

Two Kinds of Mystical Art in the Age of Scientism

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Abstract. The article explores how mysticism resurges within modern, scientific culture, especially in art. Mysticism is defined as a tradition of direct, private union with “ultimate reality,” distinct from both secret esoteric teachings and institutional religious ritual. Historically rooted in medieval Christianity and transformed by Romanticism, modern mysticism emerges as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism and scientism. Scientism, grounded in empirical methods and the exclusion of the supernatural, delegitimizes mystical knowledge yet also provokes new mystical quests by generating a sense of spiritual emptiness and crisis of meaning. In art, the author distinguishes two forms of mysticism. One treats artworks as vehicles of transcendent knowledge about supernatural realities and thus directly collides with scientism’s epistemic limits. The other locates mysticism in the creative process and private experience without asserting ontological claims, making it more acceptable to scientism. However, this acceptance is purchased at the cost of weakening mysticism’s claim to genuine transcendence.

Keywords: Mysticism, Scientism, Mystical Art

1. Introduction

In recent times, with the rise of New Age and other intellectual trends, mysticism seems to have experienced a revival. Various mystical elements appear to have been revived in this scientific modern world. The public also seems to be showing interest and enthusiasm for mysticism. Within the realm of art, mysticism has flourished, manifesting itself in numerous artistic expressions. These manifestations are complex and raise the question of what exactly is the mystery? And how should we view mysticism?

This article will first introduce the current state and definition of mysticism in art. Next, this article will review the complex relationship between mysticism and scientism. Finally, this article will examine how two distinct manifestations of mysticism respond differently to the challenges posed by scientism.

2. What is mysticism

Mysticism refers to a unique spiritual tradition where individuals establish a connection with the “ultimate reality” through direct experience. Its core lies in pursuing a state of “mystical union” that transcends rational cognition, not entirely dependent on the transmission of secret knowledge or the guidance of specific rituals, but rather directly touching the essence of the universe through personal

spiritual awakening. This tradition differs both from esotericism, which requires initiation into secret teachings, and from systematized religious rituals. Mysticism emphasizes a private and direct transcendental experience, traces of which can be found in both Eastern Zen and Western spiritual traditions. According to Linda Henderson: “The sense of the hidden links occultism to esotericism, a word also used widely in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to such occult pursuits as alchemy, the Cabala, magic, astrology, Rosicrucianism, spiritualism, and Theosophy. Mysticism, on the other hand, is a more specific term defined in Webster's as 'the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality'” [1].

Existing research has explored the profound historical roots of mysticism [2]. Despite its current vitality, contemporary practices, such as Belgian artist Thierry De Cordier's 2010s NADA series, continue this tradition by constructing a poetic dialogue between matter and nothingness through pure black canvases. This work resonates with medieval Christian mysticism's use of matter as a vehicle for spirituality while embodying post-Enlightenment mysticism's modern shift: no longer bound by religious frameworks, it instead emphasizes, like Romanticism, the individual's direct experience of the transcendent. Yet its roots extend further back to pre-modern times. Taking medieval Christian mysticism as an example, this tradition developed a comprehensive system through religious art and spiritual literature. Pre-Enlightenment mysticism largely operated within religious frameworks, aiming to achieve union with the divine source through established rituals.

Many scholars note that modern mysticism, compared to its pre-Enlightenment counterpart, actually emerged as a response or reaction to Enlightenment thought and scientism [3]. Or, to put it another way, it is to some extent a continuation or extension of Romanticism, which refers to an artistic, intellectual, and literary movement that emphasized emotion, imagination, and the individual. Post-Enlightenment mysticism exhibits distinct characteristics and tendencies from its pre-Enlightenment counterpart. It represents an extension of Romanticism's emphasis on emotion, imagination, and subjective experience, serving as a counterpoint to the Enlightenment's advocacy of reason and scientism. These studies reveal that artistic creation and mystical experiences have always been profoundly intertwined. Images serve not only as vehicles for belief but also as conduits for achieving communion between humanity and the divine. This historical dimension provides crucial foundational insights for understanding mystical expressions in contemporary art.

