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Against the Grain of History: Radical Traditionalism in

Twentieth Century German Painting

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Travis William English

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this dissertation.

Andrew V. Uroskie – Dissertation Advisor
Associate Professor of Art History and Criticism, Art Department

Zabet Patterson - Chairperson of Defense
Assistant Professor of Art History and Criticism, Art Department

David Mather – Reader
Assistant Professor of Art History and Criticism, Art Department

Barbara McCloskey – Outside Reader
Associate Professor, History of Art and Architecture, University of Pittsburgh

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

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Abstract of the Dissertation
Painting History Against the Grain: Radical Traditionalism in
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Focusing on the years immediately following World War I and concluding with the present, this dissertation examines the connections across a range of artists and periods in German art in terms of what I will call *radical traditionalism*. This analysis involves the work of George Grosz, Otto Dix, Gerhard Richter, and Neo Rauch, all artists who, despite their differences in styles and contexts, can be grouped together in their commitment to bringing forth a heterogeneous vision of figurative painting that looks beyond the limitations that have tended to frame the discussion of artistic modernism, namely, the opposition between abstraction and representation. These artists have in common not only a desire to engage with their world through figuration, but also through the adoption and adaptation of traditional models of painting that had been marginalized in mainstream modernism. Nonetheless, their turn towards tradition is anything but conservative or reactionary, as such turns in the twentieth century typically have been conceived, particularly in the long shadows of fascist and socialist realisms; neither does it represent the traditionalism that was a favored tactic of postmodern artists. Examining the work of these artists within a critical framework that draws upon Bertolt Brecht's conception of dialectical realism, Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, Theodor Adorno's discussion of natural history, and Kaja Silverman's theory of analogy, among others, this dissertation argues that these artists produce a critical, dialectical form of realism expansive in its outlook and form, borrowing from tradition to put it into productive dialogue with their own historical moments and in ways that expand the concept and practice of realism, pointing to its continued significance in the present and future.

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The Role of Tradition in/against Modernism

> Trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The Statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine. The works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit has gained its certainty of itself from the crushing of gods and men.
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> —G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

> It is self evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.
>
> —T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Focusing on the years immediately following World War I and concluding with the contemporary, this dissertation examines the connections across a range of artists and periods in Germany in terms of what I will call *radical traditionalism*. The analysis involves the work of George Grosz, Otto Dix, Gerhard Richter, and Neo Rauch, all artists who, despite their differences in styles and contexts, can be grouped together in their commitment to bringing forth a heterogeneous vision of figurative painting that looks beyond the limitations that have tended to frame the discussion of artistic modernism, namely, the opposition between abstraction and representation. These artists have in common not only a desire to engage with their world through figuration, but also through the adoption and adaptation of traditional models of painting that had been marginalized in mainstream modernism. Nonetheless, their turn towards tradition is anything but conservative or

reactionary, as such turns in the twentieth century typically have been conceived,

particularly in the long shadows of fascist and socialist realisms. Rather, these artists

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from tradition to put it into productive dialogue with their own historical moments in ways

that have expanded the conception of realism and point to its continued significance in the

present and future.

Modernity and Rupture

      Despite it being an odd place from which to open a discussion of the role played by

tradition in modern German art, I want to begin with a passage by the French sociologist

and philosopher of science Bruno Latour. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour writes,

> Modernity comes in as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists, yet
> all its definitions point, in one way or another, to the passage of time. The
> adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a
> revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity'
> appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past.
> Furthermore the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a
> quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. 'Modern'
> is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of
> time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished.[1]

Perhaps this is an odd place to start because it has nothing particular to say about modern

art in Germany, or even modern art in general. It is a good place nonetheless, as it

encapsulates some of the issues I want to raise with regard to German art and modernism

in general, but does so outside of the typical narrative of heroic avant-garde practice

familiar to any student of modernism. Furthermore, if the discipline of art history as a

general history of the *progressive* development of artistic styles, forms, and subjects

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[1] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

through *linear* time is inextricably bound to the modernity in which it developed as a

product of what it seeks to describe, as Hans Belting has argued,[2] then it is best to not take

anything for granted and instead start from a place beyond its usual disciplinary

boundaries. This passage by Latour points to what is at the heart of modernity, something

common to all the divergent forms that modernity took: a radical consciousness of time

and history. Coupled with its radical time consciousness—and more than likely a product

of it—is modernity's agonistic relation not only to the past from which it has broken (the

"winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns" of which Latour writes), but also its own

internal agonism, initially in the form its self-critical stance inaugurated by Kant in his

"Critiques," in which, as Jürgen Habermas writes, subjectivity "bends back upon itself as

object, in order to grasp itself as in a mirror image."[3] With this critical self-reflection,

reason was set up as the foundation of thought, unseating the traditional models of religion

and monarchical power. Human beings—freed from prejudice, tradition, ignorance,

dogma, and so forth—could once and for all gain autonomy through rational thought and

critical self-reflection. While autonomy and self-governance are the ideal effects of Kantian

rationality on the individual, on a broader scale, the Kantian revolution advances another

consequence. As Robert Pippin points out, the decisive results of modernity's revolution,

whatever they may be, are always self-determined, and self-imposed. "And this means that

such a proposal or historical event will simply re-open the central modern philosophical

[2] See Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. Caroline Saltzwedel and Mitch Cohen
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for a discussion of the parallel development of
modernism and the discipline of art history. Needless to say, for Belting, the crisis of
modernism that gave way to postmodernism is very much related to the crisis that has
been perceived in art history's "grand narrative" of historical development.

[3] Jürgen Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans.
Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 18.

question: by what criterion should such a collective self-determination occur, a criterion we cannot simply be said to 'share' by being human, or to 'find' inscribed in Platonic heaven?"[4] It seems that modern autonomy, because its end cannot be pinned down unless as a metaphysical universal, carries with it the dark shadow of relativism; reason becomes a foundationless foundation, and abstraction that can never carry the tangible weight or fixedness of tradition.

Modernity's self-criticality is a product of its rupture from the past. With a break from normative tradition, its sloughing-off of older models and methods of thought and reflection, modernity attempts to develop its normativity from within in a process of progressive self-genesis that continues today, given the continued faith in notions of progress and development along with the inevitable *crises* that come as their shadows. According to Habermas, the defining feature of the "new age" that came forth in its opposition to and emancipation from the past was in part the direct consequence of its breaking the shackles of history: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*." Yet while modernity emancipates itself from the weight of history, such an extreme anti-foundationalism does have its setbacks. "Modernity,"

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[4] Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 14. Pippin sums up our conception of modernity and its debt to German Idealist philosophy in the wake of Kant and Hegel. According to Pippin, "Kant. . . was the first thoroughgoing 'philosophical modernist' and so also first manifests some of the deepest *aporiai* in modernity. He rejects the very possibility of what had been the foundation of pre-modern and early modern thought—rationalist and theological metaphysics, on the one hand, and empiricism on the other—and insists on a thorough critical or self-determining reflection" (12).

continues Habermas, "sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape."[5]

Whereas earlier uses of the term "modern" implied the birth of a new epoch that would

return to the lost ideals of the ancients (in the form of Greco-Roman classicism), as in the

Italian Renaissance, by the nineteenth century "modern" began to lose its historical footing.

With its radical, deep criticality and sense of self-determination, modernity found itself

untethered from any obligations to a past that seemed irrelevant, if not utterly obsolete.

There was, however, a solution to—or an escape route from—the problem created

by modernity's divorce from tradition; rather than floundering about in an eternal present

of relativism, modernity instead looked to the future for its meaning and normativity. For

Hegel, as the philosopher who first grappled with modernity's sense of newness and its

break from the past, this was a time of transition to a "new era":

> Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth—there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born—so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.[6]

With the metaphor of prenatal development contrasted with the suddenness of birth, Hegel

here points to the ruptural change of modernity as a qualitative change from that which

came before. Whereas change had previously come incrementally, the new, modern world

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[5] Habermas, 7.

[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 6-7.

is illuminated in instantaneous wholeness. Twenty-two years later, Friedrich Schlegel

would write: "No time has ever been so strongly, so closely, so exclusively, and so generally

bound up with the future than that of our present."[7] Unlike earlier epochs which defined

themselves through their relationship—whether negative or positive—with the past,

modernity's rupture marked a point of no return; its forward march allowed not even a

backward glance. As Pippin points out, the "now" of modernity was becoming less as a way

of marking presentness in contrast to pastness; rather, it came to mark "an age of genuine

novelty, an era with assumptions about the highest or fundamental things incompatible

with past assumptions,"[8] thus creating its own foundation out of itself as a new ideal to be

fulfilled in the future. Even Hegel, who interpreted the illumination of this *now* as

something like the instant of birth, saw that Spirit would need time to develop fully in all of

its detail. "The onset of the new spirit is the product of a widespread upheaval in various

forms of culture, the prize at the end of a complicated, tortuous path and of just as

variegated and strenuous an effort." While its birth marks a wholly new beginning in

Spirit's path to eventual wholeness, this wholeness can only be articulated in the future.

"Consciousness misses in the newly emerging shape its former range and specificity of

content, and even more the articulation of form whereby distinctions are securely defined,

and stand arrayed in their fixed relations."[9]   Matei Calinescu sums up modernity's new

time consciousness as one that could only be conceived and developed within a conceptual

framework of generalalized "*historical time*, linear and irreversible, flowing irresistibly

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[7] Quoted in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 242.

[8] Pippin, 17.

[9] Hegel, 7.

onward."[10] Modernity found its *raison d'être* as a faith in progress—in its *progressive self-*

realization—born from a conception of its own pregnant futurity.

Progress and Its Discontents

The forward-march of modernity lent much to the prevailing aesthetic ideology of

modernism. Habermas, invoking Charles Baudelaire as the originary point of modernist

aesthetics, writes,

> modernism simply makes and abstract opposition between tradition and the
> present; and we are, in a way, still the contemporaries of that kind of
> aesthetic modernity which first appeared in the midst of the 19th century.
> Since them, the distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is "the
> new," which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the
> next style. But, while that which is merely "stylish" will soon become
> outmoded, that which is modern preserves a secret tie to the classical. Of
> course, whatever can survive time has always been considered to be a classic.
> But the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of
> being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead a modern work
> becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern. Our sense
> of modernity creates its own self-enclosed canons of being classic. In this
> sense we speak, e.g., in view of the history of modern art, of classical
> modernity. The relation between "modern" and
> "classical" has definitely lost a fixed historical reference.[11]

[10] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 13.

[11] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), 2-3. However much we may argue whether or not we are indeed still living within the spirit of aesthetic modernism, given the now-historical debates over postmodernism, the ideology of newness and novelty still governs the production of art and its market. Thus, whether or not individual artists and their works reject or question this spirit is a moot point. The historical turn taken by many avowedly postmodern artists and their negative attitude toward the heroic "myth" of modernism speaks to the continued presence of modernist ideology. Some, like Habermas, would see the postmodern rejection of modernism as just another permutation of modernism's—and modernity's, for that matter—internal agonism. For a discussion of the rift between the modernist and postmodernist aesthetic ideologies, see Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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Habermas points to the interconnectedness of modernism and modernity, as modernism seeks also to create its normativity out of itself. But modernism's normativity was qualitatively different in that rupture became its foundational position. No matter the great extent to which avant-gardism is distinct from modernism at large, as the work of theorists like Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, and Matei Calinescu[12] have convincingly shown, common to both the historical avant-garde and the modernism that it often vehemently opposed is the exaltation of the notion of originality. For both, originality not only meant the cultivation of novelty and uniqueness, but also the radical idea that each artistic novelty be a new beginning. "More than a rejection or dissolution of the past," as Rosalind, Krauss writes, "avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth."[13] Likewise modernism was conceived as a rupture from the past and tradition, but perhaps more importantly, each successive movement within modernism reenacted such a rupture, distinguished from whatever –*ism* preceded it and declared the new beginning. The negation of tradition thus became its own type of tradition. "The modern tradition," writes Antoine Compagnon, "is a tradition that has turned against itself, and this paradox bespeaks the fate of aesthetic modernity, which is contradictory in itself;

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[12] See: Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity" Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).

[13] Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 157.

it both affirms and denies art, simultaneously proclaiming its life and death, its rise and fall."[14]

Modernist culture gained its sense of rupture and anti-traditionalism from modernity-at-large. Despite its antagonistic relationship to so many key elements of modernity, whether in the form of rationality, scientism, commodified time or bourgeois morality (indeed, in its ever-present attitude of *épater le bourgeois*), modernism shared with modernity an exaltation of novelty. It is easy to overlook the fact that Baudelaire, the father of aesthetic modernism, dedicated his "Salon of 1846" to the bourgeoisie, albeit as an incitement to take charge and wrench art and culture from the hands of the "monopolists". Whether or not the bourgeois ever lived up to Baudelaire's challenge is a different question, but, as Clement Greenberg pointed out in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," even the most avant-garde of modern art, however negative its relation towards society-in-general, "remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed its money... attached [to it] by an umbilical cord of gold."[15] But modernism's relationship to modernity-at-large goes deeper than its need for bourgeois patronage in the face of a declining aristocracy. Endemic to both is the quest for newness. In his discussion the situation of modern art in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno elucidated this connectedness in terms of the coincidence of modernism's development in relation to advanced capitalism. For Adorno, "since the mid-nineteenth century and the rise of high capitalism, the category of the new has been central, though admittedly in conjunction with the question whether anything new had

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[14] Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, trans. Franklin Philip (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xiv.

[15] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 5 and 8.

ever existed. Since that moment no artwork has succeeded that rebuffed the ever

fluctuating concept of the modern."[16] Leaving a more thorough analysis of Adorno's

discussion of modernism and tradition for later, suffice it to say now that even for a Marxist

critical theorist and defender of modernist aesthetics like Adorno, there was no denying

that modern art gained its progressive impetus from the model of the modern capitalist

commodity form.

    We may now look on the modernist epoch with the historians backward gaze and

see it as a series of variations on a theme—the incremental and progressive move towards

the goal of a pure art and artistic autonomy—however, its practitioners did not have the

luxury of hindsight. They did not see their creations as yet another step, but as the ultimate

and final step, the absolute (end) of art. As much as art was—as it had always been—a

creative endeavor, it was now just as much a negational, if not destructive one. But as

much as modernism is defined by its attitude of negation, we cannot ignore the fact that its

iconoclastic impulse also served as a productive force, one that furthered the "tradition of

the new," as Harold Rosenberg called it. What was new in the self-constituting field of

modernism needed something old from which to distinguish itself, and the abstract notion

of tradition resting on five hundred years of art since the renaissance could only hold so

much water. Rather, the new had to negate what immediately preceded it as new, and each

artist who attempted to be authentically modern—the pinnacle of art—had to also

acknowledge that his or her work would soon fall from grace. The success of modernism

lay in a subtle dialectical play between advance and decline. Discussing this "dialectic of

decadence," as he calls it, Donald Kuspit makes the point with the example of Piet

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[16] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 19.

Mondrian, whose Neoplasticism was the absolute of geometric abstraction; that is, until

Frank Stella's reductivism superseded it. Kuspit writes,

> Next to Stella, Mondrian suddenly seems exhausted and obsolete, the overrefined realization—stylization—of an idea of artistic perfection . . . that is no longer binding. Its life—belief in it—is prolonged by experimental variation that seems infinite but is in fact limited and tiresome. . . . But the tediousness of Mondrian's compositions was not fully realized until they were seen in the unexpected light of Stella's advance. Until his advance was made, Mondrian seemed adequate, indeed, more than adequate" the perfect realization of the true idea of art. Thus, advanced art forces the art it is an advance upon into decadence, that is, undermines it by showing that it lacks necessity—that one can make a perfectly good art without abiding by its principles.[17]

Modernism was the period when the "invisible masterpiece"—Hans Belting's term—

became the ideal of art. Indeed, the modern artists not only needed to express his or her

own creative impulses; the work also "had the task of demonstrating . . . a conception of art

that had general validity."[18] But with each work's effort to be art's absolute, to define the

very nature of art, each work was also self-fabricating its own demise at the hands of the

next work that would create an even more pure and absolute definition of art. However, as

a glance at the accepted "endpoint" for the period of modernism (in minimalism and

conceptualism) suggests, art hunted back to its fundamentals leads to the "art as art"

tautology of Joseph Kosuth or similarly Ad Reinhardt's claim that his "black paintings" were

"the last paintings which anyone could make." Despite the hyperbole of such statements,

they do in fact ring true within the ideology of modernism.

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[17] Donald Kuspit, *The Dialectic of Decadence: Between Advance and Decline in Art* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), 21-22.

[18] Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. Helen Atkins (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 13.

The task of purification and essentialization that has come to be seen as one of the main hallmarks of abstract painting in the twentieth century points to the possibility that, even from the start, modernism's leitmotiv has been the contemplation of art's demise. If it is true that this type of endgame was always already built into the modernist project, modernism, in a sense, could only be true to itself as a work of mourning. For Yve-Alain Bois, this sort of "apocalyptic myth" served as a catalyst for modernism. Moreover, modernism would not have been possible without such a myth. In a dialectical dance between genesis and destruction, modernism progressed only as long as its ominous preoccupation with its own demise could be continuously deferred. As Bois writes,

> Indeed, the whole enterprise of modernism . . . could not have functioned without an apocalyptic myth. Freed from all extrinsic conventions, abstract painting was meant to bring forth the pure *parousia* of its own essence, to tell the final truth and thereby terminate its course. The pure beginning, the liberation from tradition, the "zero degree" that was searched for by the first generation of abstract painters could not but function as an omen of the end. . . . One did not have to wait for the "last painting" of Ad Reinhardt to be aware that through its historicism (its linear conception of history) and through its essentialism (its idea that something like the essence of painting existed, veiled somehow, and waiting to be unmasked), the enterprise of abstract painting could not but understand its birth as calling for its end.[19]

As much as we can—or perhaps want to—read modernism as heroic, progressive, and triumphant—utopian in its aims to the very core—we should also cede that it was as much about failure, a reoccurring rumination on its own end. Like the socio-philosophical category of modernity, the aesthetic category of modernism had to always fall back upon itself, constituting and reconstituting its identity with each successive movement, resubstantiating the originary rupture while at the same time demonstrating the possibility of its own end.

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[19] Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 230.

As alluded to before, aesthetic modernism had a somewhat prickly relationship with the modernity of which it was a part. Rejecting the bourgeois social order that gave rise to it in its quest for autonomy created paradoxes for modernism, not the least of which was its continued dependence on bourgeois patronage for its survival. And while modernism heroically rejected the rationalization and instrumentalization of life and the disenchantment of the world in modernity, despite this, it did not come to a full understanding of its complicity with modernity-at-large, namely in the form of its autonomy. If autonomy is the ideological linchpin of modernity, so it is also with aesthetic modernism. According to Pippin, the ideal of autonomy "simply expresses the oldest classical philosophical ideal: the possibility that human beings can regulate and evaluate their beliefs by rational self-reflection, that they can free themselves from interest, passion, tradition, prejudice and autonomously 'rule' their own thoughts, and that they can determine their actions as a result of self-reflection and rational evaluation..."[20] But if autonomy was the oldest classical philosophical ideal, it took modernity to put it into its fullest practice.

Modernity's Kantian foundation in autonomous self-reflection and critique certainly had its influence in the realm of modernist culture. In terms of painting it took the form of a sustained effort to purify the medium of all seemingly extraneous elements; from narrative, to the illusionistic representation of space, even to the inclusion of any form of recognizable figuration altogether, painters sought to make a purely "retinal" art, as Duchamp called it, meaning an art focused strictly on the physical aspect of painting, not only in terms of the physical reality of painting as a flat surface on which colors are placed,

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[20] Pippin, 12-13.

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but also in terms of the purely physical aspect of painting as something *to be looked at*. In other words: painting as a specifically *visual* field of presentation, appealing strictly to a vision dissociated from the totality of sensorial experience.

It was Clement Greenberg who most notably defined modernist painting in essays like "Towards a Newer Laocoön (1940) and "Modernist Painting (1965)," where he defined the "essence of Modernism" as "the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."[21] While Greenberg's broader discussion of modernism has been much critiqued by many postmodern critics and historians—often rightfully so—for its exclusionary and limited scope, we must not forget that he was also giving theoretical and critical definition to an impulse that had been alive and well in painting since at least the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. One only need recall Maurice Denis' oft-quoted injunction to "remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[22] Rosalind Krauss, one of formalist theory's staunchest proponents, offers a schema of modernist aims in her essay, "A View of Modernism." She writes:

> The syllogism we [formalist critics] took up was historical in character, which meant that it read only in one direction; it was progressive. No *á rebours* was possible, no going backward against the grain. The history we saw from Manet to the Impressionists to Cézanne and then to Picasso was like a series of rooms *en filade*. Within each room the individual artist explored, to the limits of his experience and his formal intelligence, the

[21] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5.

[22] Maurice Denis, "Definition of Neotraditionism (1890)," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Sourcebook by Artists and Critics*, Herschel B. Chipp, ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), 94.

separate constituents of his medium. The effect of his pictorial act was to open simultaneously the door to the next space and close out access to the one behind him.[23]

For Krauss, this view of modernism grew out of her own experience as a "disciple" of Clement Greenberg. One senses in her words a feeling of disenchantment with formalism's limited methodological ability to examine much of the most pertinent art of the time, which is to say the art that was opening many previously closed doors, prognosticating the rejection of modernism's stratigraphic, totalizing, and thus, exclusionary conceptualization of its own evolution, that was to occur by the 1970s. But even before emergence of new forms of politically and socially engaged art in the 1970s, there had been artists who questioned the legitimacy of modernism's dominant ideals. For example, the artists of Dada, the New Objectivity, Surrealism rejected any notion of any one "true" style, and, as Peter Bürger points out, "raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods."[24] For these movements, the history of art was not a dead past that needed to be foreclosed, but rather a trove of sources that could be reinvigorated in the present. While the artists of mainstream modernism attempted to vanquish all vestiges of the material world from their art, these movements instead made every effort to put the heterogeneity of the world back into theirs.

The Paradox of Modernism: A Tradition Without Tradition

Such explorations of the artistic past on the part of modern artists were generally met with derision by critics and historians who placed their faith in the goals of

[23] Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism" (1972), *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, 2d ed.

[24] Peter Bürger, 18.

mainstream modernism. For example, in his 1981 essay "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of

Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," Benjamin H. D.

Buchloh confronts the issue of the resurgence of traditional modes of representation

during the twentieth century. In particular, he focuses on two such moments of return: one

early in the century, when Modernism was coming into its own, and one later, in the late

1970s when Modernism seemed to be in its death throes. Just a few years after the non-

objective breakthroughs of Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich seemed to have

opened up the realm of complete abstraction and Marcel Duchamp's readymades stripped

the work of art of its false ontological conditions, *Pittura Metafisica* led by Giorgio de

Chirico and former Futurists Carlo Carrà in Italy began producing "a new iconography of

haunting, pointlessly assembled quotidian objects painted with meticulous devotion to

representational conventions."[25] Perhaps more importantly, even Pablo Picasso, after the

experimental efflorescence of Analytic and Synthetic Cubism during the early teens had by

1915 turned toward a hardened classicism inspired by Ingres. As Buchloh points out, all of

these figures "now fully repudiated their earlier nonrepresentational modes and

procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization."[26] This return of traditional

representation marks, for Buchloh, a repudiation of modernism and its historical, social,

and political necessity at a time when authoritarianism and fascism were on the rise.

Indeed, the reemergence of traditionalism in early twentieth century painting is itself a

form of "authoritarian alienation," a mystifying turn away from the instability of modern

social and political upheaval that, for Buchloh, was registered in the "paradox" and

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[25] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981), 45.

[26] Ibid.

"novelty" of modernist abstraction. At a time when political authoritarianism was gaining ground, so was the "regressive" artistic dictatorship of aesthetic tradition, what Jean Cocteau, on albeit more positive and complicit terms, called "*Le Rappel à l'Ordre*"—"The Call to Order."[27]

Buchloh's argument extends to the New Objectivity painting of the twenties as he tenably fleshes out an ideological and stylistic link between the New Objectivity's turn to hardened realism after expressionism and the fascist aesthetics of the Third Reich. He does not refer to statements—such as "The Laws of Painting"—about the importance of tradition by avowedly communist artists like George Grosz, choosing instead one by Christian Schad, one of the New Objectivity's least politically-motivated artist[28]: "Oh, it is so easy to turn one's back on Raphael. Because it is so difficult to be a good painter. . . . One has to be born a good painter … Italy opened my eyes about my artistic volition and capacity … In Italy the art is ancient and ancient art is often newer than the new art." It seems that Schad had found in classicism a standard that had been unavailable in modernism. Unfortunately, according to Buchloh, all too many artists, critics, and historians were deceived by representation's return that, unbeknownst to them, had brought about a regression to a "bourgeois mode of experience," one modeled on sublimation, which was countered by the authentic avant-gardes' strategies of negation.

However much it appears on the surface to be a dialectical-critical reappraisal of figuration in twentieth century art, at its core Buchloh's analysis carries on the traditional

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[27] Jean Cocteau, *A Call to Order*, trans. Rollo H. Myers (New York: Haskell House, 1974).

[28] That is, at least until he became a supporter of the Nazi party. See Olaf Peters, "Christian Schad," in *New Worlds: German and Austrian Art, 1890-1940*, ed. Renee Price (New York: Neue Galerie, 2001), 322.

binary logic of the opposition between tradition and revolution, an opposition as old as modernity itself. In the words of Svetlana Boym, "the modern opposition between tradition and revolution is treacherous. *Tradition* means both delivery—handing down or passing on a doctrine—and surrender or betrayal. *Traduttore*, *traditore*, translator, traitor. The word *revolution*, similarly, means both cyclical repetition and the radical break. Hence tradition and revolution incorporate each other and rely on their opposition."[29]

Buchloh's analysis is characteristic of much of contemporary art history's treatment of these aesthetic "returns" to tradition in twentieth century art. The most obvious (but perhaps least intriguing) reason for our skepticism towards "traditionalism" concerns our dominant understanding of twentieth century history, framed by the triumph of liberalism—first over fascism, and then over communism—and the modernist aesthetic program associated with it. From the fascist classicism of Italy and Germany to the various strands of Socialist Realism that took form in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, we look back on a century littered with the detritus of these aesthetic returns to tradition and the suspect ideological programs for which they were the accepted, official cultural expressions. Furthermore, while historians have tended to read the cultural products of totalitarian societies "without exception as straightforward, unequivocal illustrations of ideology," as James van Dyke writes,[30] often glossing the specific actions and events that affected the work of individual artists and their outlooks and simplifying to a merely illustrative level a given object's relationship to ideology, they have conversely tended to

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[29] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 19.

[30] James A. van Dyke, *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919-45* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 16.

ignore any ideological implications of modernist art, unquestioningly internalizing and

naturalizing its rhetoric of freedom, liberality, and historical inevitability.

With few exceptions,[31] the ideological implications of aesthetic modernism have

remained hidden behind its dominance in modern art discourse. If the history of western

art in its most general (and most often taught) sense is the history of the progressive

realization of a number of ideas (naturalism, individual expression, artistic autonomy,

medium purity), is it not speaking the same language as the modernity from which it was

born (with its ideals of pragmatism, innovation, individual freedom)? If yes, then it can

hardly develop a point of critique from within, since the necessary position of critique is

also art history's blind spot: its implicit ideological overlap with modernity. Hans Belting

has analyzed this situation, writing that, "modern art, which has had a longer history in

Europe than anywhere else, has always been more than an artistic practice; it is also a

model that allowed art history to establish an orderly, linear progression."[32] Conservative

critics and historians saw modernism as the decadent destruction of the sacrosanct

tradition of European art, while more sympathetic evaluators looked to modernism as the

culmination of a long tradition that presaged its development.[33] From our vantage point

somewhere beyond modernism's closure, we can perhaps acknowledge that there was

some truth in the former position, despite the fact that the latter seems to have won out in

our historical interpretations. But this is not to forget that the battle internal to art history

[31] One of the best examples that come to mind is Serge Guilbaut's analysis of Abstract Expressionism's resonance with Western, liberal ideology during the Cold War. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[32] Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, vii.

[33] Ibid., 167.

and criticism fought in the midst of modernism when it was still very much alive and vital was, like its subject, an instantiation of the broader battle modernity waged against history.

Envisioning a Dialectical Realism

With the critical and historical reappraisal of the modernist project being undertaken in recent scholarship that has sought to examine the diversity of modernism beyond the mainstream, scholars have finally begun to see realism and figuration in a different, more nuanced and complex light. No longer seen in opposition to modernism, the category of realism is being considered on its own terms. As Fredric Jameson, borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, defines it in *The Antinomies of Realism*, realism (in the form of the novel in his analysis) "is the vehicle of polyphony or the recognition and expression of a multiplicity of social voices."[34] Likewise, in a work that deals specifically with the visual arts, Alex Potts writes about the "world-reflecting" and generative "world-making" qualities of realism in twentieth century art, qualities that are still very much in play. "Where internally directed artistic processes took precedence over artistic depiction, this did not in any way exclude all externally directed 'world-reflecting' aspects of mimesis." Pointing to an expansive, dialectical notion of realism, one that has impacted my formulation of *radical traditionalism* in this dissertation, Potts writes that twentieth century realism "just took forms other than naturalistic depiction or drawing from life. These included the incorporation of found images and texts, as well as devising recognizable but highly stylized images whose evocativeness did not depend on

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[34] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 3.

straightforward naturalistic resemblance."[35] Using techniques that went beyond the naturalism that had characterized prior realist art, twentieth century artists began to reconfigure elements of the real in order to not only reflect the world around them, but more importantly, to generate new constellations of meaning out of its materials.

In *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, Devin Fore reconsiders the meanings and purposes of realism specifically within the context of twentieth century German culture, envisioning a "rehumanization" of art in the interwar period, after the "dehumanization"—borrowing a term from José Ortega y Gasset—of non-objective art. Nonetheless, according to Fore, this "reassertion of the human figure" was "a deeply conflicted proposal, since the seemingly natural body had by this time already become a thoroughly vexed construction."[36] This new vision of the human certainly saw its expression in Berlin Dada and the New Objectivity and their human-machine amalgamations.   According to Fore, despite stylistic similarities to earlier versions of realism, interwar realism in Germany was anything but a retrograde return to tradition, but rather underscores the modern iteration's difference from the past. "Hardly a return of the same, the strategies of paradigm repetition found in this art and literature trace the vector of time itself," in order to bring to consciousness their conceptual difference and an objective awareness of critical noncontemporaneity.[37] This dissertation extends this

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[35] Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 46.

[36] Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 3-4.

[37] Fore, 11.

analysis into the present, to show how such strategies are still at work in contemporary Germany painting.

Chapter One opens with a discussion of the role of tradition within Berlin Dada. As early as 1920, George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter, along with Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield, formulated their ideas for a new "realist" painting in an unpublished manuscript titled "Die Gesetze der Malerei" (The Laws of Painting), in which they call for a return to the medieval and renaissance traditions of precision, perspective, and figuration in order to create a properly historical materialist painting, a critical and political art of the masses. While New Objectivity painting has been seen as part of the "Call to Order" of the twenties, I will refute such claims by showing it as a continuation of the political and critical project of Berlin Dada as outlined in "The Laws of Painting." By examining the art and politics of figures like Grosz and Dix (who, while not an official member of Berlin Dada was closely associated and exhibited with the group), this chapter argues that traditionalism has a dialectical relationship to modernity and modernism, as it creates tensions and contradictions between the subject and form of painting, in the end foregrounding both, while simultaneously bringing the past to bear in the these artists' contemporary moment.

Chapter Two continues this analysis by examining Otto Dix's allegorical paintings from the Third Reich. As an *inner emigrant* and a degenerate artist, Dix saw severe limitations placed on his art by the Nazis; the contemporary urban subjects that had been the mainstay of his work during the Weimar years were no longer possible. Thus, he made a flight into history, recapitulating Renaissance allegories of death and spirituality that nonetheless came to bear critically on his present moment of crisis. I will take this analysis a step further by examining the importance of allegory as a critical practice, through the

theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin, drawing especially on his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and the later "Theses on the Philosophy of History". Benjamin experienced the same social, political, and cultural upheavals as Dix, and shared a similar worldview; one focused on a skepticism towards modernism's progressive aims, and the revolutionary potential of Marxist politics. Reacting to the upheavals of the early twentieth century, Benjamin brought into question the idea of linear historical time, favoring instead a constellational, ruptured, deconstructed view of history, where the past presents itself in heterogeneous fragments, of which it is the critic's or artist's task to assemble them into meaningful, critical form. Benjamin saw in allegory the ability to express "[e]verything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful [...]."[38] Allegory's ability to express ruin, loss, and estrangement from the past made it a powerful form of expression for Dix and its outlook as a weakly redemptive form of expression shows the true nature of the human condition under the effects of unrelenting destruction.

Chapter Three examines Dix's landscapes from the same period in relation to their historical precedents and theories of landscape as a form of symbolic expression. With references to the Renaissance landscapes of Albrecht Altdorfer and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, as well as the Romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, Dix's landscapes demonstrate the history of the genre within the context of historical upheaval, thus opening up a point at which the use of landscape as an allegory of history becomes recognizable. The analysis of Dix's landscapes will give way to Gerhard Richter's and the persistence of landscape painting in the present. For both Dix and Richter, landscape

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[38] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 166.

affords the artist a theme by which human history can be mapped back onto nature. For Richter, landscape also becomes the locus at which his deconstruction of the dual oppositions between abstraction and figuration and painting and photography is brought forth most convincingly.

