Rothko's Tears[1]

Marike Steeman[2]

Summary
The color field paintings of the American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko (1903–1970) which he called ‹human dramas › have deeply moved many viewers. Finally, after a lengthy process, when Rothko was already in his 60s, they were shown in special rooms and even in a chapel. The author of this article applies Transference Focused Psychotherapy (TFP) based on object relations and attachment theories to understand Rothko's work and its effect on people. Rothko's early traumatic childhood probably gave rise to the primary defense of splitting we can see and feel in the countertransference through projective identification. Therefore, we can understand why viewers identify with the vulnerable beauty and some of them even cry in front of Rothko’s color fields.

KEYWORDS: ABSTRACT ART, COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, OBJECT RELATIONS, ROTHKO, TFP, SPLITTING

Introduction
Looking at art puts us in direct contact with (un)conscious feelings and/or or experiences of our own and those of the artist. It provides insight into the inner world,the psychology of people in general. For psychotherapists who work from a psychoanalytic perspective, art can contribute to an understanding of patients, through parallel transference phenomena. Miller (2011) writes in his article about Morandi that works of art can enrich psychoanalysis and promote ‹ analytic listening ›. One’s own associations and reflections, also on the painting techniques, can make the artist's creative process visible, even if we know little about his or her background. Hagman (2010) speaks of the artwork as an externalized subject, driven by the power of attachment.

Art expressions are not just sublimated manifestations of repressed material with intrapsychic symbolism as considered in classical psychoanalysis. Works of art pre-eminently are relational and interpersonal. As a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and by passing through the Academy of Fine Arts at a later stage of my life I became interested in the work of artists with a recognizable handwriting and a visible creative process, such as Mondrian, Morandi and Rothko about whom I presented papers at the annual Psy Art Conferences. In this article I discuss the work of the American immigrant Mark Rothko (1903-1970), born in a Jewish liberal intellectual family, in Dvinsk (in Russia by

[1] This article is adapted from presentations on Rothko at the 32th Psy Art conference in Reims in 2016, at the ESSPD congress in Vienna, 2016, and the 2018 IFP World Congress of Psychotherapy 2018 in Amsterdam.

[2] drs. MAB (Marike) Steeman is psychoanalytic psychotherapist, teacher & supervisor TFP, member NVPP, ISTFP, chair of TFP Nederland and director of the Psy Art Foundation.

then), the present Daugavpils in Latvia. How did he arrive at his abstract color fields, by which some people are moved to tears?

Since I have been trained in TFP, Transference Focused Psychotherapy (Yeomans et al. 2015) since the 1990s, I thought it would be interesting to understand that question from the point of view of object-relational thinking and transference. TFP has been developed for people with identity diffusion, emotion regulation and interpersonal problems due to a borderline personality organization (BPO). These treatments are intensive due to the highly polarized images that the patient has of himself and the other, connected to intense conflicting affects. This made me to see the origin of art not only in terms of 'higher defenses', sublimation and projection, but also in relation to primitive defense mechanisms, splitting and projective identification (Klein 1946; Kernberg 2018).

Understanding art from object-relational thinking and transference

I try to apply the key elements and principles of TFP to understand Rothko's work and its effect on the viewer. Internalized object relationships from early life with early attachment figures are the building blocks of one's personality. They often repeat themselves in adult life and are staged directly in the transference in the therapeutic relationship. They unfold in the form of object-relational dyads (Caligor et al. 2018; Yeomans 2006). Such a dyad is the combination of the actual self-image and the actual image of the other, linked by (intense) affect. In TFP the patient's transference and the therapist's countertransference reactions are the main channel of communication, the entrance for inquiry and attempted understanding. The visual artist and his object (painting, sculpture) also form a dyad with related affects.

In looking at art, in this case Rothko's work, I will use the same method as in TFP sessions: standing still and experiencing affects and possible confusing countertransference reactions, and then tracing the dominant and possible underlying object-relational dyad. In TFP we assume that behind the (dominant) object relationship that becomes visible in the here and now, another internalized relationship can be hidden. This is depicted in the diagram ‹ a dyad defending against its opposite › (Yeomans 2015, p. 70). If one dyad is active, and for example negatively charged with aggression, the opposite dyad, libidinally laden, is split and therefore unconscious.

