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In this essay I will explore the visual arts branch of Romanticism and how it combines artistic skill with passion and emotion, contrary to expressionism which arose a century later. The movements share the same emphasis on expression, but expressionism had less focus on detail. I'm going to talk about how the movement was used not only as an emotional outlet, but also to depict certain ideas or scenes featured in scripture and poetry. Romanticism encouraged creative liberty and unity amongst creative individuals, which is something I consider to be crucial in the art community. I will make multiple links to Caspar David Friedrich who is a key contributor to the movement as well as conduct a semiotic analysis of a romantic painting with aid from theorists Saussure and Pierce.

Romanticism was a transdisciplinary movement that encapsulated an idealistic perception of the world, honing in on the innocence and beauties instead of the harsh realities. As mentioned prior, it wasn't specific to just the visual arts but extended to most of the mainstream artistic disciplines including literature and music. Artists of the time were referred to as "romantic thinkers" which suggests that the movement itself was less of a style but more of an attitude or mindset (Brown 2001 p,8). Romanticism is considered a response to the enlightenment era that followed the end of the French revolution, contributing to political philosophies that we see in society today (Galitz 2004). Romanticism and post modernism share the same anarchic values, rejecting the oppressive forces of government and societal indoctrination that aims to strip people of their individuality (Brown 2001 jacket).



(Figure 1) Turner (1796) *Fishermen at sea*

Literary and visual artists have a strong bond. Painters and draughtspeople would siphon inspiration for subject matter from poetry and other written works illustrating the scenes or narratives with careful consideration into the way that they portray certain moods or themes. A multimedia romantic artist by the name of J.M.W Turner took both roles in some of his works, providing his visual art with some poetry or vice versa in order to marry the two disciplines together and give more to the viewer to digest as an “emotive stimulus” (Roston 2014, p.341). Turner submitted a collection of coastal landscape paintings to the Royal academy of arts around 1800 alongside a small passage that he wrote initially to be adapted into a piece of music, dubbed *Inscription by Turner: Poetry* (1799). “Love is like the raging Ocean Wind that sway. its troubled motion” although Turner’s handwriting made it hard to decipher some of the words in his poem, we are still able to get another glimpse into his clear passion for the ocean (Wilton, Tate.org 2013). This is an example of how Romantic thinkers avoided the singular discipline approach and instead combined their abilities and passion to work towards their ‘goals’ in synergy and harmony.

Turner enjoyed working with watercolour for his personal work and only got around to submitting his first oil painting in 1796 (figure 1). He was raised in a middle-class household and was limited to working with the then expensive oil paints so hadn’t had much experience with the technicalities of them. He focused more on giving his

work truer to life colours so sought out pigments that would help him achieve this rather than considering their durability. As time passed the paintings decayed, gradually losing their colouration and leaving behind these eerie, sepia rich landscape depictions. Turner used wide brush strokes with hard bristled brushes, revisiting the pieces after they had dried with fresh layers of paint. This led to the paint becoming unstable and flaky, eventually causing it to fall off the canvas resulting in the many gaps in the work exhibited today (thecollector.com 2020).



(Figure 2) Friedrich (1818) *Wanderer above the sea of fog*

Caspar David Friedrich is an integral part of the visual aspect of Romanticism as a whole. Friedrich grew up in Europe during the late enlightenment period. The enlightenment era, often referred to as 'the age of reason' was born in the 1680s and was essentially an attitude towards improving life by introducing rational changes. The French revolution came from the momentum built by the enlightenment era, causing the abolishment of the French monarchy and major alterations to religious practises and foundations, adding to the widespread shift from appreciating materialism to spirituality (Enlightenment 2021). Friedrich was influenced by spirituality the teachings of Kosegarten who spoke of the relationship between

nature, life and God “The painter should paint not only what he has in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself” (thoughtsonpapyrus.com 2022). Friedrich produced magnificent landscapes with full emphasis on the splendour of the interactions of the different elements in nature. A lot of his works contain a singular human figure carefully placed within the composition; a technique dubbed ‘Rückenfigur’ in German. He aimed to visualise humanity’s journey through the wonders of God’s creation, or possibly as a metaphor for the current changes in societal values and how people had newly discovered the power that they possessed when united to work towards a common goal. (Kennedy 2018)

The piece *Wanderer above the sea of fog* is an oil on canvas painting of a majestic mountain range, shrouded with thick mist that enhances the sense of scale and depth. The colour palette consists mainly of lighter tones because of the focus on the clouds and distant mountains. Friedrich technically used subtle tints of yellow and pink in the clouds as well as differing tones and shades of blue. The effect of distance is due to the contrast between the dark tones in the front and the increasingly lighter tones that he added as he worked towards the horizon line. The figure is placed with its back faced to the viewer which acts as a point of perspective whilst simultaneously evoking a sense of mystery as to who the person is and their story (Scott 2020). An art critic named Ramdohr criticized Friedrich on the “impossible” composition of *Cross in the mountains*, a religious painting displaying a scene of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. This piece not only visualises a scene from scripture, but itself contains elements that’re up for interpretation. The piece received criticism from many for lacking a sense of depth and for its “impossible point of view” (Prager, 2007, p 94) and was considered a bad example of a landscape painting, but it managed to provoke powerful feelings like sorrow or hope in the viewer regardless (*Cross in the mountains* n.d.).



(Figure 3) Martin (1817) *The bard*

Painter John Martin is another example of somebody who derived inspiration from literature. His painting *the bard* illustrates a scene from Thomas Gray's poem *The bard* which is a story of King Edward I of England and his conquest of the Welsh. The painting depicts a gorgeous landscape composed of huge mountains and majestic cloud formations as well as a grand castle based on a real castle in Harlech. Despite its beauty, the scene within the painting is rather morbid as it shows the last surviving bard moments before jumping to his death in the river below (Jonathan5485 2011).

Theorist John Berger talks about human perception and how the brain is hard wired to associate what we know/believe with what we see "the mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity..." (Berger, 1972, p 51). Charles Sanders Peirce proposed the index, symbol and icon triad to help explain his idea of semiotic analyses. The theory suggests that the icon for a slice of pizza could be an illustration of any level of detail, the index would be associated with a slice of pizza, i.e., the box or a cheese pull and finally the symbol would be the written word 'pizza' or the translation of whatever language one speaks to refer to it (*Charles Pierce's sign categories* (n.d.)).

Using the theories to analyse Martin's painting can help me to gain a deeper understanding of the scene without necessarily needing context. The man who stands on the cliff is placed way above the soldiers who trail after him on the other side of the river. This could suggest a power dynamic in that the figure on the cliffs has an advantage or dominion over the soldiers. The fact he is also wearing red could symbolise danger, rage or even that he is a target, which proves true after learning the context. There are two birds behind the man, one perched on the edge of the cliff and the other flying in front of it. This could symbolise the man's desire to be free from the predicament he finds himself in or foreshadowing his intentions of jumping.

To conclude, I believe that Romanticism had a beautiful aim of reconnecting humans with the natural beauties of our world. I love that it came as a result of likeminded individuals fighting for change in a society with backwards morals and priorities. I was able to notice the similarities in core beliefs between the movement and other art movements while acknowledging its undeniable uniqueness. Learning more about semiotics helped me to understand how we communicate and perceive whilst appreciating the incredible skill, passion and detail the artists of this movement gave to their magnificent works.

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