

## **An owl and a mirror: On Bosch's visual motif's meaning**

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**Abstract.** Our main goal in this paper is to study one Hieronymus Bosch's iconographic motif, an owl, considering the iconography, production of meaning and connotations. Pursuant to the comparative analysis of the variants of the formal model we intend to ascertain the meaning of Bosch's "owl" motif. We supplement its pure visual legend throughout European art history with mythological and symbolic (mainly verbal) legend. Methodologically, we base the vast range of interpretations on the school of history of ideas (Aby Warburg, Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Francis Yates, Carlo Ginzburg) and the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics of culture and text analysis. The article concludes that the "owl" motif, including in the works of Bosch, conveys the semantic aura of the "blind sight" ("blind foresight"). This ideological concept is in turn included into the archaic concept of mutual communication between the worlds carried out by a mythological observer — shaman, trickster.

Our main goal in this paper is to study one Hieronymus Bosch's iconographic motif — an owl — considering the iconography, production of meaning and connotations. Obviously, Hieronymus Bosch is inconceivably puzzling to interpret. His works are overloaded with

enigmatic details; the meanings of which are hard to recall due to the remoteness in time and the bareness of historical evidence about the artist's life and ideological context of his creativity. Namely this difficulty is the main research challenge in reconstructing at least one element of Bosch's figurative language.

In turn, the iconographic "owl" motif in European visual culture is meaningful and controversial. Our aim is to reduce this multiple meaning to an individual implication while studying works by Bosch and, simultaneously, bearing in mind the broad cultural and historical context.

Note should be taken that the rules of visual meaning production (perception) differ from production of meaning of verbal texts. A mimetically motivated iconic shape has a specific value that is kept throughout the motif's existence history, whereas a word tends to lose its referential mimesis with time, which allows for its conditionality. We understand the concept of *shape* as an iconic invariant, a model that creates a common field for concrete images.

Pursuant to the comparative analysis of the variants of the formal model we intend to ascertain the meaning of Bosch's "owl" motif. We supplement its pure visual legend throughout European art history with mythological and symbolic (mainly verbal) legend. Methodologically, we base the vast range of interpretations on the school of history of ideas by Aby Warburg, Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Francis Yates, Carlo Ginzburg. In addition, we link our methodological interpretation to the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics of culture and text analysis.

The reconstruction of the context that influenced Bosch's paintings and most of the motifs has been based on an extensive selection of literature dedicated to his works and the timeline. The art historians first seriously looked at Bosch's imaginarium in XIX–XX c., when Carl Justi published his article *Die Werke des H. Bosch in Spanien* (1889) with a thorough description and analysis of the paintings. The article gave a start to vast professional research all over: masterpieces by

Bosch were carefully studied, copies earlier ascribed to Bosch and several fakes revealed, paintings were chronologically ordered for the first time (Friedländer 1941; Baldass 1971) and interpreted. His imagery used to illustrate concepts was often linked to medieval literature (Dollmeyer 1898). Many authors emphasised Bosch's tremendous scope of interests and knowledge, therefore it is possible to affirm that he was familiar with alchemy, medical treatment, astrology (Maeterlink 1907; Bastelaar 1907; Spsychalska-Boczkowska 1966; Bergman 1979; Boczkowska 1971, 1974; and others), biology (especially zoology, as his illustrations of birds and animals are undoubtedly precise), music, mathematics, arts and other faculties. Invaluable contribution to the understanding of the medieval context was made by such researchers as Johan Huizinga (1924), Aaron Gurevich (1972), Juri Lotman (especially Lotman 1992: 107–110).

## 1. Icon and legend

By the time when Bosch lived and worked, the “owl” motif had accumulated considerable symbolic potential. The cave drawings of the Trois-Frères are reputed as the earliest known image of an owl (Fig. 1). Two figures of birds could be easily identified (in terms of Panofsky, by method of “pure forms”) as images of owls: contours of birds' bodies from a profile view and big heads from a frontal view are clearly seen; besides, special attention is drawn to the shape of beaks and eyes, which hitherto remain a specific feature to identify any image of an owl. Analogous style to depict an owl is further seen in the Babylonian statue of night demon Lilith<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 2) and on Egyptian

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian goddess Lilith often appears with the wings and feet of a bird, standing on two lions and is generally thought to be related to solar masculine power. Iconographically the image of Lilith correlates to the Celtic image of Sheela-na-gigs — carvings of feminine figures with exaggerated vulva, found on church reliefs, castles and other buildings.

reliefs. It is important to note that while ancient cultures depict all birds from a profile view with some particular elements peculiar to a specific type (length of a beak, feathering, body shape, etc.), an image of an owl mainly consists of a large head from a frontal view and large round forward-facing eyes. This iconographic peculiarity is explained by the stereoscopic nature of the owl's forward-facing eyes (similarly to primates and humans) and favours the development of the iconological legend in terms of Panofsky.



*Figure 1.* The cave drawings of the Trois-Frères, France.





Figure 2. Babylon statue of night demon Lilith. British Museum.

The front-facing position of eyes presupposes an utterly different type of frontal communication — eye-to-eye. Animals in archaic mind possess the totemic character of being intermediators to the world of the dead and spirituality where the birds<sup>2</sup> have played an essential role. Thus, this feature of an owl is expected: it communicates with the beyond through the visual channel.

