

Mies, Rothko, and an Echo of the Northern Romantic Tradition

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Allurement and Effacement

At first glance, it might seem peculiar to compare Mies van der Rohe's American buildings to contemporaneous 'color-field' paintings by the Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (Fig. 1). Rothko's feathery touch, suppression of line work, and sensual color seem far away from the mechanical exactitude, linear reticulations, and somber tones of a work like Mies's Seagram Building.¹ Such incongruities surely explain why Mies and Rothko have not been previously juxtaposed.² Other 'abstract' artists—Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, and Kaiser Malevich, to name just a few—undeniably have greater superficial resemblance to Mies.³ Yet beneath Mies and Rothko's immediate differences lie intriguing parallels of formal structure and ultimately of meaning.

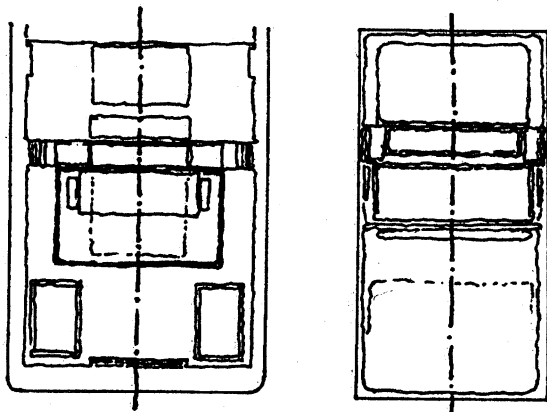


Fig. 1 Plan of Mies's Seagram Building, 1954-58, and Rothko's No. 10, 1952

In terms of shared formal structure, many of Mies and Rothko's compositions of the late 40's and 50's reduce to sparse fields of rectangles rigorously organized by bilateral symmetry. Mies and Rothko's embrace of axiality was relatively unique within their respective modernist genres of architecture and painting.⁴ Symmetry in their late works went far beyond organizing isolated forms. Typically they tiered multiple quadrangles into an axial gestalt—something most apparent when comparing Mies's plans to Rothko's canvases. Their axes read emphatically. Robert Rosenblum writes of Rothko's canvases that: "...by their sheer frontality and symmetry, they impose an intimate, one-to-one confrontation upon the spectator. To look at these works obliquely is the equivalent of avoiding their command to

stand motionless on line with their central axis, so that their embrace may be total."⁵ The Seagram plaza and flanking pools likewise channel us, insisting that we axially address the volume. Further, Mies and Rothko's symmetries project anthropomorphism. Rothko's tiered rectangles are reductions from his earlier figural paintings.⁶ He himself described these shapes as "*substitutes* for the [human] figure."⁷ Despite intense minimalism, observers sensed this figuration in Rothko's canvases. Brian O'Doherty has gone as far as to ask of Rothko's forms, "can a rectangle have a stare?"⁸ Writers about Mies, too, felt an anthropomorphic echo. Vincent Scully writes of how Mies's Seagram Building: "...can stand upon its legs, symmetrically placed behind its plaza, as a sculptural body."⁹ An 'allurement' results from these gestures toward figuration in Mies and Rothko's works; we recognize something akin to ourselves within them.

Abruptly and paradoxically, however, both Mies and Rothko blank the very symmetry that they create. This effacement is the key to understanding their shared meaning. While Mies and Rothko poise their rectangular arrays to interact with us, neither prominently marks their axis.¹⁰ No centric visage appears; instead, the periphery captures our attention. Mies and Rothko give their rectangles fastidiously mannered, fringe-like embroideries of paint or steel, which traverse, uninflected, across the broad composition's axis, drawing our eye to the edges. Center and periphery come into tension.¹¹ Expecting some sort of figuration, either through a literal rendition of bilateral form on the canvas or through its architectural equivalent of a centered, hierarchically ordered façade, we find only a stoically homogeneous frontality worthy of the monolith from Kubrick's *2001*. Tafuri and Dal Co describe this quality of Mies's work by writing: "The maximum of formal structurality is matched by the maximum absence of images."¹² David Anfam similarly writes of Rothko: "...[his] work responds with a certain stealth, meeting the onlooker with the kind of frontal, vertical and symmetrical order associated with the poise of a human being...while revealing little about its real intent." Anfam asks: "Why the combative simplicity that suggests a riddle?"¹³ At the scale of the axial gestalt no beckoning develops, only a silence ever so slightly enlivened by an infinitesimal rustling around its periphery.

Applying the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, we could say that Mies and Rothko's works initiate a "game." To win our participation, they assume a comforting compositional stance. We all intimately understand and empathize with a bilateral axis. Yet what these works ultimately seek to teach us is how such familiarity can harbor otherness.¹⁴ Like the Trojan

Horse, something unforeseen rides within—something which we might otherwise reject. With Mies and Rothko, however, this ‘unforeseen’ is not truly foreign (not a hidden, alien army) but is—more eerily—a targeted negation of the very image the carrier promises. It is effacement and nothing more.

Theodor W. Adorno, the Marxist *Frankfurter Schule* philosopher of aesthetics, extensively studied and championed this very effect. He writes of how an artwork must first cajole: “Involuntarily and unconsciously, the observer enters into a contract with the work, agreeing to submit to it on condition that it speak.”¹⁵ A recognizable image—a mimesis—draws the observer in. But then, if the artwork is truly modern, it will specifically negate what it purports to present. For Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, this joining of mimesis and negation is central to modernity; it alone offers ‘truth.’ “Artworks,” according to Adorno, “have the absolute and they do not have it... This defines the qualitative threshold to modern art.”¹⁶ For Adorno such negation, while often disturbing, nonetheless teaches: “Meaning inheres even in the disavowal of meaning.”¹⁷ Something akin to Adorno’s dialectical view of modernity links Mies and Rothko, transcending their differences of touch or color. Both allure solely to demure. Their ‘truth’ is to promise a familiar figuration while delivering its absence. Both know the ‘stinging’ poignancy of such disavowal. In it lies their parallel meaning.

Center and Periphery: Casper David Friedrich and the Northern Romantic Formulation

Mies and Rothko were both born in the swathe of Europe where, 100 years earlier, the loosely recognized Northern Romantic Tradition in painting took hold.¹⁸ The work of the most prominent painter of this little-studied “Nordic-Ossianic”¹⁹ tradition, Casper David Friedrich, shares with Mies and Rothko these same attributes of formal structure and meaning—of axial allurement and eerie effacement. Friedrich’s contemporaries recognized something highly unusual in his art—something which scholars today would describe as modernity’s nascency. Friedrich’s pictures were “blazing a new, original trail.”²⁰ His canvases disturbed and haunted Goethe, while another contemporary recognized that: “what makes them appealing is their truth, for each awakens in the soul the memory of something familiar.”²¹ Friedrich’s works, too, offer ‘truth’ through mimesis/negation. Studying Friedrich can help parse the dialectical syntax employed by Mies and Rothko. Mies has rarely been compared to this exemplar of the Northern Romantics—an odd lacuna since Friedrich so influenced K. F. Schinkel.²² Rothko, in contrast, has been previously and prominently juxtaposed with Friedrich. Robert Rosenblum, in his *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, startled the academic community by comparing Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* to Rothko’s *Green on Blue*. For Rosenblum, these two painters represent the “alpha and omega” of this obsessively spare yet compellingly hieratic sen-

sibility.²³

Friedrich was the progenitor of the Northern Romantic aesthetic.²⁴ He favored a compositionally hypnotic simplicity which verged upon emptiness—an effect approaching the meditative hush of Tantric Art.²⁵ He had a quasi-religious devotion to implacable and immense natural phenomena—particularly to open fields, skies and seas, often separated only by sublimely distant, wholly unmediated and infinitely wide horizons. He infused these otherwise sparse compositions with the intense observation of tiny, quotidian particularities—the rustling of grasses and leaves, the breaking of waves, and the modulation of light on freshly fallen snow (preferably at dawn or dusk). Simultaneously transcendental and concrete, his conceptions largely lacked middle ground, forgoing anything that mediated scales.²⁶ Into these voids of ascetically wrought detail he, like Mies and Rothko, often interjected bilateral symmetry.

