

## Ecoexistentialism in Caspar David Friedrich Works: An Analysis from the Perspective of Recent Cognitive Science Discoveries

Alexandru N. STERMIN\* 

**ABSTRACT.** With this paper, I propose an interpretation of Caspar David Friedrich's works on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. Known as a romantic painter, Friedrich explored and cultivated our deep relationship with nature through his art. From the perspective of recent discoveries in the cognitive sciences, I will analyse the ingenuity of the techniques by which, using the vast and open landscape, but also the characters represented with their backs, the artist creates the right context in which the viewer has the feeling of dissolving his self in nature, the experience of identification with the elements around and above all, the living of the present sensation, through the cleavage of the self and the activation of the experiential self. In the works of Caspar David Friedrich, I identify aspects related to existentialism and, above all, a prefiguration of immersive art that generates such existential experiences about nature.

**Keywords:** Ecoexistentialism, Caspar David Friedrich, Cognitive science, nature, art, experiential self

“All art should become science and all science art.” these are the words of Friedrich Schlegel that best summarize the approach I am about to present. How today, 250 years after Caspar David Friedrich's birth, recent scientific discoveries in the field of cognitive sciences reveal the incredible techniques that the artist used in his work to create a context that profoundly reveals to the viewers the experience

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\* Alexandru N. Stermin is a lecturer at the Faculty of Biology and Geology and a PhD student at the Faculty of History and Philosophy from Babeş – Bolyai University, in Cluj-Napoca. His area of interest is human – Nature relationship. E-mail: [alexandru.stermin@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:alexandru.stermin@ubbcluj.ro)



of nature. This leads to an exercise of ecoexistentialism, which is a way of metabolizing existential problems in relation to nature. Thus, we discover in the Caspar David Friedrich an exceptional way of representing the landscape to dissolve our self in its vastness, to feel connected with everything around and to have an immersive experience in the middle of the painting leading to its perception with our experiential self, for an authentic feeling of the present.

Caspar David Friedrich's art and manner of representing nature significantly influenced the art of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The rear-facing figure and his relationship with the depth of landscape representation generate strong emotional, metaphysical, and transcendent experience. Friedrich was not the first to express this experience in artwork, but as Jens Christian Jensen observes, he was the "first artist to employ this theme in landscape painting."<sup>2</sup>

It seems that he tried to implement Goethe's concept of manner, according to which the artist must create a visual language that speaks of a connection between the soul and the painted image.<sup>3</sup> In this way, his landscapes reveal more than just a recording of nature, they express the silence, the sublime, transience, and eternity.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, his vision and creations impacted the works of several twentieth-century artists, including Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970).<sup>5</sup>

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) drew inspiration from Friedrich, as his paintings' melancholic, city-like landscapes mirrored the metaphysical qualities of Friedrich's expression. The "Chirico City" represents "a world of silent squares, peopled with statues and shadows, and bounded by far horizons, a world of elegiac beauty and vast dignity."<sup>6</sup>

Also, with his work *Monk by the Sea* (c. 1809), Friedrich questions man's place and purpose in the vast universe, a concept that will later be formulated and cultivated in existentialism. The first step that Friedrich took in this direction was to replace the physicality of a religious building with nature and the universe.<sup>7</sup>

He was truly a daring innovator in terms of art, influencing its dynamics in the centuries that followed. As we will see, Caspar David Friedrich managed more than 200 years ago to represent through his art some aspects and nuances related

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<sup>1</sup> Berdan Alice. (2016). Caspar David Friedrich and the 20th Century. *Ibid.* Volume 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jens Christian Jensen. (1981). *Caspar David Friedrich: Life and Work*. New York: Barron's Education Series, Inc., p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Hofmann, Werner, Caspar David Friedrich. (2000). *Caspar David Friedrich*. New York: Thames & Hudson, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> William Vaughan, Helmut Börsch-Supan, and Hans Joachim Neidhardt, (1972). *Caspar Friedrich 1774- 1840: Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden*. London: Tate Gallery, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Berdan Alice (2016). Caspar David Friedrich and the 20th Century. *Ibid.* Volume 9.

