale conditioning the color-distribution selected. It seems uncertain, from the literature, whether Kandinsky himself, or his fellow instructor Oskar Schlemmer, initiated the circulation of this "test" material.[4]

And with each member of this early group of theorists, one may find an open and experimental approach to visual phenomena combined, in places, with the postulation of views which today seem incomplete and perhaps even a bit eccentric. Rorschach is among the most interesting of these early theoreticians. His reputation is based largely on his book, *Psychodiagnostics,* and on his formulation of the famous and widely used Ink-blot Test. His intent, in the Ink-blot Test, is to infer psychological data from the data of visual association. For this reason, it was requisite that he analyze, categorize, and evaluate various modes of visual response. Selecting such terms as F (Form), C (Color), M (Motion), and S (Space) to denote the various subcategories of subject association, Rorschach introduced into a psychological context a terminology derived from the visual arts.[5] His explicit and implicit speculation on the visual—as well as his theorizing on the nature of art and artist—will alike be of concern to us here, and must inevitably be considered of historical importance within the context of early twentieth-century art.

The Ink-blot Test is today probably the most widely used of all projective psychological tests, this popularity having been accompanied by a certain amount of continuing controversy. The test has been evaluated and re-evaluated, almost exclusively in terms of its clinical (i.e., psychological) usefulness alone. The technical literature is enormous.

Obviously the psychologist—the Rorschach worker—will assume an empiric position in regard to the test. His concern, properly, is not with the test's form but rather with its functioning, "functioning" being defined as the capacity of the test to reveal psychological material. Since our own intent, however, is to examine Rorschach's aesthetic views, our concern will appropriately center on the *form* of the Ink-blot Test, specifically on the manner in which this form illustrates Rorschach's set toward visual phenomena. In addition to the evidence which the Ink-blot Test itself gives of Rorschach's aesthetic viewpoint, this viewpoint may be found verbally articulated, and explicated, in *Psychodiagnostics*.[6]

It is perhaps well to note the sharp differentiation between the functional (i.e., psychological) and formal (i.e., aesthetic) aspects of the Rorschach Test as here discussed: the sharp distinction between the "workability" of the test and the "aesthetics" upon which it is based. An illustrative example may clarify the rationale (and necessity) for making this distinction. And it is requisite this distinction be made in regard to any item which may have (as a psychological test has) one meaning for workers in other fields, another meaning for the aesthetician.

Suppose a psychological test were constructed in which subjects were asked to comment on nonsense statements such as "Red is blue." If such a test were successful in revealing psychological material (i.e., if it functioned well), it would thereby constitute a valid psychological test: Yet this would by no means imply that an investigation of the statement "Red is blue" could contribute anything to an understanding of visual or aesthetic phenomena. Conversely, a second psychological test might be constructed in which subjects were asked to comment on statements of great aesthetic import; yet this second test might be most unsuccessful in the point of revealing the requisite psychological material about the subject. The aesthetician, in other words, may concern himself with different criteria than those which interest the psychologist.

For various reasons, here discussed, it might be suggested that the Rorschach Test works—or does not work—in a psychological context despite Rorschach's aesthetic views, rather than because of them.

Born in 1884, Rorschach died in 1922 after an attack of appendicitis. Despite the early date of his death, he anticipates to some extent the main socio-aesthetic tendencies of the 1920's to the 1960's when he wrote, "There is at present an unmistakable trend toward introversion again. Old gnostic paths of introversion are being trod again and people are so tired of extratension that systems like anthroposophy are receiving support in academic circles" (p. 113). There are other factors, however, which Rorschach did not (and could not) anticipate. Those are best understood by considering in résumé the events which had occurred—and the events which had not yet occurred—by the year of Rorschach's death:

By 1922 the development of contemporary art had been under way for more than a decade; Marinetti's *Initial Manifesto of Futurism* was thirteen years old; Picasso had left Cubism and was involved in his Neo-Classic period. Yet 1922 and the years immediately following are notable for the appearance of key literary and critical works which ultimately functioned to articulate a new aesthetic. In 1922, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* began to acquire a wider popular audience with publication of the first abridged edition. *The Golden Bough*, by demonstrating the relative—not absolute—nature of religion, custom, and belief, reinforced a realization of the relative nature of Western art and Western modes of visual response. The 1920's saw, also, publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and of his critical evaluation of Dante; in 1927 Roger Fry published *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*. Eliot's essay on Dante, Fry's book on Cézanne, are crucial: Eliot's apotheosis of Dante, Fry's apotheosis of Cézanne, amount to declaration that "form" —architectonically articulated form—constitutes the essence of "art." Later, during the 1960's, new questions began to arise

about what "form" was and whether multi-level ambiguity were a prime requisite in the creation of works of art. Rorschach died at the beginning of an era which completely revised its view on the nature of form, the nature of art, and the nature of the visual.