Further development of the “owl” motif is found in Ancient Greek (especially Athens) and, later, in Roman art. The goddess of wisdom Athena is rarely seen without her main attributes, and therefore an owl is often present. The popularity of an owl as a symbol of Pallas Athena is confirmed by Greek coins dating from V–II centuries BC, gemstones, amphorae and skyphoi (Figs. 3 and 4). The style of depicting an owl in Greek art, similarly to Egyptian, was repeated later on in the Roman mosaic of the Orpheus temple in Morocco (Fig. 5).



*Figure 3.* Owl. Attic red-figure skyphos, last quarter of the 5th century BC. Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon.

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<sup>2</sup> The belief that the soul could leave the dead body in the form of a bird can be traced from the Paleolithic age until now (see: Stolar 1985).



Figure 4. Attica tetradrachm, Athens, circa 449–404 BC.



Figure 5. Roman mosaic from the house of Orpheus in Volubilis, Morocco, c. III c. AD.

Those who have never seen any images of Athena have a look at the coins.<sup>3</sup> Athena was often portrayed with owl eyes, as if she was an incarnation of a totem possessed prophetic sight — Athena Pronoia. Homer described her as being “owl-eyed”<sup>4</sup> which literally means also “bright-eyed” (γλαυκ-ᾠπις *glauk-ôpis*) (Menar 1996: 125). The emphasis on the eyes and sight confirms one of the main characteristics of an invariant image of an owl: a vessel with two sighted, or as it will be studied below, blind holes.

The “owl” motif was simplified and doubled in the representation of Athena's helmet which is her other significant symbol along with her shield, armour and spear of a warrior. It is important to note that the shield of Athena is related to mirror — *aegis* with a border of snakes and in the center the head of Medusa, given to her by Perseus. Unfortunately, the narrative links between an owl and a mirror could not be traced in ancient legends and myths, although they are both found in the same iconographical context — prophetic wisdom. On the other hand, the Greek warrior helmet is one of the most frequent components of trophy still life (*nature morte*), symbolizing martial spirit and glory, mainly posthumous. A helmet along with other martial attributes was regularly used in monument decoration, stellas and sarcophagus hitherto. At the same time, Athena's helmet style (also called Spartan) with slits for the eyes and mouth, reminds one of the shapes of a mask, as a death mask or theatre mask, which in its turn corresponds to the skull motif, clearly seen in Dutch still life

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<sup>3</sup> The word “coin” (*moneta*) is derived from one of the epithets of Latin incarnation of Athena — Juno Moneta, the protectress of funds, which means “the one who warns”. It was her temple where the geese saved Rome from the Gauls when they were disturbed in a night attack. The same temple was used to coin Roman money. Thus, the warning character of the communicational function of money was reflected in this ancient legend.

<sup>4</sup> This is an interesting link to the analogous image of Aztec god of rain, fertility and water Tlaloc who is depicted with goggle-like or owl eyes (see Meletinskij 1992: 543).

ensembles. Thus, the semantic aura of an owl as a communicator with “others” is supported by similarities between forms and functions of attributes that are mimetically alike. An owl acquires strong contextual memory being surrounded by a stable set of attributes. In the function of prophetic wisdom, as in Ancient Egypt, the “owl” motif is nowadays used on graphical logotypes of publishers, booksellers and all kinds of companies producing one or other product of intellectual value.

The verbal legend follows the image of an owl since antiquity. Unlike Homer, Pliny the Elder mentioned it with more than negative connotations (1st century CE):

All of these are dim-sighted in the daytime. The eagle-owl is a funereal bird, and is regarded as an extremely bad omen, especially at public auspices; it inhabits deserts and places that are not merely unfrequented but terrifying and inaccessible; a weird creature of the night, its cry is not a musical note but a scream. Consequently when seen in cities or by daylight in any circumstances it is a direful portent; but I know several cases of its having perched on the houses of private persons without fatal consequences. (Pliny 1949–1954: *Natural History*, Book 10: 16).

It can be undoubtedly asserted, that the main characteristics of an owl image, which cannot be reconstructed for the Late Paleolithic iconography, emerge in one quite definite legend by Classic antiquity. Both Homer and Pliny, were not unknown to Bosch, since their texts form the basic reading list of an intellectual, and moreover were repeatedly quoted in Medieval bestiaries and physiologues, and then resettled in Renaissance and Baroque emblemata. On the one hand, there is wisdom and propheticness, on the other hand — bad omen, nocturnal and dark nature, blindness and death.

Christianity adopts the “owl” motif to its system of values maintaining the ambivalent rating. On the one hand, owl and mirror are associated with Christ, giving the light of truth<sup>5</sup>, as it is seen in

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<sup>5</sup> “To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lucas 1: 79).

illustrated Bern manuscript *Physiologus*, IX century (see Sachs *et al.* 1991: 125–126). Moreover, an owl is found in paintings depicting Jesus' life scenes<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the owl symbolises sinners being in the dark and having fallen away from God. *Physiologus* was compiled in the II century and contained descriptions of flora and fauna, sometimes even fantastic creatures, provided with symbolic meanings according to their religious interpretations. After its release as a didactic text for scholar studies, the bestiaries, illustrative Bibles and *Horologions* (*Books of Hours*) appeared. The encyclopedia *De rerum naturis* (*On the Nature of Things*), also known as *De universo* by Hrabanus Maurus (842–847 AD) has a separate article on an owl. *The Aberdeen Bestiary* (XII c.), which basically duplicates the above-mentioned set of characteristics, quotes monk Rabanus (that is, Hrabanus Maurus) who, in turn, refers to the Bible: “The owl signifies those who have given themselves up to the darkness of sin and those who flee from the light of righteousness. As a result it is classified among the unclean creatures in Leviticus (see 11: 16). Consequently, we can take the owl to mean any kind of sinner”.<sup>7</sup> An owl appears in the scenes of demons, witches and other nocturnal creatures, in covens and mysteries.

