

Different Kinds of Defamiliarization: *Stimmung* versus *Lichtung*

0. Preliminary Remarks

This document is the full textual story behind my presentation given at the third *Too Mad To Be True* conference on 30th and 31st October 2024 in the city of Ghent. My contribution was announced as ‘Psychosis, Contextualization and Disinhibition’ and in the accompanying abstract I promised to engage with Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary* and Louis A. Sass’ *Madness and Modernism*. And so I did. My focus will be on Sass’ notion of *Stimmung* which he uses in his book as a word to describe incipient psychosis. It is this word which I tried to link to the word *Lichtung* in my book *De overtocht: Filosofische blik op een psychose*, (which translates as *The Crossing: Philosophical View on a Psychosis*) which was published in 2021.

This attempt to connect Sass’ key word to my personal experience of incipient psychosis was not really a success. Somehow the match didn’t seem convincing to me. Hence, I stuck to my own word *Lichtung*.¹ When starting to read McGilchrist’s book, I thought I found some clues as to why Sass’ voluminous study only partially managed to cover my experience. Anybody present in the audience who is familiar with the work of Iain McGilchrist will surmise that this presentation will be concerned with the left and the right brain hemispheres. And to a certain extent it will. But basically, I will be trying to delineate the differences between *Stimmung* and *Lichtung* as two aesthetic/psychological categories, invoking – as both Sass and McGilchrist do in their books – a number of pictures from artistic painters.

I assume that the audience is familiar with Sass’ *Madness and Modernism*. Louis Sass gave presentations in previous *Too Mad To Be True* conferences and for this conference he is a member of the Advisory Board. So I will limit my introduction to a brief description of Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary*.

1. Introducing Iain McGilchrist

The four disciplines Iain McGilchrist is qualified in – literary criticism, philosophy, psychiatry and neuroscience – each play an important role in his best-selling *The Master and His Emissary* which was first published in 2009. The reader may come across poems by William Wordsworth, explorations of 20th century phenomenology, observations about schizophrenia and many pages are devoted to the way the brain is wired. The main topic of this very rich book is lateralization, or the relationship between the two different brain hemispheres.

According to McGilchrist, the relationship between the two hemispheres is, or rather should be, dialectical. It is in this way, with a phrase combining neuroscience and philosophy, I would like to characterize McGilchrist's main statement. On a cultural, but also on an individual level, the brain hemispheres should – but often don't – come together in a final synthesis.² One of the parables, if I may use this word, McGilchrist employs for illustrating this dialectical movement is the story of a musician learning to perform a piece of music. It is on first hearing the piece of music that the right hemisphere is activated – as it is in all new experiences. After a first hearing the musician may relisten to the piece and decide to put it into her repertoire. She will then proceed to take the piece of music apart, studying it, analyzing it – now employing the left hemisphere and the kind of attention it is specialized in. In doing so, the musician will be making sometimes minute decisions about how he or she will learn to perform certain sections of the piece, single bars even. At the end, the artist will perform the work of music as a whole, and we find the results of all the diligence and focused attention synthesized in a beautiful musical performance. The sense of wholeness is as it were given back to the more holistic right hemisphere which now picks the fruits of all the left hemisphere's work. The anti-thetical analytic work is as it were 'sublated' in the final mastering of the piece.

This dialectical movement is also reflected by the title of McGilchrist's book. The 'Master' is a metaphor for the right hemisphere, whereas the 'Emissary' stands for the left hemisphere. In this rather hierarchical world, the emissary is supposed to return to the master, but – this is the central concern expressed by Iain McGilchrist – we will often find the emissary starting of his own. The process described then becomes one in which the left hemisphere gets disinhibited and starts to create its own world view, a view which is limited to its specialization of analyzing and taking things apart, a view which may be called mechanistic and reductionist. In the second part of his book McGilchrist traces the development of the left hemisphere's posture into a limited, one-sided – this adjective is very apt in this context! – world view within a cultural historical context, relating the emissary's disobedience particularly to the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Modernism together with Postmodernism.

Yes, modernism! Here we clearly have an intersection with the work of Louis Sass. The influence of Sass on McGilchrist's book is vast. Instead of showing this or instead of trying to prove this, I think it suffices to offer a quote from the very first page of my edition of *The Master and His Emissary*, the note written in 2012 under the heading 'acknowledgments'. I will quote the first paragraph of this note in full:

Charles II apologized that he had been 'an unconscionable time a-dying'. This book has been an unconscionable time in coming to birth. The intellectual debts I have incurred during the twenty

years I have been gestating it are many, and I can mention only a few. First and foremost, as will be obvious to many readers, I am hugely indebted to the ground-breaking work of John Cutting³, especially to his *Principles of Psychopathology*, which was a revelation to me, but also to much else of his thought, research and conversation over the years, all of which has helped me more than I can say; and of Louis Sass, particularly his *Madness & Modernism* and *The Paradoxes of Delusion*. Their massively important work stands behind every page I have written; and, whether or not I have been able to make much of the view, they are the giants on whose shoulders I stand. Both have been generous in their encouragement, and Louis Sass has given liberally of his time in reading various versions of this book, in the process making many valuable suggestions, for which I am deeply grateful.⁴

Yes, with the theme of ‘modernism’ we have an intersection, and not a small one at that – an intersection where, I presume, a lot of intellectual traffic has passed by during conversations and other



Figure 1: Intersection

exchanges hidden from the public eye. In *The Master and His Emissary*, the theme of schizophrenia is linked to an unruly left hemisphere, and it is in particular in the chapter about the intellectual and artistic history of modernism, but not only there, that we can sometimes hear, as it were, Louis Sass’ voice behind the screen.⁵ Both Sass and McGilchrist write about defamiliarization, decontextualization, alienation and fragmentation in relationship to modernism and schizophrenia, and it is McGilchrist who is trying to convince the reader that the neurobiological substrate of these tendencies can be found in, to use one of his phrases, a ‘freewheeling left hemisphere’.⁶

