

## Friedrich's *Wanderer*: Paradox of the Modern Subject

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### Résumé de l'article

L'homme vu de dos dans *Le Voyageur au-dessus de la mer de nuages* (1818) de Caspar David Friedrich est ici considéré en tant qu'intermédiaire interposé entre le regardeur et le paysage montagneux sublime contemplé. La subjectivité moderne se retrouvant de plus en plus éloignée du monde et séparée de tout sentiment de réalité vivable ou définissable, nous soutenons que le spectre de cette figure traduit de façon fondamentale l'abstraction croissante de l'humanité quant au monde empirique. Nous discutons de ce tableau en lien avec les problématiques contemporaines des *droits de l'homme* et de l'émergence de l'État-nation, et proposons qu'il démontre le paradoxe du sujet moderne humain comme toujours déjà séparé de lui-même.

# Friedrich's Wanderer: Paradox of the Modern Subject

Julian Jason Haladyn

L'homme vu de dos dans *Le Voyageur au-dessus de la mer de nuages* (1818) de Caspar David Friedrich est ici considéré en tant qu'intervenante interposé entre le regardeur et le paysage montagneux sublime contemplé. La subjectivité moderne se retrouvant de plus en plus éloignée du monde et séparée de tout sentiment de réalité vivable ou définissable, nous soutenons que le spectre de cette figure traduit de façon fondamentale l'abs-taction croissante de l'humanité quant au monde empirique. Nous discutons de ce tableau en lien avec les problématiques contemporaines des droits de l'homme et de l'émergence de l'État-nation, et proposons qu'il démontre le paradoxe du sujet moderne humain comme toujours déjà séparé de lui-même.

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Never forget, therefore, that the basic intuition of a religion can be nothing other than some intuition of the infinite in the finite.

Friedrich Schleiermacher [1799]<sup>1</sup>

[Friedrich] likes to paint unfathomable expanses.