The interlacement of the ambivalent motifs retains the connotations that are given by mythologic, and later religious, mind to various optical tools, such as the eye and the mirror. The mirror is often interpreted as a tool to reveal and, simultaneously, to conceal the truth. The same is said about the eye and the ability to see on the whole.

It is also reflected in many languages that still carry the oldest, apparently, ambivalence of trustworthiness of the eyesight channel. Thus, Russian sayings have both attitudes: “a picture is worth a

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<sup>6</sup> Also by Bosch, see: *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam); *Ecce Homo* (1475–80, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt).

<sup>7</sup> According to *Cooper's Dictionary of Symbols*, an owl is a symbol of the perfidious Jews who reject Jesus and prefer darkness to light (Cooper 1995: 309).

thousand words” (“it’s better to see once than to hear hundred times” literally from “лучше один раз увидеть”) and “I saw with my own eyes” (“видел своими глазами”) and “eyewitness” (“очевидец”), but “don’t trust your eyes” (“не верь глазам своим”). Some wordforms possess two contradictory meanings in one, representing a dialectic pair such as “invision” meaning the ability to perceive with eyes and at the same time mental image, phantasm (“ВИДЕНИЕ” and “видЕНИЕ”). These antithetical allusions are also culturally grounded in the importance that the theory of prophetic blindness has on the antique intellectual atmosphere. Suffice it to mention a blind prophet Tiresias (Yampolskij 1993), and Oedipus who gouges his eyes out (Mamardashvili 1999).<sup>8</sup> Later, in a new turn of analytic reflection, Sigmund Freud described the Oedipus complex as the ousting of birth trauma caused by unconscious guilt (“know without knowing”). Apparently, the owl fits to this paradigm of sight blindness.

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<sup>8</sup> “By the law of Karma, if Oedipus hadn’t done what he did in the tragedy ‘Oedipus’, he would be incarnated now and again, the murder of his father and his sexual acts to his mother would be continuous” (Mamardashvili 1999, chapter 2) [*our translation* — J. G. and O. B.].

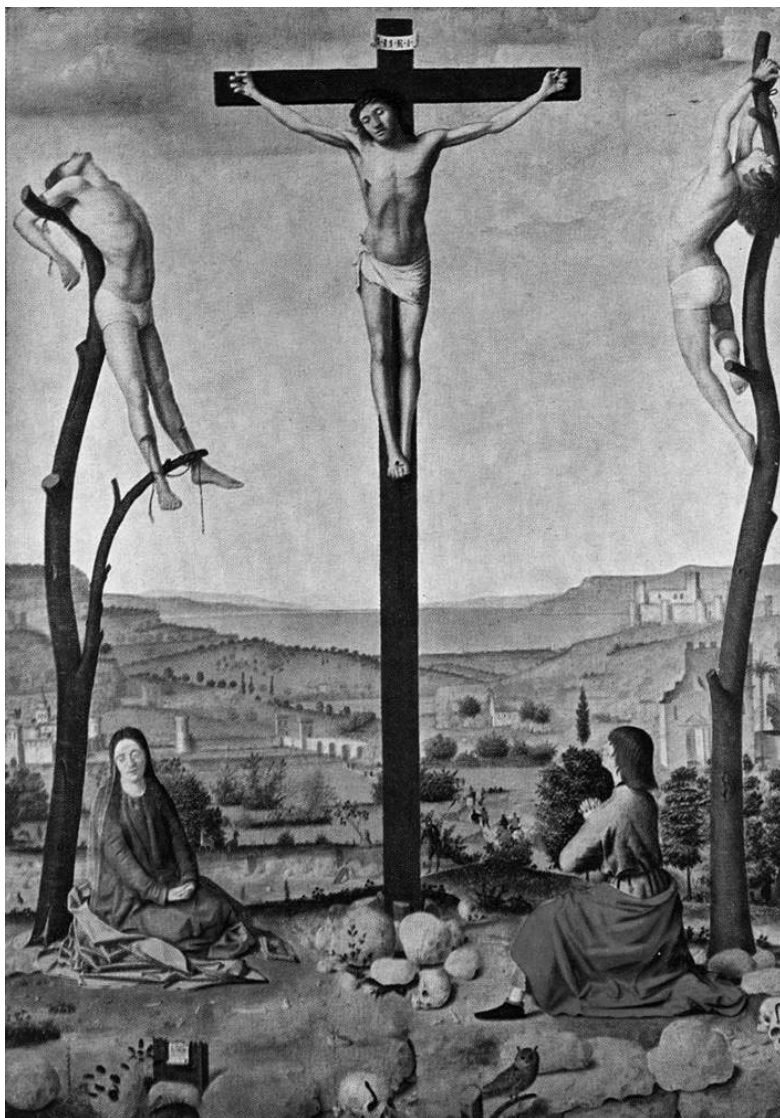


Figure 6. Antonello da Messina. *Crucifixion*, 1475. Oil on panel, 52.5 x 42.5 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen.



