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**Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf Steiner, and the Missing Object**

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**Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf Steiner, and the Missing Object**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Anthony and to my parents for their unconditional love and support.

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## **Abstract**

### **Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf Steiner, and the Missing Object**

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This thesis examines the resonances between the thought of philosopher and Theosophist/Anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) by locating Steiner, and in turn Kandinsky, in the emerging occult movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The goal is to offer a new perspective on Kandinsky's development of abstraction in the period of 1910 to 1913. After the introduction, the second section considers the previous approaches to Kandinsky's possible engagement with Steiner, outlining the range of opinions both for and against this engagement and their supporting evidence. Section three provides a thorough overview of Kandinsky's stylistic progression between 1896 and 1913. The next chapter is dedicated to an examination of Steiner and his epistemology. This chapter highlights Steiner's intellectual ties to the German Idealists, the romantics, and to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Section five describes briefly the occult resurgence at the turn of

the twentieth century with a particular focus on the movement of Theosophy and Steiner's eventual conversion to this group. In section six, I discuss the two primary Steiner sources on which Kandinsky took notes, the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals and *Theosophy* in order to explore the evolution of Steiner's philosophy into an occult cosmology. My focus then turns to an in-depth analysis of the hand-written notes and annotations taken by Kandinsky on these sources in light of the theories put forward by Steiner. I argue that Steiner's synthesis of idealist epistemology, romantic *Naturphilosophie*, Goethe's aesthetics, and Theosophy provided Kandinsky with an example of a comprehensive worldview that supported his theory of active agency in art. Section seven delves into Kandinsky's aesthetic theory as presented in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and several other contemporary essays. I propose that Kandinsky developed Steiner's ideas on the evolution of consciousness into a theory of the development of art towards abstraction. This thesis maintains that Kandinsky advanced a spiritual equation for the creative process that echoes Steiner's theory of the relationship between the spirit, soul, and body in the physical world. In conclusion, these ideas are considered through a formal analysis of Kandinsky's *Improvisation 19* and *Composition VII*.

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## I. Introduction

Over a century ago Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) posed this pivotal question: “What is to replace the missing object?”<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky’s relationship with the recognizable object and consequent development of abstraction in painting would come to define his artistic career. His long life, prolific output, and extensive writings allow for significant speculation on how and why this complete elimination of recognizable objects came about.

Born in 1866, Kandinsky lived in a time of radical transition. At the age of thirty he left behind a promising law professorship in Russia and relocated to Germany in 1896 to follow his dream of becoming a painter. It was in Germany that Kandinsky encountered the occult movement of Theosophy and the leader of the German branch Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).<sup>2</sup> Through the 1970s, scholars approached Kandinsky’s art primarily through the method of formalism, focusing on his stylistic development as an extension of Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, or as a development of the decorative arts style in and around Munich prior to World War I. However, both approaches miss the larger cultural context in which Kandinsky was operating, including the gradual changes in science and the

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<sup>1</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 1913, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: De Capo Press, 1994), 370.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980); and Jocelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). The Theosophical Society was formed in 1875 in New York City by the Russian medium Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and American journalist and lawyer Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Austrian philosopher and author Rudolph Steiner formally joined the society in 1902 and soon after he was named the general secretary of its German chapter. Steiner would remain a Theosophist until his break with the society in 1913 and his formation of the Anthroposophical Society.

prominence of occultism. Given the occult orientation of many of the ideas expressed by Kandinsky in his theoretical publications, such approaches fall short.

This thesis illuminates the writing and art of Kandinsky more fully by locating him firmly in the context of the philosophical and occult milieu at the turn of the century and, specifically, the writings of Steiner. Kandinsky's interest in Steiner can be substantiated by a number of publications present in his library and the hand-written notes and annotations that he made on these sources. After the death of Kandinsky's partner from the prewar years, Gabrielle Münter, these materials became part of the Gabrielle Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung at the Städtische Gallery im Lehnbachhaus in Munich. Central to my study are two sources belonging to the Stiftung: the hand written-notes taken by Kandinsky on the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* (1904-1908) and the marginal annotations in his copy of Steiner's book *Theosophie* [*Theosophy*], (1908). These sources provide an invaluable window into Kandinsky's engagement with and interpretation of Steiner's thought.

Kandinsky completed his first theoretical text, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [Concerning the Spiritual in Art], and sent it to the printer in December of 1911, although it would bear the publication date 1912.<sup>3</sup> The book presents his ideas on modern philosophy, spirituality, and the arts as well as practical art theory in light of these views. The core theoretical and spiritual concepts expressed in this text are crucial to understanding the impetus for Kandinsky's developing technique of abstraction. In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* Kandinsky discusses his theory of "inner necessity" as an

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 48.

explanation for his gradual progression to complete abstraction.<sup>4</sup> For Kandinsky, the expression of inner necessity through abstraction utilizes formal artist elements. Color and form, for example, could affect the viewer on both a physical and psychic level, causing “vibrations in the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary with *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Kandinsky’s painting *Improvisation 19* (Fig.1) provides an example of Kandinsky’s innovation in color and form. Completed in 1911, this painting conveys an immediate impression of vibrant color and an equally strong impression of bold line and form. The composition is defined to the left and the right by sketched black contours that delineate forms roughly suggesting groups of human figures. Radiating from the center of the composition interpenetrating patches of blue create a sensation of weight and recession countered by brief flashes of vibrant reds, yellows, and white. The figural groups serve both to balance the composition and to lend it weight. White contours and small patches of color hint at background architecture. The related woodcut *Improvisation I* (Fig. 2) and a preparatory sketch for *Improvisation I* (Fig. 3) present a gradual abstraction of the recognizable elements of architecture, landscape, and figure.

In Kandinsky’s view the artist had a responsibility to contribute to the bringing about of a new spiritual era.<sup>6</sup> In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* he describes his vision of

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<sup>4</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, (1912), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: De Capo Press, 1994), 167-170.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 213. Kandinsky details the role of the artist in the coming “spiritual age” as an agent capable of bringing about actual perceptual changes in humanity.

the relationship between the artist and his work, including the role of art in the coming spiritual era:

In a mysterious, puzzling, and mystical way, the true work of art arises from out of the artist. once realized from him, it assumes its own independent life, takes on a personality, and becomes a self-sufficient, spiritually breathing subject that also leads a real material life: it is a being. It is not, therefore, an indifferent phenomenon arising from chance, living out an indifferent spiritual life, but rather possesses — like every living being — further creative, active forces. It lives and acts and plays a part in the creation of the spiritual atmosphere.<sup>7</sup>

Kandinsky's theory of abstraction runs deeper than a search simply for "what was to replace the missing object;" it embraces a worldview that explores the relationship between the artwork and the human subject and that endows a work of art with agency and being.

The presence of such visionary ideas, discussed further below, can best be understood in light of the philosophical context and occult resurgence at the turn of the twentieth century. Central for Kandinsky were the ideas introduced and enumerated by Steiner in his journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* and his book *Theosophy*, with which the artist engaged directly. In particular, Steiner's deep involvement with the scientific method of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), who was also admired by Kandinsky, would prove important for the painter's philosophical grounding.

In this thesis I consider the notes taken by Kandinsky on the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* and the annotations in his copy of *Theosophy* Kandinsky individually in light of the theories expressed by Steiner in each text. I will place the thought of Steiner in dialog with the theories Kandinsky put forth in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. Further, I will argue that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 210.

the unique synthesis of idealist epistemology, romantic *Weltanschauung* [worldview], and occult cosmology in Steiner's writings provided Kandinsky with a basis from which he could develop his theories of active agency in a work of art. Kandinsky developed Steiner's ideas on the evolution of consciousness into an aesthetic theory of the necessary development of art away from a reliance on the representation of material appearances, towards abstraction.

## II. Previous and New Approaches

The question of Kandinsky's exposure to, and belief in, occult theories and their possible impact on his development of a totally abstract art has been a contentious one. The responses to the suggestion that occult beliefs may have had a bearing on Kandinsky's innovations run the gamut from argumentative denial to apologetic acceptance to well-researched support.

Sixten Ringbom was one of the first art historians to systematically address the spirituality of Kandinsky and his possible exposure to Steiner. His book *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (1966) as well as his essays "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting" (1970) and "Kandinsky und das Okkulte" (1982) are the definitive starting points for an inquiry into Kandinsky's spiritual background.<sup>8</sup> Ringbom's approach locates Kandinsky's theoretical ideas in the intellectual environment of Germany during Steiner's period in Weimar.<sup>9</sup> Ringbom describes the philosophical climate in Germany as characterized by an "idealistic transcendentalism" that addressed

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<sup>8</sup> Sixten Ringbom, "Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966): 386-418; Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*. (Abo Akademi, 1970); Ringbom, "Kandinsky und das Okkulte," in Armin Zweite, *Kandinsky und München: Begegnungen und Wandlungen 1896-1914*, (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Ringbom, "Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," 388. Steiner moved to Weimar, Germany in 1894 and remained until his move to Berlin in 1897.

the subject-object duality and was expected to provide a model for a worldview addressing questions of being, consciousness, and perception.<sup>10</sup>

Ringbom argues that it was from Steiner that Kandinsky derived the idea that art is one of the principle forces for the advancement of spiritual consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Ringbom relates Kandinsky's artistic and spiritual theories to those of Goethe, and, specifically, to the scientific ideas of Goethe as interpreted by Steiner.<sup>12</sup> His primary argument is that the most fertile source for Kandinsky was the spiritual theories of Theosophy and Steiner. Though in "Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," Ringbom grounded Steiner thoroughly in the context of his engagement with Goethe, Ringbom's argument progresses in the course of the text to a narrower focus on the Anglo-American Theosophy of Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbetter and their theory of "thought-forms."<sup>13</sup>

In her essay "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image" (1972) and her book *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (1980) Rose-Carol Washton Long focuses on the origins of Kandinsky's stylistic development of abstraction in the period directly preceding the outbreak of World War I.<sup>14</sup> Her analysis centers on her

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<sup>10</sup> Ringbom, "Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual'," 386–418. For further explanation of subject-object dualism, see Frederick Beiser "The Enlightenment and Idealism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Americks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 18-36. Beiser summarizes subject-object dualism as a basic fact of human experience, in which the object is given to us (the subject) and its qualities appear beyond or independent of our mental representation of it.

<sup>11</sup> Ringbom, *Sounding Cosmos*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 397-400.

<sup>14</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image," *Artforum*, vol.1, (June 1972): 42-49.

identification of Kandinsky's possible use of "hidden" or "veiled" imagery.<sup>15</sup> Washton Long bases her explanation on a careful iconographical analysis and identification of the veiled imagery, followed by an interpretation of the motifs in light of the biblical Revelation of John, as discussed by Steiner.<sup>16</sup> Her identification and enumeration of the veiled-image format and eschatological themes utilized by Kandinsky and gleaned from Steiner is clear and well-supported. However, she does not take the examination of Steiner as a source for Kandinsky further. When considered in a broader relationship to Steiner's thought, the Revelation of John is far from his only concern with the philosopher's ideas.

The gradual acceptance of Steiner as a legitimate source for Kandinsky was not universal. The loudest voices against the significance of Theosophy and Steiner were those of Hans Roethel and Peg Weiss. In his 1977 book *Kandinsky*, Hans Roethel attributes Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy and Steiner to the apocalyptic mood of Russian intellectuals at the turn of the century. Roethel stresses that neither Theosophy nor Anthroposophy replaced Kandinsky's orthodox Christian convictions, and he states emphatically that Kandinsky was never a disciple of either movement.<sup>17</sup> In her book *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years* (1979), Weiss questions the fundamental validity of Theosophy and Steiner, classing both as "pseudo-spiritual."<sup>18</sup> Weiss, a student of Kenneth Lindsay (himself an opponent of Ringbom), attributed Kandinsky's development of total abstraction to his experiences working in the decorative

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>17</sup> Hans K. Roethel, *Kandinsky* (New York: Hudson Hill Press, 1977), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 6.

arts.<sup>19</sup> Her strategy for minimizing the legitimacy of Steiner as a contextual source is to attribute the interest to Kandinsky's partner Gabriele Münter. Her most convincing argument involves her discussion of the German words *geist* and *geistige*.<sup>20</sup> Weiss is correct in discussing the accuracy of translating *geist* and *geistig* respectively as "spirit" or "spiritual" in the sense of the religious or the "supernatural." Weiss assesses correctly that the word *geist*, in German, is more closely related to the idea of the incorporeal, immaterial, mind, intellect and genius.

The work of Magdalena Dabrowski and Corinna Treitel represents contemporary examples of scholarship acknowledging the significance of Steiner for Kandinsky's development. In her essay for her 1995 exhibition *Kandinsky: Compositions at the Museum of Modern Art*, Dabrowski notes Kandinsky's interest in Steiner's ideas as they pertain to his vision of apocalyptic redemption and the Revelation of John.<sup>21</sup> She draws a parallel between Steiner's theory of "ascending degrees of knowledge" and Kandinsky's division of his works into "Impressions," "Improvisations," and "Compositions."<sup>22</sup> Dabrowski, however, like Ringbom and Washton Long, discusses Steiner exclusively in the context of Theosophy. Although she gestures towards the relationship of Theosophy to Russian

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<sup>19</sup> Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1994), 96. Lindsay repeatedly attributes Kandinsky's spiritual statements to a "Symbolist worldview" 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich*, 140-141.

<sup>21</sup> Magdalena Dabrowski, *Kandinsky, Compositions* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

philosophers such as Vladimir Soloviev, she does not consider the role of Steiner within his philosophical context.<sup>23</sup>

In her book *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (2004) Treitel contextualizes Steiner and Kandinsky by exploring their development within the wider movements of occultism and spiritualism in Germany at the turn of the century. She outlines the development of occultism in Germany from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. Treitel covers a variety of movements, detailing the impetus, evolution, reception, and impact of each through an examination of the beliefs and motivations of each movement's key players. She delves into the complicated relationship between the burgeoning interest in the occult and the evolution of science and psychology in Germany during this period. She contrasts, for example, the approach of Steiner with that of another prominent German Theosophist Wilhelm Hübner-Schleiden. Following the narrative Steiner provided for his life in his autobiography *Mein Lebensgang* [The Story of My Life], Treitel draws attention to the importance of Steiner's technical-scientific education.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, she weaves in the crucial thread Steiner's engagement with the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, though she does not discuss Steiner's own philosophical thought or development.<sup>25</sup> She details his transition into Theosophy contrasting Steiner's focus on the importance of the individual with the wider Theosophical focus on an international brotherhood.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>24</sup> Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

Treitel introduces Kandinsky in her discussion of “Theosophy and the Avant Garde”. Characterizing Wassily Kandinsky as a modern “warrior against materialism.”<sup>27</sup> She highlights the role of Theosophical ideas, like that of a resonating cosmos, in providing Kandinsky a framework on which he could build his techniques of abstraction.<sup>28</sup> Treitel credits Theosophy and Steiner with offering Kandinsky “metaphors and techniques for creating art in keeping with the modern spirit.”<sup>29</sup> She also acknowledges Ringbom by stating that Theosophy offered Kandinsky the theory of a “sounding cosmos,” whose immaterial objects could be visualized and represented by attuning one’s soul to its waves.<sup>30</sup>

Linda Dalrymple Henderson has also provided new information on Kandinsky’s context in her focus on the intersection of science and occultism in the early twentieth century. In her article “The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism: *Die Übersinnliche Welt* and the International Cultures of Science and Occultism” (2015), Henderson discusses the occult resurgence within the wider context of groundbreaking scientific discoveries of the day, including the discovery of x-rays, radioactivity and the electron, in combination with technological developments such as wireless telegraphy.<sup>31</sup> Challenging traditional views of matter as solid and permanent and the superiority of the five senses, the new science provided important support for spiritualists and Theosophists alike. Typical of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism: *Die Übersinnliche Welt* and the International Cultures of Science and Occultism,” *The Glass Bead*, no. 1 (2016), [www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism](http://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism), 2.

permeability of the boundary between science and occult in this period was the interest in occult subjects such as Spiritualism and telepathy by prominent scientists such as Sir Oliver Lodge, Sir William Crookes, and Camille Flammarion (the latter two mentioned specifically by Kandinsky in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*.<sup>32</sup> According to Henderson, journals such as *Die Übersinnliche Welt*, copies of which Kandinsky owned, were decisive not only in communicating scientific and technological discovery but also in offering an alternative Spiritualist perspective to that of its sibling Theosophy. Steiner, too, was alert to the newest science, and this previously unnoticed commonality of the two provides yet another factor pointing to the need for a closer examination of the two figures in tandem.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 3.

### III. Kandinsky's Early Path to Abstraction

Kandinsky reached the unique philosophical, spiritual, and theoretical position expressed in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* after a period of fruitful, if turbulent, artistic experimentation and stylistic development. Briefly tracing the path of Kandinsky's stylistic development illustrates clearly his ability to absorb and adapt ideas with which he came into contact. Years of travel and periodic relocation allowed him access to multiple contemporary artistic movements and innovations.