2. Traffic lights without traffic

I want to start this paragraph with an anecdote taken from Sass' *Madness and Modernism*.⁷ As so often in his book, Sass puts writings from modernist and postmodernist authors side by side to expressions from people suffering from, what he consistently calls, 'schizophrenia'. This time it is Jacques Derrida's turn, as a postmodernist thinker, to be compared to a genuine 'schizophrenic'. The context of the story is the problem of contexts itself – that is, the problem of decontextualization. After having quoted from Derrida's famous essay 'Signature Event Context', pointing at Derrida's idea that the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence can never be 'contained by its context', Sass stages a 'schizophrenic' man in a traffic situation:

Similar processes seem to be involved in the schizophrenic's tendency to be acutely conscious of alternative meanings of words, meanings that are normally ignored due to their contextual irrelevance. [...] And in everyday life they often perceive ambiguities and alternative meanings that would normally go unnoticed. Out on a walk together, one schizophrenic patient and a colleague of mine passed a Pedestrian Crossing sign that read 'Ped Xing'; turning to his therapist, the patient said, in a voice laden with irony, 'Now we are entering the Chinese village.' Noticing this kind of potential meaning in the sign, suggests a particularly fluid and speculative mode of perception, and this would seem to require a certain disengagement from the conventional context of practical reality (in this case, the traffic and streets).⁸

The strange thing is that when I read this passage for the first time in Sass' book, it was also an association with something Chinese that came to my mind at first. I have never seen a 'Ped Xing' sign in real life, and to understand Sass' story I first had to decipher this phrase. Yes, actually it is a rebus. 'Ped' is an abbreviation of 'Pedestrian', and the form of the letter X stands for 'cross'. So I would say this contextual jump to China is, at first glance, not that strange after all and does not require a 'particularly fluid and speculative mode of perception' as Sass says. I would rather say it is common and most of the time innocent.



Figure 2: Traffic lights and a Ped Xing sign

In the image shown here, taken from internet, the comment in Spanish says: ‘English lesson: “Ped Xing” is not a street in China.’⁹ In fact, not being able to solve the rebus proves to be a quite common experience and you can enjoy many more riddles like these on the Reddit website under the heading: ‘Up until a few years ago I didn’t know what the PED XING sign meant. What are some silly things that took you years to figure out the truth to?’¹⁰ My criticism on Sass would here not be that the Ped Xing sign is an ill-chosen example. The point is that the experience of the association with China would only become problematic if the Chinese village would overrule the traffic situation, or, if it would make the patient ignore the traffic lights. Unfortunately, Sass’s story does not tell us.

In my book *The Crossing*, while discussing the concept of ‘contextual salience’¹¹, I briefly mention an aesthetic experience with real traffic lights. It is something I still can undergo on winter days, and also here I presume it is quite common and innocent. When driving a car it is just a brief aesthetic flash passing by:

Sometimes, especially on gray November days, I can be moved by the cheerful bright colors of traffic lights, but I always manage to stop when a light turns red. When the aesthetic pleasure of traffic lights colors or traffic signs starts to play a serious role while driving, when that pleasure starts to overrule the proper traffic sign meanings, then things really start to get strange. And dangerous.¹²

So here, I am not distracted by a sign near a traffic light with a mysterious message on it, but by the sheer beauty, by the colors of the traffic light itself. Perhaps this experience may be a bit strange out in the city traffic, but within a museum, looking at a picture of a traffic light in aesthetic contemplation, it would be the standard attitude. To stop walking for a red light in a museum, and to continue walking for a green light really would be strange.

I will go on to show two artworks displaying traffic lights. Again, as in Sass' story, you won't see any streets or any traffic. These pictures both show a decontextualized, or defamiliarized traffic light.

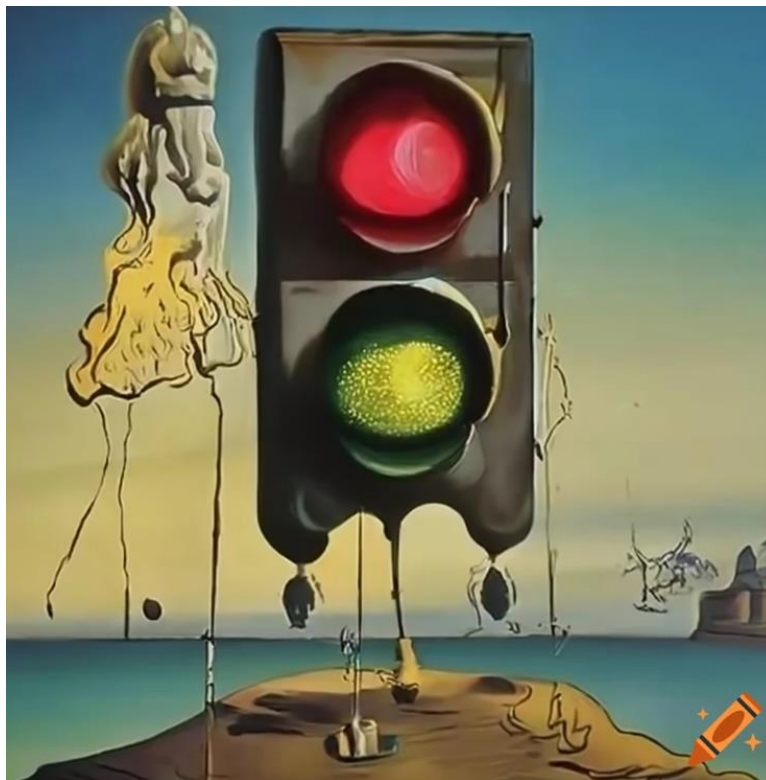


Figure 3: Surrealist painting of melting traffic lights

The first example reminds one of surrealistic painting.¹³ The straight horizon and the strange figure left to the traffic light is reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's famous painting *The Temptation of St. Anthony*.



Figure 4: Salvador Dalí, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*.

It is a strange traffic light with the yellow light missing. If you look at the underside of the traffic light frame, it seems to be dripping or melting. Also this way of making solid objects flabby can be found in the paintings by Salvador Dalí, particularly the clocks or watches in *The Persistence of Memory*.



