

## Nightmares & Dreams: Rereading Kandinsky 100 Years On

David Levi Strauss

February 2011

Rereading *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* now, I am struck by the degree to which it reads as an artifact of its specific time, at the beginning of modern art. Kandinsky cautions us about this in the first words of his introduction: “Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. Efforts to revive the art-principles of the past will at best produce an art that is still-born.” That warning should give us pause as we attempt to go “Beyond Kandinsky.”

For Kandinsky, there was another kind of art, “founded on fundamental truth,” with a “similarity of inner tendency in the whole moral and spiritual atmosphere,” and made by artists who seek to express in their work “only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external form.” *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is a manifesto (in an age of manifestos) for this kind of art: non-objective, non-materialist abstract art against “mere representation, however artistic.”

The enemy of this kind of art is “the nightmare of materialism,” wherein our minds are “infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal,” and which has “turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless space.” In the “Spiritual Revolution” chapter, we see Kandinsky as the political economist he once was, railing against the false gods of Socialism and Science.

I don’t remember when I first read *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (I think it was relatively late, in my early twenties), but I remember being torn between gratitude for the attempt, at least, to speak of the soul in a modern context, and disappointment at its manichaeism and the sometimes turgid prose (at least in M.T.H. Sadler’s English translation). And I recoiled from Kandinsky’s presentation of the spiritual as a kind of pyramid scheme, at the apex of which stands the lone genius, the visionary, “solitary and insulted” (he uses the example of Beethoven after the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony), with others arranged in descending order according to their talents, as “spiritual food” trickles down from above. This is, in part, the language and imagery of Theosophy. Madame Blavatsky ends one of her books with this prophecy: “The earth will be a heaven in the twenty-first century in comparison with what it is now.” Kandinsky quotes this approvingly, and says “there has never been a time when the arts approached each other more nearly than they do today, *in this later phase of spiritual development.*” This with two world wars, Shoah, and a multitude of other horrors to come. The extreme poignancy of those prophecies descends on us now not like “spiritual food,” but like the broken shards of the Modernist dream.