#### A. Transition to Germany and Travel

Having completed his doctorate in law and political economics in 1893, Kandinsky was poised on the brink of a promising and academic career. But he chose instead to work for a time at a printing company and then he relocated to Munich, Germany, in 1896 to study art.<sup>33</sup> Before World War I Munich was considered an influential art center of Europe, although the art world of Munich was grounded in conservative traditions. Modern movements like the Munich Secession and Jugendstil, however, had emerged, creating a stimulating new art scene.<sup>34</sup> As an art student in Munich, Kandinsky migrated between schools and styles. For a time he gravitated towards the organic Jugendstil aesthetic, even experimenting with the decorative arts.<sup>35</sup> In this period Kandinsky organized the Phalanx association and school to provide alternative exhibition opportunities for younger artists.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, curated by Angela Lampe (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Jill Lloyd and Steven Lindberg. *Vasily Kandinsky: From Blaue Reiter to the Bauhaus 1910-1925* (New York City: Neue Galerie 2013), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 33.

Kandinsky and the Phalanx organized no less than twelve exhibitions, showcasing art from outside of Germany, including Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist works.<sup>37</sup>

1903 to 1908 was a period of restless travel for Kandinsky. His trips to Vienna, Venice, Holland, Berlin, Tunis, Brussels, Paris, Rapallo, Genoa, Moscow, Odessa, and Milan seem to represent a Romantic quest to “find” himself, to develop his artistic voice through exposure to a wide variety of cultures and styles.<sup>38</sup> In 1906 Kandinsky settled in Paris for a year, where he encountered the art of Gauguin and Matisse.<sup>39</sup> Following a trip to Berlin with Münter in 1907, Kandinsky settled again in Munich to begin what would become one of the most influential artistic periods of his career.<sup>40</sup> It was during this period of 1908 up to the publication of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in late 1911 and through the beginning of World War I in August 1914 that Kandinsky was exposed to and engaged with the works of Rudolf Steiner.

Kandinsky’s early period in Munich, prior to and continuing through the duration of his trip to Paris, exhibits several recognizable and distinct styles. Kandinsky’s Russian heritage expressed itself in the narrative or mythological subject matter of mosaic quality gouache paintings. The 1906 painting *Couple on Horseback* (Fig.4) is an example of this style. Kandinsky’s *Poster for the First Phalanx Exhibition* of 1901 (Fig. 5) utilizes the bold organic line of the Jugendstil aesthetic, so prominent in Munich at the turn of the century. By contrast, *Beach Chairs in Holland* of 1904 (Fig. 6) displays a distinct

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>39</sup> Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 32.

Impressionist quality in the thick application of paint in daubs and patches of color. In these various styles one can observe a prominent dichotomy in Kandinsky's life: the struggle to belong to both Russia and Europe.

During his year-long sojourn in Paris in 1906 Kandinsky exhibited at the Salon d'Automne, which included a special Gauguin exhibit as well as a major manifestation of the Fauve style, including Matisse's *Joy of Life*.<sup>41</sup> Kandinsky is quoted as saying, "In 1906 I saw for the first time Matisse's early pictures which were so highly controversial. . . . Much encouraged, I asked myself once again the question whether one might simply reduce or "distort" objects, but do away with them altogether."<sup>42</sup> Though Kandinsky did not seem to immediately glean any stylistic ideas from the Post-Impressionist and Fauve work he was exposed to in Paris, the impact remained to emerge again in his work of the Murnau period.

In 1908, Kandinsky and his partner Gabriele Münter settled again in Munich, eventually purchasing a home in the rural town of Murnau, south of Munich in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps.<sup>43</sup> Kandinsky and Münter alternated between living in Munich and Murnau and they were often joined in Murnau by other influential artists such as Kandinsky's Russian friend Alexej Jawlensky and his companion Maria von Werefkin.<sup>44</sup> It was in this period that Kandinsky's artistic style began to mature and progress towards abstraction. Beginning with landscapes featuring the area in and around Murnau,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>42</sup> Kandinsky, "Interview with Karl Nierendorf," 1937, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 806.

<sup>43</sup> Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 37.

Kandinsky experimented with bold contour lines and wide areas of flat color.<sup>45</sup> Further, he began to simplify and obscure the forms of the subject matter in his paintings. *Murnau: Street with Women* of 1908 (Fig.7) is an example of Kandinsky's experimentation with large areas of expressive color, and the use of complementary color combinations of red and green or yellow and violet demonstrates his assimilation of the art of Matisse and the Fauves. Kandinsky's time in Murnau also exposed him to the Bavarian folk art of glass painting. In this folk style artists painted religious subject matter on the reverse side of glass to make devotional objects, using simplified bright colors and bold black outlines. Both Kandinsky and Münter experimented with this media and multiple examples of this art form would be featured in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*.<sup>46</sup>

## **B. The Blaue Reiter Period**

The development of Kandinsky's artistic style goes hand in hand with his continuing engagement with the artistic community and the public. In 1909 he helped to found the NKV, or Neue Kunstlervereinigung München, with members Jawlensky, von Werefkin, and Münter.<sup>47</sup> Through their first exhibit in December 1909 and the second in September 1910 they were able to expose the German public to modern artists such as Picasso and Braque.<sup>48</sup> Although Kandinsky left the group in 1911, the NKV was an important stepping stone.

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<sup>45</sup> Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 49.

The dissolution of the NKV prompted Kandinsky and his close friend and artist Franz Marc to seek independent exhibition opportunities.<sup>49</sup> Though not formally an artistic group, the artists associated with these exhibitions and publications are often referred to as the Blaue Reiter group, after the published almanac of the same name they published in early 1912. The *Blaue Reiter Almanac* was conceived by Kandinsky and Marc as an example of a publication that would overcome the boundaries between styles, disciplines, and periods.<sup>50</sup> It was advertised with the following excerpt;

A great revolution, the displacement of the center of gravity of art, literature and music. Diversity of forms; the constructive, compositional character of the forms; an intensive turn to inner nature , and, linked with it, a refusal to embellish outer nature. These are, in manifestations of this change, to emphasize its inner connection with the past, to reveal the expression of inner aspirations in every form suggestive of inwardness - this is the goal that the Blaue Reiter is striving to attain.<sup>51</sup>

The Almanac assembled a variety of works juxtaposing, for example, *Woman with Mandolin at the Piano* by Pablo Picasso with two line drawings done by children or a fragment of a Japanese woodcut with a Bavarian glass painting.<sup>52</sup> The Almanac showcased art, poetry, essays, and musical scores and featured articles by Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and the musician Arnold Schoenberg.<sup>53</sup> It enjoyed immense popularity, selling out with the first printing of 1100 copies.<sup>54</sup> The Blaue Reiter group also pursued diversity through

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<sup>49</sup> Hiddleston-Galloni, in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>51</sup> Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* (New York:Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1958), 62.

<sup>52</sup> Kandinsky and Franz Marc, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, 1912, ed. Klaus Lankheit (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 59 and 205.

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Milliez, "Study for the Cover of the Blue Rider Almanac," in Centre Pompidou, *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and other Works on Paper*, 49.

several exhibitions. The first in December of 1911 in Munich presented the works of Kandinsky, Marc, Münter, the German painter August Macke, and the French artists Robert Delaunay, and Henri Rousseau, while their second exhibition included additional artists such as Paul Klee, and Kandinsky's fellow Russian avant-garde artists Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larionov, and Kasimir Malevich.<sup>55</sup>

The period of 1911, concurrent with *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and the Blaue Reiter Almanac, through the beginning of World War I in 1914 represents Kandinsky's development of his abstract style. This was the period in which he posed the question: "What is to replace the missing object?"<sup>56</sup> Kandinsky continued to experiment with flattened perspective, energetic contour lines, and wide areas of expressive color that escaped their boundaries.<sup>57</sup> His reduction and simplification of form progressed even to the point that any recognizable subject matter retained only a loose correspondence to nature—he distilled his subjects to their essential forms. In this period, Kandinsky also began working increasingly with religious subject matter and themes of a coming apocalypse followed by the advent of a spiritual era.<sup>58</sup> He developed a technique of obscuring or "veiling" imagery so as not to be immediately recognizable to the viewer.<sup>59</sup> With its bold contours, interpenetrating patches of color and drastically simplified form *Kleine Freuden* [Small Pleasures] of 1913 is an example of Kandinsky's stylistic experiments.

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<sup>55</sup> Milliez, "Study for the Cover of the Blue Rider Almanac," in *Kandinsky: A Retrospective*, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 370.

<sup>57</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> See Long "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image" (1972); and Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (1980).

<sup>59</sup> Long "Kandinsky and Abstraction," 42.

Furthermore, it represents an example of Kandinsky's veiled religious subject matter, possibly of the apocalypse with the walled city on top of a mountain, four riders on horses, and a storm tossed boat suggesting the plight of humanity adrift in a materialist era.<sup>60</sup> During this period Kandinsky described his work in increasingly spiritual terms, as evidenced in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and his essays such as "Content and Form," "Whither the New Art," and "On the Question of Form" in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*.<sup>61</sup> In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, for example, he describes his painting in terms of "expressions of inner character" or "expressions of feeling utilizing inner-necessity."<sup>62</sup> It was during the pre-World War I period in compositions like *Kleine Freuden* [Small Pleasures] and *Improvisation 19*, that Kandinsky endeavored to answer the question, "What is to replace the missing object?" The following chapters will explore the background and nature of Steiner's philosophy and occultism and Kandinsky's developing abstraction in light of both the thought of Steiner and the theories presented by Kandinsky in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 47 -48.

<sup>61</sup> See Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, "Content and Form," "Whither the 'New' Art," and "On the Question of Form," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 84-90, and 96-104, 235-256.

<sup>62</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 218.

#### IV. Rudolf Steiner and Objective Idealism

The permeable boundary between science and the occult in the early twentieth century played a foundational role in the development of Steiner's and Kandinsky's philosophies. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been dominated by the ascendancy of empirical science, with theories such as those of Isaac Newton fostering an increasingly mechanical, material view of nature.<sup>63</sup> At the outset of the nineteenth century, the prevailing theory was that of the application of Newtonian mechanics to all observable phenomena.<sup>64</sup> The latter half of the century brought a cohesion of theories among the different branches of science. The laws of physics and inorganic nature could be understood through the laws of matter and energy, and these laws could be extended to the organic world of chemistry and biology as well.<sup>65</sup> In effect, all life could be understood as a combination of observable and verifiable physical and chemical processes. The philosophy of materialism was born out of the popularization of empirical scientific breakthroughs. Materialism seemed poised to explain all the riddles of life, given time and the pace of industrialization and technical development.<sup>66</sup> As the century progressed scientific discovery advanced unabated, ultimately, this progress undermined the primacy

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<sup>63</sup> For further explanation see Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearance Seriously The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2013), ch.2. The mechanical model of cause and effect allowed for results that could be precisely measured and were mathematically quantifiable. Though originally used in the formulation of laws applied to inert nature the success of these theories led to their eventual application to organic nature as well.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Carroll Galbreath, "*Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism: Rudolph Steiner and Occultism*," PhD dissertation, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 253.

<sup>65</sup> Galbreath, "Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism," 255-256.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

of matter, the reliability of the five senses, and even materialism itself.<sup>67</sup> Kandinsky himself addressed the impact of this progress stating:

The collapse of the atom was equated, in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly, the stoutest walls crumbled. Everything became uncertain, precarious and insubstantial. I would not have been surprised had a stone dissolved into thin air before my eyes and become invisible, an error of the learned. . .<sup>68</sup>

For Kandinsky and Steiner this seeming dissolution of matter refocused attention to those aspects of human existence that the mechanical model, empirical sciences, and materialism could not adequately address. These were the questions of the nature of being, consciousness, existence beyond the material world—questions of philosophy, faith, and spirituality.

Best known in the later twentieth century as the founder of Anthroposophy and the Waldorf School, Rudolf Steiner was a prominent figure in the early twentieth century, with multiple publications translated into a variety of languages. When he is the topic of discussion or research today, it is his occult activities, his association with the movement of Theosophy or his “spiritual science” that are of focus, to his credit or discredit. Outside of a handful of English language dissertations and several German language publications, comprehensive research that reveals information on Steiner’s early thought is scant, despite the fact that consideration of exactly this period sheds the most light on his later occult development. With the exception of of Sixton Ringbom and Long, the art historians who have weighed in on the question of Kandinsky’s engagement with Steiner have neglected

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<sup>67</sup> Whitford, *Kandinsky: Watercolors and Other Works on Paper*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 364.

to take his earlier philosophical work into account. He is considered solely in the context of his Theosophical and Anthroposophical activity and writing. Yet, Steiner introduced his first formative occult text, *Theosophy*, with a quote from the German Idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte's book *Science of Knowledge*: "This doctrine presupposes the existence of a new inner-sensory instrument through which a new world is opened up, a world that simply does not exist for the ordinary person."<sup>69</sup> Further, Steiner begins the first chapter of this text with a lengthy quote referencing Goethe's scientific method.<sup>70</sup> Why did Steiner, the leader of the German branch of Theosophy, begin his first occult text with quotes from a German Idealist philosopher and a German writer? The answer is located in Steiner's past.

Until his fortieth year, Steiner operated exclusively within the fields of science and philosophy and his later occult thought is the offspring of his philosophy colliding with the movement of Theosophy. From the outset Steiner sought to heal the rift that had developed between science and philosophy and to bridge the gap between inner-reality and external reality. It is useful to envision Steiner's early philosophy and progression into occultism in dialog with the neo-Kantian and romantic resurgence at the turn of the century. Until the age of forty it was Kant and Fichte's idealism, Goethe's organic scientific methodology, the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling, and Romantic aesthetic theory that would have the most bearing on Steiner's development. Steiner was firmly rooted in the metaphysical tradition of answering the questions of the nature of reality, being, and knowledge. His journey

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<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy*, trans., E.D.S. (New York, Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1910), 1-2

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

began not with Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophists, but with Kant, Fichte, and Goethe.

### **A. Steiner's Intellectual Beginnings**

Steiner was born in February of 1861 in the Muraköz region of Austrian-Hungarian Empire in the town of Kraljevec.<sup>71</sup> Steiner's father was employed as a telegraph operator for the Austrian railroad. As a result of his father's profession the family moved frequently throughout this region of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, often to small towns connected through the railroad.<sup>72</sup> In an examination of the trajectory of Steiner's development it is important to note the significance of technology and science as well as the relevance of nature. Steiner spent his childhood and formative years surrounded by the modern technology of the telegraph and the railroad. While these technologies have acquired a quaint patina in our time, these fields represented, at the turn of the century, the cutting edge of modern transportation and communication technologies. Steiner himself drew attention to the contrast between his love of the railroad and technology and to that of his appreciation for the surrounding nature.<sup>73</sup>

Due to the lower middle class status of the Steiner family and the elder Steiner's expectation of a technical career for his son, the decision was made that the young man pursue his education through the *Realschule*, a type of vocational high school in Wiener

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<sup>71</sup> Helmut Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie* (Germany: Piper, 2011), 13. It is important to note that Steiner's scant autobiographical statements and publications are the only sources for this early period of his life. Independent sources of verification are not available.

<sup>72</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> Galbreath, "Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism," 180.

Neustadt.<sup>74</sup> The education that Steiner undertook at the *Realschule* was focused on mathematics, chemistry, and physics. The aridness of this study would eventually lead Steiner down a divergent path. In his own words, “I had to study mathematics and natural science. I was convinced that I should find no relationship between these and myself unless I could place under them a solid foundation of philosophy.” Though this quote places science in a subordinate position in relation to philosophy, he would throughout his life refer to his scientific education as a foundation from which he felt he was justified to engage a range of topics from Goethe’s scientific writings to his stance against materialist philosophy.

Steiner later credited his chance encounter with Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in a Vienna used-book shop as a defining event that changed the course of his life. According to his autobiography, this encounter with Kant caused him to become interested in philosophy, specifically German Idealism.<sup>75</sup> Kant had formulated his epistemology during a period in which empirical and rationalist philosophy called into question exactly what was “real” and what could be “known” by man.<sup>76</sup> Empiricists like John Locke posited that

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<sup>74</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 19-20.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., *Biografie*, 21-22 and 29-31. After Steiner passed his Realschule “Abitur,” or examination, in 1879 he enrolled in a technical college in Vienna. Though Steiner’s Abitur did not allow him admittance to study philosophy at the university level, he made the decision to supplement his education with self-study while also sitting-in on university-level philosophy lectures.

<sup>76</sup> Frederick Beiser “The Enlightenment and Idealism,” 9-10. Beiser terms the impasse of Empiricism and Rationalism in the eighteenth century “The Crisis of the Enlightenment.” He explains that the result was materialism on one hand and the critique of belief and skepticism on the other. The explanation of the natural world through cause and effect governed by mechanical laws led inevitably to reduction. The empirical model required nature to conform to universal mechanical laws: it should, as a whole, be observable, measurable, and quantifiable. Thus, nature must be comprised of that which was observable, measurable, and quantifiable, i.e. matter. The criticism of belief had the potential to develop into skepticism. Skepticism and the burden of

knowledge proceeds from experience through the five senses, while rationalists such as René Descartes believed that knowledge proceeds from reason in the human mind prior to experience.<sup>77</sup> The crux of the dilemma, the question that is of central importance not only to Steiner's philosophy but also his later occult theory, was the question of the relationship between the objective physical world and the subjective mental realm, or, to put it another way, the relationship of the physical object and the mental image of it formed in the human mind.<sup>78</sup> In Kant's conception the only solution to the dilemma of the Enlightenment was a dualism that drew a distinction between the external material world and the internal mental world. Kant postulated that the experience of the external world proceeds through sense perception. Further, the corresponding understanding of experience proceeds from the concepts provided to the mind through reason, and the content of sense perception and experience is ordered through the concepts of time and space which are provided through intuition.<sup>79</sup> He postulated the existence of the *Ding an Sich* [thing-in-itself] which he referred to as the noumena.<sup>80</sup> Conversely, he refers to the world that is perceived by the human subject as the world of appearances, or phenomena, the appearances are the representations created in the human mind.<sup>81</sup> For Kant, while humans can perceive the

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proof for that which exists outside of the mind of man led to doubt in the reality of the external, material world and the reliability of sense perception.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 19-22.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, (Harvard University Press, 2003) see ch.3.

