Rudolf Steiner's 1918 Project with Jan Stuten for a New Colored "Light-Play-Art," Metamorphoses of Fear
by David Adams

In 1918 at the end of the first world war Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the Austrian-born founder of anthroposophy, gave the musician, composer, and scenery designer Jan Stuten (1890-1948) a task. Arising from his concerns about mechanizing, materialistic (or, in anthroposophical terminology, "Ahrimanic") influences from watching the inartistic silent films of his day, Steiner had the idea of a new, alternative color-*art* combining sound, colored light, color-movement, and colored shadows in a way that would leave the viewer free to interpret what was seen and would keep the spectator inwardly active (as opposed to the passivity of watching films). Steiner said, "It would be an unprecedented, serious, human-pedagogical concern of anthroposophically working artists to forcefully raise this up, . . .to place something in opposition to this pseudo-art [film], something that offers itself like a remedy, . . . but creatively formed, not produced through any humanly detached technical device. Thus, a kind of *light-play-art of forms and colors moving to music or speech*, but controlled by the human being."[1] Moreover, he recommended, its ap--proach should be learned from the ancient Mystery-Art of the shadow-plays, but renewed in a modern form as a colored-light-play art. The following description of this artistic initiative and its development and offshoots is largely drawn from the primary source of information about it, the 1993 German book *Bewegte Bilder* (Moving Pictures), by Wolfgang Veit.[2]

Steiner's books and lecutres on spiritual matters had been influential for the work of such pioneering abstract painters as Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Klee, and Mondrian. Steiner was concerned about how film fascinated viewers, drawing them subconsciously into materialism. He felt that viewers only saw illusory images in a way that deadened the imagination, where the viewer did not ascend to anything higher. Film created a synthetic, visionary inner world, a fabric of dreams. Rudolf Kutzli relates that Rudolf Steiner characterized film as inartistic, because [it is] "unmusical". Kutzli explained that, for anthroposophy, "music is that which one does *not* hear, the space between, the interval, the spirit. Film has no interval! There, where with music the interval lives, is
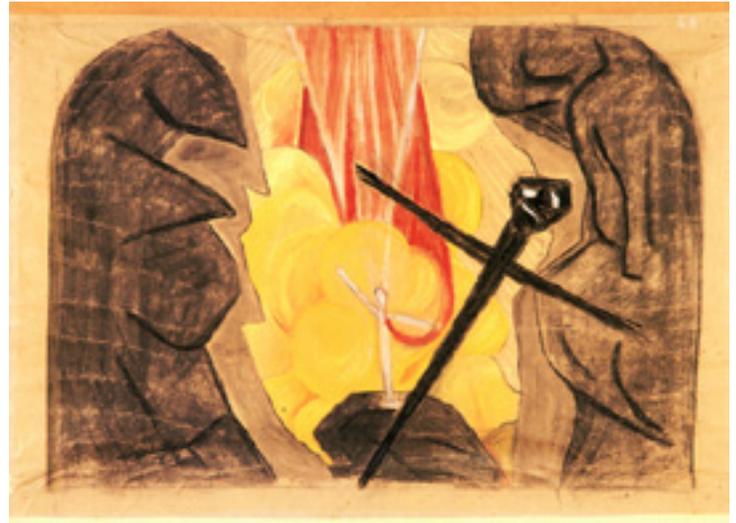
Jan Stuten Sketch No. 10, Metamorphoses of Fear*, ca. 1919-1937*

with film a nothingness."[3] (It should be remembered that the kind of early black-and-white-only films Steiner was able to see at the time were still quite rough in technique.) The proposed new "synaesthetic" art form would allow the audience to "hear" color and "see" tones. It would use music and/or the spoken word for its sound element. The technical possibilities were left open.

In 1919 Steiner gave Stuten the theme *Metamorphoses of Fear* for the first work of this new art form, a theme related to people's experiences from the just-ended world war. At that time many people in central Europe were full of fear, and Steiner hoped this artwork could help them to transform or overcome their fear. Steiner felt that Stuten with his imaginative capacity would be able creatively to picture and realize such a new "light-play-

Jan Stuten, Sketch No. 13, Metamorphoses of Fear*, ca. 1919-1937.*

Jan Stuten (1890-1948)

art." In response to Steiner's idea, Stuten drew with chalk on packing-paper fifteen sketches, which would be something like a full-score (or "storyboards") for a new colored light-play, *Metamorphoses of Fear*. That which he suggested through the sketches as stage-pictures was intended to move and change itself in relationship to music. A presentation of Stuten's initial efforts was given years later at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, and then at the Paris World's Fair in 1938. The music was improvised on the piano by Stuten.