A number of Friedrich’s paintings suggest that for him a centric axis represents the effaced subject. The potently ‘faceless’ figure in his *Woman in Morning Light*, of 1809, stands upon his central line; she is our surrogate gazing openly into the deep immensity. Her arms begin to rise in a stiff, cross-like gesture. This Christ-like posture implies that for Friedrich the bilateral axis may represent a possible path beyond the flesh—to apotheosis. Friedrich, in fact, preferred his crucifixes placed on axis, as the central position of Christ’s body in his *Cross and Cathedral in the Mountains*, of 1813, shows. Geometry offers transcendence here. In many of Friedrich’s paintings, such as his 1826 *Sea with Sunrise*, the human body vanishes entirely and only the axis remains. In these cases the image still possesses a blank anthropomorphism—that Tantric, meditative, frontal gaze.²⁷ For Friedrich, the voided axis is often all that remains behind to hint of humanity’s prior existence in the sublime universe. The axis becomes an empty runway, a record of the launch, a trace of a disembodied presence.

A ‘T-square’ hung as the sole ornament in Friedrich’s ascetic studio. His contemporaries could not imagine why a landscape painter would so honor a mere “drafting instrument.”²⁸ Yet accurately scribing the central axis was the fundamental step in his process. Geometry, he said, gave “coherence and truth.”²⁹ Friedrich never went beyond this in describing his intentions with his axes, yet perhaps a further hint can be gleaned from a letter about the practice of landscape painting written by Friedrich’s only immediate disciple, the painter Carl Gustav Carus. Carus wrote: “...when man, sensing the immense magnificence of nature, feels his own insignificance, and feeling himself to be in God, enters into this infinity and abandons his individual existence, then his surrender is gain rather than loss...”³⁰ Is this the meaning of symmetry in Friedrich’s work—of the disembodied, remnant axis which haunts the centric void of his paintings? Is the axis for him a poignant image of our joining with the sublime—of humanity having willingly offered itself to eternity? And, if so, need we necessarily interpret this as a heartening image? Or is its power derived from its simultaneously being both gain and loss?

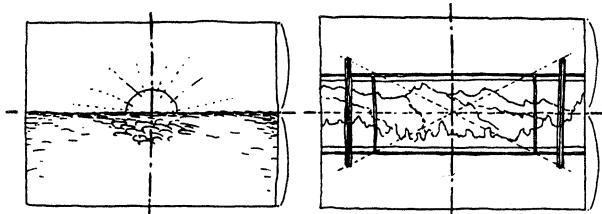


Fig. 2 Comparison of Friedrich's *Sea with Sunrise*, 1826, and Mies's *Collage of Resor House*, 1939

The prominence of an axis in Friedrich's canvases makes it easy to compare him to Mies or Rothko. For example, in both *Sea with Sunrise* and Mies's 1939 interior collage of the unbuilt Resor House the symmetry is as absolute as it is mysteriously reticent (Fig. 2).³¹ The center of each work seems established only so that we can watch its force evaporate into numinousness. Friedrich gives us slightly more centrality. His sun's disk and the breaking waves mark the middle—faintly—as the harsh horizon leads our view toward the edges. Center and periphery are once more in tension. At Resor the flanking columns and mullions urge our eye toward the center, but, once there, the focus immediately evanesces into the visually sublime field of the Tetons stretching outward toward the image's edges. The centers of both allure, then rapidly demure to the sides.

Friedrich and Mies's attitudes toward detail reinforce this tension of center/periphery. This can be seen, for example, in Friedrich's *Two Men by the Sea* of 1817 and in a collage of Mies's Berlin Neue Nationalgalerie of 1968 (Fig. 3).³² In each, a mercilessly horizontal swathe of space sweeps through the symmetrical focus. Friedrich's paired figures and Mies's flanking marble piers and wood screens daringly cross the line of the relentless horizon, abruptly locking our eye upon a centric void. Yet the vertical force of the bilateral axis which these elements create is quickly spent against the unrelievedly blank expanses above and below. Friedrich only slightly domes the sunset's halo to mark his axis's rise; Mies offers no gesture at all. The surrounding sparseness in each image gives us little else to fix upon. While fastidious care has been paid to every tiny detail—every pebble and cloud, every weld and stone joint—the unrelenting repetitiveness and sameness of scale leaves our eye panning laterally for anything else to note. Finicky detail makes Friedrich and Mies's immense, voided centers all the more enigmatic. Surely such painterly or tectonic attentiveness would have allowed for richer, more evenly graded compositions if the authors had so desired. It is obvious from this that the polarized dearth does not result from incompleteness or lack of skill but from something else—perhaps existential reflection. The gigantism of the 'centric/lateral' tension is itself consciously tensed against the diminutive, sensual particularities of the physical world, either natural or built. Friedrich's delicately moist rocks and Mies's delicately smooth marbles stand quietly before an awesomely couched abstraction.³³

This formal analysis could be brought, virtually wholesale, to many of Rothko's mature canvases. A bilaterally symmetrical spine, a coarse pull of horizontal swathes across this vertical axiality, a resulting, strangely blanked centric emphasis, and a fastidiousness of small, peripheral detail all populate his paintings (Fig. 4). Further, the sheer *willfulness* of it all is once more beyond doubt. Friedrich, Mies and Rothko all consciously sought the same formulation: a starkly axial entrée into a voluminous yet minimalist world of wide horizons, mediated only at the Fig. 4 Comparative Diagrams of Friedrich's *Bohemian Landscape* of 1810 and Rothko's *No. 8, 1952* periphery by the most finely and subtly wrought of details. Their similarity is no mere pseudomorphosis.³⁴

The peculiar power of their works resides in the uncanniness this formulation produces. As discussed by Anthony Vidler, the uncanny results from a sense of "unhomeliness"—a sense of no longer feeling 'at home' with something that was once quite familiar. It is "the propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized...."³⁵ This causes a sense of "melancholy," a development Adorno would well appreciate.³⁶ All three of these 'Northern Romantics' were independently drawn toward this wistfulness. As unrelentingly serial creators, all three repeated it again and again. The strongly parallel reactions to their works (works which, when taken together,