<sup>79</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 1945, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 680-682. For Kant reason is the source of the universal laws that exists independent of the natural world. While nature can be explained by mechanical cause and effect, not everything that exists exists in nature.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 680-682.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 680-682.

world of ideas and representations of the external world in the mind, the transcendently ideal world of the noumena is beyond human perception and thus unknowable; humans can only know their mental representations.<sup>82</sup> Steiner perceived Kant's model as placing a boundary or limit on man's perception and knowledge, refuting this boundary became one of the central goals of his developing philosophy.

The question of the identity and nature of the thing-in-itself occupied the German Idealists like Fichte. Kant's idealism confirmed the prime role of human cognition in the formation of knowledge and understanding the phenomenal world, but left open the foundation of human experience.<sup>83</sup> Dissatisfied with Kant's solution of dualism, Steiner progressed to the thought of Fichte.<sup>84</sup> Fichte served to guide Steiner to the eternal ground of all experience in the subject, the ego, or the "I."<sup>85</sup> He speculated that Kant's transcendental thing-in-itself did not exist, but rather the subject or the ego produced both the object and the understanding of the object through the intellectual facet of intuitive cognition.<sup>86</sup> It is important to note the role that intuition plays in Fichte's conception of human cognition. Steiner absorbed and adapted this central role of intuition in both his earlier epistemology and again in his later occult thought.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 680-682

<sup>83</sup> Christian Bamford, Introduction, in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of his Epistemology and His Worldview*, 1886, Rudolf Steiner, (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, Anthroposophic Press, 2008), XII.

<sup>84</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 30.

<sup>85</sup> Bamford, Introduction, in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, XIII.

<sup>86</sup> Galbreath, *Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism*, 67.

## **B. Goethe: The Role of Intuition in Philosophy, and the Model of His Aesthetics**

The importance of Goethe for the development of Steiner's philosophy and later occult thought cannot be underestimated. It is through his engagement with Goethe, in combination with the philosophy of Kant and the German Idealists, that Steiner developed his own unique philosophy. Though Goethe was widely respected for his poetry and fiction, he was largely discredited as a scientist.<sup>87</sup> Goethe's scientific findings were considered inaccurate by the standards of the empirical method; that is what drew Steiner to Goethe—the organic nature of his methodology. Steiner was formally introduced to Goethe through his instructor, the Goethe scholar Julius Schröer.<sup>88</sup> In 1882 Schröer recommended Steiner as editor of Goethe's scientific writings for the new Kürschner edition of *Deutsche Nationalliteratur*.<sup>89</sup> In 1886 Steiner published his first book *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* [Goethe's Theory of Knowledge, an Outline of the Epistemology of his Worldview].<sup>90</sup> In this text Steiner attempted to account for Goethe's scientific method philosophically by outlining what he considered to be Goethe's implicit epistemology.<sup>91</sup> By 1890 Steiner moved to Weimar to continue his work on Goethe at the Goethe Archive. The years 1890 to 1897 mark Steiner's most intensive engagement with Goethe. It was during this period that Steiner developed his epistemology in an attempt to unite science and philosophy.

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<sup>87</sup> Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>88</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 31.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>91</sup> Bamford, Introduction, in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, xxiii.

While a full consideration of Goethe's scientific writing is outside the scope of this thesis, several aspects of Goethe's thought will be crucial in later consideration of Steiner's philosophy and occultism. According to Steiner, the question of dualism was superfluous, as Goethe considered it self-evident that, ". . . the language of observation and that of thinking unite in order to reveal full reality."<sup>92</sup> Steiner characterized the dilemma of nineteenth-century empirical science thus: reality was considered to be derived exclusively from the study of external phenomena observable by the senses, yet the senses were not viewed as a reliable source of knowledge. The senses could only relay the impression made upon them, but not information about the thing-in-itself.<sup>93</sup> Further, because thought as it appears in consciousness was considered to be subjective, it was assumed that it discloses nothing objectively reliable about the thing-in-itself, and it thus could only be viewed as hypothetical.<sup>94</sup> For Steiner, Goethe's implicit outlook was that thought presented a way out of this dilemma. In Goethe, Steiner was convinced that he had found an "objective idealist," "one who believed that ideas are objective and that the objective realm consists of ideas."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Goethe postulated a correspondence between the human soul and nature, thus making all forms of human perception and cognition the ideal tools for observing nature.<sup>96</sup> In Goethe's conception, nature forms a unity and by observing various components or parts of this, by looking for "essential structures," the scientist could discover the eternal spirit,

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<sup>92</sup> C.L. Coetzee, "Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky's Aesthetic Theory," *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 2 (April 1988): 217.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>95</sup> Galbreath, "Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism," 266.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

or unified truth, underlying all observable variation and change. This underlying form, this concept that unifies is the eternal “idea,” while variability and change are only appearance.<sup>97</sup> Goethe’s scientific method begins with observation of phenomena. He then endeavored to arrange the phenomena so that the principles operative within them are made self-evident to thinking perception through intuition—i.e., knowing and seeing as one and the same process.<sup>98</sup>

For Steiner the role of intuition is, again, key. In Goethe’s method, the eternal ground is not perceived through the five senses. Only when the mind functions as an organ of perception through intuition can the ground be perceived.<sup>99</sup> Goethe’s belief in the correspondence between nature and man as well as the role of intuition are central, in Steiner’s opinion; this allowed him to refute Kant’s boundaries on human perception. For Steiner, if the idea is the eternal form that underlies nature and if there exists an inherent correspondence between man and nature, this makes man not only able to perceive Kant’s thing-in-itself, but also uniquely suited to observe the reality that Kant’s boundaries cordoned off.

While editing Goethe’s scientific Steiner was introduced to Goethe’s theory of aesthetics. Steiner was particularly interested in Goethe’s theory of art in relation to the

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<sup>97</sup> Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884-1945* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 2007), 451.

<sup>98</sup> Coetzee, “Rudolf Steiner’s Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky’s Aesthetic Theory,” 217. Goethe’s method was at odds with the empirical method in which objective observation proceeds to use secondary or instrumental concepts such as mathematical formulation or model building. In Goethe’s opinion, the empirical model not only isolated man unnaturally from the phenomena that he is observing, but, further, served only to dissect or divide the phenomena without providing an explanation of how the phenomena arose in the first place.

<sup>99</sup> Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature*, 21.

laws of nature, which he then presented as the aesthetics of Goethe's world-view.<sup>100</sup> According to Steiner, Goethe theorized that art, like nature, is produced according to “. . . divine necessity of true and natural laws.”<sup>101</sup> In Steiner's account of Goethe's aesthetics he traces the history of art against the idea of evolving consciousness, an idea later taken up by Kandinsky, who similarly discusses the history of art culminating with the dawning of a new evolutionary movement, the “Epoch of the Great Spiritual.”<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the eternal laws of nature are realized through the work of art, and the closer the artist adheres to the expression of these natural laws, the more perfect the work of art will be.<sup>103</sup> For Goethe, art was not the reflection of the Idea in material form, but rather matter appearing in the form of the Idea — i.e., the external element evinces the idea.<sup>104</sup>

### **C. Steiner, Naturphilosophie, and a Metaphysics of Art**

According to Steiner's autobiography, after his opportune encounter with Kant and Fichte he moved on to work his way through Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Hegel.<sup>106</sup> The romantic theories of *Naturphilosophie* and aesthetics provided fruitful ground for Steiner, and for Kandinsky in turn. While Kant and the German Idealists

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<sup>100</sup> Coetzee, “Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky's Aesthetic Theory,” 218.

<sup>101</sup> Ringbom, “Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual',” 390.

<sup>102</sup> Coetzee, “Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky's Aesthetic Theory,” 219.

<sup>103</sup> Ringbom, “Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual',” 390.

<sup>104</sup> Bamford, Introduction, in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, XVI. Steiner also studied aesthetics through the ideas of the poet, philosopher, and close associate of Goethe, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller. Schiller attempted to reconcile dualism through the realm of the aesthetic. He developed a theory in which consciousness moves between different states. Consciousness can experience the world through the senses or withdraw into an intermediate state in the world of reason or the aesthetic realm. This realm of beauty unites the experience of sense perception and thought.

<sup>106</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 30.

provided both the impetus and framework for Steiner's developing philosophy, it was his engagement with the intellectual movement of romanticism that planted the seeds to push Steiner's thought past a theory of knowledge into a comprehensive metaphysical system. This system ultimately evolved into a full-fledged spiritual world-view and cosmology that Kandinsky absorbed from the "Lucifer-Gnosis" journals and Theosophy.

*Naturphilosophie* addressed the inability of the mechanical-material model to explain the mind, reason, cognition, and knowledge. With this theory romantic philosophers re-conceived the concept of matter as a living force.<sup>107</sup> In the organic model of *Naturphilosophie* the relationship of the subject and object is no longer conceived as one of dualism, but rather a relationship of degrees: the mind, the subject, and the object are all considered parts of the same organic whole, the same life force.<sup>108</sup> The romantic philosophers elevated reason and the mind as the highest organization or embodiment of nature, over and above the material body. Thus, the subject's awareness of the object is a self-awareness.<sup>109</sup> What is more, each part requires the other to be realized or manifested through the whole.<sup>110</sup> In the scheme of *Naturphilosophie* the whole of nature is viewed as an organism with hierarchic levels of organization, in which the lower levels are organized

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<sup>107</sup> Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 33-35. Beiser identifies three central tenets of *Naturphilosophie*: first, nature consists of a single absolute and universal substance, second this substance is a living force that is a unity of the subjective and objective, and third, all of nature conforms to a plan that is inherent in matter itself.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 148. See also pages 82-83 and 139-148. Beiser relates the development of *Naturphilosophie* to a corresponding decline in the popularity of the mechanical-material model. He attributes the rise of the organic model to the advent of new theories in physics that developed from experiments in electricity, magnetism, and chemistry as well as the attempts to account for Newton's gravity in the eighteenth century.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 148.

and developed by the higher.<sup>111</sup> Further, the life force is considered to be the mediator between the subject and the object—the interaction between the parts of the life force bring about its manifestation. This reciprocal relationship is crucial to understanding Steiner’s philosophical theory of the relationship between sense perception, experience, and knowledge as well as his later occult theory of the relationship between the body, spirit, and the soul.

Within the model of *Naturphilosophie*, where the human mind was viewed as the highest organization and development of the nature, it follows that art, as the creative product of the human mind, was considered a self-manifestation of nature in physical form.<sup>112</sup> Building on the aesthetics of Goethe and Schiller, the aesthetic theory of the German romantics imparted to art a metaphysical role. In this role, art was viewed as the medium of manifestation, and the aesthetic experience was the instrument of perception of the whole of nature, of the eternal ground. Moreover, this perception was facilitated through intuition, since it allowed the “direct perception of a thing as a whole” through the aesthetic experience.<sup>113</sup>

#### **D. Rudolf Steiner’s Philosophy of Freedom**

In the years directly preceding Steiner’s life, empirical scientists sought to distance themselves from romantic *Naturphilosophie* and the metaphysical focus of philosophers like Fichte and Schelling, advocating reliance on direct, measurable observation.<sup>114</sup> They

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>114</sup> Ursula Marcum, “Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography” (PhD diss., University of California at Riverside, 1983), 108.

mandated a return to Kant, due to the limits he placed on man's knowledge. However, the idealist theory that there existed an ultimate reality that man could not know was unacceptable to Steiner: he accused Kant of having barred the path to higher worlds. He felt that his predecessors, scientists and philosophers alike, were distracted by attempting to account for subject-object dualism or focusing on redefining matter. In Steiner's opinion, an examination of human cognition and thought should be the primary concern of science and philosophy.<sup>116</sup> Steiner's singular focus in developing his philosophy was to delve into the origin of thought and knowledge. He considered materialism and Kant his primary adversaries. Steiner attributed the malaise and ambivalence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the spiritual emptiness of materialist philosophy.<sup>117</sup>

The time in Weimar presented Steiner not only the opportunity to engage with the thought of Goethe through his editorial work at the archive, but also the possibility of pursuing a doctoral degree in philosophy. In Austria, Steiner's academic background made this goal impossible, but in Germany he had the option of submitting his dissertation directly to a university.<sup>118</sup> He submitted his dissertation, *Die Grundfrage der Erkenntnistheorie mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre* [The Fundamental Question of the Theory of Knowledge, with specific regard to Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre], directly to Professor Heinrich von Stein, a scholar of Platonism, at the University of Rostock.<sup>119</sup> In 1891, he narrowly passed his examination, and his

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<sup>116</sup> Galbreath, "Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism," 274.

<sup>117</sup> Marcum, "Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography," 15.

<sup>118</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 89.

<sup>119</sup> Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884-1945*, 503.

doctorate was awarded.<sup>120</sup> In letters, public records, and Steiner's own words, he actively pursued the goal of becoming a professor of philosophy after his 1890 move to Weimar.<sup>121</sup> To this end he continued to develop his philosophy, eventually expanding his dissertation into the book *Die Philosophie der Freiheit. Grundzüge einer modernen Weltanschauung. Beobachtungs-Resultate nach naturwissenschaftlicher Methode* [The Philosophy of Freedom: A Modern Philosophy of Life Developed by Scientific Methods] in 1893.<sup>122</sup> The theory presented in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge* in combination with *The Philosophy of Freedom* formed the framework of Steiner's epistemology.

While an exhaustive consideration of Steiner's early philosophy is not the goal of this thesis, explanation of the foundational themes is necessary for an understanding of Steiner's later thought that so engaged Kandinsky. It is obvious that Steiner's philosophy, in its idealistic and romantic leanings, already contained the seeds of his later occultism. Steiner's philosophy is an explanation of objective reality, the eternal ground of being, and the place of man in this natural scheme. Through the experience man perceives both the material world through his senses and the essence of the world through intuition as an intellectual sense.<sup>123</sup> The process of cognition reunites the two halves to form a whole, which is the formation of knowledge. Uniting elements of Goethe's scientific method with *Naturphilosophie* and romantic aesthetics, Steiner theorized that through this formation of

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 503-504.

<sup>121</sup> Marcum, "Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography," 173-174 and 194-196, See also Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 83-89.

<sup>122</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 89.

<sup>123</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of the Epistemology of His Worldview*, 1886, trans., Peter Clemm (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, Anthroposophic Press, 2008), 98.

knowledge in human consciousness, the ground of all being was manifested in the physical world.<sup>124</sup>

Steiner's philosophy begins by defining a framework for understanding human consciousness, thought, and the process of acquiring knowledge. He approaches this through an explanation that builds on the idealistic dualism of the external physical world and the internal world of consciousness. Steiner claims that dualism is inherent to human consciousness and thus to experience. On the one side, he places the most immediate facet of experience—that of the perception of the objects of the external world through the physical senses.<sup>125</sup> He evaluates this experience of the physical senses as one of interaction between the human organism and the external world through physical and biological processes, which he qualifies as “pure experience.”<sup>126</sup> This pure experience is further defined by Steiner as an aggregate of equivalent phenomenon in a spatial and temporal juxtaposition—a chaos, a multiplicity. This multiplicity is undifferentiated and passively perceived by the senses as a sequence of unrelated percepts.<sup>127</sup>

On the other side of experience, Steiner locates thought: thought appears in human consciousness in the same manner as information from the senses; one appears from the exterior and the other from the interior. Thought, as the basis of an epistemology, for Steiner, has a twofold purpose. On one hand, it differentiates the multiplicity of perception

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<sup>124</sup> Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, 98-9.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-22. Steiner includes the perception of the Self at this level, as well, in the inventory of multiplicity. The Self is perceived simply as one of the many, with no differentiation from the rest.

<sup>126</sup> Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, 19-20.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-22

to form definitive concepts. On the other hand, once the concepts are differentiated they must be reunited with their corresponding external objects to form the ideal whole. Steiner defines this process as the formation of knowledge.<sup>128</sup> For Steiner concepts are not part of sense perception, but are added as products of thought. He explains the process through a sequence of events: sense perception acts as a stimulus for thought, and thought connects the ideal component with the perceived object. Steiner defines this ideal component as the “concept” of the perceived object.<sup>129</sup> Reminiscent of the idealist and romantic theory, the content of a concept that corresponds to an external percept is given through the “organ” of intuition.<sup>130</sup> Intuition is conceived by Steiner as analogous to observation using physical organs: intuition functions as a spiritual sense which allows for the perception of the ideal content of objectively existing thought. In the process of cognition when an external object is perceived through the physical senses, intuition, in turn, perceives the ideal content or concept to be reunited with the physical percept. Further, when the physical percept is removed from experience, the intuition and concept remain in the perceiving subject comprising a positive addition, or knowledge added to and thus changing the subject.<sup>131</sup> In this manner Steiner establishes the possibility of objective thought; thought is both subjective and objective, and, at the same time, transcends both.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>129</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom: A Modern Philosophy of Life Developed by Scientific Methods*, trans. Prof. and Mrs. R.F. Alfred Hoernlé (London, New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1916), 45-46.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>131</sup> Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, 98.