<sup>6</sup> James Thrall Soby. (1941). *The Early Chirico*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Berdan Alice. (2016). Caspar David Friedrich and the 20th Century. *Ibid.* Volume 9.

to our relationship with nature, aspects that science managed to formulate and demonstrate in the last decade. In this article, I will try to argue that there is a close link between Friedrich's art and the latest discoveries regarding the psychology of our relationship with nature. Also, I'll make a connection between the concept of ecoexistentialism and Caspar David Friedrich's art.

## Open landscape and self-transcendent feelings

It is a well-known fact that our interaction with nature generates positive emotions, and it is an important factor for our well-being and mental health.<sup>8</sup> Even that 'nature is an under-recognized healer', as it is written in a report of the Institute for European Environmental Policy.<sup>9</sup>

An important aspect regarding these positive emotions is that they include a broad spectrum, ranging from emotions related to well-being, such as relaxation and joy, to emotions related to the existential dimension of our being: awe, admiration, deep connection, and freedom. A distinction between those positive emotions can be made by dividing them into self-oriented (e.g.: pride, amusement, joy) and self-transcendent emotions (awe, freedom, deep-connection, love, admiration)<sup>10</sup>.

As a nuance of language, we can name more complex emotions - *feelings*, thus *awe* can be defined as the self-transcendent feeling of wonder experienced by the self when facing something greater and vast, beyond current understanding, a sense of being in the presence of something greater than oneself.<sup>11</sup>, frequently described by subjects that experience panoramic views, nature, great works of art or powerful existential moments like childbirth.<sup>12</sup> As a reaction to the feelings of awe, we have attitudes like selflessness and increased connectedness with other

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<sup>8</sup> Hartig, T., Van den Berg, A. E., Hagerhall, C. M., Tomalak, M., Bauer, N., Hansmann, R., Ojala, A., Syngollitou, E., Carrus, G., Van Herzele, A., Bell, S., Podesta, M. T. C., & Waaseth, G. (2011). Health benefits of nature experience: Psychological, social and cultural processes. In K. Nilsson, M. Sangster, C. Gallis, T. Hartig, S. De Vries, K. Seeland, & J. Schipperijn (Eds.), *Forests, trees and human health*. Dordrecht: Springer Science Business and Media.

<sup>9</sup> Ten Brink, P., Mutafoğlu, K., Schweitzer, J. P., Kettunen, M., Twigger-Ross, C., Baker, J., ... Dekker, S. (2016). *The health and social benefits of nature and biodiversity protection. A report for the European Commission* (ENV. B. 3/ETU/2014/0039). London/Brussels: Institute for European Environmental Policy.

<sup>10</sup> Cappellen, P.V., and Saroglou, V. (2012). Awe Activates Religious and Spiritual Feelings and Behavioral Intentions. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 4, 223-236.

<sup>11</sup> Keltner, D. and Haidt, J. (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17, 297-3147

<sup>12</sup> Shiota, M. N., Keltner, D. and Mossman, A. (2007). The nature of awe: Elicitors, appraisals, and effects on self-concept. *Cognition & Emotion*, 21, 944- 963.

people, with the community, and with the world, resulting in prosocial and pro-environmental behaviours / attitudes.<sup>13</sup>

This feeling of awe leads to an increase in the sense of connection and, on a mental level, to the perception of the dissolution of some boundaries between the subject and the environment, sometimes referred to as bodily dissolutions. This experience of loosening up boundaries between body and environment takes us to the root of selflessness and connectedness<sup>14</sup>. Studies indicate that selflessness elicits happiness via dissolution of perceived body boundaries<sup>15</sup> and also that the interaction with nature can loosen up boundaries between self and environment.<sup>16</sup>

Recent studies have investigated the context in which interaction with nature can lead to these self-transcended experiences.<sup>17</sup> The researcher investigated whether spacious, rather than dense, natural landscapes inspire feelings of selflessness and connectedness and whether these emotions and related affective states are influenced by the salience of perceived body boundaries, suggesting that spaciousness may be linked to the embodied experience of dissolving those boundaries

The participants were exposed to VR environments where they experienced different settings: open natural spaces versus closed/dense natural ones, spacious versus wild, spacious versus tended, dense versus wild, and dense versus tended.