VISUAL FREE-ASSOCIATION AND THE RANDOM CONFIGURATION

The possibility of inferring representational objects and/or scenes from accidental configurations has been noted throughout the history of art. Botticelli stated that landscape compositions might be suggested by the configurations made when a sponge loaded with paint was thrown against a white wall. Leonardo da Vinci remarked that the flow of representational imagery would be stimulated if the patternings of the cracks in a plaster wall were studied. The wife of the nineteenth-century American painter, Ralph Albert Blakelock, averred that the compositional structure of her husband's painting, *Brook by Moonlight* (The Toledo Museum of Art) was suggested to him when he noticed the reticulated patterning made by cracks in the paint on an old zinc bathtub.[7] The random configuration became art when the Dadaist and Surrealist painters fashioned a mystique based on the apotheosis of chance conjunction, chance collocation, chance configuration: André Masson dropped pieces of string on the floor and created drawings based on the accidental patternings assumed by the string.

Rorschach, in structuring his Ink-blot Test, appears to have intended that the ink blots function as "chance" (or "random") configurations. In *Psychodiagnostics* (p. 15) he refers to the ink blots as "accidental" shapes. While Rorschach's designation of the ink blots as "accidental" (i.e., "random") has been generally accepted, it is quite apparent that the blots differ in one important aspect from the various "random" configurations to which allusion may be found in the history of art (see above): The random cracks, the marks made by the sponge, the other examples given of unstructured visual configurations, are in no instance bisymmetric. Yet each of Rorschach's ink blots is bisymmetric (or near-bysymmetric).

Ordinarily, bisymmetric configurations are not categorized as random (or "accidental"). Hence the aesthetician will certainly wish to investigate Rorschach's rationale in suggesting that the ink blots are accidental, yet incorporating into them the non-accidental element of bisymmetry. Rorschach seems, in general, unaware of any possible inconsistency. Explaining his position (and his initial structuring of the test) he states that he discovered through experiment that asymmetric ink blots were rejected by many subjects, who refused to "associate" and stated that they saw " 'simply an ink-blot' " (p. 15). Rorschach suggests that bisymmetry "supplies part of the necessary artistic composition" (p. 15).

That bisymmetry might be a requisite "part of the necessary artistic composition" is indeed a surprising assertion. To what extent did the general population (or the artists) of Rorschach's day consider bisymmetry a prime requisite of "artistic composition"? One may wonder, examining art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether it were not true that bisymmetry is remarkable for its *absence* from pictorial composition. Composition in much Art Nouveau work, for example, as well as in the work of such artists as Toulouse-Lautrec, seems to depend often upon a sophisticated type of *asymmetric* balance. Some historians suggest this interest in asymmetry to have been initially inspired by the asymmetric compositional devices found in the Japanese prints which were popular in Europe from the 1850's on.

In our own day, it would certainly seem that among the more educated sectors of the general public, popular prejudice regards asymmetry, not bisymmetry, as artistic. Not uncommon today are the almost cultish convictions that "good" composition must *not* be symmetrical or bisymmetrical, and that no element in a "good" composition must occupy the

exact center of the picture plane. Only during the past half-decade, within the more radical sectors of the art world (notably among "minimal" artists) has the bisymmetric again been championed. And if the avant garde of our own day is to some extent manifesting a new preference for bisymmetry, this preference may be easily seen as a reaction against the views of a public majority which for decades has equated complicated articulation of the *asymmetric* with "art." Rorschach refers to the possibility of using "[ink-blot] figures which are asymmetrical and show poor composition" (p. 15), but does not clarify whether he considers asymmetry to be synonymous with "poor composition." Asymmetry (like bisymmetry) is, of course, neither inherently good nor inherently bad, when used as a compositional device.

While bisymmetry is a neutral element when considering whether or not art (or pictorial composition) is "good," there are other ways in which bisymmetry is not visually neutral. It is in fact an extremely suggestive (or meaningful) visual element. Rorschach provides his causes for introducing bisymmetry into the ink-blots, yet comments little on any possible associative consequences deriving from this bisymmetry; he does not suggest that bisymmetry may have, in itself, any connotations of importance. Bisymmetry carries, of course, primitive and powerful connotations of classical man-made order. Concepts of order within our society—in their visual expression—derive primarily from the rectangular configuration or, sometimes, from the grid, and from the postulation of a vertical/horizontal antithesis. Bisymmetric configurations, containing one axis, tend to suggest the other.

In another sense, bisymmetry signifies—carries visual connotations of—the basic form of differentiation between the organic world and the inorganic world. In particular, most *animal* forms are bisymmetrically organized. Rocks, natural bodies of water, and clouds are not bisymmetric. Plants seem to occupy an intermediary position since their parts (e.g., leaves, seeds) tend to be bisymmetric, though the plant as a whole usually is not. Rorschach notes animal forms to be the most frequent associations to the ink blots (25 per cent to 50 per cent animal responses in almost all intelligent subjects, regardless of education), but does not comment on the possibility of any relationship between the bisymmetry of the blots and the high proportion of animal responses (p. 45). While distinguishing between those subjects who saw in the blot whole human figures and those subjects who saw parts of the body (fingers, hands, feet, noses, eyes), Rorschach does not note that the whole human body, viewed from front or back, is bisymmetric (as are the ink blots) whereas many of the parts of the body (hands, feet) are not in themselves bisymmetric (p. 47).