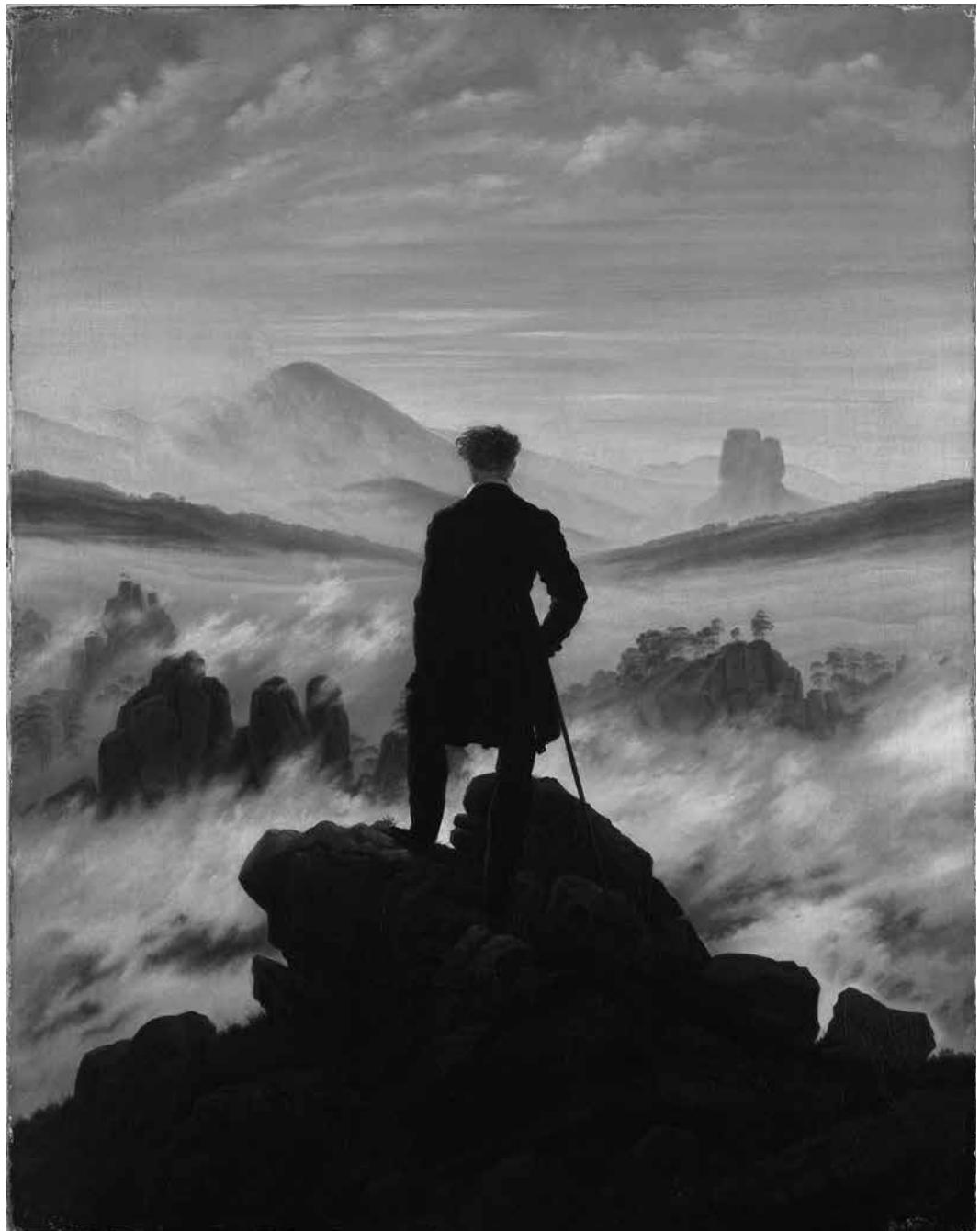
Johanna Schopenhauer [1810]<sup>2</sup>

In *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) Caspar David Friedrich places the wandering subject of the painting as an intervening medium that stands between us, the viewers, and the sublime mountain landscape being viewed. | fig. 1 | This man, dressed in a long dark-coloured jacket and holding a walking stick or cane in his right hand, stands balanced on the uneven surface of the rocks that rise above the peaks still visible through the cloudy mass engulfing much of the landscape. This foreground portion of the painting appears as a distinct plane separated from the rest of the landscape, almost as if it were a cut-out placed in front of an otherwise simple rendering of distant mountains. Separating the figure and rock of the foreground from the foggy mountainous background is an indistinct and undifferentiated spatial zone that we as viewers are unable to fully quantify or locate within the usual imagined perspectival constructions of such a scene. Even the wanderer's view from within this painted world has likely been disrupted as a result of the dense fog, which heightens the already problematic relationship between the limits of a human point of view and the natural vastness being confronted. It is this quality that excites in us a feeling of the sublime, which, as Immanuel Kant explains, exceeds "the ends of our power of judgement" and in this way represents a form of "violence" against our imagination.<sup>3</sup> Quite simply, our judgments prove inadequate when faced with the illimitable experience of a natural world of which our senses communicate only a portion. Friedrich confronts this human problem by embracing the abstract void, making visible that absence that exists beyond the perspectives we use to define our world. As this article suggests, the wanderer, overlooking this sea of fog, quite dramatically confronts the ends of the human power of judgment. Positioned at a short distance directly behind this figure, we as the viewers of the painting are in this way literally beyond the ends of such judgments. We must experience this sublime divide on the (violent) level of the imagination, picturing ourselves confronting these ends through the power of a medium that is used to bridge the gap. This is the role of the wanderer.

1. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crozier (Cambridge, 2003), 112.

2. Johanna Schopenhauer [1810], quoted in Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd ed. (London, 2009), 139.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 2007), 76.



**Figure 1.** Caspar David Friedrich,  
*Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*, 1818.

Oil on canvas, 94.8 x 74.8 cm.

On permanent loan from the

Foundation for the Promotion  
of the Hamburg Art Collections.

Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: BPK,  
Berlin/Hamburger Kunsthalle/Elke  
Walford/Art Resource, NY.

Such figures, or *Rückenfiguren*—strictly speaking, a figure seen from the back—designate a modern variant of the traditional staffage in European painting. Scattered among Friedrich’s numerous depictions of the land are a variety of such personages, including several confirmed or assumed self-portraits, which serve as visual surrogates for the paintings’ viewers. We look to this human presence as a means of determining the general scale of the scene and, more specifically, of relating our physical bodies to the spatial parameters of the painted world. It functions as a placeholder we can imaginatively occupy, allowing us a virtual existence in the landscape, and shaping our lines of sight within the spatial frame. Our relation to the *Rückenfigur* arguably produces a visual and conceptual distance by allowing us to be present in the painting even while obviously absent, the figure being our vicarious self. This distance, however, requires us to be more actively involved in the experience of the painting if we are to enter its world. The problem, as Joseph Leo Koerner articulates it, is that we are made to stand not “at the threshold where the scene opens up, but at the point of exclusion, where the world stands complete without me.”<sup>4</sup> Although the travelling figures provide a potential location within, and relationship to, these visions of the world, their presence at once encourages and denies our ability to (even imaginatively) embody such a position. The *Rückenfigur* stands as an embodiment of humanity’s abstraction from the world that paradoxically is encountered as if at a distance from behind this wandering subject: the figure functions as an intervening medium that separates us from a direct experience of the sublimity of the mountainous scene.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I examine Friedrich’s use of abstraction as a means of envisioning conditions of modern subjective existence, methodologically extending this conception of the abstract into questions of the sublime, specifically as an end to the human power of judgment. It should be noted that I use the term “modern” in an extended historical sense. In *Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei Calinescu notes that the word *modernus* “was coined from the adverb *modo* (meaning ‘recently, just now’) in the Middle Ages, with the opposition between modern and ancient really coming to the fore in the Renaissance. Calinescu acknowledges what he describes as the two conflicting conceptions of modernity: one that sees “modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization,” and the other that refers to the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century development of “modernity as an aesthetic concept” associated with modernization.<sup>5</sup> While I refer primarily to the latter conception of the term, my own understanding necessarily includes the former as well. In relation to subjectivity, this extended modern perspective follows the major shift in philosophy that begins with René Descartes and culminates in Kant, in which all experience is rooted in the concept of self. This leads to the second purpose of this paper, which is to propose that what we see in Friedrich’s wanderer is a representation of a modern form of subjectivity that emerges in the early years of the nineteenth century, in which our experience of reality is perpetually mediated, and we are made to feel an increasing disconnect between self and world.