Finally, Chapter Four broadens the analysis of contemporary painting to address the work of Neo Rauch, one of Germany's most prominent painters. Despite his popularity in museums and in the art market, Rauch's work has seen limited scholarly engagement. While his paintings are often described as surrealistic art historical hodge-podge that brings in everything, including the Socialist Realism that is purportedly so much a part of his East German heritage, all the while resisting meaning. Against the mainstream view of Ruach's work, I argue for an understanding that is much more rooted in his artistic development and life experience in the German Democratic Republic, showing the strong influence of the "dialectical realism" of his forebears in Leipzig. Rauch's predecessors, most notably Bernhard Heisig and Werner Tübke, developed a brand of realism that, like the versions discussed throughout this book, sought to bring tradition to bear in the present in order to create a critical model of artistic engagement that went beyond normative realism, specifically Socialist Realism in the context of the GDR. Likewise, Neo Rauch presents to the viewer a model of history painting that speaks to the social, cultural, and political fragmentation of contemporary experience in a post-historical world, not only in its imagery, but in its form as well.

This dissertation examines the theme of "radical traditionalism" across a range of historical nodes. What may have been sacrificed by foregoing the deep exploration of a specific period or artists will hopefully be redeemed in the breadth of its coverage. By

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bringing together what is at first a diverse and divergent group of artists and artworks, I

hope to draw the reader's attention to the overlooked relevance of realism within German

modernism beyond the discussion and shadow of Nazi art, while simultaneously

demonstrating that realism is a far more expansive category than has often been assumed,

one that has consistently been explored by German artists to both represent and reimagine

the fractiousness experience in the face of ever-flowing historical flux.

Chapter 1

Painting Historical Materialism: "Die Gesetze der Malerei" and
the Radical Use of Tradition in the Neue Sachlichkeit

The Problem of Modernism in Germany

In the years from 1918 to 1945, German art underwent a series of changes,

ruptures, and returns that even within the broader context of European Modernism's ever-

accelerating quest for newness have proven problematic, implacably resisting assimilation

into the mainstream of modern art. Despite the problems that such a notion engenders, a

German *Sonderweg*—"Special Path"—becomes a tempting, if not facile, explanation of

Germany's strange and anomalous artistic development in the early twentieth century. The

immediate post–World War I years were marked by what many critics and historians

called "the death of Expressionism", the emergence of various Dada groups in a number of

German cities (most notably in Berlin and Cologne), the Constructivist-inspired design of

the Bauhaus, a new realist style first known as "Post-Expressionism" and later named Neue

Sachlichkeit ("New Objectivity"), and finally the death of so much artistic experimentation

with the "Degenerate" art exhibition of 1937 and the hegemony of an authoritarian Fascist-

Realism under the Nazis. In 1931, two years before the Nazi seizure of power, art critic and

publisher of the highly popular art journal *Das* Kunstblatt, Paul Westheim, summed up the

uniqueness—and for him, superiority—of the contemporary German scene: "This many-

sided will, searching, and experimentation is … proof of an intellectual vitality that cannot

get enough, that constantly takes on new problems and provides itself with new goals. *That*

is why Germany today is certainly one of the most interesting art centers in the world; if we

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do not have a (clearly defined) movement, then everything is here in movement."[1] Despite

the fact that Westheim's summation can be partially attributed to the anti-French

sentiment that had played a formative role in modern German art and culture since the

Franco-Prussian War,[2] Germany's still could claim to be among the most diverse and

changing artistic climates in Europe. Even Alfred Barr, after a trip spent touring Germany

in 1931, declared it to be an exciting center of modernist practice.[3] Despite this, the diverse

and divergent paths taken by German artists in the first half of the twentieth century is less

well known and researched than its French and American counterparts, in part due to the

dominance of a Franco-American modernism that stretches from the 1850s to today in its

scope. Add to this the often times tragic nature of German history in the twentieth century

and one can see the hesitancy with which art history has approached its "German

question."

Much of the literature on interwar German art draws a direct path from the anti-

expressionist realism of the New Objectivity to the classicism of Fascist aesthetics. For

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[1] Quoted in James A. van Dyke, *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919-45* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 22-3. Van Dyke quotes Westheim's "Neue Kunst in Deutschland," *Das Kunstblatt* 15 (1931), 110.

[2] See Hans Belting, *The Germans and their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, Scott Kleager, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), particularly Chapter 4, "The Resistance to the Modern Movement" for a discussion of Germany's complex relationship with artistic modernism, especially with relation to the "foreign" avant-garde influences from France. Belting traces back even further Germany's search for a quintessentially German style, finding it in Goethe's claiming of the medieval Gothic as German during the Romantic period, at the same time that English poets were claiming it for England. No one seemed to know—or care if they did know—that Gothic art developed in France. Here we see the often messy vicissitudes of history in the quest for a national, indigenous style, where patriotism often trumps historical reality.

[3] Alfred H. Barr, "Otto Dix," *The Arts* 4 (1931), 244. Barr also proclaimed Dix's *The Trench* to be "perhaps the most famous picture painted in post-war Europe" (244).

example, in his 1981 essay "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the

Return of Representation in European Painting," Benjamin Buchloh argues for an

ideological and stylistic link between the representational turn in the 1920s and Fascist

representation of the 1930s and 1940s, in the end connecting these "authoritarian"

tendencies to the so-called "reemergence" of representational painting in the late 1970s

and early 1980s. Early in this essay, he writes, "It would certainly appear that the attitudes

of the Neue Sachlichkeit . . . cleared the way for a final takeover by such outright

authoritarian styles of representation as Fascist painting in Germany and Italy and socialist

realism in Stalinist Russia,"[4] all the while never drawing any of the distinctions even the

earliest chroniclers of the movement made between the divergent ideological and stylistic

factions of Neue Sachlichkeit. For Buchloh, it seems that representation succumbs to

authoritarianism, and that tradition eventuates fascism. While his essay marks out an

important and early critical analysis of the politics of modernist and anti-modernist

aesthetic practices, his equation of modernist abstraction with political revolution fails to

analyze the complex relationship between art and politics in interwar Europe, and also fails

to acknowledge the possibility that a merely artistic negation of the external reality

through abstraction was viewed by many politically motivated artists of the 1920s as little

more than aesthetic dilettantism. Likewise, as Alex Potts points out, its practitioners

seldom conceived "realism" as simple mimesis:

> The disruption of a consistently naturalistic picturing or imaging of things
> had at some level been integral to realism as a tendency in modern European
> art ever since the mid-nineteenth century when it emerged as a definable
> movement. Central to more polemically self-aware forms of realism from the
> very outset was an anti-art aspiration to do away with the separation

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[4] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return
of Representation in European Painting" *October* 16 (Spring, 1981), 40.

between art and life created by conventionalized artistic forms, including those that had become accepted as offering a naturalistically correct and artistically valid depiction of the world.[5]

According to Devin Fore, much interwar realism, especially those critical modes associated with Dada and New Objectivity, intentionally appropriated tradition, not in order to simply affirm it, instead employing it in a complex dialectic of negation and critique against the dominance of modernism. "The critical dismissal of interwar realism as merely an aesthetic restauration," writes Fore, "underestimates the degree to which the reappearance of older artistic devices in this period was an active and deliberate strategy to expropriate the capital of the 'cultural heritage'," in an effort to burst open the affirmative character of tradition to a new critical potential.[6] Needless to say, Buchloh's type of generalized, if not historically inaccurate reading not only obliterates the ideological and political differences between these various strands of "realism", but also downplays the divergent artistic reasons for which many artists chose to turn away from abstraction and formal experimentation in the immediate postwar years.

It is my intention here to take a closer look at the left-wing artists of the New Objectivity, namely George Grosz and Otto Dix, in order to show that their art does not fit into such easy dichotomies as radical/reactionary and modern/traditional. Rather, their works—pictorial and textual—invite us to question these dualities by showing that tradition could in fact be used by avant-garde artists intent on viewing their contemporary moment through a critical lens, not with nostalgia for a harmonious and classical past, but

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[5] Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

[6] Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 10.

rather with an eye toward the contradictions and incongruities engendered by modernism and its relationship with tradition.

A Materialist Manifesto

In September of 1920, less than one month after the close of the First International Dada Fair, held in Otto Burchard's Berlin Gallery, the Dadaists George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, and Rudolf Schlichter wrote a short manuscript titled "Die Gesetze der Malerei" ("The Laws of Painting"), outlining a new direction for visual art, a turn away from montage and assemblage toward techniques of traditional painting. Proclaiming a new "historical materialism in painting," the Dadaists call on artists to turn away from the "individualistic mess" of Expressionism" toward a "clear and certain" style that will "raise the optical impressions of the masses toward singleness of meaning."[7] Rejecting "the standpoint of abstract art," with its "undecidedness of subjective expressions," they declare—with all the bravura of a Dadaist manifesto—that "painting is collective," and that "the painter must possess the capabilities to accurately perceive the essence of his epoch."

Now what do the Dadaists mean by "historical materialism in painting?" In simple terms, they mean a rejection of expressionism's spiritualist ideology. Expressionism's unhindered and rebellious reaffirmation of the primacy of subjective identity against nineteenth century bourgeois cultural forms, combined with their quasi-utopian primitivism seemed, after World War I, at least facile, if not useless; easily manifested on

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[7] George Grosz, et. al., "Die Gesetze der Malerei," printed from an unpublished typescript in *Hannah Höch: Eine Lebenscollage, Band 2, Abteilung 1919-1920*, Edited by the Berlinischen Galerie and Cornelia Thater-Schulz (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1989), 696-698. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

the painted canvas or the printed image, Expressionism's Nietzschean hubris had little to

no concern with the political situation of its time, as it was rooted in pre-War ideals: in the

minds of many younger artists like the Berlin Dadaists, Expressionism did little to critically

reflect upon or even realistically represent the horrors of postwar reality. Indeed, the

Expressionists romantic battle against urban alienation, mass culture, industrialism, and

academic conventional in art was basically nullified by the catastrophe of the war, despite

the fact that many of them, like Franz Marc, saw the impending war in mythic terms,

believing it to be the cleansing necessary for a new culture. But Franz Marc and many

others would not live to see just how true their prophetic visions would come, as European

civilization witness what seemed to be its destruction. Any sense of spirituality or vague

utopianism seemed a lie in the face of so much material misery and destruction. The Dada

critic Carl Einstein assesses the state of contemporary art in an April 1920 review of Rudolf

Schlichter for *Das Kunstblatt*, at the time one of Germany's foremost progressive art

journals, by calling Expressionism "a lowly variety of French handicraft."[8] While conceding

that Matisse produced "good decorations," Einstein claims that, in a critical nod to Ernst

Ludwig Kirchner and the artists of *Die Brücke*, the "German soul exhausted itself in

exoticism… producing plaster nudes in the style of the Palau Islands. Naked women as

interior decoration was over and done in the eighteenth century."[9] Also in 1920 Wilhelm

Worringer, the author of the influential *Abstraction and Empathy* and initially a supporter

of Expressionism, said that with Expressionism, artists "in hopeless solitude wished to find

a community . . . Agitated revelations, visionary flashes of light have been handsomely

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[8] Carl Einstein, "Rudolf Schlichter," in *Werke Band 2 1919-1928*, ed. Marion Schmid, (Berlin: Medusa Verlag, 1981), 105.

[9] Ibid.

framed, declared permanent and degraded to peaceful wall decorations."[10]   In aesthetic

terms, the decorative character that was so much a part of modernist art, at least since the

Symbolists, was now being rejected.   As Dennis Crockett points out, if there was anything

that united the diverse members and associates of the Berlin Dada group, "it was a

vehement opposition to Expressionism."[11] When we see slogans like "Art is dead—Long

live the machine art of Tatlin" printed on placards that hung on the walls of the First

International Dada Fair, we can be certain that the Dadaists were not rallying against art

per se (a funny thing to do in what was, despite its radicality, still ostensibly an art

exhibition), but rather were rallying against a certain idea of art as a production of a

creatively disturbed psyche in search of spiritual truth and fulfillment; an art produced like

a machine produced, with no less necessity than Expressionism, but cleansed of its

sentiment. What was needed was an art that cast an unflinching, analytical, and critical eye

on the world around it.

Discussing his 1924 etching cycle *Der Krieg* (*The War*), Dix made it clear that his

gruesome images of life—and death—fighting in the trenches was drawn directly from his

own experience; this art was anything but a solipsistic escape into a primitive, pure,

utopian space. In his turn away from spiritual concerns and towards "simply" depicting

"states of affairs," we see a historical materialist conception of art at work.   He writes, "I

wanted no ecstatic extravagances. I depicted states of affairs produced by the war, and the

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[10] Quoted in Peter Selz, "German Realism of the Twenties: The Artist as Social Critic"
Beyond the Mainstream: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Art (Cambridge: Cambridge
University, 1997), 78.

[11] Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder, 1918-1924*
(University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 36.

consequences of war, simply as states of affairs."[12] While some have argued that, despite

his rejection of Expressionism, Dix's series of etchings reproduces (with great virtuosity)

many of the formal tropes of Expressionism. However, I would argue that the rough,

scumbled texture and violent, gestural lines of prints like "Shot to Pieces" represent not a

turn towards abstraction but an effort to manipulate the formal possibilities of the medium

in order to make the content all the more real, while creating a level of formal tension

within each work and the series as a whole. Perhaps Dix successfully creates an aesthetic

analogy to his real experience of the trenches; in the tension between diverse forms at play

in the each work, between the desire to depict mundane reality and the horror and

brutality that makes it anything but mundane, we might be able to garner a sense of what

the war was like, in all its boredom and monotony that could at any moment be shot

through with the threat of death.

Interspersed among the horrific scenes of mortally wounded soldiers and the dead

bodies of gas victims are images that give the viewer pause, like "Frontline Soldiers in

Antwerp," where we are confronted not with another image of shell-shocked soldiers in the

trench, but a cluster of prostitutes walking along the city street, all with ghoulish faces and

inordinately voluptuous breasts and buttocks. One soldier stands to the side, in the

foreground but cast in shadow, guardedly watching these "streetfighters" pass by. In "Skin

Graft," one of the more often reproduced images from the cycle, Dix creates a harrowing

portrait of a soldier whose face and head has been marred by battle. He looks out at the

viewer with one large eye and we recognize it all the more because most of the rest of his

face is obliterated by multi-textured grafts and reconstructions that, despite the best efforts

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[12] Quoted in Crockett, 97.

of contemporary medicine, do not amount to a face. The unflinching detail of Dix's mark-

making in the soldier's face is made all the more apparent by the relative flatness of the rest

of the work, from the grey and white striped pajama shirt of the soldier to the white of a

rumpled pillow and a steel bed, set off with a simple contour line from the grey

background, bringing the soldier's hybrid, even monstrous features into almost literal

relief. But what is highlighted and heightened is not the particularity of an individual (the

usual claim of portraiture) but instead the individual's loss of identity. His "loss of face"

almost makes him a stand-in for every soldier who suffered the physical and emotional

pain of battle and was perhaps unlucky enough to survive. If we compare this work to

"Skull," however, we can see that survival means little. With its teeming clumps of worms

spilling out of its dark eye sockets, nose and jaw, Dix's skull seems more alive than the

reconstructed soldier; death triumphs and is more vivid than those who survived. In "Skin

Graft" the viewer bears witness to a face that has become meat and a human who has

become mere matter. The almost expressionistic patterns formed by the grafts bear an

uncanny resemblance to the pitted and wounded battlefield landscapes Dix represents in

many of the other prints. Thus, this soldier becomes an emblemization of the war itself, an

allegory of destruction. The multiple techniques in a way represent very concretely the

diversity of Dix's experience of the war. As he recalled in a 1963 interview, "The war was a

horrible thing, but there was something tremendous about it, too. I didn't want to miss it at

any price. You have to have seen human beings in this unleashed state to know what

human nature is. ... I need to experience all the depths of life for myself, that's why I go out,

and that's why I volunteered."[13] In a range of subjects as varied as the range of styles

employed to represent them, from the gruesome scenes of the trenches to the comically

caricatured streetwalkers, the rotting carcass of a horse to the empty, flat and uninhabited

battlefields, Dix shows that there is no one simple way to represent the range of these

experiences, and that each subject calls for its own means; the diversity of forms creates a

sense of the depth of Dix's experience. Nonetheless, the stylistic plurality employed by Dix

also represents a rejection of the "personal" styles characteristic of Expressionist artists

like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde in favor of a practice, perhaps inspired by Dada

photomontage, that seems to set form as a response to content in a quintessentially

historical materialist aesthetic response to experience in all its complexity and

contradictions.

In political and social terms, the rejection of Expressionist ideology was just as

strong as the rejection of its aesthetics. Despite the radical aspects of many of the

Expressionist artists' and writers' ideologies, their general lack of economic and political

concern in favor of utopian idealism led to those ideologies remaining at the level of ideals.

As Douglas Kellner puts it,

> [The Expressionists'] attacks on bourgeois society included violent diatribes
> against liberalism, trade unionism, the working class movement, and the
> 'masses,' but they failed to see any even relatively progressive forces in
> bourgeois society and tended to reject the liberal tradition of democracy,
> human rights, and equality as part of the façade of the hated bourgeois
> society. Hence, the total revolt of many Expressionists tended toward
> nihilism.[14]

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[13] Quoted in Matthias Eberle, *World War I and the Weimar Artists: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer,* trans. John Gabriel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 22.

[14] Douglas Kellner, "Expressionism and Rebellion," in *Passion and Rebellion" The Expressionist Heritage*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 29. While many of the essays in this book have been superseded

In short, the spirit of the Expressionists' rejection was totalizing, its specific concerns were

for the most part aesthetic. The events of World War I and the seemingly daily

catastrophes that followed during the tumultuous Weimar years brought vague utopian

notions and nihilistic withdrawal into question. The political and aesthetic tensions

between Expressionism and new postwar attitudes were brought into sharpened public

clarity in 1920 in the days following the Kapp Putsch. Despite the hope many had for

Germany's experimentation with democracy following the loss of the war, the weakness of

the republican government was starkly apparent, and revolutions broke out, instigated by

both the communist left and the royalist right. The most noteworthy of these was the Kapp

Putsch, in which reactionary royalists, backed by the Prussian military establishment,

attempted to overthrow the fledgling democratic government led by the SPD (the Socialist-

Democratic Party of Germany) and reinstate the monarchy. Street fighting broke out in

most of Germany's cities, including Dresden. The putschists were successful for only five

days before the insurrection was finally put down by a general strike of the nation's

workers, but only after the injury and death of many who had taken to the streets to fight.

In Dresden, fighting had broken out in front of the Zwinger, the Baroque pleasure palace of

Augustus the Strong that housed the Gemäldegalerie, the city's treasured collection of old

master paintings. A stray bullet entered a window of the museum, piercing Peter Paul

Ruben's *Bathsheba at the Fountain*.

For Oskar Kokoschka, one of the foremost representatives of the Expressionist

movement and at the time a professor at Dresden's Art Academy, the revolutionary fighting

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by more recent scholarship, Kellner's contribution still stands as one of the most thorough
analyses of the dialectical and contradictory nature of Expressionist ideology and art.

would have no good end. He wrote up an announcement that he paid to have posted in the

main streets of the city, which read:

> I urgently request all those who intend to use firearms in order to promote
> their political theories, whether of the radical left, the radical right or the
> radical center, to be kind enough henceforth to hold their combat exercises
> away from the Gemäldegalerie of the Zwinger—on the shooting ranges of the
> heath, for example, where works of human culture will not be in danger. On
> Monday, the 15th of March, a masterwork of Rubens was damaged by a bullet.
> These paintings are not safe if they do not enjoy our protection. And while it
> may be claimed that we have no need for this art, the art authorities of
> Dresden who, with me, are apprehensive and nervous, consider such
> masterworks to be rare creations. And when we're responsible for
> protecting them, and they're destroyed, it's *we* who rob the poor people of
> the future of the highest good. We must do everything possible to prevent
> this. The German people of the future will certainly find more meaning in
> these paintings than do the politicized people of today. I hardly dare hope
> that my counterproposal will be heard, which states: In our German
> Republic, as in classical times, feuds should be decided by duels between
> political leaders. This seems less harmful and less confusing than the
> methods employed at present.

> Oskar Kokoschka
> Professor, Academy of Visual Arts, Dresden[15]

Kokoschka's plea was subsequently published in forty German newspapers, provoking

backlash from the communist left. Among those who reacted most strongly to Kokoschka's

statement were the Dadaists George Grosz and John Heartfield, both firm in their support

for a communist revolution in Germany. They responded to Kokoschka with an essay titled

"Der Kunstlump" ("The Art Scoundrel"), published in the communist newspaper *Der Gegner*

(*The Opponent*). "Der Kunstlump" urged for vigorous resistance to Kokoschka's plea by all

of those "who, knowing that bullets tear human beings to pieces, feel it a trivial matter

when bullets damage paintings." Furthermore, Grosz and Heartfield announce: "We greet

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[15] Kokoschka's statement is quoted in full in George Grosz and John Heartfield, "The Art
Scab." originally published as "Der Kunstlump," *Der Gegner* I, nos.10-12 (Berlin: Malik
Verlag, 1920), 48-56. Reprinted in Anton Kaes, et. al., ed. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 483-486.

with pleasure the fact that bullets whiz into the galleries and palaces, into the masterpieces of Rubens, instead of into the homes of the poor in the workers' districts." They decry Kokoschka as a representative of the reactionary middle-class philistines, giving him the ironic title of "the Viennese Rembrandt", and dismiss his paintings as contrived psychological petty bourgeois portraits. Despite being veterans who, like Kokoschka, experienced World War I first-hand, Grosz and Heartfield's views of art's place in society were in complete oppositions to the expressionist's. As Dadaists, they saw the civilized airs of European culture as a lie hiding the truth of its barbarism. The post-war situation brought about a marked change in art-making, first manifested in Dadaist provocative agitation, followed by a turn towards a hardened, unsympathetic, scrupulously observed realism that looked not to the "primitive" or the spiritual, to express inner subjectivity, but rather looked to the streets with cold, calculating, critical eyes at the German post-war social situation.

Otto Dix produced two collage-paintings as direct critical reactions to the "Art Scoundrel" debate, works that manifest the new form of realism that had developed within Dadaism. In *The Barricade* (1920, presumed destroyed), Dix gives himself and the viewer the close, condensed perspective of a participant, thus making evident his own position on the side of his Dada comrades and the proletarian fighters. As James van Dyke notes, "the barricade protecting the rebels consists largely of the debris of bourgeois culture: a bad plaster cast of a Hellenistic Venus, a copy of the 'New Metaphysical Review', a Bible, a crucifix, a homily, Titian's *Tribute Money* (or a reproduction of it), and most importantly, an

Expressionist print."[16]   Thus, the theory of montage put forth by the Berlin Dadaists is doubly enacted: by Dix, combining these cultural fragments in his painting, by rending them from their placement in the bourgeois philistine reactionary cultural milieu and by putting them to use, however ironically, in the creation of a revolutionary art, and the streetfighters, who scavenged the artifacts of the same cultural tradition, tearing them away from their contradictory place within bourgeois society as emblems at once of *Bildung* and Geist, masks for economic status in bourgeois ideology, transforming them into the real materials of revolutionary struggle. Like the street fighters who expropriated and repurposed bourgeois culture for use in their barricade, Dix and his Dada comrades expropriated and repurposed the traditional tendency toward realism in Western art in their ideological and aesthetic struggle against bourgeois culture, transforming it in the process. Likewise, in *The Matchseller* (also painted in 1920), Dix makes a more specific and pronounced attack on Kokoschka and his reactionary ideas by collaging his article in as a crumpled piece of detritus in the gutter, a piece of trash placed next to the blind, legless, war cripple matchseller, who is being pissed on by a happy dachshund; the matchseller is the human garbage produced by bourgeois society and its ideology is represented by Kokoschka's letter.

The style of these works goes beyond any traditional conception of naturalistic realism, due to the inclusion of grotesquely oversized heads of figures containing caricatural features borrowed from advertising of the time, and due to Dix's dual techniques of collage and painting, which look more appropriately suited to shop signs than canvases; they are a deliberate and crude repudiation of the values of bourgeois

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[16] James van Dyke, "Otto Dix's *Streetbattle* and the Limits of Satire in Düsseldorf, 1928," *Oxford Art Journal* vol. 32 no. 1, 2009, 45.

society through the stylistic lens of tasteless kitsch. As the critic Carl Einstein noted in a

1923 review of Dix's work published in *Das Kunstblatt*,

> Dix dares to produce a suitable kitsch, namely, the ridiculous world of the
> cleverly stupid bourgeois splashing properly about in stifling ordinariness. …
> The bourgeois gets kitsch back from him in sharp focus; he can do it because
> he paints very well, so well that his painting aborts kitsch, executes it. … Dix
> paints what is current and thereby knocks it down without the swollen
> solemnity of a prettifying dolt. Painting as a critical statement.[17]

Given the purposefully anti-aesthetic, low-brow quality of Dix's painting in 1920, it is worth

noting Walter Benjamin's analysis of what he terms Brecht's "Crude Thinking" as analogous

to what I will call Dix's "crude painting." In his discussion of Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*,

Benjamin deploys the term "crude thinking" to describe the maxims, speeches, and

confessions that pepper Brecht's text, "interrupt[ing] the text; they are—comparable in this

to illustrations—an invitation to the reader now and again to dispense with illusion."[18] For

Brecht, and likewise for Benjamin, these crude thoughts are not only valuable with regard

to the distancing effect so vital to Brecht's work, but also valuable in putting theory into

practice, as the dialectical third term between the two poles: "Coarse thoughts have a

special place in dialectical thinking because their sole function is to direct theory toward

practice. They are directives *toward* practice, not *for* it: action can, of course, be as subtle

as thought. But a thought must be coarse to find its way into action."[19] Similarly, Dix

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[17] Carl Einstein, "Otto Dix," *Das Kunstblatt* vol. 7 no. 3 (March 1923), 97-102. Reprinted in
Anton Kaes, et.al., ed., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1994), 491.

[18] Walter Benjamin, "Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans.
Edmund Jephcott, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 199.

[19] Ibid.

adopts a crude, common visual language to appeal to the revolutionary masses in order to put into practice Dadaism's radical ideas.

Expressionism, the movement that embodied the hopes for a return to primordial essence and spirituality, had become just another stylistic "-ism" in the broader project modernism. Art no longer needed to be prophetic, but sharply observant, if not outright critical. As Peter Selz writes, "Individuality was no longer held as a sacrosanct value by many artists in the postwar period who thought of themselves as social beings. At the same time that the Bauhaus set up a program to integrate the artist into a technological society, the Verists and other radical left-wing artists sought to become an integral part of the social structure."[20] I would add that these artists did indeed try "to become an integral part of the social structure," albeit as critics of that society. What was needed was a new critical realism that could put the philosophical ideals of historical materialism into aesthetic practice. But, for most of the Verists, a simple and transparent realism was not enough. With the advent of photography, it had become redundant. What was needed was a realism that could put reality under a microscope, in order to analyze its details and to magnify certain features, thereby effectively critiquing it. Mere photographic representation was not enough. They would have agreed with Bertolt Brecht's assessment that "A photograph of the Krupp factory tells us next to nothing about the place."[21] As Otto Dix noted about the new period of Post-Expressionism, "The expressionists produced enough art. We wanted to see things totally naked and clear, almost without art."[22] This

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[20] Selz, 83.

[21] Ibid.

statement makes clear his reaction to one aspect of the style that had been important to Dix and other Dadaists-cum-Verists. While we will see that style and form was in fact an important component of New Objectivity painting, the unmediated, individualistic expression of subjectivity engendered by Expressionism's technical "roughness," was being questioned as another aesthetic ideology, no less constructed and unnatural than any other. As inner life became increasingly degraded in modernity, what had become important in Weimar Germany was the surface of things. Siegfried Kracauer wrote in a seminal essay of the time: "The surface-level expression . . . by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions."[23] And as Walter Benjamin wrote somewhat differently in 1921, "Interaction characterizes everything between the individual and the outer world; the respective spheres of activity between inner and outer cross over into each other. . . . The outer found by the acting individual can in principle be referred back in whatever degree one likes to the inner, the inner in whatever degree back to the outer."[24] The identity of the subject is contingent upon his or her relation to the urban world around them and their status as a cipher of socio-economic identity.

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[22] Quoted in Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 58.

[23] Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995), 75.

[24] Quoted in Helmut Lethen, Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar *Germany*, trans. Don Reneau, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12-13.

Radicalism against Modernism

Despite its language calling for a return to traditional forms of art-making, "The Laws of Painting" represents a continuation of the political and aesthetic concerns of Berlin Dada. For Grosz, Hausmann, Heartfield, and Schlichter, all members of the German Communist Party, modern art (meaning Expressionism and abstraction) was the purview of bourgeois intellectualism, and it was their goal instead to produce art in the service of revolutionary politics. Slogans like "DADA stands on the side of the revolutionary Proletariat" and "DADA is the voluntary destruction of the bourgeois world of ideas"[25] were printed on placards and hung throughout the First International Dada Fair, amidst the photomontages, assemblages, and mixed-media paintings of the politically and aesthetically radical Dadaists. Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, of the many manifestations of Dadaism in Europe and America during the late teens and early twenties, Berlin Dada was the most overtly political in its outlook. Looking back on the postwar years, in his 1946 autobiography *A Little Yes and a Big No*, George Grosz reflected on the formation of Berlin Dada with these words:

> Dada, as much as I know, came from Zurich. During the war, a few poets, painters and composers founded the *Cabaret Voltaire*. It was directed by Hugo Ball with the help of Richard Hülsenbeck, Hans Arp, Emmy Hennings and a few other international artists. Their program was not exactly political but rather modernist-futurist. … Hülsenbeck brought Dada to Berlin, where it immediately became politicized. The atmosphere was different."[26]

The situation certainly was different in Germany, with loss of the war, revolution, severe inflation, and unemployment, art—especially in its Dada form—could not help but reflect

[25] "Dada Slogans, Berlin, 1919," *Theories of Modern Art: A Sourcebook by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 376.

[26] George Grosz, *George Grosz: An Autobiography* (Originally published as *Ein kleines Ja und ein grosses Nein*), trans. Nora Hodges (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1983), 133.

the social and political crisis. In a document written by Richard Huelsenbeck and Raoul

Hausmann, acting as the "Dadaist revolutionary central council," Dadaism in Berlin

polemically offers its demands, most of which are social and political. They write:

> What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany?
> I. *Dadaism demands:*
>> 1) The international revolutionary union of all creative and
>> intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism;
>> 2) The introduction of progressive unemployment through
>> comprehensive mechanization of every field of activity. Only by
>> unemployment does it become possible for the individual to achieve
>> certainty as to the truth of life and finally become accustomed to
>> experience;
>> 3) The immediate expropriation of property (socialization) and the
>> communal feeding of all; further, the erection of cities of light, and
>> gardens which will belong to society as a whole and prepare man for a
>> state of freedom. ...[27]

Huelsenbeck goes on to say that this programmatic statement was important to Berlin

Dada because "in it Dada turns decisively away from the speculative, in a sense loses its

metaphysics and reveals its understanding of itself as an expression of this age which is

primarily characterized by machinery and the growth of civilization."[28]

As we have seen, "The Laws of Painting" was as much about repudiating

Expressionism as developing a program for a new art. In many ways, it can be said that

Berlin Dada—at least in terms of its ideological pronouncements—wanted little to do with

art; what it wanted was a revolution in the life world that would bring about a destruction

of the old order. This rhetoric of destruction and creation, of delegitimizing the old in order

to clear the path for the new, is as old as the avant-garde itself; we may even consider it to

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[27] Richard Huelsenbeck, "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism," trans. Ralph Manheim, *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* 2nd Ed., ed. Robert Motherwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 41-2.

[28] Ibid., 42.

be one of the defining characteristics of the avant-garde. Writing about the Russian avant-gardes of Suprematism and Constructivism, but in terms generally applicable, Susan Buck-Morss sums up this new time consciousness: "When the avant-garde proclaimed 'The future is our only goal,' they were expressing a desire to break radically from past art in its traditional forms, but what was to come remained an open category."[29] As discussed above, this radical consciousness of its own futurity was something that the avant-garde inherited from modernity, what Harold Rosenberg famously called "the tradition of the new."

The exaltation of originality within modernism not only meant the cultivation of novelty and uniqueness, but also the radical idea that each artistic novelty be a new beginning. "More than a rejection or dissolution of the past," as Rosalind, Krauss writes, "avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth."[30] Likewise modernism conceived itself as a rupture from the past and tradition, but perhaps more importantly, each successive movement within modernism reenacted such a rupture, distinguishing itself from whatever –ism preceded it, declaring itself the new beginning while at the same time paradoxically prophesying the end in its very becoming the last and total work of art, creating, in a sense, a new tradition based on the negation of the very category of tradition. Think of Kasimir Malevich's claims with Suprematism to have discovered the "zero point" of representation, or the necessary destruction of artistic tradition advocated by the Futurists , or Aleksandr Rodchenko's affirmation of the end of

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[29] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 48.