Neither does Rorschach comment on an apparent contradiction which the bisymmetric orientation of the ink blots introduces into the test. While the subject to whom the test is being administered is theoretically free to turn the Rorschach card in all directions, it is questionable whether in actuality he is visually or "psychologically" free to do so. Bisymmetric configurations tend to look "wrong" when their axis is laid horizontally rather than vertically. It is surprising that Rorschach neither comments on this nor offers any disposition of the question whether, when the axis of the ink blot is laid horizontally, association is affected because energy must be expended countering the uneasy feeling that the blot is being looked at "sideways." Certain bisymmetric configurations (and some of the Rorschach cards) suggest "reflections in water" when viewed so that the axis of bisymmetry rests in a horizontal position. There are ten Rorschach cards, however, and therefore twenty possible positions of the cards in which the subject may find the axis of bisymmetry lying horizontally across his field of vision. It seems doubtful that a reasonably intelligent subject would repeat twenty times the association that the card resembled "reflections in water." One would at least like to know whether qualitative dif-

ferences exist between the things which subjects may "see" in a bisymmetric configuration viewed normally (i.e., with the axis in a vertical position) and the associations commonly inferred when the configuration is viewed with the axis lying in the atypical horizontal position. And one would certainly like to know whether a correlation exists between the bisymmetry of the blots and the strikingly high proportion of "animal" responses reported by Rorschach.

In summary, it seems surprising that Rorschach insists on bisymmetry (of the ink blots) in the face of an art tradition which asserts—in direct contradiction to his view—that visual association can proceed easily from an asymmetric configuration. Why, in fact, did neither Botticelli nor Da Vinci nor any of the other artists previously noted suggest that visual association proceed from a bisymmetric configuration? One may wonder whether they sensed that the bisymmetric may contain, within itself, too much "meaningfulness," or too many suggestive visual connotations. It would seem as if "whole-configuration" responses to a bisymmetric configuration would of necessity tend, themselves, to incorporate the idea of bisymmetry. The fact that animals are more bisymmetric than plants, which in turn are more bisymmetric than natural inorganic objects, constitutes a particularly provocative set of visual relationships which in turn may condition "psychological" associations. On a more purely visual level, bisymmetry, or mirror-image symmetry, seems universally fascinating when utilized, for instance, in such configurations as heraldic devices. Yet this inherent appeal of bisymmetry may derive from several factors not yet clearly understood and having little to do with what Rorschach labeled "necessary artistic composition." To the extent that it is the purport of the Rorschach Test that the ink blots represent explicitly "unstructured" visual configurations, the bisymmetric orientation of the ink blots works strongly in antithesis to this aim.

VISUAL OR VERBAL? LITERAL OR LITERARY?

The Rorschach is perhaps less a visual, and more a *verbal,* test than is generally supposed, and this alone may limit its value to those concerned with visual phenomena. The familiar incantation, "What do you see in this ink blot?" is not a demand that the subject report (literally) what he sees but rather that he invent verbal similes (or metaphors) in the familiar process called "free association." When, by contrast, the optometrist shows his patient a card and says, "What do you see?" he does not wish the patient to be "literary" (and produce verbal inventions) but rather wishes him to be "literal" (and to report what he *sees*). Rorschach, though assuming the test to be a purely visual test, gives little attention to examination of his own definition of *visual,* and does not consider the implications of the antithesis between the visual and the verbal, the literal and the literary. Before examining these implications ourselves, we must again return to the idea of bisymmetry, and to what might here be termed the "literal-minded (Rorschach) response."

We will find an inconsistency in Rorschach's original structuring of the test. He reports two types of "literal-minded" response to the ink blots: the first concerns form; the second concerns color. Some subjects, when asked what they "see in" (or can infer from) the ink blots, report instead what they literally *see.* These subjects say that they see "an ink blot," or (on the colored cards) colors, such as green, or blue. Rorschach deliberately altered the form of his test with the intent of eliminating the possibility of a literal response to form; he states that the introduction of bisymmetry (of the ink blots) was determined in part by a desire to eliminate literal response to the form of the blot. Yet in regard to literal response to color, Rorschach is silent on the possibility that this, too, might have been deliberately structured out of the test. He notes (p. 30) that literal color responses—when the subject states that the Rorschach

card is "black and red" or "blue and red" —are found to be characteristic of deteriorated epileptics.

We may now ask why Rorschach felt, first, that the literal response (i.e., "That is an ink blot") must be removed from his test, and why he considered invalid a response which was purely visual (or purely literal). Let us assume that response to objects in the external world may vary between two extremes; it may range from what we will here call the "literal" to what we will here call the "associative." In any literal response, a statement is made in regard to what an object "is"; the Greek philosopher manifested a typical "literal" response when he suggested "nails are made of nails." For any object A in the natural world, a "literal" response (to that object) might take the initial form

A is A.

Further qualification of this response might take the form of providing a "taxonomy" for A, or of investigating the component parts of A as well as the internal articulations between these parts. Science, notably, begins with this type of literal assumption; the chemist presumably accepts the fact that sodium is sodium and proceeds from there to describe for us its physical and chemical properties. He does not tell us what sodium means or signifies or denotes or represents and we would have no science of chemistry if he were indeed to turn his investigations in such directions. Art, too, tends to begin with literal (or, if one will, tautological) premises; one finds many artists insisting that paintings are paintings (and are made of paint on canvas). One finds workers in other fields insisting that paintings are symbols, signs, illusions, representations, and a variety of other items.

