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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Abstract

In 1982, Jacques Derrida's essay, "White Mythology"¹, in his seminal book *Margins of Philosophy*, was translated and published in English. In this essay, Derrida highlights a myth, which has endured since the inception of what we, today, call Western Philosophy. The myth, he argues, is that absolute meaning is produced by an absolute unitary connection between a noun and its referent, a self-present reality, fully sensible and in full color. The myth, he argues, reduces reality into a linear temporal progression, where with the passing of time, with each temporal moment we move further away from the reality in full color, and its full sensory input, and thus the meaning gets fainter and fainter, as if bleached and re-bleached, to the point where it no longer resembles its colorful origin in reality. The more color, the more reality, the more bleaching, the more abstraction. The more color, the closer to the original sensory input, the more bleaching, the farther from the sensory reality and closer to the intelligible abstraction. In this paper, I will argue that this "transition" from absolute meaning and full-color reality to a completely bleached abstraction may be traced in works of painters of the late 19th and the early 20th Century. I will argue that this retrogression may be traced through the works of Courbet, Monet, Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Malevich. Derrida's "White Mythology" is the myth of the movement from Gustave Courbet's *Stone Breakers*² to Kasimir Malevich's *White on White*³, traced in the realm of meaning.

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In 1855, Gustave Courbet, rejected by the Paris International Exhibition, set up his own gallery outside the exhibition grounds, titling it “Pavilion of Realism,” where he exhibited his painting, *The Stone Breakers*, of 1849, a painting, which to today’s eyes seems very traditional. Courbet displayed two common workers breaking stones at the edge of a field. His painterly methods belong to a tradition of representation that may be followed perhaps as far back as Giotto. What made his work unique and “un-exhibit-able”, at least at the sanctioned salons, was that he was painting common people doing common things. Undoubtedly Courbet was one of the initiators of the visual revolution that moved away from the trajectory of the Renaissance traditions and culminated in the early Twentieth Century with the work of the Suprematists. That revolution in painting, however, started as one of content, with no painterly accompaniment. Courbet insisted that his work was “to be able to translate the customs, ideas and appearances of [his] ... time as [he saw]... them-in a word, to create a living art-this has been my aim.” He continues: “The art of painting can consist only in the representation of objects visible and tangible to the painter...,” who must apply “his personal faculties to the ideas and the things of the period in which he lives...” “I hold also that painting is an essentially *concrete* art, and can consist only of the representation of things both *real* and *existing*.... An abstract object, invisible or nonexistent, does not belong to the domain of painting” “Show me an angel and I will paint one....”⁴

The revolution that Courbet started by basing his work on the representation of things real, however, quickly took on the painterly with the work of Manet, and later with Monet, Cezanne and Van Gogh. With these painters, a growing emphasis is placed on the application of paint, and development of visual concepts beyond faithful representation. There is a break with the depiction of reality. In its stead, each painter is highlighting a visual or painterly phenomenon.

During a year spanning 1892 and 93, Claude Monet rented a studio across the street from the Cathedral in Rouen, France. During this period he painted over thirty paintings of the cathedral façade, all identical in configuration. However, each was an illusion of the complex forms of the gothic cathedral, as bathed in atmospheric conditions of light, heat, haze, and humidity. Some of the paintings are in full color and detail, and some in almost monotone with little resemblance to the cathedral.⁵ As we now know, later in his career, at the turn of the Century, Monet selected topics that presented the potential for less vivid details to be recreated. His lily pond series⁶ are perfect examples of how his interest in the luminescence of the painted surface guided his selection of the topic. Monet’s concentration on the ephemeral qualities of light and atmosphere, in turn, focused attention on the surface of the canvas, and the development of visual phenomenon through paint and texture. Already in the Rouen Cathedral series, Monet moved the entire culture of painting away, although slightly, from the depiction of a referent reality. However, all of his paintings, reinforced by their titles, are tethered to their reference, be they faint tethers.