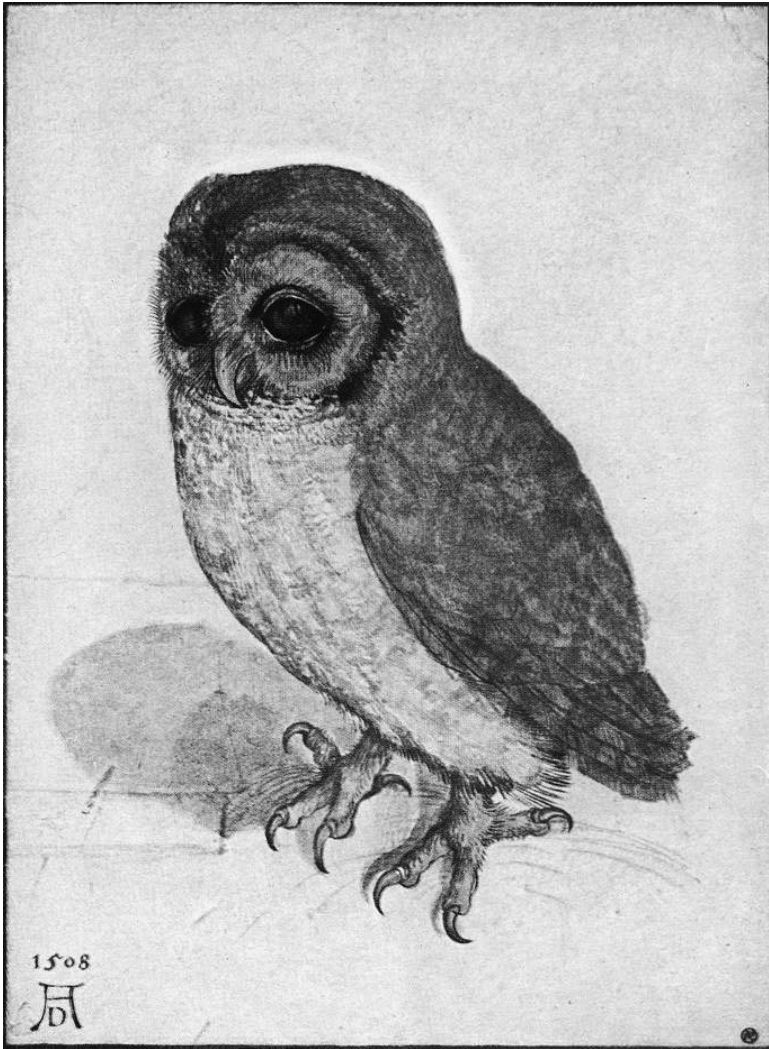


Figure 7. Albrecht Dürer. *The Little Owl*, 1506. Watercolour on paper. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 8. Albrecht Dürer. *The Virgin among a Multitude of Animals*, 1503. Pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 321 x 243 mm. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 9. Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Portrait of Dr. Johannes Cuspinian*, c. 1502. Oil on wood, 59 x 45 cm. Oscar Reinhardt Collection, Winterthur.

Renaissance artists pay also a lot of attention to the “owl” motif. Namely, Michelangelo used an owl in the sculpture composition of *Day and Night in Cappella dei Principi in Florence*, Antonello da Messina in *Crucifixion* (Fig. 6), Mantegna in *St. Jeronime in the Wilderness*, Dürer in *The Little owl* (Fig. 7) and *Virgin among a Multitude of Animals* (Fig. 8), Lucas Cranach the Elder in *Johannes Cuspinian* (Fig. 9), Peter Bruegel the Elder in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, Hans Baldung Grien in *Three Ages of Man and Death* and many others. It is remarkable that the Renaissance owl is also

associated with death, delusion and temptation (although also temptation of knowledge and wisdom). Although Dürer is kind of an exception when picturing the owl as a bird. The naturalistic line of the “owl” iconography has been kept in medieval *Physiologues* and hitherto remains in photography. Moreover, we dare to claim that the Palaeolithic drawings of an owl from a frontal view in Trois-Frères have a realistic, naturalistic character as long as it is recognizable.

## 2. Bosch and his time

Hieronymus Bosch exploited the “owl” motif in 18 art works that indicate a great significance of its semantic particularity for the artist. Researchers of Bosch do not conclude on a particular function of the image of the owl, it is mainly seen either with a negative perception as a symbol of night, evil and sin, or, on the contrary, with positive connotations of its wisdom and prophetness (Bax 1983; Boczkowska 1971; Spychalska-Boczkowska 1966; Fraenger 1975).

Bosch (1450–1516) was born into the crucial period of European culture, “the autumn of the Middle Ages” (in terms of Huizinga); comparatively quiet stability of medieval atomism would be changed with a massive movement of cultures and languages in whole Europe. Although, Bosch was a man of his time: he earned as a guild artist and therefore rarely dated and signed his masterpieces (out of 34 paintings that can be attributed to him, 7 are signed). Bosch was a master of the subject and possessed the family secrets of his artistic ancestors van Aken, and this allowed him to earn the solid capital. It is generally assumed that he also followed his father, Anthonius van Aken, by joining the Brotherhood of Our Lady (“Zoete Lieve Vrouw”) known as one of the wealthiest organisations, formed first as a corporation of guild masters and then transformed into a secret community for not only professional purposes but also religious. Fraenger (1975: 16–20; Baldass 1970: 59–60) assumed that Bosch was also involved with the

Brotherhood of the Free Spirit, or the more radical group, the Adamites, a sect that was heretical to the mainstream Church and appeared in XIII century and flourished in Europe in later years.