Turning now to the associative (or literary) response, we find it invariably begins with a denial of the idea that A is A, or, if one will, with a denial of any *importance* in the idea. The associative response begins with the supposition that

A means B.

In alternative forms of the associative response, the idea might be promulgated that A refers to B, A symbolizes B, or A denotes B. For purpose of discussion here, let us assume that *association* is present in any statement which implies that the true nature of A lies in its relationship to B, rather than in its relationship "to itself."

Rorschach appears strongly committed to the idea of associative (rather than literal) response. He does not, in other words, appear to believe his test subjects are responding in a valid manner unless "associations" are provided. The subject may not provide "literal" responses, such as "That is an ink blot." Nor may he indulge in examining the visual appearance of the ink blot as an ink blot; he may not report, for instance, on the ratio of its total height to its total width, nor make an observation that one card appears to have more fine detail than another. It is true that literal response to the *color* of the ink blots is still possible (i.e., "That is green," "That is red"), but one suspects Rorschach might have wished to remove this, too, from the test had he conceived of a way to do so.

What type of views are widely disseminated today in regard to the antithesis of *literal* and *associative*? Seemingly, we have undergone a precise about-face, today tending to value a literal response to works of art and to dismiss an associative response as irrelevant. Nor is the reason for this transition difficult to find. In certain areas of aesthetic investigation—in contemporary literary criticism, for instance—it seems apparent that the unthinking incorporation of associative or "psychoanalytic" tenets (or of what were thought to be psychoanalytic tenets) may be a disaster. It is not easy to believe, today, that a literary critic ought to function as a free-association machine; it is not easy to believe the critic can tell us anything of value about poetry simply by dredging up (and displaying) all of the symbolic associations he has inferred from the work.

The group loosely called the New Critics, notably, attempted to insist that poetry criticism ought to take a literal focus on the poem and on poetic structure, rather than concerning itself with fortuitous "feelings" or "ideas" to be found in the critic's "associations" to the poem. If the New Critics may be for any reason criticized today, it is perhaps because they sometimes did not follow with sufficient rigor their own "literal" program.

Today, notably, it is only the conservative who looks at abstract art (as he might look at a Rorschach ink blot) in the associative belief that he will find hidden in it (and must extract from it) a series of figurative images. In 1923, Picasso issued a plea that the public look at Cubist art "literally," or for what it was. Asserting that the essential nature of Cubism was accessible to any who (literally) *looked* at the work, he denied that the validity of Cubism was contingent upon any of the associations which various viewers had proposed; Cubism was not, he said, intended as an illustration of mathematical, trigonometrical, chemical, psychoanalytic, musical, social, or evolutionary theories, nor did its validity derive from the things "associated" with it.[8] Perhaps as consequence of numerous statements of this type from artists—numerous pleas for a "literal" view of art—contemporary criticism and contemporary teaching of "art appreciation" tend to stress literal *looking* at paintings, rather than free-associating about their "meaningfulness." Whatever its value may be as a clinical technique for the psychiatrist, unbridled free-association has certainly had its day as a working method for the art critic or aesthetician.

In addition, this trend towards literal rather than associative thinking would appear to have affected our society as a whole. Whether or not the response is rationally defensible, whether or not the arguments raised have logical merit, a strong reaction against all forms of symbolic association, including a reaction against the symbolism of both Jungian and Freudian psychoanalytic systems, is today common. To a high degree, this reaction seems based on a widely held conviction that the associative leads nowhere, that associative simile making is "mythic" rather than definitive, that the stream-of-consciousness is endless, that the journey into "memory" may be a journey which moves backwards.[9] People are today so sick of what things "mean" or "symbolize" that they would much prefer to live for a while in the literal world of what things "are."

In painting, one of the most crucial moves towards literalism and away from conventional associationalism has been the assertion that a painting is not a window on a wall through which one views a scene. Rather, a painting is what it literally is: a rectangle of canvas covered with paint. Many artists today insist upon calling themselves "makers of objects," and stress the literal reality of their work as artifact, rather than illusion. There is an amusing contrast between the remarks of painters, such as Frank Stella, who insist that a painting is a rectangular "object," and Rorschach's note that "a negativistic catonic may simply call the [Rorschach] plate a rectangle, not seeing the figures at all, but only the form of the card itself" (p. 36). It is certain, also, that literalism, which characterizes in varying degrees many sectors of the contemporary art world, is not a phenomenon without historic precedent. Some critics feel that American art, as opposed to European art, has from its beginnings manifested a preference for the literal to the associative, including a preference for flat spatial representation as opposed to illusionistic "three-dimensional" representation. Precedent, too, is provided for today's literalism by such documents as Maurice Denis's *Definition of Neo-Traditionalism* (1890), which begins with the famous injunction, "Remember that a picture before it is a war horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order." [10]