In Steiner's explanation of duality, the experience of sense perception supplies only an empty form. The higher truth of the essential or ideal nature of a thing can only be provided through the experience of thought—thought fills this empty form with content. The interconnectedness of thought develops in the human mind based on its own ideal content and natural laws, but it requires a mental organ for its manifestation. Steiner requests that we “imagine that we actively bring the world of ideas into manifestation and at the same time realize that such manifestations are based on their own laws.”<sup>132</sup> Building on the theory of his romantic predecessors, Steiner views as the eternal ground, which the consciousness of man manifests. In Steiner's conception the idea that arises during cognition represents the subjectively experienced facet of objective laws that govern nature: the senses present the external aspect of reality through percepts, while thinking presents the inner laws in the form of ideas.<sup>133</sup> For Steiner there is only one unified thought content of the world. This unity is nature, or the eternal ground, “Nature is interpreted to itself in human consciousness. Thought is the final member in the sequence of processes that form nature.”<sup>134</sup> As in *Naturphilosophie*, the human mind is viewed as the highest expression of nature.

Steiner viewed his philosophy not only as an epistemology, but also as an explanation of ethics and aesthetics. While his theory of ethics is less relevant to this thesis, Steiner's theory of aesthetics forms a direct extension of his epistemology into the realm of metaphysics, which he would later complete through his occult worldview and

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>133</sup> Coetzee, “Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky's Aesthetic Theory,” 218.

<sup>134</sup> Steiner, *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, 83.

cosmology. Steiner viewed the humanities as higher spiritual sciences.<sup>135</sup> He believed that through literature, music, and art, human consciousness interacted with mental content itself—the mind grasping the mind.<sup>136</sup> The theory of knowledge outlined in the previous paragraphs was not a passive model of cognition, but rather one in which cognition is active, a function of the human spirit, according to Steiner,<sup>137</sup>

The activity of cognition, like that of art, depends on seeing ourselves not as the product of reality, but as its producer; that we ascend from created to creator, from chance to necessity. Outer reality always shows us only a creation of working nature, but when we elevate ourselves in spirit to nature's being, we see that it is we who are creating.<sup>138</sup>

In Steiner's conception, the humanities represented an elevation of consciousness, through which the mind realizes not only that it manifests nature or the ground of being, but also takes this process a step further and “. . . impresses the infinite upon the material.”<sup>139</sup> In Steiner's theory, no element of chance beauty should remain in an artistic composition that did not bear the impression of the artist's spirit. This was to be achieved through the artist implanting the Idea into his material by relying on the necessary laws of nature, not on chance.<sup>140</sup> For Steiner, natural law or necessity was “poured into art” as it manifested in the human mind.<sup>141</sup> He believed the goal of art and science was to surmount the sensory through

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 97.

the spirit, which art achieves by impressing spirit into matter: “Science sees the idea through the sensory; art sees the idea in the sensory.”<sup>142</sup>

For Kandinsky, as for Steiner, the role of the artist was not essentially different from that of the philosopher. They are both spiritual scientists who aim to train their creative faculties to be in harmony with the objective natural laws. Where the philosopher creatively reveals the necessity of natural in conceptual structures, the artist makes the same necessity concrete to the senses by penetrating and weaving in the dynamics of substance.<sup>143</sup> This idea of developing consciousness and cognition to become an extension of the creative laws operative in nature is fundamental to Kandinsky’s aesthetic theory.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>143</sup> Coetzee, “Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical Influence on Kandinsky's Aesthetic Theory,” 219.

## V. The Occult Resurgence and Steiner's Move to Theosophy

In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* Kandinsky refers to the “long reign of materialism” as a nightmare from which the soul was only gradually awakening and as a “long oppressive suffering.”<sup>144</sup> For Kandinsky, the “dissolution of matter,” through contemporary scientific and technological advancement, was a defining moment, which brought European society to the brink of a spiritual revolution.<sup>145</sup> This led to a search for “something more,” which was expressed in a revival of interest in primitive and folk traditions, Eastern religion and philosophy, mysticism, and the occult. This revival was the result of several hundred years of burgeoning occult interest in Europe, which developed concurrently with the Enlightenment and was cultivated by both the Idealist and the Romantic traditions.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the occultism of the late nineteenth-century grew, in part, out of diverse philosophical interest in Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, Gnosticism, and Hermetic philosophy.<sup>147</sup>

Of the emerging occult groups at the turn of the twentieth century Theosophy was one of the most influential. Theosophical literature was the medium that provided Kandinsky access to Steiner's worldview. Kandinsky acknowledges Theosophy in the beginning chapter of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* as a group working against the influence of materialist philosophy and empirical science.<sup>148</sup> He equates the Theosophists

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<sup>144</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 128.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>146</sup> Galbreath, “Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism,” 66-69.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>148</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 143.

with artists who have turned to the art of ancient or indigenous cultures to search for truth.<sup>149</sup> The history of the Theosophical Society is inextricably linked both to the life of its co-founder Madame Blavatsky and to the currents of the occult resurgence at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Theosophical Society had been formed in New York in September 1875 by Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott.<sup>150</sup> As a modern occult movement, Theosophy developed a philosophy oriented towards the clairvoyant capabilities of man. It extolled the eternal truth and oneness behind all religious traditions.<sup>151</sup> In its mature phase the Society focused on Buddhist and Hindu ideas of karma, reincarnation, aura, and the manifest nature of God in all creation.<sup>152</sup> Through the discovery of hidden knowledge within world religions and occult powers inherent in humanity the Society hoped to form a “Universal Brotherhood” that would unite man and bring about a new spiritual age.<sup>153</sup> The history of Theosophy falls into two distinct phases. The early phase focused more distinctly on hermetic and Egyptian esotericism, while the mature phase, after the Society’s establishment in India in 1879, shifts to Buddhism as a primary source of occult knowledge.<sup>154</sup>

Theosophy’s co-founder Madame Blavatsky was born in 1831 to an aristocratic Russia-German family in Ekaterinoslav within the Russian empire; she grew up in a

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>150</sup> Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*, 85.

<sup>151</sup> Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 57.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Ellwood, *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of the Wisdom of the Ages*, (Wheaton, ILL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), 1-17.

<sup>153</sup> Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*, 90.

<sup>154</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 277-278.

wealthy, intellectual and bohemian atmosphere.<sup>155</sup> Though married at eighteen, she rebelled against Victorian convention, leaving her husband and traveling independently for the rest of her life.<sup>156</sup> Blavatsky asserted that her spiritual journey and access to occult knowledge was facilitated through living adepts or “Masters.”<sup>157</sup> She claimed that these Masters were the last members of a Tibetan Brotherhood and communicated to her through psychic means.<sup>158</sup> Blavatsky spent time in Egypt in the early 1850s and again in the early 1870s.<sup>159</sup> Her first attempt at forming a society for occult research occurred in Cairo in 1871.<sup>160</sup> This society was allegedly formed to investigate mediums and Spiritualist phenomena. It was Blavatsky’s avowed goal to demonstrate the difference between what she considered “passive” mediumship and her own “active” variety.<sup>161</sup> Blavatsky’s emphasis on active mediumship, enabled by living masters, proved to be a guiding principle in Theosophy.<sup>162</sup> In Egypt, France, England, and eventually New York, Blavatsky engaged with various secret societies and occult groups, including the Freemasons.<sup>163</sup> In 1879 Blavatsky and Olcott moved to India, and in 1882 they established the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 2-3.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>157</sup> Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*, 85.

<sup>158</sup> Martin Brauen, *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* (Connecticut: Weatherhill, 2004), 26.

<sup>159</sup> Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 278.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>162</sup> Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*, 303. Treitel relates that the explanation of mediumship facilitated through communication with the spirits of the deceased left many individuals, who were interested in the occult, unsatisfied. Blavatsky’s claim of connection with living adepts who had mastered the study of occult science provided an intellectually appealing alternative.

<sup>163</sup> Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 282 and 302. In fact on more than one occasion Blavatsky claimed to be a member of the grand lodge of the Brotherhood of Luxor.

<sup>164</sup> Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 78 and 84.

Blavatsky published her first major Theosophical text *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, while her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* was not published until 1888.<sup>165</sup> These two texts outline the foundational beliefs of Theosophy. In *The Secret Doctrine*, reminiscent of Kant's thing-in-itself, Blavatsky posited one eternal and omnipresent "principle" or "root" underlying all of reality, which transcends human understanding.<sup>166</sup> Further, all souls share a fundamental identity with this principle or root.<sup>167</sup> Blavatsky states, "Nothing is permanent except the one hidden absolute Existence which contains in itself the noumena of all realities."<sup>168</sup> In Theosophy, this unknowable force is expressed through the reciprocal relationship between consciousness and matter: all phenomena are generated as a result of this relationship.<sup>169</sup> Resonant with the *Naturphilosophical* hierarchy in nature, in Blavatsky's conception life must necessarily evolve through successive levels beginning with inert matter until reaching the pinnacle of human intelligence.<sup>170</sup> Blavatsky theorized that the unknown root becomes individualized in every human soul."<sup>171</sup> Subject to natural laws, each soul must complete the necessary process of incarnation and pass through the hierarchy of forms; through this process the unknown root acquires individuation.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, in Theosophy, the goal of the eternal root, as the refined individual soul, is reunification with itself.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 58.

<sup>166</sup> Ellwood, *Theosophy*, 20.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 58-61.

In 1897 Steiner reached a decisive mid-point in his life. He was forced to recognize that an academic position in philosophy would not be forthcoming.<sup>174</sup> This period, corresponding roughly with the ending of his work at the Goethe archive, including his involvement with the Nietzsche Archive, his move to Berlin in 1897, and his conversion to Theosophy in 1902, can be viewed as a transition from the first phase of his life to the next.

In 1896 Steiner became increasingly involved with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and the newly established Nietzsche Institute.<sup>175</sup> Steiner's involvement with Nietzsche's thought is significant as it marked his development away from Idealism.<sup>176</sup> However, Steiner's relationship with the archive quickly soured, primarily due to disagreement with the executor of the archive, Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche, Nietzsche's sister.<sup>177</sup> In 1897 Steiner accepted an editorship of a literary magazine and moved to Berlin; yet by 1900 he halted his editorial activity and put the magazine up for sale.<sup>178</sup> From 1899 he worked as a lecturer at the Berlin Workers School, but also applied for a job as a lecturer at an adult

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<sup>174</sup> Marcum, "Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography," 173, 188, and 195. See Steiner, *Briefe*, vol. I (Dornach/Schweiz: Rudolf-Steiner-Verl), 1953, "An Pauline Specht, Weimar, 4 Februar 1891, 166; Steiner, *Briefe* vol. II, "An Pauline and Ladislaus Specht, Weimar, 9 Dezember 1893, 147; and "An Pauline und Ladislaus Specht, Weimar, 23 Dezember 1895, 194.

<sup>175</sup> Marcum, "Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography," 165

<sup>176</sup> Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 519. Zander presents Steiner as taking over Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and Idealism. Steiner published a book, *Friedrich Nietzsche ein Kämpfer gegen Seine Zeit*, in 1895. Nietzsche's focus on the development of the free individual does appear significant for Steiner, as he shifts the focus of his epistemology to what he refers to as "ethical idealism." In Steiner's ethical individualism the intuition of the spiritual organ of perception, which perceives the world of ideas, takes on a moral facet. In Steiner's belief, thought in "moral intuition" leads to action through "moral fantasy."

<sup>177</sup> Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 98.

<sup>178</sup> Heiner Ullrich, *Rudolf Steiner*, trans. Janet Duke and Daniel Balestrini (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 18-19.

education academy.<sup>179</sup> Immediately before accepting a position with the Theosophical Society, Steiner was attempting to again secure work as an editor. Steiner presented this period as a transition for his soul<sup>180</sup> He claimed to have become more aware of the material world and able to live fully in it for the first time, though through this he felt he exposed his soul to “dangerous elements”.<sup>181</sup> According to Steiner, this spiritual struggle forced him to the realization that the only path available for further investigation was one related to Christianity.<sup>182</sup>

In 1900 lectures that Steiner conducted on Nietzsche brought him to the attention of two prominent Theosophists, the Count and Countess Brockdorff. He was invited to lecture at weekly Theosophical gatherings that they hosted.<sup>183</sup> These lectures mark the beginning of his concrete association with the group. It is of note that Steiner did not simply become a member, but in the summer of 1902 he attended the Theosophical conference in

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<sup>179</sup> Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 550.

<sup>180</sup> See Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*, 25 - 40. With his conversion to Theosophy and eventual founding of Anthroposophy in 1912 Steiner would find it necessary to justify his “spiritual credentials” by providing an account of his life that included all the occult events that eventually led him to the Theosophical Society. He strove to present a picture of continuity from his philosophical period to his occult period. Steiner relates, for example, that as an eight-year-old boy he had a vision of an aunt who had just committed suicide, claiming from that point on awareness of a “spiritual” world. Further, Steiner alleged that he met a herb gatherer, Felix Kogutzki, on a train to and from Vienna. According to Steiner’s narrative, Kogutzki led him to a keener awareness of the spiritual world. Around Steiner’s nineteenth year Kogutzki is revealed to be the agent of a figure referred to as the “Master.” According to Steiner, the Master completed Steiner’s initiation and guided his occult studies. Steiner established a spiritual basis for his science oriented education and intensive philosophical interest by suggesting that the Master had advised a course of “getting to know the enemy” recommending the scientific and philosophical training. See also Galbreath, 185-196.

<sup>181</sup> Marcum, “Rudolf Steiner: An Intellectual Biography,” 209-210

<sup>182</sup> Galbreath, “Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism,” 199 and Marcum 285. He describes an inner experience of having “. . . spiritually stood before the mystery of Golgotha in the innermost, most solemn celebration of knowledge.”

<sup>183</sup> Ullrich, *Rudolf Steiner*, 19.

London and accepted the position of General Secretary to the newly established German branch.<sup>184</sup> He would remain until his final break with the society in 1913.<sup>185</sup> From the beginning, it is clear Steiner used his position in the Theosophical Society to allow him to develop his career as a lecturer and to expound his ideas to a ready-made, sympathetic audience.<sup>186</sup> Steiner freely absorbed Theosophical ideas that agreed with the development of his personal philosophy, leaving aside ideas that did not. He developed a Christian focus which was directly at odds with the distinctly Eastern Buddhist and Hindu leanings of the Society.<sup>187</sup>

The period from 1900 to 1905 was a “formative phase” in which Steiner acquainted himself with the teachings of Theosophy, while at the same time teaching these theories.<sup>188</sup>

Between 1902 and the 1904 publishing date of *Theosophy* was the period of Steiner’s most

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<sup>184</sup> Galbreath, “Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism,” 201.

<sup>185</sup> Zander, *Biography*, 203-207. This occurred in relation to the then president Annie Besant and Charles Leadbetter declaring a young Indian boy to be an incarnation of both the Buddha and the second coming of Christ. This event provided Steiner solid justification for breaking with the Society.

<sup>186</sup> Zander, *Biography*, 56 and Zander *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884-1945*, 550. Outside of his autobiographical accounts, available documentation does not reveal any early occult involvement in Steiner’s life. In Steiner’s own words, criticism of Theosophy during his Vienna period, for example, refutes occult interest. Julius Schroer introduced Steiner to the intellectual group surrounding Marie Eugenie Delle Grazie in 1888. It was in this company that Steiner met the Theosophist Franz Hartmann. At the time not only did he find the Eastern influence and rejection of the Western scientific method distasteful, he considered the writing of Hartmann “diametrically opposed” to his own.

<sup>187</sup> Galbreath, “Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism,” 206. By 1907 the tensions between the traditional eastern focus of the Theosophical Society and Steiner’s western, or Rosicrucian, focus came to a head. At the International Theosophical Congress in Munich of that year the then leader, Annie Besant, is quoted as saying “Dr. Steiner’s occult training is very different from ours. He does not know the Eastern way, so cannot, of course, teach it. He teaches the Christian and Rosicrucian way, and this is very helpful to some, but it is different from ours.”

<sup>188</sup> Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 550.

intensive engagement with Theosophical texts.<sup>189</sup> The *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals were published between 1903 and 1908. By the fall of 1903, he was working on *Theosophy* and by spring it was published. *The Lucifer-Gnosis* journals and *Theosophy* were the first of his fundamental Theosophical texts; they represent a synthesis of Steiner's philosophical thought with that of the new Theosophical program. These two sources present Steiner's evolved epistemology, which addresses metaphysical questions as a complete worldview and cosmology.

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 546. We know that Steiner possessed a copy of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*. As of the summer of 1903, he was also familiar with Leadbetter's *Man Visible and Invisible*, *Astral Plane*, and *An Outline of Theosophy*, as well as Besant's *Esoteric Christianity*. Zander, 546.