The trajectory of concentration on the painted surface, rather than what the painting depicted, may be followed through Cezanne to the work of the Russian Suprematist, Kasimir Malevich. In 1915, Malevich published his manifesto *From Cubism and Futurism to Supremacist: The New Realism in Painting*. In the manifesto he argued for “the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, Madonnas and shameless Venuses, [only then] *shall we witness a work of pure, living art.*”⁷ Malevich forcefully negates the link between painting and any referent reality outside of the painting itself. “The transferring of real objects onto canvas is the art of skillful reproduction, and *only* that. And between the art of creating and the art of copying there is a great difference. The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature.”⁸ Malevich’s work, along with other Suprematists is considered to be the first systematic abstract pictorial composition based on geometric figures that expressed the supremacy of pure sensation in art, without reference to an external objective reality. Malevich has elsewhere argued that his role was to liberate art from the ballast of the representational world and through abstraction to show a new reality of painted surfaces where thought was of prime importance.

The culmination of Malevich’s work inspired by his Suprematist manifesto was the 1918 *White on White*.³ Here, color, form, and texture are reduced to bare minimum, an inclined white square superimposed on another slightly larger white square. The two squares are only differentiated by their inclination, size, tone (warm white vs cool white,) and texture of the painted surface. Although some critics have argued that Malevich’s white squares represent two spaces, the manifesto declares that he saw *White on White* as the ultimate non-objective painting, with no reference to anything outside of the painting.

In less than 70 years, these painters have transitioned from a culture of painting that was fully invested in its relationship to an exterior referent to one that is fully devoid of that connection. This is the whitening myth, to move from the purely sensible to the purely intelligible, in a successive, retrogressive, temporal series of transformations from full color and detail to monotone, from *The Stone Breakers* to *White on White*.

In “White Mythology”, Derrida is interested in debunking this myth, but not simply by proving it wrong. He is interested in first establishing the myth as the constant in Western Philosophy by reconstituting it in the philosophical writings of Aristotle and Anatole France, among others, in the same manner that we can decipher the myth in the transition from Courbet to Malevich. The myth of the originary relationship between a proper noun and its referent, he argues, exists in the realm of familial resemblance preserved through a temporal history. The history of the production of meaning and truth in Western Philosophy is founded on establishing an absolute transparent relationship with a referent, an absolutely familial, historical relationship, fully embedded in a temporal dimension, absolutely now, in the absolute moment, all meaning here and clear at once.

He then points to not only the myth, but the structure of the oppositions which are at the foundation of the myth and Western Philosophy, and by problematizing the myth, constitutes the structural possibility of the movement of meaning in a space that, I would suggest, intersects the temporal progression inherent in the myth. This space is the space of possibilities, the space for the production of work and the interplay of meaning, the space for the introduction of complexity. It is a space that is in a dimension other than the temporal dimension of the history of meaning traced to its referent origin. It traces a tangent to the trajectory of temporal history.

This tangent is strategically significant. Derrida does not “play” in the linear-temporal realm of “white mythology”. In that realm, he can only argue for or against resemblance as the foundation of meaning. He could only say that Courbet is closer to the full-color reality of his subject than Monet or Malevich. Or he could argue that Malevich’s abstraction is a pre-requisite for the intelligibility of its meaning, where the full-color reality of Courbet gets in the way of the intellectual engagement. He, instead, inserts a spatial dimension into the temporal dimension, prying it open. In this, he follows in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp, and those who followed in his steps, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage.

In the space between “proper” meaning and meaninglessness lies the world of the artist. In the space between a proper noun, a transparent announcement that points to a distinct referent, and the cry of an animal lays the world of the artist. Absolutely transparent proper meaning and absolute meaninglessness are the opposite poles that define the realm of meaning. What Derrida constructs in “White Mythology”, in his analysis of the myth of language as constructed throughout history from Aristotle to Anatole France, the myth that language in its pure originary form of a proper noun had a transparent and unitary tie to a referent, and every move away from that referent has “bleached” its meaning towards meaninglessness is an articulated trace of connections and circulations between absolute meaning and meaninglessness. Rather than pose them as two opposite and incongruent entities, Derrida weaves them tightly together into a textile that requires circulation between the poles of absolute meaning and meaninglessness in order to be engaged.

