

Art and the science of consciousness: contributions of a lesser-known Surrealist

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Amy Winter. *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002. 336 pp., 14 color ills., 20 b/w. \$77.95.

Why is it so difficult for American critics to approach this artist? The evidence of the enormous influence of Wolfgang Paalen's published writings, which is the main theme of Amy Winter's book, has repeatedly been presented in American art-historical scholarship, but has never been fundamentally analyzed. Paalen (1905?-1959) is often cited as a theoretical source for Abstract Expressionism, yet attempts to concretize this influence fail for want of deeper insight into the mode of thinking that characterizes both his writings and artwork. Winter's book, based on original research and documentation, is the most thorough American work about Paalen, with a focus on his role as anthropologist and collector and transmitter of "primitive art," and offers rich insight into this topic. But in the first and more biographical part of the book, Winter makes a fundamental error. She claims that to have an influence on Abstract Expressionism, Paalen necessarily must have been an Expressionist in his Berlin years or at least have been influenced decisively by German Expressionism. Many succeeding errors and misunderstandings have their origin in this misleading focus, mainly a combination of biographical and stylistic analysis, which is too simplifying for Paalen's cognitive, intellectual, and composed style of working. Readers get the impression that Paalen's intellectual achievements consisted in the transfer of some monistic, romantic, mystic, abstract-sublime, Jungian, and transcendentalist models and ideas to the American scene of the 1940s, ideas which in fact had been familiar to New York School artists for a long time since. But Winter cannot illuminate the origins of Paalen's "metaplastic" vision of space, which is his real contribution to American art of the 1940s. A genealogy of Expressionism simply cannot account for this material.

A few examples can make the point. There is no connection between the rhetorics of Wilhelm Worringer and Julius Meier-Graefe ("rhythmical form and primitive artistic intensity") and Paalen's rhetoric of a realm of possible forms in a non-Euclidian space in which the spectator becomes participant. Paalen's interest is entirely in the high cultures of the ancient world, and not in primitive expression. He never mythologizes the noble savage, as Worringer does; he is interested in an old vision of space seen through a nearly cybernetic perspective. The Nietzschean dialectic of romantic and classic, which was so attractive to the New York painters, was negated in Paalen's self-styled "possibility-thinking," which combined the two terms. Nor does Paalen take an irrational and antipositivist attitude. To the contrary, his aesthetics is as antimetaphysical as it is necessarily neopositivist. Positivism means to see a "positive" fact in not yet explainable phenomena, and Paalen's notion that "everything thinkable is also possible" links him more to the philosophers of the Circle of Vienna and the scientific *Weltanschauung* than he probably wished himself. It also links him to Clement Greenberg's positivism more than

art historians have yet realized.

But what does all this mean for a painting? It means looking at a painting as a kind of Sophoclean tragedy, seeing forms and colors as actors in a space which only starts on the surface but then develops in the spectator-participant. To illuminate this point is to me far more fruitful than any attempt to establish an influence network of sources for everything Paalen said and probably gave to others. In this way, I think, the concept of space and the arguments between Roberto Matta and Paalen on this point are elementary for any understanding of the influence of Paalen in the 1940s, because it was exactly this internal struggle between the two younger Surrealists that was observed by the young New Yorkers.

Matta's more sharply defined images and his metaphysical view of space and time pointed to a pictorial concept that was entirely different from the oscillating indeterminacies of Paalen's pictures and his defense of a nondimensional vagueness of implicit possibility. Matta's first masterworks, like the 1939 *Eve of Death*, manifest his tectonic idea of space, which is always thought of as something which underlies all being--an idea which is not present in Paalen's paintings or writings. Here space is conceived of simply as the limit of what we can observe--which falls away when the observer becomes a participant. Paalen's new space is nothing other than the space of imagination in which we become participants. Matta focused on metaphysical space--in other words, space existing independently, outside human perception. This idea was unacceptable to Paalen, for whom painting always involved imagination and never metaphysics. Matta used the idea of non-Euclidean space simply to enlarge and intensify the classic pictorial dreamscape-space of Surrealism. It remains, in spite of the multiperspective insights and various interferences of pictorial layers, a measurable empty box which can be filled up with references to material objects by the painter. A better understanding of non-Euclidean space requires that, in addition to the measurable dimensions of our visual surroundings (height, breadth, and depth), space has to be visualized in terms of the theory of relativity and its idea of a space-time continuum using the geometry of Bernhard Riemann. Space here is not conceived of as infinite but as limitless; one can expand or move in space in all directions without limit but, as on Earth, one ultimately returns to the point of origin. In the end, cosmic space also possesses a final but limitless content, like the spherical surface of the earth. Matta was also much encouraged by the lectures of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* (1) to disregard the time dimension and to find descriptive forms for another "surreal" world "in which everything is interchangeable and spirits disembodied float free of time." (2) Paalen, on the other hand, wanted in no way to overcome the rhythmic correspondence between image and human perception. Analogous to the Baroque fugue, jazz, and Cubist painting, he conceives of space as advancing toward the spectator out of plastic paraphrases as a sort of counterspace. He points out that

in Cubism the elements formerly held as cognitive or conceptual a-prioris enter as constitutive factors in the very structure of the edifices of art.... The great novelty of Cubist painting consists in the fact that light becomes a constitutive element in the pictorial texture, that it enters as a dynamic factor in the structure of the picture.... That is to say Cubism was able to create a new continuum of space-light in which light and shade are no longer illusionist

means, but are integrated in the plastic matter like the polarity of graphic rhythms and colour rhythms; the appearance of objects being no longer an end but only a point of departure. And in integrating the time-element by the decentralization of the plastic action, Cubist painting arrived at a continuum of space-time unknown until then in painting. (3)

