

DAT Minor
Theory and Philosophy



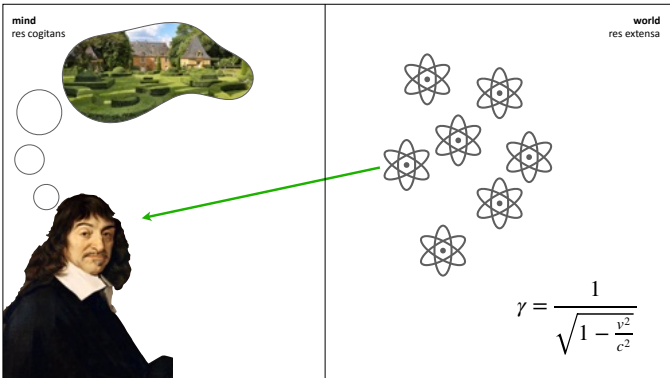
Part 4: Jena
The emergence of romanticism as a
result of the French Revolution

In this small presentation we will talk a bit about the French Revolution. We will see that this led to a fundamental change in worldview, which in turn led to a counter movement in the city of Jena, Germany.

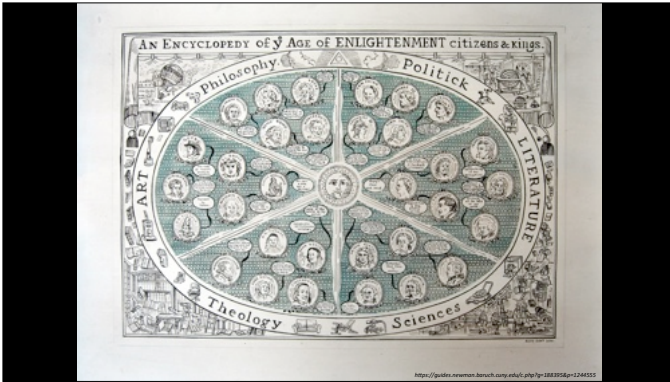


introduction: the metric system

By means of introduction, we will look at what the scientist of the French Revolution tried to accomplish.



We have already seen that René Descartes divided reality in two realms: the realm of reality (physics, mathematics, quantities) and the realm of the mind (personality, experiences, qualities). His ideas catapulted the search for truth in a more scientific manner – an era which led to the Enlightenment.



The Age of Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural movement of 18th century Europe which emphasized reason, logic and freedom of thought to reform society. It brought the thinkers of the day such as Locke, Newton, Voltaire and Rousseau into conflict with the political and religious establishment. The French Revolution is considered both the epitome and the end of this era.



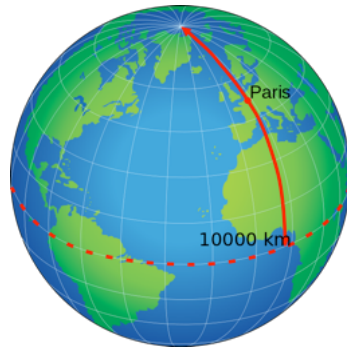
At the time, people wanted to classify *everything*, to measure *everything*, to know and control *everything*. The Encyclopédie of Diderot and d'Alambert, that we have seen earlier, is a good example of this. It is most famous for representing the thought of the Enlightenment. According to Diderot, the Encyclopédie's aim was "to change the way people think" and to allow people to inform themselves. Diderot himself hoped that the Encyclopédie would disseminate a vast amount of knowledge to present and future generations.

Different objects were measured using different methods: some in paces, others in cubits or feet. Some measurements lacked physical objectivity. Land was measured according to the number of working days. Furthermore, measurements varied from one parish to another. In some markets, two or three weight systems were used simultaneously for measuring wheat.

On mesurait des objets différents avec des mesures différentes: les uns en pas, d'autres en coudées ou en pieds. Certaines mesures n'avaient pas d'objectivité physique. On mesurait la terre en fonction du nombre de journées de travail. Par ailleurs les mesures variaient d'une paroisse à l'autre. Sur certains marchés, on utilisait simultanément deux à trois systèmes de poids pour la mesure du blé.