It is no secret that alchemy was one of the subjects of secret communities and sects, but also magic, secret practices and arts that were banned by the Church as rivals. The secret knowledge was a word of mouth, folk, attested in the national pagan rites. Therefore we face the lack of any reliable testimony on its character. The trustworthiest evidence is apparently the records of the inquisition and iconography. Since Bosch was never sued or witnessed, we assume that the only source to reconstruct his inspiration and world-view is his work.

The mentality of the medieval man was to a considerable extent in the state of diglossia (in terms of Boris Uspenskij with regard to Ancient Russia after adopting Christianity as the official religion). It can be also detected in artists' workmanship during the Renaissance that promotes values of national identity, humanism, self-awareness and science against the background of the all-unifying Church. Remaining subjects of the Catholic Church, Italian humanists, appeal to the pagan antiquity, which was thoroughly documented in written and visual sources. By turn, the Northern Renaissance appeals to the pagan folklore because there were no literary monuments left by pre-Christians: the druids either never had the written language or it was irretrievably lost. However, there are abundant iconographic evidences of folk devilry — Gothic monsters, the gargouille, which were carved into cathedral buildings or margins of illuminated books, at the edge of the official sacral space. This periphery of a collective mind, or following Carl Gustav Jung, unconsciousness flourished in European cultural and intellectual Christian life in XVI century.

Bosch certainly was a folk-minded artist and that is seen in his themes: peasants, vagrant magicians and quacks, preachers, minstrel-cum-clowns (*skomorokhs*), gamblers, gormandizers. The entire rabble becomes his heroes after Chaucer, Boccaccio and later Rabelais,

portrayed them as heroes of the world of “the carnival culture” (as described by Bahtin), which was a reversed or upside down view of the normal morals that the church presented. Though, unlike literature that presented this world from outside, as a series of novels, Bosch paints its subconscious. However, Bosch lived in a wealthy family of masters, married to a rich noble heiress and was well received in respected circles and never belonged to the bottom strata. It is likely that he painted the mentality of the intellectual circle; the transitional period from a mythological type of thinking to a historical one.

Bosch's topics could be, for convenience, divided into two sectors: scenes of everyday life, containing moral aspects, that will be continued by Bruegel the Peasant; and visions that will be carried on in the following ages by Spaniards, from Goya to Dali. It is noteworthy that later Dutch usurpation in Spain created the preconditions to an utterly productive dialog in the artistic world, where the Dutch would be faithful to the genre, up to Van Gogh, leaving the mystery to the Spanish.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the genre *moralité* is more or less clear, the interpretation of visions offers difficulties, where many theorists of art give up. The reasons are obvious: there are no alternative sources to describe the happening except the transcripts of witches' interrogations. However, mass repression of folk heathenism was not gaining as much power as in later years after Bosch. His paintings reflected rather harmless degradation of childish intellect, as an image of decomposition of

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<sup>9</sup> The dialog between Dutch and Spanish art goes far beyond the format of this paper and should be developed into further extensive study. Coincidentally, Goya was a folk artist similarly to Bosch, although he deviates from the real world in horror awareness and insanity, as the dream of reason produces monsters. Goya transforms a phantasmagoria to a nightmare. He was only considered a court painter, though he could be regarded as the first of modern artists, set aside from the pure court artist Velasquez. Velasquez was not able to go beyond the boundaries of impartial but complimentary mirror. However, he managed to state his view on sight blindness in *Las Meninas* (see Foucault 1970).

myth. The hardest task is to decipher the components in unpredictable combinations of multilayered esoteric motifs, shuffled on purpose by the author. High-level historical and mental analysis and ossification of the material is necessary in order to examine the alchemical agglomeration of metaphors and allegories. For instance, Carl Gustav Jung attempted to turn the alchemical heritage into archetypes, and therefore his book became less understandable than the initial texts he analysed (Jung 1963).

Thus, deciphering the secret knowledge that Bosch possessed is impossible. However he thoroughly and trustworthily presented the structure of the medieval mind itself. These are naive, intricate, even intermittently meaningless if beyond the abrupt, narrow and secret context, pictures of fears and wishes of the national language, or in other words, of mentality and the epoch. Signs of demoralization are always complicated to identify since demoralization is homogenization despite its odd implications. At first sight it is diversity, however, at the detailed examination — a monstrous blend of common objects. Paradoxically, we see representation of entropy — the rupture of communication channel, loss of common codes and values. Even the Bosch's genre scenes are absurd, though hiding standard domestic pragmatism — common sense, where visions are pure flights of fancy, fears and wishes intertwined in the most unexpected poses and combinations. Obviously it was not one man's imagination, but a trend in the mentality. Bosch was not a single rebel as the late Renaissance artists were; he was popular and respected, his works purchased, even though he was scrupulous in choosing customers and topics he liked. The nature of Bosch-painter is different and reflected his epoch, but not the epoch of Dali, for instance, who consciously directed his own unconscious.

While Jan van Eyck presented harmony, authorised by the Church, Bosch showed the world "head over heels", inside out, a carnival that will turn from innocuous feasts into the main, first of all consuming bourgeois, cultural line. The Carnival would gradually transform into the Revolution.



Figure 10. The prankster Till Eulenspiegel, depicted with an owl and a mirror.