Derrida redraws the line of division between the two poles incessantly with each close reading and analysis, the fabric of the line appearing as a collection of finer lines, each time multiplied and thicker, encompassing more space. We are presented with a space of possible differentiations instead of a line of difference. The line of difference, which has historically been placed between absolute transparent meaning and meaninglessness, is reconstituted by Derrida as a space in the murky thickness of meaning itself. Not between meaning and meaninglessness, but within meaning. Not a line of division, but a space of differentiation.

In *of Grammatology*, Derrida asks: “What led us to the choice of this word [*trace*]?” Derrida proceeds to answer that in the trace, “the place of the one and the other must constantly be in movement.”⁹ and in order to produce this movement Derrida brings in the metaphor of the hinge: “The hinge [*brisure*]

marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence. That is why there is no full speech, however much one might wish to restore it by means or without benefit of psychoanalysis.”¹⁰

Derrida marks the impossibility of producing absolute meaning, the truth, in the absolute present, without any mediation or delay, with a spatial device, a hinge, and uses the spatial hinge to pry open the temporal dimension of presence. By inserting a spatial system in a temporal dimension, Derrida is able to locate space, though tangential, in the temporality of the absolute presence, and pry it open, in order to occupy the moment that had been impossible to occupy at least since Aristotle. This, in turn, permits work to be done on this moment, and in this spatialized moment, in this tangential space, where there was no “room”, nor time to work prior to this prying open. Derrida has opened a gap in the temporal dimension and inserted space. This space is itself a hinge space, a space that is neither fixed, nor singular. The hinge holds within it the conception of a passage, a movement from the one to the other.

Strategically, in both *White Mythology* and *of Grammatology*, Derrida initially identifies the poles of the opposites, the structure that has sustained Western philosophy: the poles of sensible and intelligible, representational and abstract, Courbet and Malevich, *The Stone Breakers* and *White on White*. His interest is not to simply oppose one of the opposites in order to arrive at the other, to argue that self-present truth conjured by the absolute connection between a name and a referent is a fallacy, and therefore in the absence of that very connection, any other connection would do. He is interested in illuminating the structure that has held the foundations of philosophy together, and by describing the fallacy at the foundation, to open a space for his performance. In this he operates much more like Robert Rauschenberg in his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) than Malevich, or for that matter more than Rauschenberg himself, with his *White Paintings* of 1951.

Between *White on White* (1918) and 1951 much developed in the world of painting, most notably Abstract Expressionism. Robert Rauschenberg, then a young artist, as a way of defying abstract expressionist ideals developed the *White Paintings*,¹¹ a series of five collections, each composed of one or multiple identically sized canvases, all painted white, smooth, and flat, no texture, no differentiation, no inclination.¹² Indeed, he opposed his contemporaries, the icons of American painting, Kline, Motherwell, Pollock, and de Kooning, by painting absolutely no expression, flat, un-textured, white paint on a smooth, tautly stretched canvas.

Two years later, Rauschenberg made another work in relation to the Abstract Expressionists. This time, however, the work was not simply an opposition. He asked Willem de Kooning, the un-disputed reigning master of the Abstract Expressionists for one of his drawings, in exchange for a bottle of a Jack Daniels. De Kooning offered him a drawing that included pencil, charcoal, oil paint, and crayons, intensely worked and nearly impossible to erase. Rauschenberg worked for a month to erase the de Kooning drawing. The result, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*,¹³ is a palimpsest that faintly traces

histories of marks, impressions, embossings, and lines, sort of white, but not really, sort of abstract, but not really. Both tied absolutely to its referent, the de Kooning drawing, and absolutely conceptual. The performance is in the tracing of the movements between the two realms.