## VI. Kandinsky and Steiner

In 1908 Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter stayed briefly in Berlin, where they met Kandinsky's former Phalanx pupil Maria Strakosch-Giessler and her husband Alexander Strakosch.<sup>190</sup> The couple visited Kandinsky in his studio and Kandinsky attended Steiner's public lectures at the Architektenhaus on Wilhelmstrasse in Berlin, referred to as the Architektenhaus-Vorträge [Architect house lectures], with them. In these lectures Steiner addressed a spiritualized concept of matter, i.e. that matter only exists as degrees of condensed spirit.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, Steiner presented his theory on the nature of color and sound in relation to spirit. Specifically, he asserted that color and tone are to the spirit as ice is to water—as spirit is expressed outwards it appears as color and tone.<sup>192</sup> According to Strakosch-Giessler, Kandinsky was inspired by these lectures, and they spent much time in “animated conversation.”<sup>193</sup> Though attendance of Steiner's lectures does not necessarily indicate either sympathy or belief, it is a suitable starting point for a more detailed discussion of Kandinsky's exposure to the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner.

### A. The *Lucifer-Gnosis* Journals

Kandinsky and Münter owned twenty-three volumes of the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journal and his notes include information from a full twenty-six volumes.<sup>194</sup> The first five pages of Kandinsky's notes are a summary of the information provided in Steiner's *Lucifer-Gnosis*

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<sup>190</sup> Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 67.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 69. Strakosch-Giessler claimed that Steiner's lectures inspired Kandinsky to paint a picture of the Ariel scene from *Faust II*, which was in their possession until 1956.

<sup>194</sup> Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 417; and Ringbom, “Kandinsky und das Okkulte,” 103-105.

article “Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis” [The Steps of Higher Knowledge]. This article was meant as a continuation and expansion of the information provided in a previous article “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten” [How does one attain Knowledge of Higher Worlds]. These articles were written, in Steiner’s words, to describe in more detail what “conditions” the soul would encounter as it progressed on the journey through the different levels of spiritual cognition. In “Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis” and “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten” Steiner explains what can be expected in the higher worlds of imagination, inspiration, and intuition. Progress through these levels is the avowed goal of Steiner’s esoteric student and these two articles are dedicated to a visually detailed description of each level as well as the training and methods necessary to develop a higher level of spiritual perception. In “Von der Aura des Menschen” Steiner discusses the colors of the human aura and multiple bodies of man. These esoteric concepts allow Steiner to focus on a broader explanation of higher perception that is predicated on his earlier epistemology. In its occult incarnation Steiner’s epistemology evolved into an occult cosmology of higher worlds. His theory of cognition develops into an equation through which the spirit is active in the physical world.

Pages seven through nine of Kandinsky’s notes deal with “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten.”<sup>195</sup> This article was published from 1904 to 1905 in issues 13 through 28 of *Lucifer-Gnosis*. All sixteen issues are present in the Münter-Eichner collection. Throughout this lengthy publication, Steiner presents a cautious and disciplined spiritual path. This text details the stages of “initiation” necessary to perception of the

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<sup>195</sup> See Appendix, 84-86.

higher worlds and the requirements of the training itself, including descriptions of possible results of such study. The student is encouraged to cultivate specific states of mind, body, and soul, with Steiner emphasizing reverence, critical judgement, and awareness of the nature and effects of thought.<sup>196</sup> The path the student is to follow is described as a “spiritual science”; the ultimate reunification of philosophy and science occurs in his occult thought. Steiner’s spiritual science is not “super natural,” rather, it was meant to be analogous to the empirical sciences.<sup>197</sup>

By far the largest portion of “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten” is dedicated to describing the quality of thought and feeling that must be cultivated to pursue the path of spiritual science and a detailed explanation of the actual meditation and visualization exercises and their intended results.<sup>198</sup> In his notes on this material, Kandinsky concentrated on the necessary qualities of body, mind, and soul that a student must strive to achieve.<sup>199</sup> Further, he notes in detail the importance of the awareness of thought and emotion, both having the capability to affect the physical world. In *Über das Geistige in*

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<sup>196</sup> Steiner, “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten,” *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 13, (1904): 2-4

<sup>197</sup> Galbreath, “Spiritual Science in an Age of Materialism,” 32-35.

<sup>198</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten.” *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 14, (1904): 37. Thought takes center stage in the explanation of meditation presented by Steiner in “Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse höher Welten”. He describes the practice of mediation not as a physical activity that focuses on stillness or breathing, not as a repetition of a mantra or sound, and not as a practice with the goal of the absence of thought, but rather, as a singular controlled focus of thought and cognition. Steiner describes meditation as an activity in which thought should be clear, sharp, and precise. Meditation allows the student to recognize that thought is as “real” or objective as the external world. Meditation, as an inward focus of reflection and contemplation, begins the journey on the path described in “Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis.”

<sup>199</sup> “Kandinsky und das Okkulte,” 103-105. See Appendix, 84-85.

*der Kunst* Kandinsky addresses the effect of thoughts and emotions on what he refers to as the “spiritual atmosphere.”<sup>200</sup>

“Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis” was published in between October 1905 to May 1908, in volumes 29, 30, 32, 34, and 35 of *Lucifer-Gnosis*, all of which are present in the Münter-Eichner collection. Kandinsky took four pages of notes on this text, with the fifth page containing only three lines.<sup>201</sup> On page one Kandinsky begins with the notation: “. . . Zur zeitweisen Zurückziehung der Seele von ihrer verbindg mir den Sinnesorganen.” [“. . . Temporary withdrawal of the soul from its connection with the organs of the senses.”] This quote can be found, the first of many times, in *Steiner’s Philosophy of Freedom*, where it indicates that one should be willing to remove one’s self from the experience of the senses to focus on pure thought.

The information presented in “Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis” can be divided into two sections: the description of the levels of imaginative, inspirational, and intuitive worlds and knowledge; and description of the prerequisites and techniques necessary to develop the spiritual organs of perception. Steiner begins by discussing the mental cultivation necessary to allow perception of the higher levels of cognition. Theosophy allowed Steiner a platform from which to transform this advice into an actual practice: he prescribes exercises in meditation, concentration, and visualization. Kandinsky summarizes this on the first page of the aforementioned notebook.<sup>202</sup> It is through such

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<sup>200</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 192.

<sup>201</sup> See Appendix, 78-82.

<sup>202</sup> See Appendix, 78.

exercises that the spiritual organs develop. In the same vein, Steiner describes the physical and mental qualities a student must cultivate during daily life to further sow the seeds that will allow the mind to develop along the spiritual path. These include control of thought and actions, trust, balance, and a focus on freedom in action and judgment. Kandinsky notes each of these necessary attributes as well.<sup>203</sup>

Although at this point Steiner's thought had progressed to include further levels of perception than those presented in his epistemology, he nonetheless, launches his explanation of this spiritual journey from this familiar point. At the beginning of "Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis" he summarizes his earlier theory of cognition.<sup>204</sup> In this new occult form Steiner's epistemology has evolved, the role of thought as the eternal ground develops into a cosmology of "higher" worlds that are both part of and constitutive of the material world. These higher worlds are labeled as the levels of: imaginative knowledge, inspirational knowledge, and intuitive knowledge.<sup>205</sup> The progression does not involve perception of the "transcendent" or the "supernatural," but rather a development of the ability to perceive levels that are immanent, requiring the nurturing of inherent mental-spiritual organs, in addition to the physical sense organs.

In this occult incarnation, the first level of perception exists as that of the physical world perceived through the sense organs; Steiner describes this as the level of "material knowledge and mode of cognition". This level encompasses the elements of the physical object, the image of the object, the concept, and the Self. Here Steiner's epistemology

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<sup>203</sup> See Appendix, 78-81.

<sup>204</sup> Steiner, "Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis." *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 29, (1905): 518-519.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

forms the basis from which the student's journey precedes.<sup>206</sup> As the student progresses to each higher level one element of material cognition is removed. Thus when the student progresses to the second level of imaginative knowledge the physical object is absent and the student must develop the facility to perceive an object not by its external manifestation, but from a "soul-spirit" origin.<sup>207</sup> The development of the spiritual sense organs allow, at this level, what Steiner describes as perception of the liberated properties normally associated with external objects: color, sound, odor are disassociated from the object and "float free". Further, sensory perception at this level does not stop at these properties, but rather, in a process that mirrors Steiner's earlier process of concept-percept reunification, through the spiritual organs the student is able to begin to reunify the free-floating properties with their true expression, which is not the external object, but actual spiritual beings.<sup>208</sup> Kandinsky specifically notes this description and that of the properties identified as spiritual beings.<sup>209</sup> He will later refer to the visual elements of color and form as "beings" in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*.

At the third level, that of inspiration, the visual image falls away entirely, and the student's perception functions entirely in the ideal realm of the concept and the Self. The soul plays a key role at the level of inspiration. At this level Steiner returns, as well, to his philosophical explanation of the role of feeling and willing. In his earlier epistemology feeling and willing were the results of the perceived subject's relationship to the external

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>208</sup> Steiner, "Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis." *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 32 (1906): 615

<sup>209</sup> See Appendix, 79.

world. In their Theosophic incarnation feeling and willing become attributes of the soul.- At the level of inspiration the external falls away and thus cannot form the impetus of thinking and willing; for Steiner thinking and willing, lacking the external, become the “mother-substance” from which impressions arise.- Steiner is careful here to mention, again, the necessity of healthy emotion and judgment in this case, which is deemed of the utmost necessity for the impressions of the higher world to arise, and to avoid hallucination and error. Kandinsky notes the importance of feeling and willing, as well as the importance of healthy judgement and the exercises to promote this state.<sup>210</sup>

At the final and highest level of perception, the level of intuition, Steiner builds from his epistemological definition of intuition. Where Steiner had defined intuition in his epistemology as the perception of ideal concepts, here intuition facilitates perception of ideal beings.<sup>211</sup> Intuitive cognition allows the student to move past the perceived properties of impressions to reunite the concepts formed by the Self, at the level of inspiration, fully with the beings of which they are only expressions.<sup>212</sup> While the progress the student makes through these levels can be understood as Steiner’s version of a Theosophical cosmology, the process of perception developed here is also analogous to the process described in Steiner’s epistemology. The process has been expanded to accommodate the occult elements, but it remains essentially the same. The role of thought, feeling, and intuition evolve, but the subject still receives impressions that must be progressively reunited with their concept to form an accurate picture of the “ground of being.” This incremental

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<sup>210</sup> See Appendix. 80-81.

<sup>211</sup> Steiner, “Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis.” *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 32 (1906): 615-617.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 615-617.

development of stages in which the physical object (indeed, the external world) is removed as the subject turns inward and ultimately observes the “ground of being” stands not only as a spiritual metamorphosis of Steiner’s thought, but also presents an intriguing answer to Kandinsky’s question: “What is to replace the missing object.”

The final entries in Kandinsky’s notebook cover the information presented in Steiner’s article “Von der Aura des Menschen” presented in issues 8 through 11. These issues are not present in the Münter-Eichner collection, but it is logical to assume that Kandinsky had access to them at one time. “Von der Aura des Menschen” covers a wide range of topics, many of them familiar ground. Steiner opens, fittingly, with a quote from Goethe’s experiments with light in which he describes color as the “. . . deeds and suffering of light.”<sup>213</sup> This quote brings the examination of Steiner’s thought full circle to Goethe’s correspondence between the human soul and nature, and he thus predicates the information to follow on the scientific methodology of Goethe. From the title of the article one would expect an introduction to and explanation of the concept of the aura. However, Steiner uses this occult topic as a vehicle for an explanation of his philosophical theory of perception and cognition. Steiner uses Goethe’s quote to establish the idea that humanity should not mistakenly assume that only that exists which it can perceive. Instead, humanity can only

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<sup>213</sup> Steiner, “Von der Aura des Menschen,” *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 8-11 (1904), “Die Farbe sind Taten des Lichtes. Taten und Leiden. . . Farben und Licht stehen zwar untereinander in den genauesten Verhältnis, aber wir müssen uns beide als den ganzen Natur angehörig denken, denn sie ist es ganz, die sich dadurch dem Sinne des Auge offenbaren will. Ebenso entdeckt sich die ganze Natur einem andern Sinne . . . So spricht die Natur hinabwarfst zu andern Sinnen, zu bekannten, verkannten, unbekannten Sinnen: so spricht sie mit sich selbst und zu uns durch tausend Erscheinungen. Dem Aufmerksamen ist sie nirgends tot, noch stumm.”

perceive that for which it has developed the suitable organs of perception.<sup>214</sup> Steiner uses feeling and emotion, that are perceived and experienced as the eye perceives and experiences external objects, to introduce the innate human ability of higher perception through spiritual organs. This allows him to segue into a lengthy explanation of the colors of the human aura and their corresponding symbolic meaning. Kandinsky condenses this extensive information into a table where the colors and their symbolism are easy to access.<sup>215</sup> He dedicates an entire section of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* to a detailed explanation of the nature and relationship of colors.<sup>216</sup>

Further, Steiner relates the explanation of the aura to the existence of multiple bodies in man. This esoteric concept, like the aura, allows Steiner to lead into a deeper discussion of higher perception. The body, he explains, is divided into the physical body, the soul, and the spirit; each has a specific role in the process of higher perception. The physical body functions as an interface with the external world, the spirit exists in the higher worlds, the soul acts as the intermediary between the two.<sup>217</sup> The positive impression made on the subject through the process of cognition, as well as sensation and feeling, are transferred to the spirit by the soul, and thus the spirit receives knowledge from the physical world. In this spiritual explanation the process of the reunification of sense perception and ideal concept is expanded. It is no longer simply the mediation between the physical world and ideal thought-content. This process enables the spirit to act in the material world.

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<sup>214</sup> Steiner, "Von der Aura des Menschen", *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 8, (1904): 3-4.

<sup>215</sup> See Appendix, 87.

<sup>216</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, See chapter VI.

<sup>217</sup> Steiner, "Von der Aura des Menschen." *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 8, (1904): 6.

Through perception communicated by the soul the spirit forms a relationship with the physical world, that would otherwise not be possible.<sup>218</sup> Through the soul's communication with the body the spirit can create "impressions" or effects in the physical world. Kandinsky notes this explanation of the three auras of man and the multiple bodies.<sup>219</sup> With this spiritual equation Steiner expands and elaborates his earlier Idealist/Romantic conception of man allowing the manifestation of realization of the ground of all being. Moreover, this explanation in combination with the earlier discussion of spiritual perception presents a system in which the inner world can effect actual physical change in the external world. This idea would be of particular importance to Kandinsky's conception of agency in art.

Throughout "Von der Aura des Menschen" Steiner mentions that the processes he is discussing can be found in greater detail in his new book *Theosophy*. Indeed, throughout the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals in general Steiner references not only his upcoming book *Theosophy*, but also his earlier philosophical publications. Kandinsky owned a copy of *Theosophy*, which is preserved in the Münter-Eichner collection.<sup>220</sup>

## **B. *Theosophy* 1908**

*Theosophy* was Steiner's first and fundamental Theosophical book. In this book Steiner brought his epistemology and concepts from the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals together with an explanation of karma and reincarnation to create a comprehensive world view.

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<sup>218</sup> Steiner, "Von der Aura des Menschen." *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 9, (1904): 42.

<sup>219</sup> See Appendix, 88.

<sup>220</sup> Kandinsky's copy of *Theosophie* [Theosophy], dated 1908, is located at the Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung. Copies of Kandinsky's annotations were graciously provided by Marta Koscielniak to Dr. Linda Henderson, who shared them with me.

*Theosophy* presents Steiner's epistemology with all of its inspirations and goals described in the language of Theosophy.<sup>221</sup> In this book he continued to pursue answers to the questions that had engaged him since his early life: what is the given world, what is the ground of all being, what is man's perception and thought, and how man, his perception, and his thought relate to both the given and the thing-in-itself. In *Theosophy*, Steiner presents a threefold description of man and the world. The majority of this text is dedicated to meticulous descriptions of the soul and spirit worlds. In the final chapters, Steiner elaborates on the discussion of the bodies of man and concludes with an abbreviated description of the "path to knowledge."

In the opening lines of the introduction Steiner grounds the text with the previously quoted passage from Fichte that describes a kind of knowledge that requires a "new sense organ" in man and establishes the existence of a knowledge that cannot be perceived by the ordinary senses.<sup>222</sup> The pursuit of this knowledge is introduced as available to all people, and with its acquisition revealing a higher spiritual truth.<sup>223</sup> Kandinsky's initial annotation marks Steiner's opinion that "... the presentation of the facts given in this book will in no way conflict with the truly scientific methods."<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, X-XI. In fact, Steiner recommends his earlier philosophy as equal to the occult path he is presenting saying, "Those who feel more drawn to another method of searching after the truths here set forth, will find one in my *Philosophie der Freiheit* [Philosophy of Freedom], The lines of thought taken in these two books, though different, lead to the same goal. For the understanding of the one, the other is by no means necessary, but is undoubtedly helpful for some persons."

<sup>222</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 1-2.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>224</sup> See *Theosophy*, xviii and Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophie: Einführung in übersinnliche Welterkenntnis und Menschenbestimmung* (Leipzig, Germany: Max Altmann Verlag, 1908), IX.

