

Wander-Full World

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The Chicago Center for Caspar David Friedrich Studies was founded in 2019 in conjunction with an exhibition I organized at my current place of work, the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago. This exhibition was named *Kleine Welt*, after a well-known Paul Klee print from 1914 that alluded to the titular “small world” of academic book publishing, the sometimes spectacularly limited visual imagination of which was the true subject of this exhibition. One half of the project consisted of a library of some sixty-odd books, shown inside vitrines, with identical Paul Klee covers – titles taken from the fields of anthropology and psychoanalysis, art history and critical theory, Jewish studies and literary theory, musicology and philosophy. (The selection showed Paul Klee’s paintings to be an especially popular choice of cover art in the realm of mid-twentieth century “continental” philosophy of the Derridean and Heideggerian variety. And there can be no study of Walter Benjamin or the Frankfurter Schule, of course, without invoking Klee’s *Angelus Novus*.) The second part of *Kleine Welt* was composed of a separate library devoted exclusively to books adorned with Caspar David Friedrich’s talismanic *Wanderer Above the Sea of Mists* (1818), a defining masterpiece of Romantic art – a selection of tomes I have been collecting since the early 1990s for the sole reason of this particular iconographic convergence. Many of these books are evidently well worth reading, and the oldest volumes in the Center’s Friedrich library – Paul Johnson’s *The Birth of the Modern*, Terry Eagleton’s *Ideology of the Aesthetic* – have proven to be pivotal in my own intellectual formation, but I have long ago given up on the aspiration of plowing through them all: books such as *Art and Spiritual Experience* and *Looking at Mindfulness: Twenty-Five Paintings to Change the Way You Live* were indeed bought on the basis of their covers alone (these books are to be “judged” solely by their covers), and I certainly have zero interest in wasting my time reading such titles as Joseph Goebbels’ *Michael: A Novel*, for instance – the exact type of volume, of course, that cuts right to the core of the *Wanderer*’s troubling iconicity, the “problem” of which is what the Friedrich Studies center was founded, in part, to study in the first place. Indeed, such is the distressing identification of Friedrich’s “Northern” art with the chimera of a certain “Aryan” sensibility that it should come as no surprise that the *Wanderer* was chosen to grace the cover of such objectionable books as *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century* by one Jared Taylor – one title which the Friedrich Center’s Chicago chapter wisely declined to acquire for fear of feeding Amazon’s algorithm a false sense of our library’s political leanings. Speaking of this disturbing Aryan association: Friedrich’s *Wanderer*, of course, is deeply entwined with Germany’s visual sense of self – to the extent that it appears to be well-nigh impossible, these days, to publish a book on the subject of German Idealism and/or German Romanticism without taking graphic recourse to one or more of Friedrich’s paradigmatic tropes, with his *Abbey in the Oakwood* and *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* a close second and third for the general purposes of capturing and illuminating the riddle of *Deutschtum*. For this reason, too, the *Wanderer* is perennially reanimated as a tragicomic leitmotif of sorts every time a publication such as *Cicero*, *Der Spiegel* or *Stern* feels called upon to pontificate about the future of Germany. The *Wanderer*, after all, always looks ahead.

In the preface of the eponymous publication that accompanied the *Kleine Welt* exhibition and the attendant inauguration of the *Wanderer* library, we had the following to say about a project that only superficially appears to lambast the academic publishing business for its lack of imagination and susceptibility to clichés (for which we now use the word “meme” – and it is tempting to consider the *Wanderer* in particular as an especially forceful early example of meme-think):

On a more fundamental level, this is a project about the power of the image, of a select handful of images and their spellbinding grip on one strand of the twentieth century’s intellectual imagination above all. The power of these images is such that they seem effortlessly to withstand even the crassest and crudest forms of recycling – think of the endless repurposing for cheap advertising objectives or graphic gamesmanship of Friedrich’s *Wanderer* in particular. We are interested, in short, in these images’ afterlife – the ease with which they have entered the stream of our intellectual consciousness and smoothly sail from one point of anchorage to another. This exhibition of book covers, then, is an ode to the power held by these specific images over a realm of the mind that often fancies itself impervious to the lure and surface charm of the world of “pictures,” and often likes to think of itself as above and beyond imaging. Not so.

The Chicago Center for Caspar David Friedrich Studies’ *Wanderer* library continues to grow, but seeing it expand to the point where it can now also accommodate such titles as Joseph Goebbels’ *Michael: A Novel* and the aforementioned *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century* makes it clear to the Center’s founders that this may not only be a project “about” the power of the image, but also, in the end, about its powerlessness.

Someone save Caspar!