Beyond this, some existing research has begun to note that mystic art can be further divided into two complementary dimensions [4]: one treats art as the direct vehicle for mystical knowledge, seeking to express the mystical object through artistic means. This form of mysticism appears to emphasize the resulting mystical artwork itself. The second-dimension centers on the subjective experience as an internal process, focusing on how individuals “reach” or “access” the mystical through contemplation or artistic creation, thereby transforming the entire artistic process into a mystical one. American philosopher William James, when talking about mysticism, stated that “defies expressionists quality must be directly experienced: it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.” [5], which emphasizes the subjective and private nature of such a mystical experience.

However, despite the scattered awareness among scholars that mystical art can be understood through the two distinct dimensions mentioned above, existing research on these dimensions remains severely lacking. Further examination of the various forms of mysticism will better help us understand the current development of mystical art and reflect on modern mysticism's response to scientism. In the next section, I will review the challenges scientism poses to mysticism.

3. Scientism and mysticism

To understand the characteristics of contemporary mysticism, one must first examine the critique of traditional mysticism, and indeed the entire religious tradition, by scientism since the Enlightenment. For a long time, scientism has not only been a critic of mysticism and mystical art, but as thinker Wassily Kandinsky [6] points out Scientism has also suppressed the focus on mysticism in the field of art studies, it has also suppressed scholarly attention to mysticism within the field of art studies. However, despite being a critic and challenger of mysticism, scientism's influence on mystical art has not only been one of brief suppression and marginalization. In fact, we can also observe that scientism has continuously stimulated the emergence of new forms of mysticism.

Scientism originated from the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the subsequent Enlightenment. During this period, science achieved monumental breakthroughs in physics, astronomy, and other fields, challenging the established framework of natural philosophy. More significantly, alongside the scientific revolution, Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Kant extended critical reflection from the scientific realm into philosophy and political science. They began re-examining the boundaries and nature of knowledge, and changing our understanding of both nature and society.

Compared to the intellectual traditions of the past, such as Aristotelianism, scientism not only emphasizes that we should regard the human reason as the highest authority but also fundamentally reshapes the entire epistemological landscape. Specifically, scientism regards induction, rather than traditional deduction, as the core of scientific reasoning. This shift resulted in scientism placing immense value on empirically grounded research based on experimentation. This, in turn, restricted the objects of knowledge to those amenable to empirical investigation. Consequently, scientism accepts only a limited range of natural objects that can be subjected to empirical inquiry as legitimate subjects of study, while excluding all supernatural knowledge beyond reason and experience from science. It even dismisses these knowledge as a relic of ignorance. This led to so called secularization, that is, the tendency to regard any attempt to recognize supernatural elements as superstition. Consequently, art and philosophy associated with religion and mysticism faced widespread rejection and denigration following the Enlightenment. This trend persists to nowadays.

Although scientism remains a dominant intellectual framework to this day and is regarded as one of the core elements of modernity, people gradually began to realize its problems as early as the early 19th century, immediately following the Enlightenment. For instance, nineteenth-century German Romantics and German Idealists raised dual dissatisfaction with scientism. On the one hand, its radical naturalistic and materialistic tendencies reduced the relationship between humanity and nature to pure instrumentalism and utilitarianism. As a result, Nature ceased to be a meaningful and ordered entity within the traditional epistemic landscape, becoming merely an accumulation of matter and resources. Humans could no longer cultivate any sense of belonging or intimacy toward such a nature. On the other hand, scientism also led people to understand society mechanistically and functionally, resulting in a fragmented tradition of isolated individualism and communal bonds. Philosopher Charles Taylor pointed out that, based on these two points, the framework through which humans recognize and feel the meaning of life ultimately becomes unstable. This is why the questioning and anxiety about the meaning of life became a unique symptom of modern humanity [7].