A well-known example is a very angry ‹ abandoned › patient and a ‹ unavailable › therapist (who has to reschedule a session e.g. because of an emergency), with an underlying intense desire for nurturing, which is denied and evokes fear. In this case, the patient sees himself as entitled to an ideal, ever-present perfect ‹parent ›. Then follows the investigation of the different representations in an enactment and which roles are visible at that moment. Another starting point of TFP is that the persons in a dyad can switch positions: an internalized object relation is evoked by a certain trigger, such as abandonment or insult. So who gets what role in the dyad depends on such a trigger and on what is projected or split at that moment. Therefore the countertransference remains the most important source of information in particular in relation to early defense mechanisms (Kernberg 2018; Yeomans et al. 2015).

Countertransference is viewed as the sum total of emotional responses to a patient's transference, the projector (P). Analogous to Racker (1957), TFP distinguishes two forms of countertransference. Concordant countertransference is the empathy or identification with P's subjective affect, the self-experience of that moment. Here the therapist senses what P himself (consciously or not) experiences. In complementary

countertransference, the therapist feels what the other, the part-object of P in the activated dyad, is experiencing.

The therapist identifies with that projected internal object, because P himself cannot bear ot contain it. It is split (dissociated), and P experiences it as not his or hers. If P sees and treats the therapist as that part-self, the therapist begins to feel as such. This is because the therapist picks up strong signals through behaviour and nonverbal or verbal expression of P (the two other sources of information).

This intense countertransference reaction is often a signal for the primitive defense splitting (Kernberg 2018), in this case ‹ projective identification › (Klein 1997) and denial. If there are more developed defenses, such as repression, there can be ‹ more ordinary › projections, where the emotional response is much less intense for both the projector and the receiver. Finally, the countertransference can, of course, be determined by the reality of the therapist, such as a recent death of a loved one, or unresolved conflicts (Yeomans et al. 2015).

From this perspective I view the work of the artist Rothko, who has projected his inner world onto the canvas. It is an experiment to take transference phenomena and object relations as an entrance in order to understand a particular painting and his work in general. I will therefore also use the general ‹ channels of communications › of TFP (Yeomans et al. 2015; Caligor et al. 2018): ‹ (counter) transference ›, explained in detail above, ‹ non-verbal ›, photos of the painter, the images and his painting techniques, and ‹ verbal ›, titles of Rothko's paintings, and books by and about him.

Annotation

Personal preference and certain sensitivities when looking at art naturally lead to differences in experience. I remember well that in 2015 I visited the large Rothko exhibition in The Hague with three of my sisters. At the distance of fifty cm determined by Rothko, all four of us had a different experience of one of Rothko's dark Colorfields: from ‹ falling in ›, receding, experiencing the beauty, up to seeing soberly a large window at night. I myself was fascinated, standing too close by, to see how he technically had achieved those effects.

The question is whether it is ethical to make psychological interpretations about someone without permission and without having established a professional relationship with that person. The American Psychoanalytic Association (apsaA) gives more scope than the APA (psychiatry) to use the theory of psychoanalytic disorders for the purpose of ‹ understanding a wide range of political, artistic, cultural ... and other phenomena › (Park 2018). In this article I will start from my personal countertransference reactions and use my TFP knowledge, insight and experiences for the benefit of a psychoanalytic perspective on art appreciation. The working method based on object relations and transference-countertransference could serve as a source for, for example, more insight into trauma and defense mechanisms. Like Miller (2011), I think that an interdisciplinary approach can enrich diverse fields.

The influence of Rothko's childhood experiences

Starting from object relations theory, it is relevant to know something about Rothko's childhood years, which were unstable and insecure. They are seen as traumatic by several authors (Breslin 1998; Cohen-Solal 2014; Turco 2002). The Russian persecution of the Jews in 1905 made his father, Jacob Rothkowitz, pharmacist and Jewish political leader, to suddenly become less liberal. Marcus, a latecomer in the family of four, was the only one to receive a strict Jewish upbringing. When Marcus was 7 years old, father

left for relatives in Portland (United States). The emigration of the rest of the family followed two and three years later. Mother was the last to leave, with the 10-year-old Marcus and his oldest sister. That same year Rothko's father died of colon cancer.