[30] Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 157.

painting in his 1921 monochrome canvases. "The modern tradition," writes Antoine

Compagnon, "is a tradition that has turned against itself, and this paradox bespeaks the fate

of aesthetic modernity, which is contradictory in itself; it both affirms and denies art,

simultaneously proclaiming its life and death, its rise and fall."[31]

 While Grosz and his compatriots in many ways participated in the rhetoric of

creative destruction that was such a vital part of avant-garde modernism, we see one

glaring difference in "The Laws of Painting," something that strikes the attentive reader as

different and strange, something that seems to go against the grain of modernism. The

"historical materialist painting" called for by the Dadaists will rely on traditional

representational practices, not on the development of a new visual language: "Painting has

as its object: darkness, light, bodies, color; figure and ground, distance and nearness,

motion and calm. Perspective is the rein and helm of painting . . . Plasticity requires a

knowledge of the rules of the shadow, the mathematics of the body, and each is ensured by

geometry."[32] These sound less like the words of avant-garde artists and more like those of

an academician. Within the context of artistic modernism, they strike us as being heretical

and reactionary, a rejection of the progressive realization of pure art (via abstraction) that

seemed to be the *raison d'être* of modernism. How does this call to traditional forms of

representation fit with the radical aims of these artists? In more general terms, how does

traditionalism play a critical role within modernism?

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[31] Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, trans. Franklin Philip (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xiv.

[32] Grosz, et. al., 698.

Historical Materialist Painting: Grosz and Dix

In the work of Grosz, we see a transition from his earlier, Futurist-inspired expressionism, as seen in a works like *Metropolis,* to the hardened, descriptive qualities of paintings like *Pillars of Society*. Trading the inferno-like visual cacophony of the earlier work, with its chaotic and violent tumult of bodies, buildings, and street signs, Grosz's lines in *Pillars of Society* become crisper, and his colors become clearer, presenting the viewer with a view of those in control of the Weimar Republic unclouded by Modernist abstraction and stylization. The Nazi war profiteer in the foreground holds a sword and drinks his beer (perhaps a reference to Hitler's failed "Beer Hall Putsch" of 1923), his head opened and overflowing with thoughts of war. Behind him is a journalist, wearing a chamber pot as a hat and carrying a palm frond, the traditional symbol of martyrdom used ironically by Grosz to represent the self-righteousness of the uncritical news media. To his left is a fat, well-dressed leader of the Social Democrats, carrying the flag and a placard that reads, "Socialism is work." Emerging from his opened head is a steaming pile of excrement. Behind these three is a right-wing minister, proclaiming the virtue of the Freikorp's violent quashing of the 1919 Communist revolution, which was supported by the new Social Democratic government. Grosz represents in the most brutal and ugly ways the hypocrisy and corruption of power in Weimar Germany's so-called democracy.

Employing critical nods to Kirchner's Dresden and Berlin street scenes, Grosz produced a number of paintings, drawings, and prints that depict the urban environment in a remarkable multitude of styles. Like Dix, Grosz's aesthetic materialism developed into a stylistic pluralism that functioned as an immanent reaction to the content being addressed in any given work; urban life could be expressed as much in the chaos of Cubo-futurist

fragmentation as in the calculated, cool observational qualities of an almost medieval

detailed precision. In 1925, one year after the implementation of the Dawes Plan, which

brought about a temporary economic stabilization of the Weimar Republic, Grosz painted

his *Street Scene, Berlin*. Verists like Grosz and Dix were being increasingly criticized in the

Communist press for not depicting the working class in a positive enough light. Needless to

say, this period also marks the beginnings of both artists souring attitude towards the

Communist party, and Grosz's contributions to Communist journals and papers became

fewer as time went by.[33] In this work, Grosz presents his vision of the Berlin street,

identified as a corner near the train station at Friedrichstraße. In it he represents the type

of microcosm of the class divisions in Weimar society that had become the thematic

cornerstone of Verist practice. In the left foreground, an aloof man in a suit and tie,

carrying a cane and wearing a fedora, haughtily passes a blind war cripple selling matches.

In a telling detail, he holds a seemingly unlit cigarette in his left hand, and the proximity of

his fingers to those of the matchseller, which hold a box of matches, could represent a

transaction; nonetheless, by not looking at the war cripple, the man with hat and cane

maintains a cool separation from reality. Behind them an elegant woman walks by,

crossing paths with a cigar smoking fat man whose head has more in common

physiologically with a bullfrog than a human. He seems to carry a small purse or bag in his

visible hand, a rich man perhaps on his way to the bank with the day's profits. Others pass

by, but their faces are indistinct, and no one shares anything in common but the space they

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[33] For a detailed discussion of Grosz' relationship with the Communist Party, see Barbara
McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to
1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), particularly chapters 2 and 3 for an
account of Grosz's politics during the Weimar Republic.

inhabit and through which they pass. With its cool, almost flat technique and washed out colors, Grosz gives us a powerful image of the specific forms of urban alienation of his time.

While one may rightfully contend that implicit criticism of society and urban life is also present in Expressionist city views, most notably those of Kirchner, one can also say that the Expressionists' criticisms were tempered by a sheer giddiness of overwhelming sensation exhibited in their lurid colors and formal distortions. Whatever implicit social criticism might exist in Expressionism, it plays a subsidiary role to the primary task of subjective, emotional expression. And what may be an initial suspicion of conservatism on the part of Grosz when placed next to Kirchner's abstraction may however give way to a deeper understanding of the differences between their moments and their aims. Indeed, the task of Grosz is quite different; whereas Kirchner may have intended to express something of his own alienation in the face of society, perhaps in the hopes of transcending it through his art, Grosz do not hold fast to such illusions. To the contrary, Grosz wanted to present something about the specific forms of alienation within society, while doing so with a familiar, traditional, even boring style, perhaps in order to say something about the limits of the sort of subjective expression engendered by expressionism, particularly in a medium that is based (more so than any other medium) on conventionalized, historical, and relatively unchanged practices of applying pigment to a surface with a brush. Grosz acknowledges that tradition rather than rejecting it, and, in doing so (inadvertently perhaps), he makes an argument that goes deeper than a criticism of avant-gardism and expressionism, an argument that confronts the task of painting and any promise of aesthetic transcendence. What may at first seem like reactionary realism comes to seem more like a highly self-conscious effort to place within his own art the limits placed on the

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value and even the possibility of subjective expression in a society that ten years prior seemed hell-bent on destroying as many of those subjectivities as quickly and unflinchingly as possible and that persisted to do so, albeit in more insidious and indirect ways through economic and political exploitation.

In 1931, just two years before the National Socialist seizure of power, Grosz wrote "Among Other Things, a Word for German Tradition," an essay that provides an even more forceful appeal for a return to tradition than "The Laws of Painting." In it, Grosz makes a direct appeal for artists to look to the German Medieval Masters in order to produce paintings that could embody the social and political upheavals of the contemporary moment. Grosz writes, "The art of our time is pale. A child with an overgrown head and horned-rim glasses. Anemic and very contemplative . . . a proper big-city stay-at-home. It is obvious from his looks that he broods a lot. Estranged from nature and reality, he creates from within himself exact circles and mathematical-looking figures. And takes all of this terribly seriously. Observers from a later time will smirk in genuine astonishment at what today's clever propaganda has passed off to the gullible people as the 'latest' art."[34] Not wanting to be misunderstood as a classicist, Grosz writes that it is impossible to live today as "an Old Dutch Master. But in this faithless and materialistic time one should use paper and slates to show people the devilish mug concealed in their own faces." Calling on artists to confront their time as artists did in the past, Grosz implores them to "tear down the storehouse of ready-mades and all the manufactured junk and show the ghostly nothing behind them. Political convulsions will [502] influence us powerfully. Do not fear looking

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[34] George Grosz, "Among Other Things, a Word for German Tradition," Don Reneau, trans., in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, et. al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 501–02.

back to your ancestors. Look at them, [Hans] Multscher, Bosch, Bruegel, . . . and [Albrecht] Altdorfer. Why then the usual pilgrimage to the philistine French Mecca? Why not return to our ancestors and set forth a German tradition?"[35]

The artist whose work has come to embody this turn to a specifically German tradition in the 1920s is Otto Dix. Dix's working method in oil and tempera glazes and his highly crystallized paintings showed such a pronounced debt to the German Old Masters that Grosz affectionately nicknamed him "Otto Hans Baldung Dix," after Hans Baldung Grien, one of the late medieval artists in which Dix was most interested. Although not a signatory of "The Laws of Painting," Dix was closely associated and exhibited with the Berlin Dadaists, and likewise, his work shows a similar transition from Dada stylistics to the hardened realism of the New Objectivity, as evidenced in a comparison between *The Skatplayers* of 1920 and *Salon I* of 1921. The former includes elements of collage, popular among the Berlin Dadaists, and is painted in a crude, flat style. The happy-go-lucky appearance of the card game is belied by the grotesque assemblages of the players' bodies, their monstrous collections of makeshift prosthetics of wood, metal, and other materials, some of which are collaged onto the surface of the painting, like the jaw of the figure on the right, heightening their added-on, artificial effect, while below the table, the wooden peg legs of the players blend almost without notice with the legs of the charis on which they sit. *Salon I*, on the other hand, represents one of Dix's earliest efforts to produce a smoother, more traditionalized realism, but one not devoid of acerbic caricature. Seated around a table in a darkened parlor boredly awaiting their next transactions are a group of prostitutes, in many ways no less grotesque than the card players. Their differences are

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[35] Ibid., 501-02.

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less markers of individuality and more a representation of the variety of decadent rot that their makeup cannot conceal.   Here, the smooth, detailed, Renaissance-inspired technique that will become the hallmark of Dix's work by the mid-1920s is employed to dramatically represent these prostitutes as the ciphers of Weimar social decay.

In a 1927 statement published in the *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, Dix offers his opinion of modern art: "In recent years, one catchphrase has motivated the present generation of artists. 'Find new forms of expression,' reads the slogan. But whether such a thing is possible seems to me doubtful. Anyone who looks at the paintings of the Old Masters, or immerses himself in the study of their works, will surely agree with me."[36] Dix then offers up what can be characterized as an encapsulation of the broader philosophy behind the New Objectivity, with its return to the concreteness of the visible and tangible object: "For me, the object always remains primary, and the form is first shaped through the object." If form is shaped by content then the two of them are inextricably linked, two sides of the same coin, and it is thus false to separate them from one another. Indeed, the form is only worked out in the act of representing the content or subject of the work. The form is not proscribed from outside; it develops out of the struggle to bring meaning to content. As such, form plays a pivotal role in how the *what* of art comes to mean. As evidenced in this quotation, Dix rejected modernism's "cult of the new" and the primacy of "purified" form at the expense of legible subject matter.

One of Dix's most scathing paintings is the *War Triptych*, worked over by the artist during the final years of the Weimar Republic when he was a Professor at the Art Academy

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[36] Quoted in Dietrich Schubert, *Otto Dix mit Selbstzeugnissen and Bilddokumenten* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 93-94.

in Dresden. Dix was ousted from his post in 1933 for painting works that "damaged the moral well-being of the German Folk."[37] The *War Triptych* is undoubtedly one of the works that led to this negative assessment. Dix had not produced any major works on the theme of World War I since his 1924 series of etchings simply titled *Der Krieg (The War).* In the triptych of the same title, the viewer is faced with the horrendous and gruesome truths of trench life, the kind witnessed by Dix himself as a machine-gunner on the front lines. Dix paints a decimated, post-apocalyptic landscape strewn with rotting and blown-apart corpses. Some gnarled tree limbs entwined with a skeleton arch across the top portion of the panel. The skeleton points to the right, where the rotting legs of an upside-down dead soldier, riddled with bullet holes, are jutting up towards the blackened sky. His arm is outstretched, and a bullet hole is in the center of his contorted palm. As Dennis Crockett points out, the pointing skeleton and the inverted body, complete with "stigmata" are quotations from the crucifixion scene in Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece.*[38] Dix quite literally inverts the religious message of Grünewald's altarpiece though, the figure of John the Baptist pointing to the crucified Christ in a message of salvation (brought full force in the *Resurrection* panel) is traded for an upside-down skeleton pointing to an upside down rotting corpse, neither of whom have any human markers of individual identity. The senselessness and meaninglessness of death in the Great War cannot, in the end, be made palatable by any spiritual atonement or promises of eternal bliss in the kingdom of heaven. In Grünewald, we are shown that no matter how gory and horrific Christ's death was, it lead to the blindingly glorious resurrection, in which the pus-filled markers of death are

[37] Ibid., 106.

[38] Crockett, 96.

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replaced by precious rubies in Grünewald's depiction of the spiritual triumph *over* death.

For Dix, however, the death of the soldiers offers no such atonement; their deaths will not

be negated in resurrection. Rather, they will remain the most base of material. On a whole,

the scene's horror might only be rivaled by some of Bosch's Hell scenes, but unlike Bosch,

Dix depicts a very real hell on Earth. The viewer is taken from left to right on a visual

chronology through the stages of trench warfare. In the left one, soldiers march toward

their deaths, depicted in the central panel. In the right, a ghostly figure of the artist pulls

the lifeless body of one of his comrades up and stares defiantly at the viewer. Dix has also

incorporated a predella panel at the bottom, depicting soldiers lying in the trenches. It is

ambiguous as to whether they are dead or sleeping, but their green skin points to the

former. In a painting already rich with art-historical references, from the triptych form to

the oil and tempera technique, to the quotations from Grünewald, Dix includes another in

this panel. It directly references Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ*, in which the grotesque body of

Christ is shown gangrenous and stiffened. As Jay winter reminds us, Dostoyevsky's *The*

Idiot, Prince Myshkin almost lost his faith after laying eyes on Holbein's picture.[39]   For

Winter, the gruesome, horrific representation of the war points to a very modern

sensibility of remembrance and mourning prevalent among the artists and writers who

actually experienced battle firsthand.[40] But, if Dix's work is modern in the content of its

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[39] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 163.

[40] Ibid., 2-5. According to Winter, within the realm of artistic and cultural representation and remembrance following the Great War, there is a rupture between the traditional narratives of war—usually filled with concepts and images of glory, heroism, and hallowed death through patriotic sacrifice—and a new modern, critical sensibility that focused on the horrors of war. I would call the modern conception of mourning a materialist one, simply because it points to, often with graphic detail, the very real material conditions of

remembrance of the war, in its truth-telling gruesome candor, it does so to bring it into

direct contrast with the almost excessively traditional form it takes. This is what is most

fascinating and powerful about Dix's work: it does not choose between the false dichotomy

of modern or traditional, but rather forces the two together in a dialectical tension that

problematizes both. While it may first seem like an archaic formal device, the triptych form

presents a necessary condensation of space and time; it presents a historical totality, but on

that is nonetheless structured as separate episodes with their own structural autonomy

and individual images. Beyond being simply a citational mode that looks to the distant

past, the triptych becomes a formal device for presenting the gaps of history and

experience that might otherwise go unseen. Thus, it becomes one of the varied tools

employed by Dix in the construction of his critical, dialectical realism.

Dix exhibited the work shortly after its completion in 1932 at the Akademie der

bildende Künste in Berlin, allowing for a prominent—albeit short-lived—public

reception.[41] Compared to Wilhelm Sauter's 1935 *Heroes' Shrine*—a painting that seems to

be the Nazis' direct rebuttal to Dix's *War Triptych*, I hope we can see how very different the

radical traditionalism of Dix is from the sentimentalized memorialization of trench warfare

produced by Nazi-sanctioned artists. Sauter presents the viewer with a series of Heroes, all

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life and death in the trenches without recourse to abstract "euphemisms." According to
Winter, modern memory "describes the creation of a new language of truth-telling about
war in poetry, prose, and the visual arts," while more traditional forms of remembrance
"were distilled from a set of . . . 'traditional values'—classical, romantic, or religious and
ideas widely disseminated in both elite and popular culture before and during the war" (2-
3).

[41] Peters, 24.

survivors of the war. Even with their injuries they retain their human dignity becoming

something more than human as the saviors of their nation.

Critical Realism: A Brechtian Perspective

The dialectical conception of form and content is something common among many

avant-garde, Marxist-oriented artists and writers in the interwar years, perhaps most

noteworthy in the theoretical writings of Brecht. Dix's statement about the *how* and the

what of his painting shares much in common with Bertolt Brecht's conception of the

dialectics of form and content formulated in his "On the Formalistic Character of the

Theory of Realism," part of the "Expressionism Debate" that took place among Marxist-

oriented thinkers in the interwar years.[42] As Brecht writes,

> Anyone who saw me at work would think I was only interested in questions
> of form. I make these models because I wish to represent reality. As far as
> my lyric poetry goes, there too I take a realistic point of view. But I feel that
> one would have to proceed with extreme caution if one wished to write
> about it. On the other hand, there would be a great deal to be learnt about
> realism in the novel and drama."[43]

No doubt, Grosz, Dix and Brecht would consider themselves to be realist artists, albeit not

in the Lukácsian sense of the term that foregrounded the nineteenth century's realist

aesthetic. Both want to represent reality as *totally* as possible, with as much *truth* as

possible. For this reason, though, their realism is anything but transparent in the sense

that we normally think of realism as straightforward mimesis, art as the mirror of nature.

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[42] For a collection of these texts with a valuable discussion of the debate over the legacy of
Expressionism in Weimar Germany by Fredric Jameson, see Theodor Adorno, et. al.,
Aesthetics and Politics, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et. al. (London: Verso, 2007).

[43] Bertolt Brecht, "On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism," in Adorno, et. al.,
Aesthetics and Politics, 71.

Instead, with Grosz, Dix, and Brecht a different idea of realism was developed, one that is not about realism as a kind of mimetic transparency of form, but rather a realism about how form or functions in relation to content in order to produce meaning or truth. This is not the same thing as Roland Barthes' "reality effect," in which a sense of the real is produced—or constructed—through the rhetorical working of a sort of ekphrasis, a close description of the visual.[44] Much more self-conscious than achieving the "effect of reality," Dix and Brecht use a multiplicity of formal strategies in order to point to and hone the critical truth-content of reality. As Brecht goes on to write,

> If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then—if there is to be any mutual understanding—one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms. Formalism on the one side-content on the other. That is surely too primitive and metaphysical. Looked at purely in terms of aesthetics, the concept presents no special difficulties. For instance if someone makes a statement which is untrue—or irrelevant—merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist. But we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form.[45]

What Brecht points to is the absurdity of considering form as something separate from content. Rather, form and content are interconnected dialectically, and I think Dix is working out something similar. Despite his emphasis on content (he was perhaps, at least in public pronouncements, less self-referential and theoretically-oriented than Brecht), he does point to form and content's interconnectedness. Content and form are linked, since the subject dictates and gives rise to the form. The subject—chosen by the artist—will itself delineate its proper form. In a sense, the subject guides the style chosen by the artist,

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[44] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141-48.

[45] Brecht, 71-2. Earlier in the essay, in a discussion of his working method, Brecht tellingly states, "I learnt more … from the paintings of the peasant Breughel than from treatises on realism" (70).

not the other way around. These artists have in common, irrespective of their very different individual media, a stylistic pluralism. For them, realism is not a monolithic, unitary formal system, but rather a guiding principal for artistic creation. Realism is not a style in its own right, but a philosophy of how art comes to express reality's truth-content, which for critical realists like Grosz and Dix, was more often than not disguised behind the harmonious semblance of the given. What is at stake in this distinction is realism's capacity to be critical, and so as to not slip into a sort of objective, journalistic reportage, the diverse tactics it must employ in order to remain critical. One encounters a pluralistic diversity of form in Grosz and Dix, not only across the span of their careers, but even in individual works. The stylistic variety and critical caricature one finds in Grosz's paintings are certainly not markers of traditional realism; nonetheless, they bring critical attention to certain elements in the picture in order to unmask a social reality. Likewise, Dix's "radical traditionalism" used a variety of formal techniques, from collage and naïve, crude painting to the stylistic virtuosity of the German Renaissance, all of which served to heighten the discontinuities and ruptures that are often masked over in the dominant mode of historical memory. In these instances, the work of both artists looks back to the formal logic of Dadaist photomontage, such as the work of Hannah Höch, which ripped images from the continuity of the popular illustrated newspaper, putting them to work in new, non-linear constellations of meaning, ones in which the artist puts critical agency back into the eyes— and mind—of the viewer.

With specific reference to Dix, but equally applicable to Grosz, Olaf Peters rightly points out that stylistic plurality was not "simply the expression of an almost naïve passion for the real," but instead "obeyed a highly differentiated criteria and always appears to

have been grounded in function."[46] The dialectical and critical conception of realism acts as

a sort of *bricolage* or *montage*. A work like Grosz's *Eclipse of the Sun*, for example, is

anything but realist in the conventional sense of the term. Painted in 1926 during the brief

period of relative economic stability that came as a result of the Dawes Plan, the work

exemplifies the complex dissection of accepted reality undertaken by Grosz.   Seated

around a table that juts toward the viewer across the center of the composition sit the

vaunted leaders of the Weimar Republic. President Paul von Hindenburg, garbed in his

general's uniform bedecked with an array of medals, looms large, and his bloated red head

is crowned with a laurel wreath. Surrounding him are his well-dressed but headless

ministers who busy themselves with paperwork as the elder statesman parrots the words

whispered in his ear by a military industrialist who carries a bundle of weapons under his

arm. Arranged before Hindenburg are a striped cross, in the red, white, and black of the

German imperial flag, alongside his bloodied officer's sword. At the edge of the table

closest to the viewer stands a donkey wearing blinders and eating what appear to be

ballots out of a trough. Below the table is a skeleton along with what seems to be a grated

window, through which a person desperately gazes with their hands grasping the bars. In

the upper left corner of the canvas is the sun of the title, eclipsed by the dollar sign. The

result of this horrific gathering is made visible in the darkened and burning cityscape that

rises up in the background of the fragmented space: capitalism driven only by the

accumulation of profit is the primary destructive force in Weimar society. As Barbara

McCloskey describes it, "*Eclipse of the Sun* assailed Weimar's era of stability as a contrived

fiction promulgated by American capital and a corrupt German order beholden to

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[46] Olaf Peters, "Intransigent Realism: Otto Dix Between the World Wars," *Otto Dix* , ed. Olaf
Peters (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2010), 19.

militarism, big industry, and religion."[47] Blending formal diversity with an almost

allegorical mode of representation, Grosz develops a strong and condensed critical vision of

his society. At the same time, Grosz's dissection sets up a visual model of critical thought

for the viewer willing to see, interpret, and assemble the details into a meaningful whole.

The critical artist picks and chooses from the history of forms those that suit the

content best. Self-conscious and reflexive, he or she is always aware that in art, form and

style are what mark the path to critical truth and a fuller picture of reality. As Gene Ray has

described it with regard to Brecht's theories and the broader aim of critical art in interwar

Germany, the tactics of dialectical realism "show society, not as a static and naturalized fate

or second nature, but as a field of forces and processes in motion, unfolding in time, subject

to development. The individual appears in such representations not just as a psychological

subject, but also as a nexus or ensemble of social relations that are historical and therefore

changeable."[48] The turn to tradition and stylistic plurality in dialectical realism is thus

anything but a "return to order" or a conservative reaction to the supposed aesthetic

radicalism of modern art, as Buchloh argues. What we see in these gaps, discontinuities,

and ruptures in the continuity of the work are constitutive of a sort of allegorical

conception of meaning, one that uses form to break up the totality of the work of art in an

effort to critically examine the ruptures that are often masked over in the social totality.

By consciously working against the dominance of modernist abstraction, Weimar

works like Grosz and Dix's raise, through their subject matter and form, a compelling

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[47] Barbara McCloskey, *The Exile of George Grosz: Modernism, America, and the One World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 11.

[48] Gene Ray, "Dialectical Realism and Radical Commitments: Brecht and Adorno on Representing Capitalism," *Historical Materialism* 18 (2010), 7 (3-24).

statement about the political and social obligations of modern art and the artists who produced it. In a dialectical clash between an exalted, historical style and their contemporary, controversial subject matter these artists not only produced ambivalent and powerful critiques of their society, but also the modernist art that supposedly represented it. For these radical traditionalists, the focus on formal innovation and abstraction engendered by modernism's ceaseless chain of "-isms" had led to a denigration of the importance of material reality. Simply put, the *how* had become more important than the *what* of painting. As a mode of critique that tangibly brought forth a tradition that had been all but vanquished by modernism into what can be considered a dialectical relationship with the present critical moment, their radical traditionalism highlights the destruction of modernity's anti-traditional futurity and the modernist art with which it more often than not seemed complicit. Within the context of modernism, with its radical futurity and anti-foundationalism, the "realist turn" becomes not a naïve rejection of aesthetic modernism and the hope-filled, almost theological idea of the *Novum* in modernity, but a nuanced, knowing, and deeply referential critique of the Modern. It acknowledges its cynicism in relation to the contentious subject of "the new" by circumventing the experimentation of the prewar years. It seems to question the value of so much rapid change and experimentation in the arts, almost as if the heightened quest for newness and originality became a kind of tradition in its own right, even a parody of the radical sense of originality that had inaugurated modernism. What may have began as a utopian project of aesthetic and social liberation and revolution ended as its negative: the bored sense of newness for newness's sake. As a response, the dialectical realism of Grosz and Dix showed that art

could be engaged with material reality and even tradition while at the same time being

thoroughly of its time.

Chapter 2

Otto Dix's Third Reich Allegories and the Critical Redemption of Tradition

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In ever era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.
> —Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

How can a tradition be rescued from its seemingly imminent destruction in a moment of crisis? More importantly, if rescue is even a possibility, how does one prevent tradition from affirming the "conformism that is about to overpower it," as Benjamin writes, making it "a tool of the ruling classes"? How can the artist or thinker transform this fragile, rescued tradition into a critical statement without debasing it or severing its ties to the past from which it has been reclaimed? Benjamin's use of the word *tool* points to the ideological instrumentalization of tradition by the ruling classes in their quest for domination. As he writes elsewhere in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," recalling the image of soldiers carrying back to Rome the spoils from Jerusalem in the sculpted reliefs of the Triumphal Arch of Titus,

> Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great

minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. *There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.*[1]

Whatever we may think of the great artistic achievements of Western Civilization, much of their history serves as material reminder of the struggle for the accumulation of power and material wealth; every work of beauty has as its dark side the material conditions of existence that are bracketed off from it but from which it gains its sustenance. At a time when modernity seemed to have overcome the problem of tradition by negating it, a number of artists and thinkers associated with left-wing tendencies were thinking through its rift in historical consciousness. As David Pan points out, it is facile to assume that questions surrounding the value of myth, ritual, and tradition were the sole purview of Nazi ideology; many thinkers on the cultural and political left were also grappling with the ways in which tradition could be wrenched from the fascist conformism that was about to overpower it.[2]

How then, could tradition be wrested from instrumentalized conformity, from barbarism masquerading as culture, and be seized hold of and made anew as a revolutionary flash "at a moment of danger?" How could tradition be redeemed from the "taint" of barbarism that envelops it, saving it doubly from the history that has assured tradition's survival and its instrumentalization by reactionary forces?

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255. Emphasis added.

[2] David Pan, "The Struggle for Myth in the Nazi Period: Alfred Baeumler, Ernst Bloch, and Carl Einstein," *South Antlantic Review* vol. 65 no. 1 (Winter 2000), 41-57.

These are the sorts of questions that occupied Benjamin from the 1920s with his major work on allegory, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, until his final years before his suicide in 1940 and the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." I venture to suggest that similar questions were in Otto Dix's mind during his period of *inner emigration* in the twelve long years of the Third Reich, as he painted complicated religious allegories and historicized landscapes. Even during the 1920s, as we have already seen, Dix's work was seeking out ways to use the tradition of art as a critical tool in his representations of Weimar modernity. For Otto Dix, historical allegory provided a mode of artistic critique that responded to the tremendous political, social, and cultural upheavals of his time.

If, as Benjamin noted in his analysis of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, one of his first major published texts, "all genuine works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy,"[3] then perhaps Dix's paintings—if they are indeed authentic works—have as their sister the thought of Benjamin. Like twins separated at birth, the works of Dix and Benjamin bear witness to the same tumultuous period of German history from a similar critical perspective, one that, despite the continuing catastrophe that marked their moment in early twentieth century Europe, held strong to a belief in revolutionary hope. Despite the separations of different media—the visual arts and philosophy, respectively—the two

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[3] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," trans. Stanley Corngold, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 333. Originally published in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge,* 1924-1925. It is worth citing the passage that precedes this phrase, due to the richness of Benjamin's use of metaphor: "Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique seeks to discover siblings of the work of art. And all genuine works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy."

bodies speak to a shared experience of tragedy, disaster, and the faint hope for some future

redemption, one that nonetheless is thoroughly mediated by a vital relationship with the

past. As Benjamin noted in one of his strongest and most succinct critical statements on

progress, "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is

quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—

namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake."[4]

This chapter has at its heart the notion of rescue in a double sense. For one, it seeks

to analyze Dix's effort to recuperate a dying tradition in the face of modernity's violence by

making use of Benjamin's contribution to a critical theory of the ideas of progress and

historical linearity that were so essential to the modern project. If art serves as a material

condensation of social reality, then Dix's allegories, in their radical turn to tradition,

represent just such a revolutionary emergency break. To judge them according to the

standards dictated by modernism and its demand for progressive newness seems to miss

the point of what they are trying to do and, indeed, what Dix and his fellow Verist artists

had been trying to do since the early days of the Weimar Republic. However, much of the

art historical literature on Dix seems to do just that. For example, Linda McGreevy writes

that, "[h]is increasing use of old master technique crystallized his canvases, as can be seen

in his great triptychs, *Der Krieg* and *Der Grossstadt*, and in his numerous ironic portraits.

Their themes attest to the continued but mellowing presence of Critical Realism."[5] That

Dix's "Critical Realism" mellowed during the later Weimar years should be taken as a point

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[4] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-40*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 402.

[5] Linda McGreevy, *The Life and Works of Otto Dix: German Critical Realist* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981, 67.

of contention. I believe that this "crystallization" is actually one of the strongest critical

elements in Dix's art at this time; a time generally marked by what Hans Belting has called

"the invisible masterpiece," the quintessentially modern idea of art in the absolute that

characterized so much avant-garde experimentation during the modernist period.[6]

The critical and historical "shelving" of Dix's Third Reich works calls for the second

instance of rescue in this analysis, as it seeks to rescue these works from the historical

margins to which they have been relegated, as embarrassing examples of kitschy

acquiescence to Nazi cultural policy. Rather, like Benjamin did for Baroque mourning

plays, I want to show how Dix's use of allegory and tradition was a powerful and

historically specific critical statement. It is unarguable that Dix's adoption of the

Renaissance oil-and-tempera *Lasurtechnik* serves as a distancing device that makes his

work seem cooler and detached than it had been when he painted with oils on canvas. But

to read the distancing effect produced by Dix's technique as a loss of critical edge in his

work is to ignore the critical possibilities engendered by the very sensations of alienation

and disengagement that these works provide, all the while ignoring the fact that these

feelings were common negative effects of modern lived experience. Is it not a great

possibility that Dix's emphasis on surface in his turn towards tradition exhibits the

possibility of a sardonic critique of the "cult of surface" in Weimar modernity?[7]

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[6] Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. Helen Atkins (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

[7] For a discussion of the importance of surface in Weimar art and culture, see Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Dix's later reflected in 1965 upon his rather clinical approach to portraiture with these words: "You know, if one paints someone's portrait, one should not know him if possible. No knowledge! I do not want to know him at all, want only to see what is there, the outside. The inner follows by itself. It is reflected in the visible" (Quoted in McGreevy,

As discussed in Chapter 1, historical materialist painting had no place for the spiritualist *modus operandi* of the prewar avant-garde. To say that Dix's work from the late twenties into the years of the Third Reich due to its lack of programmatic adherence to his subjects and methods from the early twenties shows a total disregard for what was so foundational to critical realism; that is, its ability to adapt its critical methods to changing socio-historical circumstances. Indeed, if there is anything that marks the career of Dix, it is the seemingly never-ceasing change we witness when viewing work from the span of his life, from the cubist-inflected expressionism of the war years, to the crude painting and collage of his Berlin Dada phase, to his adoption of the mixed technique of the Old Masters and his increasing trend towards a more substantial traditionalism during the years of the Third Reich, to his final phase—from 1945 until his death in 1969—marked by a return to an exuberant, painterly expressionism. Dix, more so than any German artist of his time, and perhaps against his own statements about the value of experimentation, was a consummate experimenter. However, his experimentation was never simply for the sake of "finding new forms of expression." Rather, as discussed above, his chosen subject always dictated his stylistic and formal choices. His was not a willy-nilly exploration of the formal possibilities of painting, but rather a search for the best way to represent the truth of his subject in steadfast material form. Dix's experimentation is more the mark of a critical and

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67). For Dix, primary emphasis is placed on the exterior, surface qualities of what is painted, whether living or inanimate. Likewise, Dix emphasized the masterly surface of his paintings with the use of the hard-wrought and time-consuming glazing technique. It is hard not to read this as an instantiation of Weimar Germany's cult of the surface, while at the same time an illustration of New Objectivity's stance against psychologism and spirituality. From New Objectivity painting, to the store fronts of new department stores, to the critical analyses of theorists like Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, a whole new appreciation was being developed for the surfaces of things.

immanent engagement with the world rather than the disengaged formalist

experimentation characteristic of so much modernist art.