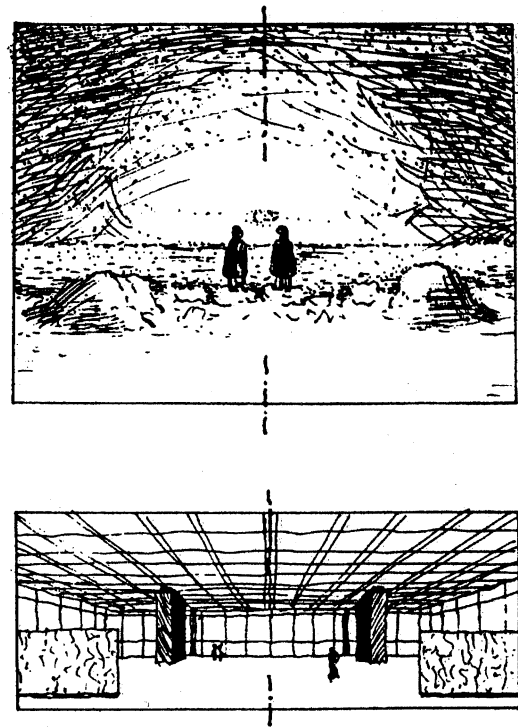


Fig. 3 Comparison of Friedrich's *Two Men by the Sea*, 1817, and Mies's *Collage of Mies's Berlin Neue Nationalgalerie*, 1968

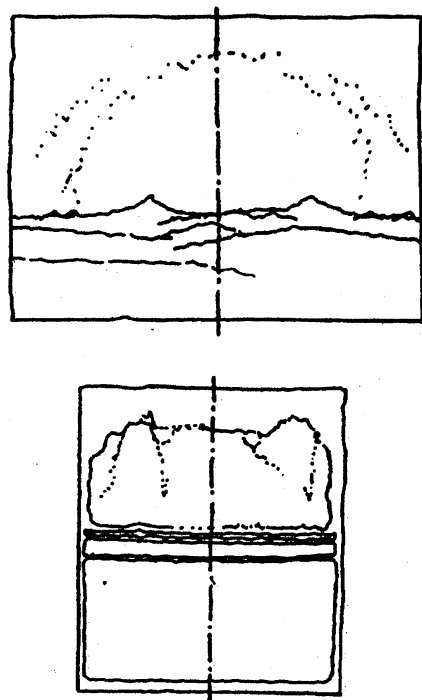


Fig. 4 Comparative Diagrams of Friedrich's Bohemian Landscape of 1810 and Rothko's No. 8, 1952

actually represent an extraordinarily diverse group of products) suggests that Friedrich, Mies and Rothko struck upon a core form that functions akin to a Jungian 'archetype.' Their portrayals of mimesis and negation, of 'presence-bearing-absence,' tap into a vein of human intersubjectivity.³⁷

Friedrich found this formulation early and never wavered, while both Mies and Rothko passed through numerous—and frankly much more compositionally rich—phases before settling on this axial asceticism late in life. What is startling, though, is how identical were the steps that Mies and Rothko took while progressing toward the structure Friedrich exemplifies.³⁸ A chronological diagramming of both Mies and Rothko's evolving compositional profiles shows dynamism cooling relentlessly, in graduated, increasingly orthogonal stages, until the axial gestalt crystallizes (Fig. 5)

).³⁹ Centrality seems to achieve compositional ascendancy over peripheral motion; in Nietzschean terms, Apollonian calm prevails over Dionysian ferment.⁴⁰ Even Mies and Rothko's indecisive backward glances run in parallel. Just before their late, 'classic' formulations arrive, each explores a brief reprise of *de Stijl*-inspired, pin-wheeling form, tightly constrained within a single rectangle (Pair E);⁴¹ and even once their symmetrical formulations have fully hardened, a rare and now rather stiff retrospective dynamism can still occasionally recur (Pair G).

Areoles and Corners

While all three of these 'Northern Romantics' adhere to the above formulation, the more conceptually abstract, utterly geometrical character of Mies and Rothko's works is undeniably distinct from Friedrich's quite literally representational manner. Mies and Rothko's shared fetishism for rectangles as rectangles verges on absolute. Friedrich makes paintings that almost reduce to pairs of pure rectangles, but the one above always clearly re-

mains a sky and the one below a sea. Mies and Rothko's distillation of their compositions to nearly pure geometry opens up a level of further comparison between them that is not directly extendable to Friedrich.

Of course the sheer 'architecturalness'—the flatness, repetition and orthogonal forms—of much mid-century 'color-field' art makes it easy to find correlations between paintings and buildings. Of the 'color-field' painters, though, it is only Rothko who shares with Mies the making of rectangular fields which possess an intentionally 'faint figuration'. In both Mies and Rothko's cases, the 'figuration' incumbent in the axis is supported by the interweaving of slight, compositional subtleties of center and periphery within their rectangles themselves.⁴² As axiality achieved dominion in both Mies and Rothko's overall compositions, the peripheric maintained a relevance—but one now operative at an

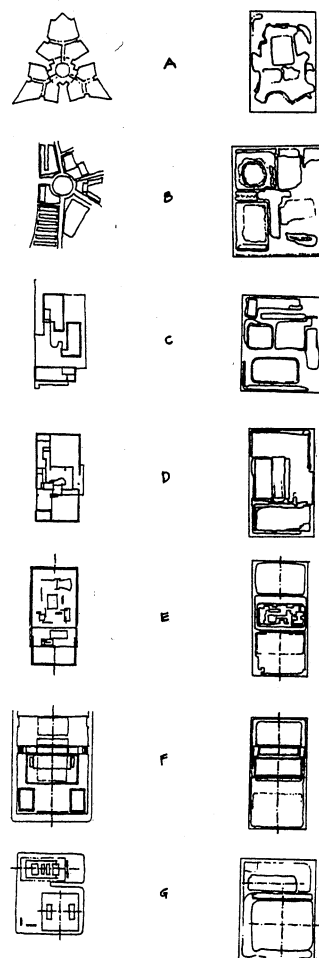


Fig. 5 Diagram of Compositional Changes in Mies and Rothko's Development (Mies, left; Rothko, right)

infinitesimal rather than a global scale of composition. The vacuity of the center of their rectangles redirected Mies and Rothko's whole labors—all their drawing or drafting—to the outer fringe. David Anfam has noted that Rothko's rectangles somehow summon our interest more than those of other 'color-field' painters, writing: "perhaps far more than most, Rothko's [paintings] are insistently nuanced, quickening us to interrogate them."⁴³ These nuances of Rothko's find direct parallels in Mies's work.

Foremost among these nuances are Rothko's edgings. These atmospheric delimitations did not arise out of gestural directness. The painter painstakingly studied them, making endless adjustments.⁴⁴ This weaving of hues suprisingly intensifies the precedence of figure over ground. Amorphousness somehow lends substance to his "personages" (Rothko's name for his rectangles).⁴⁵ Slight aureoles, resulting from the multiple layering of paint, further enhance their figural significance. These "bright penumbras" or "abstract halos" inevitably suggest exhalations from a living being.⁴⁶ David Anfam has noted the "alive, brooding potentiality" that these edges give Rothko's forms.⁴⁷ The periphery's quiet intensity and the center's blankness are antithetical, yet Rothko's subtle mastery of scale allows them to coexist in momentous, controlled tension; the rustling edges never undermine the broad blockishness of the overall forms.