(Flichy 1991, p.25; trans: chatGPT)

And it was necessary – particularly in France. A lot of different measuring systems were in use, e.g. even on the same market two systems were used to measure the amount of wheat that someone bought.



In 1791 the commission originally defined the metre based on the size of the earth, equal to one ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the North Pole.

Humboldt stood present when, in the drizzle on a small grassland, the last piece of the longitude was measured that connected Paris with the North Pole. When it was done, the attendees took off their head and shook each other's hands.

One ten-millionth of the distance would be cast into metal and form the basis of all future measurements. They wanted to call it 'the meter'.

(Kehlmann 2006, p.34, trans: BB)

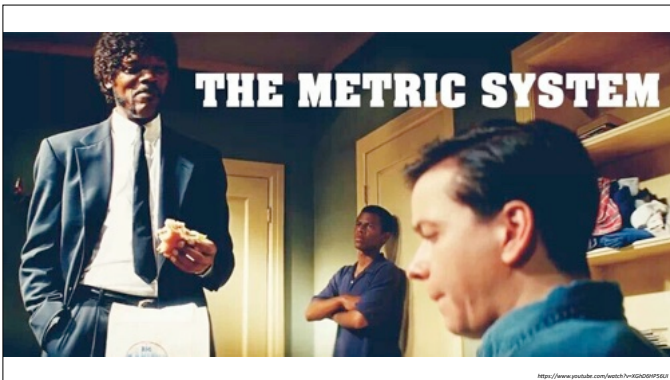
The meter as as basis for everything that could be measured. One tenth of a meter cubed would be a litre. One litre of water would weight one kilogram. To raise one kilogram of water from 14.5°C to 15.5°C one would need thousand Joule.



We also see this emphasis on rationality and measurability reflected in the architecture of the period. Neoclassical architecture emerged in the mid-18th century, drawing inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman designs. This style emphasizes symmetry, proportion, and simplicity.



So the famous dictum of the French Revolution (Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité) can also be thought of as Rationalité, Simplicité, Universalité.



There's a well-known scene in Pulp Fiction that reflect the difference between the Metric System and the Imperial System still in use in the US (and a few other countries).



This radical focus on calculability and rationality led to a philosophical contra-movement that came to life in a small village near Weimar, in the German landlock-state of Thuringia.



We have already seen that this focus led some thinkers to wonder about the value of the other effects of human endeavour. Specifically, we saw that this has led to the invention of 'aesthetics': the study of the truths that are delivered through our senses (as opposed to the more general truths discovered by science and mathematics).



In 1774, the poet and writer Johann Goethe had published a small novel about a young man (Werther) and his obsessed love for the beautiful Lotte. This very famous book (called the first German best-seller) talks about something that the scientific method cannot explain, cannot accommodate; yet something that every individual feels – feelings such as longing, imagination, love, solitude, or nature.

René Descartes



How can we know the world?

Immanuel Kant



What are the conditions for knowledge

Johann Fichte



What is the role of the 'I', the observer?

We have already seen how Descartes made the individual the foundation of certainty (not tradition or masters, but only the things you yourself are certain of). There is a direct line from Descartes to another famous thinker, Immanuel Kant. His work circles around the question of the *conditions* of knowledge. Reacting to Kant, the now mostly forgotten but at the time immensely popular thinker Johann Fichte made the suggestion that the subject is not only the foundation for certainty, but that he actually *actively constitutes* the world of experience.

This means that subjectivity becomes a productive power, that imagination

gains philosophical dignity and that inwardness becomes world-forming.



In May 1794 Fichte arrived in Jena as somewhat of a philosophical super star. His lectures on the 'Ich' (the 'I') attracted such persons as Goethe (who lived in the nearby Weimar), the poet Novalis, and the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, among many others.