THE S (WHITE-SPACE) RESPONSE

Rorschach noted that certain subjects gave associations to the ink blots which

consisted of response to the white space(s) of the card, rather than response to the black or colored ink blot. His conclusions in regard to this response—which he designates S response—are interesting. He suggested that more than one S response was cause for "suspicion," and found S responses most common in stubborn, eccentric normals and negativistic, scattered schizophrenics (p. 39). Some later Rorschach workers have established an optimum number of S responses, and regard with suspicion a quantity of S responses which exceeds this established optimum.[11]

The S response constitutes, of course, the reversal of figure and ground, a "visual" possibility which has been exploited in art for forty years. Today, when the concept of co-equal figure/ground reversibility—or the possibility of co-equivalent positive and negative space—is both first principle and cliché of the "art appreciation" classes to which virtually all college educated sectors of society are exposed, it might be valid to wonder whether the S response does not exist within an entirely different socio-aesthetic context than existed in Rorschach's day. We teach people today, in other words, to look at *both* ground and figure. Presumably Rorschach believed it abnormal to value grounds (or "backgrounds") as much as the figures which lay on them. He concluded that S responses—responses to these grounds—"always indicate some sort of tendency to opposition" (p. 39). It might be interesting to know whether, in periods when paintings were more often viewed as a formal dualism of positive and negative space, S responses were more common. Cook found S responses to be more common among Samoans than among European and American groups, and attributed this to a higher valuation placed on the color white; the grounds on all Rorschach ink blot cards are white.

The artist whose work depends on the exploitation of this type of figure/ground reversibility[12] would most probably assert that this type of form represents to him not "tendency to opposition," but, rather, "awareness of dualism," which sounds like a similar concept but really means something else entirely.

COLOR

The manner in which color is incorporated into the Rorschach Test raises questions on several levels. First, the test imputes certain sets of psychological characteristics to individuals who respond strongly to color, and thus apparently assumes that response to color is primarily determined by individual psychology. Rorschach found the greatest frequency of primary color answers in "epileptics, manics, imbeciles, paretics, scattered schizophrenics, or notoriously hot-headed, hyper-aggressive and irresponsible 'normals'" (p. 33). In the larger context, whether color response is primarily a matter of individual psychology would appear to be conjectural. As events of the last two decades have dramatically demonstrated, response to color would seem to be socially conditioned. Our entire society has moved sharply in the direction of strong response to color and increased willingness to utilize a broad range of very bright colors. There has been a simultaneous subrogation of what were, in actuality, color taboos. Today, for instance, it is no longer felt that tastefully decorated living rooms must be furnished in monochromatic—preferably beige—color schemes; kitchen and bathroom plumbing equipment is no longer manufactured exclusively in white. When the ladies of the community gather in their best dresses, these best dresses are no longer exclusively black, and for this reason, acquiring the "first black dress" is no longer a significant socio-psychological signpost in the maturing of a young girl. Black, occasionally varied by violet, is no longer considered the only appropriate color for the garments of elderly women; exclusive adherence to black clothing is today not likely to be socially interpreted as a gesture of propriety, but more likely will be considered a sign of deficiency in imagination. Infants are no longer—as they were twenty years ago—garbed exclusively in pale pastels of pink, blue, yellow, or white, nor does the respectable working girl—as she once

did—go to the office clad usually in dresses of black, brown, navy-blue, or grey. Stereotype response confined solely to the "symbolic" aspect of color is less commonly seen, and—as Moholy-Nagy hoped—our society is slowly becoming conditioned to response to the direct sensuous impact of color. Leger's vision—which he discussed with Trotsky—of a city with blue streets, a city with yellow streets, seems today to be within the realm of possibility. Love of bright color, response to bright color, while it was frowned on by the polite conventions of twenty years ago, is socially sanctioned and encouraged today.

These changes in regard to color response and color inhibition have been extremely far-reaching, and have affected our folklore and our patterns of social response. It no longer seems riotously funny—as it did, for instance, twenty years ago—to see a movie or play where the plot involves the chagrin of a wife whose husband humiliates her by appearing publicly in "loud" neckties or vividly colored sport shirts decorated with Hawaiian prints. The social connotations—to say nothing of the psychological connotations—of love of bright color have changed drastically. During the 1940's, a fifty-year old woman who wore a pink-and-green dress—or a middle-aged business man who went to the beach in an orange-and-blue bathing suit—might indeed have been considered eccentric, "far out," aberrant. Today it is more probable that like individuals, making like color selections, are responding to a socially determined norm. No one debates any longer the question of whether blue "clashes" with green. The use of bright color is today conventional; previously (and in Rorschach's day) it was unconventional.

While, presumably, the psychologist can infer psychologically useful generalizations from subject color response on the Rorschach Test, it is doubtful whether broader generalizations useful to study of the visual arts can be likewise inferred. Whether or not the psychologist can ignore the socio-historical context of color response and color usage, the art historian or aesthetician can not. A claim, for instance, that Cézanne may have had less skill than Ingres at rendering local color is an irrelevancy. Or at least an irrelevancy in an art historical context: Cézanne—but not Ingres—worked in an era when the rendering of local color was considered a less important factor in the creation of art.

