**In the Zone of Pure Potential:**

**Luciferian Speculations on the Age of Light.**

Ronnie Lippens

Keele University

**Abstract**:

In 1970 the Dutch philosopher and psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg announces the end of classical psychoanalysis. In an age without taboos, the mere idea no longer made sense to van den Berg. In the same year Mark Rothko’s stark Chapel in Houston, Texas, is completed at the point in the painter’s life when he had exhausted his experimental attempts to visualise sovereign, superhuman life. Both events are not completely unrelated. Both mark the point in Western culture when radical sovereign aspiration gained its final momentum. The year 2016 marks the point when this Luciferian aspiration achieves hegemonic dominance, and occupies the core of cultural life. We are now in a position to look back on Rothko’s Chapel, and ask ourselves if, in this newly dawned Age of Light, there still is, as the painter seems to have suggested, a dark-side, a zone of inner, hidden depth, and if, contrary to van den Berg’s prediction, it still makes sense to psycho-analyse the Luciferian moment. In this contribution an attempt shall be made to reflect upon these questions.

**Key Words:**

Mark Rothko – Jan Hendrik van den Berg – absolute sovereignty – Lucifer – pure potential

**By Way of Introduction**

This contribution, in a way, centres on the year 1970. An attempt will be made here to speculate on how two seemingly unconnected events –i.e. the completion of Rothko’s Chapel, and a short essay by the late Dutch psychiatrist Van den Berg- may be able to shed light on the origins, emergence and development of what many are beginning to call ‘The Age of Disruption’. The year 1970 was of course also the first year in a decade which was very much the focus of Christopher Lasch’s classic –published at the end of the 1970s- on *The Culture of Narcissism*. In it, Lasch explores and analyses an undercurrent in American culture which, consolidating at the time of the book’s writing, harboured a deep and quite pervasive narcissistic mood. Crystallizing against the backdrop of ecological and military “doom”, this culture of narcissism, Lasch went on to argue, is constantly fuelled by the continuous eroding and weakening of the Super-Ego in the context of crumbling loci of authority (the family in particular). The waning of authority, and of structure as such, tends to generate a culture of narcissists who are always desperately trying to quall the anxiety that gushes in through the holes left vacant by a dying Super-Ego. The narcissist, who no longer has any truck with authority, remains however dependent on the world. The aspiring celebrity, for example, is always going to be dependent on a world that allows them their fifteen minutes. The narcissist finds this “tension” unbearable. In *The Minimal Self*, Lasch (1984) goes on to explore “survival” strategies in an age shot through with narcissistic “tension”. “Minimalist” strategies seem to be dominant here (and yes, Rothko is mentioned). Withdrawing from the world in a “mood of retrenchment” (1984: 150), the minimalist, in a bid to achieve omnipotence, attempts to erase the boundaries that, unbearably, divide the narcissistic self from the non-self.

There seems to be, Lasch suggests, a “Faustian will-to-power” (1984: 238) at work in strategies that thrive on illusions and desires of omnipotence. In this contribution, though, we will call those illusions Luciferian. All his agony notwithstanding, Faust is still very much dependent. He is, first and foremost of course, dependent on Lucifer. But he is, ultimately, also dependent on the world, and on all the codes, or the Law, in it. A real Faustian really wants to be Lucifer Himself. This is the point that we hope to be able to explore here. The Luciferian moment, in our reading, emerged in the wake of the Second World War. Lasch does briefly refer to the experience of the war and the related “exhaustion of political ideologies” (1984: 224-6), but here we locate the origins of contemporary Luciferianism precisely in the experience of this world wide calamity. In our reading it is at that particular moment in history that the first seed of our ‘age of disruption’ was sown, and it was abstract expressionists such as Clyfford Still, or Mark Rothko indeed, who, at the end of the war (Still started painting his signature lightning bolts in 1944), were beginning to pick up, and express, signs of the massive “tear” in the fabric of humanity left by the war (“tear” is a word sometimes synonymously used for Still’s lightning bolts). We will be able to explore this in more detail below. Let us just state here that, tiny kernel at first, by the time of Rothko’s Chapel, and Van den Berg’s essay on minimalism (indeed) and the end of psychoanalysis, the little seed had already laid the foundations for ‘disruption’ to thrive on. At the heart of this deep cultural shift it might be possible to trace a move, from a form of life that turns on the default operational logic that holds “All else failing, submit!”, to one with a default logic which is coded as follows: “All else failing, refute all code!”. The history of this shift has antecedents that stretch far back in time. Peter Sloterdijk has probably laid bare most of those in his *Terrible Children of Modernity* (2014). There has always been, in Modernity, writes Sloterdijk, a strong “anti-genealogical” undercurrent, carried by “bastards” (literal bastards, at first, then “bastards” more broadly) who, turning their backs on the codes of tradition, had their eager eye on the future, and who went on to create new worlds, and their own life-paths in them. But to look to the future, and to create, even “anti-genealogically”, is still to accept code and sacrifice. Like Faust, Sloterdijk’s bastards still submit and sacrifice, i.e. to future and to creation. The Luciferian, with aspirations of absolute sovereignty burning in the void of his or her vacant soul, is no longer willing to accept this. He, or she, reserves the right to refuse *all* code. He, or she, refutes *all Creation*.

**In the Beginning**

In a short piece on ‘Expressive Individualism’ in *The Heythrop Journal*, Patrick Madigan (2013) deliberately drops the name of Milton’s *Lucifer*. In it he argues that in these late modern times of ours, when the “cult of the artist as genius” reigns supreme in Lady Gaga style celebrity culture and beyond, “Lucifer and not Jesus has become the dominant archetype for the modern imagination denying or killing a father perceived as making a heavy, and perhaps excessive, demand” (2013: 993). We agree with Madigan that an extreme Luciferian romanticism is pervading contemporary artistic culture. But Lucifer’s late modern return to the world, in our view, is not just about art or popular culture. There is something more encompassing going on, and it is to a speculation on those goings on that we now turn1.

