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## Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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# The Flow of Western Culture

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## NIHILISM AND MYSTICISM (1800--Present) (Continued)

### II. The Arts

In his catalogue preface to the second Post-Impressionist show (1912), Clive Bell speaks of far more than just the Post-Impressionists: "We have ceased to ask, 'What does this painting represent?' and ask instead, 'What does it make us feel?' We expect a work of art to have more in common with a piece of music than with a colored photograph." {65} With the loss of certainty about reality, let alone whether God might exist, painting drifted more and more into psychology and an attempt to paint the inner state of the mind, or the feelings of the painter about the world, rather than paint the world itself.

#### A. Edvard Munch (1863--1944)--*Jealousy* (1895, 26¼" X 39¼").

Like Van Gogh, Munch was a man driven more by madness than most. His childhood was depressing and dominated by his father whom he seems always to have feared (his mother and sister both died of consumption). "The black angels of disease and insanity stood guard at my cradle. . . . I always felt that I was treated unjustly, motherless, sick, and threatened with punishment. . . ." {66} Out of his childhood came a particular sensitivity to the terror and alienation of the mind, and his paintings are a record of neuroses from the inside. "I paint not what I see, but what I saw . . . The camera cannot compete with painting since it cannot be used in Heaven or Hell. . . ." {67}

In this particular painting, of which there are several versions, we see a man in the foreground who looks out at us with a look that could be anything from hatred to despair. In the background a woman, looking like a demon in her almost flaming red robe, appears to be either seducing or being seduced by the man next to her. We gather that the man in the foreground is jealous because of what is happening, but the direction of the action is very ambiguous. The dramatist Strindberg, who was a close friend of Munch, gives the following analysis:

Jealousy, sacred feeling of cleanliness of the soul which abhors to mingle with another through the intermediary of woman. Jealousy, legitimate selfishness, born of the instinct to preserve self and the race. . . He who is jealous says to his rival: 'Go, imperfect one, you fan the fires that I have lit. From her mouth you shall breathe and drink my blood. You will remain my slave since my spirit shall rule you through this woman who has become your master.'{68}

Many of Munch's pictures are of the relationship between a man and a woman, and almost all of them are filled with anger, distrust, with women even pictured as vampires. Of his method, Munch wrote: "Just as Leonardo da Vinci studied human anatomy and dissected corpses, so I try to dissect souls."{69}

**2. Munch--*The Scream* (1893, 35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 29").**

This is undoubtedly not only Munch's most famous picture, but one of the most famous pictures from the early twentieth century. Perhaps only one who has truly feared losing their mind could put so much emotional energy into a painting like this. The whole canvas seethes with anxiety, fear, and isolation. Munch's own comment: "Above the blue-black fjord hung the clouds, red as blood, red as tongues of fire." And later he wrote: "I would not cast off my illness, for there is much in my art that I owe to it."{70} The 1895 lithograph of this picture is inscribed "I listened to the great, infinite cry of Nature." As dread has enveloped Western culture, this picture is emblematic of the whole cultural ethos and not just the individual.

**3. Emil Nolde (1867--1956)--*The Last Supper* (1909).**

Nolde, a German artist, along with Georges Rouault (1871--1958), was one of the last artists in our century to paint biblical scenes with real conviction. He painted *The Last Supper* after an exhausting and near to death sickness. Almost in a dream, he began to sketch.

Without much intention, knowledge, or thought I had followed an irresistible desire to represent profound spirituality, religion, and tenderness. . . . I was to paint the most mysterious, the profoundest, most inward event of all Christian religion! Christ, His face transfigured, sanctified and withdrawn, encircled by His disciples who are profoundly moved. I painted and painted, hardly knowing whether it was night or day, whether I was a human being or only a painter. I saw the painting when I went to bed, it confronted me during the night, it faced me when I woke up. I painted happily. The painting was finished. *The Last Supper*.{71}

**4. Nolde--*Twilight Creatures* (?).**

Nolde only seems to have painted biblical images for a few years. He seems also to have had an interest in the spiritual forces below the surface of things and this picture is surely an image of demonic creatures. Nolde

began as one of the leading Expressionists, but his later paintings seem to lose some of their power, and become more pleasant landscapes congruent with his growing German nationalism. He is one of the few painters represented here who lived to a "ripe old age."