Rorschach touches on the idea that modes of visual response may be socially (as well as psychologically) conditioned. He does not, however, carry the idea as far as one might wish. He suggests, for instance, that different eras of history—different societies—may differ in their orientation to visual elements, including their orientation to color. At other times he seems to contradict himself in this regard, ascribing a psychological reason to events which might perhaps be explained—or might be influenced—by factors which were other than psychological. He suggests that the "late maturation" of many Swiss artists is a function of a late shift in their (psychological) experience type (p. 111). Elsewhere, he suggests that the painter Ferdinand Hodler came to use blue almost exclusively because "blue is the favorite color of all who control their passions" (p. 111). From an art historical viewpoint, other explanations suggest themselves; it seems possible that the late maturation of Swiss artists—if such is indeed the case—might be related to the specific problems encountered by the provincial artist working in isolation from world art centers. Hodler's use of blue might perhaps be considered in relation to its use by Cézanne (Hodler's senior by fourteen years) and by Picasso during his blue period; near-exclusive use of a single color (Renoir's red-tinged late work, Picasso's rose period, Paul Brach's blue paintings, John Grillo's yellow paintings, Ad Reinhardt's black paintings) seems almost completely (with the exception of Rembrandt and Chardin) confined to the art of the contemporary era, and perhaps prefigures the recent development of color-field painting and (colored) primary-structure sculpture.

Along the same line, Rorschach provides

a chart, containing various speculations in reference to the test response he would expect from painters of various stylistic "schools." The primary difficulty of the chart is its extreme ambiguity, and the near impossibility of ascertaining which painters Rorschach had in mind as examples of each school. He suggests, for example, the type of test response he would expect from an Impressionist painter, but leaves unresolved the question of what he means by an Impressionist. *Impressionist* is ordinarily used so loosely, to refer to such a varying and conglomerate group of artists, that some precise definition is needed to clarify Rorschach's intended context. Manet, Degas, Morisot, Cassatt, Pissarro, Monet, Sisley, Bazille—perhaps even Cézanne—might be considered Impressionists, but differ widely in their work, in their aims, and in their temperaments. Renoir, credited with introducing into Impressionism the broken color often considered its main identifying characteristic, cannot really be considered an Impressionist at all if his entire career is taken into account. Seurat's divisionism or Neo-Impressionism, which to the layman's eye may seem similar to impressionism (because of its broken color) is really quite different in intent.

In addition, Rorschach's equation of Impressionism with "colors" (p. 109) is oversimplified and ignores consideration of the concepts of open-air painting, anti-Classical or "accidental" composition, and Realist-derived subject matter which, at least today, are considered to have been integral factors in the development of Impressionism. This equation of Impressionism with an unusual use of color was, however, fairly common in Rorschach's day. And what has been termed Rorschach's "open" attitude to visual possibilities is perhaps best illustrated by reference to the less open attitude of a somewhat earlier writer: In 1903, Emily Noyes Vanderpoel wrote, "Doctor Charcot and his school in Paris have made many examinations into visual disturbances, and through these examinations much of the peculiar coloring and mannerisms of some of the modern painters of the so-called impressionist, tachist, mosaist, gray-in-gray, violet colorist, archaic, vibraist, and color orgiast schools have been explained. The artists tell the truth when they say that nature looks to them as they paint it, but they are suffering from hysteria or from other nervous disturbances by which their sight is affected." [12a]

Rorschach's discussion of Impressionism is obviously more "modern" (and less trivial) than the ideas presented by Emily Vanderpoel. But his ambiguous use of the term *Impressionist* and the suggestion that all practitioners of a particular art style share a common "psychology" is appalling in its implications. Assuming that there is, indeed, a certain personality type shared by *all* "Impressionists," any possibility for aesthetic evaluation disappears; the greatest giants of the movement must be assumed to demonstrate the same psychological dynamics as do the most untalented peripheral followers of Impressionism. The innovators of Impressionism must be assumed to be "psychologically" the same as the most mundane and uninspired of their followers. Monet and Pissarro, who created many of the masterpieces of Impressionist painting, become "the same" as the dozens of minor American Impressionists whose work commands our attention primarily for its historic, not aesthetic, value. Even worse, we must assume Monet's "psychology" is the same as that of any of the hundreds of amateur painters who today sit, in hundreds of amateur art classes across America, dabbing away at polka-dot canvases done in an "Impressionist" manner. The mind bogles at the idea of classifying in a single personality group both innovator and imitator, genius and fool, the gifted and the inept merely because all paint in a manner which seems to indicate they "like colors." The suggestion that members of such a heterogenous group might all share the same psychological make-up would seem to be bad psychology as well as bad art criticism. In short, more explanation is required of exactly what Rorschach meant by the "personality" (or "psychology") of

an Impressionist painter. Explanation is needed, too, of why we are to assume any common psychological traits among Impressionists, especially when biographical studies of the major French Impressionist painters tend to suggest they were temperamentally heterogenous as a group. It is easy to understand Rorschach's idea that a correlation might exist between style in art and the psychology of individual artists. It is easy, too, to understand that the idea might have seemed to him to be "intuitively" correct. The problem here is whether this idea—as he stated it—does not constitute a misleading oversimplification.