We were always told that Lucifer was not just ‘one’, but ‘legion’. We should therefore use the plural form when writing about ‘Him’. We also know that, like all angels, whether fallen or not, Lucifer has no gender. In fact, ‘He’ is not traversed by any lines of division and separation at all. He is the ‘Bearer of Light’, the ‘Morning Star’, and when He fell to earth he did so in the shape, and with the thundering force, of a blindingly bright bolt of lightning. Ever since Newton, physicists have stressed the qualities of light: that it is extremely primordial, and that, in its white appearance, it is the perfect sum total of all colours in the spectrum. White light, Lucifer’s light, is the primordial sum in which all lines of division are absent, dormant, residing as pure potentiality in the obliterating purity of the light’s whiteness. So we really should not write ‘He’ when referring to Lucifer. Of all the creatures in this world, He is the least singular, and the least singular male. And yet, write ‘He’ we shall. Not so much because He has been depicted, throughout the ages, as a male-bodied angel (we will revisit Blake’s depiction of Lucifer later in this essay), but, rather, because Lucifer’s primordial-and-non-divided-multiplicity goes hand in hand with a desire to act, nay: *rebel,* as a singular, absolutely sovereign entity who is constantly –almost eternally, we’ve been told- rousing and leading His army against the father and his creation. There is no contradiction here, only a paradox. He who wants to be utterly primordial and totally undivided, also wants to be that which His desires have, paradoxically so, divided away, indeed split off: the single-bodied, desiring creature who, singularly, acts in, and upon, a world of singular creations. We shall explore this very shortly, but before we do that let us note that in the above lines the following words were used: ‘creature’ and ‘primordial’. One could say that Lucifer is the ‘primordial creature’. Is it not said that the first words spoken by the god of creation were: ‘Let there be Light’. And then, as we know, there was Light. Lucifer, then, is the very First of creations. He is, as it is said, the very first ‘Son of God’. He is extremely primordial indeed. In His undifferentiated whiteness, He appeared long before any other creature did, and all that time, before that fatal moment, He was the Bearer of Light, who carried, within His infinite expanse, untold potential, and the promise of limitless possibilities. But all this came to an end when the father decided to keep creating, and to spend a considerable amount of the pure, primordial potential which, up to that point, Lucifer was the sole Bearer of.

That Lucifer would ultimately have an issue with His father’s spendthrift (another notion that we shall be revisiting later) does not strike us as a huge surprise. Firstborns of course, as is well known, tend to have jealous inclinations anyhow, but Lucifer’s problem with the rest of His father’s creation could not be reduced to sibling envy or jealousy. There is something a lot deeper than that to be discerned in Lucifer’s rebelliousness. The fact that the father imbued his creation with Law –his divine Law- and that he placed the human creature –a mere biological organism, barely above the reptile and the snake, as Lucifer would be eager to prove experimentally- at the pinnacle of this Law infested creation, was unbearable to the Firstborn, Bearer of primordial Light. Other angels liked what they saw in the father’s creation (as it is written, some of the Sons of God did, after the Fall, cast a coveting eye on the daughters of men) but Lucifer Himself could not accept this. Not only was a ridiculously weak creature given dominion over the father’s creation (i.e. earth) but this thus created universe works according to a Law which, as all laws, cannot but stifle, indeed: wastefully destroy, the infinite potential of possibilities that, originally, primordially, was Lucifer’s to keep and safeguard. Law is wasteful. All law is. It draws its energy from the open potential whence it emerges, only to spend that energy, and fix and freeze what used to be open promise into coded regularity, thus making it unavailable as pure, unspent, primordial potential. How wasteful indeed.

Something had to give. We know that Lucifer made a serious attempt to organise a rebellion against the father. It is written that a war was actually waged. Lucifer lost the war and was cast –in the shape of a bolt of lightning indeed- into Hell, together with all other fallen Sons of God who had fought at His side. Since then, Lucifer has made several attempts to walk the earth, his father’s despised creation. On most occasions the aim was to simply demonstrate experimentally the weakness and the unworthiness of the human creature. However, on two occasions Lucifer’s goal was a lot more encompassing. The first of these occasions was in the Garden of Eden, the second is very recent and is actually still ongoing. The events in the Garden of Eden were, from Lucifer’s perspective (and yes, He does have a perspective, very paradoxically so), an abject failure. The second time when Lucifer set foot on earth with a more encompassing intent was in the dying days of the Second World War. He is still among us and it looks like success –or something approaching it- is now becoming a distinct possibility. In this section we shall briefly revisit the events in the Garden of Eden. The remainder of the essay will focus on what could be called the Age of Light. That Age of Light is the very recent times spanning, roughly, from the immediate post-war period to the present day. This is Lucifer’s hour.

But first: the Garden of Eden. It is as yet unclear whether Lucifer appeared on earth, that very first time, after He had been cast into Hell, or whether he was cast into Hell following His intervention in the Garden of Eden. It doesn’t really matter much in our view although we are inclined to accept the former hypothesis. Thoroughly disappointed with His father’s creation, and having subsequently organised the rebellion in heaven, unsuccessfully as we know, Lucifer is likely to have harboured a desire to try again, this time directly on earth, in the Garden of Eden itself. It is often said that Lucifer’s intention was merely to demonstrate the weakness and wickedness of the laughable human worm. One could argue that there He *was* successful. Adam and Eve were weak and wicked alright. And we’ve already hinted at the fact that Lucifer took –as if to underline the point that He was making- the form of a lowly serpent to complete the experiment. But Lucifer must have set His aims much higher than that. His ulterior aim, we venture here, was to reverse creation, pure and simple. His strategy was to dissipate the divine Law with which the father had imbued the Garden of Eden. Once this divine Law would have been broken, dissolved as it were, creation itself would lose its operational code and would simply vanish. All would then revert back to the primordial state of pure, un-coded potential, and Lucifer would be restored to His rightful sovereign place as the First Son of God, as the Bearer of pure potential, as the keeper of the eternal promise of possibility.

