

## SHAMANIC MOTIFS IN THE EARLY WORK OF DALE FRANK

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The art of Dale Frank is often found to be complex in the extreme and difficult to analyze. His work has been accused of inconsistency bad taste, and it has been argued that there are neither structure nor developmental phases in his work. On the contrary, his work is structured, although the framework is visionary, religious and mythological.

This paper will discuss Frank's apparent affinity with the shaman's primal religion, rituals and symbols in his early work, to his later self-identification with Christ. It will also briefly outline his shamanism in terms of Eliade's book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1972), with Frank's corresponding images and concerns. Sickness, dreams and ecstasies develop a shamanic initiate "into a technician of the sacred", evoking the myths and symbols of the shaman's cosmic drama. "Shamanic methods are strikingly similar the world over". Other fusions of shamanism and Christianity link Christ and the shaman Orpheus, and include the North American Indian shaman, Essie Parish. Similarly, in an unpublished statement of the 5th July 1980 Frank acknowledged his religious impulse by noting that as a youth he "was going to enter the Catholic priesthood" and that "I would like to be a devoted Catholic". Eliade describes shamans as religious leaders, priests, medicine men and sorcerers who are found in all 'primitive' societies, who cure themselves of illness and ultimately attain great personal power. The shaman becomes an innovator who combats the precariousness of existence through his own force of will. Several parallels can be made with Frank's early life.

Growing up outside Singleton, a country town in NSW, Frank's variant of shamanism emerged of its own accord. During the 1960's, the Government in New South Wales took valuable homes and farming land from his extended family. Deprived of family income Frank subsequently lived a precarious existence, forging his powerful personality both through economic ordeals and by an extremely difficult relationship with his father offering obvious parallels with the insecure life-style of the shaman. Shamans have also been described as

inheriting a 'quarrelsome' highly-strung personality. In his teens Frank lived in isolation in a cold, dark basement in Adelaide, characteristic of shamanic initiation, experiencing ecstatic dreams and trance-like illumination.

Both Frank and his wife have described his horrendous nightmares that compare to what the shamans call "Big Dreams" and are so vivid "that it is like being awake". Shamanic dreams involve the schema of suffering, symbolic death and resurrection, mastering the techniques of ecstasy, mystical journeys, to the underworld and Heaven and conversation with Gods. It seems that Frank has "instructed" and healed himself through his dreams and early art making. While many shamans mime the journey of the soul in dramatic form, Frank "mimes" this process through his painting.

Frank's work evokes ascent to the heavens as a psychic traveller through the visionary world, in paintings such as *It's My Party - To Johnny and Mickey - He's Left Home* (1990) depicting his visionary journeys into space. His "journeys through the cosmos," include *The Road Sign And The Spatial Constellation in Green Harmony Abstraction (Bus Stop At The End Of The Universe)* (1987) where red traffic lights and planets suggests some sort of cosmic and time travel. The initiate experiences many horrifying, morbid dreams that are just the first of a continuing series of 'trials', similar to shamanic initiation. Discussing the intensity of his imagery in his artist's statement at Roslyn Oxley Gallery, October, 1986, Frank described it as "A powerfully expressive symbolism which is so unalterable in its forms that a person uninitiated may at once recognise a work of signification without knowing its meaning". It is precisely this quality of vision that seems most shamanistic in his work.

The following twelve examples briefly outline some of the most prevalent correspondences between Frank's painting and shamanistic initiations and motifs:

### Dismemberment, Renewal of Organs, Seas of Blood (1-3)

1. Eliade defines the images accompanying shamanic 'initiation' in terms of several pre-determined patterns such as "dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera" which can be found in Frank's titles such as: *Being Just A Liver, The Virgo, Portrait* (1982). In the painting *Portrait of The Artist's Sister* (1983) one finds 'artery-fountains', two kidneys and a liver which form

a face.

2. Eliade points out that "dismemberment ... and the renewal of organs" also frequently symbolizes shamanic 'ritual death followed by resurrection.' Discussing his portrait *The Fleishy Islands And The Red Tide* (1983), Frank similarly refers to it as "a portrait made of pieces of meat and a red tide of blood".