We can see here how Paalen always tries to transpose nonanthropomorphic entities via analogy into human categories of vision. Matta instead always tended to analyze an object through its transformation beyond human categories, to which analytical Cubism had strictly limited itself. The real morphology of an object is determined by various states of transformation "resulting from the emission of energies and their absorption in the object from its first appearance to its final form, in the geodesic, psychological milieu." (4) Both Matta and Paalen's friend Gordon Onslow Ford tried to eliminate the object from human optics, illustrating their metaphysical idea of alchemic transformations occurring in infinite space. They left behind Cubism's severe pictorial logic. "In fact," writes Martica Sawin, "one Onslow Ford drawing of that period contains a section resembling analytical cubism that is crossed out and inscribed 'No Sir.'" (5) Paalen's painting, built on his vision of Cubism, focused on objects in physical transformation in spaces that exploded the confines of the conventional three dimensions. The figures Paalen recalls by his rhythmical orders of color neither grow out of a spatial illusion nor illustrate the content of a spatially preformed order. On the contrary, he does everything to avoid giving the space-time continuum an absolute status outside human perception. The figures need to be perceived using the human categories of space and time to become real, but they themselves are functions of the formation of space-time within the perceptual space. These ideas are very close to the current investigations of theoretical physicists, particularly recent work on quantum gravity. In Matta's masterly paintings and drawings of the years 1941-44, perspective lines put up the framework of a seemingly endless variety of spaces which simultaneously coexist. Matta made lines "operate separately to suggest multiple perspectives akin to his so-called non-Euclidean spaces." (6) For Matta and Onslow Ford, line stood for movement in time and space, while for Paalen it was far more a structure to lead the eye rhythmically in its movement over the painting and to compensate for the dematerialized means of color in giving emotional tone to the latent imagery. In the paintings of Matta and Onslow Ford, the logic of abruptly interchanging space segments interfering with each other and containing spatial objects and telepathic lines brought with it the necessity for illustration. Their idea of non-Euclidean space and mysterious interferences between simultaneous objects in a fourth dimension led in fact again to a most traditional peepshow framework of painting, of which the viewer was an outside observer. The theme of the "I and the Other," which American artists were obsessively interested in, was excluded. Matta's ideas failed at least to convince such artists as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, who were interested in Cubism and totem art. Matta had his own plans for an art magazine in 1942, but nothing came of them. His group sessions with Pollock, Lee Krasner, William Bazotes, Jerome Kamrowski, and Robert Motherwell in spring 1942 broke up, according to Winter, over issues of "precise draftsmanship, perspective ... combined with Matta's attempts to control the artists and his arcane metaphysical ideas." Motherwell vehemently defended Paalen's position: "Motherwell talked about

Paalen all the time, he even brought in Paalen's magazine ..." (7)

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The artist Peter Busa seemed to have the same impression: "We were more interested in the formal possibilities and the mechanics of it [but] Matta felt that was kind of not very cultured. The meetings, friendly at first, turned 'intense.'" (8) Ethel Baziotis recalled in an interview in 1990: "Paalen was very much discussed in the Forties and it rivaled the discussions on Matta.... He was in the air, and also he was doing something revolutionary and new ..." (9) These facts, already stated by Winter in her dissertation on Paalen, nevertheless fail to lead writer and reader to the evident conclusion. Matta evolved a masterly crowning of Surrealist ideas in his paintings of 1939 to 1945, while Paalen opened a new chapter in the concept of space which brought painting to new heights after the war. A lot of work on this artist is still to be done.

1. P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (New York: Knopf, 1938).
2. Gordon Onslow Ford, quoted in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 64.
3. Wolfgang Paalen, "On the Meaning of Cubism Today," *DYN* 6 (1944): 6.
4. Roberto Matta, quoted in Sawin. 29.
5. Sawin, 28.
6. Sawin, 301.
7. Amy Winter, "Wolfgang Paalen, *DYN*, and the American Avant-Garde of the 1940s," (diss., 1995), 579f.
8. Quoted in Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (London: Potter, 1989), 427.
9. Interview with Amy Winter, September 28th, 1990. See also Winter, 500.

Andreas Neufert is the author of various books and articles on Paalen, among them *Wolfgang Paalen: Im Inneren des Wals: Monograph, Writings, Catalogue Raisonne* (Springer, Vienna/New York, 1999) and *Wolfgang Paalen: The Painter as Thinker and Visionary* (Dobele, Dresden, 2001). For a list of his publications see: <http://www.paalen-archiv.com/literature>. He can be contacted at art@paalen-archiv.com.

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