The Desert Grows

        From 1933 until 1945, Otto Dix (1891-1969) painted at least one allegory each year.

Dix's technique and style in painting these allegories mimicked that of the Old Masters,[8] as

he had done with increasing consistency in his paintings since the early 1920s. However,

he added to his practice a new citation of German Renaissance subject matter, imagery, and

most importantly, allegory as a means of expression. Visual allegories are the expression of

an idea through a seemingly unrelated image; the correspondence between the idea and

the image is based solely on convention; the meaning expressed by allegory bears an

external relationship to what is actually represented. There are various reasons for Dix's

choice to paint allegorical images. Most obvious is that Dix's more overtly socially critical

art fell victim to suppression by the Nazis' oppressive *Reichskulturkammer*, headed by

Reichsminister für Volksaufklärung (People's Enlightenment) *und Propaganda*, Josef

Goebbels.[9] As a result of the Nazi regime's efforts to cleanse German culture of its

"Bolshevik" degeneracy, Dix was stripped of his professorship at Dresden's Prussian

Academy in 1933, as well as banished from exhibiting or selling his work. Therefore, it was

necessary for him, in order to continue working, to hide his social criticisms behind

citational conceptions of Renaissance allegories. By 1933, Otto Dix, once the leader of the

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[8] For a detailed analysis of Dix's oil and tempera technique, see Bruce F. Miller, "Otto Dix
and His Oil-Tempera Technique," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74 (October
1987), 332-55.

[9] McGreevy, 2001, 369.

critical, left-wing part of the New Objectivity and the most sought after portraitist in Germany, was stripped of his rights to exhibit and sell his works by the Nazi regime. The reasons cited for his dismissal were common for artists deemed degenerate by the Nazi regime, summarized in the *Lehrverbot*, which forbade an artist from teaching. It reads, "Apart from the fact that some of your paintings are a gross offense to moral feelings and therefore a danger to the German people's moral regeneration, you have also painted pictures that are likely to impair the people's will to defend themselves."[10] Other deprivations the Nazi regime placed on artists included the *Ausstellungsverbot*, which forbade an artist from exhibiting his/her work, and the most severe of punishments, the *Mahlverbot*, which forbade an artist to even paint. To be cited with any of these restrictions was to be labeled *entartet*. Dix was spared only the *Mahlverbot*, being allowed to paint only for private commissions and for foreign sales.

Dix commented in 1966 on his dismissal from the Dresden Academy with these words: "I was informed that I was no longer to set foot in the academy. But I still had all of my work there. Nevertheless: I had to get out right away! In Saxony, things grew sinister: they're particularly fanatical there, on the one hand; and on the other, they're friendly, as it were."[11] The contradiction in this statement between the growing sinister fanaticism and the friendliness of the people of Dresden at this time is ambiguous. Perhaps Dix meant that the people of Saxony, although polite in a provincial sense, were at the same time more prone to the developing sway of Nazi ideology. Following his abrupt dismissal, Dix

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[10] Fritz Löffler, *Otto Dix: Life and Work*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 94.

[11] Quoted in Karcher, 169.

occupied a studio in Löbtau, a working-class district of Dresden. Shortly thereafter, due to

the growing fanaticism in Dresden, as well as pressure from friends concerned for his

safety, Dix moved himself and his family to rural Lake Constance, in Germany's southwest

corner.   Schloss-Randegg, a property owned by Dix's brother-in-law, Dr. Hans Koch,

became the temporary home of Dix, his wife Martha, and their children Ursus and Nelly.

According to Eva Karcher, the years spent at Schloss-Randegg were difficult for Dix;

he was far removed from the city life that was his artistic subject throughout the

twenties.[12] In 1936, Dix and his family moved permanently to a newly built house

overlooking Lake Constance, in Hemmenhofen, near Switzerland, and although their level

of physical comfort increased, the psychological burdens of *inner emigration* continued for

Dix. Isolation from the urban milieu that served as his muse, as well as from other artists,

and the stifling label of degeneracy were especially hard for Dix. His situation was similar

to that of most of the artists who made the decision to stay in Germany during this

dangerous and difficult period. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt describes the dire situation of

degenerate artists during the Nazi regime:

> Many more of them survived than one would have guessed, but they survived
> in isolation, cut off from other artists, unable to communicate with their
> friends, living constantly under the threat of the concentration camp,
> deprived of the tools of their trade and of space in which to work. They went
> underground. [. . .] But this isolation from other painters and from any kind
> of appreciative public had a paralyzing effect: a damming up of the sources of
> creation.[13]

Like many artists who remained in Germany, Dix did not disappear into total obscurity

during the years of the Third Reich. However, his direct and exacting critical eye was

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[12] Ibid., 170.

[13] Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 84.

irrevocably changed with the advent of Nazism and its control over all forms of cultural

production. Fortunately, Dix was able to smuggle art supplies from neighboring

Switzerland, where he was even able to exhibit some of his work.[14] But the loss of his

specifically German, urban subject and audience dealt a dire blow to Dix's creative drive, at

least according to most of the biographical literature. However, Dix remained as prolific as

ever, and while his work changed due to constraints unimaginable a few years earlier, any

notion that his creativity was stifled is belied by the quantity and variety of works he

produced during this difficult period.

In contrast to the loss of an appreciative audience, eight works from Dix's oeuvre

were included in the infamous *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, which began its tour through

Germany and Austria in 1937, greeted by record numbers of museum goers—one of the

great ironies of Nazi cultural ideology.[15] The works selected for the exhibition were

crammed together on the walls, inflammatory placards and statements surrounding them,

and pamphlets were printed showing art works beside medical images of physical

abnormalities for the purpose of drawing comparison between "degenerate" art and what

the Nazis viewed as physical "degeneracy," both of which were to be eradicated. Thus, in

this context, Dix *was* exhibited to the public (more people saw his work in *Entartete Kunst*

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[14] McGreevy, 2001, 374.

[15] Peter Selz, *Beyond the Mainstream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 180. All in all, the Nazis confiscated from Germany's public collections 16,000 works by 1,400 artists. 650 of these works were exhibited in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, which began its tour in Munich's Archaeological Institute. As Selz points out, "the original *Degenerate Art* exhibition turned out to be the forerunner of the big museum blockbusters, and its attendance record has still not been equaled."

than had ever seen it before), albeit humiliated as a degenerate, his work decried as the

product of "Cultural Bolshevism."[16]

At a time when many artists either went into exile or stopped producing work

altogether, Dix remained in Germany, choosing *inner emigration*, and continued to create

drawings, etchings and paintings. However, to remain in Germany and still create art, Dix

had to change artistic direction. His allegories are the result of a shift away from the overt

criticism of bourgeois decadence and warfare that made him famous as a leader of the New

Objectivity towards a veiled criticism of the Nazi regime and its cultural policies; Dix's new

direction took the form of a criticism concealed within art historical prototypes. His

rejection of modernism's compulsive "search for the new" was the catalyst for his chosen

stylistic vocabulary as well as the choice of subjects he depicted. Dix's interest in the Old

Masters not only shows his skepticism towards the artist's ability to find these "new

forms," but also represents a rejection of modernism's intensive futurity. Indeed, the

optimistic hope of much modernist practice had been time and again dashed by the brutal

realities of experience in interwar Germany. Nowhere else in Dix's art is his intense

interest in the work of the Old Masters more evident than in his allegories from the era of

the Third Reich.

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[16] Not all who attended *Entartete Kunst* were supporters of Nazi ideology. For certain, some people attended the exhibition knowing that it may well have been their last opportunity to see the work of Germany's modern masters. As Lehmann-Haupt writes, "The exhibition attracted huge crowds, not only party members and masses of the curious and the casual but also large groups of friends of modern art, who could do no more than pass through the halls in utter silence with faces of stone" (80). Interestingly, Alfred H. Barr, then director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, attended some of the earlier, smaller exhibitions that led up to *Entartete Kunst*. In writing about this experience, Barr mentioned the removal of "Paintings by five of the best known artists in Germany" (McGreevy, 2001, 365).

The iconographic and formal tension in Dix's allegories between full-fledged historicism and a concern for critiquing his contemporary moment begs a new consideration of their significance, one that views them not as anomalies created out of necessity, but as important commentary on German culture at one of its most crucial moments. After all, Dix's allegories, in their seeming antimodernism, invoke the modern simply by their sharp contrast to it. Even those artists, like Dix, who rejected the aesthetic aims of modernism are to some degree modernist, given their thorough critical engagement with their contemporary moment; even if veiled in historical subjects and forms, Dix's work is of its time as much as any produced in the twentieth century. Even if it is difficult to see any straightforward radicality in Dix's traditionalism, its non-programmatic variety should give pause. From the invocation of romantic *Erlebniskunst* to the crystalline Renaissance technique, from the structure of the Baroque to ironic quotation of Nazi kitsch, Dix's polystylism found its logic more in Dada montage than in any adherence to tradition for tradition's sake. In the case of Dix, allegory is not symptomatic of historicized escapism, or simply a pragmatic means to hide his criticisms, but a powerful tool of resistance and critique during a period of unprecedented flux and crisis. If, as Walter Benjamin put it, allegory expressed "[e]verything about history that, from the very beginning, had been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful,"[17] then Dix's paintings from the Third Reich serve as powerful expressions of the destructive character of history.

Already in 1932, while still in Dresden, Dix began working on what would be the first of his allegorical paintings, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Dix paints the personifications of the sins as a macabre carnival troupe tumbling in a chaotic parade

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[17] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, John Osborne, trans. (London: Verso, 1998), 166.

diagonally across the canvas from right background to left foreground, with its glimpse of

apocalyptic ruin beyond. In the front is an old crone – the personification of Avarice --

carrying a masked child-like figure on her back, the personification of Envy. Interestingly,

the Hitler-like mustache was not added to Envy's mask until 1946, after the danger of Nazi

retribution had passed.[18] Behind Avarice and Envy are Death, with his heart torn out,

wearing a skeletal costume and carrying a scythe; Anger as a demonic beast carrying a

knife; and Lust, a brightly clothed woman who grabs her exposed right breast and

lasciviously licks her syphilitic lips. Behind Lust is a rotund child, carrying a pretzel and

wearing a large pot-like mask. He is Gluttony. To his left is a figure wearing a huge head-

shaped mask, held up with its hand, which pokes out of the mask's ear. This enormous

head, with its nose in the air and an anus for its mouth, is Pride.

Inscribed on the ruined wall behind the figures is a quote from Nietzsche's *Thus

Spoke Zarathustra*, a text of which Dix was particularly fond.[19] It reads: "The Desert Grows.

Woe to him who conceals Deserts."[20] The inclusion of a quotation from Nietzsche is a

reflection of Dix's admiration for the philosopher, whose ideas were to Dix, "the only true

philosophy."[21] The quotation adds a modern element to an otherwise historical

representation, and leaves no doubt that Dix was criticizing his own contemporary

moment, rather than making a generalized statement about wrongdoing; it becomes a very

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[18] Karcher, 2002, 170.

[19] In 1912, Dix created a large plaster bust of Nietzsche (whereabouts unknown). Also, Dix took a book of Nietzsche's writing—along with the Bible—to the trenches in World War I.

[20] Keith Hartley and Sarah O'Brien Twohig, "Schloß Waldegg and Hemmenhofen," in *Otto Dix* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 209. The original German is, "Die Wüste wächst, weh dem, der Wüsten birgt!"

[21] Quoted in Karcher, 1987, 8.

direct warning to a society on a course toward ruin. Both Nietzsche and Dix use historical

forms – allegory for Dix, parable for Nietzsche – to critique the contemporary.

Dix's use of carnival performers as allegorical personifications has its prototypes in

sixteenth century Northern painting and Medieval folk culture, especially in the work of

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1530-1569). Bruegel's *The Combat Between Carnival and Lent*

(1559, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) is a representation of the sort of celebration

that took place on the eve of Lent, but it is also an allegorical representation of the battle

between vice and virtue, worldly folly and divine piety. Dix's carnival figures act in much

the same allegorical way; under the indifferent, decadent, and cynical surface of Weimar

culture dwelt the ever-growing threat of Nazi power. Interestingly, Bruegel leaves the

battle's outcome ambiguous. For Dix, however, there is no battle. In a world where virtue

is already decimated, the Sins need only parade through its ruins in their triumphant

march. For James van Dyke, Dix's invocation of folk and traditional cultural forms may

represent an attempt to mark out a critical space within the "artistic terrain" that was being

quickly demarcated by Nazism, in order to overturn "hegemonic national-conservative and

National Socialist notions of the healthy art of the people."[22] Despite the overtly

traditionalist subject and form of these works, Dix was presenting anything but the healthy,

wholesome, utopian image of the German *Volk*.

In 1934 and 1935, while living at Schloss-Randegg, Dix painted *The Triumph of

Death*. In this allegory, Death is not the costumed carnival figure of *The Seven Deadly Sins*,

but a very real and menacing skeleton, in the tradition of Hans Baldung Grien as well as the

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[22] James van Dyke, "Otto Dix's Folk Culture," in *Otto Dix and the New Objectivity*, ed. Ilka
Voermann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 86.

Black Plague era frescoes in the Camposanto in Pisa.[23] There is also here a marked stylistic

shift towards a more Romantic rendering of the figures and their surroundings, pointing to

what was, a necessary shift towards a style more accepted by the Nazis, if not an ironic

appropriation of their aesthetics, as van Dyke argues. Dix paints a ruined church—a key

emblem of German Romanticism—within a very Northern Renaissance-inspired landscape.

Death, with rotten skin hanging from his bones, is in his royal cape and crown, poised and

ready to strike a disparate assembly of individuals with his scythe. Dix's image of Death is

historically similar to Breughel's in his *Triumph of Death* (c.1560), which depicts a skeletal

Death as *Grim Reaper*, the harvester souls.

The other individuals Dix paints represent the ages of man. In the center

foreground is a baby, curiously prodding at some poppies, symbols of sleep and

indifference; the child is ignorant of Death's close proximity. To the right of the baby are

young lovers – a mainstay in Northern Renaissance depictions of the theme – as unaware

as the child, but for wholly different reasons. At their feet a rosebush grows, symbolizing

love and passion. To the left of the baby is a crippled old crone, who leans over as she digs

in the ground. She has tilled the ground her whole life, but only thistles grow at her feet,

crowding out any useful crops. As Linda McGreevy writes,

> *Triumph of* Death, Dix's *vanitas*, is typical of the artist's developing Third
> Reich style, combining a scrupulous adaptation of High Renaissance formal
> elements, lurid color, and a moralizing program that would avoid the
> possibility of a problematic reception by its very historicism. At this time,
> Dix's allegories are formally florid, iconographically extravagant, and
> laboriously finished.[24]

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[23] Karcher, 1987, 198.   *The Triumph of Death* in the frescoes of the Camposanto in Pisa is
the first known representation of this theme, and dates to circa 1350, just after the Plague
of 1348.

[24] McGreevy, 2001, 371.

Nonetheless, there are some features that may strike the viewer as disjunctive and out of

place in an otherwise historicized scene. Behind the old crone is a soldier, in a typical

World War I German artillery uniform. He stands guard with his gun, but his attention is

not on Death; his gaze is directed enviously at the young lovers. The only figure who

acknowledges Death is the blind, legless beggar, perhaps a reference to Dix's earlier

paintings of war cripples. The beggar's dog, his only companion in a world full of people

otherwise distracted with their own selfish pursuits (whether pleasurable or toilsome),

recoils in fear at Death's arrival. The inevitable outcome of this scene is that Death will take

them all in one quick slash of his scythe. Eva Karcher observes that the themes of *Eros* and

Death are present throughout Dix's *oeuvre*. They are present as early as 1911, in his

prescribed, rather formulaic *Flowers and Decay* (Stadtmuseum, Bautzen), where Dix paints

a skull and a vase of flowers on a windowsill. They are especially profuse in Dix's critical

work from the twenties, in etchings on the subject of the *Lustmord*, or "sex murder," and in

paintings such as *Unequal Couple* (1925, Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart), where he paints an

older man and a younger, extremely voluptuous woman in an awkward sexual embrace.

These themes are given allegorical significance in *The Triumph of Death*, with the inclusion

of the young lovers. And although the child in the foreground is perhaps the result of the

lovers' activities, Death will still prevail. By placing modern figures of the sort that

dominated his earlier work—the soldier and the war cripple—within an assertively

historical setting, Dix yanks traditional allegory away from distant history and places it into

the crisis of the present, while at the same time placing it firmly within the specific context

of his own critical aesthetic. The incongruity functions as the sort of Brechtian rupture

discussed in Chapter 1, in which the viewer dwells not just with the specific theme of death's pervasiveness, but also with Dix's complex invocation of temporal disjuncture.

Perhaps less pessimistic among Dix's allegories is *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1937). Despite having painted so many ostensibly Christian- themed works, Dix did not subscribe to the any faith. About Christianity he said, "I am not a Christian, because I can't and won't keep the great essential commandment 'Follow me'."[25] In spite of this, Paul Westheim, on hearing of Dix's allegorical paintings, wrote in a letter to George Schmidt, Director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, dated July 19th, 1939,

> In the last few weeks I've been told that Dix has become a Catholic – out of
> protest, like many intellectuals at this time in the Third Reich! He has
> painted several St Christophers and, at the moment, is painting a 'Temptation
> of St Anthony'. In other words, he's now trying to get out of his system – in a
> disguised form – in a temptation of St Anthony, what he got rid of in his war
> painting.[26]

However, Dix's representation of Saint Anthony's temptation has less to do with his faith in Catholicism (or lack thereof) and more to do with Dix's uncompromising faith in the Old Masters. Unable to paint works that critically addressed his present in any overt way, Dix found new critical models in the history of German painting.

Here, as in his other allegories, Dix paints a theme popularized during the Northern Renaissance. The theme of Saint Anthony's temptation was painted again and again by Hieronymus Bosch and others, but it is in Matthias Grünewald's depiction of the theme in the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-16) where Dix found his most compelling visual influence.[27]

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[25] Quote in Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, 202.

[26] Quoted in Löffler, 101.

[27] Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, 202.

His Saint Anthony is quite similar in appearance to Grünewald's, as are the monsters that tempt the Saint away from his sacred focus. Dix represents St Anthony's struggle with extreme psychological and spiritual intensity, unlike Grünewald's more physically violent interpretation of the theme, where it almost seems that St Anthony is kicking and screaming to get away from his monstrous attackers. Here, however, Dix paints a group of no less horrid, but perhaps slightly gentler demons, intent on distracting the saint by their close proximity. However, St Anthony does not look back; in his heavenward gaze, he continues with his prayers and is granted a misty vision of the head of the crucified Christ, with its real crown of thorns. This ethereal vision acts as a strong counterpoint to the crucifix towards which St Anthony was focused in his prayers.   The overall composition, however, has its main prototype less in Grünewald's picture and more in Dix's earlier *The Seven Deadly Sins*, with the figures moving forward from right to left.[28] Another element reminiscent of Dix's earlier painting is the inclusion of the lascivious woman; only here the woman fully exposes her sexualized body from beneath her garish candy-colored drapery. The composition is also similar to *The Triumph of Death*, with its very German setting; not the desert along the Nile, which would be in keeping with the story of St Anthony, but a rocky outcropping, looking out over Lake Constance in the distance. This adheres to the Northern Renaissance tradition of placing Biblical and religious subject matter within a contemporary context, but it also links the subject directly to Dix's own experience, living in a sort of exile on the shores of Lake Constance.

On a biographical level, Dix may have found correlation between his own experience with "inner emigration" and the struggles of St Anthony, the latter "having withdrawn to

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[28] Ibid.

the desert to live a life of prayer, poverty, and good works."[29] Dix could have given up

painting altogether, or succumbed to "temptation" and become a Nazi-approved artist.

And although he was not a Christian, Dix *did* have a certain pragmatic and personal interest

in religious themes and subject matter. Reflecting back on his career in the 1960s, he said,

> The idea for the Christian pictures was not hatched in the studio. My own life
> gave me plenty of opportunities to see the Passion acted out or experience it
> myself. "Job," "St. Christopher," "The Prodigal Son," "St. Peter and the Cock
> That Crowed" – it was not just a passing interest that led me to those themes.
> They are all parables of my own experience and that of humanity as a whole.
> That is what prompted me to deal with them. But apart from that, there is
> another thing that fascinates me: the task of creating something new out of
> subjects that have been done to death, of renewing art in the same way that
> Christianity is continually renewed. Christian motifs offer complete artistic
> freedom. [. . .] Christian themes are relevant to the present, as well as the
> past and future: They have a timeless quality. [30]

So for Dix, Christian subjects did not necessarily appeal to him on a spiritual basis, but on a

more physical, experiential level. Dix found a correlation between his own life and

experience and the stories of Christianity. He viewed Christian stories as one would view

classical mythology; that the parables have a certain personal, but also universal appeal

that transcends the time and place in which they were created. And for Dix, it is this

historical transcendence that gives them their power as subjects worthy of artistic merit.

More importantly, religious themes, although not necessarily allegorical in their own

right, served an allegorical function for Dix. As stated above, Dix's interest in religious

themes had less to do with any sense of religiosity on his part and more to do with the

nature of religious themes as allegories of the human condition. The power of religious

themes lies in their prescribed nature; as is the case of allegory, meaning in Christian art is

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Karcher, 1987, 81.

based on accepted and conventional depictions of Biblical or Apocryphal narratives. Their more universal acceptance allowed Dix to use religious themes in an allegorical manner; as works of art, they are less devotional than they are statements that rely on their ostensibly religious content to relay their double-edged message. Aside from recounting a Biblical narrative, Dix was formulating social criticism in his religious allegories. As Dix's expressive means became ever more limited in the face of oppression, argues Birgit Schwarz, he used whatever means necessary to continue working, even if "the rope became shorter and shorter and the balancing act less and less daring."[31]

Another of these Christian-themed works is *Lot and His Daughters* (1939). Dix portrays the point in the Old Testament tale when Lot's daughters are making him drunk, so as to sleep with him and preserve his line. Lot's clothed daughter eagerly gives him another glass of wine and exposes herself to him, evidenced by her bare leg, while Lot appears to be well past the point of refusing, naked, drunk, and helpless against his daughter's advances. His other daughter, nude and looking out towards the viewer, seems eager to continue with the incestuous act. She is yet another of Dix's personifications of Lust. Again the motif of sexual temptation appears in one of Dix's allegories, perhaps not only as a personification of Lust, but as a critique of Nazism's allure to the German public. The harsh corporeality and sexualized demeanor of Lot's daughters is very similar to the image of Lust in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, as well as the seductress in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Lot's drunkenness can be viewed as a symbol of human frailty and weakness. In this case, one can read Lot's daughters as representations of Nazism, and Lot as a German society "drunk" on the allure of Nazi ideology, oblivious to the destructiveness behind its

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[31] Birgit Schwarz, "'Long live (occasionally) tendency in art!': Dix and the Dialectics of Modernism," *Otto Dix and the New Objectivity*, 70.

mask of redemption.

Dix once again places the scene within a German setting reminiscent of Altdorfer. In an almost prophetic depiction, the burning city in the background is not Sodom, but Dresden, which would burn due to Allied bombing in 1945. And although Dix would not have known that Dresden would actually be destroyed in 1945, I think his burning Dresden serves as a metaphor for the destruction of German culture by the Nazis, stemming from his own experience in the city, of being forced out of the academy and into artistic isolation. But *Lot and His Daughters* serves as a metaphor of the futility of Dix's project as well; as he attempts to create a path forward out of Germany's artistic heritage in his own limited way, the destruction of that heritage continues unabated on a scale greater than any possible resistance to it.

The use of bright lurid colors in *Lot and His Daughters* is similar to its use in *The Temptation of St Anthony*, but is all the more garish. Eva Karcher sees Dix's use of color in these works as yet another level of criticism. She writes, "Dix's distaste for the megalomania of the period is reflected in the deliberately overstated coloring with its strong hint of kitsch, the excessively sentimental portrayal of the female figures, and the bombastic depiction of the landscape, which is redolent of the operas of Wagner."[32] Therefore, *Lot and His Daughters*, and to a lesser extent *The Temptation of St Anthony* do not only act as criticisms of German society, but also wittily attack Nazi aesthetics. Paul Westheim, who was in exile in Paris during World War II, called Nazi art *International Kitsch*, describing it in *Mendacious Realism* as a

Romantic flight into a pathos-filled, theatrical world of illusion . . . the real

[32] Karcher, 1987, 63.

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salient of Hitlerian art. . . . The fact that it is, albeit to an inconceivable degree, tasteless, *kitschy*, academically dull and meager in terms of craftsmanship is something it has in common with the lower middle class and philistine creations of producers of *kitsch* in all countries. . . . In this respect it is simply international *kitsch*, the least national style that could ever exist.[33]

Dix not only used the style of Nazi art, but also threw Nazism's interest in historicized subjects back in its face. Rather than representing heroic themes in his own version of *kitsch*, Dix chose to represent tragic ones, alluding to the destruction wreaked by Nazi's totalizing ideology. As James van Dyke argues, Dix may have been attempting to reclaim Germany's artistic heritage from Nazism, in the hopes that not all would be tainted, if not destroyed.[34] In this sense, Dix was participating in a cultural project of redemption that was far more fluid and complex than the usual ideological categories of reaction into which such efforts are normally placed. In this sense, Dix's allegories critique a wide range of practices and institutions; through their historicism, allegorical subject matter, and style, Dix was able to take on a number of his chosen themes in these works, producing multiple levels of meaning in his allegories.

Allegory as Exegesis

What, then, is the significance of Dix's use of allegory as a mode of representation? On a basic level, we can see that "Dix was expressing his continued, albeit covert, opposition to

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[33] Quoted in Hermann Wiesler, "Der Ausstieg Aus der Kultur," *Spiegel Spezial* No. 2 (1989), http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/spiegelspecial/d-52322581.html (accessed December 28, 2014).

[34] James van Dyke, "Otto Dix's Folk Culture," 86.

the Nazis' corrupt allure," as Linda McGreevy writes.[35] However, to only accept this answer

is to evade the critical importance of allegory as a discursive practice that has value in its

own right.   To truly understand the importance of Dix's use of allegory during the Third

Reich, it is necessary to step away from a solely historical and iconological approach, and

consider allegory through a theoretical lens. By examining allegory's contested place

within modernist aesthetics and artistic practice, we will see that Dix's use of allegory plays

an important role in his ongoing skepticism towards modernism.

Prior to the emergence of Romanticism as an artistic movement, allegory was a

popular form of artistic practice. From Giotto's allegorical figures of the Virtues and Vices

among the frescoes of the Arena Chapel (1305-10) to the *vanitas* themes of seventeenth

century Dutch still-life painting and beyond, allegory was one of the main ways to elaborate

meaning in the visual arts. However, with the birth of Romanticism in the late eighteenth

century, the distinction was made between the *allegorical* and the *symbolic*; the symbolic

represented by, in the words of Craig Owens, "the work of art as pure presence."[36] And

although this idea "of the art work as informed matter" had existed since antiquity and the

origins of aesthetics, the Romantics reinvigorated it, "[providing] the basis for the

philosophical condemnation of allegory."[37] As Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, "the

aesthetic contrast between allegory and symbol—which seems self-evident to us—is only

the result of the philosophical development of the last two centuries."[38] The Romantics

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[35] McGreevy, 2001, 384.

[36] Owens, 324.

[37] Ibid.

founded their aesthetics in the notion of the *symbolic*, thereby relegating the *allegorical* to

the dustbin of historical naiveté. Goethe, as a prominent leader of German Romanticism,

was the first to elaborate the distinction between symbol and allegory. His ideas influenced

A.W. Schlegel, Fredrich W.J. Schelling, and others in Germany, but also Samuel Taylor

Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle in England.[39] In his *Werke*, Goethe

delineates the difference between symbol and allegory:

> 1. Symbolism transforms appearance into an idea, the idea into an image in
> such a way that the idea remains always infinitely effective and unreachable
> in the image and remains ineffable even if uttered in all languages.

> 2. Allegory transforms appearance into a concept, the concept into an image,
> but in such a way that the concept can be grasped and can be had completely
> as something delimited in the image and can be expressed in it.

> 3. It is a big difference whether the poet looks for the particular in the
> general or whether he sees the general in the particular. The former
> produces allegory, where the particular has validity only as an example of the
> general; the latter, however, is the actual nature of poetry; it expresses the
> particular without thinking of the general or without pointing at it. He who
> grasps this particular vividly gets the general with it at the same time
> without being aware of it, or only late.[40]

Goethe's categories grew out of his dissatisfaction with the landscapes of Friedrich

and others, which he saw as becoming allegorical. According to Joseph Leo Koerner, "what

[38] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1982), 65. In pages 63-73, Gadamer discusses the distinction between symbol and allegory and its origin in Romantic aesthetics. On page 65, Gadamer gives the example of Winckelmann to show how the concepts were used even as late as the eighteenth century. "It is clear that Winckelmann, whose influence on the aesthetics and philosophy of history of the time was very great, used both concepts synonymously and the same is true of the whole of the aesthetic literature of the eighteenth century."

[39] Vance Bell, "Falling into Time: the Historicity of the Symbol," in *Other Voices: the (e)Journal of Cultural Criticism* (vol. 1, no. 1) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997), http://www.othervoices.org/vbell/symbol.html (accessed June 14, 2014).

[40] Quoted in Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991), 88.

specifically disturbed the 68-year-old Goethe about this new and young Romantic

brotherhood was the artificiality of its art, as well as its tendency to conceive of content as

somehow separable from form." It is from this separation that he saw allegory emerging,

and so against it, "Goethe set the vision of a 'fitting unity of the spiritual meaning and

sensual evocation' wherein 'true art celebrates its triumph.'"[41]

For Goethe, the symbol represents in material particularity a universal idea so that

the two are intertwined in an indissoluble unity; the apprehension of the form and the idea

become one. Allegory, on the other hand, separates the form and the idea, where the form

has significance only as a representation of a *general idea* as Goethe described it. The form

points to the idea only through representational convention. In this sense, the idea can

essentially be expressed on its own terms, without allegorical representation; one can be

exchanged for the other as long as their arbitrary relationship is understood. An allegorical

form and the idea which it expresses bear an unnatural relationship to one another, since

this relationship is necessarily an external one. The relationship between form and idea in

the symbol, however, is one of inwardness and essential significance.[42]

The Romantic privileging of the symbol was inherited without question by

modernist aesthetics. As McGreevy writes, "What Modernist art theory focused upon was a

recurrence of the desire for […] unity of form that necessitated a disregard of subject

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[41] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 139.

[42] Gadamer, 67.

matter as too topical and chaotic, a desire that gave rise to universalized abstraction..."[43]

Benedetto Croce, influential to Expressionism for his belief that art is linked with intuition rather than any physical, objective reality, wrote harshly about the perceived weakness of allegory in his *Guide to Aesthetics* of 1913:

> The insurmountable difficulties of allegory are well known; so is its barren and anti artistic character known and universally felt. Allegory is the extrinsic union or the conventional and arbitrary juxtaposition of two spiritual facts – a concept or thought and an image – whereby it is posited that *this* image must represent *that* concept. [. . .] For given the juxtaposition of thought and image, thought remains thought and image remains image, there being no relation between them. So much so that, whenever we contemplate the image, we forget the concept without any loss, but, on the contrary, to our gain; and whenever we think the concept, we dispel, likewise to our advantage, the superfluous and annoying image.[44]

Croce's emphasis on the duality of allegory, as opposed to the implied unity of the symbolic, is similar to Goethe's conception. For Croce, allegory creates a duality that is antithetical to the unity present in a, for lack of a better term, "true" work of art. The idea of concept sublimates the image, and vice versa, making each unnecessary for the comprehension of the other. Furthermore, allegorical representations derive their meaning from convention. The dual notions of aesthetic autonomy and artistic originality that dominated mainstream modernist artistic practice were the antithesis of allegory's conventionalized mode of representation.

However, even within the timeframe of modernism, specifically in the context of World War I and its aftermath, modernism's linear quest for newness and originality was being questioned. This skepticism is especially evident in the dialectical realism of Grosz

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[43] McGreevy, 2001, 2.

[44] Benedetto Croce, "What is Art?", in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 106.

and Dix's Verism, as explored above, and its use of historical modes of representation. As Matthew Biro writes, "certain artists and critics during the Weimar Republic experienced their time as a moment of radical crisis and, in response, worked to produce an 'allegorical' form of modernism: a mode of appropriationist representational practice that attempted to identify the future of the contemporary moment, the new world that was emerging out of the old."[45] The upheavals of World War I and its aftermath brought about a sense of urgency, a renewed interest in social and political engagement for German artists during the Weimar Republic, and it is Otto Dix who exemplified this new concern for having a critical eye, focused both forward and back. As Peter Selz rightly puts it, "now in the daily postwar chaos, there was no longer the need for visions."[46] Utopian expressions were no longer possible. The shift towards uncertainty in Europe required a reevaluation of the utopianism, abstraction, and introspection of modernism and its now seemingly disconnected values. Again Selz writes, "Individuality was no longer held as a sacrosanct value by many artists in the postwar period who thought of themselves as social beings."[47]

It is at these moments of uncertainty and skepticism throughout history that allegory comes into play as a viable form of expression. Craig Owens observes, "Allegory first emerged in response to a [...] sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history, it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed."[48] Certainly World War I, the period of

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[45] Matthew Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix," in *Art Criticism* vol. 15, no. 1 (2000), 46.