The importance of the relations between humanity and nature in Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* has long been noted, with numerous scholars

4. Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 191.

5. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, 1987), 13, 41.

connecting his treatment of the natural world with an expression of personal religious beliefs shared, to varying degrees, by many Romantic artists and writers. Directly related to this is the attribution of the notion of the sublime to his work, which, throughout the existing literature, is taken as signalling the representation of God in nature. Even the scholars who argue against interpreting Friedrich's paintings through the category of the sublime, such as Werner Busch and Johannes Grave, still approach the term as a conceptual surrogate for God.<sup>6</sup> In place of treating the sublime as an answer Friedrich gives us, I want to propose that in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* sublimity is a question he poses, not just to the individual viewer but to the general (or universal) viewing subject of the work. The painting denies the viewer access to the world as a reality and, more significantly, as a representation; the figure of the wanderer stands in our way, reminding us that this landscape is merely a painted image. This, I argue, is a visualization of modern subjectivity as an act of doubling: the (painted) wanderer stands in front of us as we view the painting, leading us to try to imagine ourselves in his privileged position overlooking the scene.

#### Humanity's Horror Vacui

Friedrich describes the world in its modern abstractness. In his paintings, unknowable realities are framed by the abstractions of nature, represented as mediated experiences that must be created in and through subjective experience. As Busch tells us,

For Friedrich, the essence of things became visible only if brought out—exactly as suggested by Schelling—through the hardness and rigour of the artist's intervention; but hardness and rigour of artistic form emerges, in the Romantic view, only in the moment of self-concentration that permits an intimation of universal connectedness. Moreover, the hardness and rigour acts as a pointer to the viewer's response to the work.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of a direct confrontation with nature, in which the artist is seen as simply recording the world, Friedrich's landscapes represent nature as a rigorously mediated experience that the artist can only (abstractly) describe or point to. This abstract relationship is denoted within many of Friedrich's paintings through his use of a vast and often indiscernible space of nature that visually overwhelms any human presence, whether inside or outside the imagined world of the artwork.

In *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10), one of the most consistently used examples of this feature, a (very) small figure in a dark robe stands alone on a stretch of uneven shoreline looking off into the nothingness of an unsettled sea and substantial overhanging cloudy sky. | fig. 2 | Scenes of figures by the sea watching ships that sail away from land are part of a common trope in Western painting in which the witnessing of departure functions as a means of contemplating human mortality and finiteness; Friedrich's use of this tradition spans his entire career and includes one of his last major paintings, the aptly titled *The Stages of Life* (1835). With *Monk by the Sea*, however, no ships are visible: there is nothing for the monk to contemplate but absence itself—a pictorial lacuna that literally engulfs the diminutive presence of the figure, who stands as a remainder of a lost reality within an otherwise abstracted world.

6. See Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich. Ästhetik und Religion* (Munich, 2003) and Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich und die Theorie des Erhabenen* (Weimar, 2001).

7. Werner Busch, "Empirical Studies of Nature," trans. David Britt, in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art: 1790–1990*, ed. Keith Hartley et al. (London, 1994), 279.



**Figure 2.** Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10. Oil on canvas, 110 × 171.5 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.  
Photo: bpk, Berlin/Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen/Andres Kilger/  
Art Resource, NY.

Let us pause briefly to consider this contradictory position. The privileged place assigned to humanity in the world no longer could be taken as a given, not least because of the increasing sense of relativity that came with existing in a universe without (known) limits. Alexandre Koyré makes this explicit in his distinction between the *closed world* and the *infinite universe*, whereby the finite and ordered view of the cosmos that had been accepted in various forms until about the sixteenth century is ultimately replaced “by an indefinite and even infinite universe which is bound together by the identity of its fundamental components and laws, and in which all these components are placed on the same level of being.”<sup>8</sup> Not only was the basis of a belief in God severely undermined by this change in human perspective, so was the view of humanity itself. This is an active confrontation with, and even acknowledgment of, the *horror vacui* of existing within a world that is beyond definition. It is a fear of the void encapsulated in the concept of the sublime. Friedrich’s contemporary, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, suggests that the experience of the sublime “is caused by the sight of a power beyond all comparison, superior to the individual, and threatening him with annihilation.”<sup>9</sup> How can we represent or define our relationship to a world that threatens us with annihilation? And how can we even begin to seek personal, cultural, or religious meaning in the void that is an infinite universe?

8. Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, 1968); 2. Svetlana Alpers echoes this development in her critical analysis of the optical developments in the seventeenth century, primarily in relation to the Dutch preoccupation with lens-based technologies, which include the modernized camera obscura (with a lens instead of a simple pin-hole), the microscope, and the telescope (which emerged out of the Netherlands in 1608). As she states: “An immediate and devastating result of the possibility of bringing to men’s eyes the minutest of living things (the organisms viewed in the microscopic lens), or the farthest and largest (the heavenly bodies viewed through the telescopic lens), was the calling into question of any fixed sense of scale and proportion.” Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983), 17–18.

9. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York, 1969), 205. It should be noted that Arthur Schopenhauer is the son of Johanna Schopenhauer, a German writer and art historian who visited Friedrich’s studio in 1810.

10. Philip B. Miller, “Anxiety and Abstraction: Kleist and Brentano on Caspar David Friedrich,” *Art Journal* 33.3 (Spring 1974), 206.

11. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hanay (London, 2004), 159.

In his paintings Friedrich is able to picture the abstractness that is our view of the world and, more importantly, to describe a supreme being (God) as manifested in and through this fundamental or *real* abstraction. He accomplishes this primarily by embracing the mediations necessary to represent what is by its nature beyond human representation—including a higher power or God, whose depiction becomes intertwined with Friedrich’s envisioning and understanding of nature. Comparing Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* to the landscape paintings of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan van Goyen, Philip B. Miller distinguishes between van Goyen’s ability to overcome a *horror vacui* by picturing “landscapes from a height sufficient to subordinate as much as possible to his horizontal line” and “Friedrich’s transformation of such a convention into quite modern terms of problematic space,” which he accomplishes by instead playing the sense of a *horror vacui* “to the hilt.”<sup>10</sup>

The small figure in *Monk by the Sea* confronts this *horror vacui*, which takes the form of an abstract spatial void of colour—with modulations of predominantly blues, greys, whites, and blacks—without an apparent or logical end. The edges of the canvas appear less like a narrating frame and more like an arbitrary demarcating of our limited view of the limitless: the ends of our ability to judge the world. In this representation of the sublime, a human fear of the void, expressed as an optical condition through Friedrich’s emptying of all but the most basic pictorial elements, invokes the imagined or mediated vision of God as an infinite and unrepresentable presence.

In a post-Reformation world, and in the aftermath of the Scientific Revolution, it is not possible to approach the divine except as a mediated presence because, as Søren Kierkegaard boldly states, “God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite difference in kind.”<sup>11</sup> This infinite difference constitutes a distinctly modern point of view on both nature and God that, as we witness in Friedrich’s landscapes, celebrates the infinite universe

**Figure 3.** Johannes Vermeer,  
*Allegory of Faith*, ca. 1670–72.  
Oil on canvas, 114.3 × 88.9 cm.  
The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of  
Michael Friedsam, The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York.  
Photo: The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)).



as an annunciation of that which is beyond human reasoning. Within such a universe one can imagine what Martin Luther termed the “Hidden God.” As Koerner tells us, Luther returns here “to the Old Testament, where invisibility signalled God’s immeasurable glory.”<sup>12</sup> In Friedrich’s paintings, we are not spared the fear of the void; on the contrary, it is the *horror vacui* of his imagery that most readably signals the hidden existence of a sublime presence—be it a supreme being such as God or the incalculable expanse of the universe—before which we are rendered self-consciously incapable of realistic judgment or reason.

By the time the devout Protestant Friedrich began painting his quintessentially religious images, he had developed this abstract aesthetic in an exaggerated and self-evident manner, even when incorporating religious signs or symbols into his work. In the centralized crucifix mounted on a peak of jagged reddish rocks in his controversial altarpiece *Cross in the Mountains* (1807–08), what Friedrich actually presents is a sculptural representation of Christ on the Cross rather than a depiction of the “real” Crucifixion. It is important to stress the distinction being made between the act of rendering in paint an imagined scene of Christ on the Cross and the act of picturing an already rendered—and accordingly pre-interpreted—representation of the Crucifixion. One important precedent for *Cross in the Mountains* is Vermeer’s *Allegory of Faith* (1670–72), in which we are shown a relatively small sculptural crucifix resting on a small table and a large painted Crucifixion framed on the back wall of the pictorial space, both being significantly located behind an open Bible also on

12. Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago, 2008), 209.

the table (with visible but illegible text). | fig. 3 | A woman sits in the middle of the scene as the allegorical figure of Faith, clutching her breast and looking toward the upper right-hand side beyond the spatial confines of the canvas, the artificial limits of which are visually acknowledged by the presence of a drawn curtain on the top left corner. What we see is an allegorical scene of Faith that Vermeer paints in realistic detail; yet this realism, like the curtain in the pictorial world of the image, only serves to highlight that which is missing, that which cannot be represented: the painting can only be completed by those whose faith orients them to make the meaning explicit and tangible.

In Friedrich's landscapes the appearance of religious signs such as crucifixes are similarly unnecessary. The possibility of religious encounters permeates his entire conception and treatment of nature as a visual abyss, an approach that serves to remind us of the infinite difference separating human consciousness from a divine or sublime presence. It is this gap that necessitates a form of belief that, in Johann Gottlieb Fichte's view, is the "necessary way of thinking and demanding an intelligible order, law, or arrangement—call it what one will—an order according to which true morality, the inner purity of the heart, necessarily has results."<sup>13</sup> The meaning we are able to derive from experiencing Friedrich's depictions of nature is in this way not disguised or hidden beneath the surface of the image, simply waiting for us to find it. Instead, it is in large part a reflection of our own interpretations of what we see. The emptiness of *Monk by the Sea* is therefore not a façade covering hidden meanings but a surface that reflects a *hidden God*—and the *hidden subject* confronting this mirror-like encounter with a sublime absence—whose invisibility we experience as a representation of the unknowable world.