Figure 5: Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*

In this picture the landscape really resembles the traffic painting just shown. If you click on the image, you will see the video in the YouTube Encyclopaedia Britannica-channel with a voice-over relating this piece of art to defamiliarization.¹⁴

My second example is also an aesthetic rendering of a traffic light. Also, here there are no streets, no pedestrians or cars, also here you see a traffic light without traffic.



Figure 6: Terry Banderas, *A Bird and Traffic Light*

So also here we have a specimen of defamiliarization. It is a painting made by Terry Banderas, and the artist comments: 'My painting shows an everyday traffic light that we all take for granted.'¹⁵ The artist's comment here underscores the phrase used for Salvador Dalí paintings – 'presenting familiar objects, but presenting them in unfamiliar ways'. This is also what Banderas does, not taking a familiar object for granted. But here the atmosphere is wholly different as it is in the Dalí-like painting.

Apparently, there are different ways to defamiliarize. The first picture takes one to an eerie landscape where the traffic light is placed in a world of sea and sand. We are far removed from the places where you might expect to see traffic lights – city areas, tarmac way, crossings with cars, bicycles and pedestrians, or what you might call the traffic lights' 'proper context'.

In the second picture any explicit suggestion to city traffic is absent as well. The traffic light is, as it were, isolated, taken out of its context yet without being put into a different, alien context. The only addition the artist made is a tiny little bird sitting on the cable the traffic light is suspended on. And this is something one might actually witness in a real traffic situation. You will see many nice photographs if you google on 'bird' and 'traffic light'. So though defamiliarization is certainly present in this picture, it is not wrong to call it a realistic picture. The scene is not a dreamscape. Time, space, gravity still function as they do in the normal world, and there is no infringement on cityscapes or ecospheres as we know them.

Still the visual experience of the traffic light is more intense. To borrow a phrase from the literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, a phrase we will return to at the end of this paper, it offers a 'sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known'.¹⁶ Instead of taking it for granted as we would do as a pedestrian or a car driver, we rediscover the traffic light as a visual object and start looking at it with our eyes. We really 'see' it, as if we see it for the first time.

In the next paragraphs I will pursue these two different ways of defamiliarizing. The painters I will be most concerned with are Giorgio de Chirico and Vincent van Gogh. I will show a number of pictures divided into two groups, and I would like to invite the reader to try to sense the different moods these two groups of pictures convey.

3. *Stimmung*

Surrealism is very much present in *Madness and Modernism*, and before I say something more about the way Sass relates surrealism to 'schizophrenia' I will show a number of pictures that are displayed in the book itself.

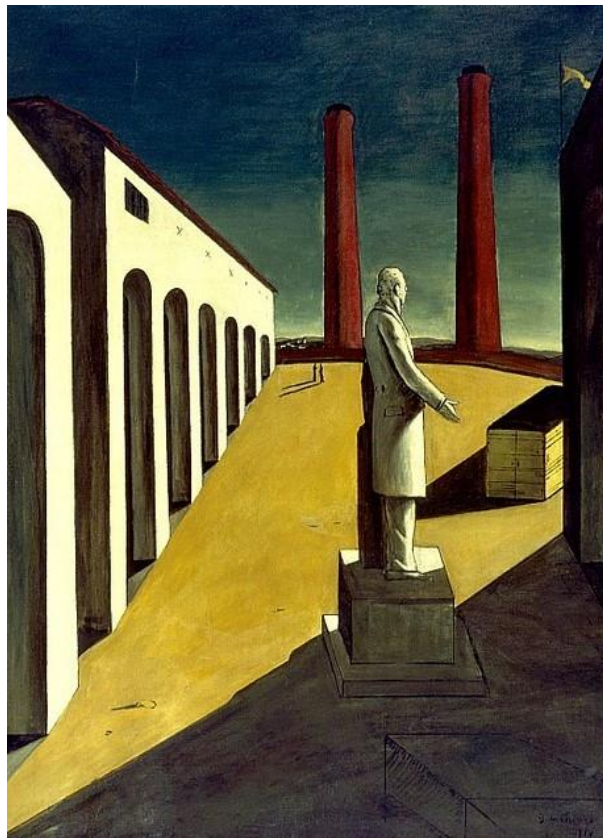


Figure 7: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*



Figure 8: Giorgio de Chirico, *Gare Montparnasse (Melancholy of Departure)*



Figure 9: Yves Tanguy, *The Furniture of Time*

Everybody familiar with surrealism would agree that the number of examples of estranging pictures easily can be extended. However strange these pictures are in themselves, they still clearly have something in common. The painting by Yves Tanguy shown here is made twenty years later than the

paintings by De Chirico, but in terms of art history they can be described in one story, the story of surrealism, a story in which artists influence each other and take the cues for their visual landscapes from predecessors. In this story, as Louis Sass explains, Giorgio de Chirico is an important forerunner of the surrealist movement, which had its apex in the 20s and 30s of the 20th century. Apparently, the portentous landscapes of De Chirico appealed to many other modernist artists, and so there is reason – for both Louis Sass and Iain McGilchrist – to wonder how these developments in art history relate to psychopathology in general and to schizophrenia in particular.

Louis Sass picks out De Chirico to embark on his story of madness. After an introductory chapter, he begins his second chapter with a long quotation from De Chirico’s diary and calls his pictures to the help for describing an ‘emotional and perceptual experience’ related to a state of incipient psychosis. The word he employs for this ‘preceding aura’ of psychosis is the German word – also taken from De Chirico – *Stimmung*.¹⁷ With the help of the book *The Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl: The True Story of “Renee”*, Sass attempts to create a map of this *Stimmung* experience, describing four experiential aspects which will also function as reference points to return to in later chapters in his book.¹⁸ ‘Like many of de Chirico’s paintings,’ Sass writes, ‘Renee’s world of Unreality lacked the chiaroscuro of normal forms of perception – the quality in which some objects, those deemed subjectively more important, are as if lit up in the focus of awareness while others recede into obscurity.’¹⁹

Having mapped de Chirico’s *Stimmung* to incipient psychosis with the help of the witness of a schizophrenic named Renee, and with a focus on art which is called ‘modernist’, Sass embarks on his journey linking art and psychopathology. It is a journey, as he makes clear from the start, which is not concerned with *all* kinds of psychoses. ‘Schizophrenia’ is the consistent psychopathological term Sass uses throughout his book. ‘I must stress, however,’ Sass writes, ‘that I will not be concerned in this book with *all* forms of insanity, but only with certain types.’²⁰ Manic psychoses, for instance, are explicitly excluded from the over-all theoretical frame.²¹ Sass will be using words as ‘madness’, ‘insanity’, ‘psychosis’ regularly, but having the ‘schizophrenic’ as the main protagonist of his storyline – the book will become, for anyone who has gone through a non-classified psychosis, a challenge to relate to.