Jan Stuten, Sketch No. 15, Metamorphoses of Fear, ca. 1919-1937.

Walt Disney and his American team at the Paris World's Fair of 1938 had seen the dramatic performance of a scene from Goethe's *Faust* from the Goetheanum stage in Dornach – with the music and stage scenery design of Jan Stuten. Disney showed an interest above all in eurythmy (Steiner's new movement art of "visible speech and song"), a part of the performance), seeking a conversation with Jan Stuten on this new art of movement created by Steiner. Stuten, who himself at the World's Fair had learned about modern projection and lighting technology in order to pursue further the task given him by Steiner, showed the Americans his fifteen sketches for the new light-play-art work, the *Metamorphoses of Fear*. The film people with Disney's studio studied these with great interest. A little later *Fantasia* appeared with the Bach Fugue, whose imagery may have been partly inspired by Stuten's sketches (but certainly moreso by the work of pioneering experimental filmmakers Jules Engel and Oskar Fischinger, who worked on *Fantasia* for a time; Fischinger also was interested in anthroposophy in the 1920s in Germany[4]). But its execution as a successful Hollywood animation in this film was really opposite to the original intention of Rudolf Steiner to create a counter-impulse against the illusion and materialistic suggestiveness of film. Meanwhile, the concept of Steiner and the sketches of Stuten for a long time remained forgotten.

In Stuten's sketches a large proscenium arch extends over the individual metamorphic scenes that arrange themselves organically in seven "motif steps," i.e., the developmental phases of oppression, dread, fright, and horror are gradually increasing in severity until at the eighth step the composition collapses and seeming chaos develops. Then in seven successive steps a further change, an inside-out process, begins: Out of the world of death and destruction a new order emerges, permeated by light and warmth. The clearly articulated structure prevails and finally frees itself, pulsed through by a motivating rhythm of colored forms in an oscillating play of symphonically colored sounds.

Painter, physician, and scientist Hans Jenny (1904-1972, the author of the two-volume *Cymatics* on the structure and dynamics of waves and vibrations[5] later got involved with Stuten's work in connection with the unusual stage lighting and set design for the Goetheanum stage. Following Steiner, Jenny felt such design must start with colored light itself, "like breathing in colors and light." Already well before 1920 Steiner had worked with several artists (e.g., Stuten, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer) to try to develop a new art of diffuse, immersive stage-lighting and stage scenery, to be used for the spiritually oriented theatrical productions at the Goetheanum. Steiner left behind approximately 700 directions for developing such a new kind of stage lighting.[6] Although much of this was also developed for the new art of eurythmy, where colored lighting creates ever-changing colored shadows and atmospheres on and around the constantly moving silk veils and gowns of the performing eurythmists on stage, it also can contribute to the independent project of the "light-play-art."

Jenny pointed to a revolutionary figure of the modern stage, Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), who painted and sculpted with light forms, using a new projection of light through colored glass onto gauze veils, either through or against the gauze. Appia was able to create either nebulous or clear forms by projecting onto these layers or onto solid bodies. The source of light had to be moved constantly. He used glass or mica, painted with his finger on glass plates spots of paint, darker or lighter, to create clouds of various types, mists, and other effects. He used rear-lighting, where being lit from behind made actors seem larger, and used illuminated screens. Inspired also by this, Jenny experimented with a new beginning of the colored light-forms, used for conjuring up the inner soul-spirit spaces of the Goetheanum dramas (which included Steiner's own four "Mystery Dramas"). Christiaan Stuten, Jan's son, and Wilfried Hammacher worked with him on this multi-dimensional theater. Jenny's goal was to use light as a space- and form-creating being that could flexibly form dramatic events.

Jenny often used overlapping colored shadows. He found that a dramatic color-play could be created, even if just by moving his own hand in front of the projected, colored light source. There were various possibilities.

One could create either wavelike/flamelike or rigid shapes – for example, where red flows from the upper right corner and dark-green moves from the lower left corner. Each light source could crescendo and decrescendo so one could also obtain a modulation of the colors. Cloth or veils could be draped over the hand or wire "cage" shapes could be used over the hand. Stencils or silhouettes couldd be held in front of the light-sources. If forms were moved closer to the light, they became sharper; they appeared more diffused if moved further away. The projected forms were given "life" because the operator was creating them with his or her own hands. Also different colored lights could be shown on different layers of screens (scrims, veils), producing color perspective effects as well as colored shadows.