[46] Selz, 79.

[47] Ibid, 83.

the Weimar Republic, and especially the rise of Nazism and World War II – when Dix

painted his allegories – qualify as examples of periods of historical flux, in the destructive

gap between a seemingly distant past, an almost hopeless present, and an utterly uncertain

future.

Owens's ideas on allegory have their origins in the theoretical writings of Walter

Benjamin (1892-1940) who, according to Owens, is "the only twentieth-century critic to

treat the subject without prejudice, philosophically."[49] Benjamin experienced the same

social, political, and cultural upheavals as Dix, and shared a similar worldview; one focused

on a skepticism towards modernism's progressive aims. In his "Theses on the Philosophy

of History," Benjamin's last work before his suicide in 1940,[50] he presents his view of

history in its most essential form: "The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be

sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A

critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of

progress itself."[51] Reacting to the upheavals of the early twentieth century, Benjamin

brought into question the idea of linear historical time, favoring instead a constellational,

ruptured, deconstructed view of history, where the past presents itself in heterogeneous

fragments, of which it is the critic's or artist's task to assemble them into meaningful,

[48] Owens, 315.

[49] Ibid., 316.

[50] Walter Benjamin, doubly condemned under Nazism as not only an anti-fascist but a Jew, was forced to expatriate to Paris. While in Paris, he worked on his unfinished *Arcades Project.*   Hoping to escape to America after the German occupation of France, Benjamin committed suicide while being held-up by French authorities on the Franco-Spanish border.

[51] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 394-95.

critical form.

For Benjamin, this critique must be allegorical in nature; in other words, history is no longer viewed as linear and progressive, but as, to again quote Biro, "material to be appropriated – potentially useful but in no way universally binding – in whichever ways and through whatever media the politically engaged artist deemed appropriate."[52] The material of history is used by the artist or critic to develop a sort of *exegesis* – an allegorical critique – which appropriates the nearly forgotten for the purpose of informing, critiquing, and creating dialogue with the present in an allegorical manner. By placing them within the context of the present crisis, fragments of history produce a dialectical, allegorical relationship to it.

Benjamin's theory of allegory is presented most extensively in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, written circa 1927. In this exceedingly abstruse text, Benjamin not only sets out to reform the task of criticism, but to recover allegory and aesthetics, which had "been subject to the tyranny of a usurper who came to power in the chaos which followed in the wake of Romanticism."[53] This usurper is the Romantic preoccupation with a notion of the ideal unity of form and content in the symbolic. For Benjamin, "[t]he introduction of this distorted conception of the symbol into aesthetics was a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism."[54]

Through his analysis of German Baroque Mourning plays, which had been long held in disdain as weak derivations of Classical tragedy, he attempted to rescue allegory from

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[52] Biro, 2001, 153.

[53] Benjamin, *OGTD*, 159.

[54] Ibid, 160.

critical oblivion, and to show that "Allegory [...] is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is."[55] Benjamin shows that allegory is not only as basic and necessary a form of expression as speech or writing, but that it is an essential form of expression as well, and perhaps best presents the relation between images and the ideas they purport to represent. Benjamin also shows that allegory is not simply an alternative, if not debased form of representation, but that "the symbolic eventually becomes distorted into the allegorical."[56] One example Benjamin cites is Johann Winckelmann's discussion of the Classical *Belvedere Torso*. Winckelmann, in his effort to analyze the symbolic power of the torso actually performs an allegorized reading of it, analyzing it "part by part and limb by limb."[57] According to Benjamin, in Winckelmann's analysis, the torso's "beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished."[58] Winckelmann's analysis of the torso furthermore dissolves its symbolic nature by destroying the notion that the truly symbolic work of art transcends conceptualization.[59]

  Benjamin saw in allegory the ability to express what the Classical symbol could not, that is, "Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely,

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[55] Benjamin, *OGTD*, 162

[56] Ibid., 183

[57] Ibid., 176

[58] Ibid.

[59] Gail Day, "Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics" in *Oxford Art Journal* vol. 22, no.1 (1999), 109.

sorrowful, unsuccessful [...]."[60] The symbol's preoccupation with beauty and unity precluded the true nature of existence as conflict and tension in the gap between concept and image, noumenal and phenomenal, history and the present. Benjamin's perfect allegorical image for the course of human history is the "death's head." "And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious [...]."[61] Allegory's ability to express ruin, loss, and estrangement from the past makes it a powerful form of expression; its outlook as a weakly redemptive form of expression shows the true nature of the human condition under the effects of unrelenting history. As Biro writes, "[...] allegories undermined all readings of history as a linear narrative and, instead, promoted a rethinking of the relationship between past and the future."[62] In its dialectical tendency, allegory critiques the present via the past, which is lost to modernity. Again Biro observes, "By stopping narrative movement, and examining actions from more than one socio-historical perspective, allegories attempted to remind their readers of all that they had lost through modern, rational 'progress'."[63] Specifically within the context of the first half of the twentieth century, allegory provided a mode of historical exegesis that modernism in its futurity could not.

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[60] Day, 166.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Biro, 2000, 51.

[63] Ibid.

Conclusion

By understanding the critical and theoretical significance of allegory as a mode of expression, we can see that Dix's use of it was not *only* necessary due to Nazi repression, but also served as the most powerful expressive tool for Dix to critique his own moment of historical crisis. Barring all hope for a Utopian future, Dix was left to resuscitate history and its forms of representation, not in a vain hope for a return to the values and ideals of the past, but to bring attention to what was lost with modernity. And it is through allegory that Dix created powerful visual statements about the upheavals of his time.

With the emergence of each new modernist movement in art came a growing tendency to identify with the past solely through its negation. In contrast to modernity's drive to break with the past, Dix expressed through allegory the desire to remember and appropriate the past which modernity rejected. With allegory history is no longer linear and teleological; it is a collection of circulating fragments, to be used and appropriated by the artist or critic for their purposes. Allegory exposes as simple rhetoric the modernist pretense of a progressive break with the past and instead provides a model of time not as linear but as a loop; history, in this post-stratigraphic model, can be repeated. The present now enters into a dialectical relationship with the past, where history can potentially inform the crisis of the present.

The power of allegory lies in its ability to draw attention to a fragmented, ruined past through its appropriation of it, for the purpose of critiquing the present. As Owens writes,

> Allegorical Imagery is *appropriated* imagery: The allegorist does not invent
> images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses
> as its interpreter. [. . .] He does not restore an original meaning that may
> have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds

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another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace.[64]

Dix was not working with a sense of idyllic nostalgia for the past. In his allegories, he shows us that death and destruction mark the course of history. His allegories are by no means optimistic; his worldview is similar to Benjamin's in that both show us the significance of allegory to represent the endless destruction of humanity. If this implies a resignation on the part of Dix, then so be it. It is through his acknowledgement of our inevitable mortality despite our ever-growing hubris that his commentary makes its most powerful point, not only about his contemporary moment of crisis, but also about the unchanging human condition of destruction.

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[64] Owens, 317 (emphasis added).

Chapter 3

History, Melancholy, and the Rhetoric of Painting in the
Landscapes of Otto Dix and Gerhard Richter

> Landscape can replace history painting because the impulse to paint
> landscape is itself the mark of our place in time.
> —Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*

The Afterlife of the German Landscape

Reflecting back toward the end of his life while looking out on the idyllic landscape around Lake Constance that had been his home since the early 1930s, Otto Dix observed, "A beautiful paradise! So beautiful it's sickening. ... I should be in the big city. I stand before the landscape like a cow."[1] Since his flight from Dresden at the beginning of the Nazi years and his *inner emigration* for the duration of the Third Reich, until his death in 1969, Dix maintained a distance—both physically and in his artistic output—from the metropolis that had inspired so much of his prior work. As discussed in the last chapter, Dix turned to religious and allegorical subjects as a mode of continuing his critical practice behind the veil of tradition. Even more so, however, he turned to landscape as a subject, making it the most prodigious segment of his output during the years of the Third Reich.[2] In 1965 he stated, "I painted heaps of landscapes during the Nazi Years. Here I was certainly stuck. ... I

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[1] Philipp Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 79. For a discussion of the landscapes within the broader context of Dix's late work, see Christoph Bauer, "Das altmeisterliche und spätexpressionistische Werk von Otto Dix," in *Otto Dix: Werke von 1933 bis 1969*, Christoph Bauer, ed. (Cologne: Weinand Verlag, 2003).

was banished to the landscape…"[3] Given this sort of pronouncement, it is no wonder that

many critics and historians assessing Dix's career claim a waning of the artist's creativity

and in the quality of his work by the early thirties from which he would never recover.

Even his once supportive contemporary, Carl Einstein, dismissed Dix's work from the late

twenties onward. In his tome *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Dix is barely given a page of

text, while artists like Matisse and Picasso receive as many as twenty, showing that

Einstein's own view on modern art had by this point shifted towards the mainstream of

modernism. The anachronism of Dix's style and subject matter are seen at this point as

embarrassing and kitschy, his citations of the works of others too heavy-handed. Einstein

begins his brief over view by writing that Dix's "artistic strength does not always

correspond to his boldly chosen subjects."[4] While Einstein had earlier praised Dix's critical

realism, he now criticized Dix's turn towards traditional techniques. What was once valued

in Verism—an uncompromising grasp of reality (which, however differently from Cubism

or Constructivism, tended to shatter that reality all the same)—was now seen as divorced

from the traditionalism of Dix's later historicist work. Einstein goes so far as to call a work

like *Der Graben*, which had been deemed by many as the most powerfully critical artistic

expression on the war produced, an "unwieldy allegory" and a "perverse and sentimental

garden idyll."[5] He concludes by saying that "Perhaps [Dix] is at heart a reactionary painter

with a left wing motif."[6]

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[3] Quoted in Dietrich Schubert, *Otto Dix mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten,* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1980), 115.

[4] Carl Einstein, *Der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1926), 170.

[5] Ibid.

The subsequent negative assessment of these works stems partially from their

affinities with the type of work produced by Nazi-sanctioned artists, whose penchant for

saccharine, nostalgic landscapes idealizing the rural *Heimat* and the purity of agricultural

existence was put on full display in Hitler's exhibitions of German art and have since

become the shameful aesthetic markers of National Socialism's corrupt and reactionary

ideology. Nonetheless, this argument has been used to criticize most of Dix's work

produced since at least the 1920s and seems entirely too easy. Despite his own negative

assessments, landscape forms an important part of Dix's work during these crucial and

challenging years. Rather than agree or argue with Dix, who was undoubtedly frustrated

by the limits placed on his work by his political circumstances, or with his critics, who too

often judge the work based on an ahistorical standard of critical-aesthetic practice that

obfuscates engagement with the work or the circumstances surrounding its creation, I

would like to consider how the landscape functions in relation to Dix's broader critical-

artistic project. Since landscape was a genre new to the artist, what does it add to our

understanding of his oeuvre? Given their close resemblance to the type of work sanctioned

by Nazi aesthetic doctrine, should we see these pictures as Dix's capitulation to a right-

wing nationalism based upon the revivification and reification of cultural traditions that

had been left behind by modernity? In his essay on "Otto Dix's Folk Culture," James van

Dyke asks,

> can we perceive in his pictures the attempt to develop a popular, traditional
> painting that apparently took up hegemonic national conservative and
> National Socialist motions of the healthy art of the people, but really threw
> them into question? Did he possibly try to occupy critically the artistic
> terrain demarcated by Richard Müller [president of the Dresden Academy

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6 Einstein, Der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, 170.

when Dix was dismissed from his professorship in 1933] rather than abandon it? Did he try to deconstruct its borders?[7]

Furthermore, can we see Dix's Third Reich landscapes as a continuation of his critical practice? No other artist in Germany in the early twentieth century produced work as stylistically polyvalent as Otto Dix; from his adoption of expressionism early in his career to his Dada experimentations with collage, from his critical realism of the 1920s to his Renaissance-style allegories from the Third Reich, and beyond to the return of exuberant expressionism later in his life, Dix's work is marked by a stylistic response not only to changing personal situations, but more importantly to changing socio-political ones. With this in mind, are his landscapes an adaptation of his critical project to the upheavals of their moment? Was Dix, like Kafka before him in literature, creating a "minor" painting, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari, by developing a critical practice of quotation that could deconstruct and upend the hegemonic culture in ways impossible through direct negation?[8]

These landscapes, most of which represent the environs of Lake Constance, where Dix was then living, or the rural landscape of Saxony, drawn from memories of his earlier life in Dresden, are far too plentiful, diverse, and complex to be rejected as substandard but necessary work produced in acquiescence to Nazi aesthetic policy. Indeed, they represent the breadth of Dix's stylistic plurality, with historical echoes of Albrecht Altdorfer and the Danube School of the German Renaissance, to the peasant scenes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, to Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic landscapes. It seems that, despite the shift

[7] James van Dyke, "Otto Dix's Folk Culture," in *Otto Dix and the New Objectivity* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz Verlag, 2012), 86.

[8] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

away from his more familiar subject matter, Dix continued with his penchant for drawing

upon a broad range of historical styles in order to best express his ideas and feelings about

his chosen subject, reminding us of his statement from 1923, discussed in Chapter 2, that

the *how* of painting proceeds from the *what* of the subject.

In order to develop a more historically and theoretically nuanced understanding of

Dix's landscapes and his radical traditionalism, this chapter will take a journey both

backward and forward from Dix's moment, back to the origins of landscape as a modern

genre in the sixteenth century, and forward to the present to examine the landscapes of

Gerhard Richter, whose stylistic pluralism and critical attention to art history once again

bring the tradition of landscape painting to bear in the present. Caught between the

symbolic fecundity of landscape Romanticism and that banality of the familiar

photographic snapshot, Richter's landscapes point to landscape as a historical and

rhetorical gesture, problematizing the notion that the genre is first and foremost one that

presents the viewer with the immediacy of nature. In this, Richter shares with Dix the

propensity to use seemingly outdated modes of representation to comment on the present

and its desire to unproblematically replace such modes with something seemingly more

timely. Thus, these painters and their work serve as the critical constellation through

which this analysis will explore landscape as a model of painting that comments not just on

nature and representation, but also on history and shifting conceptions of temporality.

The concept of *Nachleben* (afterlife) developed by the philosopher and critic

Gerhard Richter (not to be confused with the painter) proves helpful here. The term,

borrowed from the cultural history of Aby Warburg, where it was used in reference to the

afterlife of classical forms in Western culture, takes on a broader critical and philosophical

meaning in Richter's thought. Echoing Walter Benjamin's critique of modern time

consciousness, Richter claims that thinking about objects and ideas in terms of "afterness"

opens them to a renewed critical potential beyond the simplistic binary of obsolescence

and newness that dominates modernity. *Nachleben* serves to disrupt this binary,

transforming it into a productive dialectic:

> If *Nachleben* teaches us to think in terms of *Vorgeschichte* and
> *Nachgeschichte*, it thereby also teaches us that the experience of historical
> time is never that of presence alone. The after upon which *Nachleben* and
> *Nachgeschichte* pivot is the site where temporal experience (and there can be
> no other) is beckoned, even fundamentally determines, by an elsewhere, an
> intuition that the object or thought under scrutiny cannot yet (or no longer)
> be fully understood, because the moment of its actuality is never lodged in
> the *Gegenwart* of its presence or present tense. In this way, there can be no
> *Nachleben*, and no engagement with a fore-history and an after-history, that
> does not require us to learn to engage with absolute absence—either in the
> guise of the "no longer" or in the form of a nonanticipatable "not yet."
> Thought here becomes a form of living on, a mode of survival in a world in
> which nothing is ever what it seems.[9]

As a mode of representation, the painted landscape becomes a method for Dix and Richter,

as well as for their forebears and those who may employ it in the future, to engage with

artistic tradition in a way that recuperates it not in a reactionary sense (as might first be

assumed), placing it outside of time—making it timeless—but rather in a way that makes it

dwell with its historical conditions of possibility, while beckoning to the possibility of its

contemporary relevance. In its engagement of *absence* the landscape can become a cipher

of historical time. As we have seen already, Dix's work engages with the prickly

vicissitudes of modernity by pointing back to what is no longer, as well as what may yet

come. In terms of Richter's work, many of its interpreters have focused on his effort to

continue painting despite its "death" (to borrow the rhetoric of late modernist criticism),

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[9] Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4.

not simply as an empty curmudgeonly gesture, but as one that still believes in the task of

painting and its continued necessity as image-making and world-forming.[10] Both artists

ostensibly return to terra firma (i.e., landscape as place and landscape as historical

tradition), but they approach it as a terra incognito presented as "a form of living on," to

repeat Richter's assessment, "a mode of survival in a world in which nothing is ever what it

seems."

Landscape and *Inner Emigration*

Presenting this engagement with their own prehistory, many of Dix's landscapes

speak indirectly through quotation and citation of older, formative models of landscape

painting. Among the most representative of these landscapes is a group painted during

1935, showing the village of Randegg. In works such as *Randegg with the Hohentwiel*

(1936), the viewer is presented with an idyllic autumn landscape bathed in the golden light

of either early morning or evening. Surrounding the distant village are highly detailed

ploughed fields that trace the contours of the southwest German hills. From our ideal

vantage point—borrowed from the Netherlandish landscape painters of the Renaissance—

nature seems vast; the close-knit village lies in a valley surrounded by a seemingly endless

expanse of hills, dominated by the taller plateau of the Hohentwiel. While the landscape is

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[10] Among the most sustained analyses of Richter's rhetorical painting has been carried out
by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh through critical texts and interviews with Richter. See Benjamin
H. D. Buchloh, ed., *Gerhard Richter* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009). This volume
includes Buchloh's formative "Divided Memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard
Richter's Work of Mourning (1996)" as well as two interviews (one from 1986 and one
from 2004) with the artist. In these interviews, to be discussed in more detail later, the
reader is continually shown the rift between Buchloh's conception of the trajectory of
modern art—one that tends to equate formal experimentation with radical political ideas—
and Richter's more constellational thinking about painting, its relation to the past, and its
potential in the future.

expansive, fading into a far atmospheric distance, the hills serve at the same time as a natural fortress protecting the village from outside forces. Thus, perhaps the image serves as an allegory of Dix's own situation, as he is lost (but ostensibly secure) in the proverbial wilderness of *inner emigration*. At the same time the image seems overtly optimistic, even relishing in the beauty of nature and rural existence's harmony with it, the scene exists beyond modern temporality in the eternal slumber of the past, hermetically sealed off from and oblivious to the dangerous proclivities of the contemporary moment. Indeed, any hint of contemporary life is expunged; human subjects are made evident only in traces of the past, whether in the form of the rustic village houses and church steeples or in the neatly ploughed fields.

In a similar autumnal scene, *Randegg with Vögeli* (also from 1936), the town is placed in the far distance, faint in the atmosphere, while a round, strangely cultivated hill lies in the foreground, just right of center. Between the two are a number of tropes of the rural landscape: the valley farms, snug cottages, and a rolling stream. To the right of the picture, just beyond the foreground's prominent hill is another slope, on which we barely see a pair of woodcutters in a small clearing in the dense forest. In the quotidian detail we see gray smoke rising from a fire, perhaps built for burning the newly removed brush and for a momentary warm respite from the labor. As fires go, it lacks all the apocalyptic drama and intensity of those seen in Dix's allegories of destruction from the same period. Among the other details Dix presents is the small plot of staked grapevines atop the central hill, dotted with the dark, tiny birds called forth in the title. In the lower left—the portion of the picture closest to us—we see curling tufts of grass glinting silver with hoarfrost. None are more significant than the others; whether a farmer cutting wood, a bird in the field, a tree

along a path, or a clod of grass, everything is presented with equal attention in this world of objects observed and recorded by the artist and offered up to the viewer.

At once intimate and expansive, comforting in their familiar details and seeming to yearn for what is beyond our limited vision, these landscapes point to Dix's own ambivalence in the face of his new and uncertain existence. Beneath the surface appeal of their picturesque and even sentimental nostalgia, their warm tones and eye-capturing details, is an otherworldly lifelessness. Bereft of the human presence that was the catalyst behind so much of his prior work, they present a world as an object viewed and even imagined in its details, manipulated to suit the artist's vision, but nonetheless uninhabited and unsubjectified except as a painted image produced by the hand of a painting subject. Their familiarity lies not so much in their all too *gemütlich* presentation of rural life, but rather in their (cold, almost mechanical) citation of past art. In them, we see the world landscapes of Patinir and Brueghel, the fanciful details of Altdorfer and Cranach, and the God-imbued nature of Friedrich, but it all adds up to images that seem mute. If they speak, it is through a sort of pictorial ventriloquism, and they give a sense of Dix's alienation from this environment in which he focuses intently on its details. The sheer quantity of these landscapes in comparison to other work produced by Dix during this period seems to point to Dix as a painter on autopilot; a creature of habit, not unlike the cow in the field to which Dix would later compare himself in the recollection presented at the opening of this chapter.

To push Dix's self-assessment further, even at the risk of turning an off-hand comment into a philosophical pronouncement, one may wonder why Dix saw himself in such animal terms. Did he feel he could no longer communicate, having been forced to

silence the critical language with which he had previously worked? Was it the endless

repetition of admittedly banal themes painted with as much passion as a cow chews its

cud? Most likely, these considerations had something to do with the creaturely

predicament in which Dix found himself. Beyond these though, we must seriously rethink

what it means to resist a system of total domination in which familiar forms of political and

ideological protest—including art—were long before vanquished and destroyed along with

those who practiced them. If we want to interpret these pictures through the lens of Dix's

critical practice, no matter how hard such a task may seem, as I argue we should, we must

reconsider what it means to resist. Furthermore, we must reassess the ways in which we

have categorized art as political practice. Typically, the political and social history of art is

focused on works that engage with some sort of explicit political or social content, such as

the Weimar works of Dix and his critical realist compatriots. Less common yet still

conventional is the political and ideological treatment of form, such as when we read

political or philosophical radicalism into formal experimentation, such as has been done

with Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, or any number of other aesthetically avant-garde

modernist movements. In both situations, it is often the case that the artists themselves

point to such readings, either directly in the subject of their work or through their

theoretical pronouncements. Likewise, in both situations, we tend to read political,

philosophical, social—in short, extra-aesthetic—content in seamless relation to what is

being commented upon, as a one-to-one relation between the work and what it represents.

But what do we do in a situation when any such pronouncements and subjects are lacking,

when such a relation can only be inferred in absence or through negation? Do we take

Dix's landscapes at face value, as simply the failed, clichéd, and banal expressions of a

defeated, emptied man? Or do we attempt to conjecture a powerful critical practice based on irony and hidden meaning? Do these perspectives necessarily negate one another?

Some of the paintings take a closer view of the village with their direct inspiration coming from Pieter Brueghel the Elder's genre scenes representing rural life for the newly-minted urban middle class of the Netherlands, who idealized what they saw as the simplicity and purity of village life and its cyclical ties to nature and seasonal change. While Brueghel provided all of the details one could desire—for example, the iconic *Hunters in the Snow* of 1565, which shows us that, despite the cold and snow of winter, this village set within an impossible imagined landscape is teeming with the experience of daily life, from the empty-handed hunters in the foreground, to the tavern keepers with their bonfire and the distant children skating on a frozen pond—Dix tended to show his rural villages without habitation.

In a pair of pictures that represent almost the same view but in summer and winter, *Randegg with Thunderstorms* and *A View of Randegg in Winter* (both from 1934), the clusters of houses ensconced in the valley betray no signs of their human inhabitants. No one tills the fields or mends the roofs, and no one walks the narrow streets of the village. Even in an image such as *Hemmenhofen in Winter* from 1940, which bears the closest resemblance to Brueghel's work, the two farmers working in the left foreground of the picture go almost unnoticed, dwarfed by the tree on the right and the imposing buildings that surround them. At the center of the image is a village church, complete with cemetery marked by stones and crosses; death outweighs life in its presence and detail. If compared to Dix's earlier street scenes, for example, his "war cripple" paintings of 1920, or the left and right panels of the *Metropolis* triptych of 1927-8, what we see in the later works is a

world fossilized out of time, untouched by the unfolding of human history. It is something out of the distant past and bears no noticeable index of modernity. Dix purposefully presents a world at once familiar yet alienated, a quotation that is noticeably not right.

Death in the Landscape of History

One can mark an earlier moment in Dix's work when the human figure loses its central position to become part of the setting, and with it, slips from being a social and cultural figure—however degraded and alienated—to a creature of nature. In his trench paintings, particularly in *The Trench* (1923), the human figure exists in a wholly abject state, as part of the bombed out and burned setting of the battlefield, to the point where the bodies and the earth are barely distinguishable; the landscape ruptures forth like entrails and the decimated corpses of soldiers fall apart like clumps of dirt. In this regard, Dix's later landscapes, despite their peaceful surfaces, may have more in common with his war paintings than may be obvious at first glance.

As mentioned above, we must reconsider our received notions of critical-artistic practice in the face of Dix's Third Reich works. Dix was working in a situation in which subjective creative freedom was severely compromised, if not impossible. Given he lived in relative isolation, he had no audience for his work, aside from one exhibition in the early years of his exile period.[11] To even reconsider the possibilities of protest and criticism is to

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[11] This exhibition took place in 1935, two years before the Munich *Entartete Kunst* exhibition (but two years after the much smaller one held in 1933 in Dresden's Neues Rathaus). The 1935 exhibition, held at Karl Nierendorf's gallery, placed Dix's landscapes with those of Franz Lenk, his old friend with whom he had painted in 1934 on a trip to the Hegau. Lenk held an important position within the *Reichskulturkammer*, and one can imagine that despite this, Dix was still attempting to maneuver as much as possible within the increasingly tight space allotted to artists who were out of favor with the regime.

give lie to the truth that one no longer had the necessary subjective space from which to

wage such resistance and that one could go on functioning as if it were possible to maintain

distance from Nazi hegemony and to critique it at the same time. We may be reminded of

one of the many descriptions of the "damaged life" in exile presented by Adorno in *Minima*

Moralia, one that applies as much to the "inner exile" experienced by Dix:

> There is no way out of the entanglement. The only responsible course is to
> deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence and for the rest to
> conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as
> is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air
> to breath, in hell."[12]

When a life worthy of the name is no longer possible, perhaps the best expression of its

impossibility is to show its lack, through a fossilized, frozen world created by humans but

devoid of their lived presence. While Adorno was writing what he called his "melancholy

science" (the name he gave his negative dialectics and a critical play on Nietzsche's "gay

science"), Dix was producing a correspondingly melancholic art. The creaturely, alienated

gaze that pervades these landscapes is a hallmark of melancholy. Looking back at

Benjamin's analysis of melancholy in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, we can see that

creatureliness is the predicament of the melancholic subject. A sense of being unmoored,

homeless, alienated from all but the most mundane levels of meaning and expression, and a

sense of irrevocable and implacable subjective loss are at the heart of melancholy and why

Benjamin identified this temperament with creaturely being. After all, what distinguishes

During these early years of the Third Reich, Dix was able to sell some of his landscapes. See
van Dyke for a discussion of Dix's tenuous situation at this moment. For a discussion of the
reception of the 1935 Nierendorf exhibition, see Olaf Peters, *Neue Sachlichkeit und
National-Sozialismus: Affirmation und Kritik, 1931-1947* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag,
1998), 131-32.

[12] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflection on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott,
(London: Verso Books, 2005), 27-8.

the creature from the human is the human's ability to create a subjective identity set off

from the object world, while the creature is tossed into the world, a thing among so many

things, doomed to "bare life"[13] without narrative or representation, and subjected to the

laws and judgments of a tyrant. As Eric L. Santner remarks in his study of the concept,

> Creaturely life—the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the
> very point of their radical difference—is a product not simply of man's
> thrownness into the (enigmatic) "openness of Being" but of his exposure to a
> traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures
> have undergone radical transformations in modernity.[14]

The depopulated, vacuum-sealed landscapes of Dix, with their paradoxical sense of a

closely perceived reality that is nonetheless fully quoted from historically distant sources,

are the allegories for a breakdown in the normative structures of objective reality, and for

the exiled creative consciousness of the artist. With the loss of his typical social and human

subjects, Dix did not—in fact, could not—continue as he had done before. Reduced to an

isolated, marginalized, creaturely existence, placing his earth- and object-bound

melancholic gaze on the outmoded, he painted what was acceptable but in a way that

marked it through with death and destruction. In these landscapes, we see not only an

object world devoid of lived human presence, but we also glimpse an artist who seems to

have lost the ability to depict human experience, an artist lost along with a form of

historical life that has been pushed violently into death.

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[13] The term is borrowed from Giorgio Agamben, who discusses the origins and political
purposes of the concept in a number of his works, most notably in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign
Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
1998).

[14] Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 2006), 12.

This sensibility makes itself most explicit in *Jewish Cemetery in Randegg in Winter with the Hohenstoffen* (1935), often cited as the most symbol-laden of Dix's inner emigration landscapes. For the most part, commentators have brought up an obvious reference to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany (while the Nuremberg Laws were put into effect in 1935, the destruction of Jewish property and people took place only later). The other obvious point of reference comes not from contemporary history, but rather from the distant history of art, notable in Jacob van Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery* (1655), a work that became a model for Romantic-era landscape painting, notably that of Caspar David Friedrich. For Friedrich and his contemporaries, the landscape became a cipher not only for human subjectivity and spirituality, but also a reminder of historical temporality and inevitable decay.

In his essay "Ruisdael as Poet," Goethe, discussing the seventeenth-century Dutch artist's works, points to an important but often overlooked feature of landscape painting: its ability to represent temporality. For Goethe, aside from the picturesque loveliness of Ruisdael's work and the painter's skillful "light, shade, use of color and the overall effect [leaving] nothing to be desired," Ruisdael's true ability lies in his poetic sensibility, which points to something beyond artistically skillful representation.[15] Ruisdael presents the thoughtful viewer with an idea in his representations of nature—the idea of human history; thus, temporality enters the work through nature as allegory. Among the "tall old firs," the aged "but still thriving" groves of linden trees, the rushing streams, the habited villages and the "lean ruins of an immense cathedral" is the past, but not simply the past. Rather,

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[15] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Ruisdael as Poet (1818)," in *Goethe: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearley, trans. Ellen von Nardroff and Ernst von Nardroff, (New York: Suhrkamp, 1986), 62.

Ruisdael represents for the viewer "the past in the present."[16] What is this special past

brought forth in the landscape unlike any other genre of painting? Is the present to which

Goethe refers different from the present of everyday experience, bracketed off from the

everyday as the moment of aesthetic apprehension? Do the past and present coincide in

the work, or do they coalesce as the moment in which the past represented in the work

meets with the present of a viewing subject?

Goethe remarks that the picture is entirely devoted to the past, allowing no space

for the life of the present; the melancholic gaze of decay is what reigns over the

contemporary. The ruins of the church in the background speak to what was once vast,

striving towards the heavens, but now teetering on destruction in a shower of rain. "The

whole precinct, which was once so fruitful, is now a wilderness, partly overgrown with

shrubs and bushes, and even with old and withered threes." For Goethe, everything from

the decaying church to the ruined mausoleums, all encroached upon by nature, speak to

what once was grand, but is now lost. The whole image speaks to a sense of mortality, not

just the graves.

As Alice Kuzniar writes, "Extrapolating from Goethe, one might say that landscape

painting, by calling forth what is no longer present, points to its own distance from

actuality and to its fictional status."[17] In Kuzniar's interpretation, the past is vividly

brought forth in landscape painting into the present; however, despite its unique

palpability in the materialism of painting, the painting is nonetheless artifice. I would

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[16] Goethe, 63.

[17] Alice Kuzniar, "The Vanishing Canvas: Notes on Germany Romantic Landscape
Aesthetics," *German Studies Review* Vol. 1 No. 3 (Oct. 1988), 359-376. Kuzniar gives an
invaluable account of Romantic aesthetics through the landscape, from Goethe, Schlegel,
Novalis, and Herder, among other major figures.

certainly concur with Kuzniar that landscape painting does create a sense of what is no longer present by developing a proximity that bridges a distance both physical and temporal between viewer and viewed. However, I think she overstates the case of absence by ignoring the other part of Goethe's landscape temporality; that the past is not so much represented in the landscape despite its physical absence (thus made artificial by being re-presented as something akin to simulacrum), but rather that the past is brought forth in the present in the totality of the image, literally given *presence* and actualized, albeit as a cipher for another totality now lost. While the painting itself—in its imagined reality based on generalizations culled by the artist from the specifics of nature—is a fiction, the idea brought forth in it and by it is nonetheless a truth. Furthermore, the idea depends upon the tension between its truth and the fiction of landscape.

Aside from the tension between fiction and truth, others exist in the work of landscape: between the lost past and the present, between the empirical representation of nature and the presentation of an abstract philosophical idea, between nature's "bare life" and the human construct of culture (the idea of nature itself having been constructed out of this binary). It is not surprising that the landscape became such a richly interesting, if not vexing subject in Romantic aesthetics. Despite its deceptive, seemingly straightforward mimetic simplicity, landscape painting actually opens up a boundless regress of tension and contradictions involving fundamental questions of the formation of meaning, the nature of representation, the uncertainty of interpretation, and the limits of all of these.