Much the same, interestingly, could be said of Crown Hall. The central void and the elaborate skin interact reciprocally. Mies, like Rothko, understands scale; his "structural braille," though of considerable substance, actually seems fragile surrounding this immense space.⁴⁸ Viewed in plan, Mies's edgings are no less delicately embroidered than Rothko's are. The greatest perceptual similarity of Mies's perimeters to Rothko's, though, exists not in plan but in experiential space, when one walks around the outside of Mies's bristly volumes. One critic notes that the skin's depth creates an "extraordinarily subtle richness" through an "alternating opacity of the steel and reflectivity of the glass caused by the blinker effect of the mullions *en masse*."⁴⁹ Another critic notes how the skin's "constantly changing three-quarter views" induce a "rotational composition" that unfolds through time and contrasts with the prism's overall symmetry.⁵⁰ Rothko's canvases elicit comparable remarks; indeed, sometimes it can be difficult to guess whose edges are being described. One scholar writes of Rothko's scumbles that: "Some areas are matte. Others have a sheen that catches the light." In Rothko's canvases: "...the whole superficies is changeful—less an inert screen than a membrane shifting from taut to loose, diaphanous to dense, as we probe it."⁵¹ In these ways, Rothko's edges "implant mutability into what at first glance appears an immutable, even static format" and lend "a durational aspect."⁵² In the hands of Mies and Rothko, welded steel and feathered paint elicit similar reactions. Their rectangles acquire a quiet vivacity.

The sophistication of Mies and Rothko's approach lies in the interplay of axis and edge. Their minimalism distills figuration to its last operative vestiges.⁵³ They conjure anthropomorphism from its most extreme scalar attributes: the global gesture of the axis and the nuances of the skin. The tension of their works

derives from how these interact. Scully, when writing of how Mies's Seagram Building "...can stand upon its legs, symmetrically placed behind its plaza, as a sculptural body," also immediately adds that the skin's density and intensity are also essential to this anthropomorphism since these qualities insure that the volume does not read as a mere "structural cage or a spatial hollow."⁵⁴ Viewed this way, the skin paradoxically reinforces a reading of 'presence' even as it crosses over and effaces the potential of the axis to speak. Tafuri and Dal Co also seem to be describing such complex interactions when they write of Mies's American works that they "take on body again, but they no longer articulate themselves."⁵⁵

Mies and Rothko's handling of corners further reinforces the skin's participation in this interplay. Another consistent device in Rothko's classic works is his subtle 'rounding' of his rectangles. This "paragraphed"⁵⁶ effect causes a delicate inward concentration within each quadrant, giving a "discreet separateness"⁵⁷ that insinuates centrality and thus autonomy. Rothko's 'tucking in' of his embroidery at every turn implies that some unidentified, 'magnetic' power—some quiet immanence—resides at each rectangle's unmarked geometrical focus.⁵⁸ One of Rothko's preliminary sketches shows dozens of nested, quadrangular ripples (each one with its corners slightly more rounded) growing out from a geometrical center to create one of his rectangles.⁵⁹ Like all of Rothko's nuances, this rounding must remain exactly understated for maximum effect. When he over-exploits it, his forms turn into lozenges; instead of rectangles haunted by a faint animism they become 'cartoon-like' protozoa, with nuclei shielded from view.⁶⁰ Rothko also could at times under-exploit this device, completely sharpening his corners. With the loss of this faint animism, tension evaporates from those canvases.⁶¹ Once having seen Rothko's feathery edges and inflected corners, the stacked, bilateral symmetry of his blank forms alone no longer seems fully adequate to conjure the dialectic—the "poignant conjunction of presence and absence"⁶²—expected from his work.

Working with mechanically straight steel sections, Mies, against all odds, similarly 'rounds' his corners. The "suppressed passion" Mies lavished on his indented turns is legendary.⁶³ He willfully—even somewhat irrationally—cantilevers his cladding instead of placing it on his column centerlines.⁶⁴ These outriggers leave his corner columns tucked perceptually inward, nested within a "rich articulation of angles" that creates a ferric version of Rothko's painted paragraphing.⁶⁵ Philip Johnson notes the perceptual richness of this inherently "Classical" gesture and compares it to the slowing of rhythms at Schinkel's Altes Museum's corners. For Johnson, Mies's subtlety at his corners tenuously centralizes the "endless rhythm of the fenestration" and assists in our ability to "comprehend the totality of the building."⁶⁶ One thinks of the Parthenon's corner contractions. As with Rothko's, the perceptual autonomy—the centric presence—of Mies's otherwise commonly rectangular forms is thus immeasurably enhanced. That Mies and Rothko had fundamentally parallel attitudes toward corners seems confirmed by ex-

amples where each experimented with slight, ‘Greek-cross’ configurations which pressed their edges outward until suggestive of paired, overlapping rectangles (Fig. 6). In these the goal of enhanced centrality seems obvious.⁶⁷

A totally *systemic* thinker like J. N. L. Durand would be appalled by Mies’s bow to visuality at his corners.⁶⁸ For Mies, simply turning a mechanically ‘modern’ corner—simply folding the composition over unruffled with analytical respect for the corner columns’ centerlines—held no satisfaction.⁶⁹ Schinkel, interestingly enough, did attempt this kind of ‘modern’ corner in his very last built work—the Bauakademie in Berlin of 1831. There the terminal pilasters have no differential articulation compared to those of the interstitial bays. With this last act, Schinkel proved himself more a Twentieth-Century architect than Mies.⁷⁰ Mies’s fundamental indifference to the grid’s Cartesian universality is clearly indicated by the difficulty he had in making re-entrant corners, as seen at the rear of Seagram’s ‘T-shaped’ tower. What makes for visual glory on the outward turns, causes embarrassing clashes at the inward.⁷¹ Mies *never* allowed a re-entrant after Seagram; his desire to experientially ‘round’ corners forbid it. Rothko, too, forever gave up on re-entrant shapes as he entered his own ‘classic’ phase. Every rectangle became magisterially *whole*.

While admittedly small, these nuanced edge and corner devices of Mies and Rothko contribute decisively to the allurements of their work. Though the centers of their rectangles are unmarked, their elaborate peripheries paradoxically imply cen-