So, what was this divine Law, and what was its code? Here we are on slightly firmer ground since of course all this is written. The father’s divine Law just says that the human being should live and prosper and hold dominion over the other creatures on earth. This Law also included a prohibition which forbade human creatures to transcend their mere biological, creature-like status, or, in other words, to achieve ‘human-ness’, civilisation, and a corresponding pre-occupation with matters such as ‘good’ or ‘evil’. In other words, the divine Law in the Garden of Eden was a natural, biological Law that compelled human creatures to live out forceful natural, biological lives. This was the Law that was wasting all primordial potential. It only took a mere serpent, Lucifer was able to experimentally demonstrate, to prompt the human creature into breaking this divine Law. However, the experiment did not go the way that Lucifer may have originally intended. Rather than leading to the dissolution of creation, this breaking of the divine Law merely further complicated the issue for Lucifer. The divine Law –the Law of nature- remained in existence. The human creatures, now fully ‘human’, were simply cast out of the Garden of Eden, were punished by the sudden and very painful awareness of their creature-like origins and qualities, and were forced to take responsibility for their actions and to assume, from then onwards, the consequences of their thirst for ‘knowledge of good and evil’ and their desire to be like their creator (that is how Lucifer framed His seductive move). Humanity was thrust into its own sphere, into the realm of ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’, or better: civilizations, each with their own coded laws of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Following Freud’s reading (1913, but also 1939) of the traumatic emergence of humanity out of its savage origins, into an abundance of neurotic-compulsive, coded systems of totemic law, each with their amalgam of taboos, one could say that the biological human creature, drenched in divine natural Law, suddenly awoke to itself in and through the theologies of its own making. This was not anticipated by Lucifer. After the Fall in the Garden of Eden it became clear that not only did the divine Law of nature survive His experiment, it was then joined, and covered, by an additional layer of coded Law –theological Law- which itself consisted of a relentless barrage of neurotic, fixed-and-frozen theologies, each coded by their respective totemic ‘good’ and taboo-like ‘evil’. Both layers are present in human beings. The anthropologist Ernest Becker (1975) for example has been at pains to argue how in human beings the dread of, on the one hand, their creature-like origins, and their impending creature-like demise on the other, makes them cower and hide in the illusions of their little cultures, where they then tend to cling, in utter desperation and agony, onto whichever coded ‘meaning system’ (or ‘theology’, we would say) is available there to promise some modicum of redemption.

History teaches us that, if the divine Law of nature was, from a Luciferian perspective, wasteful, then the theological Law of humanity, in all its diversely coded forms, is no improvement at all. All ‘meaning systems’ or, in other words, all ‘theologies’, have something of a double-edged sword about them. On the one hand they bind and integrate (and therefore also destroy), while, on the other, they also divide and separate (which, it should be admitted, can have creative consequences). But they all operate according to ‘code’. They all are, and quite inevitably so, ‘coded’. They all draw energy, and fix and freeze it in recurring regularities which, more often than not, channel potentialities, and the possibilities dormant in them, thereby preventing the full and complete, pure potential of being and life from remaining intact. With each draw of energy and with each spend of potential towards the maintenance of the coded workings of Law –the divine Law of nature, yes, but even more so the theological Law of human civilization- waste occurs. The waste of energy and potential is vast, and, it seems, unstoppable. It didn’t help when the father, after the Fall, utterly disappointed in his favourite creature, and in a highly punitive mood, decided to limit its lifespan to just ‘120 years’. Purely biologically speaking, this is indeed very wasteful. But as Ernest Becker explained (see above) the introduction of mortality in creation, and the awareness of mortality, in the creature-that-became-human, have engendered such a dread, compulsion and resulting destruction, that many a commentator, ever since the dawn of human time, could only shake their head at the mere thought of it. To put it in other words, history has, so far, been an endless string of cakes –some sweet, most bitter- that had to be eaten, while none could be had at the same time. To the Bearer of primordial Light and pure potential, this is unbearable. In the zone of pure potential, one can, indeed one must be able to eat one’s cake (intervene in the world, and therefore spend) and have it (keep all potential intact, and therefore remain in a position where nothing was spent). In a world coded by divine Law, and by theological Law, this is impossible. There, spent means spent. To spend means having to live with the consequences of your spending. To create, in the world of coded creation, is paid for by the loss of your capacity to eat your cake and have it. It is to be dependent. It is to lose absolute sovereignty. Even Lucifer realizes this. Indeed this realisation was precisely the reason for His *démarche* in the Garden of Eden in the first place.

Whether or not creation –and its wasteful Laws- can be undone remains to be seen. They probably can’t. But Lucifer’s desire to return to the state of pure potential, to a state before *all* Law, before *all* code, before all division –His realm, His un-coded universe- has not died. In fact, some of it has been stirring quite forcefully from the moment the guns fell silent in 1945, and the body count –waste of all wastes- was complete. It is to this stirring that we now turn in the remainder of this essay.

**The Age of Light**

In 1970 Mark Rothko’s Chapel, which the painter himself had designed for the de Menils, oil industrialists2, philanthropists and art collectors in Houston, Texas, was completed near the grounds of a local University campus. Rothko never saw the finished work; he had committed suicide shortly before. Many have speculated as to why the curmudgeonly painter had chosen to end his life. There were medical issues, and his marriage had broken down, but there is something about his artistic career that should not be discarded in any speculation on this theme. We shall return to this later. For now let us have a closer look at the Chapel.