Goethe forcefully showed that as a mode of representation, landscape is among the most powerful of symbolic vehicles. By representing history within the context of nature, the landscape encapsulates a spirit of ambivalence with regard to the progress and

potential fallibility of human history. Perhaps this power is why it gained popularity

among artists, poets, and like-minded thinkers in the nineteenth century, precisely at a

moment when notions of artistic representation and its ability to present meaning were

being questioned. As discussed in the previous chapter, allegory is the rhetorical gesture of

"speaking otherwise." Allegory uses language and form to express meaning other than that

which is first implied in the form itself. In pointing to an idea beyond what it physically

represents, allegory highlights the difference between the object and its interpretation. Its

significance as a strategy for the artist may lie in its use of indirect, coded forms of

expression, but for the viewer/interpreter, allegory dramatizes the infinite regress of

meaning making.

In its ability to open up a relation between the almost foreclosed past and the

present by bringing them together, the landscape evokes Benjamin's concept of the

"dialectical image." Benjamin's thought is shot through with reflection on the nature of

history (the relationship between the terms *nature* and *history* is itself important and

meaningful). In these many reflection—from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* through

to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the concept of the dialectical image returns again

and again, if not in name then in the spirit of the concept. One of the most articulated

meditations on the dialectical image appears in the unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's

fragmentary final work on modernity. Here, we can examine the affinity between

Benjamin's explanation and Goethe's theory of the landscape. In "Convolute N," Benjamin

explains his concept:

> It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present
> its light on what is past; rather, image is that where in what has been comes
> together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words:
> image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the

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past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <bildlich>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.[18]

The "critical moment on which all reading is founded' is the moment at which the past is about to be lost to the demands of historical progress. The "now" of the dialectical image lasts for only a moment, and it is the task of literary interpretation to draw our attention to its dialectical constellation before it disappears. The dialectical image forces the forward-looking gaze of modernity's historical progress backward. In doing so, this melancholic gaze becomes invigorated by the realization that progress and destruction are inextricably linked, thereby bringing into question the very notion of historical progress.

Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image is linked to his conception of allegory as it was already presented in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Thus, we can read the dialectical image as the culmination of Benjamin's long-term investigation of the legacy of Romantic aesthetics; a third term that takes us away from the false opposition between symbol and allegory, since all signification operates through allegory's "speaking otherwise." Adorno draws the parallels closer in his reading of Benjamin's *Origin*. For Adorno, Benjamin's allegory *is* history; allegory is the very locus where past and present unite in a concrete particularity beyond which history cannot be conceptualized. It is only through the allegorical/dialectical image that the very notion of history is expressed:

> Allegory is usually taken to mean the presentation of a concept as an image and there it is labeled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression! What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is

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[18] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463.

nothing but a historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history.[19]

Reading Adorno's words on the representational primacy of allegory, we may be reminded of Benjamin's discussion presented in the last chapter of Winckelmann's analysis of the Belvedere torso of Hercules, in which the act of interpretation transforms the transcendent unity of the classical symbolic work into an allegorical fragment, read part-by-part like a hieroglyph.[20] Both Benjamin and Adorno point to us toward the fact that all expression is itself already allegorical; allegory is the natural state of expression. Representation must always proceed through allegory. Likewise, all historical interpretation is allegorical. Indeed, the allegorical is the nexus where history and art, signification and expression meet and overlap.

As it was for painters of concrete particularity who came before him, for Dix, the landscape is the locus where these relations are mapped out. At the same time that the landscape draws these philosophical and aesthetic threads together, it does not do so to synthesize them into a harmonious unity. If it could, the uncanny and alienating qualities of the landscapes would disappear. Instead, we are repeatedly confronted by the inability of interpretation to transcend its object, and of the object to disclose its secrets. Nature, according to Max Pensky, enters into the representation as an emblem at once both meaningful and meaningless. The 'true' expression of nature's meaning is its transience and falleness, its separation from the divine unity of being. Thus, nature and historical

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[19] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor Adorno*, Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 262-3.

[20] See Benjamin, *OGTD*, 164-77 for Benjamin's discussion of Winckelmann's analysis of classical art and its symbolic perfection.

catastrophe are one: "Nature itself […] becomes the sphere of allegories, the pile of runes of the continuum of historical catastrophe. […] Petrified, transformed into the specter of repetition, history is transfigured into dead nature; mortified, nature becomes the elements of historical ruin and the universality of death."[21] As Benjamin stated, "history merges into the setting," and this notion fits strikingly well with Dix's landscapes, which seem to exhaust their representational thrust in their steady and detailed (almost too detailed) depictions of a nature devoid of action beyond its own transience. In this regard, Dix had no need to represent the gruesome events of his time; the landscape already well enough expresses history as a process of mortification, not moving towards an end, but towards destruction's infinite finality. Human history falls back on natural history. In these works, it seems we must confront landscape painting not as a simple response to artistic repression, but as a powerful rhetorical strategy employed to express a complex constellation of relations between the contemporary, the historical, nature, and representation; one that is powerful not in the unity of its vision, but rather in how it shows us the fact that our position in relation to nature and history is always allegorical and that the creation of meaning always comes at the cost of the distance opened up between us and things through representation. Painting may be weak to the task it has been given throughout history, but its power lies in the fact that it can be nothing other than weak, therefore exposing to us the broader truth of our position. Dix refuses to tell a coherent, harmonious story, and we may be reminded of those eerie, early landscapes of Altdorfer, with their surfeit of detail and narrative emptiness. As Christopher Wood writes about Altdorfer in a thought that applies equally to Dix, "These pictures lack any argumentative

21 Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 120.

or discursive structure. They make no move to articulate a theme. Instead, they look like the settings for missing stories."[22] The stories are missing because they could not be told, with holes once filled by an acting human figure, which has been now lost in a world of profound, melancholic inertia.[23]

Landscape and the Limits of Painting

If we allow that in Dix's landscapes, we see painting acknowledging its inborn limits in the face of historical catastrophe, we see in Gerhard Richter's work—in ways perhaps not obviously similar to Dix's—a sustained engagement with painting's limits. Benjamin Buchloh, one of Richter's closest and most astute observers, remarks on Richter's project in ways that resonate with Dix, particularly at the point of Richter's self-conscious historicism. For Buchloh, "Richter's art can be seen as an extraordinary succession of painterly strategies by which what have always been thought of as mutually exclusive cultural and historical demands have been successfully, if paradoxically, integrated."[24] But integrated to what end? While Buchloh is correct to point out that Richter's work represents an engagement with "painterly strategies" traditionally seen as disparate—particularly within the context of modernism and postmodernism—nonetheless, if integration of these

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[22] Christopher Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 13.

[23] Ibid., 26. Wood provides in invaluable argument for landscape's founding in a moment of cultural crisis and loss, as an artistic product specific to an emergent modernity.

[24] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning (1996)," in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) 70. For Buchloh, Richter's work not only questions the modernist dichotomies between abstraction and representation, but also embodies the political, social, and aesthetic divisions of Germany in the twentieth century.

elements is the goal, Richter's work lacks the totalizing conclusion one may normally

associate with such integrative activities. From his earliest works based on mass media

imagery and snapshots to his "painterly" abstractions, from the gray monochromes to the

modular and seemingly endless grids of color, one might say that Richter's painting has

indeed engaged with the polarities of modern art in a more or less total way, but in a way

that does not integrate these polarities into a totality, but rather dwells in their interstices

and aporias. Like Dix, Richter is a painter always aware of painting's tradition and his

position within it, and both artists are thus difficult to categorize by virtue of their

awareness that to stake out a singular position in the field of painterly production is to

create the potential for critical blind spots. Furthermore, both painters have produced

bodies of work that speak many languages of painting, never reducing it to a single voice or

style. Favoring an exploration of painting's heteroglossia, they share across their different

historical settings skepticism toward any notion of painting's ability to directly express

some sort of subjective projection of this figure called an artist. At the same time that Dix's

landscapes point in the direction of a lyrical subjective investment in the expressivity of

nature, they nonetheless foreclose such expressivity behind a citational mode that belies

the very possibility of such expression. Likewise, Richter uses past historical styles and

themes to call into question painting's claims to expression, a notion that will be explored

below.

The narrative of twentieth-century avant-garde art is dominated by the modernist

notion of individual artists making and developing their unique contributions to a

homogenous field, a field which has a certain logic and which placed specific demands upon

the modernist artist in terms of how and what they produced. In modernism, patrons and

publics no longer dictated what the artist did; modernism's teleology of erasure and advance was the arbiter of significance, and at a certain point in the structure of modernism, painting no longer seemed relevant. As Robert Storr writes in reference to modernism's dominant discursive field (and Richter's problematic relation to it), "modernism consisted of the linear progression of movements propelled by individual talents struggling to make their distinctive contribution to 'mainstream' painting and sculpture."[25] This mainstream had developed as a trajectory from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in the late nineteenth century to Expressionism in the early twentieth, onward to various more and more extreme manifestations of abstraction and pictorial deconstruction, from Cubism onward to Abstract Expressionism, in stylistic modes that attempted to create a one-to-one relationship between the search for artistic truth and the authenticity of lived experience. Storr continues,

> After World War II the cult of authenticity [perhaps best embodied by Abstract Expressionism] rested upon artists' sincere efforts to match their work with their experience; and the cult of formal integrity rested upon the consistency of their intentions with regard to the larger scheme of their medium's predicted development. Inauthentic, insincere, or inconsistent art—signaled by stylistic zigzags and about-faces as opposed to uninterrupted forward motion—were a matter of existential bad faith or aesthetic fickleness.[26]

Richter's body of work is resplendent with examples of such existential bad faith and aesthetic fickleness, with its abrupt shifts between abstraction and representation, all the while denying the difference between the two. As Alex Potts writes, "In critical analysis of twentieth-century art, the assumption is often made that the more compelling and

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[25] Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 15.

[26] Ibid. For Storr, Mondrian and Pollock are the prime example of this mode of thinking among historians of modernism.

politically radical work is of its very nature anti-realist and is to be seen as distinctly modern by virtue of refusing or systematically disrupting representation or reference."[27] Within this opposition, works that are ostensibly representational but not naturalistic, such as Richter's, present a conundrum.

Of the aesthetic-ideological pronouncements of late modernism, one of the most significant was the "death of painting." Having been killed off by the anti-illusionistic and anti-pictorial strategies of Minimalism and Conceptualism, painting was declared obsolete by many critics and artists, and those who persisted in it, were labeled reactionaries, that is, if they did not do so to interrogate its limitations, flaws, and inadequacies. Richter's work poses a significant challenge to the hegemony of this narrative, given his commitment to the task of painting, and throughout his long career one finds a continued interrogation of the notion of painting's death in his interviews and written statements. Remaining conscious of his own limitations and the limitations of painting, Richter has nonetheless consistently denied painting's irrelevance, though he has not done so with an easy, affirmative adherence to any illusions about paintings powers of expression. Indeed, his work negates such sentiment, treading a thin line between painting's obsolescence and its continued ability to present new truths.

Romantic Recapitulations?

One of the fields in which Richter has navigated the shifting terrain of painting's contemporary task has been the landscape. Indeed, of all the subjects interrogated by Richter (leaving aside for now the problems exposed by his work with such categories as subject and style), the landscape may be the one that has been most sustained across

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[27] Alex Potts, Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics, and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art (New Have: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

Richter's oeuvre, and within it, takes on a multiplicity of forms. From his earliest gray-scale

photo paintings, such as *Alster* from 1963 and *Great Pyramid* from 1969, to his series of

twelve abstract paintings from 2005 titled *Wald* ("Forest"), the landscape appears as a

leitmotiv in Richter's painterly program. However, despite its prominence across Richter's

oeuvre, the landscape theme is rarely addressed by scholars and critics, the single

exception being the 2011 publication of *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*, which includes a

selection of these works from throughout Richter's career along side three essays by

German scholars of Richter's work. In his essay for the volume, Richter biographer Dietmar

Elger discusses the possible reasons for this scholarly avoidance of Richter's landscapes,

which "may lie in a certain helplessness or speechlessness that overcomes viewers in the

face of such 'Romantic' scenes, which so very obviously seem to fulfill the wider public

expectations or recognizable images in art and to satisfy (by proxy) their longing for an

atmospheric encounter with Nature."[28] In Elger's explanation we encounter two issues of

particular concern to the present analysis: one, that these are recapitulations of "Romantic"

scenes, and two, that they somehow satisfy the desire for an "encounter with Nature".

Elsewhere, Elger argues that any such encounter with Nature through Richter's landscapes

would be based on a misconception, given their double mediation by Richter's photography

and by nineteenth-century Romantic landscape painting. This brings us to the hard nut to

crack with regard to Richter's landscapes: the supposed sincerity of their citation of

Romanticism. While it may be easy to deny these works any ability to offer an encounter

with Nature (whatever that may mean in the realm of looking at paintings, which always

already *re*-present objects), it is much harder to slough off their indebtedness and possible

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[28] Dietmar Elger, "Landscape as Model," in *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*, Dietmar Elger, ed. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 20-21.

recapitulation of Romantic landscape painting, exemplified by the work of Caspar David

Friedrich, whom Richter mentions repeatedly and provocatively in reference to his own

landscapes. When Richter claims that with his landscapes he "felt like painting something

beautiful" [29] or that "it is quite possible to paint like Caspar David Friedrich today,"[30] one

can imagine the artist's staunchest defenders cringing in embarrassment at such un-radical

and seemingly naïve statements, and his harshest critics making note as evidence of his

closet conservatism and academicism. No wonder the landscapes tend to be marginalized

in the prominent discussions of Richter's work. Nonetheless, given Richter's difficult

position within the terrain of modern and postmodern art, the landscapes may indeed be a

sort of locus around which can be built a constellational understanding of Richter's broader

project, as well as his place within an alternative tradition of German art.

While Gerhard Richter is among the most discussed artists working today,

interpretations of his work and its position within art history tend to revolve around three

interpretive strategies, as outlined by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy*

of Contemporary Art. According to Osborne, these are: "*epistemological skepticism*" (in the

postmodern sense of doubt about the possibility of an unmediated "real"), "*historical*

remembrance and mourning" (painting beyond the medium's "death," while also

interrogating past subjects and styles), and "*painting as redemption*" (an affirmation of the

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[29] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf-Gunter Dienst, 1970," in *Gerhard Richter: Writings, 1961-2007*, ed. Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), 56.

[30] Gerhard Richter, "Letter to Jean-Christophe Ammann," in ibid., 72.

"ontological power" of painting despite its "fallen historical position."[31] In most cases cited

by Osborne, these three interpretive models have been employed in an effort to place

Richter firmly within the modern/postmodern avant-garde tradition, with its oppositions

between tradition and newness, figuration and abstraction, and content and formalism.

Needless to say, Richter's work has resisted such assimilation into the mainstream of

modern art. As Kaja Silverman points out in one of the more original recent readings of

Richter's project, "differences do not translate into oppositions for Richter. He has a

profound aversion to binary formulations, both within the domain of politics and within

that of art, and he cannot encounter one without attempting to dismantle it."[32] In many

ways, Richter's highly self-conscious project has served to negate the antagonistic binaries

of modern art in order to generate an agonistic field that protects aesthetic difference while

holding it in dialectical tension.[33] Rather than reconsider Richter's placement within the

paradigms outlined by Osborne, I would like to think about how his work functions to

elucidate some of the problems engendered by the dominant modes of reading and

interpreting modernist painterly practice, particularly in relation to these binary

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[31] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 88. For Osborne, these models developed around an effort to plant Richter within the postwar American tradition, particularly in relation to Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Minimalism, most elaborated in Robert Storr's interpretation, put forth in the catalogue for the 2002 exhibition, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*. To a more philosophical extent, Buchloh's continued engagement with Richter's work has basically fulfilled the same function by defining Richter in relation to the late modernist project as it developed in the United States and in turn echoed by European artists.

[32] Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 169. Silverman's original and thorough analysis of Richter's painting as analogy will be discussed below.

[33] For a discussion of the difference between antagonism and agonism in the realm of politics that is nonetheless helpful here, see Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

oppositions. In short, how does Richter's work engage critically with these oppositions, and how does his sustained attention to the landscape play a crucial role within his critical project?

An Alternative Aesthetic Autonomy

Most numerous among Richter's landscapes are those that conform to his photo-painting style. Painted from photographs taken by Richter on his travels, at times they make little effort to hide their snapshot origins. For example, his three paintings of Mount Vesuvius from 1976 all contain at their bottom edge a glimpse of rocks, or even an observation deck in the foreground, recalling the sort of accidental inclusions that beset the tourist's snapshot and point not only to the painting's origins in photography, but moreover the casual photography of the traveler produced with a point-and-click, less with a concern for aesthetic import and more to index the photographer's presence at the photographed location. But while the tourist is set on capturing the iconic landmark in his or her snapshots, in Richter's paintings, Vesuvius all but disappears into the hazy setting, engulfed by clouds, atmosphere, and Richter's characteristic "blur" effect, produced by running a squeegee-like implement over the still wet surface of the canvas.

Recalling Rosalind Krauss's analysis, indexes "establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify."[34] The index is a sort of pure referent, in that it points directly to the thing it represents, without symbolic

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[34] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part I," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 198.

or allegorical signification. In an interview from 1972, Richter describes his transformation of the photograph into a painting as a shift from information to object. For Richter, we traditionally see photographs as factual record because they exist as information; their means are transparent in relation to their purpose as a record of something. In other words, photographs inform rather than express. The objectivity of photographs comes from the fact that "they relate to an object without themselves being objects."[35] While many contemporary critics and theorists have questioned any claim to truth on the part of photography, no one can deny that in their pervasive presence as information in visual culture, they tend to be looked at differently from paintings, which are situated more as objects of contemplation. Richter goes on to describe the intention behind his "blurring" of the painted image. He rejects any notion that the blurs approximate a blurred photograph. Instead, the blur is a "superficial" device used to define his relationship to reality, which has to do with "imprecision, uncertainty, transience, incompleteness, or whatever. But this doesn't explain the pictures. At best, it explains what led to their being painted. Pictures are something different [from photographs], you see; for instance, they are never blurred. What we regard as blurring is imprecision, and that means that they are different from the object represented. But, since pictures are not made for purposes of comparison with reality, they cannot be blurred, or imprecise, or different (different from what?) How can, say, paint on canvas be blurred?"[36] For Richter, painting is autonomous and self-reliant in the sense that it frames its own rules and interpretation through what seems to be a higher or purer level of artistic agency behind its creation. With this, he presents a very different

[35] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön, 1972," in *Writings*, 60.

[36] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön, 1972," in *Writings*, 60.

model of art's autonomy than the one dominant in mainstream modernism, which used a work of art's non-identity with the world as its measure.[37] Richter seems to be saying that abstraction is not the marker of painting's autonomy, which precedes any specific picture; rather, autonomy lies in the absolute intentionality that is always expressed in and through the act of painting, an intentionality that his little to nothing to do with whether a painting is abstract or representational.

Painting photographs transforms them into objects, and thus, transforms their relationship to what is represented. "I can also see them as objects and even make them into objects—by painting them, for instance. From that point onwards they cannot be, and are not meant to be, objective any more—nor are they meant to document anything whatever, whether reality or a view of reality. They are the reality, the view, the object. They can only be documented."[38] Despite the fact that Richter transcribes his photographs into painting as faithfully as possible, the image is still transformed. Of course, one cannot recognize and render all of the details captured in a photograph. Likewise, the photograph, although documenting the world, leaves much behind. Both are excerpts, analogous in what is at once their revealing and at the same time their concealing of the world.   In a way analogous to the way the photo refers to its external object, the photo-painting comes to refer to the photograph, while they are set apart from one another, there difference is not simply negational (or binary); rather, their difference is premised on a relational intertwining that opens up to a dialectic of semblance internal to the work and its referent.

[37] I am thinking here of Adorno's presentation of aesthetic semblance and non-identity as the preconditions for art's autonomy and critical potential. See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[38] Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön, 1972," in *Writings*, 60.

Richter's work does not coax the viewer into developing a meaning external to the painting in traditional iconographic terms. In this regard, his notion of painterly truth lines up with Adorno's radical notion of truth content outside the traditional concept of meaning: "The truth content of artworks is not what they mean but rather what decides whether the work in itself is true or false, and only this truth of the work in-itself is commensurable to philosophical interpretation and coincides—with regard to the idea, in any case—with the idea of philosophical truth."[39] In Richter's creation of visual analogies, or better, analogies of the visual, he sets up a system of internally relational differences among images that in many ways relates to a critical philosophical practice, one that attempts to present an another model of art's autonomy. It is through the similarities between the photograph and its referent and the painting and the photograph that we must interrogate their differences "more emphatically, [...] because there is no more powerful form of ideological mystification than similarity."[40] Richter's work ruptures the totality of what Adorno called *Schein* (often translated as "semblance"). Richter's paintings deny the reconciliation of false consciousness gained through semblance, and in their difference, the enigmatic truth of art is put forth.

On a more fundamental level, as Elger writes, "the paintings acquire additional qualities which clearly set them apart from the photographic original. The changed medium plus the enlarged format lend the painting a more intense presence than the

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[39] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 130. For a recent discussion of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in relation to contemporary concerns and issues in the field of aesthetics, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[40] Silverman, 174.

photograph had."[41] Even if the painting superficially "represents" the same thing as the

photograph, their difference in media amounts to a parallel difference in status and

meaning. Responding to the familiar notion that a photograph is a document of an object;

Richter develops a model in which painting is rather an analogy of an object with its own

properties that need not depend on what it "represents". In a way quite different from

photography, painting pulls along with it, no matter how much it attempts to dislodge itself,

the whole tradition of making paintings as a specific type of object with its own intrinsic

system, and therefore, the possibility for an even richer array of analogies and associations.

As Richter himself put it, "It [a painting] has more reality than a photograph, because a

painting is more of an object in itself, because it's visibly hand-painted, because it has been

tangibly and materially produced."[42] The painting opens up a distance from reality in its

self-assertion as an object in a way that the photograph, all too reliant on its indexicality,

does not. It causes the viewer to ask more questions and take less for granted, and in the

end says more about reality, "because it's more unsettling. It's always more or less

different from reality, and that's unsettling."[43] In its creation of distance, the painting opens

up the possibility that even our first-hand view of nature is founded on difference and

analogy. And painting's distance, it seems, is premised on its materiality, in the sense that a

painting always proclaims itself as a created representation. On the other hand, in

photography (particularly in non-art contexts) the medium tends to disappear in favor of

the documentation and information provided by the image. Richter's theory of painting's

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[41] Elger, 25.

[42] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Doris von Drathen, 1992," in *Writings*, 284.

[43] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Doris von Drathen, 1992," in *Writings*, 284.

difference is also a theory of painterly materialism, in which the medium itself, as the

constant presence of the palpable material substrate of the image, is the bearer of its

(always partial) truth. If the photograph is transformed by Richter's painted copy, it is

from its status as index to one of analogy.   Richter's work has increasingly reassessed

photography's status as document, as he engages with the medium more directly in order

to align its status as analogy with painting, a status that does not rely on expression but

rather on intention.

Richter's Disparate Analogies

      Richter often describes his work as the creation of analogies, but what does he mean

by this? When asked in a 1970 interview how he interprets his role as a painter in our

society is, Richter responds,

> As a role that everyone has. I would like to try to understand what is. We
> know very little, and I am trying to do it by creating analogies. Almost every
> work of art is an analogy. When I make a representation of something, this
> too is an analogy to what exists; I make an effort to get a grip on the thing by
> depicting it. I prefer to steer clear of anything aesthetic, so as not to set
> obstacles in my own way and not to have the problem of people saying: 'Ah,
> yes, that's how he sees the world, that's his interpretation.'[44]

Elsewhere, Richter states, "Painting is the making of an analogy for something non-visual

and incomprehensible; giving it form and bringing it within reach. And that is why good

paintings are incomprehensible."[45] While we may be tempted to interpret Richter's

description as a postmodern leveling-out of signification, in which everything is equal to

everything else, we must at the same time acknowledge that Richter avoids the type of

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[44] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf-Gunter Dienst, 1970," in *Writings*, 55.

[45] Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1981," in *Writings*, 120.

cynicism, irony, relativism, and nihilism one typically encounters in critical postmodern art. While Richter shares with postmodernism a skepticism towards received knowledge and the totalizing ways it has been traditionally organized, his skepticism does not extend to the collection of knowledge in general, or judgments about its quality. While his "system" may be unsystematic, decentralized, and non-hierarchical, he nonetheless still believes that good painting has some truth to tell, even if that truth is relational, immanent, and always partial. "Creating the incomprehensible has absolutely nothing to do with turning out any old bunkum, because bunkum is always comprehensible. 'Not comprehensible' partly means 'not transitory': i.e., essential. And it partly means an analogy for something that, by definition, transcends our understanding, but which our understanding allows us to postulate."[46] In the end, access to the "Real" only comes through analogies, and painting is one of the ways by which we have traditionally posed these analogies. Filtered through the eye, the mind, and the hand, the painted picture becomes philosophy by other means.

Kaja Silverman sees Richter's creation of analogies at the foundation of how we may best interpret his work, less as a sort of game played in the field of modernist art discourse and more as its own philosophical project. As Silverman explains, an analogy sets up a relationship among things that does not substitute them for each other (as is the case with metaphor). "In an analogy, [...] both terms are on an equal footing, ontologically and semiotically. They also belong to each other at the most profound level of their being."[47] Richter's paintings do not replace the photographs on which they are based, and the truth of painting emerges out of its relationship with the photograph, not in its replacement of it.

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[46] Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1981," in *Writings*, 120.

[47] Silverman, 173.

As Silverman writes, "by rendering visible the special kind of analogy that links a photograph to its referent, Richter also teaches us to think differently about other kinds of difference."[48] The two are not opposed; rather they intertwine in a dialectical system of representation, one that asks us to think about difference beyond negation.

Coupled—and perhaps in tension—with their allusions to anonymous snapshot photography are the numerous references to Romantic prototypes in Richter's landscapes. More specifically, they often consciously evoke the imagery of Caspar David Friedrich. When viewing a work like *Small Stairs at the Seaside* (1969), one cannot but be reminded of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10). Both pictures present us with an emptiness made more palpable by the singular presence of something external to nature: the lone monk in the case of Friedrich and in Richter's, a staircase leading to a platform that extends off the left of the canvas at the point at which it meets the hazy horizon. With few exceptions, Richter's landscapes do not include the direct figural signifiers of human subjectivity that dot Friedrich's landscapes and drive home the sense of humanity's spiritual connection to nature. Nonetheless, Richter does include more indirect references to the world of humans, in the forms of paved paths and roads, bridges, signs, fences, and other more or less modest signs of human presence. In a certain sense, these becomes the ruins that populated landscapes since the time of Ruisdael, and recalling Goethe's description of *The Jewish Cemetery*, we can read them as the melancholic signifiers of the persistence of the past, set within paintings that themselves mark their own prehistory. However, unlike the cemetery of Ruisdael, or the Gothic abbey ruins or even more archaic dolmens of Friedrich, Richter's human traces are of a less metaphysical inclination, unless we think of them as

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[48] Ibid., 175.

markers of modernity's religion of industrial and economic progress. Looking at *Ruhrtal*

Bridge (1969), for example, we see the monumental structure of the longest steel bridge in

the world stretched out just above the horizon, set against a hazy morning or evening sky.

Despite the actual size of the bridge, the painted landscape holds no markers of scale aside

from a subtle glimpse of the Ruhr bending and flowing just to our side of the bridge's span.

The thin lines of the bridge's perfectly straight horizontal and vertical elements extending

just slightly into the expansive sky do little to assure us of its stability, especially when

placed atop the stubbornly dark, solid landscape below. What might otherwise seem

grandly inhuman in its scale and materials is here sucked back down into the landscape

that supports it. Indeed, Richter transforms the industrial sublime into the almost banal,

the monumental into a ruin. Thus, an analogy opens up between Richter's representation

and the tropes of traditional landscape, setting up a critical dialogue that interrogates the

possibility of nature's signification. In the end, nature as the simply existent wins out over

signification.

Georg Lukács' notion of "second nature" fits well with many of Richter's landscapes.

For Lukács, the harmony of subjective interiority with nature is the purview of lyric poetry

(we can extend his analysis to the Romantic landscape in the visual arts). With lyricism, the

kind we encounter in Romanticism, nature becomes the outward, material manifestation of

the soul, and therefore, of God. In Friedrich's landscapes, particularly those that include

human subjects, the *Rückenfigur*, as Friedrich's poet-contemporaries called them (*Two Men*

Contemplating the Moon of c.1825, or *Moonrise at Sea* of c.1821, for example), we enter the

landscape by proxy through these wanderers in search of a spiritual presence within

inanimate nature. Nonetheless, while we may view these scenes as presenting us with a

sense of subjective harmony with the outward world found in nature's forms, it comes at a

moment when humanity's relationship with nature was being questioned. Friedrich's

landscapes present us with a "subjective viewpoint," but one that may as much question

any sense of harmony with nature at the moment "within the life of humanity where

landscape no longer is lived but viewed."[49] As Schiller wrote,

> It comes *from this*, that nature for us has vanished from humanity and we
> only meet it in its true form outside of humanity in the inanimate world. Not
> our greater *accord with nature*, quite the contrary our *opposition to nature* in
> our relationships, circumstances, and customs, drives us to seek a
> satisfaction in the physical world which is not to be hoped for in the moral
> world…[50]

The moment when the possibility of humanity's subjective link to nature is contemplated

and given visual and poetic form is already the moment at which its separation from nature

has been totalized. The myth presented in lyric poetry is one of the synchronicity of the

soul and nature, the "greatest moment," as Lukács writes,

> at which the meaningful unity of nature and soul or their meaningful divorce,
> the necessary and affirmed loneliness of the soul becomes eternal. At the
> lyrical moment the purest interiority of the soul, set apart from duration
> without choice, lifted above the obscurely-determined multiplicity of things,
> solidifies into substance; whilst alien, unknowable nature is driven from
> within, to agglomerate into a symbol that is illuminated throughout. [51]

Romantic lyricism presents us with a mythic reification of subjectivity in nature, and while

the Romantics may have been aware of its mythic status, they were nonetheless longing for

the vision of spiritual wholeness it represented. First nature (Nature proper) represents a

longing for unalienated existence, according to Lukács, but nature is always transformed

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[49] Koerner, 262.

[50] Quoted in Ibid.

[51] Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of
Great Epic Literature, Anna Bostock, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 63.

back "into a kind of picturesque lumber-room of sensuous symbols" without meaning. The

idea of symbolic unity presented in Romanticism and discussed in relation to allegory in

the last chapter, is false consciousness.

Richter acknowledges this false consciousness in relation to nature quite forcefully

in a series of notes written in 1986:

> Of course, my landscapes are not only beautiful or nostalgic, with a Romantic
> or classical suggestion of lost Paradises, but above all 'untruthful' (even if I
> did not always find a way of showing it); and by 'untruthful' I mean the
> glorifying way we look at nature—nature, which in all its forms is always
> against us, because it knows no meaning, no pity, no sympathy, because it
> knows nothing and is absolutely mindless: the total antithesis of ourselves,
> absolutely inhuman.[52]

Richter, it seems, does not buy into the traditional interpretation of Romantic landscape

painting as an image of subjective harmony with and in nature. Instead, he seems to think

in the far more nuanced terms that Romanticism already presents us with nature as

hieroglyph at the moment when alienation from nature was being strongly felt for the first

time, at the beginning of modernity.[53]

> Every beauty that we see in landscape—every enchanting colour effect, or
> tranquil scene, or powerful atmosphere, every gentle linearity of magnificent
> spatial depth or whatever—is our projection; and we can switch it off at a
> moment's notice, to reveal only the appalling horror and ugliness.[54]

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[52] Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1986," in *Writings*, 158.

[53] Of course, the beginning of modernity can always be deferred back further in time, as
Christopher Wood does in relation to Albrecht Altdorfer: "Landscape in the West was itself
a symptom of modern loss, a cultural form that emerged only after humanity's primal
relationship to nature had been disrupted by urbanism, commerce, and technology. For
when mankind still 'belonged' to nature in a simple way, nobody needed to paint a
landscape." See *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, 23-26.

[54] Richter, "Notes, 1986," 158.

Is this why Richter almost never paints nature unadulterated by human presence? We must always bear in mind that Richter's landscapes are always filtered through the medium of photography, which itself already imparts a layer of human manipulation into an image that may otherwise contain no visual signifiers of human presence, such as his seascapes or his earliest landscapes based on images taken while on vacation with his family on Corsica in 1968. Needless to say, these are exceptions to the rule that Richter's landscapes always include bits of the "second nature," as the world of the human-made, discussed by Lukács, where meaning is achieved, but only as a negation of interiority, as the image of its alienation. "[I]t is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities."[55] While nature remains mute, second-nature speaks, but in a language of alienation that says that humanity will never feel at home in the world. Even in the most seemingly picturesque painting by Richter, perhaps his *Garden Path* of 1987, in which the intimacy of the green shrubs and the opening towards the garden from our position in the woods is illuminated by the warm glow of the summer sky in hazy mystery, the path that beckons us into this open, warm space hugged by the forest, is blocked by a barrier. Its rigid, thin, perfectly straight vertical post and horizontal bar cut us off from the landscape, a landscape that is itself a human creation—a garden, as the title tells us—from which we are nonetheless still barred. "Estrangement from nature (the first nature), the modern sentimental attitude to nature, is only a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of as a parental home."[56]

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[55] Lukács, 64.