Problematic, elsewhere in *Psychodiagnostics,* is Rorschach's equation of the suppression of color (in art) with the suppression of emotion (p. 112). *Emotion* is a term seldom used in art criticism today, but one can understand what Rorschach meant. One still cannot, however, agree with his conclusion: Goya's lithographs (especially *The Disasters of War*), Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, Picasso's *Guernica,* the paintings of Franz Kline or of Soulages, the black-painted sculpture of Tony Smith, the black-painted sculpture of Louise Nevelson, all provide examples of works in which the suppression of color (or the use of monochrome) cannot be said to be accompanied by the suppression of emotion. Contrariwise, some critics might claim that each of these works is *primarily* characterized (despite the restraint in use of color) by a "feelingful," "passionate," or "emotional" content.

The basic problem in regard to all of Rorschach's comments on color would appear to be whether we today can accept his implicit assumption that his own era provides a norm for patterns of color response. If we do indeed accept this assumption, then it may perhaps be suggested that society during the 1960's has gone completely mad in its extravagant use of bright color—mad, at least, by the standards of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. A more relativistic view of color-response norms is, of course, possible. And in that case a suggestion might be made that standards in regard to the use of color (and in regard to patterns of color response) have changed greatly. Rorschach's negative views and negative findings, in regard to color, perhaps reflect the standards of his own day rather than any generalized psychological truths about human response to color. Rudolf Arnheim has suggested that some of Wilhelm Ostwald's comments on color must be rejected for precisely this reason, and because Ostwald overlooked the distinction between "scientific color rules" and the transitory color norms (or "temporary fashions") of his own day.[13]

Presumably Rorschach found some precedent for his negative views on color in the experiments of Descoudres[14] and Katz,[15] both of whom demonstrated that color responses decreased as chronological age increased. Both suggested that their experiments demonstrated the "primitive" or "childish" nature of color response. Again, since we incline today to view children as untrained humans rather than untamed savages, it might be assumed that many contemporary workers would draw a different inference from these experiments. It might be suggested, for instance, that color responses decrease in older subjects because people may be *conditioned* to ignore color and to respond to form alone. That such a conditioning was common in Rorschach's day is apparent; that it is less common today, and may be unknown tomorrow, is also apparent.

That our own age, in relation to Rorschach's, has such disjointed views in regard to "normal" color-reaction suggests the broader problem that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between aberrant behavior which is "psychologically" conditioned and aberrant behavior which is "socially" conditioned (or which is declared aberrant solely because it conflicts with transitory social mores). While it is not within the context of this paper to consider the broader question, its outlines may be seen if the reader will consider the relative role of formal religion during the twelfth century and during the twentieth. Most probably, during the

twelfth century, only the imbalanced questioned the theology of the Church or the existence of God; conversely, during our own era, such questioning falls well within the range of the socially normal.

FORM VERSUS COLOR

Much of the content of Rorschach's evaluations consists, in essence, of a weighing of the relative merits of form response and color response, with some suggestion of an inferior position for color response. While we have considered the "philosophical" implications of Rorschach's negative view of color, we have not yet considered the "practical" implications, or the manner in which Rorschach's structuring of the Ink-blot Test reflects his own views on the form/color antithesis:

On several levels, color and form are not presented in a co-equal manner on the Rorschach Test, because Rorschach did not structure the test with a co-equal attitude towards form and color. He structured the (bisymmetric) shape of the ink blots, but did not structure their color. He removed from the test the possibility of a literal response to form, but did not remove the possibility of a literal response to color. It has, incidentally, been noted that color in various editions of the cards has varied because of printing variability. Rorschach designated card VIII as "harmonious" in color and form, card IX as "discordant" in color and form, without commenting on the problem that different eras vary as to the colors or color sets which they consider "harmonious," and vary, further, in their views on whether "harmony" or "discord" of color is more desirable or "artistic." Here, again, the fact that Rorschach uses the antithesis harmony/discord rather than the less judgmental similarity/contrast, indicates interjection of an emotional bias in regard to color which is typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet is not necessarily typical of other eras.

A consequence, in part, of the practical necessities of commercial reproduction of the Rorschach cards, but perhaps also a consequence of Rorschach's own viewpoint, is the visual manner in which color is incorporated in the ink blots. From the point of view, at least, of today's taste, all of the Rorschach cards are very interesting in form, largely because of the shape intricacy of the blots. However, those blots which incorporate *color* are very boring, schematic, and ordinary in color. Many people enjoy studying the intricate variations of shape to be found in the various Rorschach ink blots; few could find much fascination in the rather bland and banal range of color nuance which the blots incorporate. If it were desired to separate subjects with "form preference" from subjects with "color preference," it might be more reasonable to ask such individuals whether they felt more interest in the shape intricacies of the Rorschach ink blots or in the color intricacies of—for instance—the shimmering and iridescent colors to be found in opals. That such a choice might prove difficult for many subjects to make perhaps indicates that, at least from an aesthetic viewpoint, the choice between form and color may not be a relevant choice. Whether a choice between form and color can be made at all depends on how one wishes to define form and how one wishes to define color. Some periods of art—and some periods of art criticism—have presumed an irreconcilable antithesis between form and color, between the draughtsmanly and the painterly. Some periods have seen the entire question of art as exhaustively defined through this form/color duality which today appears less pertinent; the relation between form and color appears symbiotic rather than antithetical. Form perception cannot exist without simultaneous color perception; color perception cannot exist without simultaneous form perception. There is no form without color; there is no color without form. To ask whether *form* or *color* is more important may be an irrelevancy equivalent to asking whether the arteries or the veins are more vital to the circulation of the blood. To the psychologist, using the Rorschach Test for psychological purpose, the possible irrelevancy,

in a larger context, of the form/color choice need not matter. Yet if it is desired to infer aesthetic or art-historical generalizations in regard to form/color which rely on the material gathered through the Rorschach Test, the possibility that the choice between form and color may be irrelevant—or merely semantic—is crucial.