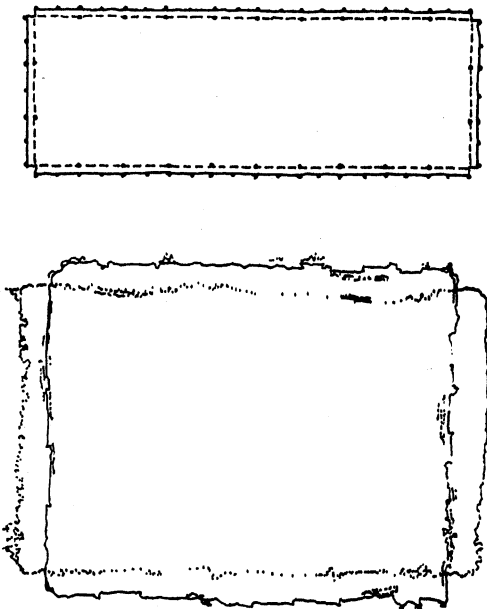


Fig. 6 Plan of Mies’s Lafayette Park, 1958, and Rothko’s Browns, 1957

trality, supporting a reading of sovereignty vis-à-vis the surrounding orthogonal field. A ‘humanist/centric’ anachronism pregnantly lingers amidst the intensely modern abstraction of their manner.⁷² This allures us, “quickening us to interrogate them.” Like true “personages” should, Mies and Rothko’s rectangles have a definitive inside and outside (an *innenwelt* and *umwelt*) delimited by an articulate skin. They are not just the result of fortuitous partitioning within universally Cartesian space. More than ‘objects’ resulting *from* the field, they become ‘subjects’ discreetly recognizable *within* the field. Causal relationships are thus thrown into doubt. Mies and Rothko invoke Cartesian epistemology only to question its hegemony: whether an orthogonal field preceded their rectangles (engendering them) or whether their rectangles preceded the field (engendering it through their own autonomous, orthogonal emanations) remains unclear. Are they products of a field or do they (like robust, Renaissance palazzi) reach outward axially into virgin, unreticulated territory to establish a field? If the compositional preexistence of an infinite, universal grid is, in Rosalind Krauss’s words, “the emblem of modernity,” then these rectangles’ causal ambiguity deeply tenses against the literal, visual ‘modernity’ of Mies and Rothko’s works.⁷³ The faint gestures of figuration by Mies and Rothko counter any simplistic reading of rote, mechanistic generation.

These nuances are critical to the potential for mimesis in Mies and Rothko’s works. Without them, the highly abstract language of rectangles which they employ risks being interpreted as mere geometrical ‘pattern-making’—as visually sophisticated but nonetheless meaningless formality.⁷⁴ In contrast, the representational language of Friedrich’s canvases always and instantaneously locates his intentions firmly and consciously within the mimetic sphere. That Friedrich intends his compositions to be ‘images’ (meaning-laden forms) instead of just pleasing patterns is thus inherently clear despite the considerable reductionism already operative in his canvases. In the context of Friedrich’s views of ‘real’ (meaning representational) space, his axis alone seems sufficient to conjure a faint figuration. In the more abstract, largely non-representational realms of Mies and Rothko, the axis requires the support of these ‘figural’ details to establish this mimesis.

Mimesis and Negation

Ultimately the meaning of Mies and Rothko’s works, and to a lesser degree of Friedrich’s, acquires its ‘sting’ through the ambivalence they project about figuration’s potential within a world ordered by the Enlightenment’s project. Their works are not consoling instruments of illusion placed reassuringly in the path of humanity’s uncertain transition through modernity’s dissonances. Instead, they seek to expose these dissonances. Their anthropomorphism again and again reasserts figuration’s existence; the fact that such signals allure us reminds us of how susceptible we are, and will likely always be, to figuration’s appeal. We crave figuration’s subjectivity all the more in an increasingly

mechanistic age. Yet the image we are offered is effaced. Placed before us are modernity's vast scales, limitless horizons, countless repetitions, and anonymousness (things which Friedrich's canvases suggest that he ably foresaw and which Mies and Rothko's works suggest that they experienced directly). No easy assurance is made that humankind will remain a 'subject' within the increasing alienation, objectification and rationality present

in modernity. Through mimesis/negation, these works project a wistful, melancholic image of humanity's needs being intermixed with the realities of a new age.

No one has explored these issues with greater depth than Adorno. While Adorno's ultimate view of the role of mimesis/negation in Modern art is heavily slanted toward a Marxist critique and lies rather distant from concerns that could have motivated Mies and Rothko (let alone Friedrich), his emphasis on the dialectical character of mimesis/negation is nonetheless singularly useful in analyzing their works.

For Adorno, "art is a refuge for mimetic comportment"⁷⁵—a critical counterweight within a world increasingly ruled by instrumental, as opposed to critical, rationality. The Enlightenment's worthy goal of emancipation through the application of rationality became perverted through the use of rationality solely as an instrument of efficiency as opposed to as a way to measure the *reasonableness* of humankind's goals in and of themselves.⁷⁶ Means became substituted for goals.⁷⁷ The aesthetic realm today functions as a necessary reminder that such mindless instrumentality provides only a portion of what humanity needs — only a portion of that which can provide true, *critical* rationality. Yet the "truth" of art does not arise simply from art's ability to position the other pole. Art is the venue where instrumentality and these 'other' needs are together admitted and brought into juxtaposition: "Art is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it."⁷⁸ For Adorno, the willingness of art to openly acknowledge and consider instrumental rationality's existence and its project, and thus to reveal, highlight, and forewarn of instrumental rationality's potential for alienation, is what gives art its continuing relevance today.⁷⁹

Of course mimesis, for Adorno, is hardly confined to anthropomorphism as seen in the cases of Rothko and Mies or even to the imitation of the sensual world at large. Through his Marxist lens, mimesis acquires its greatest power when it functions as an imitative critique of the prevailing Capitalist structure itself. This strand of his argument, again, would take us far from the comparison at hand. What is however uniquely relevant in Adorno's analysis to Mies and Rothko's works is his realization that mimesis must join *dialectically* with "that against which it remonstrates" in order to expose this component's shortcomings.⁸⁰ For Adorno, in the Modern age, mimesis and instrumental rationality are in many ways incompatible, and that incompatibility must be expressed with simultaneity.⁸¹ To show this is the role—"the spirit"—of the aesthetic. But an artwork cannot achieve its fully "subversive" power simply through projecting

a confrontation of instrumental rationality and humanity's other needs. That would risk the Hegelian 'double-bind' of two opposing statements confronting each other without hope of resolution.⁸² Mimesis must risk joining with rationality in order to truly critique it.⁸³

Many of Mies and Rothko's labors, as outlined above, are directed specifically toward this intermixture. They first postulate rationality's increasing hegemony through the rectangularly generic and repetitive absolutism of their compositions. Having established what purports to be a universally Cartesian spatial field, they then challenge this gesture through the introduction of axial focus. Reminiscent of an anthropomorphic hierarchy, this axis tenses against the field's generic claim; subjectivity enters the composition. Yet rather than reinforce this 'subversive' axis and evolve it into direct figuration, horizontals are immediately raked across it, denying it. The resulting, blocky forms are then purposefully blanked, their centers lost to view. Rationality's claim is reasserted through this attitude of 'rectangles as rectangles' and nothing more. In addition, the periphery's intensity draws our eye away from the axis, further weakening it. Yet this peripheric intensity itself proves subversive. Each isolated, rectangular form acquires its own individuality and presence through the nuances operative specifically in its edges and corners. We wonder if these rectangles may themselves be 'subjects,' or factors of that original overall axial 'subject' now largely lost from view. Constantly in Mies and Rothko's works we are confronted with dialectic tension between opposing readings.

Mies and Rothko express an ongoing struggle between subjective and objective realms—of a struggle humanity still wages to find a true home (an *empathetically recognizable* place) within the uniformity and conformity so prevalent in modern life. Neither Mies nor Rothko predicts how this struggle will end—or indeed if it *will* ever end. They forewarn, but offer no guide. This ambivalence about figuration's potential in the modern world is the 'stinging' meaning underlying their work.

In comparison to this, Friedrich's canvases presage more hope, carried by belief. It is true that he deploys similar forms, which trigger similar, dialectical interactions. And it is further true that his voided axis leaves us guessing about how willingly humanity abandons "individual existence" and joins with the vast, sublime, anonymity ahead. Nonetheless, his deep religiosity allows him to see this as a step humanity must take, not question. For Friedrich, modernity and its dissonances must be part of God's evolving plan. Though we understandably fear what lies ahead, we must not balk. Whatever the costs of mounting the axis and experiencing the launch, these acts can only bring us closer to a final resolution—closer to God.