The Chapel has an octagonal shape which to some extent mimics the original Christian churches (for an intricate analytical description of the Chapel and its antecedents, see Nodelman, 1997). This, in a way, is a return to the Origin. The 14 panels –there are 14 stations of the cross- are positioned concentrically around the walls. All are darkly hued monochromes, with colours ranging from deep purple to greyish black. Rothko, as is well known, had developed his signature style characterised by shapes (usually three) that float against a thinly bordered backdrop (on which more below) at the end of the 1940s. In the Chapel nearly all traces of such shapes (apart from the faintest of suggestions on one of the panels near the entrance of the building) have disappeared. The octagonal shape of the building is such that the viewer, regardless of his or her positioning in the space of the Chapel, will always have a number of the monochromes in their field of vision. Darkness, so to speak, is all around; all around the Light ….. Indeed, the walls and ceiling of the Chapel are painted brightly white. In the middle of the ceiling burns a bright white light. It is so bright that a shade is partially covering it. This Chapel was Rothko’s last work of art. Without a grasp of his earlier work though, it would be very hard, if not impossible, to make sense of it.

Rothko, as said, changed his style in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. So did many other painters and it could have been a truism (but it wasn’t, see on this Polcari, 1988 and 1993, who had to actually spell it out) to say that the emergence of what was called ‘abstract expressionism’ in those late 1940s was directly related to the experience of that war. It may also be a truism –albeit one that is now very often forgotten, and rarely mentioned- to say that this experience had a very deep, unique and unprecedented impact on cultural life, indeed on life as such, in the post-war era, and after. This statement should be qualified: not the war as such did have this impact, but, rather, *the end of the war*. It was *the end* of the war that made it possible for some, wavering at first, to imagine a condition away from all Law, and from all code. *All* Law, and *all* code. Only when, for a very brief moment, the guns fell silent, and when the utter devastation, carved deep in the flesh of humanity, by the clashes of, and in, theological Law, sunk in, did Lucifer sit upright, and take note, hopeful. There may be very little coincidence in the fact that images of radical, absolute sovereignty flourished so conspicuously in those days. Radical, absolute sovereignty is, besides thoroughly paradoxical, of course also impossible. But that is not the point here. The point is that the desire for, or will to absolute, radically absolute sovereignty, that is, sovereignty that is somehow able to escape (here’s the paradox and the impossibility) all Law, and all code, suddenly became imaginable, desired by the flesh, willed by intention.

This desire for, or will to absolute sovereignty, comes in a variety of forms. In a Sartre (1943) for example the image of radical, absolute sovereignty appears as the intentional will to negate, and to commit (do note the double paradox here), from within the void of nothingness that lies at the heart of the human condition. It is at this point, as the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio wrote (already in 1944, and perhaps overstating his accusation) where the “decadent” post-war inclination towards “evasion of a fundamental authority” set in. This, Bobbio continued, went hand in hand with a will to “abstention from the proposition and imposition of systems of conduct and values”, and with “the devaluation of morality in its law-giving capacity”, with a Nietzschean “love of the exceptional” and “the single being”, and with the “revival of the Romantic cult of the hero” (1948: 12-37).

In Bataille’s work (1957), on the other hand, this moment appears as the desire for what he called ‘continuous life’, or life away from the functional strictures of civilization, and away, even, from the self that could not be anything but captured and structured by code. Bataille’s is a partial attempt though, as it only requires a dive away from theological law, into the sacred space of divine, natural Law. We may perhaps be allowed to note here in passing that this is why we believe that the choice to have William Blake’s 1808 water colour *Satan Arousing the Rebel Angels* as the cover illustration for Michel Maffesoli’s *The Time of the Tribes* (i.e. the English translation of 1996) may have been a little unfortunate. The picture shows the leader of the Fallen standing upright, bathed in white light, commanding the rebel angels who, all of them, are writhing in the dust, and are almost indistinguishable from the natural rock to which they are chained. Maffesoli’s point was that in our late modern consumerist age, tribal, hedonistic “puissance” reigns supreme. But a Lucifer, proudly standing upright, shining brightly, would have none of this. His move is one that, quite intentionally, goes way beyond natural Law, way beyond the codes of subterranean tribal sociality, or “puissance”.

Artists were quick to express and visualise this desire and this will. One could argue that Jackson Pollock, for example, when he was drip-painting his enormous canvasses, stretched out as they were on the floor, close to the energies of the earth, was actually attempting to achieve control *away* from the strictures of theology, within earthy nature. That said, the energetic fervour that marked Pollock’s drip-technique and style was such that some have argued that his desires also aimed at subverting the very divine Law of nature as well (see on this Lippens, 2011). However, it is in Rothko’s work, which is vertical, rather than horizontal, that the Luciferian moment appears on canvas, fully-fledged. It was a Rothko who was able to express the intentional will to absolute sovereignty (however paradoxical this will, and however illusory this sovereignty may be of course) and it is in his work that both theological and divine Law were left behind, transcended, so to speak, through the hole, indeed through the void that was struck, during the war. The void pierced through the structured layer of theological Law, and further downwards, through the layer of divine natural law, that is, through the very flesh of humanity itself. In other words: it is through this wound –a wound that opened up a whole imaginary of absolute sovereignty- that a connection with the Luciferian imaginary of pure potential was made. It is though this wound –this absolute void of creative nothingness, and pure potential, to evoke Sartrean language here- that Lucifer was able to step onto earth, once again, after all those eons. In Rothko’s work, writes Natalie Kosoi (2005), “nothingness [is] made visible”.

Do have a look at Rothko’s *No. 27 (Light Band)*, which he completed in 1954, at a time when his signature style had already developed out of his earlier ‘multiforms’ at least 5 years previously (on Rothko’s work, see, generally, e.g. Phillips and Crow, 2005, or Clearwater, 2006). We immediately recognise the three floating shapes. In many of his early shape-paintings the shapes seem to engage, very hesitantly though, in something like wavering, explorative touch. This is also the case here in Light Band. In later paintings this tentative contact, or communication, would disappear. Rothko, who, in his early years commented upon his art quite regularly (see the anthology in Rothko, 2006), often admitted that his main source of inspiration was Nietzsche; this should not come as a surprise.