COLOR SHOCK

Rorschach defines a particular response which he designates "color shock." This response consists of an inhibition which occurs in some subjects when, after viewing several black-and-white Rorschach cards, they are shown a colored card. Rorschach perhaps does not clearly enough enunciate that color shock—as he describes it—does not seem to be a response to color per se but, rather, a response when color is introduced into a format previously established as black-and-white. The significance of this may be illustrated by suggesting that the ordinary technicolor movie film neither "surprises" nor "shocks" the viewer through its use of color. But conversely, a black-and-white film, suddenly *changing* to color when it is being shown, occasions some degree of surprise in most viewers at the moment of transiton.[16] This surprise, analogous to Rorschach's "color shock," is occasioned not by color per se but by change of format and by introduction of color into a format previously established as black-and-white.

Whether or not valid aesthetic generalizations can be inferred from the cumulative results of the Rorschach Test, it must be suggested—and the examples given here are illustrative rather than exhaustive—that much of Rorschach's viewpoint on the visual seems out-of-date. The Rorschach Ink-blot Test has been structured to incorporate a viewpoint toward the visual which relates more to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth and incorporates some of the curious blind spots toward the visual which characterize the late nineteenth century; a bisymmetric configuration is not a random configuration. Rorschach's suggestion that his subjects are "choosing" between form and color is confused by the fact that the ink blot *forms* are (1) structured (i.e., bisymmetric), (2) interesting to look at, and (3) intricate. By contrast the ink blot *colors* (used in the colored ink blots) are (1) unstructured, (2) uninteresting to look at, and (3) schematic. Because of this lack of coequivalence in form and color on the test, it seems unwise to assume that Rorschach's "form and color" may serve as paradigm for form and color in a more general context.

In addition, a more "literal-minded" response to the visual world is more commonplace today than it seems to have been in Rorschach's day. It is today possible for the artist, acting out of an art tradition, literally to refer to a painting as a rectangular object. Such a response—despite apparent similarities—is quite different from Rorschach's "negativistic catatonic" who literally refers to the Rorschach card as a "rectangle." And we must discard as irrelevant Rorschach's implicit assumption that it is by definition invalid to take a literal-minded (rather than literary) approach to visual phenomena.

The assumption that color response is primarily a matter of individual psychology is open to question, as is Rorschach's negative view on color, and the negative overtones of some of his color terminology. Questionable, also, is the assumption that visual perception splits easily into a dualism of form versus color.

[1] M. Bleuler, and R. Bleuler, "Rorschach Ink-blot Tests and Social Psychology," *Charact. & Pers.* 4 (1935): 99–114.

[2] T. H. Cook, "The Application of the Rorschach Test to a Samoan Group," *Rorschach Res. Exch.* 6 (1942): 51–60.

[3] Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* (New York, 1947), p. 74.

[4] Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius, eds., *Bauhaus: 1919–1928* (Boston, 1959), p. 68.

[5] In addition to F, C, M, or S, intermediary responses such as CF or FC are possible.

[6] Hermann Rorschach, *Psychodiagnostics,* trans. Paul Lembau, M.D. (New York, 1951). Page references to the English translation have been parenthetically incorporated into the text.

[7] V. Virgil Barker, *American Painting* (New York, 1960), p. 606.

[8] "Statement by Picasso: 1923," in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York, 1946), pp. 270–71.

[9] See, for instance, the views expressed in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation,* or Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art.*

[10] See also Pablo Picasso: "The bull is a bull, the palette a palette and the lamp a lamp. That's all," quoted in Barr, *Picasso,* p. 247.

[11] See, for instance, Charles P. Fonda, "The White-Space Response," *Rorschach Psychology,* ed. Maria A. Rickers-Ovsiankina (New York, 1960), p. 97.

[12] James Brooks, Ellsworth Kelly, Franz Kline, Mondrian provide examples.

[12a] Emily Noyes Vanderpoel, *Color Problems: A Practical Manual for the Lay Student of Color* (New York, 1903), p. 6.

[13] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 338.

[14] A. Descoudres, "Coleur, forme ou nombre?" *Arch. de Psychol.* 14 (1914): 305–41.

[15] D. Katz, "Studien Zur Kinderpsychologie," *Wiss. Beitr. Padäg. Psychol.* (1913).

[16] Hans Richter's film, *8 × 8* and Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* utilize the cinematic device of switching from black-and-white to color at a midpoint in the film.