#### Hidden God, Hidden Subject

Unlike the small figure in *Monk by the Sea* whose existence is overwhelmed by the abstract void of the surrounding seascape, the wanderer in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* appears as a visually substantive human presence strangely standing both inside and outside the mountainous landscape that dominates the world of the artwork: he exists within the representation but also looks onto what is represented. His position in fact mirrors our own placement as viewers standing in front of the painting, except that the wanderer's body in part darkly obscures our view of the mountain scene—all that is (potentially) in front of him is rendered void for us, an absence defined by his bodily presence. The figure thus functions as a blind spot, denying our vision by occupying the optimal perspectival position at the edge of the depicted precipice, the most sublime perspective on the natural scene, forcing us to view the mountains from a subsidiary stance behind and including the subjective stance he occupies. We literally look at his back as he overlooks the foggy abyss: an image of the image seen.

The question of this man's presence in the centre of the painting seems oddly irrelevant at first glance. Yet, given the composite nature of Friedrich's landscapes, the wanderer's occurrence as a predominant visual feature within our immediate field of vision deserves to be questioned. A well-documented feature of Friedrich's work is the fact that the depicted scenes are most often not taken from a single source but instead consist of elements and features derived from various natural sites that have been visually

13. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis, 1994), 174.

collaged or pieced together to appear as a singular, “real” location. Timothy Mitchell even points out that several of his depictions of mountains, which likely includes those seen in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, are derived from the descriptions and drawings of the geological formations and peaks of the Alps provided by Friedrich’s close friend Carl Gustav Carus, the artist never actually having visited the Swiss mountains himself. Such an approach signals Friedrich’s lack of interest in strict realism: nature for him being a language to be used in order to represent what he considered more real than reality, he “sacrificed topographical accuracy for what he saw as a more profound truth.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, although the figure appears as an individuated presence, he is actually an amalgamation of historical and, more significantly, political forces that serve to constitute his being as a distinctly conflicted and socially hidden subjectivity. In other words, the wanderer is an image of the newly emerging modern subject that appears most forcibly in the early years of the nineteenth century.

As the literature on *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* makes clear, there has been considerable speculation on the identity of the man pictured on the precipice and on the reasons for his visual importance in this painting. Koerner provides an exceptional summary of the (potential) history of this individual, along with a possible explanation as to why the artist has pictured the figure differently than virtually all other human presences in his works:

According to a tradition dating from the time before the canvas appeared on the art market in the 1930s, the turned figure represents a high-ranking forestry officer named von Brincken, whom historians have identified as a certain Colonel Friedrich Gotthard von Brincken of the Saxon infantry. In Friedrich’s canvas, the *Rückenfigur* wears the green uniform of the volunteer rangers (*Jäger*)—detachments called into service by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia to war against Napoleon. Von Brincken was probably killed in action in 1813 or 1814, which would make the 1818 *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* a patriotic epitaph.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not this is in fact a rendering of that specific individual is irrelevant to our present investigation. What is important in Koerner’s summary is the connection he makes between the individual and nationhood. His suggestion that the painting is a patriotic epitaph is supported by the mere fact that the figure wears the uniform of the volunteer rangers who served in the Napoleonic Wars.

It is particularly telling that Friedrich chose to have this man facing directly away from us. If the individual identity of the man is important, if the image is a personal epitaph, why not make his face visible? Jacques-Louis David, for instance, is careful in *The Death of Marat* (1793) to make the face of the politician and journalist visible, since our responsiveness to the depicted death of this martyr for the French Revolution depends upon associating the historical name “Jean-Paul Marat” with a visual identity or face—whether or not the image really looks like the “real” historical figure is ironically still irrelevant. If Friedrich’s painting is a patriotic epitaph in a manner similar to David’s, why position the wanderer facing away from us?

The simple answer is that by turning the figure away, Friedrich generalizes or universalizes the wanderer, thus enabling us to imaginatively occupy his presence. A more complicated response is to consider the figure not strictly as a means to an end—be it the celebration of a particular individual’s (von

14. Timothy Mitchell, “Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Watzmann*: German Romantic Landscape Painting and Historical Geology,” *Art Bulletin*, 66, 3 (1984), 455, 461.

15. Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 210–11.

Brincken's) sacrifice or the viewer's attempts to partake of this subjective position within the imagined world—but rather as a represented end in itself. In this manner, the wanderer can be seen as standing in for and describing an absent or hidden subject in whose reflection we experience the modern relation of human to world.

### Subjectivity and Nationhood

From a historical perspective, this reading of the painted figure in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* reflects a complex series of social and political changes in the status and understanding of what it meant to be "human" that surrounded eighteenth-century declarations of the "rights of man," particularly as these rights related to the rise of the nation-state. Evident in both the 1776 *Declaration of Independence* associated with the American Revolution and the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* associated with the French Revolution is a pronounced shift away from *historical rights*, which only applied to a select stratum of individuals within a society, toward *natural rights* that are "inalienable" and "given with birth" to all members of humanity. This represents a level of independence that Hannah Arendt describes as "the newly discovered dignity of man."<sup>16</sup> She qualifies this statement, however, by delineating the extent to which this dignity, no longer beholden to a supreme authority such as God, is now dependent upon one's being the citizen of a nation-state for its general application and enforcement. As Arendt points out,

man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people. From the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an "abstract" human being who seemed to exist nowhere.... As mankind, since the French Revolution, was conceived in the image of a family of nations, it gradually became self-evident that the people, and not the individual, was the image of man.<sup>17</sup>

As the guarantors of human rights, this family or community of nations thus controlled the meaning and authority of these rights in large part through the definition of "human" that was used as an ideal for both the American and French revolutionaries, in which "the people" as a generalized and abstracted category took power over the individual—who, at one and the same time, is and is not part of the people. A man who defends the rights of his nation is thus celebrated not as an individual but as a representative of the people, in whose dignified and patriotic existence all members can (vicariously) partake.