Despite these turbulent first ten years of his life, Rothko performed well in school. He graduated cum laude and received a scholarship to Yale University. He enrolled in the Faculty of Arts with electives in history, psychology and philosophy. But as a Jewish immigrant, Rothko felt left out among the elite white Protestant students. Nevertheless, he engaged in political debates and founded a newspaper with a few fellow students. When after two years he no longer received a scholarship, he stopped his studies. He restlessly travelled back and forth between the Jewish community in Portland, where among other activities he took acting lessons in the city of New York. In 1925 he temporarily followed a design course.

His passion for painting began when he visited a friend at the Art Students League of New York. Rothko, who had drawn before, then decided to become an artist. He enrolled in drawing classes and later took painting lessons with Max Weber, another Jewish immigrant. Although Rothko struggled with authorities, Weber was an important father figure to him (Breslin 1998; Cohen-Solal 2014). In order to examine how and to what extent Rothko's life and personality, and art movements at that time, have influenced his work, I will walk chronologically along a few paintings.

Figurative work, in the thirties and forties

Rothko never felt at home in the United States. He refused to integrate and always remained angry about the migration from Russia. The Subway series can serve as an illustration of these experiences. Rothko shows images of the New York underground (see, for example, Subway scene, 1938; Subway, 1939; and Underground fantasy, 1936). We see tall, thin people, alone, introverted, who almost coincide with the pillars. You can identify with the Jewish outsider Rothko, with his desire to fit in (concordant countertransference). Rothko had read Freud's Interpretation of dreams and here he paints the ‹ underworld › as a symbol for the unconscious (Breslin 1998). The warm earth tones in the series may enhance feelings of melancholy. The dominant object relationship here seems to be a withdrawn self-representation and a ‹ protective › object connected with a desire for connection. Possibly there still is a warded off dyad in the expression of the thin emaciated figures in that ‹ chilly › metro (complementary countertransference), connected with anger. This may be related to earlier rejection and insult, amplified by the anti-Semitism of the time.

Some years before, Rothko created Bathers/Beach scene (1934). We see three naked women on the beach. The title may evoke beautiful images, but Rothko's naked bodies are depicted crudely and out of proportion. They don't look attractive. The dark use of color and the rough paint strokes contradict. The dominant object relation appears to be a negative image that Rothko may have of women, associated with feelings of disgust and anger (concordant countertransference). The contradiction between the content and what is depicted suggests an underlying dyad. The complementary desire for closeness is warded off by dissociation or denial: ‹a dyad defending against its opposite›. Experiences of beauty originate in the early mother-child relationship, from an aesthetic creative self that artists unconsciously draw from. Violations of these aesthetic experiences are felt in the transference as ‹ ugliness › (Hagman 2010).

The early work Family (1936) leads us to other projected object relations. The painting shows a mother, father and baby, painted in soft yellow, ocher and red. At first glance a nice picture, the mother with open arms showing or giving the baby to the

father. The baby is depicted in the midst of light, like ‹ his majesty the baby ›, as Freud called this narcissistic position. Partly due to the warm color palette, you can identify with Rothko's desire for connection and harmony (concordant countertransference). At the same time, the image looks strange. Both the attitude of the mother, with her far too long arms, and her eyes, mouth and gaze distort the picture. The image of the ‹ good › mother, as a mask, feels fake. In addition we see an intimate moment of the baby touching the father. But his face is empty and resembles a mask too. The decor in the background gives the impression of a scene on stage.

The confusing self and object representations are distorted and give conflicting transference reactions, both concordant and complementary. Primitive idealization as an early defense may be the case, whereby the ideal image is simultaneously ‹ violated ›.

Rothko painted various seated women. They rarely look happy, rather angry, such as Seated woman with crossed legs (c. 1935), which, as in Bathers, is painted roughly and with a coarse brush. This is different with the small panel Seated woman (1930). The image comes across as a vulnerable, unattainable female object, where you can see the painter himself as a watching, also vulnerable, withdrawn self. The woman's eyes are striking. Two black painted rounds, dark holes as an expression of fear or emptiness? In her attitude there is disappointment, sadness and impotence. Her mouth, a crooked smudge, evokes bitterness. The hands are large and are hanging motionless and useless. Do they want to touch or be touched? In most places the pigments are very transparent, and here and there the lines are drawn quickly.
If you know Rothko's story, whose mother was a strong woman without much affection (Breslin 1998), you may be touched by this unattainable vulnerable female figure. This small panel between all those large canvases gave an extra effect of fragility at the retrospective exhibition in The Hague.