Adorno, no doubt, would regard Friedrich's canvases as naïve offerings of "impotent comfort"—as statements that engage the dynamic of mimesis/negation yet fail to deliver a truly modern sting.⁸⁴ Friedrich foresees resolution where none exists. A century after Friedrich's passing, Mies and Rothko, in contrast, no longer subscribe to religious certainties. The Enlightenment's

championing of instrumental rationality had by then fully revealed its other side – its distance from anything that could justifiably be called a god. Hence the more ambivalent character of their works.

NOTES

- ¹ Regarding color, however, it is interesting to note that Rothko claimed not to be interested in color per se. Chave notes: “Color, [Rothko] explained, was nothing more than an ‘instrument’ for expressing something larger: the all-important ‘subjects’ of his pictures.” Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko, Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 13. For a contrasting study claiming the importance of color in Rothko’s work, see: John Gage, “Rothko: Color as Subject,” in Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998), pp. 247-263. Regarding the distinction of feathery vs. mechanical qualities between Rothko and Mies’s works, it is interesting to note that after Rothko entered his ‘Classic’ phase he said: “I am only interested in precision now” and added that his new quest was for proportion – very Miesian remarks indeed. See: Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 179.
- ² Franz Schulz mentions Rothko once in his biography of Mies, but only in passing, along with several other Abstract Expressionists, as an example of the increasing abstraction in art in 1950’s America. Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe, A Critical Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 227. Rothko certainly knew of Mies since Rothko was commissioned to do a series of murals in the Seagram Building; there is, in contrast, no information about Mies’s knowledge of Rothko.
- ³ In terms of an obsession about drafted grids, Agnes Martin has been compared to Mies. See: Rosalind Krauss, “The Grid, the /Cloud/, and the Detail,” in Detlef Mertins, *The Presence of Mies* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 134-138. In terms of absolutist, foursquare form and dark coloration, Ad Reinhardt has been mentioned, and, in terms of minimalism, Malevich has been invoked. See: Kenneth Frampton, “Modernism and Tradition in the Work of Mies van der Rohe, 1920-1968,” in John Zukowsky, ed., *Mies Reconsidered: His Career, Legacy and Disciples* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 53.
- ⁴ The Painter Barnett Newman also arrived at axiality at approximately the same time as Rothko, though Newman’s use of vertical symmetry was neither as all-consuming nor as sustained as Rothko’s. While other Abstract Expressionists flirted occasionally with axial configurations (for example: Adolf Gottlieb’s largely asymmetrical and organically inspired forms can at times hover on the canvas in unison in an axial pattern, as in his *Circular*, of 1959), Rothko and Newman are the only two for whom symmetry was a major force, and Rothko the only one for whom it became an obsession. While Reinhardt’s ‘9-square’ canvases are technically symmetrical, their square format seems derived from a desire for four-sided centrality rather than axiality. Rowe has discussed the development of axiality in Mies’s later career and also discussed how Mies’s disciples and others rapidly followed him. Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), pp. 120-121. Both Mies’s and Rothko’s embrace of the vertical axis has led critics to compare their works with Renaissance Classicism. See: Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), p. 33, and Ashton, p. 162.
- ⁵ Robert Rosenblum, “Notes on Rothko and Tradition,” in *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1996), p. 26.
- ⁶ Chave, pp. 105-145. Rothko scaled many of his canvases to human size, subtly reinforcing their human visage. See: Irving Sandler, “Mark Rothko (In Memory of Robert Goldwater),” in *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1996), p. 12.
- ⁷ Mark Rothko, interview with William Seitz, 1952, cited in: Bonnie Clearwater, “Statements by Mark Rothko,” in Alan Bowness, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970* (London, Tate Gallery, 1987), p. 73. So strongly do Rothko’s rectangles read as ‘personages’ that his canvases have provoked mentions of Sir Geoffrey Scott and the anthropomorphic interpretation of empathy. See: David Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas. Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 77.
- ⁸ Brian O’Doherty, *American Masters, The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 162.
- ⁹ Scully, p. 34.
- ¹⁰ Mies does provide a canopy extending from beneath the raised volume of Seagram, but this seems an almost begrudging gesture in comparison to the scale of the overall mass.
- ¹¹ A tension between center and periphery pervaded all periods of Mies van der Rohe’s long and varied career. Throughout Mies’s German phase (in his early historicist villas, heavy Schinkelschule compositions, and mid-career avant-garde projects) and likewise throughout his American works (in his brick courts, aula-like glass pavilions, and reticulated steel cages), he constantly returned to the oppositional dyad of spatial focus versus spatial dispersal. The image of stasis pitted against dynamism, often formulated by him as an axial concentration tensed against an outward rush toward the horizon, filled his imagination. While arguably some degree of play with the fundamental visual struggle between center and periphery is inherent in virtually any work of visual art, Mies truly ruminated life-long on this theme and managed again and again to uncover startlingly fresh variations. With justification it can be said that a tension of center and periphery is one of the major threads of continuity in Mies’s oeuvre. It was Colin Rowe who first directed critical scrutiny to this component of Mies’s aesthetic, noting Mies’s desire to “equilibrate both an outward pull and a centralizing moment” when discussing Mies’s one-story sandwich volumes such as Crown Hall at IIT. See: Rowe, p. 150. Numerous writers have discussed the tension of static and dynamic in Mies’s work as an opposition of “Apollonian and Dionysian” sensibilities. See, for example: Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 183-186.
- ¹² Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1979), p. 340.
- ¹³ Anfam, p. 11. For additional discussions of this, see: O’Doherty, pp. 161-163, and Chave, pp. 116-120. Anfam has further discussed some of the complexities inherent in the blankness of Rothko’s paintings [p. 77]: “Blankness . . . plays a role in the scheme of things in as much as effacement can presuppose its opposite: vacancy tends to demand our fulfillment or participation (a fact memorialized in the old adage that nature abhors a vacuum). Just as a tabula rasa is