**5. Chaim Soutine (1893--1943)--*Child with Toy* (c. 1919, 31 7/8" x 25 5/8").**

Born in the tiny Lithuanian town of Smilovitchi, a Jewish shtetl (a small Eastern European Jewish community), Soutine was the tenth of eleven children. His father was a mender, the lowest rung on the very stratified Jewish hierarchy. Raised in abject poverty, an artist where drawing was forbidden, Soutine was haunted for the rest of his life by his childhood. He was repeatedly beaten by his brothers for painting, and he finally left for an art school in Minsk at the age of sixteen after he had been beaten and left for dead for asking a man to pose for a portrait.

In July of 1913 Soutine left Minsk and moved to Paris, where he remained for most of the rest of his life. However, in 1922, his whole life was changed from starving artist to artist in demand, almost literally overnight. An eccentric collector from Philadelphia, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, who had made a fortune selling a sore throat medicine, saw one of Soutine's pictures hanging in a bistro in 1922. He arranged to meet the artist, and bought 52 of Soutine's paintings for \$3,000, at the time an amazing price. For the rest of his life, he was never poor, but psychologically he was always in poor health.

Soutine was an exceptionally odd person, with many phobias and strange habits. Perhaps as a reaction to his Jewish upbringing, where an animal was always killed and bled immediately, he developed a fascination with painting beef and poultry carcasses, which he sometimes hung up for days in his apartment. He bought hats by the dozen and was convinced they had magical powers. He would only paint when no one could see him, even hiding if possible. He destroyed many of his canvases that did not please him, and mutilated many more. He spent most of the last ten years of his life in a fruitless search for the perfect scene to paint, and he died very close to madness.

His paintings of people were mostly of servants or people who are "lower" in society's eyes. This may well have been his own way of dealing with his almost outcast status as a child. All of his pictures show the intensity with which he approached his work, and the deep textures he obtained by alternating heavy impasto with areas painted almost entirely on the back of the canvas. His landscapes swirl and almost decompose with even more uncontrolled energy than Van Gogh's, with colors as vivid as Gauguin's.

**6. Pablo Picasso (1881--1973)--*Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911, 8' x 7'8").**

Without doubt the most influential painter of the twentieth century, Picasso here has painted one of the turning points in modern art. It was so shocking that even his friends seem not to have liked it, and it was not shown publicly until 1937. Done over a number of months, it began as the Brothel of Avignon, as an allegory about lust, and initially there were also two men in the picture. One sat among the women eating with them, while another

came in from the left with a skull in his hand. Both were dressed as sailors. But Picasso seldom moralized, and these figures were painted out and the picture was given its present name by the art critic, poet, and friend of Picasso, André Salmon. While not yet "Cubist" (which would come in the next year) the figures are no longer seen from one point of perspective, nor with one continuous form. Rather, the plane of the picture has many different planes superimposed on it, as if the figures had been sliced and then reassembled. Picasso's interest in African art, particularly from the Ivory Coast, is also shown in the treatment of three of the faces. But their faces tell us little. This is not a painting to praise or condemn prostitution, and what meaning we attach to them will probably come from ourselves, not the painting. They are subjects to deconstruct, objects to manipulate, and not women to admire, or desire, or to pity. And in all of these ways they foretell the direction of modern art away from beauty seen in the form of the thing itself and towards a loss of an external reality and even humanity itself.

Picasso's whole life can be summed up by a statement of his friend Gertrude Stein: "He alone among painters did not set himself the problem of expressing truths which all the world can see, but the truth which only he can see." {73}

**7. Picasso -- *Female Nude* (1910--11, 38<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>").**

Several years after the initial development of Cubism, a term invented by the French art critic Louis Vauxcelles and meant to be derisive, both Picasso and Braque (1882--1963) began to explore how far the idea of pure fragmented geometric planes could be used to depict three dimensional structure. Years later Picasso said:

Many think that Cubism is an art of transition, an experiment which is to bring ulterior results. Those who think that way have not understood it. Cubism is not either seed or a foetus, but an art dealing primarily with forms, and when a form is realized it is there to live its own life. . . . Mathematics, trigonometry, chemistry, psychoanalysis, music, and whatnot, have been related to Cubism to give it an easier interpretation. All this has been pure literature, not to say nonsense, which brought bad results, blinding people with theories. {74}

When we invented Cubism, we had no intention whatever of inventing Cubism. We wanted simply to express what was in us. {75}

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. {76}

**8. Jackson Pollock (1912--1956)--(*Unknown*).**

When many people think of incomprehensible modern art, they think of a Pollock "drip" canvas (though drip is far too passive a word for how

Pollock applied paint). Beginning as a realist painter, shortly after World War II Pollock struck out in an entirely new direction. Abstract Expressionism, or "action painting" was just coming into its own in the U.S., and Pollock was on the first wave. Abandoning the usual approach to painting, he placed his unstretched canvases on the floor of his studio and worked from all sides of them, applying the paint in whatever way would give the desired effect.