Steiner frames the first chapter, and all the information to follow, with a quote from Goethe. This statement advises the dispassionate and independent observation of nature and its relationships.<sup>225</sup> In chapter one, the three levels of man's relationship to the world: the body, soul and spirit, are subdivided into further relationships of three. Moreover, Steiner elaborates on the manifestation of the eternal ground through the human mind, as originally presented in "Von der Aura des Menschen," including the ability of the eternal ground to effect actual change in the physical world. This concept offered Kandinsky a basis from which to develop a theory of agency and the ability of art to create in the material world. This information can be understood most clearly in the light of Steiner's epistemology; the goal remains to explain the relationship of man and man's perception to the given world and the world of ideas or the eternal ground. Through the senses of the physical body information about the given world is presented to the soul and as a result impressions of the objects in the physical world are formed in the soul. At the level of spirit intuition, functioning as a sense organ, reveals the identity of the "beings" that are the objects in themselves - this is perception of Kant's thing-in-itself.<sup>226</sup> Steiner explains, "Through the body man is able to place himself for a time in connection with the things; through his soul retains in himself the impressions which they make on him; through his spirit there reveals itself to him what the things retain in themselves."<sup>227</sup> In Steiner's occult conception the human is divided hierarchically into body, soul, and spirit. At the physical level the mineral world evolved a physical body with an advanced nervous system and

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<sup>225</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 9.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-15.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

brain that functions as spiritual organ of perception. The soul is the ground of impressions from the physical world. The soul is the mediator between the physical and the spirit. The spirit is equivalent with the eternal ground and it is from the spirit that the will to affect change in the physical world manifests. Furthermore, Steiner transforms his epistemological relation of subject and object into a spiritual evolution. Thus in Theosophy the soul becomes the seat of the “I” or ego, which in turn uses the body and spirit as tools; yet is apart from both. Further, the spirit is individualized through the “I.”<sup>228</sup>

In Steiner’s worldview, the super-sensible worlds are neither outside, nor apart from the physical world, but are interwoven with it to create reality. In the second chapter Steiner explains these realms in relation to evolution. The progress of the soul through the spiritual realms results in an evolution of the soul and, it follows, humanity. Moreover, through the interaction of evolved souls in the world the physical world itself evolves.<sup>229</sup> Karma is explained, via the following equation: through thought, the spirit impresses itself on the physical world; actions are directed by the spirit, by the eternal ground through thought, and these actions create karma which is carried from one life to the next to be the spiritual propagation of reincarnation. The evolution of the spiritual form through reincarnation is presented as the complement and companion to genetic evolution and heredity. In this conception the physical body is evolved as a vehicle for sense perception. The soul has an individual component as the region where sensation arises and impressions are formed.<sup>230</sup> To this Steiner adds the idea that the soul is also the intermediary between

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 10-15

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 60-68.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 60-62.

the present and the eternal; i.e., between the body and the spirit. Sensory impressions become connected in the soul to concepts and become memory; the transitory impressions progress to being taken on by the spirit and are transformed into spiritual growth.<sup>231</sup> The reverse of this process the “will to action” of the spirit, that impels man to act in the world through the soul. This then leaves an impression of the spirit, transforming the material world.<sup>232</sup> The evolution of the soul’s abilities and its actions in the material world becomes the ideals of reincarnation and karma. Steiner attempts to anchor both in spiritual processes that are logically validated by relation to concrete physical processes. At the conclusion of his explanation of reincarnation and karma, Steiner draws the discussion back to the central importance of thought: “Thinking which takes up an unprejudiced attitude toward the phenomena of life, not afraid to follow thoughts resulting to their final consequences, can, by pure logic, arrive at the conviction of the law of karma and reincarnation.” Here he combines science and philosophy in a validation of, and elevation through, his theosophical occult theory.

In the chapter three Steiner describes the worlds of spirit, soul, and body. Steiner includes not only natural descriptions of each world, but also explanations of the soul’s progress through each region after death.<sup>233</sup> His explanations of nature and the content of the soul and the spirit worlds are grounded at every turn with relation to the physical world. Steiner is careful to present his somewhat fantastical descriptions in a logical manner, using a method of description that is familiar from the empirical sciences. The “matter” and

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 62-64.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 64-66.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 87-161.

“forces” of the soul and spirit worlds are explained as behaving in their respective worlds as matter and force relate to and behave in the material world. The soul world, as the individuated mediator between physical and spiritual, is governed by sensation and emotion. In the soul world, man confronts archetypal emotions such as desire, greed, or lust.<sup>235</sup> The reciprocal relationship of body and spirit is laid out in detail. Steiner reiterates that physical experience gives rise to impressions, which become translated into new abilities of the spirit; thought becomes a wish, which is translated into deed by the physical body.<sup>236</sup> In Steiner’s theory, the physical body is an agent of the spirit in the world—through reincarnation and karma and through the action of man the physical world evolves to be more in line with the will of the spirit.

The majority of Kandinsky’s annotations begin in earnest with the section titled “The Country of the Spirit Beings.” Steiner describes the spirit world as populated by “living thoughts” or spirit beings, which are archetypes of everything present in both the material and soul worlds—this is the causal world.<sup>237</sup> Kandinsky notes this explanation as well as the creative nature of the archetypes.<sup>238</sup> Steiner explains that the archetypes work together to create the laws of nature on which the physical world is based.<sup>239</sup> These laws are described as being perceived as “spiritual music.” The colors and lights of this world, according to Steiner, produce tones and harmonies that are the primal or archetypal tones.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 110-111.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 131-133.

<sup>238</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 131-133 and *Theosophie*, 99-101.

<sup>239</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 101.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

This synesthetic idea reoccurs in Steiner's theories often and would have appealed to Kandinsky who, through personal experience, associated color and sound.<sup>241</sup> In fact, Kandinsky marks several sentences pertaining to the spiritual music of the archetypes.<sup>242</sup> In particular, Kandinsky marked, "What the intellect perceives in the physical world as law, as idea, reveals itself to the 'spiritual ear' as a kind of music."<sup>243</sup> Steiner details the bodies of the archetypes in the spiritual world as essentially cavities that are filled with a myriad of forms in motion and spiritual music. Kandinsky notes his description of the archetypes as "shining" and "sounding."<sup>244</sup> Finally, in a *Naturphilosophical* scheme Steiner divides the constitutive archetypes that exist in the spirit world into a hierarchy beginning with those which generate the material world, through the archetypes of each human emotion, and ending with the sixth and highest level of the creative forces of the archetypes themselves.<sup>245</sup> Kandinsky noted each level of the hierarchy.<sup>246</sup>

The culmination of Steiner's occult philosophy was his expanded description of man's relationship to thought as elaborated in his explanation of the spirit world. In Steiner's cosmology, the entire spirit world is constructed of that which creates thought in the material world. Further, what man perceives as thought in the material world is perceived as actual, objective beings in the spirit world. As Plato's reflections in the cave, man's thoughts are but reflections of the archetypal beings of the spirit world. Thoughts

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<sup>241</sup> Kandinsky noted, for example, the synesthetic effect of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in his essay *Reminiscences*, 363.

<sup>242</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 125-126 and *Theosophie*, 101

<sup>243</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 133.

<sup>244</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 134 and *Theosophie*, 101.

<sup>245</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 134-137.

<sup>246</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 135-139 and *Theosophie*, 102-105.

became for Steiner no less than the thing-in-itself of Kant; they are the eternal ground and constitutive of all things in the physical and soul worlds—man is the mediator, the ultimate organ of manifestation.

In the final sections of *Theosophy*, Steiner revisits the topic of the aura and the spiritual perception of human thoughts and emotions. He expands the topic introduced in *Lucifer-Gnosis* in extensive detail explaining that the bodies, or sheaths, of man project both color and form, referred to as the aura, which can be perceived through the latent organs of the subtle body.<sup>247</sup> For Steiner the aura is composed of three layers which reflect the aforementioned body, soul, spirit equation.<sup>248</sup> With approximately twenty annotations Kandinsky focused on the colors of the aura and their interpretations.<sup>249</sup>

Steiner brings *Theosophy* to a close with a brief explanation of what is described as the “path to knowledge.” In this final chapter Steiner again draws the thread of his epistemology through his occult narrative. He proposes that thought, or thinking as a living force, is the indispensable starting point for the spiritual journey, or in his words, the study of spiritual science.<sup>250</sup> In Steiner’s conception the capacity for the perception of higher knowledge comes only through thinking. In this section he revisits the qualities that must be cultivated to pursue spiritual science that he introduced in “Die Stufen der höheren

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<sup>247</sup> For a detailed discussion of the possible interaction of Kandinsky with Theosophical thought-forms see Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 79-90.

<sup>248</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 180-181.

<sup>249</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 180-185 and *Theosophie*, 136-141. Kandinsky underlines, for example, the names of the colors, the emotions associated with them, and the description of the visual effect of the colors as “raying,” “sparkling,” and “glittering.”

<sup>250</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 196-199.

Erkenntnis.” Kandinsky marks the quality of restraint in the realm of emotion.<sup>251</sup> Further, Kandinsky notes Steiner’s recommendation to control unchecked will, and selfish thoughts, which allows the seeker to cultivate spiritual perception.<sup>252</sup> Kandinsky’s final annotations mark Steiner’s explanation that the seeker’s actions and thought must “. . . obey the laws of the nobly Beautiful and the eternally True without any disturbing influences from his personality,” and the necessity of selflessly dedicating the individual spiritual progress to the betterment of humanity.<sup>253</sup> It is important to note that Steiner explicitly states that though man is incarnated in the material world, he is still essentially a spiritual being.<sup>254</sup> Moreover, the impressions man leaves in the material world are put in motion through the spirit. For Steiner, the task of man, as mediator of the higher worlds, is to manifest the spirit in the physical world to contribute to the spiritual evolution of humanity—the body and the matter of the physical world are but tools.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 205-207 and *Theosophie*, 154-156.

<sup>252</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 207 and *Theosophie*, 150.

<sup>253</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 212 and *Theosophie*, 159.

<sup>254</sup> Steiner, *Theosophy*, 110-111.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

## VII. Resonances: Kandinsky's Worldview in Theory and Practice

### A. Translation in Context

Cultural context plays an important role in the consideration of Kandinsky's use of German in his theoretical texts. As his second language, after Russian, Kandinsky's German was, at times, both creative and unorthodox. Beyond this, translation of historical texts warrants further examination relating to usage in a given time, place, and culture. The German word *geist* is a clear example. Scholar Peg Weiss supported a translation of *geist* that relates this word more closely to an idea of the incorporeal, immaterial, mind, intellect, and genius as opposed to something closer to the modern understanding of the word "supernatural," as in relating to Spiritualism, clairvoyance, and mediumship. It is important to note that the difficulty lies not only in the translation of the term *geist* into a suitable English equivalent but in the meaning of the term spirit or spiritual in either language. Moriz Heyne's 1890 *Deutsches Wörterbuch* defines *geist* as "the invisible driving ground and life force, a being without body" and "the driving force that is viewed as personal and independent, that has 'inner' residence, different from the soul or the body, but closely related to both."<sup>256</sup> The Muret-Sanders 1906 *Encyclopedic English-German and German-English Dictionary* translates *geist* as "... spirit as opposed to the flesh, soul as opposed to the body, mind as opposed to matter, and intellect as opposed to feeling."<sup>257</sup> In two English

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<sup>256</sup> Moritz Heyne *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirschen, 1890), 1076 "unsichtbare, treibende Grund und Lebenskraft; unkörperliches Wesen" and "jene antreibende Kraft ist persönlich oder selbständig gedacht, mit der Wohnung im Inneren; verschieden von Seele und Leib, aber mit ihm eng verbunden."

<sup>257</sup> Eduard Muret, *Muret-Sanders Encyclopedic English-German and German-English Dictionary* (Berlin-Schöneberg, Germany: Langenscheidt Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1906), 104.

dictionaries from the late 1880's spirit is defined as: "the breath of life, vitality, life itself, or vital power, from the Latin 'spiritus.' Further, it is defined as "immaterial intelligence; intelligence conceived apart from any physical organization or material embodiment and "the intelligent, immaterial, and immortal part of man; the soul, as distinguished from the body."<sup>258</sup> The German and English definitions are, then, comparable and would have been understood by either a German or English reader at the turn of the century.

The difficulty arises with the modern usage of spirit, spiritual, or even supernatural. *Geist* as used at the turn of the century by Steiner and Kandinsky is a philosophical term relating to the nature of reality and being, rather than the modern usage denoting the "religious" or the "super-natural" as "relating to existence beyond the visible observable universe; unable to be explained by science or the laws of nature; of, relating to, or seeming to come from magic, a god, demigod, spirit, or devil."<sup>259</sup> It is important to note that in German the meaning of a given word will be based on ?? based on its use in a philosophical context.

## **B. Theory and Practice**

Kandinsky's published his formative theoretical texts "Content and Form," "Whither the New Art," *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, and "On the Question of Form" from 1910 to 1912.<sup>260</sup> These texts provide a window into both his world view and his art

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<sup>258</sup> Robert Hunter, A.M., F.G.S., and Prof. Charles Morris, *Universal Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier Publisher, 1897) p.161

<sup>259</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/super-natural>, retrieved 07/23/15.

<sup>260</sup> See "Content and Form," "Whither the New Art," *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, and "On the Question of Form," , in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Verno, 87-90, 98-104, 119-219, and 235-256.

theory. Moreover, dating to the period directly following the publication of the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals and *Theosophy*, these texts provide a clear opportunity for an examination of the possible resonances between the thought of Steiner and Kandinsky. Nonetheless, the result of attempting to condense or attribute the development of an artist to any one source or current of thought is a simplification that does the artist an injustice. The goal of this thesis is not to shrink the breadth of Kandinsky's artistic innovation down to a single theory of "influence" by the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. However, an examination of the core theoretical concepts presented in these texts, considered in tandem with key ideas presented by Steiner, offer significant insight into the development of Kandinsky's abstraction.

The essays "Content and Form" of 1910-1911 and "Whither the 'New' Art" of 1911 provide a foretaste of ideas presented in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, while the theories in the "On the Question of Form" essay published in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* present the key ideas of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* developed in more detail.<sup>261</sup> Kandinsky's thought, as presented in these key texts, revolves around the reciprocal relationship between his spiritual world view and his art theory. Kandinsky presents a potential spiritual basis for abstraction in art and suggests a theoretical equation for the creative process that is based on, for him, natural and inherently spiritual laws. He frames this discussion within the larger context of the spiritual struggle against materialism. The first and second sections of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* address this relationship. In the first section, "About

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<sup>261</sup> "Content and Form" was originally published in the catalog for the *Salon 2* exhibition organized by Vladimir Izdebsky in 1910-1911. "Whither the 'New' Art," considered by Kenneth Lindsay as the sequel to "Content and Form," was published in 1911 in the Russian journal *Odesskie Novosti*, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 84-85 and 96.

General Aesthetic,” Kandinsky presents his ideas on modern spirituality, which in turn supports the second section, “About Painting,” an overview of practical art theory in light of his spiritual world view. This section of the thesis follows Kandinsky’s division and consider his practical theory in light of his spiritual worldview.

In the first section of *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky establishes broadly the opposition between materialism and an emerging spirituality.<sup>262</sup> He details the danger of materialist philosophy to society in general, to art, and to the relationship between society and art.<sup>263</sup> Kandinsky, like Steiner, felt that a “great spiritual era” was immanent, in which esoteric or occult knowledge would be available to all who wished to pursue it.<sup>264</sup> He presents those individuals who have turned traditional scientific methodologies as exemplars of the opposition to the materialist world view, including Madame Blavatsky, Theosophists, and Steiner.<sup>265</sup>

Kandinsky considered the artist as an agent capable of bringing about a spiritual change in humanity.<sup>266</sup> In his autobiographical account *Reminiscences* of 1913 he described the primary goal of *Über das Geistige* and the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* as calling forth in

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<sup>262</sup> Christopher Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1928: the Quest for Synthesis*, (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2010), 26.

<sup>263</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 130.

<sup>264</sup> Ringbom, 406 and Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, footnote 244. Kandinsky further defines the coming spiritual epoch the period of the “ascendency of knowledge” in which the science of art will occupy its proper place, utilizing a combination of “emotion” [Gefühl] and science.

<sup>265</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 144-146. Kandinsky also named prominent scientists who were interested in spiritualism, including Alexander Butlerov, William Crookes, Camille Flammarion, and Charles Richet.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

people the ability to “experience” the spiritual in the material.”<sup>267</sup> Kandinsky characterized the spiritual evolution of humanity as a triangle, in which art was one of the most powerful agents for moving the triangle slowly upward toward knowledge.<sup>268</sup> With the groundwork of his opposition to materialism and the emphasis on the ability of artists to contribute to the coming spiritual era, Kandinsky established his key ideas: a comprehensive system of natural laws governing painting and an explanation of the spiritual system that would support it. Kandinsky introduced what was, in his words, Goethe’s “prophetic” theory of a possible *Generalbass*, or system of natural laws, governing painting.<sup>269</sup>

Though there is no concrete evidence, it has been suggested that Kandinsky studied Goethe’s theory of aesthetics and color.<sup>270</sup> In his analysis of source material for *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Christopher Short suggests that Kandinsky was sympathetic to Goethe’s holistic scientific method, which, as previously described, validated both rational observation and intuitive understanding.<sup>271</sup> Goethe’s methodology offered Kandinsky the opportunity to unite intuition and reason in a comprehensive system.<sup>272</sup> In Christopher Short’s opinion, the theory of correlation between color and meaning as presented in the

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<sup>267</sup> Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 381.

<sup>268</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 131.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 162 and 197.

<sup>270</sup> See Grohmann, *Kandinsky*, 90. Ettlinger, *Kandinsky*, 50, Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 389-400, Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1928: The Quest for Synthesis*, 34-40.