Selflessness was measured using the self-loss subscale of the awe experience scale.<sup>18</sup> Items affirmations include 'I felt that my sense of self was diminished', 'I felt my sense of self shrink', 'I experienced a reduced sense of self', 'I felt my sense of self become somehow smaller', and 'I felt small compared to everything else'. Also, connectedness was measured using the connectedness subscale of Yaden et al.'s (2018) with items that were formulated as: 'I had the sense of being connected to everything', 'I felt a sense of communion with all living things', 'I experienced a sense of oneness with all things', 'I felt closely connected to humanity', and 'I had

<sup>13</sup> Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 883–899.

<sup>14</sup> Van Rompay, T. J. L. and Jol, T. (2016). Wild and free: Unpredictability and spaciousness as predictors of creative performance. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 48, 140–1491.

<sup>15</sup> Dambrun, M. (2016). When the dissolution of perceived body boundaries elicits happiness: The effect of selflessness induced by a body scan meditation. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 46, 89–98.

<sup>16</sup> Bratman, G. N., Hamilton, J. P., Hahn, K. S., et al. (2015). Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112, 8567–8572.

<sup>17</sup> Van Rompay, T. J. L., Oran, S., Galetzka, M., & van den Berg, A. E. (2023). Lose yourself: Spacious nature and the connected self. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 91, 1–10.

<sup>18</sup> Yaden, D. B., Kaufman, S. B., Hyde, E., Chirico, A., Gaggioli, A., Zhang, J. W., & Keltner, D. (2018). The development of the awe experience scale (AWE-S): A multifactorial measure for a complex emotion. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14, 474–488.

a sense of complete connectedness', using 7-point rating scales. A third measurement was made on the connectedness to community using the Inclusion of Community in the Self Scale, when the respondents were asked to select the pair of circles that best expresses their relationship to the community. The six pair circles developed by Mashek et al (2007) are overlapping each slightly more than the preceding one. Also state-anxiety was measured using a short version of the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory with a 7-point rating scale related to statements such as: 'I feel upset', 'I feel frightened', 'I feel nervous', 'I am jittery', and 'I am confused'.

If we examine the VR- environment used for the experience of spacious, we will find a great similarity with Friedrich 's works that represent open landscapes. Interestingly enough, on one VR landscape we can find an oak tree similar with the one represented in Friedrich's arts. The paintings which we can make a possible connection to the ones used in this study are: *Bohemian Landscape* (c. 1810/11), *Midday* (1822), *Summer* (1807), *The Source of River Elbe* (c. 1810), *Village Landscape in Morning Light* (1822), *Oak Tree in the Snow* (1827 and 1829), *Fog in the Elbe Valley* (1821). Also there are similarities on dense-tended VR- environment with the *Chasseur in the Forest* (1813-14) and *Early Snow* (c. 1828).

Results reveal that participants experienced a greater loss of self and felt more connected in the spacious VR- environment, the type of nature (tended or wild) was not significant. Also, participants sensed less salient body boundaries in the spacious condition compared to the dense ones. Regarding the anxiety, it was lower in the spacious settings and in the tended ones.

With these remarks we can argue that also with the effects of spaciousness from other paintings such as *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) and *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818) the artist facilitates the embodied experience of dissolving body boundaries and connection with the environment.

In terms of self-experience, spacious landscapes, as opposed to dense ones, create an environment that diminishes self-centeredness and fosters a deeper sense of connectedness with the broader world. Beyond aesthetics, preference, and safety considerations, spaciousness plays a crucial role in self-experience; it enables individuals to release self-referential negative thoughts and it affects their connection to their surroundings.

### **Back-figure and the two selves**

Just as Friedrich discovered the vastness of the landscape and always returned to it in his works, he did the same with the faceless characters - *rückenfiguren* (back-figure, figure from the back). Friedrich was not the first artist to represent

back-figure in his art. Starting with the 14th century, in Italy, artists such as Giotto, Raphael and Vermeer are known to use it in their paintings. By the way he frequently employed this character in his works, sometimes in the centre of the paintings, Caspar David Friedrich is famous in the history of art with *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, considered an archetype of this representation.

There are many interpretations of the reason why the artist chose these characters to appear in this way. It was speculated that he incorporated the rückenfiguren to create a connection with those who might at first be looking just to the landscape without reaching beyond it to melancholy, solitude, and isolation. For that kind of perception, the back-figure character can be an element sending to the metaphysical experience of the painting<sup>19</sup>.