Jenny found he needed to train a team of sensitive light-form artists who could work smoothly in the same rhythm using a flowing, weaving coordinated system. Written scores were created for light productions ("light librettos"). Thus, Jenny got well-practiced co-workers to achieve a beginning at this kind of production between 1964 and 1966. They could metamorphose a color-shape from center to periphery and vice versa; or expand a red circle to a ring. With this new, coordinated technique on various projection surfaces – cheesecloth/gauze, foil, the background horizon, and the variable mobile "screens" of E. G. Craig – the full stage space could be livingly

Hans Jenny, et al. *Stage Design for Shakespeare's* Midsummer Night's Dream, Goetheanum 1992.

shaped from the flowing and forming colored light. A living colored-light scenery was produced, a kind of elemental light-play-art, a color-space, a panting in 3-dimensional space with a symphonic character.
Jenny: "It established a type of color-structure-score: large and small, resting and excited waves, various kinds of weaving forms, fixed structures, flamelike dynamics, lightning-like configurations, and so forth." It replaced the naturalistic stage with "a kind of pictorial speech." All the effects were created spontaneously by the worker's hands. A team of 14 people made up the "light orchestra." "The hand is here light-forming, space painting; one must familiarize oneself with a color-gesture and create one's own style of movement." [7]

Scene from a Performance of Rudolf Steiner's Mystery Drama, The Guardian of the Threshold, Goetheanum

After this, these stage-lighting experiments could not directly be continued, because the constantly changing light distracted the actors too much. However, they continued to influence the kind of theatrical lighting and set design holding sway at the Goetheanum stage, especially for performances of the four "Mystery Dramas" by Steiner. I saw some of these performances there in 1979, where, at least for the scenes purported to take place within a non-physical, spiritual setting, and otherwordly realm of hovering colored light and abstract forms was effectively conjured up. Then in 1992 Wilfred Hammacher used light-forming techniques similar to those of Jenny for the Goetheanum production of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and at the Novalis Stage in Stuttgart. The most convincing result was in the scenery of his Goethe's *Faust* Parts 1 & 2 and Steiner's Four Mystery Dramas. Christiaan Stuten was also involved in these productions. He argues that Steiner primarily intended the new light-play-art to take place in a large space (not, as has been advocated at times, a puppet theater), in order to be a real alternative to the engulfing, strongly suggestive power of film – a total image-experience out of the music and word, where the spectator can actively accompany what happens.

A somewhat related initiative for a colored-light therapy started in the Camphill Village at Aberdeen, Scotland (at Heathcote House) around 1948. (The following description is largely based on an article by Janet McGavin[8] and interviews conducted by the author in 2004 with Christof-Andreas Lindenberg, Norma Lindenberg, aand Manfred Maier.) It was inspired by the late Carlo Pietzner, a special or therapeutic educator and painter (who earlier in Vienna was friends with Oskar Kokoschka and other Viennese artists). Pietzner belonged to the group around Dr. Karl König, who founded the (now worldwide) Camphill Village movement based on Steiner's therapeutic and educational ideas. While working with colored lighting and a screen during puppetry, Pietzner observed the especially living quality of the developing complementary-colored shadows thrown by the puppets onto the screen. This led

Screen
Colored Shadow Display
Colored Glass Window
Platform for Eurythmist
Musicians
Children Viewing Screen
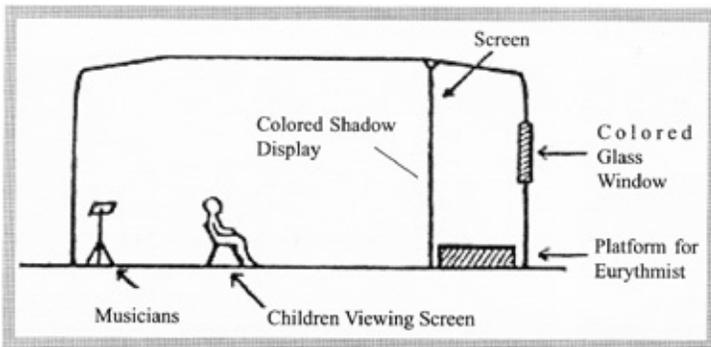
to the idea to create an environment in which possible therapeutic qualities of these colored shadows could be made available for handicapped children. They built a special hut with five colored-glass windows. Instead of puppets, a human eurythmist moved and gestured behind the floor-to-ceiling screen with the colored lights behind casting moving colored-shadow patterns on the screen that could be synchronized to music and speech.