This *tyranny of the majority*, as Alexis de Tocqueville eloquently describes it, which follows specifically the declarations of inalienable human rights, causes a paradoxical situation that is a major factor in understanding what distinguishes the modern subject from previous conceptions (or perceptions) of subjectivity: namely, the sense of alienation that increasingly characterizes one's experiences within modernity. In this historically recognized change, which arguably takes shape around the time of the French Revolution, we witness not a distinct or abrupt rupture with previous modes of subjective experience but the culmination of a problematic in the basic relationship between self and world that had been building since at least the Reformation.

16. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, 2001), 298.

17. Ibid., 291.

If we follow Hegel's model of history, it is the Protestant introduction of a principle of subjectivity defined by an inwardness of will that we see fulfilled with the establishment of the inalienable or Universal Right (rights) for all enacted after the French Revolution. Hegel sees the "monstrous inconsistency" of the State being run through "the sway of the Majority over the Minority" as a failing in the application of Reason rather than a failure of the Idea of Reason itself.<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, among others, is exceedingly critical of the Hegelian reliance on the Idea of Reason as the base conception of the state and, more generally, of the rights of man as indistinguishable from and even predicated upon the rights of the national citizen. This conflation is precisely what makes the individual a marginalized and ineffectual presence within modernity—it is through the effects of the nation-state as a mediating device that individuality is decisively framed. Discussing Marx's critique of these rights, Henri Lefebvre states,

The rights of the citizen are abstract, fictitious. They only give the individual an imaginary sovereignty that lies outside of real individuality, and in an unreal universality, whereas the rights of man are essentially the rights of the egoistic individual, and ultimately, in bourgeois society, the rights of the owner and of private property.<sup>19</sup>

In this statement we see the granting of inalienable rights as a source of increased alienation within modern culture, in which a paradoxical separation of the individual from their own subjectivity comes about through the active abstracting of lived human existence, treated as *imaginary*, without recourse to any authority except that of the people—a majority known within Marxism as the *dictatorship of the proletariat*—which purposefully excludes individuality as such. Reason, as imagined through the lens of the state, is an inward will meticulously controlled by outside social and cultural forces.

By claiming the state as one of the many mediating devices that programmatically define the history of political thought as it developed in the nineteenth century, I am suggesting we envision the nation-state as a vehicle for subjective judgments, not of individual subjects per se but of the "majority" judgments of the people, which are given political authority through this mediation. Such political judgments, which refer to those subjective judgments facilitated or sponsored by the state, should not be mistaken as objective simply because they emanate from the state. It is important to remember that the "rights of man" were intended to replace the absolute authority of the monarch, whose rule was delivered to the people as an objective truth handed down through bloodlines as the historical rights of those seen as God's representatives—a birthright of the few that is reconstituted as the *natural rights* given by birth to all. The institution of inalienable rights at the end of the eighteenth century signalled a belief in the subjective ability of the people to rule themselves, without recourse to an imposed, objective authority. The state as ruled by the people should therefore not be treated as a source of objective truth and authority that is handed down to individual members of society (much like the word of God). Unfortunately, this is how state authority is often perceived and even utilized. In place of such an understanding we must recognize the authority of the people for what it is: a conduit for authorizing a collection of subjective judgments. Since human rights "were proclaimed to be 'inalienable,' irreducible to and undeducible from other rights

18. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, 1956), 438, 448.

19. Henri Lefebvre [1964], "The Withering Away of the State," in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elen (Minneapolis, 2009), 75. Lefebvre is directly responding to a quote from Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, although with the distinct benefit of not just considering the historical relevance of Marx's critique of Hegel and the overall importance of the rise of the nation-state on issues of subjectivity, but more importantly how these changes have contributed directly and indirectly to the succession of social and cultural advances and conflicts that have followed throughout the nineteenth into the twentieth century, leading up to the 1960s when Lefebvre is writing.

or laws, no authority was invoked for their establishment,” Arendt points out, “Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal.”<sup>20</sup> In this manner, the state is quite literally a human intermediate for the governing of humanity, an institutional insistence on considering the *human for human’s sake*—to extend the logic of the purposive purpose inherent in Kant’s aesthetic judgment—that is the support for and prerogative of the modern subject.

If we take seriously Lefebvre’s proposition, that Hegel “developed the political theory of the nation-state,” we may begin to appreciate the Hegelian response to the French Revolution as an attempt to reconcile the newfound power of will given to the subject with the impossibility of establishing an absolute authority to grant the “natural-given” right and ability to exercise this power—discussed in detail in *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>21</sup> Where the “rights of man” made it necessary to posit a more dignified conception of humanity (as the Human) that reflects and embodies these rights, so too did the rise of the nation-state as a form of authority based upon the subjective judgments of the people necessitate a more profound history that is both a representation of and justification for humanity. Stated differently, Hegel’s conception of history can be seen as a solution to the pronounced loss of outward or objective means of authorizing human existence within the modern world by both providing a means of validating subjectivity as a collective of minds and positioning subjects as part of and in relation to the larger narrative of the Human. (It should be noted that from a Hegelian perspective the narrative in itself is of greater importance than the reality of what is narrated, the “real” in many ways being beside the point for history.) What we see in this contradictory system is again similar to Koyré’s distinction, in which the state is constituted as a *closed world* that authorizes the narrative of history by abstracting subjectivity in order to limit the limitlessness of the *infinite universe* of subjective judgments. The modern subject of this history is thus posited as a *real abstraction*, a paradoxical entity that appears to have no place in this universal narrative except as a spectator of it.