A more accurate title for his book then probably would have been *Schizophrenia and Modernism*, but instead Sass chose a better sounding word, the alliterating word ‘madness’. When he uses the more general terms, like ‘madness’, ‘psychosis’, or ‘insanity’, we, as readers, are sometimes dealing with descriptions and evocations that only apply to a section from all the patients who have undergone psychosis.²² This one-sidedness (heed the metaphor again!) is carried over into *The Master and His Emissary*. In this book we find madness – like Louis Sass also Iain McGilchrist sticks to the word ‘schizophrenia’ – related to a dysregulated left hemisphere.

When I first read *Madness and Modernism* I tried to relate my personal experience to the evocations in this book. And yes, there are many things Sass writes about I can relate to, including, to some extent, the eerie atmosphere of De Chirico’s paintings. Nevertheless, in writing my book, I did not take over this word *Stimmung* and De Chirico as an exemplary painter. I chose for another painter and another German word for describing incipient psychosis. The painter is Vincent van Gogh, and the word is *Lichtung*.

4. *Lichtung*

Before I say something more about this *Lichtung* I will show two painting by Vincent van Gogh, one of which I used as an illustration in *The Crossing*.



Figure 11: Vincent van Gogh, *Two Cut Sunflowers*

The first one is entitled '*Two Cut Sunflowers*'. The state these sunflowers are in suggests that, in real life, they would soon be thrown away. Here they are – probably after a brief time of domestic radiance in a vase – isolated and brought to the spectator's eye with an unidentifiable blue surface as background. Van Gogh's painting makes the beauty of the sunflowers persist after their usual brief flowering time and in this way the painting extends our usual sense of the beauty of flowers.

The second example I want to show is Van Gogh painting *Shoes*. In their aesthetic logic, both paintings clearly resemble the painting of the traffic light by Terry Banderas shown before.



Figure 10: Vincent van Gogh, *Shoes*

The shoes in this painting are clearly defamiliarized: there are no feet, there is nobody walking or pulling them on or off, there are no roads to walk on. Usually old shoes like these are taken for granted, they are just used, or, in this stage, they may be – just like the cut sunflowers – thrown away. But to the onlooker they are shown as objects to contemplate, or even to admire for their visual beauty.

In my book I tried to link my experience of incipient psychosis to what is usually called ‘aesthetic experience’.²³ Often such aesthetic experiences are related to moments of intense beauty, when confronted with an impressive piece of art, music or natural scenery. We can think of a world as if painted by Rembrandt, or as if painted by Vermeer, or as if painted by Caravaggio. The main reason to choose Van Gogh as a vehicle for this experience is his way of extending his vision of beauty unto objects and scenes that are usually deemed negligible or even ugly. More as in impressionistic painting, Van Gogh’s paintings offer a tension between the piece as an object of beauty and as a thing of everyday usage. Here we may run into feelings of aesthetic bliss overruling the exigencies of everyday life.

The word I chose to employ for this experience is the word ‘*Lichtung*’, taken from the work of Martin Heidegger. Van Gogh makes the sunflowers and the shoes as it were ‘light up’, makes beauty shine through at places that – within the context of everyday life – are usually ignored or don’t even seem to deserve any attention from an aesthetic point of view.

To some degree, borrowing this term *Lichtung* is problematic, because Heidegger avoids writing about aesthetic experiences. In his eyes experience [*Erlebnis*] does not qualify as a road to truly understanding

works of art.²⁴ Heidegger's *Lichtung* is a very complicated notion which only starts to occur later in his work. It is a word which carries a sense of Truth that can be contrasted to, for instance, the '*idées clair et distincts*' from René Descartes, or the '*adaequatio rei et intellectus*' from St. Thomas Aquinas. In Heidegger's world Truth appears as 'unconcealment' [*Unverborgenheit*], which is also a translation of the Greek word '*aletheia*'. The *Lichtung* is a play of darkness and light, concealment and unconcealment, and one of the privileged places for this unconcealing light is the work of art.

A famous later treatise by Heidegger in which the *Lichtung* and its relationship to art is at the centre of attention is *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36) (*The Origin of the Work of Art*). In this work a Greek temple, a poem and a painting are taken as examples for conveying this typical sense of Truth. The painting Heidegger chooses is exactly Vincent van Gogh's painting of – as Heidegger assumes them to be – peasant shoes we have shown above.²⁵ Also in this text we can find passages which emphasize the way the painting defamiliarizes the shoes:

From the painting by Van Gogh, we cannot even ascertain where these shoes stand. There is nothing around this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they could belong, only an indeterminate space. Not even clumps of earth from the field or from the field-path cling to them, which at least could point to how they are used. A pair of peasant shoes, and nothing further. And yet.²⁶

Yet after these descriptions of the sheer canvass follows an evocative, poetic passage in which Heidegger tries to reach out to the Truth of these shoes. In contrast to definitions in terms of matter and form, or other traditional philosophical ways of designating truth, the shoes as painted by van Gogh now come into being as shoes that really have been used, as shoes that form part of peoples' lives. Yet the people to whom these shoes might belong themselves, usually would hardly notice them in the way Van Gogh does – familiar as they are with them:

The peasant woman, for her part, simply wears the shoes. If only this simple wearing were so simple. Whenever the peasant woman puts her shoes away in the late evening in severe but healthy tiredness, or in the still dark dawning of morning grabs them once again, or on a holiday passes them by, then she knows all this even without paying attention or considering it.²⁷

What we see in Van Gogh's picture are two shoes within an undefined space, almost forcing the watcher to really look at them. Every reference to the use of these shoes, every reference to an everyday world, is removed, is cleared away. Yes, by 'clearing away' the familiar, a 'clearing' is created – and 'clearing' is the word with which Heidegger's *Lichtung* is usually translated into English.