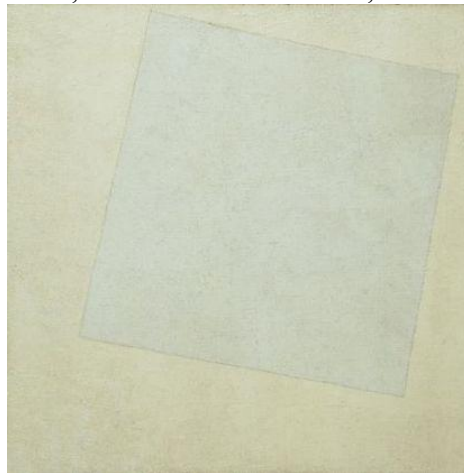
Rauschenberg's and Derrida's conceptual performance creates a work that traces the movement of a hinge between drawing and erasing, the Abstract Expressionists and Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, between vandalism and creativity, destruction and creation, between representation and abstraction, and between sensible and intelligible. Both have worked through their disciplinary practices, but finally, it is their strategic performance that keeps the hinge in motion and refuses to belong to and reinforce the structure of oppositions.

Notes

Derrida, J. (1982). "White Mythology", In: J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, 1982, 207-271. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers*, 1849. Approximately 65" x 94", oil on canvas (painting lost during World War II.)



Kasimir Malevich, Suprematist Composition: White on White, 1918, approximately 31 1/4" x 31 1/4", oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



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Claude Monet, Rouen Cathedral, 1894, approximately 39 1/4" x 25 7/8", oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Theodore M. Davis Collection, bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915).



Claude Monet, *Water Lily Pond*, 1926, diptych, each part approximately 200cm x 300 cm, oil on canvas, Chichu Art Museum, Naoshima, Japan.



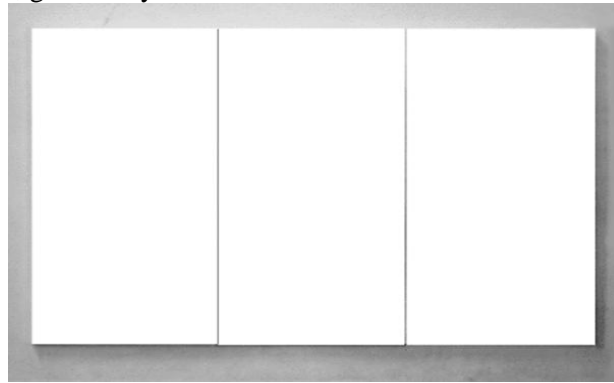
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Ibid. p. 174

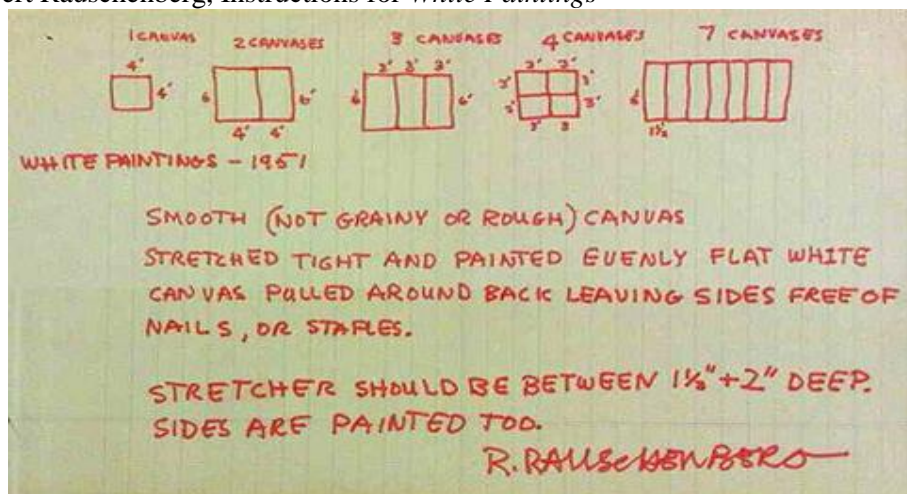
Derrida, J. (1974). *of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p.70

Ibid, p.69

Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951, triptych, 72" x 108", oil on canvas, San Francisco MoMA, gift of Phyllis Wattis.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Instructions for White Paintings*



Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, 25 1/4" x 21 3/4", traces of ink and crayon on paper, with mat and label hand-lettered in ink, in gold-leafed frame, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Phyllis Wattis.