The role of the spectator represents the modern subject’s foundational position for experiencing the world beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing to this day—although, again, this crucial historical shift should not be seen as a definitive break with previous pictorial modes but instead as a key moment of recognition. Here it is necessary for us to recall Jonathan Crary’s account of this shift in *Techniques of the Observer*. Where most historical accounts of these changes in visuality hinge upon the epochal introduction of the photographic camera that replaced a long-standing tradition of the camera obscura, Crary argues that such developments are instead “the outcome of a more complex remaking of the individual as *observer* into something calculable and regularized and of human vision into something measurable and thus exchangeable.”<sup>22</sup> This conception of the modern individual as what he terms the “*observer*,” a concept he posits against the connotation of a “spectator,” is crucial to Crary’s argument in this text and in his subsequent book *Suspensions of Perception*.<sup>23</sup> His rationale is mainly etymological: where “spectator” has its roots in *spectare*, commonly understood as a passive “to look at,” “*observer*” is rooted in *observare*, meaning a more active “to conform one’s action, to comply with.”<sup>24</sup> An individual is in this way understood as being

20. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 291.

21. Henri Lefebvre [1975], “Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche,” *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, ed. Stuart Elen, Elizabeth Lebas, and Eleonore Kofman (New York, 2003), 42.

22. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 17. Emphasis added.

23. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

24. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 5–6.

either a passive spectator or an active observer in a particular experiential mode, a useful distinction for my argument.

It may be helpful to approach this distinction in terms of subjective will, understood as the source of personal judgments that (predominantly) replaced the universal will of God in the aftermath of the Reformation. “I know my will not as a whole, not as a unity, not completely according to its nature, but only in its individual acts, and hence in time, which is the form of my body’s appearing,” Schopenhauer explains.<sup>25</sup> Yet, Fichte notes that too many people “completely fail to notice what is actually present and is in fact within their power and constitutes their own true self: namely, their will.”<sup>26</sup> For Crary, it is Schopenhauer’s investment in the will that accounts for his rejection of the passive reception of sensation on the part of the subject, who instead becomes “both the site and product of sensation.”<sup>27</sup> Individuals are thus active observers because their perceptions are the source as well as the ultimate goal of their subjective visual judgments, which are thus irreducible to and undeducible from the world outside the subject. For this reason we must recognize this active or wilful perception to which Crary calls attention as being simultaneously a profoundly *passive* experience of the world. In this manner, the world appears to us as a mere spectacle to be *looked at* from an unfathomable distance that is quite literally determined subjectively. The very activeness of subjective will thus ironically positions us as spectators of, rather than participants in, our own world.

### Sublime Spectatorship

And this is the position in which we find Friedrich’s wanderer: looking upon a world that is in every imaginable way separated from his subjective presence. As if his perceptions allow him to actively envision this world (he stands on the precipice) only by rendering it as a subjective representation—like viewing a painted landscape or exploring the universe through a telescope—that he is not part of and can only experience as a spectator. This separateness of subject and world is made visible by the expansive mass of fog that engulfs and washes out everything beyond the figure, making any absolute or fixed perception of the scale and proportion of the landscape impossible. It is this relational ambiguity that makes the experience of the scene sublime. Subjective judgment is rendered inadequate when confronting the seemingly infinite abyss of a world that exceeds our ability to define it (or more importantly, to narrate it), resulting in a fear of the void turned inward, hidden in the subject itself. Such *horror vacui* is an inward loss of the objective world in which the hiddenness of subjective judgment is seen—much like in the *Hidden God*—as signalling the immeasurable glory of subjectivity itself. The fact that we are separate from the world becomes a celebrated position of the Human, as supported and authorized by modern history, one that is understood as a privileged perspective allowing us to look at nature from the outside.

25. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, 101–02.

26. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 169.

27. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 75.

28. Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 213.

As Koerner appositely points out, “...strangely in a painting that so emphasizes the subjective standpoint, *Wanderer* renders our own place as viewers of the landscape deliberately unstable.”<sup>28</sup> If Friedrich does represent this human point of view, the spectator of nature in this case would clearly be the wanderer—that is, supposedly, the volunteer ranger (von Brincken) who

fought and possibly died defending Prussia against Napoleon—and not us; we look at his back as he looks at the landscape. Our position as spectators of the wanderer's spectatorship, an extremely important and often overlooked feature of a German painting produced after the French Revolution, reflects the abstracting of modern subjectivity in which experience becomes increasingly located not in a direct relation of self and world but as a subjective mediation that renders the world as an inward representation perceived from a privileged distance.