In an oft quoted essay, ‘The Romantics Were Prompted’, published in the journal *Possibilities* in 1947, Rothko writes about his *multiforms* which, at that point in time, were gradually beginning to morph into his now familiar shape-paintings: “I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame” (2006: 58). The shapes, then, are entities (actors, performers) that move about unabashed, undaunted by, and completely indifferent to legal, moral, or social code. They are, he continues, “freed” from “both the sense of community and of security” which “depend on the familiar”. Only then, i.e. “freed”, do “transcendental experiences become possible” (2006: 58). These entities have taken their leave of Law and code, and even the “familiar” sense of “community” and “security” –so much part of human biological life in the sphere of divine, natural Law- no longer binds them. They are “unique elements in a unique situation” [...] “organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world” (2006: 59). All that is “probable” in a “familiar world” lies behind them. They are on their way to, and maybe they’ve already arrived in another space, in another zone, one that lies firmly beyond the Laws, and the codes in them, that humanity has known for so long, and used to be so familiar with. Rothko’s entities, in other words, live in the Luciferian moment. Unlike Pollock, who desperately tried to visualise sovereignty from Law and code in frantic gestures made by a vacated, dissolved self in sacred earth, Rothko’s imaginary sovereign still moves as a “single human figure”, “alone in a moment of utter mobility”, whose “solitude could [not] be overcome”. And even though Rothko makes a plea for “ending this silence and solitude”, and for “stretching one’s arms again” (do have another look at the shapes and their probing edges), that never really happens. Nearly all of Rothko’s signature paintings were and remained part of a “tableau vivant of human incommunicability” (2006: 59). In Giesbrecht and Levin’s words, Rothko’s work, “simultaneously transcendental and pre-verbal”, or primordial, is largely illustrative of a narcissistic trend in late modern culture, that is, a trend of “progressive withdrawals and fantasies of disinterestedness [...] [that] involve[s] the valorization of autonomy, purity, disincarnate sensibilities, and a denigration of the visible body” (2012: 136-38). Howard Hughes may come to mind here, the magnate, wrote Paul Virilio (1980), who, after the war, sped away from the earth, and all that lives on it, as a total recluse, living, as it were, in a zone of pure potential where no energy, nothing at all, was to be spent, let alone wasted, on anything or anyone (Hughes was known to keep all his urine with him in his retreat, in his inter-galactic escape pod). Utter unhampered speed indeed. “Utter mobility”, says Rothko. To be absolutely sovereign, here, means to live detached, radically and therefore also impossibly detached, from all that is “familiar”. It is to live in a void (an imaginary void, of course, an illusory void) of pure contemplative reflection. Rothko’s is a form of minimalism that, itself expressive of indifference, recalls the eternal time in blistering biblical deserts where, as is written, Lucifer, the lightning bolt, has been known to dwell (on the minimalism-desert nexus in Rothko’s Chapel, see Chave, 2014). “Emptiness”, says David Rounds (2006).

But why would one intentionally *will* this? Rothko gave a few hints when in an interview in 1956 he said that his work is about the tragedy of the human “drama”. Moving through a tragic landscape, Rothko’s entities –full of “internal freedom”, i.e. un-coded and codeless, totally sovereign- somehow pass by a world of “basic human emotions –tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on” (2006: 119). Shaking their head at all this “human drama”, and “acting” or “performing” indifference, they head for the Light. “In the burst of splendor”, Rothko later wrote, on the topic of light, “not only is all illuminated but as it gains in intensity all is also wiped out” (2006: 144). All that used to be “familiar”, is wiped out. *All is wiped out*.

This brings us back to the Chapel, where Light is central, but where the shapes –the aspiring sovereigns- seem to have disappeared almost immediately beyond this one panel at the entrance. Rothko himself spoke very little about his Chapel, but, pressed to say something, he stated that the paintings represent the ‘infinite eternity of death’ (cited in Nodelman, 1997: 306). In our reading the entrance to the Chapel is the gateway to the zone of Light. This is the imaginary zone of absolute sovereignty, the zone of pure potential where no Law, whether theological or divine, is able to reach, and where cakes can be eaten and had at the same time. There, creative actions never waste any potential. All potential remains intact. In that zone actions never bind the actor. No consequences will ever come back to haunt them. There the sovereign has become extremely light, completely unburdened. Weightless, the sovereign has become Light. In the Chapel, sovereign will and intention is everywhere. It fills the space with light, it is in the whiteness of the walls, and it beams down from above. It *is* Light. Hidden away from the world, from all that is “familiar”, the interior of the Chapel is the house of the Bearer of Light. In Rothko’s imaginary, it is an escape pod for reclusive sovereigns who, in the words of William Cain, are the only ones who, unlike mere mortals like us, “could live in the world of the Chapel because what Rothko had painted here comes after the world we know. These paintings are from death” (2009: 180).

The walls of the Chapel, the light in it and the space through which it travels, are all *before the Law*. Quite literally so: they were all there before the Law appeared on them, or in them, in the form of the 14 panels which, as said, all refer to the stations of the cross. The stations of the cross in turn represent the Law, both in its theological manifestations (e.g. the juridical moments during Jesus’s final *via dolorosa*), in its divinely natural ones (e.g. the moments of sheer biological kindness that can be discerned in Veronica’s gesture, or the passionate brutality of the flagellation), and of course in its hybrid forms (e.g. the support offered, under duress, by an initially reluctant Simon of Cyrene). In the Chapel all Law has, however, vanished. Only dark hues remain. Where the Light is, Law is not. And where Law is, the Light has gone. It is in our view possible to speculate how Rothko, the aspiring sovereign par excellence, may have felt despondent when he came to realise, near the end of his life, how his accumulated artistic creation had led him into an impasse. All his shape-paintings had become a coded Law all of their own. Redemption though beckoned in the Chapel, one final further step beyond the shapes at the entrance.