Beyond this, a widespread dissatisfaction directly targeted science's exclusion of supernatural knowledge. By excluding supernatural entities, including the Infinite or God, from the realm of cognition, the pursuit of union with the supreme perfect being and harmony with nature as a whole,

as sought in traditional philosophy and religion, naturally became impossible. Consequently, the positive tendencies of the Enlightenment immediately provoked opposition from a host of thinkers and artists. Romantics and certain German idealists employed pantheism as a tool to counter scientism and reestablish the place of supernatural knowledge within philosophy, religion, and art. As early as the late 18th century in Germany, the Pantheism Controversy swept through the cultural sphere, centered on whether the playwright Lessing was a pantheist and the relationship between pantheism and natural science. Evidently, a doctrine asserting God's omnipresence within all things and demanding direct intuitive grasp of the divine inevitably invited scientism's critique of mysticism. Finally, we should note that, modern mystical art largely continues this Romantic response to scientism. That is to say, it is a product stimulated by scientism itself.

Now, we can observe the complex relationship between scientism and mysticism. On one hand, scientism fundamentally rejects mysticism, viewing it as irrational thought and denying its validity. In an era dominated by scientism, the development of mysticism appears to have been strongly suppressed and marginalized. Yet on the other hand, prompted by reflections on the limitations of scientism, people have begun to re-explore mysticism as an alternative intellectual path, seeking to address the spiritual dilemmas that scientism has failed to resolve. Thus, scientism itself seems to have stimulated the emergence of new mysticism.

4. Two distinct types of mystical art

Returning to mystical art, mystical art can actually be divided into two categories. The first type serves as a vessel for mystical knowledge. This category of mystical art presupposes the existence of supernatural knowledge objects while emphasizing the ability to convey knowledge about these supernatural entities. Such art is rejected by scientism, which fundamentally denies the finitude of its knowledge objects and the legitimacy of its knowledge. It, in turn, opposes scientism. Artists employ symbolic visual language to convey mystical truths that transcend rational cognition and breach the boundaries of everyday experience. This creative approach rests upon a fundamental premise: a supernatural knowledge system exists independently of human perception. While inaccessible to scientific rationality, it can be accessed through specific cognitive pathways, such as art and intuitive mystical experiences. Guided by this conviction, artists believe artistic creation can serve as a pathway to recognize and communicate such supernatural truths. Take, for instance, Thierry De Cordier's NADA series from the 2010s, a prime example of modern mystical art. The core of this work lies in conveying a supernatural knowledge of "nothingness." Through the use of black canvases, the artist simulates a visual effect of "emptiness." This transcends mere abstraction; it represents the abolition and transcendence of the Christian cross imagery.

The second type of mystical art serves as a vessel for mystical experiences and sensations, emphasizing the creative process itself and its direct communication of inner feelings. This type of art does not seek to depict supernatural objects of cognition but instead focuses on the meditative states, that is, streams of consciousness, or emotional resonances generated during creation. Since it does not involve ontological claims about supernatural realities but it rather explores the boundaries of human experience solely at the psychological level, this form of mystical art does not directly clash with scientism like the first type. Specifically, this type of creation exhibits two distinct characteristics: First, it regards the creative process itself as a unique mode of cognition, emphasizing the ineffable experiential knowledge gained by the artist during the act of creation. Its focus lies not on the final symbols or representations presented, but on the physical, mental, and conscious states present during creation. Through the manipulation of actions and materials, the process of the artwork's birth is also given by the artist with subjective symbolism or meaning.

Secondly, within this mysticism that emphasizes subjective experience and the creative process, there also exists a private, author-centric creative journey. To be specific, in certain unique creative processes, the author imbues specific stages with symbolic, supra-rational meanings and connotations. However, since these creative processes are not directly visible or known in the final artwork, the symbolic and mystical meanings imbued during creation remain confined solely to the artist's subjective experience. When presented to other viewers, the work does not seem to bear the function of conveying esoteric knowledge, especially when the creative process itself remains undisclosed. In fact, even when the creative process is revealed and explored, viewers can largely only recognize that the artist possesses a specific intention, without truly being able to determine or grasp what that intention actually is. This constitutes a form of private mysticism.

Importantly, unlike the first category of mystical art that focuses on expressing the object of cognition, the second category of artistic creation does not need to be involved in the ontological debates that whether gods, souls, or other supernatural entities truly exist behind these mystical experiences. Artists concentrate solely on how to generate this intense, extraordinary personal sensation itself. This strategy of anchoring mystical experiences within the realm of human perception allows the works to evoke transcendent feelings while at the same time, it doesn't directly conflicting with scientific rationality.