As Julian Jason Haladyn wrote:

It functions as a placeholder we can imaginatively occupy, allowing us a virtual existence in the landscape and shaping our lines of sight within the spatial frame. Our relation to the Rückenfigur arguably produces a visual and conceptual distance by allowing us to be present in the painting even while obviously absent, the figure being our vicarious self. This distance, however, requires us to be more actively involved in the experience of the painting if we are to enter its world.<sup>20</sup>

Starting from here, I want to argue that, by using this character with his back, the artist complements the open landscape technique to help us reach the point of self-dissolution in nature even more. He does this by accessing our *experiential self* with his incredible intuition, the type of self that has been recently described in psychology.

The psychologist and cognitive scientist Daniel Kahneman, who was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2002, distinguishes between two selves: the *experiencing self* and the *remembering self*.<sup>21</sup> The *remembering self* is a storyteller, accessing the memory and projecting the past, preventing us from living present moment. The *remembering self* helps us create and keep our identity, the story of our life and existence. The *experiencing self* is the one that lives in the present, in the *here and now*. It is also capable to reexperiencing the past by bringing all the memories and feelings in the present moment, but its main function is to help us experience the present moment.

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<sup>19</sup> Berdan Alice. (2016). Caspar David Friedrich and the 20th Century. *Ibid.* Volume 9.

<sup>20</sup> Haladyn, J. J. (2016). Friedrich's "Wanderer": Paradox of the Modern Subject. *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne. Canadian Art Review*, 41(1), 47–61., p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Kahneman D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York.

Analysing Friedrich's paintings according to Kahneman's discoveries, the difference between the experiences of the open landscapes without and with the back-faced character can be summarized as experiencing something *about* the nature, in the first case, and experiencing something *in* the nature, in the second one.

Using this technique, the painter only makes a splitting between our two selves. Looking at the character, we identify with him, we project on him our experiential self and he gives us his experience of *here and now*, not only in the front of the painting, but in the middle of it. With this projection of ourselves in the painting, we connect with the surrounding landscape, and thus, the possibility of revealing our self and identifying it with nature is absolutely possible.

If this character did not exist, our narrative self could enter the scene, which would make us think what we would feel if we were there, at which point our experiential self is inactive. In this case, it takes a more sustained effort of imagination to activate it. By identifying the experiential self with the character in the painting, we become the character, and the landscape becomes our reality. Thus, entering this kind of reality in our consciousness results in creating a kind of memory as if we were once there, a memory that our narrative self can later integrate into the story of the experience.

## Conclusions

In the light of the latest scientific discoveries, what Caspar David Friedrich does to those who look at his paintings with vast landscapes and back-faced characters, is an incredible exercise in which he dissociates the two selves, activating the experiential self and projecting it in the midst of a landscape which, through its vastness, makes them dissolve themselves and identify with nature. In addition, it inoculates the viewers with some false memories, in relation to the reality of the event, as they have never been in those landscapes. Not to mention that a few of those landscapes do not even exist, as far as some of those environments were composed of disparate elements, they are real in relation to experience, and if this is what the brilliant painter wanted to convey, it seems that, in his creativity, he found the methods to do it.

Our identity, our self-transcendent emotions, the dissolution of the self, and the identification with something more than ourselves are all part of existential experiences. Experiencing them in a deep relationship with nature, they become part of *ecoexistentialism* - a way of experimenting and exploring existential problems (identity, well-being, love, death, freedom, and the meaning of life) in relation to

nature. Regarding the existential experience of identity, from the ecoexistentialist perspective, we find in Caspar David Friedrich an exploration of identity that dissolves in nature - an identification with all that is around, and also an exploration of the inner identity linked to our two selves that we experimented by projecting one of the into characters from the paintings. In this context, we can identify in Friedrich's work an artistic approach that reveals and brings our philosophical relationship with nature to the scene.

What Caspar David Friedrich does when inserting the experiential self inside the painting and surrounding it with landscape is what immersive art installations do today. In this context, we could say that the romantic painter probably foreshadowed the experience of immersive art.

Caspar David Friedrich is one of the most representative artists of all time who deeply explored man's relationship with nature and cultivated it through his art. His approach remains current, just as the words of Schubert (1780 – 1860) about Friedrich are still relevant today, describing him as "a painter of nature out of time, whose mind seems to be deeply attuned to the innermost meaning of nature."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Amstutz, N., 2020. Caspar David Friedrich Nature and the Self. Yale University Press, p.7.



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