But most importantly, his lectures were also attended by Karoline Michaelis, the wife of Friedrich Schlegel.



As was custom for rich and intellectual women of the time, she organized so-called *salons*: intellectual gatherings where people read and discussed poetry, artworks and philosophy. True to the dictum of Horatius: *aut delectare aut prodesse* (either to please or to educate).

Her salons were attended by the same group of people that followed Fichte's lectures. Inspired by this, the discussions circled around questions concerning belonging, freedom, subjectivity, and education. Because if it is the I itself that creates the reality, doesn't that lead to radical freedom? And how do we educate people for this freedom...?



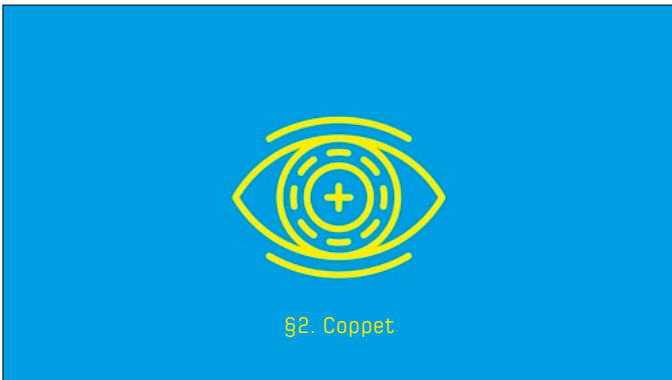
If the self participates in constructing reality, then art needs no longer be "just imitation"; it can become a medium of revealing truths or producing worlds in itself.

If you combine this idea with the limitations of rationality that the French Revolution radicalized, you can see how Romanticism focussed on the small individual person in the great and all-accompanying nature.

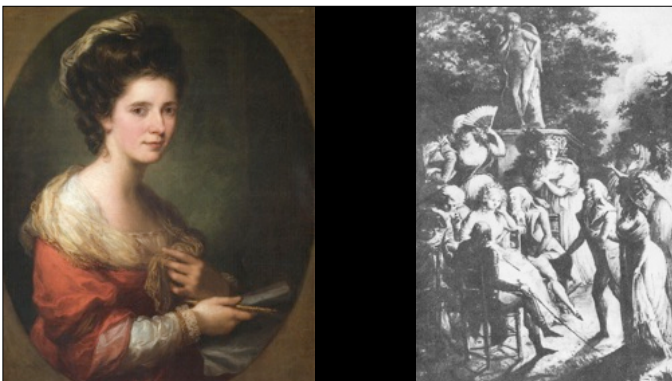


When one talks about German romantic paintings, the name that almost always comes up is Casper David Friedrich; here you see a somewhat less famous painting by him: *der Mönch am Meer* (The monk by the sea).

A single figure stands on the edge of the world, gazing toward the infinite. There is no horizon, no comforting boundary, no divine presence — only the vast indifference of the sea and sky. Yet this is not despair: it is the solitude of one who listens for meaning – a meaning that as of now is found *inside* the individual.



We need to discuss one more important figure in this process: Germaine de Staël.



Germaine de Staël was an extremely wealthy writer, politician, and feminist. Just like Karoline Schlegel she also organized salons, in this case in her family estate of Coppet – which resulted in the *Groupe Coppet* (the Coppet Group).



Because of her wealth and her position (her father was the minister of finance of Louis XVI, the last French king of the *Ancient Régime*), she stood in the middle of the French Revolution. She was present when the king and Marie-Antoinette were brought from Versailles to Paris to be beheaded.