The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them. Technique is just a means of arriving at a state-ment. . . . I *can* control the flow of paint: there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end. {77}

Pollock lived with the same intensity and abandon as he painted, and, dead drunk, he killed himself when his car skidded into a tree. But his painting had a profound effect. Willem De Kooning wrote "Every so often, a painter has to destroy painting. Cezanne did it. Picasso did it with cubism. Then Pollock did it. He busted our idea of a picture all to hell. Then there could be new paintings again." {78}

**9. Salvador Dali (1904--1989)--*Soft Construction with Boiled Beans; Premonition of Civil War* (1936, 29½" x 33").**

Painted with wonderful technique, as are most of his surreal pictures, Dali anchors the picture in an arid but mundane setting, and the hideous apparition itself arises from the top of a chest of drawers. And as the being rips itself apart, it is indeed a premonition of the civil war in Spain. In the foreground, a man walks with bowed head, oblivious to the whole scene. The juxtaposition of the real with the grotesque is typical in Dali, and sexual images abound.

The idea of paranoia run wild as the source of inspiration is common in Dali's paintings. Andre Breton (1896--1966), commenting specifically on Dali said:

I believe the moment is at hand when by a paranoiac and active advance of the mind, it will be possible . . . to systematize and thus to help to discredit completely the world of reality. . . . Paranoia uses the external world in order to assert its dominating idea and has the disturbing characteristic of making others accept this idea's reality. {79}

Few painters have been so self-promoting, and his later paintings tend to become Dali the exhibitionist, rather than Dali the painter.

**10. Francis Bacon ( 1909--1992)--, [center panel] (1962, 78" x 57").**

If Picasso's paintings were upsetting to many people, Francis Bacon's painting made them sick to their stomach. Born in Dublin, he was forced by his father to leave home at 16, and his travels about the decadent capitals of Europe between the Wars left their mark on his very open mind.

In 1929 he returned to London where he lived until his death. He painted little until the 40s, and it was not until a show in London in April of 1945 that Bacon suddenly became a "recognized" painter. What he displayed was a triptych entitled *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. Friend and art critic John Russell describes them as "images so unrelievedly awful that the mind shut snap at the sight of them." {80} The description fits almost all of Bacon's subsequent paintings. In ways sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, Bacon's paintings have shaped much of the art since 1945. As Russell so poetically says, "what once rang out like an individual cry of pain has been taken up, all over the world, as the first oboe's A natural is taken up by the whole orchestra." {81}

Later in his life, Bacon took to portraits, usually of friends, but always with the same twisting and distortions of the body, and the likeness of the image more to something that has been tortured than to the person being painted. Why paint his friends? "If they were not my friends, I could not do such violence to them." But he did not paint with them in the room. "If I like them, I don't want to practice the injury that I do to them in my work before them. I would rather practice the injury in private by which I think I can record the facts of them more clearly." {82}

#### 11. **Bacon--*Head VI* (1949, 36 5/8" x 30 3/8").**

Part of a series of six heads, they represent a sequence of deforming a picture originally painted by Velasquez of Pope Innocent X. It is difficult to speculate on what Bacon wants the reader to feel after viewing these canvases, but perhaps a comment of his can at least open the door to suggestions. "One thing I'd like to have is an enormous room lined with distorting mirrors from floor to ceiling. Every so often there'd be a normal mirror inset among the distorting ones. People would look so beautiful when they passed in front of it." {83} Just possibly, after we walk away from a Bacon picture, we suddenly see the beauty around us just as we are in flight from the horror on his canvas.

Bacon sums up both his own art and much of that of the century when he tells us how he feels about life:

Also, man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. I think that even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities, which man now, you could say, has had canceled out for him. Man now can only attempt to beguile himself for a time, by prolonging his life--by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors. You see, painting has become--all art has become--a game by which man distracts himself. And you may say it has always has been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is fascinating is that's [sic] going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all, so that he can make life a bit more exciting. . . . {84}

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