3. Another of Frank's initiatory experiences involves images of 'blood waters rising' where evil spirits are described by shamans as testing the initiates 'psychic force'. Seas of blood are most evident in such paintings as *The Flooded Studio, The Studio And The Stain From Memory* (1984) and *The Wake* (1984).

## Eyes (4)

Sometimes Frank's blood red seas are strangely scattered with many eyes that "search the night for enemies". These can be seen in Frank's paintings of and *The Flooded Studio - The Studio And The Stain* (1984), *The Wake* (1984). Eyes are also prominent in *The Artist with no Excuse* (1984), or the mystic's third eye in *The Demon Artist's Portrait With A Question of Siamese Success* (1984) that portrays what Harner might term the shaman's 'strong eye', or the eye of knowledge 'visualising' in 'an altered state of consciousness'. According to Drury, some shamans can see inside their and other people's bodies with eyes extended - like a lobster's 'antennae'. *Self-Portrait To The Peered At The Yellow Sea* (1984), portrays a view from the inside of the head, reflecting optic nerves, cords or what he described as 'the gap between the surface of the face and the mind'.

## Wounds and the Shaman's Theory of Illness (5-6)

The shaman's theory of illness entails the curing of their own and others physical or psychological crises, a ritual apparent in drawings such as *A Cruising Moral, Lonely Boys With Wide Hips Lead To Only Breast Cancer and Empty Cradles* (1981), *The Making Of Oral And Loin Cancer* (1981), and *The Hierophants Cancerous Oats* (1982). All of these works refer to and often represent spreading cancerous tumours and intestinal organs while later works refer to Black Death, Syphilis and AIDS. In the shaman's role as healer, magical darts are supposedly 'extracted' from the victim's body. Similar images can be found in some of Frank's recent works with nails or darts on the

surface in paintings such as *The Cosmology of the Recurring Reactionary* (1990). A shaman may also be described as 'Pharmacon', which means both poison and remedy, suggesting the shaman's dual role of both the making of bad spells and the curing of illness. According to Frank *Art I* (1989) is a bad spell that has been placed on another artist. During 1985 and 1986 he also "poisoned" the surface of his paintings by mixing paint with chemicals that eventually grew crystals.

6. Frank's tendency to cut his paintings suggests the shamanistic ceremony of 'opening' where stitched "wounds" symbolize 'death and rebirth'. Frank's wounds are also depicted in *The Wounded Painting That Tempted To Look Into The Mirror Behind The Artist's Back* (1985) and in *The Two Saints* (1985), which refers to St. Bartholomew and St. Sebastian, in which a hole has been burnt into the surface.

### Redemption (7)

In his more recent works, flowing paint, suggestive of stains, relates to the Shaman's initiatory, redemptive acts: cutting their bodies and creating expiatory, repentant offerings of blood. As a young man Frank cut his hands and a cross into the skin over his heart, suggesting what Hall defines as "symbols ... of man's redemption through the shedding of Christ's blood". *I Love You* (1990) depicts Frank's offering of his blood to us.

### Ritual Nudity (8)

Ritual nudity such as the custom of baring the shaman's torso, is depicted in Frank's *Self Portrait of St. Bartholomew, The Torso* (1985).

### The Double and Ritual Androgynization (9-10)

Double images are present in a large body of Frank's work, for example *The Two Moons* (1984) and *Classicism* (1990). While his double image may suggest a schizoid self it might also refer to the shaman's double which Harner describes as having "a ghost with you always - another self." In a statement titled "punchline" (Roslyn Oxley Gallery, September, 1983) Frank refers to the "androgyny", of his self-

portraits somewhat as shamans draw human sexual organs on their costumes to 'sanctify' them, symbolizing a divine biunity. Frank too has androgynized male and female in his works of 1982-83. Ritual androgynization can also be seen in Frank's early performances of 1979, where he dressed as a female in a pale blue ball gown. Change of sex can also be seen in his painting *Self Portrait As A Woman And An Artist* (1983). Bodily transformation is also portrayed in an image of shamanistic descent, by engulfment or swallowing by human, animal or tunnel. Frank's *Self Portrait at 21 With Milk-Maids* (1983) contains three portraits 'swallowed' one inside the other.