Known in German-speaking medieval culture, the folklore figure of Till Eulenspiegel (Fig. 10) (printed editions appeared shortly before Bosch's death) was one of the heroes who, according to the legend, played jokes to the contemporaries revealing their greed, hypocrisy, foolishness, and basically also unmasked the flimsiness of the society. The invariable attributes of Till were a mirror and an owl (sighted blind communicator between the worlds), the same as for Athena-Minerva. It is also relevant that the folklore antiquity has kept the concept of trickster behind the figure of Till Eulenspiegel. A similar concept is hidden under the majestic mask of Athena's wisdom. The switch of an agent, carrying the same attributes, is expectable.

### 3. Bosch's owl

Bosch frequently used an owl in his works. The iconography of "his" owl is standard: it is either a body-vessel with yawning eye-holes, or only a head with eyes. The most known triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* depicts five owls: one on the left inner panel and four on the central. Both versions of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* have two owls on the central panel. The Bosch's owl can be found in very unpredictable places and seen only with scrutiny. Mainly, it appears as a silent contemplator, emerging from behind the corner, column or chimney, as in *The Conjurer* or *The Ship of Fools*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Art theorists conventionally give the titles to the paintings as Bosch himself never named them.



Figure 11. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Conjurer (The Magician)*, 1475–80. Oil on panel, 53 x 75 cm. Musée Municipal, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

*The Conjurer* (Fig. 11) shows a common genre scene: the vagrant magician shows thimblery, the tricks still popular in street animation. While the conjurer is doing the cups, the pickpocket is robbing the bent over spectator. The crowd is heterogeneous: courtly lovers, a nun, gapers, all involved in the happening. The owl's head, another contemplator, engaged and excluded, involved but remote, sticks out of the conjurer's basket.

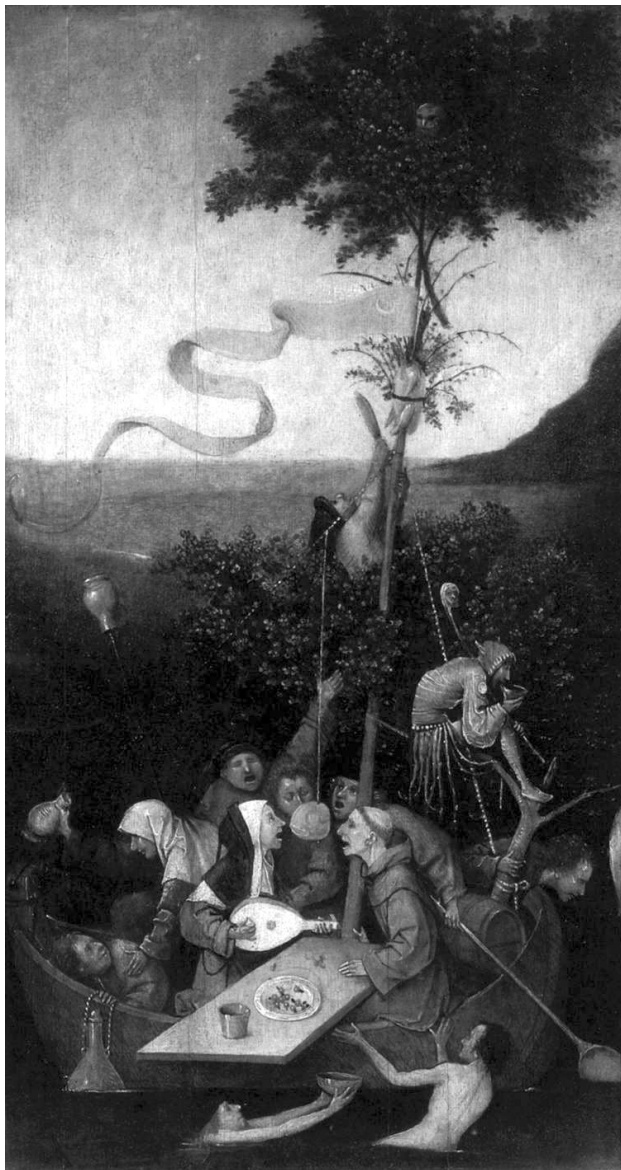


Figure 12. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Ship of Fools*, 1490–1500. Oil on wood, 58 x 33 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

*The Ship of Fools* (Fig. 12) is a somewhat abstract allegory, though also played by genre figures, painter's contemporaries. The mentality of medieval man did not think in a historical perspective, only "now" and "always" mattered. At least this is seen in iconography: Christ's life scenes, crucifixion and tortures, unalterably placed in the contemporary context. On the other side of "now" was "always", essentially the beginning and the end, "both now and ever and unto the ages of ages" where "ever" and "unto the ages of ages" mean the same as "always". In so doing the world regularly begins and ends at the defined point in the cycle. Time in the Middle Ages was not perceived in linear dimension, but in cyclical, emphasising its mythologem.