5. The challenges between mysticism and scientism

In the second section of this article, we discussed how mysticism has faced questioning and criticism from scientism since modern times. However, the two types of mystical art mentioned above appear to encounter different circumstances when they confronted with scientism.

First, it must be noted that a complex relationship exists between these two forms of mysticism. On the one hand, they may overlap together. An artist might believe both that art can convey mystical messages as the content and that the creative process itself constitutes a psychic experience as the process. On the other hand, they may also be distinct. Depicting transcendent subjects does not necessarily require a mystical creative process. Likewise, a mystical creative process does not necessarily express transcendental objects of knowledge. Moreover, the first type of mystical art, which focused on expressing transcendent objects of knowledge, often affirms not only the reality of these transcendent objects but also the reality of knowledge or perception of them. In contrast, mystical art centered on the mystical creative process and experience need not insist on the reality of transcendent objects. It requires only the affirmation of the mystical nature of its own creative process and artistic experience. Such subjective processes and experiences are actually neither verifiable nor falsifiable.

The first type of content-related mysticism is ambitious, that is it attempts to directly depict the concrete features of another transcendental world. This amounts to challenging the very authority science have held since the Enlightenment to define the boundaries of knowledge. When artists claim their works reveal divine forms or supernatural dimensions, these subjects themselves are entirely beyond the grasp of empirical science. This creates a fundamental clash with the positivist principles of scientism, often leading to accusations of superstition or overactive imagination. No matter how captivating these objects of superstition or imagination may be, the subjects they depict remain, from a scientific perspective, unverifiable and thus devoid of reality and objectivity. Consequently, it is predictable that this form of mysticism, much like its pre-Enlightenment counterparts, would face fierce resistance and criticism from scientism.

Mysticism focused on creative experience, however, faces a relatively milder reception. Since it concerns only the artist's subjective feelings and the inner experience of the creative process,

without claiming to reveal objective supernatural entities, scientists would find it difficult to falsify personal inner feelings and thus often tolerate its existence. As we saw in James's discussion of mystical experiences, although the object of the mystical experience is suspended, the authenticity of the mystical experience itself is difficult to doubt. Regarding the two core elements of this mysticism, the artist's private creative process and the mystical creative experience, science may offer its own rational explanations. Yet it cannot question the reality of this private process or the mystical nature of the experience in the same way it challenges the authenticity of its depicted subjects. Consequently, the clash between this mystical art and scientism may be relatively mild.

However, this moderate stance carries limitations: First, when artists center their work on ineffable private experiences, the communicative impact is often limited, viewers may fail to perceive the mystical sensations the artist experienced during creation, creating a fundamental barrier to artistic communication. Second, if the reality of transcendent objects is denied, the very reason why the mysterious creative process and experience in the second category of mystical art are considered mysterious seems open to question. For, as we noted at the beginning, mysticism is mysticism precisely because it pursues transcendental knowledge, not merely because it is unique or private. Finally, this type of art often struggles to fully detach itself from underlying beliefs in supernatural realities. Despite emphasizing the focus on mystical processes and experiences, it invariably attempts to imply that such experiences carry implications beyond themselves, that they can offer insights into knowledge objects beyond the boundaries of science.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, in this article, I first reviewed the complex relationship between mysticism and scientism and pointed out that, since the Enlightenment, although mysticism has been rejected and suppressed by scientism in various fields, new forms of mysticism have nevertheless been continually stimulated as a response and reaction to scientism. I then argued that, in the realm of art, mysticism can in fact be identified in two distinct forms. One emphasizes treating mystical artworks as vehicles for transcendental knowledge, while the other focuses primarily on the subjective creative feelings and mystical experiences involved in mysticism. Finally, I suggested that different types of mystical art find themselves in different situations when confronting scientism. Although mystical art that seeks transcendental knowledge and transcendental objects is subjected to strong rejection and criticism from scientism, a form of mystical art that emphasizes subjective experience is much more likely to be tolerated by scientism, since it does not violate the boundaries of knowledge as defined by science. Yet this greater tolerance is to some extent gained at the cost of sacrificing mysticism's own mysterious character.

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