What Friedrich describes in this particular configuration is nothing less than the position of Germany in relation to the French Revolution. Rebecca Comay aptly describes the duality of the German perception of the events of the French Revolution as both a reflection of the Reformation, which allowed Germany to lay a historical claim to this revolutionary legacy, and an experience of modernity “as a missed experience”—forming at one and the same time the basis for German idealism and the Marxist conception of the “German misery.”<sup>29</sup> It must be remembered that unlike France and numerous other countries, Germany did not become a nation-state until the latter part of the nineteenth century—in part because of “an intractable split between an emergent German nationalism and the forces of Prussian reaction” that defines the “competing images of the wars of liberation against Napoleon.”<sup>30</sup> Comay describes this as an untimeliness that will hold back Germany’s emergence as a nation-state, even though many of the social and political changes brought about by the Revolution were adapted and developed by German thinkers who ironically established the parameters for the modern subject.

We see this beginning with Kant, whose particular view of the French Revolution, as well as the American Revolution, is distinctly and even proudly that of a non-participant. One might even go so far as call his approach or judgment of these events *aesthetic*. As he writes,

This event [the Revolution] consists neither in momentous deeds nor misdeeds committed by men whereby what was great among men is made small or what was small is made great.... It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great transformations, and manifests such a general yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered.<sup>31</sup>

It is not the *deeds* or *misdeeds* that are of interest to Kant, but the disinterested experience of being outside the event itself looking in as one watching players engaged in a game. “In the context of the French Revolution,” Arendt makes clear, “it seems to Kant that the spectator’s view carried the ultimate meaning of the event, although this view yielded no maxim for acting.”<sup>32</sup> This is perhaps the most crucial element of what we may call Kant’s *active spectator*: the paradoxical position in which the *ultimate meaning* of an event is achieved not by participating, which makes one necessarily self-interested in what happens, but rather through an active or wilful lack of interest—disinterestedness in Kant’s terms—that allows one to see and experience the overall meaning of the events (as history) without prejudice. This is especially important in Germany because it is the core of the untimeliness that, as Comay states, “turns thought to the order of experience, even if it is a question of a missed experienced, a lapsed experience, or even, in the end, another’s experience.”<sup>33</sup> This

29. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford, 2011), 1–3.

30. Ibid., 53–54.

31. Immanuel Kant [1798], *Conflict of the Faculties*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), 301–02. Arendt makes the noteworthy observation that, given the current political situation in Prussia making free discourse in public difficult if not impossible, the public to which Kant is referring when he speaks of “spectators” is “the reading public, and it is the weight of their opinion he is appealing to,” the written text representing a mediated space of discourse that allowed more freedom than public discourse. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, 1992), 60.

32. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 52.

33. Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 153.

is the position in which we find ourselves in relation to Friedrich's wanderer: we are spectators of our own, and another's, acts of spectatorship.

### Envisioning Modern Subjectivity

Considered a quintessential representation of the sublime, Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* appears less as an excess of sensation for the viewing subject and more as an excess of inwardness, a distancing of sensation by folding it into the subject sensing the sensation. "The viewer's ability 'to think himself into' the *Rückenfigur*'s place becomes the very instance of separation," according to Koerner.<sup>34</sup> It is an experience of exclusion in which we are doubly denied access to the world: first, on the level of reality, which has been deemed inaccessible through direct sensation, and second, on the level of representation itself, Friedrich's landscape being merely and even obviously a painted image. As a visualization of modern subjectivity, we as the interpretive viewing subject are at once located discernibly outside and behind our own projected subjectivity that is here folded back onto itself. This doubling of the subject viewing the landscape, with the (painted) wanderer standing in front of us as we view the painting, represents the very duality of an interiorized subject who experiences the world as a *real abstraction* that is constantly situated behind and obscured by the illusions of subjectivity.

It is in the act of sensing the world from a singular bodily position, non-universal and therefore necessarily mediated through a distinctly differentiated subjective presence, that the subject of modernity is always already a return to the self and apparently—as far as an individual can see—never able to fully affirm or *be* the self as a subject. Ever-present in modern subjectivity is an underlying scepticism or cynicism in the abilities of the senses to accurately affirm the world. Without such an affirmation, Arendt tells us,

neither faith in God nor trust in reason could any longer be secure, because the revelation of both divine and rational truth had always been implicitly understood to follow the awe-inspiring simplicity of man's relationship with the world: I open my eyes and behold the vision, I listen and hear the sound, I move my body and touch the tangibility of the world.<sup>35</sup>

It is this de-affirmed relationship between sensual subject and world that we experience in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, where the awe-inspiring vision we open our eyes to is uncannily absent through its presence. The sublime content of the painting—Friedrich's transcendental reading of man's engagement with nature as related to and even eclipsing religious excitation—is overshadowed by the wanderer, through which the experience of sublimity is processed. In place of the *awe-inspiring simplicity of man's relationship with the world*, as Arendt describes it, we as modern subjects are faced with a reality that is no longer given to us but instead represents a will that we must impose or impress onto the world, a subjective will that, extending Friedrich Schleiermacher's theories, is the "intuition of the infinite in the finite."<sup>36</sup> Standing as a wanderer over the abyss of the world, the subject becomes an aesthetic sensorium where knowledge is eclipsed by meaning, which must be subjectively produced as an act of will. This is the paradox of the modern subject: experience itself is always sensed at a distance from behind the mediating presence of subjectivity. ¶

34. Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 247.

35. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 2006), 54.

36. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 112.