[56] Ibid.

Disparity as the Greatest Possible Freedom

In 1986, Richter began painting a series of his photo-painted landscapes, onto which he would then paint passages like those found in his "abstract" paintings. In *Venice*, *Krems*, and *Clump of Trees* the blurred landscapes characteristic of Richter's method to this point are over-painted with slashes and streaks of color produced by his technique of applying paint with a squeegee-like implement, as well as the occasional "gesture" applied with a brush. The squeegeed streaks typically spread horizontally across the landscape image, while the brushstrokes tend toward the vertical. Combined, these techniques correspond to the elements found in the landscape; the streaks thus become analogous to the sky and earth, the brushwork analogous to vertical elements, such as trees. In *Krems,* for instance, a landscape that seems to depict trees and houses (on the far right a window and roof are visible) is obscured by a green streak that spread unevenly across the surface, made up of the mid-tone between the dark and light greens of the trees still visible beneath. Moreover, atop this horizontal stretch of green are vertical brushstrokes worked through the squeegeed field in a mix of yellow, white, light and dark greens, ostensibly in the form of rudimentary trees, with upward diagonal strokes branching off from vertical strokes that rise up from the ground line. Richter seems to be laying one type of landscape over the other, asking the viewer to question how they are different, not through negation but rather through analogy. Is one truer in terms of painting?

In *Venice*, the last of a group of paintings depicting the less pictorial, even anonymous, parts of the lagoon—only *Venice (Island)* contains a glimpse of something recognizably Venetian: a tower that may be the campanile of San Marco or San Giorgio in the far right distance—the streaks across the surface in yellow, blue, green, terracotta, and

gray bring a gestural intensity to an otherwise still and silent image of sky and land

reflected in placid water like a mirror. The abruptness of their difference is so striking that

it almost pushes the viewer to put "gesture" in quotation marks, since Richter seems to

forcibly use the calm anonymity of the underlying photo-painting to draw our awareness to

rhetorical deployment of the technique to signify expression and abstraction. One may

even be reminded of the argument made by Robert Rosenblum that modernist abstraction

had its roots in Romantic landscape painting.[57] But even then, the two elements are just

too disparate, and when we think Richter is hitting us over the head with a clever critique

of the opposition between representation and abstraction as the two competing languages

of art by placing the two together, the terracotta stroke that stretches horizontally across

the right two-thirds of the image, hovering in the midst of a grove of shady trees almost

take on the quality of the long brick structures (perhaps warehouses) that jut out into the

water in two of the earlier straight photo-paintings in the Venice series. As soon as we

convince ourselves otherwise, that this isn't a building but a gestural brushstroke, Richter

pulls the same hue down into/on top of the water in a series of softer rippled strokes, as if

it is being reflected. With this, the incommensurability between the two languages breaks

down. Once again, Richter demonstrates that paintings do not correspond to a nature,

truth, or reality beyond themselves. The truth they pronounce, as Silverman writes, is a

very human one and one that dwells between traditional oppositions that we take as truth,

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[57] See Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Even if we were to conclude that Richter is drawing us toward the point made by Rosenblum, it would have to be with a sense of irony very uncharacteristic of the artist, since Rosenblum's discussion is premised on the spiritual rhetoric of Romantic art and its adoption by modern abstract artists, notably the New York School. Needless to say, Richter has rejected this rhetoric many times over in his notes and interviews.

bringing forth a "gray zone" that exposes such hard and fast suppositions as ideological

mystification.[58]

Richter has gone on to produce, beginning in 1989, over-painted photographs, some

of which are made from photographed details of his own paintings, such as the series *128*

Details from a Picture, Halifax 1978 IV from 1998, examining further in a sort of *mise en*

abyme the intertwining tensions, differences, and analogies between these forms.[59] As he

concludes about his overall project in a 1986 interview with Buchloh, "all that I am trying

to do in each picture is to bring together the most disparate and mutually contradictory

elements, alive and viable, in the greatest possible freedom."[60]

In 2005 Richter produced the twelve-painting series *Wald*, which provocatively

sums up his exploration of the landscape, and ties together many of the ideas discussed in

this chapter. Once again, in an example of the generative force of photography, as well as

the landscape as theme in Richter's work, this series of abstractions is based upon a

collection of photos taken by Richter in the Hahnwald, in the environs of his home in

Cologne. Representing Richter's most direct engagement with a specifically German

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[58] Silverman, 175. Silverman, I think rightly, attributes Richter's nuanced and singular
approach to modern painting at least partially to his having grown up in East Germany and
his subsequent emigration to West Germany in the early 1960s. For Silverman, this
experience gave Richter a first-hand knowledge of pronounced ideological false-
consciousness as well as an ability to see the prevalent ideologies operating in Western
modernism that went unnoticed by its own practitioners. For a broader and more detailed
analysis of Richter's almost-forgotten work in East Germany and his earliest works
produced in the West, see Christine Mehring, et. al., ed. *Gerhard Richter: Early Works, 1951-
72* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010).
[59] For a sizable compendium of these works along with a series of critical essays, see
Markus Heinzelmann, ed., *Gerhard Richter Overpainted Photographs* (Ostfildern: Hatje
Cantz Verlag, 2008).

[60] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 1986," in *Writings*, 187.

landscape tradition—one founded in the mysterious forest scenes of Albrecht Altdorfer and played out over subsequent generations through Friedrich to Dix and now to Richter— these paintings also push landscape back onto the field of abstraction in a way that presents their aims in Richter's work as one and the same while leaving behind the tensions that pinned down the over-painted photo-paintings.

In the hundreds of photographs that form the substrate of the *Wald* series, Richter focuses on the details of the landscape within the forest; gone are the low horizons and sky-filled distances of his earlier photographs.[61] With the depth of field focused on low-lying thicket, branches, and tree trunks closest to the leaf-covered forest floor, the forest becomes the thickened, shallow (dare we say flattened) counterpoint to the more conventional expansive landscape. Added to this is their vertical format, which emphasizes surface over depth. While many of the images focus on the correspondence between the vertical tree trunks and the photograph's format, some of them push in the opposite direction, emphasizing in close-up the horizontality of fallen branches and trunks, of the diagonal extension of uprooted but yet unfallen trees. All of the photographs have been taken in what was presumably winter or early spring, giving full exposure to the leafless patterns generated across the surface of the image with a nearly monochrome intensity of grays, browns, and light greens. One cannot help but resort to the language of painterly abstraction to describe the photos. Indeed, any viewer familiar with Richter's larger body of work will most likely see the analogies he is creating with his abstract paintings, with

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[61] In 2008, Richter published an artist's edition of these photographs, interspersed with texts selected from a German forestry magazine, the words shuffled by a random generator, with any overt references to the forest excised, thus, abstracting the text. See Gerhard Richter, *Wald* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

their play between verticals and horizontals and their colors differentiated across

relatively flat fields unhindered by closed forms.

Bringing landscape and abstraction together, the twelve paintings of the *Wald* series

vary from light to dark, relatively colorful to almost monochrome. Despite the fact that

Richter never uses earth tones, the works nonetheless share some powerful affinities with

the Wald photographs, especially where the vertical brushstrokes, dominated by gray, cut

through and over the horizontal squeegeed streaks built up in layer upon layer of color

beneath, like the trunks and branches that rise up against the infinitely varied field of

leaves and other organic detritus that form the ground in the photographs. The paintings

also share the vertical format of the photographs, and their large scale analogizes them to

the standing human figure.

There are certainly many similarities in these works to abstract paintings by other

artists: their layered colors, despite their opacity, may remind us of Rothko's work, and the

vertical strokes that run up and down each in varying intensities are unmistakably similar

to Newman's "zips," as Jeanne Anne Nugent points out.[62] However, these seem to be the

easy comparisons to make, since all seem to be speaking the same formal language, but for

very different reasons. While Rothko, Newman, and most other twentieth-century abstract

painters wanted to use abstraction to take the viewer away from the material world and

hint at a metaphysical, if not spiritual realm beyond (the modern interpretation of the

Romantic sublime), Richter uses it to bring us back towards the earth, and in this regard,

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[62] See Jeanne Anne Nugent, "Gerhard Richter's 'Woodlands' and Other Things of the Past,"
in *From Caspar David Friedrich to Gerhard Richter: German Paintings from Dresden*, Ulrich
Bischoff, et.al., ed. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König and Los Angeles:
Getty Publications, 2006), 98.

they are perhaps most similar to the work of Friedrich. Given Richter's appreciation of

Friedrich, one can see these works as his attempt to recapitulate the Romantic past, and to

the extent he believes is still possible, paint like Friedrich today and make works that

express some truth. The most obvious analogies to Friedrich's work are to works like *Fir*

Trees in the Snow or *Trees and Bushes in the Snow* (both 1828), which seem remarkably

earth-bound, presenting the viewer with the landscape's material thickness in detail rather

than its expansiveness as you stand before it and it before you, each in analogous

singularity. In Friedrich's more intimate works like these, the relatively unremarkable

images present the world as it is framed by our gaze; more often in its proximally close

details than as expansive distant *veduta*. As Koerner writes, "These pictures compare not

so much the objects in a world, as your experience of the world. They display you to

yourself in your various orientations toward the things you see, the spaces you inhabit and

the infinities you desire."[63] In short, they present a model of our vision to us, a sort of

pictorialized philosophy of vision.

Coming back to Richter, the *Wald* paintings, despite the fact that they are first and

foremost abstractions, they nonetheless create a model of vision analogous to Friedrich's,

one premised on a physical, embodied encounter with the thickness of the world, and in

their matrix of scraped and sliding layers, where even in a seemingly monochrome gray

canvas like *Wald (9),* the material density of the painting surfaces in flecks and hints of the

colors below, we encounter an analogy to material depth of nature as it is translated into an

image in the eye. Likewise, Richter invites us to see analogies within these paintings, not

only to the forest, but also to the broader world of forms. Writing about Richter's

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[63] Koerner, 15.

abstractions in general, Kaja Silverman recalls this active analogizing. The paintings are "abstract through and through. But although they do not make any concessions to figuration, one cannot stand for very long in front of them without beginning to see things; like cumulus clouds in a blue sky, they invite us to search within them for phenomenal forms."[64] Richter, of course, invites such analogizing and rejects the rhetoric of abstraction's purified distance from the material world. For Richter, "we always search for something that looks familiar to us. I see something and in my head I compare it and try to find out what it relates to. And usually we do find those similarities and name them: table, blanket, and so on."[65] For Richter, it is the formation of analogies that keeps the viewer interested and makes the work true; without the analogies, we become "frustrated" and "bored."

We are taught to see abstract paintings, especially non-figurative ones like Richter's, as autonomous and set off from the world of material heterogeneity. Turning away from the falsehood of objects, they dwell in a self-same state of plastic perfection, self-referential and ideal. They form a closed system of their own perfected internal dynamics, expressed through pure form. Richter's work interrogates and in the end destroys these notions to demonstrate that painting is inextricably linked to the world of forms; as an object of our vision, it cannot help to be placed beside all of the other forms visible to our eyes, whether in physical, material proximity, in a photograph, in a painting, or a painting itself. Seeing means to analogize; just as the thickets, shrubs and fir trees of Friedrich's landscapes point to the possibility of some spiritual beyond, the swaths and scratches, flecks and strokes of

[64] Silverman, 176.

[65] Robert Storr, "Interview with Gerhard Richter," in *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 304.

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color in Richter's abstractions point to the world and its forms, and with them, abstraction

returns to the world of material forms.

Landscape and Obstinancy

Like Otto Dix, Richter has time and again expressed a distrust of modernism's

metanarrative and the artists who have without question acquiesced to its ideological

framework. Recalling Dix's doubt about the importance of finding "new forms of

expression," we can see a similar attitude with Richter: "Painting was my attempt to

explore what painting is still able and permitted to do. It was also the sheer obstinacy of

carrying on painting […] Acting as if it could be done—as if nature could still be painted in

that way."[66] In both cases, we encounter an artist at odds with their time, Dix in the case of

both modernism and later the Fascism against which it was vehemently opposed, and

Richter in the case of painting's end. Landscape became one of the most powerful vehicles

by which these artists have explored the persistence of tradition that most found bankrupt,

not in order to avoid their contemporary moment in any reactionary sense, but by placing

tradition squarely within the purview of the contemporary, to show that these forms still

speak. Like Benjamin's "Angel of History," they look backward while being propelled ever

forward, seeing the piled up wreckage of human history. They "would like to stay, awaken

the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," but are instead pushed forward by the

storm of progress. The anachronism of the landscape takes on, however weak, a

subversive and critical quality. Of course painting cannot change the world; it cannot

"make whole what has been smashed." Nonetheless, it can evoke a difference from the

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[66] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Wolfgang Pehnt, 1984," in *Writings*, 137.

merely existent, as both Dix and Richter do, creating a model (even if it is merely an image of the landscape) that irascibly pushes itself into the present with the hope of breaking open its rigid totality.

Chapter 4

History and Noncontemporaneity: Neo Rauch and the
Legacy of East German Painting

I am rooted in eastern Germany.

—Neo Rauch[1]

For one road to reality is by way of *pictures*.

—Elias Canetti, *The Torch in My Ear*

The Problem of Contemporary Realism

In *Experiments in Modern Realism,* his study of the politics of realism in twentieth-

century Western European and American art, Alex Potts writes,

> Realism in modern art is best understood as representing a constellation of
> concerns and impulses, rather than a clear-cut category defining a single
> historical movement or aesthetic. Some form of representation is integral to
> any work one might consider realist—it is art in which recognisable
> reference is made to particularities of a larger world or reality by way of
> distinctly articulated motifs or signs. These may include writing and text,
> iconic images and fragments of material that retain some of their non-artistic
> meaning in their new context. Naturalistic depiction is only one form of such
> reference and in any sense can often become so conventionalized as to fail to
> evoke any sense of a concrete reality apart from the artwork. Alternative
> means, such as assembling representations of disparate phenomena that
> could not be
> encompassed within a spatially realistic or unified picture often have proved
> more appropriate then naturalistic depiction for creating a richness and
> density and range of reference to the complex
> concatenation of realities in the world inhabited by the artist.[2]

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[1] Quoted in Gerhard Mack, "Mit den Waffen des Malers," *Art, Das Kunstmagazin* no. 1
(January 2001), 23.

[2] Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in
Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2-3.

Potts' idea of realism does much to provide a more expansive field in which to think about different types of realism and to reconsider how such types operate and interrelate to and diverge from each other. In broader terms, Potts' argument for the vitality and centrality of realism in modern and contemporary art adds to a growing critical literature that seeks to question and reconceptualize the received categories by which we have thought about modern art as a historical category. For example, when we consider, as Potts does, Dadaist montage not as an experiment in formal abstraction but rather as an important tactic in the development of critical realism, we can begin to see new constellations of relationships that would typically slip past the more rigid stylistic categories of the dominant conception of modern artistic practice. We can also begin to see reason for reconsidering such historical divisions as those between modernism and postmodernism, and instead examine the often-overlooked persistence of certain practices, albeit in varied permutations, across such historical "great divides". Perhaps most important, though, is a desire to look past the limiting notion that the most original, avant-garde, and aesthetically radical art of the past century and a half has without question been abstract or non-representational and to expand beyond a limited conception of realism that shaped much of modern art discourse. Potts continues, "In critical analysis of twentieth-century art, the assumption is often made that the more compelling and politically radical work is of its very nature anti-realist and is to be seen as distinctly modern by virtue of refusing or systematically disrupting representation or reference."[3]

At least since Greenberg, such a perspective has held sway, and there are many reasons for its dominance and persistence. In terms of the trajectory of modern art

[3] Potts, 4.

traditionally delineated by historians, pride of place has been given to Cubism and its

deconstruction of Renaissance pictorial space as modernism's most radical gesture, one

that broke the floodgates through which all following-isms would flow (in light of which, it

may be worth remembering that Picasso and Braque never turned completely away from

representation, having always maintained a tense connection between material and

painted worlds).[4] Cubism's dominance also creates the stylistic tether by which historians

have tied the "triumph" of postwar American art to the movements of prewar European

modernism and their mutual emphases on abstraction and formal experimentation. But

perhaps most important with regard to the uncomfortable silence on modern realism are

the roles played by realist art (most often unquestioningly sanctioned as academic

naturalism styled on nineteenth-century prototypes) in the cultural fields of

totalitarianism, most notoriously in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. With this

preference for academic naturalism that looked back to the nineteenth century for its

models, completing bypassing the developments of modernism, realism became henceforth

associated with the backward gaze of Totalitarian ideology as its aesthetic form, while in

liberal capitalist societies in the postwar period, abstraction and formal experimentation

became the cultural expression of Western values, albeit based on a shaky notion of

aesthetic autonomy. In a paradox, art that at once served as symbols of Western

modernity, with its ceaseless innovation and free expression unbounded by ideological

constraints, was at the same time thought to be free of politics and ideology. An opposition

between abstraction and realism took form that tended to sideline art that did not fit so

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[4] For a nuanced and astute argument for Picasso's pictorial exploration of material truth and lived, historical experience, see T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

neatly into this aesthetic-ideological binary. Nonetheless, many artists, in both socialist

East and capitalist West produced a "third way" in art, one that eschewed the aesthetic wall

between the two worlds, and art history has only recently begun to come to terms with the

fact that the divisions on which it based its understanding of postwar art are not as clear as

once thought; as art history begins to think more globally, it has become necessary to

reconsider the legacies of the East, both in the history of its now passed cultural life and in

the continuing legacy of its forms that persist in art today, taken up by artists either in the

form of the secondhand, discarded material remains of "real existing socialism," or by those

who experienced it firsthand to draw on the continuing force of its memory in the present.

The contemporary German painter Neo Rauch is one such artist whose work seems

to dwell in in-between spaces and times, finding its impetus in the interstices of dominant

modes of thought and artistic production, between figuration and abstraction, past and

present, and hauntingly personal memory and collective historical awareness, Neo Rauch

paints a world brimming with willful and determined individuals who, lost in solipsistic

activities (even when their actions are collective) both mysterious and suspiciously

mundane, deny the confusion that surrounds them. In Rauch's fractured space, where

landscape, interior space, and flat swatches of color collide without transition, these

characters coincide with myriad objects, from banal, if at times obsolete, utensils and tools

to strange flows and piles of unidentifiable, often brightly-colored matter. To put it most

succinctly, at the foundation of Rauch's pictorial strategy is an effort to put into play a

seemingly endless variety of oppositional tensions, the kind that can only be (or at least

best be) mobilized in the realm of painting.   As Rauch has phrased it with explicit reference

to some of his pictorial sources, "I refrain both from any hierarchization and from a

conscious evaluation of my pictorial inventory. This means that elements like Balthus,

Vermeer, Tintin, Donald Judd, Donald Duck, agitprop, and cheap advertising garbage can

flow together in a furrow of my childhood landscape and generate an intermingled

conglomerate of surprising plausibility."[5] In a strategy that hearkens back to

Rauschenberg's "flatbed" paintings, or further to Dadaist montage and Cubist collage, Neo

Rauch seems to be the prime inheritor of the anti-hierarchical "everything *and* the kitchen

sink" mentality that informed avant-garde artistic practice throughout much of the

twentieth century and which saw its apogee in postmodernism.

I would argue that Rauch's work is less an art historical grab bag and more rooted in

relatively long-standing artistic practices and traditions developed in the German

Democratic Republic by his predecessors and teachers at Leipzig's Academy of Visual Arts,

most notably by Bernhard Heisig, Werner Tübke, and Arno Rink. This painterly tradition,

often identified as the "Leipzig School" (hence Neo Rauch's association with the "New

Leipzig School"), developed in the 1960s—*after* the period in which Stalinist Socialist

Realism was dominant in East Germany—and continued through the end of the German

Democratic Republic. While critics have often cited Rauch's artistic development in the

GDR, they have often incorrectly read his development as a product of Socialist Realism,

with little regard to the historical specifics of East German art and culture. Aside from the

common biographical analysis of Rauch's work, analysis that places the painter as an

example of what April Eisman has termed the "close Other"[6] from formerly socialist

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[5] Quoted in Alison M. Gingeras, "Neo Rauch: A Peristaltic Filtration System in the River of Time," *Flash Art* 227 (Nov.-Dec. 2002), 67.

[6] In her essay on the reception of Bernhard Heisig, Eisman, drawing on the work of Piotr Piotrowski, defines the "close Other" of formerly socialist Europe as an "Otherness based

Europe, little has been done to make sense of it in a broader historical and philosophical

context that gives attention and respect to the artistic milieu of the German Democratic

Republic and the role it played—and continues to play—in neo Rauch's work. In analyses,

Rauch's difference is either elided or fetishized, but seldom informed by an accurate

historical perspective. By prying apart the monolithic myth of socialist art as either

Socialist Realism or Noncomformism that has come to inform much of the Western

commentary on artistic production in the "Other Europe" during the Cold War, this chapter

seeks to emphasize the historical channels in which Neo Rauch's work developed, and

which still feed it to this day, arguing that before Rauch is a surrealist, a postmodernist, or a

Pop artist, he is a history painter, one whose subject is the blind spot between past and

present, personal memory and collective history.

Despite an ever-growing critical interest in Rauch's work, little attention has been

paid to it in the field of art historical scholarship, aside from a few essays dealing with

particular moments in his career or in comparisons to like-minded artists and literary

figures.[7] His reception has been dominated by critics, who, despite the varied language

used to describe his work, tend to point to a rather limited set of tropes and ideas with

on politics rather than race. Rooted in the same cultural history and traditions as the West,
their art nonetheless developed in a different semiotic and ideological space than Western
Europe, so even when it looks similar, it often has a different meaning" (47). See, April A.
Eisman, "Denying Difference to the Post-Socialist Other: Bernhard Heisig and the Changing
Reception of an East German Artist," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture*
vol. 2 no. 1 (2012), 45-73.

[7] For a thorough biographical overview, see Harald Kunde's series of biographical sketches
in Hans Werner Holzwarth, ed., *Neo Rauch* (Cologne: Taschen Verlag, 2012). April Eisman's
"Painting the East German Experience: Neo Rauch in the Late 1990s," *Oxford Art Journal*
vol. 35 no. 2 (2012), 233-249 is exceptional in its analysis of work from Rauch's early
mature career in relation to the artist's East German experience and post-*Wende* politics.

regard to the images and the artist's experience. Among the most common critical

repetitions, holding varying degrees of accuracy, are: the claim that Neo Rauch was trained

in the Socialist Realist tradition, or that he was himself trained as a Socialist Realist artist;

his reliance on dream imagery and his status as a sort of latter-day Surrealist; and perhaps

most common, the utter singularity of his work and its opacity to interpretation. A

paragraph from Arthur Lubow's "The New Leipzig School," published in the January 8,

2006 edition of *The New York Times Magazine* serves as a summation of these ideas, all

with an appropriate level of pretentious metaphorical description and vague "critic-speak":

> Rauch's paintings are in Robert Storr's words "Völkisch and science-
> fictionish." They speak a Pop Art idiom with an East German accent. With
> their faded and thinly painted colors, anachronistically costumed figures and
> spatially disorienting landscapes, they recall the paintings that the American
> artist R.B. Kitaj made in London from the mid-60's to the mid-70's. Kitaj,
> however, is a highly cerebral artist, and his paintings seem to carry endnotes
> as copious as the ones T.S. Eliot appended to "The Waste Land." Even though
> Rauch's paintings are also informed by history, especially art history, they
> resemble dreams that are receding from consciousness. "What Neo Rauch
> does is borrow themes and take imagery from the Socialist Realist
> paradigm," Joachim Pissarro says. "Along with that, there is a surrealistic
> quirkiness and bizarreness. You see simultaneous scenes that are not
> connected, that you as a viewer cannot pin down or put a name on. The
> characters never confront each other, either. There is a sense of isolation
> that goes on in his picture space." Lately, Rauch's canvases have become
> even stranger and more complex, as the uniformed characters from the 50's
> and casually garbed people of today are joined by 18th-century soldiers,
> peasants and dandies, and occasionally by fantastic animals, all displayed in
> luridly lighted landscapes with multiple vanishing points. Wildly theatrical,
> the paintings demand that the viewer's eye jump nervously to take in
> concurrently played, weirdly suggestive but ultimately inexplicable
> activities.[8]

For Rauch and his contemporaries, there really was no Socialist Realist paradigm. By the

time Erich Honecker came to power in 1971, East German art had expanded beyond the

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[8] Arthur Lubow, "The New Leipzig School," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 8,
2006), 42.

limited scope of Soviet-sanctioned realism towards a more open pluralism. The new

attitude is perhaps best summed up in a speech given shortly after his appointment as

Socialist Party Chairman: "...for those artists who truly believe in Socialism, there can be no

more taboos on their work, neither in content nor in style."[9] It was during this period of

"aesthetic thaw" that the artistic tradition in which Neo Rauch developed as an artist took

hold, particularly around the Academy in Leipzig. While earlier, Dresden's Art Academy

had dominated artistic training in Socialist Realism, Leipzig came to prominence with a

new, pluralistic, and dialectical realism, to be discussed in more detail below, that paid

credit to earlier modernist art, notably German Expressionism and die Neue Sachlichkeit,

while also citing earlier art, whether from the German Renaissance of Italian Mannerism.[10]

Thus, Neo Rauch's "quirkiness and bizarreness" in borrowing from art history becomes less

inexplicable than many contemporary Western acknowledge when examined in relation to

his predecessors in Leipzig. Indeed, Rauch's work is less an anomalous and mysterious art-

historical grab bag and more rooted in relatively long-standing painterly practices and

traditions that date back to the German Democratic Republic into which he was born and in

which he learned his craft; traditions that nonetheless have little to do with any notion of

Socialist Realism and were engaged in throwing off its yoke, to create a lively, critical, and

more open artistic culture in East Germany that lasted until its demise.

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[9] Quoted in Eisman, "Denying Difference to the Post-Socialist Other: Bernhard Heisig and the Changing Reception of an East German Artist," 57.

[10] For an in-depth discussion of the broader history of painting in East Germany and the many transitions that belie any notion of a monolithic and dominant Socialist Realism, see Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR: Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991).

Neo Rauch's *Wende* Art

Neo Rauch's artistic training as an undergraduate and graduate took place at

Leipzig's Academy of Visual Arts, which had become a bastion of traditional figural painting

in its emphasis on realism and technical skill. In the early years of the GDR, the Academy

adhered to the Socialist Realist model of artistic production. At the same time, painting was

subsidiary to the print arts and graphic design, given their more popular appeal. By 1961,

however, the hegemony of Socialist Realism was being questioned when the painter

Bernhard Heisig, himself a former student, became the academy's headmaster. Heisig

advocated critical discussion about the ways Socialist Realism could be applied in

conjunction with students' exploration of their own means of expression.[11] It was in the

environment cultivated by Heisig (who would be Rauch's thesis advisor) that Rauch's

formative training took place, belying any notion that he was trained as a Socialist Realist

painter. Despite this, claims such as Peter Schjeldahl's that Rauch "studied under the

tottering academic regime of Socialist Realism,"[12] emerge with enough frequency that

Rauch has asserted that, "Socialist Realism wasn't taught in Leipzig or any other East

German Academy in the 1970s. We were trained in realism, but not in Socialist Realism.

We weren't political and neither were our teachers. The realism I strived for was parallel

to other styles of Realism in the West. So whenever I hear Socialist Realism, it fills me with

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[11] Sophie A. Gerlach, "From Shamed to Famed—The Transition of a Former Eastern German Art Academy to the Talent Hotbed of a Contemporary Painters' School: The Höchschule für Grafik- und Buchkunst, Leipzig," in *Art and Theory after Socialism*, Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles, ed. (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 12.

[12] Peter Schjeldahl, "Painting for Now: Neo Rauch at the Met," *The New Yorker* (June 4, 2007, 96.

pain, because that was a phenomenon of the 1950s, and I was born in 1960. I may borrow certain motifs, but I only use them with irony."[13]

As a student, Rauch's work was dominated by an expressionist style of loose, painterly brushwork and "energy-laden neon-like glowing colors," as a 1989 review in East Germany's foremost art magazine, *Bildende Kunst*, described it.[14] Heisig's work (to be discussed in more detail later) was characterized by gestural brushwork that hearkened back to the late styles Lovis Corinth and Oskar Kokoschka. His work as Heisig's master student gave nod to expressionist tradition, while his subjects were limited to studio interiors and portraits, far more conventional than his later work and the work of his teachers. The neon colors have reappeared in Rauch's most recent exhibited work, playing a particularly prominent role in the paintings that made up the solo exhibition titled *Para*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2007. Despite their reappearance, Rauch's work from the 1990s was dominated first by dark, somber, earthy tones, and later by lighter, yet faded colors that seem to many observers to hearken back to the color palette of daily life in the GDR, dominated by grays and washed-out greens, yellows, blues, and browns, the colors of apartment blocks, socialist clothing, and Trabants.

The shift away from expressionism in Rauch's work is attributable to a number of factors. No longer an East German painter, Rauch had to come to terms with a changed economic, social, and cultural climate in post-*Wende* Germany. This isn't to say that he turned his back on his earlier experience, but rather that he adapted to these broader

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[13] Quoted in Morgan Falconer, "Neo Rauch: Parallel Realism," *Art World* No. 6 (August-September 2008), 45.

[14] Quoted in Eisman, "Painting the East German Experience: Neo Rauch in the Late 1990s," 237. Neo Rauch has excluded work produced prior to 1993 from his oeuvre, making it difficult to find.

changes and responded to them in his work. In a certain sense, while the "East

Germanness" of his work has changed over time, it has nonetheless grown stronger while

at the same time becoming part of a larger frame of historical reference. In the East

German artistic climate of the seventies and eighties, expressionism was employed by

many artists, even state-sanctioned individuals like Heisig, in order to create a sense of

subjective expression in their work, distancing themselves from the old cultural orthodoxy

of Socialist Realism. Employed with ideas similar to those of its practitioners in the early

twentieth century, expressionism allowed artists to maintain a sense of figuration and

reality in their works in order to remain true to the official purposes of art in socialist

society, all the while in a style that spoke to the artist's individual experience.

Expressionism also provided a link to Germany's pre-Nazi past, becoming a powerful tool

with which artists dealt with the destruction and legacy of World War II. As an

"interrupted tradition," as Cornelia Homberg has called it, expressionism provided a means

adequate to the task of artists in both East and West who found themselves turned back on

themselves and to the past in the social, political, and cultural chaos of the destructive

consequences of the war.[15] In the new united Germany, with the Cold War division

seeming increasingly like an interregnum rather than the rule, there were no more

aesthetic limits placed on an East German artist accustomed to them, and the diversity of

the field became fully apparent. At the same time, painting seemed less relevant, as artists

began to engage with new media. Rauch, as Eisman writes, "went from being a rising star

in his country's most prestigious artistic medium to being ridiculed for practicing an

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[15] Cornelia Homberg, "German Art: Why Now?" in *German Art Now*, Cornelia Homberg, ed.
(New York City: Merrell, 2003), 14.

outmoded art form."[16] As Rauch himself has described the situation he was in after the fall

of the Berlin Wall during a 2011 interview, "At that point painting was once again being

written off as dead. I don't know whether it's always the same idiots who decide this, but

every ten years there is a cockerel that climbs onto the dung heap. At the time I said to

myself, fine, now I can lead the life of a loner, a painter dwelling on the forest edge, I can

become a 'best-kept secret'. The irony is that something quite different emerged out of

it."[17] In hindsight, Rauch may claim that he did not change, although one can clearly see a

crisis in his work that brought about major changes. The double shock of everything at

once being possible in terms of artistic practice and the proclamation of painting's

obsolescence by Western critics seems to have led Rauch to explore more fully the

possibilities for painting and its continued relevance in the contemporary world. Whereas

painting was with little question seen as the most important of the visual arts in East

Germany, Rauch could no longer take for granted the status of his craft or his position as an

artist.

By 1993, the year that Rauch claims to have found his personal style, the

expressionism of his student years was all but gone, reserved for painterly fields of

relatively flat, dark color, layered in relatively thing washes over his canvases. In works

like *Dromos* and *Saum*, both from 1993, one still sees the presence of loose gestural

brushwork, but now in darkened planes of color. Vaguely biomorphic objects painted in

monochrome float across the surfaces of these works, usually in the darkest hue used in the

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[16] Eisman, "Painting the East German Experience," 239.

[17] Rita Pokorny, "You Won't Find an 'Untitled' Among My Works," *The Art Newspaper* (May 2011), 51.

flat planes and having the effect of stamped or printed imagery, but with limited

discernibility. Everything seems to slide across the surface, with compositional unity

achieved primarily through a limited color palette. In examining these works, one can see

Neo Rauch struggling to find either a balance or a productive tension between figuration

and abstraction, with an overall lack of integration between the two, despite the

rudimentary, pared-down nature of each. As Rauch has said of his work during this period,

"I have experienced the danger of getting lost in the abstract jungle… At some point I

realized that I had to attempt to arrive at a figure. Because apparently I am a storyteller; I

need objective things to reach closer to the poetry of my dreams. Then I started to fish

beings out of the veils of color that had something vegetative, amoeboid about them."[18] By

1994, human figures become more distinct and less fragmentary although deformed, with

arms too small for their bodies or head disproportionately large, and still painted to look

like cheap graphics in monochrome. The figures, floating on grounds of dark, flat color,

begin to perform the sorts of elusive activities that occupy the populations of Rauch's

paintings to the present day. If Rauch is a storyteller, his stories are ambiguous at best.