- the necessary framework or prelude to writing and the generation of meaning, so the absence that the images embody plays upon the viewer's presence. We bring more to them than we might if they did not at face value feign to tell us 'little.'
- ¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 91-119. For an extensive review of Gadamer's ideas and an application of them to architecture, see: Lindsay Jones, *Twin City Tales: A Hermeneutical Reassessment of Tula and Chichén Itzá* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1995), pp. 195-210.
- ¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 73.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- ¹⁸ Mies was born in Aachen, Germany, and Rothko in the Baltics.
- ¹⁹ From Johann Jakob Rühle von Lilienstern, quoted in: Wieland Schmied, *Casper David Friedrich* (New York: Abrams, 1995), p. 47.
- ²⁰ Lilienstern, quoted in: *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Goethe wrote that Friedrich was the "only landscape painter who has attempted to inject mystical-religious meaning into landscape painting and drawing." Quoted in: *Ibid.* Vasily Andreyevich Shukowski, quoted in: *Ibid.*
- ²² For Friedrich's possible impacts on Schinkel, see: Barry Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel, An Architecture for Prussia* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p. 24; John Leighton and Colin J. Bailey, *Casper David Friedrich, Winter Landscape* (London: The National Gallery, 1990), pp. 48-49; and Philip Johnson, "Schinkel and Mies," in *Philip Johnson, Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 165-166. Among the scarce mentions of Friedrich in relation to Mies are: Thomas H. Beeby, "When the Sacred Journey Ends: Protestant Thought and the Meaning of Puritanical Modern Architecture," *Threshold* (School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1982), pp. 47-48; and Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 203. Krauss mentions in passing both Rothko and Friedrich as examples of the 'abstract sublime' in a study of Mies, but does not actually compare their works to Mies. See: Rosalind Krauss, "The Grid, The /Cloud/, and the Detail," in Mertins, p. 138.
- ²³ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 10-12. Rosenblum argues that a distinctive aesthetic ethos pervaded many of the visual arts in the late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries across a region stretching from the Baltics and Scandinavia in the East across to the Low Countries and England in the West. For an even earlier scholarly attempt to link Friedrich to modern trends in Abstract Expressionism, see: Klaus Lankeit, "Die Frühromantik und die Grundlagen der 'gegenstandslosen' Malerie," *Neue Heidelberger Jahrbücher* (1951), pp. 55-99. For a criticism of these attempts, see: Pierre Vaisse, "Friedrich Among Us," in *Casper David Friedrich, Line and Transparency* (Paris: Centre Culturel du Marais, 1981), p. 38.
- ²⁴ In Rosenblum's analysis, this Tradition went on to include the more contemporary figures of Edward Munch, Emil Nolde, and Ferdinand Hodler. See: Rosenblum, *Modern Painting . . .*, pp. 101-114, 123-128, & 132-135.
- ²⁵ For a reference to tantric art in relation to Rothko's work see: Chave, p. 173. For an extensive discussion of the influences of Tantric Art on abstract painting in general, see: Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," in Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 132-135.
- ²⁶ Schmied, p. 35.
- ²⁷ As Friedrich's contemporary, Vasily Andreyevich Shukowskhi wrote, "If one discovers in them [Friedrich's paintings] more than meets the eye it is because the painter does not see nature like an artist who is merely searching for something to paint, but rather like a man of sensitivity and imagination who finds in it, wherever he looks, a symbol of human existence." Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ²⁸ Wilhelm von Kügelgen, quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 48. Schmied himself writes of Friedrich [p. 52]: "What his contemporaries all too often thought of as mere mysticism was in large part mathematics."
- ²⁹ Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 31. Friedrich added: "When making a picture everything compels me to collect my thoughts in a specific geometric figure, and to proceed to construct it quite abstractly, like a mathematician."
- ³⁰ Carl Gustav Carus, "Neun Breife über Landschaftsmalerei, geschrieben in den Jahren 1815 bis 1824" (Dresden, 1955), English translation in: Lorenz Eitner, ed., *Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750-1850, Sources and Documents, II* (Englewood Cliffs: 1970), p. 48.
- ³¹ Interestingly enough, these compositions are absolutely bilaterally and horizontally symmetrical. For a discussion of this related to Friedrich, see: Rosenblum, *Modern Painting . . .*, p. 23. For a discussion of this effect in this particular drawing of Mies's, see: Randall Ott, "The Horizontal Symmetry of Mies van der Rohe," in *Dimensions* (Vol. 5, 1993), p. 126. For a general discussion of the use of a horizontal axis in Mies's work, see: Robin Evans, "Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries," in *Translations from Drawings to Buildings and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 232-276. The horizontal axis in this painting of Friedrich's and in Mies's drawing induces a hovering, weightless effect. Goethe criticized Friedrich's work because it often could be viewed "just as well upside down." See: Schmied, pp. 10 & 40.
- ³² Other canvases of Friedrich's that could be easily substituted here would be his *Bohemian Landscape (Mountain Landscape)*, where the human figures are replaced with two trees, or his *Bohemian Landscape (with the Milleschauer)*, where two mountain cusps serve to center the image.
- ³³ This is not the trap of reification, in Adorno's sense of the word. Abstraction is not made concrete in these works but rather brought into intense tension with the concrete.
- ³⁴ Erwin Panofsky coined this term to describe how formal parallels that can arise within different times and disciplines serendipitously, without actually sharing any common meaning. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (New York: 1964), pp. 25-26.
- ³⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 6-7. For Vidler's comments on Adorno, see pp. 8-9. For mentions of the uncanny in reference to Rothko, see: Anfam, pp. 79 & 92.
- ³⁶ Adorno, p. 105. For contemporaneous comments on the melancholy that is apparent in Friedrich's work, see the thoughts of Shukowski