It is often remarked that Heidegger's language is highly abstract, which is a view on his language or a way of experiencing his language I cannot fully agree with.²⁸ One of the peculiar things of Heidegger's language is that it often does not comply to the binary divide between abstract and concrete language. Often metaphoric substructures resonate through his texts and even may rise to the surface and start to play a role in his philosophical argument. The German word *Ursprung*, for example, does not only designate 'origin', but in a text written by Heidegger may also carry with it the notion of a 'primeval jump'.

This metaphorical undercurrent is particularly strong in the way Heidegger uses the word '*Lichtung*'. The concrete, 'literal' meaning of the word '*Lichtung*' is 'an open space in the forest' and the usual translation into English, '*clearing*', is in this sense very apt. In another text employing the word *Lichtung* Heidegger himself remarks that the work derives from the French '*clairière*' – a space within the forest where vegetation, bush and trees have been removed, and a space is cleared where light may shine through.²⁹ If you google on *Lichtung* or *clearing* or *clairière* you come across very beautiful pictures as the one I show here.

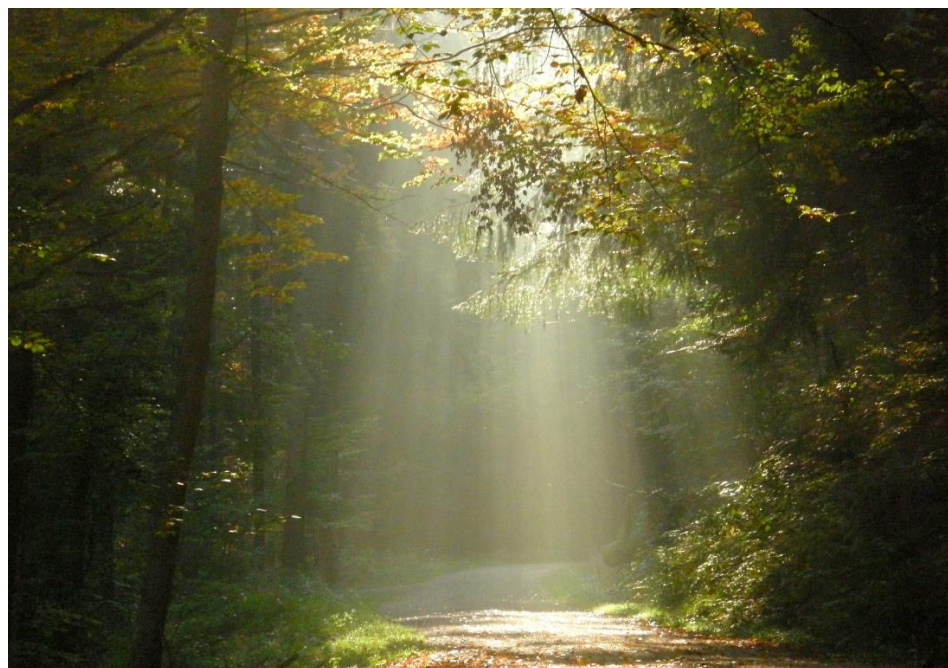


Figure 12: *Lichtung*³⁰

In Heidegger's text the *Lichtung* has an intended aesthetic dimension to it, and it is the image of a clearing in the forest I adopted as the main symbol for the cover of my book and for the supporting website.³¹

In *The Master and His Emissary* Iain McGilchrist pays quite some attention to the history of phenomenology, writing paragraphs about Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Max Scheler. Compared to more 'exact' or rational philosophical currents, like cartesianism or logical positivism, phenomenology in general seems to be more friendly to the right hemisphere type of attention. Furthermore, the work of Martin Heidegger in particular has his special interest because McGilchrist takes his attitude to experiencing the world as a philosophical counterpart of William Wordsworth seeking after ways of experiencing the world 'as if seen for the first time'.³²

For this relationship McGilchrist picks up the notion of 'authenticity'. 'Authenticity' then functions as a kind of restoration of the world as it is given to the sense, instead of being known and understood in a mindset governed by routine and habit.³³ So in discussing Heidegger and 'authenticity' we find McGilchrist writing explicitly on making the familiar unfamiliar:

The routine of daily life, in which things have their familiar place and order (right hemisphere), can dull things into what Heidegger called inauthenticity (left hemisphere), through the very weight of familiarity, and in my terms its left hemisphere re-presentation comes to take the place of the thing itself (broadly the *idea* of the hammer replaces the thing as it is experienced). [...] As things become dulled and inauthentic, they become conceptualized rather than experienced.³⁴

Here the subject of defamiliarization is clearly broached, echoing the formula from Victor Shklovsky we already quoted: a 'sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known'.

5. Defamiliarization

The word defamiliarization as we use it here, derives from the work of Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984). Shklovsky was a Russian literary critic affiliated to the avant-garde, which flourished shortly after the bolshevist revolution in 1917 till the 30s, a brief period in which Russian art and literature seemed to be in tune with modernist currents in other countries in Europe. As a literary critic he was part of what came to be known as Russian Formalism. This peculiar period in Russian art history, the voices of which would soon be stifled with the rise of Stalinism, spawned works of poetry, painting and music that seem to be part of a broader modernist current. So the link between the insights of Shklovsky and the developments in surrealist painting are, to say the least, subtle and complex. What we can read in Shklovsky's most famous essay 'Art as Technique', is that he wanted to raise his ideas on defamiliarization to a more general aesthetic theory, expanding it to other canonized literary writers such as Miguel de Cervantes, Laurence Sterne and Leonid Tolstoy.

