Introduction: Abstraction and Materiality in the Arts, Literature, and Music

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"But as [Aschenbach] dreamt his way into the void, the horizontal shoreline was suddenly intersected by a human form and, summoning his gaze back from the infinite and bringing it into focus, he saw none other than the beautiful boy coming from the left, walking past him in the sand."[1] The cinematic potential of this passage, in which the delicate youth comes into focus as he strides "into frame" before his somnolent admirer, is insistently realized in Visconti's adaptation of Mann's novella for the screen.[2] Repeated shots of the boy, his back to the camera, silhouetted against sea and sky, exploit what is already filmic about the German Romantic pictorial canon, in which such figures are legion. Piet Mondrian's *Composition No. 10: Pier and Ocean* (1915), which serves as the visual motto for the present issue, distills the Romantic motif in terms of a Modernist reduction to the seemingly abstract interplay of horizontal and vertical indices.[3] The figure's "intersection" of the "horizontal shoreline" draws Aschenbach back from "the monotonous mist of barren space," the "boundless simplicity" that is the ultimate object of his yearning.[4] Gerhard Richter, much of whose work constitutes an homage to the work of Caspar David Friedrich, makes the case for abstraction in terms consistent with the Romantic quest for the ineffable, as famously stated by Novalis ("Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge"[5]): "abstract paintings … make visible a reality we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate. We note this reality in negative terms: the unknown, the incomprehensible, the infinite. And for thousands of years we have been depicting it through surrogate images such as heaven and hell, gods and devils. In abstract painting we have found a better way of gaining access to the unvisualizable, the incomprehensible; because abstract painting deploys … all the resources of art, in fact in order to depict nothing."[6]

The five articles that comprise this issue of *Konturen* are representative of papers delivered at a conference held at the University of Oregon in April of 2011—a conference for which the terms “abstraction” and “materiality” supplied the guiding conceptual coordinates (*Abstraction and Materiality in the Arts, Literature and Music*). Echoing through this title is that of Wilhelm Worringer’s influential *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), which Sherwin Simmons locates along a trajectory leading to a series of works done by Franz Marc in 1914, where the painter’s famed predilection for horses, cows and deer yielded to a more abstract treatment of color, form and movement. This juncture, which Marc himself likened to the “rejection of the idols,” is replicated in Schoenberg’s *Moses and Aaron*, whose “vertical and horizontal symmetries” Jack Boss painstakingly analyzes with respect to the conflict between Moses’ (ultimately futile) faith in the word and Aaron’s golden calf. (Certain of Marc’s painted and plastic creations are in fact suggestive of the latter, itself prototypical of the “surrogate images” that, following Richter, abstraction has displaced.) We find comparable animal figures in Jung’s account of a father who, anxious about his young daughter’s long sojourn in the lavatory, asks her what she is “making.” “Four horses and a carriage,” she answers. The material is unavoidably at hand in this story, which Cy Twombly recounted as a way of illustrating that painting is fundamentally infantile and fundamentally *felt*—a “palpation,” as Thomas Schestag puts it. Schestag’s evocative discussion hones in on Twombly’s being drawn to Rilke’s *Les roses*. Twombly’s affinity for what is dense about Rilke’s phrases—his “roses”—stands in counterpoint to Forest Pyle’s discussion of the same painter, whose engagement with the Romantics “reveal[s] a movement towards abstraction already at work in Romanticism itself.” This line of thought is close to my own, as developed in what was originally the introduction to this conference, in which the tension between abstraction and materiality finds its ominous projection in a phrase from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: “food for thought and also for vultures.”[7]

[1] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: ecco, 2004), 55.
[2] *Death in Venice* (*Morte a Venezia*), dir. Luchino Visconti, Warner Brothers, 1971. DVD.
[3] An exhibit held in Munich in 1995 explored, through striking juxtaposition, the often explicit engagement on the part of recent German painters with the Romantics. Of particular relevance here is the manner in which the criss-crossing masts and yards of square riggers pass over into the more purely abstract intersection of horizontal and vertical lines (as seen in the work of Blinky Palermo). *Ernste Spiele: Der Geist der Romantik in der deutschen Kunst 1790-1990*, ed. Christoph Vitaly (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 1995), 290-93.
[4] Mann 55.
[5] Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, vol 2., *Das philosophische Werk I*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schultz, 3rd edition (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1981), 413.
[6] Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962-1993* (London MIT Press, 1995), 100.
[7] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 57.