In Breslin (1998, fig. 4) Rothko's mother is depicted in a family photo taken in Dvinsk after father had already left for the United States. We see her as Breslin described her: a sturdy introverted woman. Marcus sits on the floor as a 9-year-old, a seriously unhappy-looking boy with a book on his lap. He holds on to the leg of a table. Next to him we see a cheerful nephew with a completely different appearance. Marcus, according to his older brother, was a fragile, sensitive child who was often ill (Breslin 1998). In Rothko's well-known self-portrait Selfportrait (1936), Rothko's eyes have the same black circles as in the aforementioned Seated woman (1930), albeit behind glasses. Turco (2002) speaks of identifications with mother, the internalization of her suffering, also his own suffering, and longing for the mother from whom he has to separate at the same time. In this self-portrait we see a sturdy man standing straight with a thick, almost square coat, a distinguished aloof artist.

This self-portrait also seems to be a part self-representation of father Jacob Rothkowitz, the then prominent leader in the Jewish community. Rothko later always spoke with reverence of his father, ‹ a man of great character, great intelligence › (Breslin 1998). As a child, Marcus probably looked up to his father, but that idealized image was flawed, for example when the same initially liberal father suddenly sent 4-year-old Marcus to a strict Jewish-Orthodox school. There he had to change clothes and study the Talmud (Breslin 1998; Cohen-Solal 2014). Not much later, due to pogroms during the revolution, father abandoned him out of ‘necessity’ by leaving for the United States. And when father suddenly died shortly after the family reunion in Portland, it all had a major impact on the development of Rothko's identity. In Selfportrait, the tight posture and the heavy coat are contradicted by a vulnerable side. In close-up, the sleeve and shirt become so transparent that the linen, the skin of the painting, becomes visible.

According to Hagman (2010), in this way the distance is bridged to, as it were, skin contact.

According to Hagman (2010), an artist's creation arises from an unconscious search for experiences of beauty and wholeness, rooted in the child's early attachment to the mother. If the artist knows how to create such an ‹ aesthetic experience ›, the viewer can identify with that experience. In Seated woman with crossed legs (ca. 1935), in Untitled/Bathers (1934) and somewhat in Family (1936) you also see the other side of beauty, the ‹ experience of ugliness › that leads to the disruption of harmony and the ideal (Hagman 2010).

Transition

Around 1939-1940 Rothko stops painting. The threat of the Second World War in Europe grabs him. After a number of breakups his first marriage came to an end in 1938 and led to a depression. He doubts his artistry, again immerses himself in philosophy and psychology, and writes about his dilemmas as an artist. In the eighties unfinished critical, often cynical essays from that time were found by his children. Much later, Rothko's son Christopher published them after ordering in book form: The artist's reality (Rothko 2004).

The Second World War had a major influence on other New York avant-garde artists too. From then on, art had to be detached from personal anecdotes and merely express universal human suffering in a world of war and violence. They were inspired by Greek mythology. Rothko's motive became ‹ to evoke the extremes like ecstasy and destruction › (Rothko 2006). In Rothko's The Omen (1943) about terror and vulnerability, we see a screaming dominant figure facing a receding female figure, apparently protecting a child. Rothko now calls his paintings ‹ dramas, the tragedy of humanity ›.

In several statements his black-and-white thinking is striking: ‹ Without Monsters and Gods, we cannot enact our human drama, otherwise we will sink into melancholy › (Chave 1989; Baal-Thesuva 2010). In the view of Rothko and his contemporaries, Jung fits better than Freud: no personal stories. To access general archetypes, Rothko experiments with ‹ automatic drawing › by running pen and hand thoughtlessly over the paper. He uses horizontal lines or planes to indicate divisions between the conscious and the unconscious (Breslin 1998). These so-called surrealist works with amoeba-like, biomorphic imagery (e.g. Sea fantasy, 1946; and Hierarchical birds, 1944) probably also feature Rothko's own "monsters", as split part-self representations associated with early fears and aggression.