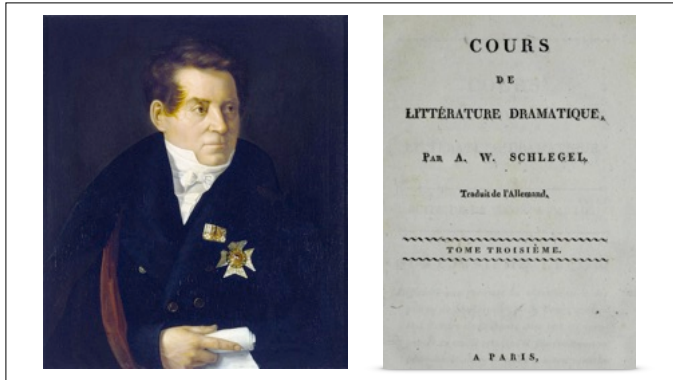
Initially, the *Groupe Coppet* was quite charmed with the revolution and with its general Napoleon Bonaparte. However, as he increased his power over the country, Germaine de Staël became ever more critical, publishing one pamphlet after another in which she described and analysed the dictatorial tendencies of Napoleon.

In the end, Napoleon had her exiled. On 23 October 1803 she crossed the border to Germany.



During her exile, she studied German culture and customs, and wrote a famous book *de l'Allemagne* (about Germany).

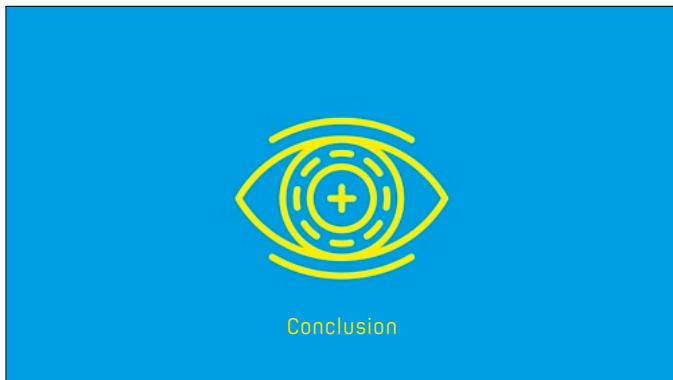
She found the German society more serious, more thorough, more thoughtful than the French. Her analysis was because of the nature, the immense forests in the country, German society had less distractions than the French and that therefore the Germans read more: reading was more about 'use' than about 'fun', it was all about the good that books brought. Germans were too serious, they did not understand jokes.



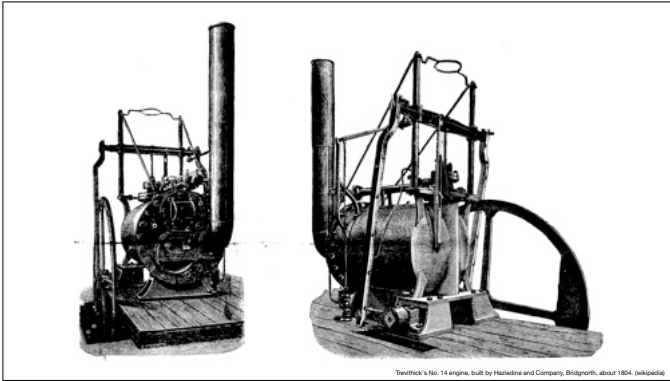
Once in Berlin she came into contact with August Schlegel, brother of the philosopher, who was then lecturing on drama and literature. They became very close friends, and together they went to Jena to meet up with the romantics.

Because of her enormous network (she was acquainted with all the upper class people all over Europe), Germaine de Stael became a very important factor in spreading the ideas of the Jena Romantics. E.g. Lord Byron was a frequent visitor of the Coppet Salons.

It was Schlegel who coined the term Romanticism, but the continuous use of the term by Germaine de Staël that led to its popularity in France and later all over Europe.



So, where does all this leave us?



The scientific worldview led to a surge in experimentation on how we can predict the forces of nature – and thereby control them. The most important technological invention that resulted from all this was the steam engine; but in general modernity brought unprecedented powers of organisation, science, and technology.

Romanticism emerges as one of the first major attempts to ask what these developments mean for human experience itself – a question that is still relevant today.

What happens when the world becomes completely calculable, but is no longer resonant?

This is actually the question that haunts us since we started off this module in Göbekli Tepe...