<sup>271</sup> Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky*, 34-35 and 87.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

second section of *Über das Geistige* represents the beginning of Kandinsky's formulation of a *Generalbass* of painting.<sup>273</sup>

In Ringbom's view, Steiner combined the aesthetic tradition of Goethe and the romantic philosophers with occult ideology. He argues that Kandinsky's exposure to Goethe was filtered through Steiner in the form of the aforementioned Kürschner edition of *Deutsche Nationalliteratur*, in which Steiner's editorial commentary is colored by his opinion of the validity of Goethe's methodology.<sup>274</sup> Ringbom draws attention to Steiner's focus on Goethe's idea of the beautiful as a manifestation of the secret laws of nature in his lecture *Goethe as the Father of a New Aesthetic*.<sup>276</sup> Ringbom explains that in the sections *Farbenlehre* and *Materialian*, Goethe presented what he considered "legitimate or lawful results" [gesetzliches Hervorbringen] and he hoped that artists would soon "... feel the need of the harmonious juxtaposition of color and would make the corresponding effort to study this area of art."<sup>277</sup> With his conversion to Theosophy, Steiner equated these laws of nature with spiritual laws.

Goethe also proposed that artistic sensitivity was one of the most effective prerequisites for the development of spiritual ability, since artists possessed the ability to visualize these laws of nature.<sup>278</sup> In Steiner's conception, artistic sensitivity had the potential to facilitate spiritual ability and higher knowledge.<sup>279</sup> In his lecture on Goethe,

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>274</sup> Ringbom, "Occult Elements in Abstract Painting," 389.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 389, footnote 23.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 391; 391, footnote 32; and 406.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 406.

Steiner called for “a science of aesthetics starting from this definition: “Beauty as a physical reality appearing as though it were ‘Idea’ —such a science does not exist: it must be created. It can be called straight away the ‘Aesthetics of Goethe’s world-conception.’ And this is the science of aesthetics of the future.”<sup>280</sup> Although, as Ringbom states, the “notion of abstract art” was foreign to Goethe in *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky redefine the “beautiful” as exactly that—abstraction.<sup>281</sup> Kandinsky sought to establish principles according to which a work of art could be executed in accordance with natural spiritual laws and thus contribute to the coming of the great spiritual epoch.<sup>282</sup> His *Generalbass* of painting can be viewed as an answer to the call of Goethe and Steiner, or the call of Goethe through Steiner.<sup>283</sup>

In his theoretical writings from 1910 to 1912 Kandinsky gradually developed his theory for a *Generalbass* of painting. He proposes a spiritual equation for the creative process that resonates with Steiner’s explanation of the relationship between the body, soul, and spirit of man in the physical world. In Kandinsky’s equation, both man and the work of art have an inner and outer facet. Moreover, when the soul is still connected to the physical body it can receive vibrations only through the senses, which form a bridge between “material and immaterial”<sup>284</sup> In “On the Question of Form” he describes a “creative” or “abstract” spirit that seeks materialization through art.<sup>285</sup> Like Steiner’s

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<sup>280</sup> Steiner, Goethe as The Founder of a New Science of Aesthetics, 26-27.

<sup>281</sup> Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 393

<sup>282</sup> Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky*, 88-89

<sup>283</sup> Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 391.

<sup>284</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 87.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

conception of spirit, Kandinsky's abstract creating spirit works through the soul, using the bridge of the physical senses.<sup>286</sup>

The key to Kandinsky's equation--the manner in which the spirit interacts with the soul is the natural law and spiritual force he terms "inner necessity." Inner necessity is the driving force of Kandinsky's creative process. He describes it as a natural, inherent force present in every artist. Further, Kandinsky defines inner necessity in *Über das Geistige* as the force of the "... ineluctable will for expression of the objective" or the spiritual force behind the objective in art."<sup>287</sup> He describes the development of art through the guidance of inner necessity as "... a continuous manifestation of the Eternally Objective through the Temporally Subjective."<sup>288</sup> For Kandinsky in *Über das Geistige*, the "eternally objective" is the "purely and eternally artistic"; it evolves into the aforementioned, abstract creating spirit of "On Content and Form." Kandinsky explains that, seeking expression, the abstract creating spirit utilizes inner-necessity to create a "new value" in the mind of man, for which man consequently seeks material form.<sup>289</sup>

When related to the theory of a *Generalbass* of painting, the direction of inner-necessity leads the artist to create a visual language that is capable of creating "inner vibration" in the viewer and thus elevating receptive viewers to a spiritual state. In Kandinsky's world view, the artist was no "Sunday's Child," but rather had a responsibility

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 174 and 208.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 174. Kandinsky explains further: "The element of the pure and eternally artistic is, as opposed to this, the objective element, which becomes comprehensible with the help of the subjective."

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 235-236.

to contribute to the bringing about of a new spiritual era.<sup>290</sup> Like Steiner, Kandinsky considered the soul to be capable of refinement.<sup>291</sup> In Kandinsky's conception the world "sounds" or vibrates in a manner that calls to mind Steiner's explanation of an "undifferentiated mass" of impressions encountered through the senses in experience. Kandinsky believed that the sounding nature of the world required a force to organize the sounds into a systematic combination that could refine the soul.<sup>292</sup> He felt that the exclusive aim of art should be to provide this system.

Kandinsky describes inner necessity as made up of three mystical elements: the element of the artist's personality, the element of the artist's culture or period, and the third element of the "purely and eternally artistic."<sup>293</sup> This third element of the "purely and eternally artistic" or the "abstract creating spirit" guides the use of color and form through the inner-necessity sensed by the spiritually attuned artist. For Kandinsky, the artist had two specific tools at his disposal to create such a composition:

This situation is the point of departure on the path by which painting, with the help of its means and materials, will develop into art in the abstract sense; and where it will, in the end, reach the purely painterly composition. Two means at their [the artists'] disposal for these compositions are color and form.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 89. Kandinsky believed that art was one of the greatest realms of the spirit and thus could contribute significantly to the coming of the great spiritual era.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 43. Kandinsky clarifies further: "Composition on the basis of this harmony is the juxtaposition of coloristic and linear forms that have independent existence as such, derived from inner-necessity, which create within the common life arising from this source as a whole that is called a picture. Only these individual constituents are essential. All the rest (i.e. including the objective element) are incidental. The rest merely provide overtones." 193.

Kandinsky considered form “the outward expression of inner content,” And he defined form as “. . . delimitation of one surface from another.”<sup>295</sup> For Kandinsky, the sole purpose of form was to express its inner content.<sup>296</sup> In addition, Kandinsky equated content both with inner sound and spirit.<sup>297</sup> Through the guidance of inner-necessity form could affect the human soul through its inner sound.<sup>298</sup> Moreover, that adherence of form to physical or natural objects was a hindrance and that only with the abstraction of the form could its inner sound reach its full potential.<sup>299</sup>

Kandinsky dedicated a significant portion of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* to an explanation of his color theory. A brief footnote in this text is a convincing signpost on the journey to understanding Kandinsky’s possible occult interests. In reference to his theories on color, he notes, “All of these assertions are the results of empirical spiritual perception and are not based on positivist science.”<sup>300</sup> As previously mentioned, it has been speculated that Kandinsky was exposed to the color theory of Goethe.<sup>301</sup> Beyond his strictly scientific analysis of color, Goethe postulated the possible physical, emotional, and even moral

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<sup>295</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 165, 236, 247, and 248.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>297</sup> Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 247.

<sup>298</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 165. “. . . the artist is the hand that purposefully sets the human soul vibrating by pressing this or that key (= form). Thus it is clear that the harmony of forms can only be based upon the purposeful touching of the human soul. This basic tenet we shall call the principle of inner-necessity.”

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 179.

<sup>301</sup> See Grohmann, *Kandinsky*, 90; Ettlinger, *Kandinsky*, 50; Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 389-400, Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1928: The Quest for Synthesis*, 34-40.

effects of color.<sup>302</sup> For example, he formulated a table of “oppositions” between colors. Kandinsky’s analysis of yellow and blue as “warm or cold” and “attracting or repelling” can be viewed as corresponding to the system proposed by Goethe.<sup>303</sup> The philosopher had speculated on the emotional qualities of color, relating them to human qualities.<sup>304</sup> In his notes on the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals Kandinsky dedicates an entire page to a table outlining Steiner’s explanation of the emotional qualities of color as perceived in the human aura.<sup>305</sup> In his annotations in *Theosophy* Kandinsky also noted the colors of the aura and their visual associations with the states of the mind and emotions of the subject.<sup>306</sup> And in *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky dedicates several sections to a detailed description of the physical, emotional, and moral effects of color.<sup>307</sup>

In his *Theosophy* notes, Kandinsky marked, in particular, what Steiner described as the “sounding nature” of the spiritual world: “One has only to form a mental picture in which everything described as ‘Type,’ as ‘shining with light,’ is at the same time sounding.”<sup>308</sup> For Steiner, the sounding nature of the spiritual world is available to those who develop spiritual organs of perception. Color, like form, is described by Kandinsky as having an inner sound, which through the guidance of inner-necessity, has the potential to

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<sup>302</sup> Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky*, 36-37.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>305</sup> See Appendix, 87.

<sup>306</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 180-185 and *Theosophie*, 136-141.

<sup>307</sup> See Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, section B. Painting: chapters V, “Effects of Color,” though chapter VII, “Theory,” 156-210. 160, in particular 178-189.

<sup>308</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 134 and *Theosophie*, 101.

create vibration in the soul of the viewer.<sup>309</sup> In “On Content and Form” Kandinsky states: “The world sounds, It is a cosmos of spiritually affective beings, Thus dead matter is living spirit.”<sup>310</sup> For Kandinsky, the work of art was an active agent in the world.

In his theoretical writings of 1910 -1912 Kandinsky outlined a spiritual world view and an artistic method that was intimately related to it. His theory of the independent existence of the visual elements, as set forth in the quote above, is directly related to his theory of the spiritual equation for the creative process. In “On the Question of Form” and *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky also describes color and form as actual beings with their own inner life.<sup>312</sup> The practical effect of this independent existence is that it emancipates these elements from the physical object, effectively freeing them from the traditional responsibility of representation of objective or natural form.<sup>313</sup> Thus, the only goal of form is to reflect? its inner nature, and the aim of color is to express its inner sound; both are guided by the natural law of inner necessity.

In his notes on the *Lucifer Gnosis* journals Kandinsky paraphrases a passage in which Steiner discusses the nature of beings or archetypes in the higher world: “The floating of colors, without foundation (= without physical form) is the revelation of beings that always surround man. With progression into the higher (imagination) worlds one also perceives the beings that emit color and tone etc. The way to that is inspiration—

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<sup>309</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 160.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 250

<sup>312</sup> Kandinsky, “On Content and Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 245-247 and *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 168 and 210.

<sup>313</sup> Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky*, 60 and Ringbom, 403.

intuition.”<sup>314</sup> Kandinsky’s annotations in *Theosophy* focus primarily on chapter III, “The Country of Spirit Beings.” In this chapter Steiner details the archetypes of all objects and beings that exist in the physical world.<sup>315</sup> Kandinsky notes the existence of the archetypes, the fact that the archetypes “sound,” and he records the archetypes and their attributes in every level of this higher world.<sup>316</sup> It is tempting to suggest that Steiner’s detailed explanation provided Kandinsky with possible visual images of this spiritual world and its archetypes, but the connection is even more fundamental. One could say that Steiner’s occult cosmology provided an example of a world view in which color and form, among all other aspects of the physical world, could exist as actual beings. In Steiner’s conception, the activity of these beings or archetypes is what creates the physical world. What is more, according to Steiner, through the development of spiritual organs these beings can be perceived for what they really are, free from the object.

The existence of visual elements as independent beings served another, equally important, role as a foundational element in Kandinsky’s push towards abstraction. Throughout his theoretical writings of this period he periodically revisits the question of whether the object must be entirely eliminated or not.<sup>317</sup> On one hand, he reiterates the idea

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<sup>314</sup> “Das Schweben der Farben etc. ohne Grund u. Boden (ohne phys. Gegenstand) ist die Offenbarung der Wesen-heiten, die den Menschen stets umgeben. Beim Aufsteigen in die höheren (ds imag.) Welten nimmt der Mensch auch die Wesen wahr, welche Farben, Töne etc. ausströmen. Der Weg dazu is Inspiration - Intuition.

<sup>315</sup> See Steiner, *Theosophy*, 129-140 and *Theosophie*, 97-107.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-139.

<sup>317</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 101. Kandinsky’s definition of abstraction extended beyond the sphere of art. He felt that the contemporary interest in abstraction was indicative of a change in the spiritual atmosphere. In his opinion the new forms of spirituality including monism, occultism, and Theosophy were forms of abstraction.

that all forms, abstract or representative, possess inner sound. Thus, depriving oneself of any means of expressing inner sound should be avoided.<sup>318</sup> On the other hand, in “On the Question of Form” he asserts that line, like color and form, exists as an independent being and can be qualified as a thing or an object.<sup>319</sup> He claims, then, that abstraction makes use of “things that lead a material existence,” just as realism does.<sup>320</sup> As a result, he makes clear that there is no difference if the artist uses real or abstract forms, as they all exist as objects and possess inner sound capable of calling forth inner vibration in the viewer—the only guiding principle in the equation is the natural, spiritual law of inner necessity.<sup>321</sup>

In formulating his conclusive theory of abstraction Kandinsky returns to his spiritual equation of the creative process. He utilizes this theory in combination with the independent existence of the visual elements to redefine the traditional notion of beauty and bolster his push towards abstraction. This larger equation, ultimately, provides the answer to Kandinsky’s question “What should replace the missing object. In Kandinsky’s conception, the spirit, or the purely and eternally artistic, is equated with the objective, while elements that reflect the artist’s personality or a style in a given period are viewed as changeable and temporal or subjective. Though the objective must rely on the subjective to embody it, Kandinsky felt that a reliance on natural or representative objects could

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 168. Kandinsky states “To deprive oneself of the possibility of thus calling up vibrations would be to narrow one’s arsenal of expressive means.”

<sup>319</sup> Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 247.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 247-248.

hinder the expression of the spirit.<sup>322</sup> For Kandinsky, the gradual evolution of contemporary art was a natural process. In this process, the most effective method to facilitate the strongest expression of the spirit was to push the organic or representation into the background. To this end, he recommended the replacement of corporeal elements with purely abstract forms or corporeal forms that had been abstracted.<sup>323</sup> However, it is important to note that Kandinsky advocated for balance in this period and did not suggest an immediate and complete shift to total abstraction. For the artist, abstraction was a way to bring harmony to the compositional elements and thus allow the full power of their inner sound to evoke vibrations in the soul of the viewer.<sup>324</sup> He viewed all forms valid, given they had been chosen through the guidance of inner necessity, an idea he expressed in “On the Question of Form” in terms of “the Great Realism” and “the Great Abstraction.”<sup>325</sup>

In Kandinsky’s opinion, only the artist was capable of judging the merit of a work of art, by judging to what extent the final form corresponded to its inner content.<sup>326</sup> Recalling Steiner’s interpretation of Goethe’s definition of the beauty as correspondence to natural laws, Kandinsky defined beauty as “. . . whatever arises from internal spiritual necessity is beautiful. The beautiful is that which is inwardly beautiful.”<sup>327</sup> It is the artist’s responsibly to “weigh up” the inner value of his materials and the artist must be free to

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<sup>322</sup> Kandinsky *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 200.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>325</sup> Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 242-245.

<sup>326</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 87.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

base his art “entirely upon that inner principle”<sup>328</sup> and free to choose any form that corresponds to it.<sup>329</sup>

The answer to Kandinsky’s question “what should replace the missing object” can be found then in his belief in the natural and inherent spiritual basis of art. He declares the question of form irrelevant and presents it again from a spiritual perspective. The question becomes “To what extent is the inner sound of the given form concealed or laid bare?”<sup>330</sup> Ultimately, in Kandinsky’s equation, inner necessity can justify any form.<sup>331</sup> Specifically, inner necessity was key in guiding the use of abstraction. For Kandinsky color and form, emancipated from the role of representation, expressed the purely and eternally artistic most clearly. Kandinsky declared: “My personal quality consists of the ability to make the Inner sound forth stronger by limiting he eternal.”<sup>332</sup>

### **C. Analysis of *Improvisation 19* and *Composition VII***

In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* Kandinsky declared:

Composition on the basis of this harmony is the juxtaposition of coloristic and linear forms that have an independent existence as such, derived from inner necessity, which create within the common life arising from this source a whole that is called a picture. Only these individual constituents are essential. All the

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 238. Kandinsky states: “In short, the artist is not only entitled, but obliged to treat his forms in whatever way is necessary for his purpose. There is no necessity for anatomy and so forth on the one hand, nor, on the other, for overthrowing these sciences as a matter of principle, but what is necessary is the complete unlimited freedom of the artist in his choice of means.” 211.

<sup>330</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 170.

<sup>331</sup> Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 248.