- in: Schmied, p. 47.
- ³⁷ For a discussion of Jungian influences upon the Abstract Expressionist Movement, see: Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 43-45.
- ³⁸ Mies started this series of steps several decades before Rothko (roughly in 1920 versus 1940), but both ended up at the same place at virtually the same time. In addition to the steps shown in the diagram, it is interesting to note that both Mies and Rothko began their careers with a phase of “literal” figuration – Rothko in his more realist paintings of the 30’s and Mies in his traditionalist, *Schinkelschule* works of the teens.
- ³⁹ The series of steps in this diagram and works illustrated are [#’s for Rothko come from Anfam catalogue]: (A) Complex, dynamically deployed forms — sharply angular or curved (Mies’s Friedrichstrasse and Rothko #349); (B) More increasingly rectangular masses in largely orthogonal relationships with only vestigial angular or curving gestures (Mies’s Alexanderplatz and Rothko #400); (C) Largely rectangular shapes that slide past each other in a tight, right-angled spatial field, though still leaving a very ragged overall edge profile (upper floor of Tugendhat and Rothko #404); (D) Wholly rectangular masses that now seem to “fill-out” the canvas/site and come to fully control — or be controlled by — the overall compositional rectangle (Second Ulrich Lange House and Rothko #402); (E) Immediately before the classic, symmetrical formulation arrives, retrospective variants are tried — pin-wheeling, asymmetrical forms on a much smaller scale come back with a fragile, almost poignant intensity, now locked within a discreet rectangle (interior plan view of Museum for Small City and Rothko #408); (F) Absolutely strict, classic quietude of the spare bilateral symmetry of a reduced series of rectangles (Seagram and Rothko #478); (G) Occasional retrospective glances in each of their work even well after the classic symmetrical format has established itself unequivocally (Chicago Federal Center and Rothko #437).
- ⁴⁰ Both Mies and Rothko admired Nietzsche deeply. See: Neumeyer, pp. 53-61; Anfam, p. 17; and Chave, pp. 178-180.
- ⁴¹ Both Rothko and Mies, curiously, went out of their ways to claim no special interest in Mondrian despite the obviousness of Mondrian’s influence. See: Chave, p. 257; and Wolf Tegethoff, *Mies van der Rohe, The Villas and Country Houses* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), p. 50 (Note #52).
- ⁴² If an axis alone were enough to achieve ‘figuration’ within a purely geometrical composition, then we would expect to sense anthropomorphism in the symmetrical compositions of, for example, Josef Alber’s *Homage to the Square* series. We do not. Something in addition to an axis must be operative in purely geometrical compositions to achieve this ‘faint’ figuration.
- ⁴³ Anfam, p. 77.
- ⁴⁴ Compton writes: “He might tune the edge by rendering it sharper, softer, straighter or more curved, more linear or painterly, by brushstrokes parallel to it, at right angles, or at random angles.” Michael Compton, “Mark Rothko, the Subjects of the Artist,” in *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1996), pp. 53-54. Chave notes that hours of close observation created these edges’ “brushy, gently modulated” effect. Chave, p. 14.
- ⁴⁵ Compton, p. 46.
- ⁴⁶ Anfam, p. 85.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ⁴⁸ William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and their Architects (Volume 4): The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 229.
- ⁴⁹ Peter Carter, quoted in: Frampton, *Studies in . . .*, p. 192.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193. For an additional description of this effect, see: Jordy, pp. 240-241.
- ⁵¹ Anfam, p. 11.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁵³ This is quite different from other, more evenly graded ways of lending an anthropomorphic reading to towers, such as the intense literalism found in Rem Koolhaas’s reading of New York’s skyscrapers. For an illustration, see: Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monicelli Press, 1995), p. 23.
- ⁵⁴ Scully, p. 33.
- ⁵⁵ Tafuri and Dal Co, p. 339.
- ⁵⁶ O’Doherty, p. 164.
- ⁵⁷ Chave, pp. 175-176.
- ⁵⁸ This distinguishes Rothko from more rationally oriented Abstract Expressionists like Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman. Rosenblum discusses how the lack of closure in Newman’s rectangles (the fact that no edge-strip of color bounds the canvas) implies their extension to infinity. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting . . .*, p. 210-211. Compton refers to Rothko’s rectangles as “inwardly generated,” and distinct from those of Clyfford Still or Newman. Compton, p. 56.
- ⁵⁹ For an illustration of this sketch, see: Weiss, Plate 90.
- ⁶⁰ These lozenges expose that Rothko’s rectangles are abstractions of his earlier, organically inspired personages. See, for example: Anfam, #307.
- ⁶¹ O’Doherty goes so far as to characterize Rothko’s late works, where the edges become unrelievedly hard, as failures. See: O’Doherty, pp. 186-187.
- ⁶² Chave, p. 1.
- ⁶³ Jordy, p. 227.
- ⁶⁴ For comments in this regard, see: Michael Wigginton, *Glass in Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 86. A sole exception to placing the skin off the centerlines would be Mies’s planned Convention Center for Chicago. His general pattern was to move the skin outward on high-rise buildings and inward on open one-story volumes. At Farnsworth, Crown Hall, or his proposed Mannheim Theater, for example, the columns are exposed and the skin rides along their inner surface. In these one-story spaces, though, the skin always cantilevers – sometimes substantially — past the columns on two ends of the rectangle, causing a subtle ‘rounding’ anyway due to the lack of structure at the corner. Mies’s obsessive desire to somehow open and articulate his corners is shown by his pulling of the structure back from the corners at, for example, the New National Gallery in Berlin. For the most comprehensive overall review of the development of Mies’s corners, see: Jordy, pp. 221-277.
- ⁶⁵ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), p. 97. The projecting layer of his applied, mullion-like I-Beams further enhanced the cantilevering effect.
- ⁶⁶ Johnson, p. 171.
- ⁶⁷ Subtlety, however, still remains key. For Mies and Rothko these

“Greek cross” gestures remains an edge detail; the literal cross axes do not read independently, and the sense of an unencumbered, simple rectangle remains.

- ⁶⁸ In J. N. L. Durand’s plans in his *Précis*, the grid lines run through all column points, and the masses of the walls rigorously stand upon the grid’s centerlines. In this type of system, re-entrant corners are no trouble. The system can turn in any direction with equal ease. Durand wrote of the rigor of his system’s process: “. . . after tracing equidistant parallel axes, and cutting these axes perpendicularly with others similarly spaced, the walls, as much as is fitting, are placed on the axes, and the columns, pilasters, etc., on their intersections . . .” Quoted in: Sergio Villari, *J. N. L. Durand (1760-1834), Art and Science of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 60.
- ⁶⁹ Even in Mies’s very first large-scale project using a grid, his *Neue Sachlichkeit* Concrete Office Building, of 1922/23, he contrapuntally modifies the structure and skin conditions at the corner. See: Dietrich Neumann, “Three Early Designs by Mies van der Rohe, *Perspecta* 27, pp. 87-88.
- ⁷⁰ The Bauakademie’s corners show no differential understanding of themselves as corners; the pilasters and infill simply turn as if paper patterns have been cut and joined together. Any interstitial pier could have suddenly become the corner at will. Seen in true elevation, there is nothing to signal the corner’s approach; the series of bays comes to an end by simple amputation, and could have run on infinitely or ended sooner. In Mies’s drawn elevations, in contrast, embroidery of several extra lines always frills outward to decorate the edge. The modern, ‘anti-classical’ character of Schinkel’s Bauakademie grid is strongly enhanced by the placement of a column in the very center of the facade—something Mies would never do.
- ⁷¹ By setting his skins outward, off the grid, and thus enriching his normal corner condition, the re-entrant condition was made impossible to resolve. For an illustration and commentary, see: Jencks, p. 102.
- ⁷² Arnheim has noted the universality of the visual theme of center versus grid. See: Arnheim, Rudolf, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. vii-xi.
- ⁷³ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 10.
- ⁷⁴ Mies and Rothko’s nuances in this way resemble Mondrian’s subtle

pulling back of his black grid lines ever so slightly from the edges of so many of his canvases. That Mondrian’s highly abstract works contain intention beyond their geometry thus becomes clear. They are not unthinking geometrical pattern-making.

- ⁷⁵ Adorno, p. 53.
- ⁷⁶ For Adorno this was ultimately evidenced by the holocaust.
- ⁷⁷ Adorno acknowledges the inevitability of this predicament: for Adorno the process of enlightenment itself tends, through the aegis of rationality, toward an overly monolithic—even totalitarian—character. Modernity, seen by Adorno through a Marxist lens, is not a harmonious image. Instrumental rationality for him is the foregone conclusion of contemporary Capitalism.
- ⁷⁸ Adorno, p. 55.
- ⁷⁹ Adorno writes: “How an artwork deals with this antinomy determines its possibility and quality.” *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133. He writes [p. 86.]: “artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are: This is their spirit.” For Adorno, an artwork is a unique object in that it can signal past itself and thus transcends pure instrumentality. Mimesis, however, cannot be mere imitation; indeed, if an artwork literally replicates the sensuality of nature it risks reversion to pure rationality—it in effect becomes just yet another instrument (this time of the science of representation). At the moment of creation, the artwork’s efforts at representation must be tempered by dialectical intermixture with the goals of instrumental rationality to avoid, ironically, succumbing to instrumental rationality.
- ⁸¹ It is through an expression of that incompatibility that we realize that Utopia has yet to be reached.
- ⁸² This interpretation of Adorno’s thought is offered in: Michael Cahn, “Subversive Mimesis: T. W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique,” in Mihai Spărosu, ed., *Mimesis and Contemporary Theory, vol. 1* (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1984), p. 49.
- ⁸³ At best, the artwork can give a “glimpse of reconciliation” between opposites. Art that is true to its “spirit” must retain a bittersweet sting and not descend into banal representations of a new harmony.
- ⁸⁴ Adorno, p. 133. Adorno actually uses the word poison to describe the potency of this sting. On the issue of religious art, Adorno remarks that: “The metaphysics of art requires its complete separation from the religion in which art originated. Artworks are not the absolute, nor is the absolute immediately present in them.”