Thus, the crucifixion happened in a zero point of timeline. The Venerable Bede, who regarded the incarnation of Jesus as the beginning of the era, was the first to set the ripen shifts in the understanding of time by Christians. This point was at the same time and now and always (Grigorjeva 2005: 156–157). Considering this concept of time, *The Ship of Fools* could be seen as an inversion of the Crucifixion zero point. It is an allegory that has no reference to a concrete period in time, but happens here and now. The ship, or rather a fragile boat, fully packed with mixed members of public, minding their own absurd business. A mast is made out of a green tree whose leaves hide an owl. The manner of painting an owl here is quite specific for Bosch, since the motif reminds us of a mask and a skull at the same time. The motif of the skull is additionally intensified by an inversion of the canonic composition of the crucifixion where, at the foot of the cross, laid Adam's skull. Further, the allegory is easily readable: the unsteady abyss instead of the steady rocks, music and tipsy revelry instead of sorrow, a crescent (which is not only a symbol of Islam) instead of a cross, outrage and nonsense (such as the drunkards who drink outside water (or amniotic fluid) instead of wine (blood of Christ) and eat berries instead of a lamb while receiving communion).

According to the medieval beliefs the crescent was a symbol of delusion, infidelity, temptation. Another question is why Islamic rulers use it instead of a sun or cross — Islam has its own culture of basic graphic symbols and a crescent was never negatively considered. At the same time, cross-like symbols were derived by the Druids' descendants, Christians, from a symbol of sun through a swastika form. The death of the God is a zero point in time and space (Grigorjeva 2005: 167–172; Grigorjeva 2007). Therefore Druids-Christians apprehend the Christianity in their own way, as a change and final triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy, Cross over Crescent of The White Goddess (Graves 1948).<sup>11</sup> However, as there is no definitive triumph of the center over the periphery, it is the spiral route of evolving culture by Hegel, two mutually enriching phases of one cycle.

Therefore, in the reverse world, there is a green tree at the cross-shaped mast. The principle of masculine rational regularity (structure) is replaced by the spontaneous feminine structure (rhizome<sup>12</sup>). Above this reigns an owl, the dead head, *memento mori* of an engaged observer, or self-observer. An engaged observer watches himself in one context or another. However, the 'observer' condition contradicts the 'being' condition; to exist does not mean to be. This formula was well known to antiquity, when an owl, a mirror and an eye had same qualities. If there is a material eye, an optical apparatus, then who activates it? One who consciously makes use of it, but not is not equal to it. An interpreter. Ernst Gombrich precisely described this feature of representation, which is actually applicable to any act of semiosis, or

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<sup>11</sup> The Swiss anthropologist Johann Jacob Bachofen (1815–1887) argued in the first volume of his book *Das Mutterrecht* (*The Mother Right*, 1861) that the matriarchy or gynocracy found among tribal peoples, where authority in both the family and the tribe was in the hands of the women, was to be associated with the worship of a supreme female earth deity. Bachofen was the first who actually pointed on the sacral character of matriarchy.

<sup>12</sup> The term that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari used to describe organic condition of cultural discourse in contrast to text.

in other words recognition or signification: "I cannot have my cake and eat it. I cannot make use of an illusion and watch it" (Gombrich 1960: 5)<sup>13</sup>.

Gombrich's statement helps *ex post* to understand another enigmatic motif in *The Ship of Fools* — the round loaf dangling from a mast robe and hungry mouths trying to reach the bread to no avail, which apparently symbolises the bread of sensorial perception of the world that could never be eaten. The keenness for sensorial perception cannot be satisfied as every new round of comprehension brings new blind zones and rouses eagerness. In fact, this motif is a visual evidence of the hermeneutic circle as it was later described by Schleiermacher (1768–1834; Schleiermacher 1998). At the same time, the "bread" motif demonstrates the canonic iconographic theme of communion with the Host (body of Christ) that is likely to appease hunger forever.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the act of comprehension is in contrast with the act of faith.

An owl is a mirror of Bosch, his reflection, his logo. The alter ego of the painter, the invisible trickster, is wandering about from masterpiece to masterpiece.<sup>15</sup> We would call Bosch a trickster-mocker, a painter-skomorokh, as we find many similarities in their functional existence. A trickster is a whatever being, a figure of archaic mind inherited by the Middle Ages and transformed into the leading masses

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<sup>13</sup> Gombrich referred to Pliny who introspected the difference between the physical act of seeing and conscious awareness of what has been seen: "The distinction between what we really see and what we infer through the intellect is as old as human thought on perception. Pliny had succinctly summed up the position in classical antiquity when he wrote that 'the mind is the real instrument of sight and observation, the eyes act as a sort of vessel receiving and transmitting the visible portion of the consciousness'" (Gombrich 1960: 12).

<sup>14</sup> "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6: 35)

<sup>15</sup> Later Vermeer would leave a chair for one invisible observer in his interior compositions. Only once the chair would be taken by the painter, but he turned his back to a viewer.

parvenu insurgent (see extensive compilation by Hynes, Doty 1993)<sup>16</sup>. The function of the trickster was to disobey conventional behaviour and reveal the mismatches of the system, otherwise to work with cognitive dissonance; sometimes purposefully setting up conditions, in provocations, or experimental environments. A trickster is the one who ridicules the world by revealing the truth and hiding behind the mask. The one who could recognise a trickster concealed behind the mask is actually another, initiated into the same game, a trickster who is aware of multiplicity of norms and able to play the worlds. In fact, the truth that has a variety of meanings, can be non-existent as well as multiple — but depends on the interpretation point. The truth can be obtained through the gaps in languages, first of all, in humour. As the trickster is an intellectual, he is an eternal betrayer to any well-structured corporation. He is an androgyne, a jester, a philosopher, an actor, a magician, a thief, a liar of his own, under no proper corporation. Nevertheless, he knows the norm and canon since it or its transformation grounds any game. There is no game without rules; even a fight for violation of the rules has its own rules.