Multiforms in the 40s

When Rothko's mother died in 1948, he became depressed again. For months he visits the Moma almost every day to study The Red Studio by Matisse (1911). He is not interested in the images in Matisse's work, because he feels they should be removed: ‹ The familiar identity of things had to be pulverized in order to destroy the infinite associations … › (Rothko 2006). However, he is fascinated by the way in which Matisse painted the background (Baal-Teshuva 2010; Breslin 1998). And so the most important transition took place in Rothko's work: the ‹ multiforms ›. He blurs or omits recognizable objects.

This leads to several flat shapes, different in size, with ‹ smeared › edges. Flat surfaces had to remove all illusion and only reveal authentic emotions (Blotkamp 1994; Chave 1989; Rothko 2006). Like his fellow artists, Rothko henceforth designated his work by numbers or ‹ untitled › (e.g. Untitled, 1948; No. 18, 1948; Untitled, 1949). Influenced by

primitive art and the lessons Rothko taught Jewish children for years, he saw colored forms as living subjects, bearers of feelings, performers in an empty space (Baal-Teshuva 2010; Breslin 1998). Yet Rothko was unable to express himself exclusively in form and color without content.

In the year of his mother's death he paints Number 10 (1948). In the loose forms we can see a body, a head and breasts; a large overwhelming black-gray human figure, painted on earth tones. We see some yellow and pink areas that, like the background, contrast with the dark, monstrous figure. Based on Rothko's view, shapes as carriers of feelings, the warm-toned particles may have another meaning than the predominant dark figure. In relation to the deceased mother, this image could represent an aggressive-laden dominant object relationship projected by an angry and frightened abandoned child. His mother's death led not only to his depression, but also to his first multiforms.

In those multiforms Chave (1989) discovered several ‹ objects › in the form of various figures, sometimes from Rothko's earlier work. She perceived object representations, such as two parents with a child in between (Chave 1989, p. 170). Until 1950, Rothko painted many large canvases with these multiforms in all colours: chaotic, complex but at the same time painting-technically quite balanced canvases with performers, as actors on a stage (Baal-Teshuva 2010; Clearwater 1986). His aim was only to convey a wide range of human emotions in close contact with the viewer. ‹ My work is not abstract ›, said Rothko (2006), ‹ it lives and breathes ›. Just like Cubism, abstract expressionism arose partly in opposition to traditional realistic art and cultural norms about aesthetics. That would stand in the way of the development of the creativity of artists and of new art forms. Harmony and wholeness were replaced by conflict and disintegration (Hagman 2010). This led to several new movements.

In 1952 the Moma exhibited the Fifteen Americans, including Rothko, Pollock and Clifford Still. Meanwhile Rothko had left his New York avant-garde group and abstract expressionism behind. His meaningful friendship with Still broke up in an atmosphere of rivalry. He expressed his aversion to movements such as action painting and pop art. For example, once he refused to shake Andy Warhol's hand (Breslin 1998).

Color Fields, 1950s

Rothko felt more connected to Barnett Newman, who, like him, opted for a meditative vision of abstract art. Together they wrote a manifesto that laid the foundation for the color field painting (Chave 1989). Rothko's transition to his ‹ colorfields › was an organic proces. He further abstracted his multiforms into two or three rectangular color fields placed on top of each other (e.g. Untitled no 21, 1949; Untitled, 1950; No 10, 1950). He built up these surfaces in many transparent thinned layers of paint with pure pigments. In this way he created large, powerful rectangular areas of color, the edges of which he deliberately made soft, misty and smooth. As a result, the surfaces give the effect of movement, as if they just do not touch each other.

With these now famous color fields, Rothko wanted to create an active, almost physical relationship between the viewer and the painting (Chave 1989). He therefore instructed gallery owners and museums about the light in the galleries and about the height of the works. It had to be possible to view a painting from half a meter away. Only then could people experience that they would be drawn into the color fields ‹ to participate in their movement and thus transcend the boundaries of human existence … › (Rothko 2004). He received negative reviews, because journalists found his work vague and elusive. Nevertheless, he made his breakthrough with these color fields from

the 1950s and exhibited all over the world. This fame resulted in a number of commissions, such as a dozen paintings for the Seagram Building in Manhattan.