In the introductory notes to this essay the Russian term 'ostraneniye' is introduced – literally 'making it strange', a word which is consistently translated as 'defamiliarization' by Sass and McGilchrist. It is this concept which for Shklovsky makes the difference between literature and non-literature. The writer of the introduction to *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* explains this concept by offering car-driving as a major example:

Shklovsky's argument, briefly stated, is that the habitual way of thinking is to make the unfamiliar as easily digestible as possible. Normally our perceptions are 'automatic', which is another way of saying that they are minimal. From this standpoint, learning is largely a matter of learning to ignore. We have not really learned to drive an automobile, for example, until we are able to react to the relevant traffic lights, pedestrians, other motorists, road conditions, and so on, with a minimum of conscious effort. Eventually, we may even react properly without actually noticing what we are reacting to – we miss the pedestrian but fail to see what he looks like.³⁵

Learning, then, or getting used to things, integrating things in everyday life, is making the unfamiliar familiar, as much as the pictures we have been discussing attempt to make the familiar unfamiliar again.

When discussing the Russian formalists in *Madness and Modernism*, Louis Sass links this defamiliarization to the *Stimmung*:

Victor Shklovsky, the leader of the Russian formalists defined art as defamiliarization ('making it strange') [...] According to this futurist/formalist view, art's essential role was to overcome the numbing of perception that accompanies the automatizing of actions frequently performed. [...] Achieving this kind of illuminating awareness naturally requires that one displaces oneself from all standard action patterns and familiar modes of perception. Shklovsky describes several techniques for doing this. [...] Such techniques are very reminiscent of the truth-taking stare³⁶;

and the experiences they were designed to bring about involve the same qualities of fragmentation and uncanny hyperclarity that are characteristic of the *Stimmung*.³⁷

Giorgio de Chirico and Viktor Shklovsky are also present in Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary*. And in this book the question of defamiliarization is intimately related to the idea that the familiar is processed by the left hemisphere, whereas the unfamiliar is processed by the right hemisphere. When writing about De Chirico, McGilchrist is on track with Louis Sass:

In fact a remarkable number of the leading figures of modernism displayed schizoid or schizotypal features: Nietzsche, de Nerval, De Chirico, Dalí, Wittgenstein, Kafka, Bartok, Stravinsky, Webern, Stockhausen and Beckett are just a few that spring to mind. (By contrast a remarkable number of Romantic artists – and indeed artists of all times other than the modern – exhibited the contrasting features of affective conditions such as melancholia or bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder). [...] This combination of anxiety or fear with boredom and indifference is also remarkably like the emotional range of the schizophrenic subject, where apathy and indifference are varied mainly by paranoia. Both schizophrenia and the modern condition, I suggest, deal with the same problem: a free-wheeling left hemisphere.³⁸

But then, when Shklovsky is mentioned, a bifurcation emerges in the route map, in which a disinhibition of the left hemisphere is opposed to a return to or a synthesis with the right hemisphere. For these two kinds of defamiliarization McGilchrist employs two different words – ‘newness’ and ‘novelty’ – a distinction that is important to McGilchrist's larger argument and that runs through the book as a whole. We find a crucial passage in the section on Romanticism:

The deadening effect of the familiar – the inauthentic, in phenomenological terms – is the trap of the left hemisphere. Breaking out of it requires the work of the imagination – not fantasy which makes things novel, but imagination that makes them new, alive once more. A defining quality of the artistic process, perhaps its *raison d'être*, is its implacable opposition to the inauthentic. However, there is an absolute distinction, even an antithesis, here being made between two ways of responding to the experience of the inauthentic. [...] In the first case, the solution is seen as lying in a conscious attempt to produce novelty, something never seen before. To invent, to be ‘original’. In the second, the solution, by contrast, is to make the everyday appear to us anew, to be seen again as it is in itself.³⁹

‘Novelty’ then, versus ‘newness’... These two words by and large correspond to the pictures of the traffic lights I started my story with. On the one hand there is surrealism, which just offers ‘novelty’, on the other hand there is a contrasting aesthetic mode of defamiliarizing which leads to genuine ‘newness’. The cultural-historical center of gravity of this newness is to be located, as McGilchrist has it, in Romanticism. The most important Romantic presence in *The Master and His Emissary* is William Wordsworth – as an

exemplary figure in whose poetry we can witness the 'emissary' returning to the 'master' he was sent from. The Wordsworthian 'recollection in tranquility' is one relevant phrase with which the Romantic poet tried to recapture, among other things, the newness experienced in one's youth or early childhood.

The distinction between 'novelty' and 'newness' then also corresponds to the difference between respectively *Stimmung* and *Lichtung*. Let us follow the quotation from above:

In the second, the solution, by contrast, is to make the everyday appear to us anew, to be seen again as it is in itself, therefore to discover rather than invent, to see what was there all along, rather than put something new in its place, original in the sense that it takes us back to the origin, the ground of being. This is the distinction between fantasy, which presents something novel *in the place of* the too familiar thing, and imagination, which clears away everything between us and the not familiar enough thing so that we see *it* itself, new, as it is.⁴⁰

In this passage, which is not so much about aesthetic experience but more about an integrative reappraisal of the world as it is, a kind psychological homecoming, we see the wonderful light of the Heideggerian *Lichtung* or 'clearing' shine through. The clearing of trees, bush and other vegetation in the forest then comes to carry the image of clearing an object from its sediments of habit and routine.