<sup>332</sup> Ringbom, “Occult Elements in Abstract Painting,” 401.

rest (i.e. including the objective elements) are incidental. The rest merely provide overtones.<sup>333</sup>

The existence of earlier preparatory sketches and the related woodcut for make *Improvisation 19* an ideal example of Kandinsky's theory in practice. The artist described his Improvisations as "largely unconscious, spontaneous expressions of inner character, the non-material nature." In the earlier examples of the related composition *Improvisation 1* (Figs. 2 and 3), the shapes of a church in the middle, one or two groups of people on either the left or the right, and possibly mountains or onion-domed buildings can be recognized on the left. In the preparatory sketch the groups of figures are more immediately readable as human. In the woodblock version, the figures have become geometrical and abstract, while the architecture has developed a more definitive form. When discussing figural groups in a composition in *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky poses the question ". . . Are the human figures essential to the composition, or could they be replaced by other organic forms that would avoid disturbing the basic inner sound of the composition?"<sup>334</sup>

The progression of the forms of both the figural groups and the architecture from *Improvisation 1* to *Improvisation 19* is a clear example of his theory of abstraction. The final version is dominated by the black outlines of the two figural groups. The architecture

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<sup>333</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 193.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 168. Furthermore, he states ". . . and if so, then we are faced with an example in which the sound of the object not only does not help the sound of the abstract element, but is directly inimical to it . . . In this instance, therefor, one should either find another object more compatible with the inner sound of the abstract element, or else choose to let the whole remain purely abstract."

in the center has been is completely replaced by a field of varying shades of blue, with only a suggestion of the onion dome shapes to the left. A strong sense of motion is present, progressing and connecting the group at the left with the larger group at the right. In the final version of *Improvisation 19* Kandinsky has abandoned the element of space or depth through overlap, since he considered the exclusion of the third dimension one of the first stages of abstraction.<sup>335</sup> In *Theosophy*, Steiner argued that true perception of the higher worlds is only reached when not only color is lifted, but also when three-dimensional space has “fully lost itself.” Any perceived depth in this composition comes from the varied field of blue tones. In his notes on *Theosophy* Kandinsky registered Steiner’s explanation of blue as accompanying the attitude of devotion and as present in people with “strongly religious” personalities.<sup>336</sup> In *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky describes blue as a peaceful and “typically heavenly” color that expresses an element of tranquility.<sup>337</sup> Moreover, he explains “The deeper blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the *Übersinnlichem* [supersensory/supernatural].”<sup>338</sup>

Kandinsky described his Compositions as “an expression of a slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after a long maturing.”<sup>339</sup> A glance at *Composition*

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<sup>335</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 194.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Kandinsky also noted Steiner’s comparable explanation of blue in the *Lucifer Gnosis* journals, see Appendix, 87.

<sup>337</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Lindsay and Vergo, 182.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. I have added the possible English translation of “supersensory” to Lindsay’s “supernatural” for *Übersinnlich*. It could alternatively be translated also as “psychic” or “transcendental” depending on the context, all are valid possible translations.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

VII (Fig. 8) is enough to form an instant impression of vibrant swirling colors, a multitude of forms in motion, and energetic lines at the service of abstraction. While it may be possible to detect the faint remnants of previous objects, they are so veiled here as to be undetectable. In *Über das Geistige* Kandinsky makes clear that, for him, the non-material abstract had the clearest appeal and most direct effect on the soul of the viewer.<sup>340</sup> He connects the most developed form of his work, the Composition with contributing to the bringing about of the new spiritual era.<sup>341</sup> In my opinion, Kandinsky's art, the Compositions, in particular, were meant to function on an actual spiritual level. In light of his belief in the artist's responsibility to humanity, these works strongly suggest Steiner's theory of the action of spirit in the material world. In this example, a painting Kandinsky believed to be created according to the "pure and eternally artistic" inner necessity, he undoubtedly believed that the spiritual reached through the visual elements of color and form to create vibrations in the soul of the viewer and could effect change in the material world.

Both Steiner and Kandinsky addressed the relationship of humans to the object in their own unique ways. Steiner considered the object and the material world as a starting point for the spiritual development of the student. For Steiner, contemplation or meditation in the physical world would allow, through development of the subtle organs, a perception of the higher worlds and the realization that all objects in the material world are actually projections of beings in the higher one. Kandinsky worried about abandoning the material

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>341</sup> Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 150.

object entirely in his art, fearing that the resulting pattern would be misunderstood as merely decorative or functional. As a result, the object functioned as a starting point for Kandinsky as well, a starting point from which the artist could pursue the abstraction of color and form through the guidance of inner necessity. Inner necessity is key to understanding Kandinsky's theory and work in the period between 1910 and World War I. Echoing Steiner's emphasis on the Goethean idea of art corresponding to natural law, Kandinsky's inner necessity functioned as kind of spiritual intuition with the singular purpose of expressing, or allowing to manifest, the purely and eternally artistic. The goal of art and the artist, for Kandinsky, was expressed through his spiritual equation for the creative process. Like Steiner, he focused on the ability of the spirit to effect change in the physical. The guidance of inner necessity allowed the artist to create a composition, utilizing color and form as independent beings, that would evoke a vibration in the soul of the viewer. The reliance on inner necessity as a natural law freed the artist to pursue abstraction with dedication, as it alone allowed the spiritual force of the purely and eternally artistic to sound forth with clarity.

## VIII. Conclusion

With his 1966 article “Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual” and the book *The Sounding Cosmos* of 1970, Ringbom laid the foundation for an in-depth examination of the possible engagement of Kandinsky with the thought of Steiner. As previously noted, though Ringbom’s discussion tended to focus on Kandinsky’s interest in Theosophical thought-forms, he addressed the possible significance of Steiner’s interpretation of Goethe’s scientific methodology and aesthetics to Kandinsky’s development. In a postscript to “Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual” Ringbom mentions the recent discovery of the notebook containing Kandinsky’s notes on the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals that this thesis has explored in-depth.<sup>342</sup> Ringbom’s analysis of this new source was necessarily brief in his postscript, but he drew attention to a further significant aspect these notes. Ringbom mentions that Kandinsky’s notes focus not only on Steiner’s explanation of the higher worlds and their description, but also on the practical aspects of Steiner’s “path to knowledge.”<sup>343</sup> Kandinsky, in fact, summarizes Steiner’s teachings on meditation and the qualities that a student of the “spiritual sciences” must cultivate to allow for the development of the higher sense organs.<sup>344</sup> These notes point to a broader context for Kandinsky’s interest in the occult over and above the development of a *Generalbass* in painting; he was seeking a comprehensive worldview and way of life that would support it. Indeed, Kandinsky was described by contemporaries as prophetic, or as a romanticist

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<sup>342</sup> Ringbom, *Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual*, 418.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>344</sup> See Appendix. 78-80.

and dreamer.<sup>345</sup> Auguste Macke's wife stated that Kandinsky's art was: "... like a doctrine, a *weltanschauung*."<sup>346</sup> Moreover, Kandinsky was known to have dedicated himself to "... contemplate exercises in the Indian manner."<sup>347</sup> An indication of Kandinsky's further interest in the occult can be found in the titles present in his library now in the aforementioned Münter-Eichner Stiftung. In addition to the Steiner sources, the library also contained, for example: *Studien aus dem Gebiet der Geheimwissenschaft* (1905) [Studies in the Field of Secret Science] by Duprel, *Die Entwicklung des spiritismus von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (1893) [The Development of Spiritism from the Beginning of Time until the Present] by Kiesewetter, and *Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (1911) by Yogi Ramachakra. The library also contained further occult journals, some of which also contain marks and marginal notes.<sup>348</sup> It is my hope that the detailed examination of Kandinsky's notes in *Theosophy* and the *Lucifer-Gnosis* journals will provide a starting point for a more detailed study of Kandinsky's larger occult milieu and the role it played in his life.

The recent scholarship of Corinna Treitel and Linda Dalrymple Henderson examines the larger context in which Kandinsky lived and worked. Treitel's detailed analysis of the occult climate in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century and Henderson's in-depth consideration of the intersection between science and occultism, in

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<sup>345</sup> Ringbom, *Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual*, 388.

<sup>346</sup> Quoted in Ringbom, *Art in the epoch of the Great Spiritual*, 388.

<sup>347</sup> Ringbom, *Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual*, 388.

<sup>348</sup> Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, 52-53. Per Ringbom the library contained *Spiritische Rundschau*, vol. 8, (1908), no.3; *Neue Metaphysische Rundschau* vol.XV, (1908), nos. 1 and 2; *Die Übersinnliche Welt*, XII, (1904), nos. 9 and 10, XIV, (1906), nos. 2 and 3, XVI, (1908), nos. 1 through 3.

addition to the ground breaking work of Ringbom, provided the impetus for this thesis. With the benefit of this firm foundation, one of the primary goals of this thesis was to locate Steiner, and, as a result, Kandinsky, in an evolving occult atmosphere that was part of and indebted to the philosophical debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe. I have argued that the unique synthesis of idealist epistemology, romantic *Naturphilosophie*, Goethe's aesthetics, and occult cosmology in Steiner's writings provided Kandinsky a world view that would support his theories of active agency in art.

Kandinsky developed Steiner's ideas on the evolution of consciousness into an aesthetic theory of the necessary development of art away from a reliance on the representation of material appearances towards abstraction. Moreover, Kandinsky's spiritual equation for the creative process, with its emphasis on the natural law of inner necessity as the guiding force of the purely and eternally artistic, can be said to belong to the lineage of *Naturphilosophie*. Specifically, it grew out of the *naturphilosophical* model in which the human mind was viewed as the highest development of nature, and art, as the creative product of the human mind, was considered a self-manifestation of nature in physical form. The romantics and Kandinsky viewed art as a medium of manifestation, and the aesthetic experience was the instrument of perception of the whole of nature, of the eternal ground.

The explanation of Kandinsky's theory of a *Generalbass* of painting, in which the elements of color and form have the ability to create vibrations in the soul, allows for a new interpretation of paintings such as *Improvisation 19* and *Composition VII*. Though it could be suggested that Steiner's vivid descriptions of the path to higher knowledge

provided Kandinsky with the suitable inspiration to create compositions of the higher worlds, it is important to remember that for Steiner, and for Kandinsky, description was meant only as a starting point. For Steiner the path had to be experienced personally. For Kandinsky the answer to his question, “What is to replace the missing object,” is found in his spiritual basis for the creative act. Ultimately, the object is unnecessary and superfluous. In such a conception the residual architectural and figural forms in a composition like *Improvisation 19* are meant only as a visual and spiritual starting point. It was the ability of the varied blue field or the harmoniously grouped forms, chosen through the guidance of inner necessity, to effect change in the physical world and thus elevate the viewer’s spiritual state that is central to Kandinsky’s worldview. As Kandinsky stated:

The artist is no Sunday’s Child of life: he has no right to a life without responsibility . . . he must know that every one of his actions and thoughts and feelings constitutes the subtle, intangible, and yet firm material out of which his works are created and that hence cannot be free in life—only in art.

Kandinsky and Steiner believed that the world was on the brink of a new spiritual epoch and that art, as one of the strongest agents of the spiritual, had a crucial, active role to play in bringing it about.

## Figures



Figure 1: Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 19*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 120 x 141.5 cm.,  
Städtische Galerie, Munich



Figure 2: Wassily Kandinsky, Sketch for *Improvisation I*, 1909. Pencil drawing from Kandinsky's sketchbook. Städtische Galerie, Munich



Figure 3: Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation I*, 1911. Woodcut, 13.9 x 11.6 cm., Städtische Galerie, Munich



Figure 4: Wassily Kandinsky, *Couple on Horseback*, 1906. Oil on Canvas, 55 x 50.5 cm., Städtische Galerie, Munich.



Figure 5: Wassily Kandinsky, *Poster for the First Phalanx Exhibition*, 1901. Lithograph, 19 5/8 x 26 5/16 in., Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Modern, Paris.



Figure 6: Wassily Kandinsky, *Beach Chairs in Holland*, 1904. Oil on Canvas Board, 24 x 32.6 cm., Städtische Galerie, Munich.



Figure 7: Wassily Kandinsky, *Murnau: Street with Women*, 1908. Oil on Cardboard, 71 x 97 cm., Neue Galerie, New York.



Figure 8: Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 78  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 118  $\frac{1}{8}$  in., The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

## Appendix - Kandinsky's Notes on the *Lucifer-Gnosis Journals*<sup>349</sup>

### Page 1

Steiner, how does one achieve/attain knowledge  
of higher worlds?

Lucifer Gnosis

Meditation, Concentration etc.

temporary withdrawal of  
the soul from its connection  
with the organs of the senses

In doing so the activity  
of the soul on the body must be replaced

Recognize what remains

#### 6 Characteristics

- 1) Control of the thought world (place thought at the center)
- 2) Control of actions (ordered actions every day)
- 3) Bearance - be in control of oneself
- 4) Impartial/objective - accept the new
- 5) Trust in the environment

Inner balance

- \* Sense for affirmation - Christ
  - \* and the dead dog (teeth)

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<sup>349</sup> Spacing, style, and punctuation follow Kandinsky's original hand-written notes. Translated from the original German in Ringbom, "Kandinsky und das Okkulte," 105-106.

## Page 2

The Will to Freedom - let oneself

be inspired (Volume 30, 31)

World of Imagination. The floating

of colors >>without foundation

<< (= without physical form)

is the revelation of beings

that always surround man.

With progression into

the higher (imagination) worlds

one also perceives the beings

that emit color and tone etc. The way

to that is inspiration - intuition.

Necessity of the >>guru<<

the esoteric leader in the world of imagination.

In this world, first, images from ones

own soul (like in the mirror, in other words

seem to project towards the person),

in which good

feelings can appear ugly  
und vice versa. One cannot, at first,  
differentiate between images  
of the soul and other beings.  
And when this recognition  
is reached, then one sees  
oneself from outside and the  
physical world from inside. (Volume 32 and 33)

Inspiration. Of the three basic  
powers of the soul life - imagination,  
feeling, willing - the first  
falls away and the two others  
form the mother soil from which,  
through inspiration, the images  
develop inside.

Thus feeling and willing must  
be particularly healthy.  
One must differentiate  
between truth and untruth in acute  
form (>>untruth<< - direct pain \_ \_)

On the other hand, the necessity  
the >>natural<< consequences of the  
effects of an exciting occurrence = imagining

One must practice: observing  
calmly exciting ideas and  
abstain from the excitement.

Such exercises lead to inspiration,  
which does not >>fall from the  
Heaven<<, but rather is achieved  
through training (also in  
earlier earthly incarnations).

One's own exercises do not suffice.

Immersing oneself in the narratives  
of others of the higher worlds, the strong  
feeling of the same - is exactly that  
necessary condition of inspiration. Inspiration  
leads us to the knowledge of  
the processes in the  
higher worlds (development of  
the individual, the earth, its

planetary embodiments etc.) If  
being comes into consideration,  
then intuition is necessary (volume 34)

**Page 6**

(empty)

Conditions (it depends only  
on the will to enter  
to these paths) (No one can entirely  
fulfill these conditions)

- 1) Health (body and mind)
- 2) To feel oneself as an integral part of all life
- 3) Thoughts and emotion have the same meaning for the world  
as actions
- 4) The actual essence of humanity  
is not the exterior, but rather the inner
- 5) Steadfastness of decision once made
- 6) Gratitude (love for all) the world and humanity
- 7) To unceasingly lead ones life as these conditions require

Therefore esoteric instruction - formalities

Devotion. The love of the work -

not success (volume 19).

Practical points:

1) Patience (desires and cravings  
must be quieted)

2) To be true to oneself in  
the depths of the soul

3) >>In no way to hope,  
until one has recognized the  
truth in a field.<<

4) No anger, fearfulness,  
superstition, prejudice, vanity,  
ambition, curiosity, unnecessary  
desire for communication, or  
judgement based on rank, gender,  
ancestry etc...

5) Calm actions in response to all  
of the subtleties of the soul-life through  
reticence of ones own arousals  
of the soul (inner stillness

**Page 9**

and silence and waiting

with patience).

Environment is also important (be

in nature!) and to substitute it

through the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita, the

Gospel of John, Thomas von Kempen) (volume 18)

(Colonel A. de Rochas (>> L'exterior-

isation de la sensibilité<<, l'ext. de la motricité) and in particular

Les sentiments, la musique et le

geste<<)) volume 10.

**Page 10**

Anim. Nature

Subtle form

Calm people

Devoted natures

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People with passion

		browns and reds recede	
primarily	lighter red	and different greens	blue
brown u. brown-	and green		and the more ideal
red tones also			the bluer
all unintel. people			Peop. with >>good
and even dark		during thought	disposition<<, but
blood red		comes a	passive
		comes an	- beautiful blue
		agreeable	(also the religious)
		green tone	But when also -
			intelligent,
			then alternates
			green and blue
			currents

Steiner see "Regarding the Aura  
Of the Human"  
(Luc. -Gnosis, N. 8)

## Page 11

[written upside down and contained in consecutively smaller ovals]

the effect of the animalistic on the individual

what the individual experiences through the senses

knowledge

3 Auras

Steiner see “Regarding the Aura

Of the Human”

Luc. -Gnosis (n.11)

April 1904

The individual is comprised of:

- 1) Phys. body - Sthula Sharira
- 2) Life-body - Linga Sharira
- 3) Sense-body — Kama rupa  
= Astral-body
- 4) Intellectual-soul - Kama manas  
= lower Manas
- 5) Consciousness-soul - higher Manas  
that bears the >>I<<
- 6) Life-spirit - Budhi  
= Spiritual body
- 7) Spirit-person – Atma

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