Many shamans have a method of welcoming a spirit animal into their body by metamorphosing into an animal to travel to the underworld. In the drawing *The Beached Sperm Whale And His Affection To The Disinfected Onlooker An Art Moral* (1985) Frank seems to undergo a metamorphosis from penis to whale for an ecstatic journey to the oceanic underworld through the tunnel.

### The Cave and The Tunnel (11-12)

In his artist's statement at Roslyn Oxley Gallery, October, 1986, Frank noted his desire to "Visit the inner parts of the earth". As Eliade notes the process of entering a cave is also an important symbol of initiatory 'passage into another world' by which the shaman gains insight to 'meet their helping spirits', as in Frank's *The Evil Seepage And the Caveman* (1983). Joan Vastokas notes that "the concentric motif seems characteristic of the visionary experience itself and stands for the aperture through which the shaman penetrates the Underworld or sky".

Like many shamanic masks with "concentric circles radiating from a central void", Frank's drawings such as *Judgement The World The Fool* (1982) and *Sucker Dealer* (1991) seem to evoke journeys into the world above or below. An underground domain is also suggested in *Dorian's Eye To The Painter's Yellow Sea and Winter Willow (Therese's Pretty View In View Of The Rocky Palette* (1984), which commemorates the suicide of Frank's friend, Therese. This work depicts a view from Therese's grave, looking up to the sky. Eliade notes that some shamans 'who wish to become medicine men lie by graves'.

Ecstatic experiences involve initiation ceremonies of suffering, death and resurrection. Frank's performance *Closet: entombed, burial and*

*resurrection* (1979), in which he lay on the ground as if entombed in loosely-laid fire bricks which gradually fell off with his increased breathing, suggesting his own resurrection, compares with this process. Later works, such as the painting *Sour Love and The Ad of Buffalo Never Set an Esal - View From The Window* (1988) suggests the shaman's ecstatic travel between Earth and the Heavens on bridges, animals, the drum or the axis mundi which links Underworld, Earth and Sky in works such as *The Delusions of The Studio Fountain* (1985).

However, as Eliade specifies, the drum is often called the "sea," an image elaborated by Frank in works such as *The Sea And The Sore Eye* (1984), which depicts an 'exploding' water fountain, an axis mundi connecting sea and heaven in an ecstatic vision of ascension. Eventually, the shaman believes he transcends humanity through becoming one with God's light. *The Painting and The Process of God Looking Like a Painting From Murmansk* (1987) seems to offer a similarly beatific vision. Mystical images like this are, Evelyn Underhill writes, "lit by that strong light which is peculiar to visionary states". *The Painting (The Vicious Conspiracy)* (1984) depicts Frank himself as a God-like light shining out of the darkest void. This painting is one of Frank's most explicit references to a contemporary interpretation of the mystical, rapturous experience of becoming 'one' with his God. Writing in the *Scientific American* (1977) Ronald Siegel described this type of image of trance state experience as "a bright light in the center of the field of vision that allows images on the periphery to be observed." While this might be Frank's mystical union many of his images are of more negative experiences.

Mario Praz writes that 'true mysticism tends to the negation both of expression and of Art'. In turn, Evelyn Underhill suggests that mystics take up the 'imagery of negation'. Brian Turner, writing in *Religion and Social Theory* (1991) has also noted the relationship between criticism and mysticism. The process of the *via negativa* - may be defined as a journey into the mystery of Divinity and a way of experiencing divine darkness "by way of suffering and pain", and as such an "experience of immense spiritual depth and a source for a new birth", the *via positiva*. Frank more often seems to evoke the *via negativa*, which, in part approaches God by wiping one's mind clean of an 'entire culture'. Frank's "anti-aesthetic," appears to derive from a mystical point of view combined with a re-experiencing "of the creation mystics of the Middle Ages", crossing Postmodern ontological boundaries.

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