**Darkness**

In the same year when Rothko’s Chapel was completed in Houston, a Dutch phenomenologist and psychiatrist, Jan Hendrik van den Berg, announces, indeed notes the end of Freudian psychoanalysis. In one of his many works, *Depth Psychology* (which, quite exceptionally among his many works, was never translated into English from the original Dutch) he provides a thorough critique of classical psychoanalysis –the psychology of drives, repression, and dark depths- which he considered to be a cultural phenomenon that belonged to a different era and whose relevance had all but disappeared by 1970. The book ends with van den Berg’s reflection on a number of representations of house interiors, including a picture of Sarah Bernhardt’s (the actress), taken in Paris in 1880. The room is full of objects and bric-a-brac, positioned, or indeed scattered around the space, and is throwing shadows everywhere. This picture, writes van den Berg, which was taken in an age when “precious chaos”, clearly felt as present, had to be hidden, and actually did the hiding itself (1970: 328). The series ends with a picture, taken in 1970, of an extremely minimalist home interior –not unlike the one in Rothko’s Chapel- where white light is overwhelmingly present and where a few remaining patches of black and greyish hues suggest the presence of furniture. This picture, says van den Berg, is taken in an age of “maximum visibility” (1970: 332). A blinding light has caused nearly everything to disappear: in the room there is no more *Es*, no more *Ueber-Ich*, and no more *Ego*. There’s nothing to hide, and nothing is hidden. Nothing casts a shadow anymore. All “depth” has gone, and psychoanalysis, classical psychoanalysis to be precise, no longer has anything to excavate. All is in the open.

Van den Berg was known as an arch-conservative writer. In fact, in many of his later works he regretted, with not just a modicum of contempt, the “hooliganism” that had come to pervade Western and global culture. By that he meant the iconoclastic culture of “equality” that had been allowed to proliferate, and that no longer accepted unequal difference, i.e. essential differences between, and inequality of meaning systems (in what we would call the sphere of theological Law), and essential differences between, and inequality of biological organisms and systems (in the divine Law of nature). In this unacceptable iconoclastic maelstrom, all hierarchy, and all taboo, had all but been washed away. Both the human cultural order (theological Law) and the human biological one (divine, natural Law), were on the verge of collapse. All was about to be crushed, obliterated, by the equalizing light of iconoclastic hooliganism. One look at the cultural centre *Centre Pompidou* in Paris, which was completed in 1977, tells us a lot, van den Berg was fond to repeat: the sewage and other ‘biological’ life support systems of the building are on the outside. There no longer is any difference that matters. All is equal. There is nothing to hide. Nothing is hidden. All is in bright daylight. There are no taboos. There is no shame. Little wonder, then, that classical psychoanalysis, in 1970 already, according to van den Berg, had only historical value.

Van den Berg was however quick to qualify his diagnosis of the state of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis still had its uses, on condition that it abandoned its classical roots, and reinvented itself as cultural analysis and cultural critique. The point is not to analyse how ‘drives’ are frustrated and subsequently repressed or sublimated. The point is to analyse how dominant cultural trends shape and reshape, and reshape again, the ever “changing nature of man” (Van den Berg, 1956). Human nature is highly malleable and changes all the time. The point is not to locate traumatic experiences in a patient’s past. People do not suffer from the past. They suffer from the present. Their illness, their discomfort, is in the present. It is in their present situation. Their illness is in the world that surrounds them, there and then. It is that world, not the past world, which causes them ‘trauma’. Your ‘trauma’ today will happily disappear tomorrow if tomorrow’s world will be one where the culturally dominant trend will no longer consider today’s ‘traumatic’ experience as a source of shame or guilt. The time of psychoanalysis is the very present, not the past. The task of the psychiatrist, as van den Berg explained in his essay on ‘What is Psychotherapy?’, also published in 1970, is to analyse the ever-changing cultural present, and to detect its ever-changing silences, its absences and all that it ignores or discards. It is in those silences and absences that the ~~psycho-~~cultural analyst should then stand, with the patient. Van den Berg’s main source of inspiration was the work of psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (see the posthumous anthology in Sullivan, 1964) who, himself, was heavily indebted to the Mead-inspired micro-sociology that was flourishing in 1920s and 1930s Chicago. Sullivan’s main point was that each interpersonal *situation* generates its own specific silences and absences. Each situation, then, has its own blank spots, or dark spots. Those should be the focus of the analyst.

But this now brings us back to our theme. Where, in the Age of Light, are the dark spots? Where is the darkness? Where is the Light unable to penetrate? What are those purplish-black panels in Rothko’s Chapel? Those greyish blots in minimalist “maximum visibility” interiors? What has not yet been obliterated by the Luciferian light? What has this Light been able to push into darkness? What, in other words, is the illness, the discomfort, of the Age of Light? Who are, to evoke Freud, the *Discontents* of our Non-*Civilization*?

In a way we have already hinted at this when above we wrote that the panels in Rothko’s Chapel could be read as the Law, now vacated in Lucifer’s Age of Light. In this reading the panels also include such theologies as those that profess ‘equality’, ‘fairness’, and ‘justice’. Van den Berg may have been inconsolable about the fact that this particular set of theologies had, by 1970, been wreaking havoc in Western culture, and he may also have harboured desires to see the set replaced with a more divinely natural one that stresses hierarchical difference and structured order, he failed to see and anticipate that both, and all codes and corresponding taboos in them, were on the verge of being “illuminated” and swept away as an irrelevance, in the Luciferian momentum. Taboos indeed: the iconoclastic culture of equality that caused van den Berg such pain is, it too, not so much taboo-less, as taboo-ridden.