An interesting question then is, how will McGilchrist judge the propositions of Viktor Shklovsky? Will he follow Sass in relating them to the *Stimmung* – that is to surrealism, and related modernist artistic currents? Certainly, McGilchrist would not come to a frontal disagreement with Sass, for he is aware that the relationship between Shklovsky and surrealism is, as we said, subtle and complex. Historically, and also in terms of moods and trends, Shklovsky is affiliated to surrealism, yet McGilchrist finally decides that Shklovsky's defamiliarization is closer to the *Lichtung* than to the *Stimmung*. I will offer a lengthy quote in which McGilchrist states his argument:

As modernism progresses, alienation, through shock and novelty, becomes a defense against the boredom and inauthenticity of modernity. The inauthenticity against which modernism reacted is not in doubt. But there are [...] two directions in which, under such circumstances, one might go. One can see the problem as a *contingent* loss of the authenticity of the right-hemisphere world and try to re-engage the right hemisphere, by patiently clearing away the adhesions of familiarity overlying one's subject.⁴¹

Note these words 'clearing away' – without doubt we are in the vicinity of the Heideggerian *Lichtung*, the clearing which brings, as we have explained, sunflowers or shoes or traffic lights into their true Being. McGilchrist goes on:

Or one can see the right hemisphere's world as *intrinsically* inauthentic and try to sweep it away altogether. Newness (seeing afresh what one thought of as familiar, as though for the first time – the patient process of Romanticism) and novelty (deliberately disturbing the representation of reality in an attempt to 'shock' oneself into something that feels unfamiliar) are contrary concepts. Viktor Shklovsky's call, in his essay 'Art as Technique', to 'make it strange' could represent either.⁴²

So here we have a contrast between the 'newness' of Van Gogh and the 'novelty' de Chirico. As for Shklovsky himself, McGilchrist focuses on the width of his vision and particularly appreciates how he notes 'that Tolstoy "describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time"'. And then he offers a quote from Shklovsky's short essay which resonates through the whole of his book, as it resonates through the whole of this article:


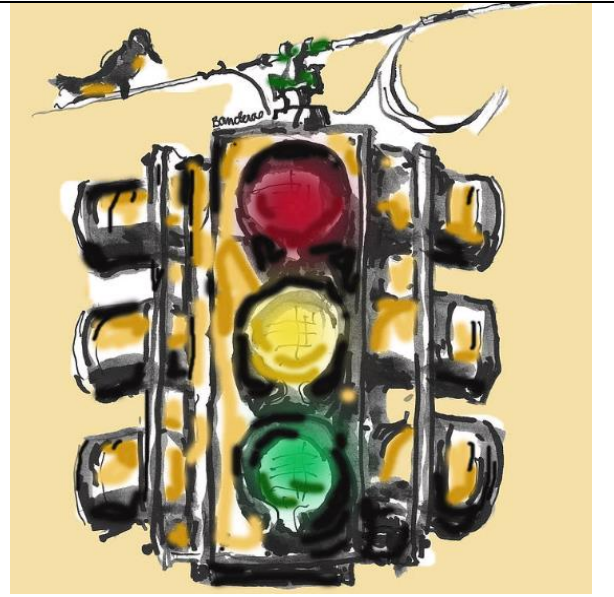
Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war [...] art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known...⁴³

And, after having repeated this last phrase, McGilchrist concludes:

I would therefore make an important distinction between Shklovsky and the majority of those who espoused the slogan of 'make it new'. But Shklovsky's more subtle understanding, representing the right hemisphere's bid to take back to authenticity what had become exhausted by overfamiliarity was not to prevail.

Coda

So we ended with the question of what type of defamiliarization Viktor Shklovsky, the writer who brought this idea to attention within aesthetic theory, really was aiming at. Of course we do not have to decide on this question, and I think the most important observation made by Iain McGilchrist is: ‘Viktor Shklovsky’s call, in his essay “Art as Technique”, to “make it strange” could represent either.’ There are two different ways to make the familiar unfamiliar, and I will end my story with the key terms or key ideas we can find in *The Master and His Emissary* for describing this distinction.

	
Giorgio de Chirico	Vincent van Gogh
Surrealism	Romanticism
Novelty	Newness
Fantasy	Imagination
<i>Stimmung</i>	<i>Lichtung</i>
Empirical Rationalism	Phenomenology
Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
Schizophrenia	Other types of psychoses

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¹ Vorstenbosch 2021, see paragraph 2.4, 'Into the light...,' ('Naar het licht...'). After quoting from Louis Sass writing on the *Stimmung* (Sass 1992, p.44) I proceed with: '*Stimmung* – I will stick to my word *Lichtung* – the longer it lasts, the creepier it gets' (p. 74).

² Words like 'synthesis' and 'thesis', echoing Hegel's philosophy, can be found throughout *The Master and His Emissary*. Hegelian dialectics is explicitly highlighted in the paragraph 'Reintegration as *Aufhebung*', p.203-207.

³ John Cutting (1952-) is a British psychiatrist who has written on brain hemispheres and schizophrenia. His *Principles of Psychopathology: Two Worlds – Two Minds – Two Hemispheres* was published in 1997.

⁴ McGilchrist, viii.

⁵ *Madness and Modernism* is not really concerned with brain lateralization, though the subject is treated in the appendix 'Neurobiological Considerations', see particularly the section 'The Laterality Hypothesis' (p.392-397).

⁶ McGilchrist 2009, 403. I will return to this phrase 'freewheeling left hemisphere', which is reminiscent of feedback loops and disinhibition.

⁷ This same passage is discussed in *De Overtocht*, p.39.

⁸ Sass 1992, p.204. Shortly after the Ped Xing story, Sass mentions a 'seemingly meaningless string – "green is or"' – Derrida, like schizophrenics, manages to give meaning to in his "Signature Event Context". Sass does not mention the fact that this string is actually taken from Husserl and his discussion of meaninglessness in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1901). In three paragraphs in the first chapter of *De overtocht* – 1.2 Green is or, 1.3 Le vert est ou, 1.4 Grün ist oder - there is an extensive discussion of this philosophical debate.

⁹ Taken from: <https://x.com/sheilagalle/status/723127704296513536> (accessed September 30th 2024).

¹⁰ See https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/h2jsg/up_until_a_few_years_ago_i_didnt_know_what_the/ (accessed September 30th 2024).

¹¹ 'Contextual salience' is a term taken from Shitij Kapur, who understands psychosis as 'dysregulated contextual salience'. See Kapur 2003. The subject is discussed in the first paragraph of *De overtocht* – 1.1 Contextuele saillantie (p.21-24).