Bosch started his own career as a guild master, however changed his name, left the family and started a separate life as a well-known contemporary, bright and talented individual. Bosch, painting the horror of his collective unconsciousness, was reflexive and reflective and prone to self-analysis. Otherwise there is no other possible reason to explain why he depicted an owl in 18 of the 34 paintings attributed to him.

Charles de Coster thoroughly described the next step of the trickster's development, transferring the legends of Eulenspiegel to the actual historical context of the Spanish invasion to the Netherlands. According to Coster, Till Eulenspiegel was close to leading masses,

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<sup>16</sup> In our opinion, a trickster is the direct descendant of a shaman — a communicator between the world of mankind, mortals, and the world of spirits, eternal.

however this transformation of a trickster to a national avenger brought nothing positive, only genocide.

Luis Buñuel in cooperation with the great admirer of Bosch, Salvador Dali, in 1929 shot a short movie with one of the most horrifying images in cinematographic history — a woman's eye slit with a razor, with the vitreous humour spilling out from it. The above mentioned line of the "eye" motif connotations is sound. The shocking impact of the above scene serves as an indispensable sanitising procedure for every analytical observer, revealing to them the extent of dissociation between themselves (as observers) and the object observed.

Concluding, we bring in several poetic dicta describing properties of eyesight compiled by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* that has been republished 18 times since its first edition:

A perfect painting is like a mirror of Nature,  
in which things that are not there appear to be there,  
and which deceives in an acceptable, amusing,  
and praiseworthy fashion.

(Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Introduction to the Elevated School of Painting*, 1678)<sup>17</sup>

The hand touched a flat surface; but the eye, still seduced, saw relief;  
to the extent that one could have asked a philosopher,  
which of these two contradictory senses was a liar?

(Denis Diderot, *Salon*, 1761)

Another expression by William Blake that Richard Gregory refers to in his classic monograph *The Intelligent Eye* (Gregory 1970):

This life's dim windows of the soul  
Distorts the heavens from pole to pole  
And leads you to believe a lie  
When you see with, not through, the eye.

(*The Everlasting Gospel*, c. 1810, section 5, line 101)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Brusati 1995: 11.



Thus we are presented with an uninterrupted chain of conceptual knowledge, expressed in word and image, a knowledge concerning peculiarities of experimental sensory cognition as the ‘blind sight’ of a perpetual hermeneutic circle. We can, henceforth, trace the continuity of thought going back to at least the Greek antiquity<sup>19</sup>, pausing at the specific example of H. Bosch at the turn of the Middle Age on its way to Renaissance and all the way down to our contemporaries, the analytical thinkers E. H. Gombrich and R. L. Gregory. On this path we have been accompanied by the Universal Communicator the Trickster, the many-faced incarnation of Hermes Trismegistus. The analysis of Hermes is currently omitted due to insufficient material at our disposal at present, as the file on Hermes still waits to be compiled.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-everlasting-gospel/>

<sup>19</sup> We have reasons to believe that this concept already existed in Paleolithic times, as well as during the Babylonian Kingdoms.

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### **Сова и зеркало: об одном визуальном мотиве у Иеронимуса Босха**

Основной задачей данной работы является рассмотрение одного иконического мотива — совы — и его функциональной нагруженности на примере творений Иеронимуса Босха, основываясь на сопоставительном анализе вариантов формальной модели. Мифологическую и символическую (преимущественно, вербальную) «легенду» совы мы дополняем ее визуальной «легендой» на протяжении всей изобразительной истории «европейской» культуры. В своем методе интерпретации мы в первую очередь опирались на школу истории идей (Аби Варбург, Эрнест Гомбрих, Эрвин Панофский, Фрэнсис Йейтс, Карло Гинзбург) и традицию Тартуско-Московской школы семиотики культуры и анализа текста. Основной вывод работы: мотив совы, в том числе у Босха, предполагает семантическую ауру идеологического концепта «слепого зрения» («слепого предвидения»), в свою очередь вовлеченного в идеологию архаического

концепта коммуникации между мирами, реализующегося в мифологической картине мира фигурой наблюдателя — шамана, трикстера.

### **Öökull ja peegel: Ühe Boschi visuaalse motiivi tähendusest**

Meie peamiseks eesmärgiks käesolevas artiklis on uurida üht Hironymus Boschi ikonograafilist motiivi, öökulli, pidades silmas ikonograafiat, tähendusloomet ja konnotatsioone. Püüame määratleda Boschi öökulli motiivi tähendust formaalse mudeli variantide võrdleva analüüsi põhjal. Me täiendame Euroopa kunstiajaloo esinevat puhtvisuaalset legendi mütoloogilise ja sümbolse (peamiselt verbaalse) tõlgenduslegendiga. Metodoloogiliselt lähtume ideede ajaloo koolkonna (Aby Warburg, Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Francis Yates, Carlo Ginzburg) erinevatest ideedest, Tartu-Moskva kultuurisemiootika koolkonnast ning teksti analüüsist. Artiklis järeldatakse, et „öökulli” motiiv üldiselt, kuid sealjuures ka Boschil, seondub pimedaga nägemuse („pimedaga ettenägemise”) semantilise tähendusväljaga. See ideoloogiline kontseptsioon on omakorda seotud kontseptsiooniga eri ilmade vahelisest kommunikatsioonist, mida viib läbi mütoloogiline vaateleja — šamaan või kelm.