In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud himself, in 1932, argued how the institution of culture, or civilization, or, in our words here: theological Law, inevitably leads to guilt. There is guilt because of the aggression that is felt towards the Law. There is also aggression towards the Self, not just for harbouring aggressive inclinations towards the Law, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for ultimately obeying that very Law. This of course cannot but spell discontented, neurotic trouble. But what does this discontent look like in a non-civilized Age of Light? If the desire, and the intentional will, in the Luciferian moment is to escape the clutches of Law and code –all Law, and all code- and reside in a primordial zone of absolute, omnipotent sovereignty, then where is the dark discontent? Or to use Bobbio’s words, if the Age of Light is all about living a life –however imaginary, however illusory such a life - shot through with an obstinate refusal to accept “foundation”, “authority”, “proposition”, “imposition”, “systems of conduct”, “value”, “morality”, in short: “Law”, then where is the discomfort, where is the discontent? Under the Luciferian paradoxical command “Thou Shallt Submit to No Law”, where is the unease? In the purplish shadow of the Luciferian Super-Ego that abhors all Super-Ego, where is the agony?

It is in all those spaces where the Luciferian light, having become ever-more dominant, has not yet been able to “illuminate” and “wipe out” a desire for, or a will to Law, and to the codes that structure it. It is with those that still have a need for Law, and code. It is with those that want Law and code, with those that desire to be coded by Law, and with those that harbour a will to impose Law, and code. The discomfort and discontent resides in their frustration, and in their aggression towards the Light that keeps encroaching upon them.

But that is not all. The discomfort and discontent in the Age of Light is also in those that raise themselves upright and start to walk, hopeful, in Lucifer’s tracks. With every step of illusory success they are likely to become ever more irate with all that crosses their path, for in even the tiniest of objects and events, they are, in all their projective paranoia, bound to recognise the workings of Law and code. As Madigan puts it: they are the eternal ‘victims’ of the Law, and of the codes in it, of an eternal ‘father’ for whom they have only contempt (2013: 992). Their ire, however, does not always translate in Luciferian indifference or in withdrawal.

And finally, the discomfort and discontent are also in the shame and in the guilt of all those that are unable to reach the state of Luciferian perfection. Their neurotic coping strategies are choking late modern culture. The feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that underpin their shame often lead them to look for redemption in grotesque overcompensation. Those that cannot be truly sovereign sometimes search for solace in the perversely farcical role of the Hero. Their discomfort and discontent can be located in their frustration and aggression towards the Light that seduces them but that, unreachable, could never be in their grasp. It can be found in the frustration and in the aggression that they feel towards themselves, for allowing themselves to be seduced, for failing to reach the Light, and, finally, for submitting to grotesque Law and code in perverse neurosis.

But all this means that the discomfort and the discontent, in the Age of Light, are everywhere. The Light has not penetrated everywhere. The desire for, and to will to Law and code are all around us. As Becker understood, it is very hard for the human creature to live a life beyond coded ‘meaning systems’, *beyond meaning*. And those that do lend a favourable ear to the call of Lucifer, and who are seduced by it, can only dream of an un-coded life, of a life lived in pure potential. The Age of Light is an age of utter, inescapable agony. The agony is total. The Bearer of Light has Himself come to realise that His plan can only succeed through failure. Indeed: he who desires or wills absolute sovereignty and a life in the zone beyond all Law, away from all code will, at the point of success, realise his failure. His success could only come about as the result of a submission to the Law that is coded as follows: ‘Live a life of pure potential!’. But in the Luciferian moment no Law, no code, could ever be accepted, let alone allowed to have an impact on life. In order to be successful, then, the Luciferian has to reject his own Law, and the codes that structure it. This, in our reading, is why Rothko, in his Chapel, probably felt compelled to hang the darkly hued panels. They represent that which is inescapable: the Law, and the code, that structure the Luciferian moment itself, and that, fully rejected, have to also be fully included if a life in pure potential is to be impossibly possible, or at the very least, imaginable. Rothko must have become aware of this quandary just before he took the final step.

**The End?**

We may not live in End Times. But something appears to have ended. The Law, and all its codes, whether theological or divinely natural, have lost much of the force which many would once have taken for granted. ‘Meaning systems’ are fading away into the greyish dark, and where they do re-appear, they do so in the full glare of the Light, in full visibility, projecting their brittle outlines, and showing their weakness. Hidden in his imaginary Luciferian zone, the contemplating mind, reflecting indifferently upon the world from a distance, now has a lot less trouble discerning their movements, tracing their origins, and predicting their collapse. All is in the open. *All* that used to be so familiar will, eventually, *be wiped out*. Law and code have, in the Age of Light, lost much of their former capacity to structure and channel pure potential. In the Light, anything can, potentially, emerge, or disappear. What started as a tiny kernel of sensitivity in the dying days of the Second World War, and gained a second wind around the year 1970, achieved dominance in 2016. One of the signs of this dominance was the election of a US President whose administration does not really know Law, and has no qualms at all about sending out, to the rest of the world, an endless stream of statements and edicts, the one contradicting the other. There is little to keep this stream of contradiction in check. The energy spent on one edict never prevents the next, contradictory one, to be launched. All potential is preserved. There is no more path dependency. Cakes are constantly eaten and had at the same time, all in obliterating visibility.

A lot is now in ruins. In his book *Planet Utopia* (2017), however, Mark Featherstone sees ‘value’ in ruins, and makes use of this ‘ruin value’ opportunity to imagine a new ‘minor’ utopianism. Featherstone targets the dystopia that has been wrought by neo-liberalism’s relentless ‘cybernetic’ machinism that, focusing on the circulation of abstract value, and holding humanity at ransom through indebtedness, has managed to smother human potential so severely that only ruined traces are left. In this dystopian landscape, where nothing holds, many react by withdrawing from the world. Featherstone mentions, for example, the *hikikomori* in Japan. Not completely unlike a Howard Hughes, they retreat –in a very “minimalist” way- into their protective cocoons, and reflect upon the world as they watch it crumbling apart on their computer screens. Theirs are manifestations of a desire, or a will -to evoke Zygmunt Bauman’s latest words here- to build “stranger free” “comfort zones” where the contradictory cakes of “freedom” and “security” can be eaten and had at the same time (Bauman and Mazzeo, 2016: 77, 108).