¹² Vorstenbosch 2021, p.41.

¹³ The image is generated by AI and found on <https://www.crayon.com/image/elfCrAFzRqS1wvVdWfDKRA> (accessed October 2nd 2024).

¹⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica channel on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k80rA7rM6ck> (accessed October 2nd 2024). The voiceover-text is: 'Despite the intricacies behind Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*, a two-word phrase is all any art lover needs to conjure up this work of art. Completed in 1931, Dalí's "melting clocks", quickly became a worldwide sensation and today are considered by some as the height of the Surrealist movement. Dalí specialized in art that features familiar objects, but he presented them in unfamiliar ways, embracing irrationality. Conceiving of an irrational piece required a somewhat irrational process, which Dalí calls the paranoiac-critical method. Developed in 1930, the technique relied on self-induced paranoia and hallucinations to make art and explains why so much of Dalí's work feels like a dreamscape. This includes *The Persistence of Memory* where a realistic coastal landscape, which was inspired by Dalí's hometown in Catalonia, meets unrealistic, or surreal, subject matter, in this case, a set of melting clocks. Typically known for their dependability in telling time these clocks have been rendered useless as they hang on various surfaces within the painting. While some believe that these clocks represent the 'omnipresence of time', Dalí's explanation of the inspiration behind these clocks is much simpler: They look like melting Camembert cheese' (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Image taken from <https://terrybanderas.blogspot.com/2017/08/a-bird-and-traffic-light.html> (accessed October 2nd, 2024).

¹⁶ Shklovsky 1965, p.12.

¹⁷ Sass is quoting from the memoirs of De Chirico who took up this German word from Friedrich Nietzsche, an author he was avidly reading in his younger years, Sass 1992, p.43-45. See also Soby, p.28.

¹⁸ To a certain extent the history of the beginning and the cure of the psychopathological illness called 'schizophrenia' in the biography of an individual patient, is something which underlies the structure of *Madness and Modernism* as a whole. It is the story which begins with the *Stimmung* and may end with feelings of 'regret for the sense of intensity, superiority, or safety they have lost, but probably more often with feelings of relief for having come through reasonably intact' (p.353). This Renee – actually the fictional name of one of Marguerite Sechehaye's patients – functions as the most important protagonist in this biographical subcurrent. She is also present in the background of the Ped Xing story. *Madness and Modernism* notably ends with the story of Renee's homecoming,

see p.353-354. In *De overtocht* I pay extensive attention to Sass ending in the paragraph 6.2 'Hervonden werkelijkheid' (Reality Regained).

¹⁹ Sass, p.47.

²⁰ Sass, p.5

²¹ Ibid.

²² In his first chapter of *Madness and Modernism* Sass discusses the difficulties of delineating schizophrenia and mentions that at times schizophrenia may even be equated with psychosis (see in particular p. 13-19). Still by making demarcations and excluding manic psychoses, Sass' argument, does not apply to the full range of psychopathological 'madness'.

²³ Aesthetic experiences are discussed in a separate chapter as one of the 'varieties' of spiritual experience in Yaden & Newberg 2022, p. 248-268.

²⁴ In the afterword to *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1980, 66-68) Heidegger objects to relegating the question of art to the aesthetic, which is always confined by experience (*Erlebnis*). In his view aesthetic experience separates the Beautiful from the True, whereas the Beautiful can occur as the appearance of Truth in the *Lichtung*, or 'clearing' of a work of art.

²⁵ Van Gogh painted in total eight pictures with shoes. The picture shown here is, as has been retraced by Schapiro Meyer, the picture Heidegger saw during a visit to Amsterdam in 1930 and it is this one he is referring to in his treatise. Heidegger's assumption that Van Gogh has depicted peasant shoes has been contested by Derrida (see 1978, p.255-383). These question are discussed extensively in *De overtocht*, p. 75-84. See also:

<https://bronnenpagina.nl/de-overtocht/illustraties/1> en <https://bronnenpagina.nl/de-overtocht/illustraties/3>

²⁶ Heidegger 1980, 18.

²⁷ Ibid, 19.

²⁸ Also Louis Sass seems to subscribe to this view, writing about 'Heidegger's own highly abstract prose – which, it has been said, is "untranslatable, even into German"', 191-192.

²⁹ These insights are taken from a footnote in *De oorsprong van het kunstwerk*, the translation into Dutch of *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* by Mark Wildschut & Chris Bremmers, p.66-67. See also *De overtocht* p.58-59.

³⁰ Taken from <https://www.fototapete.ch/bildkatalog/show/15110-Lichtung> (accessed October 5th, 2024).

³¹ Here I want to notice that Louis Sass chose Giorgio de Chirico's *The Seer* for the frontispiece of his *Madness and Modernism*. For the supporting website of *De overtocht*, see <https://bronnenpagina.nl/>.

³² 'Through his special use of language, particularly linguistic connectors, prepositions and conjunctions, to convey the experience of 'betweenness', his use of double negatives to present a thing and its opposite not the mind at once, and most important of all, to allow, painfully, something to come into being out of an almost luminous absence or emptiness, Wordsworth brings about poetic formulations that are often the counterparts of the positions that I believe Heidegger strove laboriously to express in discursive prose', McGilchrist, p.375.

³³ This inference from Heidegger surely may be criticized on philosophical grounds. 'Authenticity' in Heidegger is a much more complicated subject.

³⁴ McGilchrist 2009, 154.

³⁵ Shklovsky 1965, p.4. In the quotation I replaced 'stoplights' by 'traffic lights'.

³⁶ 'The Truth-Taking Stare' is the title of the first chapter in *Madness and Modernism*. It is taken from Karl Jaspers' *General Psychopathology* and is linked to the diary notes of and the atmosphere in the paintings by De Chirico. 'I will use *Stimmung* to refer to the perceptual and emotional experience in question, and "truth-taking stare" to refer to the mode of action – that is, a particular way of looking – that goes along with it.' Sass 1992, 45.

³⁷ Sass, p.63.

³⁸ McGilchrist, p. 403

³⁹ Ibid, p. 374.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 412.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.