König described their work in an article published around 1954, emphasizing the close relationship of human feeling and breathing. "For that purpose we place a group of 10-15 children in front of a large
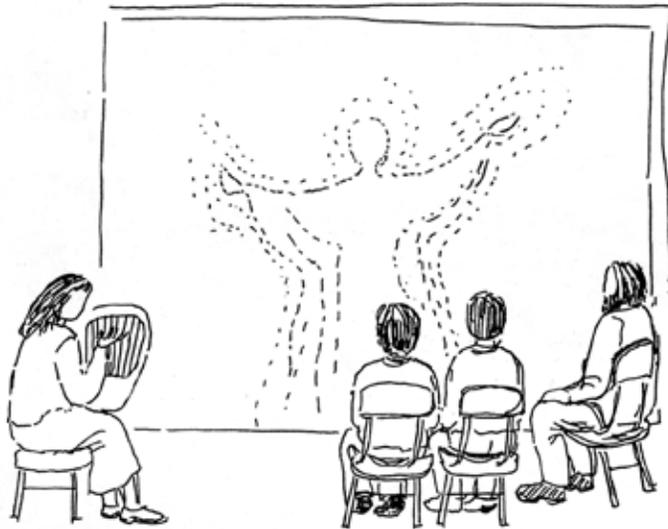
translucent screen. . . . Behind are five colored windows, in blue, red, yellow, orange, and green. . . . A therapist moves in eurythmic gestures between the screen and the windows." König described how the children, sitting in a completely dark room, see on the screen a life-size display of ever-changing, brilliant colored shadows and forms. All this is enhanced by music and song. A whole session lasts about 20 minutes. "We discovered a tremendous calming effect on the children," he reported.[9]

There are three different ways in which this therapy has been developed.
1) An artistic experience that may be considered therapeutic for everyone who observes it. This especially has been developed at the (Camphill) Village Aigues-Vertes (Onex/Genf, Switzerland), where a sequence of colored shadows inspired by the moods of the meditative,

seasonal verses in Steiner's *Calendar of the Soul* is displayed, changing each week.
2) A general therapy for groups of youngsters in curative homes. This has been taken up most widely and is used as a hygienic measure to help restless children come to peace, to loosen cramped conditions, and stimulate a feeling for beauty.
3) A specific therapeutic measure for individuals. This approach has been initiated at the Camphill Village at Ballytobin (Ireland), where it is used either to work directly on a disturbance of the bodily incarnation process or a single symptom arising out of such a disturbance.[10]

Musician and composer Christof-Andreas Lindenberg joined this therapy work in 1950, developing special music for it with the help of musician and composer Edmund Pracht. This impulse was carried in the early 1960s from Heathcote to the Glencraig Village Community in Northern Ireland. It was first brought to the United States at Camphill Special Schools, Beaver Run, in Pennsylvania in November of 1967, during the construction there of Rainbow Hall. An area of the hall was built with nine colored-glass windows shining down from above, in the same arrangement as the colors of the carved glass windows in Steiner's Goetheanum building. There, Manfred Maier and others started in the 1980s to experiment with a set-up of little shades covering nine colored windows, so that the intensity of the colored light can be adjusted during a performance/therapy session.

Since then, this therapy work has spread to at least seven Camphill locations as well as perhaps five institutions outside of Camphill, mostly in Europe. There is also an international group of primarily European therapists that meets annually to converse and share research. Each location and person works with the therapy in different ways. Some change the intensity of color and light during the course of treatment, while others use a static arrangement of windows adding human movement and music. For example, at Ballytobin in Ireland they tend to use almost no movement but rather elaborate color and music relationships. Other places have daylight shining in front with other colors shining behind.

In recent years at Beaver Run in Pennsylvania they have added nine new windows to the same area in Rainbow Hall, but located lower down in the rounded walls at the level of the middle of the child. These windows use the same color arrangements as above, but they are in removable wooden frames and can be replaced with either windows of other colors or clear glass with theatrical gels of a wide range of colors. This makes it possible to employ a wide range and combination of colored shadows for therapeutic purposes (for example, to make one side entirely peach-blossom color and the opposite side entirely light-green). There are also blackout blinds on the windows attached to cords that can be used to control them, allowing individual colored windows to be fully open, partially closed in increments, or fully closed.