Featherstone’s ‘minor’ utopianism rests upon the realisation –a realisation inspired by the work of Merleau-Ponty- of the ecological interdependence of humanity. Humanity is bound together by shared ‘flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Common humanity is not possible if its potential energies are constantly sucked up and drained exponentially, and processed cybernetically under the sign of abstract value and debt. If a common humanity is to be possible, then, Featherstone continues, one could do worse than think how this common ‘flesh’ could be the source and the destination of relations that are based on what Marcel Mauss once (1925) analysed as ‘gift’, rather than on debt. Featherstone argues for a move away from the theft of human potential –the thief here is the neo-liberal debt machine- towards the multiplication of human potential through ‘continuous life’ (as a Bataille would have had it), and gift-giving. Put slightly differently, this new utopianism is one that urges a move away from the theological Law and codes that operate abstract machinic neo-liberalism, towards a more divinely natural potlatch-like Law that, hidden perhaps, must still be alive somewhere –as it once was, probably, in more ancient biological times- in the common flesh of humanity. In the new world it will not be the thief who is admired and respected, but the giver-provider as, it is believed, was once the case.

But what if we have now indeed arrived in a new Age of Light, in an age, in other words, where all Law, all code, has become suspect? Featherstone is careful to make a connection with the experience of the Second World War and the utterly destructive clash of totalitarianisms. Not only are neo-liberalism’s cybernetic post-war origins to be found in the dread of the ‘meaning systems’ that generated totalitarianism, but this continuing dread has, recent history now tells us, prevented many from taking a stand against the neo-liberal, cybernetic ‘solution’. This, one would find hard to argue with. The point that will be suggested here however is that the severe impact of the Second World War cannot be easily brushed aside, or conveniently underestimated. Not only did this unprecedented event shatter the conditions for an easy belief in authoritarianism and totalitarianism, it also crushed the aura of all Law, and all code. It tore through the ‘flesh’ of humanity (as a Clyfford Still, in his search for “plenitude and power”, must have sensed; see Polcari, 1993: 91-116). It punctured a hole through both the theological and divinely natural layers of human life, opening up a void through which a glimpse of absolute, primordial sovereignty could be imagined.

This means that on the one hand, the dystopian cybernetic machine that Featherstone is at pains to analyse, is, in the contemplating eyes of aspiring sovereigns, only a mere theological ‘meaning system’, which they would be extremely loath to fully submit to. They may decide to live in its atmosphere, but they could never submit to it. Seen this way the *hikikomori* may not just be reacting to, and distancing themselves from neo-liberalism’s cybernetics, but could, rather, very well be a manifestation of Luciferian, sovereign indifference. However destructive the cybernetic debt machine may be, it may in itself not be the deepest of problems that we could be facing in the Age of Light. In her novel *Denier du Rêve,* which was written between 1934 and 1959, the French, Nietzsche-inspired novelist Marguerite Yourcenar was able to convey a sense of the limitations of both totalitarian and abstract ‘meaning systems’. The title of the novel translates, literally, as *Dream Coin*. It is set in Mussolini’s fascist Italy. The dictator is never mentioned, only hinted at, and is present in the lives of the nine protagonists only as a faintly suggested abstraction. The protagonists are connected though a coin –a reference to abstract economic exchange- that changes hands, from one protagonist to the next. But neither of those ‘systems’ has a firm hold on the protagonists who, each, are harbouring their own little dreams and hopes, their own little utopias. The ‘meaning systems’ may succeed in capturing and over-coding some of the energy and potential in those little worlds, and the little utopianists may, once in a while, choose to live in the systems’ atmosphere, but the bulk of their human potential will still remain un-captured, available for further dreaming about little worlds.

There is, one could say, at least a glimmer of hope in all this. However ... the tear in the ‘flesh’ of humanity of course also means that the likelihood of a divine, natural, biological Law that says ‘Thou Shallt Give and Share for the Good of Yourself and All’ ever returning, is now quite remote. Its ghost is still haunting us. We are ready to grant Featherstone that, but whether or not Lucifer’s gateway to the world, indeed this tear in humanity’s flesh, will ever be sutured tight again, is a question that we are unable to answer. One thing can be said though: any attempt to suture this tear and to close the void will require us to work with Lucifer, rather than against Him, and even if we were to be successful, then His ghost too will be hovering among the living, haunting them with images of absolute sovereignty.

**Notes**

1. This paper was first presented at the seminar on ‘The New (Ab)Normal’, held at Keele University (UK) on 27th June 2017. Thanks to Mark Featherstone and to Eva Giraud for inviting me to contribute to this seminar. Thanks also to the participants in said seminar for their very constructive comments. I should like to mention, in particular, Ryan Bishop, John Armitage, Siobhan Holohan, Nick Bentley, Mwenda Kailemia, Steve Hall, Seb Averill, and Gordon Fyfe. The paper makes references to some of Rothko’s artworks, i.e. his *Chapel* (1970), and his *Light Band* painting (1954). The works are not reproduced here but are of course easily accessible through the internet.
2. Many thanks to Ryan Bishop for mentioning this to me, adding that oil, in our day, is to a significant extent the source of light.

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**Author’s Bio**:

Ronnie Lippens is Professor of Criminology at Keele University (Staffordshire, UK). His research interests tend to focus on elements in what has become known as “visual criminology”. He has been working on what could be called prophetic art, i.e. art that somehow seems to announce –rather than merely express- the crystallisation and consolidation of particular forms of life, and the forms of governance embedded in them. He has published on this and other topics in a wide variety of venues.