

Abstract for Consciousness Reframed '98

Title: The Darkroom of the Mind

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The visual history of western civilization is closely connected to the history of the western philosopher's efforts to enlighten the human mind. Rene Descartes' concept of an interconnectedness between the material world and its effects on the human mind still seems to influence the present time; like his basic definition of light as a "very subtle and fluid matter" and solid objects like e.g. the two sticks of a blind man that are nothing else than "condensed rays of light".

Light has been playing a crucial role in art history ever since. Its iconological function, though, has never reached an autonomous position. In the context of the christian religion, it served the symbolic meaning of visualizing the outer-worldliness of Jesus Christ as an infant. Other art historical examples of dutch painting from the 16th and 17th century present a development that reaches its turning point in the middle of the 18th century.

The 19th century introduced colour as an impressionistic subject in painting mediated through the use of pigments on surfaces - other experiments with light led to the invention of photography. But colour and light were separated from each other until a lightened projection screen such as a monitor was created.

The presentation of visuals on a TV or a computer monitor provide the viewer not with a reflection of light that is necessarily bound to an object or a surface but with a direct visual input as a light wave. Each colour that we perceive on a monitor is simulating the perception which we use to receive through either daylight or artificial light which is reflected from objects.

With the introduction of monitors, the qualia of colours has changed. And with it came the dark room as a prerequisite for perception of complexly defined light waves. In order to be able to perceive these light waves on a monitor, the human body has to be either situated in a dark(ened) room - or provided with a situation where the eyes are stimulated only by one possible source of visual information e.g. goggles.

If we try to connect the art historical investigation into the meaning and iconography of light with the philosophical history of the dark room as a metaphor for the mind, do we have to come up with the result that it appears as if artists today are on their way to visualize consciousness?

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