Some more recent work has been done to deepen the "spiritual scientific" understandings behind this therapeutic work (as well as the purely artistic work), drawing from the occult and philosophical concepts and phenomenological scientific methods of anthroposophy. The phenomenon of the afterimage has been worked with to a level beyond merely an impression of the complementary color. There are also the mysteries of colored shadows, which Rudolf Steiner dealt with to a certain extent in his scientific *Light Course*.[11] How is a colored shadow different from an afterimage generated from perception of opaque colors? What is the element of life and consciousness that is involved in the generation and perception of colored shadows? Is the source of light the source of the shadow? How are colored shadows created in natural daylight different than the tinted shadows created by using slide projectors or spotlights and colored gels and which aspects of the human constitution are stimulated by each? What about use of digital light sources? Do elemental beings affect each possibility differently? What are the differences between projected and reflected light? Between different lenses or other filtering mediums through which the light can shine? Does too quick or too "mechanical" an external motion not leave the observer's perception free enough for a proper artistic experience? Is there a "correct" application and relationship between the "spectrum" of musical tones and the "spectrum" of colors? Ongoing research continues.

Although arising independently, this therapy work and research has a close connection to Steiner's initiative for a new "light-play-art," which also was intended to act hygienically to counter harmful effects of early films and other electronic media (as well as fear). But the independent light-play-art project has never fully been realized, although even today there are small numbers of artists within the anthroposophical movement who continue to work with the development of this colored light art. Today this project can be seen from a larger perspective as one more small stream within the ongoing, multi-faceted development in the arts of "visual music." [12]

Endnotes

[1] Werner Schäfer, *Rudolf Steiner über die technischen Bild und Tonmedien [Rudolf Steiner on Technological Image- and Sound-Media]* Bremen: Verein für Medien Forschung. Quotation translated by author.

[2] Wolfgang Veit, *Bewgte Bilder: Der Zyklus "Metamorphosen der Furcht" von Jan Stuten; Entwurf zu eine neuen Licht-Spiel-Kunst nach einer Idee von Rudolf Steiner [Moving Pictures: The Cycle "Metamorphoses of Fear" by Jan Stuten; Sketches for a New Light-Play-Art after an Idea of Rudolf Steiner]* Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 1993. All translations from this book are by the author.

[3] Rudolf Kutzli, quoted in Veit, *Bewegte Bilder*, p. 17; see also Rudolf Kutzli, "Farbiges Schattenspiel: Ein Impuls Rudolf Steiners" in Helmut von Kugelgen, ed. and comp., *Märchen – Puppenspiele – Farbige Schatten*, Studienheft 8 der Intern (Stuttgart: Internationale Vereinigung der Waldorfkindergärten, 1975), pp. 62-73.

[4] See William Mortiz, *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), especially pp. 83-87.

[5] Hans Jenny, *Cymatics: A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration*, 2 vols., trans. D. Q. Stephenson (Newmarket, New Hampshire: MACROmedia, 2001 (1967 and 1974).

[6] Alla Selawry, *Ehrenfried Pfeiffer: Pioneer of Spiritual Research and Practice*, trans. Joe Reuter (Spring Valley, New York: Mercury Press, 1992), pp. 8-9. See also Julia Althaus, "Rudolf Steiner and the Performing Arts" in *Rudolf Steiner – Alchemy of the Everyday* (exhibition catalog; Basel: Vitra Design Museum, 2011), pp. 54-63.

[8] Janet McGavin, "Colored Shadow and Music Therapy," *The Cresset*, 18, 2 (Summer 1972): 58-60.

[9] Quoted by Manfred Maier in "Therapeutic Work with Colored Daylight," *Art Section Newsletter* No. 22 (Spring-Summer 2004): 6.

[10] This summary adapted from an announcement of a conference in *Journal of Curative Education and Social Therapy* (St. John's 1994): 39.

[11] Rudolf Steiner, *The Light Course*, trans. Raoul Cansino (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Anthroposophic Press, 2001).

[12] On the tradition and development of visual music, see, for example, Kerry Brougher et al., *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900* (exhibition catalog; New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005; Bruce Wands, *Art of the Digital Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006); Cindy Keefer, "'Space Light Art' – Early Abstract Cinema and Multimedia, 1900-1959" (2005) and other articles at www.centerfor visualmusic.org; and Maura McDonnell, "Colour and Sound: Visual Music" (2002) and other articles at www.iotacenter.com.

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