But after a conflict with the clients — the works turned out to be for the luxury restaurant The Four Seasons — Rothko became frustrated because he didn't want to create a decoration for the elite. The deeper meaning of his work would be lost. After a few canvases he distanced himself from the project and traveled to Europe with his second wife Mell and their daughter Kate. There he was so fascinated by ancient temples and chapels that when he went home to New York he returned the commission and bail (Breslin 1998). He did, however, make several similar canvases in dark tones, realizing that he had actually been painting temples and chapels for quite some time (e.g. Four darks in red, 1958; Red on maroon, 1959; and Black on dark sienna on purple, 1960). Cohen-Solal (2014) calls them ‹ echoes of the Talmud ›, the roots of his Jewish background.

After his father's death, as an 11-year-old boy, Rothko went to the synagogue every day for one year but thereafter he never returned. In paintings intended for Harvard University, Rothko added signs and symbols that revived his long-denied Jewish background. Both the temple-like Seagram murals (1958-1960) and the dark Harvard series show that he internalizes his Jewish roots and identifications with his father.

A dark Rothko Chapel and light paperwork

Rothko's last commission actually became a chapel, a place of reflection for all denominations, the Rothko Chapel (1968-1970) in Houston. The walls consist of a series of flat monochrome paintings. Rothko was often secretive about his layered painting techniques, but despite the dark colors and the tight frame, they have the same absorbing effect as his earlier bright color fields. According to the visitors, it is like walking into the depths, through which a mysterious light vibrates. Rothko once asked a museum director in England to turn off the lights in the room with his dark-tinted paintings in the twilight of sunset. Both were delighted by the <mysterious> light that began to emanate from the canvases (Breslin 1998).

But the recognition and fame that Rothko had achieved gave him neither peace nor satisfaction. He did not witness the opening of the Rothko Chapel in 1971. In 1970 he took his own life with alcohol, an overdose of medication and cutting both arms. A year earlier, during an escalating argument with his wife Mell, he had left the family with two children behind and moved into his atelier. He had started a relationship with a 40-year-old girlfriend (Breslin 1998). Rothko had been a drinker for a long time, he was a chain smoker, and throughout his life he had struggled with recurrent depressions, binge eating, and tantrums, which affected his relationships (Breslin 1998; Clearwater 1986; Turco 2002).

The Kernberg group defines self-destructive behavior and suicidality seen as problematic aggression regulation, where object relations with both victim and perpetrator identifications are active, linked to fear and aggression. Underlying, but dissociated, ‹ a dyad defending against its opposite ›, there is the desire for an idealized parent object. This splitting from a paranoid schizoid position (Klein 1997) often is related to insecure attachment, early trauma, or serious regression during a major life crisis. Positive libidinal laden and negative aggressive laden internal self-objectrelations are separated (Caligor et al. 2018; Kernberg 2018; Yeomans et al. 2015). More specifique, they are dissociated: when one is active, the other one is unconscious.

Finally
Due to Rothko's depression and suicide, it is often thought that he only painted gloomy canvases with a dark palette in the last years of his life. But during the last two years before his death he also made opposing subtle pastel-tinted works on paper, the so-called Paperworks (1969-1970) (Baal-Teshuva 2010; Clearwater 1986). In the BBC's 2000 documentary Rothko's Rooms, these fragile works are referred to as ‹ giant whispers ›. I found that name very appropriate and it can be understood as a libidinal laden dyad of a child who in the dark is softly calling for his mother or father who does not come, connected with fear, sadness and longing. Rothko wanted people to be close to his work, to meet ‹ a general human need for intimacy and humanity › (Chave 1989; Rothko 2015). In this sense, his search for painting techniques on ‹ the skin › of the canvas almost literally seemed like a metaphor for that desire, coupled with early symbiotic experiences in parent-child interaction, potentially moving viewers to tears.

* This article is adapted from presentations on Rothko at the 32th Psy Art conference in Reims in 2016, at the ESSPD congress in Vienna, 2016, and the 2018 IFP World Congress of Psychotherapy 2018 in Amsterdam.
** drs. MAB Steeman is psychoanalytic psychotherapist, teacher & supervisor TFP, member NVPP, ISTFP, chair of TFP Nederland and director of the Psy Art Foundation.

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