Nonetheless, they are not unreadable or meaningless, as many critics have asserted. Faced

with the challenge of being relevant in a far more diverse and diffuse art world than he had

been used to, Rauch began to expand the lexicon of his imagery, and in the process, began

involving his recently vanquished world, all but forgotten in the cultural politics of the

immediate post-*Wende* years. Indeed, the "turn-around" in German society led Rauch to his

own turning back towards a past that most were pressured to forget in the face of Western

triumphalism. Yet the people who populate these canvases seem caught off-guard, even

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[18] Quoted in Holzwarth, 28.

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unaware by their world's increasing unrecognizability. If the figures' emotional

expressiveness remains catatonic at worst, perhaps stoic at best, their physiques are

marred by blurred and sticky deformations: anonymous, deformed figures within

amorphous, dilapidated settings. Who are these men and women, performing their

mysterious tasks, shadows of a former world? The indistinct and uneven surfaces of these

canvases create a sense of residue, giving a palpable material presence to the ghostly

feelings of mourning and loss.

Neo Rauch's paintings fit into a category of works produced in a post-socialist

Europe that has yet to come to terms with its recent past and the legacy of that past in both

East and West. With this genre Charity Scribner has described how "The cultural remains

of the second world register the dialectics of collective memory that wind from nostalgia to

mourning to disavowal. In the strongest of these texts and artworks, remembrance resists

repudiation—but not in the simple sense by which the work of mourning would complete

our view of the past."[19] If Rauch's paintings represent mourning, it is the traumatic

mourning of repetition.

By 1995, Rauch was painting in lighter, yet drab colors, and his figures became

larger and more defined, placed into ambiguous but increasingly detailed settings. At

times, though, Rauch seems to be capitalizing on the tensions between abstraction and

figuration, narrative and form, developed in his earlier work, pointing to a "third path"

between the two. *Fencer*, painted in 1996, exemplifies this tension. Its two figures, nearly

identical in their physical features and dress, are ambiguously placed facing each other but

at a diagonal distance, given the shift in scale between the larger, more central figure and

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[19] Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 165.

the smaller one to the right. Each brandishes a rod-like object, as they seem to fence, as the

title suggests. A flat, industrial green covers most of the surface of the canvas, with three

black bands of paint, varying in width and length, extending horizontally across the bottom

third, breaking up its otherwise undifferentiated field. Are these forms meant as a

rudimentary expression of a ground line, dividing up the space of action? What purpose do

they serve in the image? The thinnest black band, closest to the smaller figure, ends with a

band of pale yellow, while the two thicker bands end with a pattern of gray and brick red

stripes. The striped pattern is repeated in two objects, each standing atop a round-topped

table adjacent to each figure. The object closest to the viewer appears to be an

architectural model of a factory complete with smokestack, while the more distant one

remains a mystery, made partially invisible by the edge of the canvas. Are the fencers

protecting these prizes from one another in an absurdist matchup of dim wits? The figures,

painted in a blurry grisaille, seem like carelessly removed cutouts from an illustrated

instruction manual; their banal anonymity only slightly thwarted by the left's inverted

arms and the right's absent feet. Despite the look of determination on their faces, their

practical purpose and intentions remain unfathomable, and despite the appearance of

activity, the two seem indefinitely frozen in ambiguous time and space.

  In a number of works from the mid to late nineties canvases, easels, paint cans,

and/or brushes appear, as Rauch seems to thematize, or at least make reference to, the act

of painting. In *Searcher*, from 1997, a figure with his back to us walks along a path that

divides a barren, flat field into a green and brown patch, carrying what appears to be a

metal detector. Is this the artist searching for a subject (or gold)? To his right stands an

outsized easel, on which a solid green canvas or board is propped and beside which stand

two cans of paint, yellow and green. Reminiscent of those used in comic strips, a yellow beam, partially obscured by a patch of putty gray paint that covers much of the sky, descends from the upper left diagonally across the canvas and seems to strike the green painting. Nonetheless, it seems to have no effect, as if to say the artist can search for a subject or expect it to appear in an act of divine inspiration, but that both result in nothing.

Eisman proposes that in such works, Rauch is thematizing "the question of 'what is art'."[20] In *Choice* (1998), for example, a two-headed (one black, one white) artist stands on a stepladder, holding a paint can in one hand and a brush or stick in the other, before a large canvas, painted mostly flat black contains one large white ring containing three white dots and part of another below it with two of the same dots. This motif appears as the facial features on the black head of the painter, thus begging the question of whether or not this is some sort of self-portrait, perhaps pointing to the subjective/expressive mythos behind much abstract painting. The canvas rests on an easel and a sort of platform, out of the back of which extends what appears to be an electrical cord. More of the same cords emerge in a bundle from a tubular object behind the easel and extend upward and out of sight through a floating window just beyond a strange accordion-like structure that seems to form part of the studio's wall. Behind the artist stand two more almost identical canvases, and two handlers are carrying the farthest one away. In the right foreground, extending beyond the edge of the canvas stands a table covered with cans of paint, brushes sticking out of most of them. Given that the paintings being produced are basically painted in black and white, this quantity of paint cans may seem odd at first take. Nonetheless, it serves as a trace reference to two of the major practices of late modernist abstract painting.

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[20] Eisman, "Painting the East German Experience," 241.

Firstly, we are reminded of iconic images of Pollock's studio, stocked with a multitude of cans, brushes and sticks that served as the means of his monumental gestural performances, documented in Hans Namuth's films and photographs. Secondly, we are confronted with the vestiges of minimalism's serial/quasi-industrial production (best represented in German art by the work of Blinky Palermo), not just in the many cans of paint, but also in the repetition of simplified geometric forms within each and across the row of paintings depicted. Rauch puts these two strands together, perhaps in order to show that abstract painting, despite its ideological weight, is basically an assembly line of interchangeable, self-referential images produced by artists who are as reliant on rote formulas as any figural painter. The choice of the title seems to be a choice between two poles of painting, and has left this artist with a split persona, represented literally by the bicephalic figure. Is Neo Rauch presenting his work as the model of dialectic reconciliation?

While one can never be certain of the intended meanings of Rauch's paintings, the issue of intention seems somewhat beside the point. As with any artist's work, Rauch's resists and purposefully highlights the ways by which painting comes to elude any over-arching, univocal interpretation or even intentional signification, showing that the path from intention to picture to meaning is never direct or finished. In short, Rauch puts semiotic excess into overdrive. At issues here seems to be something more multiple and certainly less rarefied than the question of what art is, as Eisman suggests, not that the question is precluded from possibility. But I think Rauch is unaccustomed to such rhetoric, or at least not interested in engaging it. What is at stake here seems to be the viability of a specific kind of art, one that relies on figuration, narrative, and tradition, no matter how

much it problematizes these. Like Dix and Richter, Rauch creates work that—despite all

the questions it faces about its insincere citation of historical motifs, its increasing reliance

on painterly bravura, or its willy-nilly slide into a warmed-over surrealistic absurdity—still

explores a possibility, however weak and marginal, for painting as something other than

the traumatic repetition of its own death.

Present Pasts: The Formation of Dialectical Realism in Leipzig

Among Rauch's teachers and predecessors in Leipzig, it was never taken for granted

that realism, as a mode of artistic production was pre-ordained and unproblematic

category. Working in the ideological gap between a monolithic and univocal Socialist

Realism and the westward-looking modernist and necessarily private practices of

"nonconformist" artists like Hermann Glöckner, who fabricated small, quasi-Constructivist

objects out of everyday household items,[21] Bernhard Heisig, Werner Tübke, and their

colleagues developed a model of dialectical critical realism that has proved to be among the

more durable legacies of the GDR. In their work, the past was given presence in the now,

while they engaged with private and public memory and history on multiple levels,

including complex allegories, all the while maintaining individual styles and valuing

personal expression. Taking strategic advantage of Honecker's rhetoric of artistic thaw,

they presented a model of artistic resistance to Western and Soviet cultural imperialism,

one that has been difficult to assimilate into broader narratives of Western artistic triumph

in the face of Eastern atrophy. Andres Huyssen sums up the ambivalence of their aesthetic

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[21] For a discussion of the role of modernism in East German art, see Paul Kaiser, "Symbolic Revolts in the'Workers' and Peasants' State': Countercultural Art Programs in the GDR and the Return of Modern Art," in *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds. (New York: Abrams, 2009), 170-185.

maneuverings as an active turn away from "the idealizing genre painting of socialist

reconstruction, turning instead toward the specters of the past, either to historical and

antifascist subjects [...] or to metaphorical parable painting, but they shied away from any

outright critique of their own dictatorship."[22] While scholars may in retrospect see this as a

troubling acquiescence to the regime, it is important to be reminded that outright

resistance would have foreclosed any possibility of making public art, something that was

still important to artists committed to the ideals of socialism, if not its contemporary

practice in the GDR. Huyssen goes on to write that,

> in their work [...] as in the writings of [Christa] Wolf, [Heiner] Müller, and
> Volker Braun, there slowly emerged spaces of political criticism clawed out
> from under the pressure of censorship and enforced self-criticism. Aesthetic
> deviation from socialist-realist norms, combined with continued
> commitment to socialism as abstract utopia, emerged muted and couched in
> the exuberant baroque mannerisms of Tübke or in the censorship-eluding
> 'slave language' of mythological or biblical imagery.[23]

The work of the Leipzig artists was created out of a demanding and ever-present

negotiation with authority, a sort of tactical-aesthetic *Realpolitik* in the constraining world

of "Real Existing Socialism" that, in the end, resisted many of the main ideological impulses

of the GDR's dominant forms of cultural expression, while simultaneously maintaining ties

to and offering up less dogmatic visions of two of its most fundamental precepts:

antifascism and a commitment to Marxism.[24] As Piotr Piotrowski points out, even those

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[22] Andreas Huyssen, "German Painting in the Cold War," *New German Critique* 110 Vol. 37
No. 2 (Summer 2010), 222.

[23] Ibid.

[24] For a superbly researched example of scholarship that deals with the tireless
negotiations of these artists with state power using the example of Werner Tübke and his
Bad Frankenhausen Panorama, see Eckhart Gillen, "'One can and should present an artistic
vision ... of the end of the world': Werner Tübke's Apocalyptic Panorama in Bad

artists who found it hard to scrape out a position for themselves within official cultural

production shared its ideology, at least on a basic yet fundamental level. He writes that this

"peculiar anti-capitalist consensus created a very complex relationship between the official

state culture of the GDR and the unofficial alternative culture associated with the more or

less independent intellectual groups."[25] Thus, a form of "socialist humanism" developed,

one that was unique to the GDR among its fellow socialist states of the Eastern Bloc. "The

East Germans," writes Piotrowski, "Were seeking a different tradition, one associated with

leftist, politically engaged art, but their historic perspective had a selective character. They

endorsed the pre-war traditions of New Objectivity, Expressionism and so forth, but

rejected those associated with the German avant-garde, which of course, was also situated

within the territory occupied by the political left."[26] While I would argue against any notion

that Expressionism and New Objectivity were *not* part of the historical avant-garde,

particularly in its German context; however, it does stand true that the focus was on

figuration and a broadly conceived dialectical realism, one that found influences well

beyond those cited by Piotrowski. Hearkening back to Expressionism, Verism and even

earlier periods, this dialectical realism borrowed motifs from the history of art in order to

subvert any notion of reality as monolithic, in favor of a form of figural representation that

worked from the basis of montage-like fracture and multiplicity, one that could stimulate

radical thanking and criticality in the viewer. By basing their work on formal polystylism,

Frankenhausen and the End of the German Democratic Republic," *Getty Research Journal* No. 3 (2011), 99-116.

[25] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, Anna Brziski, trans. (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 148.

[26] Ibid., 148.

the Leipzig School reinforced their art's nonidentity with the authoritarian world around them.[27]

The painters of the Leipzig Academy, led by Heisig, developed the concept of the *Simultanbild* ("Simultaneous Picture"), which disrupted the traditional unity of time, space, and narrative in a painting with montage-like elements culled from more automatic, almost stream-of-consciousness techniques, in order to, as Heisig states in a 1964 speech to the Congress of Visual Arts, "establish a contact to the viewer […] a type of art which challenges the viewer mentally, which provokes, annoys and attacks."[28] It must be pointed out that as both major artists in the GDR and as professors at its most renowned academy, Heisig and his colleagues could provide the state with less daring commissions while at the same time producing and exhibiting more personal work. In a sense, maintaining artistic authority paradoxically meant speaking through two mouths and painting with two minds.

In terms of the wide-ranging reference points employed by *Simultanbild* painters, none were as broad as Werner Tübke's. Borrowing not only from New Objectivity, Expressionism, and Surrealism, Tübke also laid claim to the Venetian Mannerist quickness of Tintoretto, the stylized and expressive figuration of El Greco, and a breathless attention to detail of the Northern Renaissance. Out of this polystylism developed a body of work that, while always visually engaging, also begs the viewer to question their relation to and place within historical memory, from the personal to the socio-political. Tübke's series of eleven paintings entitled, *Recollection from the Life of Judge Schulze*, painted between 1965

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[27] This idea of dialectical realism borrows heavily from Gene Ray's interpretation of Brecht. See Gene Ray, "Dialectical Realism and Radical Commitments: Brecht and Adorno on Representing Capitalism," *Historical Materialism* No. 18 (2010), 3-24.

[28] Quoted in Gerlach, 12.

and 1967, exemplify the diversity of his mode of production. Judge Schulze is a fictional

jurist who, as the series shows, was a member of the Nazi judicial bureaucracy.

Represented by the red robes and black hats that reappear as a motif throughout. In the

third painting of the series, painted in 1965 in oil and tempera, an outsized figure,

presumably Judge Schulze, sits at the center of the composition, poised regally in his heavy

red robe. However, on closer inspection, the viewer can see that Schulze is held in place by

numerous white ropes that connect from his figure to various points on the ground around

him. Tübke suggests that beneath the façade of absolute power is the hot air of a balloon or

likewise the propped-up emptiness of a circus tent. The exposed hands, neck, and head of

the figure are those of a stuffed mannequin or sewing dummy, the caricature-like face

drawn on the smooth surface of the head gazes toward a dizzying maelstrom of violent and

grotesque imagery in the lower left half of the painting. Despite this, its mouth is open in a

teeth-bearing grin, showing that Schulze is enjoying the brutal chaos below, with its

skeletons, prisoners, tortured bodies, and Gestapo perpetrators. While this section of the

canvas is the busiest, relatively speaking, the whole thing swirls with imagery in a

vertiginous and fragmented space borrowed from de Chirico and Dali, with its sharply

receding staircase in the foreground leading to the semi-walled ruinous courtyard in which

Schulze sits. The accelerating perspective leads to an almost Mediterranean landscape in

the background, with cypress trees and terracotta-roofed structures set among steep hills;

it is the only moment of relative calm and comfort in an otherwise disquieting image.

Dividing the upper portion of the image is a vertical dilapidated tower that serves as a

visual extension of Schulze's already gargantuan figure. To the right is the relative calm of

the landscape scene, while on the left and even extending slightly into the idyllic landscape

is an apocalyptic swirl of smoky grey and verdigris clouds out of which has descended a glowing neon angelic figure over a decimated cityscape just behind the chaotic objects of Schulze's gaze.

While it is difficult, perhaps nearly impossible, to parse out the messages of all of the imagery in the painting, let alone make satisfying sense of the individual parts in relation to each other, certain motifs do stand out, and seem to contribute to an overarching theme, even while resisting what might be any impulse toward giving an overt narrative structure to Schulze's recollections: tortured human figures are juxtaposed with more than one languorous female nudes, making a point of Nazi sadism, while in the foreground the viewer encounters a simple stele—a wreath of remembrance at its base—depicting a dove of peace spreading its wings. The site of this monument, particularly modest in relation to what surrounds it, is still in construction, although seemingly abandoned, alluding to the idea that any reconciliation with the past is deferred, if ever complete. In the end the personal experience of Schulze, however fictional it might be, breaks down into a montage of fragments to be grasped by the viewer, perhaps in order to create a space among so many disjointed parts in which they can make their own connections and thus relate specific motifs to their own experiences of disjuncture as witnesses to their nation's recent tumultuous history and likewise, its place within the personal and social present. All the while, Tübke created an image so iconographically complex that it begs the question of whether or not its heavy-handedness was also an indirect strategy developed to evade censorship, one that in the end led many critics to see him as a threat to Socialist Realism.[29]

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[29] Claudia Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall: Demarcating Culture in the Cold War Germanys* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 117-121. In 1965, the ˆSchulze series was officially criticized as "dangerous" for its departure from the precepts of Socialist Realism. See Gerd

Painting *Simultanbild* was certainly not without its risks, and after the *Schulze* series, Tübke was forced to retreat into a much more thoroughly historicist world of Renaissance motifs and less prescient allegory. The private self prevailed until his reputation faced its potential recuperation, when in 1976 he gained the most prestigious and expensive commission ever given by the GDR. The commission called for a monumental panorama painting commemorating the 450th anniversary in 1974-5 of the Peasant's War, led by the revolutionary Lutheran theologian Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525). The panorama was to be displayed at Bad Frankenhausen, the location of the decisive victory in the Peasant's War of the nobility against Müntzer and his peasant armies, in a museum space devoted to it.

Müntzer believed that the reformist theology of Lutheranism failed to give way to economic reforms and had instead left the old political-economic order in place. The liberation offered by Lutheranism was only a spiritual one, leaving material reality unaltered; thus, revolution against those who had arrested the development of the Reformation was necessary to complete the task begun by Luther, however much he rejected the premise of rebellion against the political powers who had protected him from Pope and Emperor.[30] Having been captured and executed in the aftermath of the battle of Bad Frankenhausen, in which somewhere between 3,000 and 10,000 peasants were

Lindner, "Sinnbilder wider das Vergessen. Zu Werner Tübkes Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. jur. Schulze, in *Werner Tübke: Das malerische Werk. Verzeichnis der Gemälde 1976 bis 1999*, ed. Brigitte Tübke-Schellenberger and Gerd Lindner (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1999), 25.

[30] For concise overviews of the Peasants' War in the context of the Protestant Reformation, also known as the Early Bourgeois Revolution in the GDR, see Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), particularly Chapter 6 on "Luther's Political Legacy," and Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1996), also Chapter 6, which more thoroughly covers Müntzer's theology and the anticlericalism of the Peasants' War.

massacred, Müntzer was consigned to the dustbin of history's vanquished until Friedrich

Engel's *The Peasant War in Germany* appeared in 1850. Engels' discussion of the inaugural

war in Germany's "revolutionary tradition" was an argument not only for the revitalization

of this tradition under the auspices of Marxism, but also an early model for the practice of

the materialist analysis of history. With this, Müntzer was revitalized as a model of

Communist revolutionary martyrdom *avant la lettre*, despite the ultimate failure of his

revolution.

While the GDR, like most of its socialist contemporaries in central and Eastern

Europe, was generally reluctant to embrace its prehistory, its immediate past as part of the

Third Reich and subsequent division from West Germany made any embrace of history,

particularly any idea of *national* history particularly problematic. Behind the triumphalist

blinders of socialism's emphasis on teleological futurity was a deeply traumatized

collective psyche, one that saw its survival only in the form of collective amnesia.

However, the radical theologian Müntzer and the Peasants' War became the exception to

the rule, even despite the official stance of State Atheism.[31] Given that Müntzer was a

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[31] Despite official State Atheism, authority in the GDR had an ambivalent relationship with religion, particularly Lutheranism, which was the overwhelmingly dominant faith within the bounds of its territory, which was the birthplace of Martin Luther and his Reformation. In many ways, the government sought ways to exploit Protestantism's deep roots in East Germany as a way to coalesce the populace, leading to the tolerance of religious faith, at least in the form of Lutheranism. Nonetheless, it would be in the Lutheran churches that the first movements towards change would develop in the 1980s, and where the Monday Demonstrations of 1989 and 1990 were organized; they had become one of the few spaces in which people could resist the wide-reaching arms of state power, even if such resistance was predominately silent. In the end, the church that had once served as a ready-made source of social cohesion for the GDR would also be the locus of its undoing. For an examination of the complex relationship between church and state in the GDR, see Wendy R. Tyndale, *Protestants in Communist East Germany: In the Storm of the World* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

native Saxon, and that the Peasants' War and its decisive battle were fought in the territory that comprised East Germany, authorities enthusiastically laid claim to this history as a precursor to socialism's final triumph in the formation of the GDR in 1949. In short, Müntzer became the point of origin for East German socialist history, and was commemorated in monuments, postage stamps, and scholarship.[32] Tübke's painting, which would become on its completion the largest oil painting in the world at 46x403.5 feet, was to be the pinnacle statement of Müntzer's heroism and the definitive representation of the GDR's reception of the Peasants' War at the same time that it was to be the greatest triumph of the nation's artistic production, representing socialist art as monumental, complex, and very much public. That it became something very different is a testament to Tübke's will and the proclivities of what no one realized at the time was to become the history of *late* socialism in Europe.

As a complete examination of the Bad Frankenhausen panorama is beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice it to point out that the work that Tübke produced was starkly different from the naturalist, historically accurate depiction of revolutionary heroism called for by the cultural authorities. In 1989, fourteen years after it was initially commissioned and two months before the accidental opening of the Berlin Wall, Tübke presented a dizzying image of surreal, apocalyptic fervor in the context of one of the grandest public

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[32] Ernst Bloch, who had returned after the war to East Germany as a professor of philosophy at Leipzig, had written his own text on Müntzer in 1921, *Thomas Müntzer also Theologe der Revolution*, in which Müntzer serves as a historical model of Bloch's own anticipatory Marxist messianism. One of the earliest cultural appropriations of Müntzer in the GDR came in the form of the 1956 epic film, *Thomas Müntzer*. For a discussion of this work, see Robert Walinski-Kiehl, "History, Politics, and East German Film: The Thomas Müntzer (1956) Socialist Epic," *Central European History* Vol. 39, No. 1 (Mar. 2006), 30-55. For an examination of the broader reception of Müntzer in the GDR, see Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in the Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985), 99-122.

unveilings in GDR history, overseen by Honecker himself. Across the circular walls of the specially built Panorama Museum was a scene that synthesized the historical event of the battle with a broad theological vision of the Last Judgment. As Eckhart Gillen writes, "Tübke adhered to Ernst Bloch's assessment of Müntzer as a man who saw no contradiction between theology and revolution and regarded the peasants as the real propagators of the Reformation."[33] Filled with complex symbolism, medieval iconography, portrayals of historical figures (Müntzer's is a self-portrait of Tübke), and references to the paintings of Cranach, Brueghel, and Holbein, among others, the panorama goes well beyond the state's desire for a properly historical materialist representation of the battle that would fit within the broader ideological aim of glorifying socialism as a revolutionary force through the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. Indeed, immediately apparent to any viewer is the pervasive sense of doomed chaos that reigns across the painterly spectacle, leaving little said with regard to the joy of a socialist past or present, and certainly not the future. Perhaps the only thing that allowed Tübke the freedom to work on the painting for so long and its subsequent triumphant display was discord among the cultural figures overseeing the project; one can imagine that such a scene, which rejected the Marxist-Leninist redemptive teleology in favor of one of apocalyptic destruction, would not have been accepted at some point earlier in Tübke's career before the cracks in the regime were more widely opened. As many have pointed out, the work almost serves as an allegory of the dissolution of the GDR, one that went—at least publically—unacknowledged by state authorities. For Harald Behrendt,

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[33] Gillen, 105.

by treating life in a double perspective of time, the painter involuntarily becomes a prophet of disaster in his own time. But when—only a fortnight before the Leipzig Monday demonstrations—the Panorama was opened accompanied by the usual self-glorification of the state and the population understood the scenes of the picture as an allegorical criticism on the work of art. Looked at in retrospect, the painting seems to imply a self-criticism of the SED [*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, the "Socialist Unity Party," East Germany's one political party] state as the main sponsor.[34]

Werner Tübke managed to use on of the state's few sanctioned historical narratives, one that it used to legitimize a history distinct from that of the West, in order to criticize its main ideological precepts from within, and he did so through allegorical art-historical reference points that proved resistant to any easy or direct sublimation to socialist rhetoric. In the end, Tübke, like Dix before him in a different moment of historical crisis, shows that despite an emphasis on the "end of history" when state socialism collapsed, Brueghel, Dürer, Cranach, and Bosch offered up a model for artistic expression that is as much in a position to reflect human history in general and most importantly, in relation to the contemporary moment. This view persists to this day in the work of Neo Rauch.

Bernhard Heisig, Neo Rauch's main teacher at the Leipzig Academy and aside from Tübke, the most well known painter from East Germany, also produced paintings that intended to look critically at Germany's disjunctive history. Albeit in a looser, more expressionist style, Heisig produced works that, like Tübke's *Schulze* series, sought to confront Germany's recent history from the subjective perspective of those who had experienced firsthand, like him. In a stylistic synthesis of Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix, Heisig's works explode with imagery and a haptic painterly materialism. Stylistically different from Tübke, Heisig nonetheless produced work in a

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[34] Harald Behrendt, Werner Tübkes Panoramabild in Bad Frankenhausen: Zwischen staalichem Prestigeprojekt und künstlerischem Selbstauftrag (Kiel: Verlag Ludwig, 2006), 260-1.

similar range of themes and with many of the same historical reference points drawn from

Renaissance painting, as in the Brueghelian Tower of Babel that appears in many of both

their works. Certainly neither was afraid to address the immediate German past, a past

from which the East German state desired a totally clean break. Indeed, the war became

the most frequently painted theme of Heisig's work, and like Otto Dix, George Grosz, and

Max Beckmann did in relation to World War I, Heisig sought to cut deeply into the

traumatic reality of World War II in painting through the critical lens of his own experience.

In *Fortress Breslau (The City and her Murder)*, painted in 1969, Heisig recreates the

chaos of the destruction of Wrocław when with the arrival of the Red Army in 1945, the

Nazi military leadership declared the city a fortress and prohibited the evacuation of

women and children until doing so in the midst of a snowstorm, in which thousands died.

As for the city itself, half of it was destroyed, along with at least 40,000 of its inhabitants,

who lay rotting in the rubble during what was a three-month siege.[35] Heisig was born in

German Breslau, only to leave in 1947 when the city once again became Wrocław under

Polish rule. He had been a member of the Hitler Youth and became a soldier in the SS,

participating in the Siege of Breslau.[36] Heisig recalls,

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[35] For a historical account of the Battle of Breslau, see Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, (New York: Penguin, 2009), especially Chapter 16, 522-552.

[36] For a biographical overview of Heisig, see Freya Mülhaupt, "Biographische Dokumentation," in *Bernhard Heisig: Retrospektive*, ed. Jörn Merkert and Peter Pachnicke (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1989), 94-107. April Eisman has shown how Heisig's biography became a point of contention in his post-*Wende* reception, particularly for Western scholars troubled by his past, less as a member of the SS and more as a successful painter in the GDR. In order to be regarded by Western art institutions, his difference as a "close Other" had to be denied. See April Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig and the Cultural Politics of East German Art* (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007).

I was born in 1925. Three years of soldierly stupidity in the war. You get stupid slowly, waiting until it is someday your turn. Max Beckmann's 1915 *Medical Barracks of Courtrai* opened my eyes, as they say. I always read with interest about people who changed during the war, were purified or even had the insight and recognized the sense and nonsense of the war in the foxhole. Mine was not such an encounter, but others could shake off the war as a glove and later glorified everything, even as a war cripple.[37]

While Heisig situates the viewer closest to the Nazi soldiers, who occupy the right central portion of the painting, as if from the perspective of one of them, the viewer nonetheless sees them as the murderers of the city, one of who was Heisig himself. One of the soldiers kneels down, facing the lower right and tensely firing a machine gun. His helmet covers his face as he aims, but his teeth are bared. Beside him in profile stands a soldier who gazes upward as he stands beside a bed on which a naked woman lies with her legs tied and leaning upward toward the end of the bed furthest from the viewer. Behind the two soldiers stands their commander, who appears to be beginning to fall back, his head thrust to the side as he holds his hat in his fingertips. On the right edge of the canvas a grey silhouette of a figure is hanging by the neck, a sign hung on its chest reads: "Ich habe mit den Bolschewisten paktiert" ("I collaborated with the Bolsheviks"), and behind all of the figures the city rises up in steep perspective, both away from them in the dark river of the upper right and towards them, with the curving cables of a suspension bridge thrusting forward, framing the scene like steel arms. In the darkened sky, the city blazes fiery orange and red in the upper left. Heisig creates a turbulent vision of violence and barbarism with which he was complicit. It is certainly true that the GDR never acknowledged the atrocities committed by Soviets in their Westward march, seeing the Red Army one-dimensionally as heroic liberators only, and in a sense, Heisig tows the party line by laying the blame with

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[37] Quoted in Peter Pachnicke, "'In jeder Figur stecke ich drin': Innovation der Figurenmalerei," in *Bernhard Heisig: Retrospektive*, 15.

the Germans. Nonetheless, his personal experience of the events and the resolution to paint them, while at the same time avoiding any representation of the heroism of Soviet soldiers, creates a terrifyingly personal vision that transcends and even refutes ideology; while the leadership of the GDR absolved itself of any complicity with Nazism, Heisig memorializes his own conscious as a co-perpetrator of its crimes, for which the guilt persisted.

This guilt is represented alongside the trauma of war in *Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* (1975-77). A restless soldier lies across the canvas with his arms raised over his head as he appears to cry out in terror. His bed has been transformed into a messy pile of indistinct forms through which a blood red flow passes. Out of this river of blood a series of coffins containing corpses emerges, lined up along the bottom edge of the painting, seeming to prop up the soldier, while over and around him, diminutive warplanes fly and tanks ride, literally transforming his body into a battlefield. The loosely painted Christmas tree rises up menacingly at an angle from behind the pileup, while above an angel descends with trumpet, attempting to push aside an eagle—a symbol of the Nazi state—that looms up behind the soldier. Why is the soldier "unteachable"? Unable to express the trauma and guilt of his experience, has he failed the fundamental test of socialist reeducation, that is, to collectively forget the past? In West Germany in the wake of World War II, many artists, including Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, and Jörg Immendorff had taken up, in varied ways the task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, of "coming to terms with the past," while in East Germany, the past, especially the most immediate, was in many ways denied. "During the 1950s and 1960s," as as Bojana Pejić writes, "the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] was confronted by Fascist memories and

nightmares and this was part of the process of atonement. In the GDR, on the other hand,

the work of mourning was considered the privilege of their Western relatives. Because

Nazism was regarded as a facet of Capitalism and therefore had little to do with the New

(and Democratic) Germany."[38] The development of "Real Existing Socialism" allowed

almost no room for the acknowledgement of any trauma or guilt, personal or collective, in

its quest toward a joy-filled, healthy communist future, in which any personal sentiments

were to be shunted for the sake of the new social order. The building of the workers' and

peasants' utopia prohibited discontent.

In a state that actively and forcefully suppressed the remembrance of past brutality,

Tübke and Heisig occupied a fragile position as artists who wanted to work beyond the

ideological strictures and aesthetic of Socialist Realism. With the *Simultanbild* of the

Leipzig School, a form of history painting was developed that rubbed Socialist Realism

against its grain, while also bringing into question some of the core ideological values of

"Real Existing Socialism" in the GDR, namely its renunciation of history's dark side coupled

with its utopian futurity. The referential and stylistic diversity of Tübke and Heisig may

have also created an aesthetic mode that subtly expressed a desire for a politics and society

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[38] Bojana Pejić, "The Dialectics of Normality," in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 220. According to Jeffrey Herf, the public memory of Nazism in the GDR was quickly shifted from the remembrance and commemoration of those who Germans who perished in the Resistance (a number far fewer than the state would admit) toward the present and future struggle against fascism in the form of capitalism and Western imperialism. September's annual "International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Fascist Terror," which began in 1945, was by 1952 transformed into a public peace demonstration. As Herf writes, the public ceremonies on this annual holiday "displayed a relentlessly 'progressive' (that is, forward-looking) redemptive spirit. Occasioned by losses in the past, they were devoted to victory in the present and future" (167). See Herf's *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for a discussion of the various ways that Nazism was remembered—and forgotten—in both East and West Germany.

beyond the GDR's univocal authoritarian narrative. In this, they created a model the

implications and relevance of which are still alive today in the contemporary

Simultanbilden of Neo Rauch, one that is central to understanding his work, especially if the

desire is to avoid categorizing his work as essentially empty baroque-postmodern-

surrealistic-socialist fetishism.

Neo Rauch, a Post-Myth, Post-History, Post-Political Painter of History Painting?

Since the 1990s, Neo Rauch's work has become only more complex, broadening its

range of historical reference material to the more distant past, with figures that seem to

have stepped out of Goethe's novels working alongside Rauch's usual suspects culled from

the life world of the GDR. At the same time, his style has become more akin to the lush,

painterly realism of the nineteenth century, even while maintaining the customary use of

flat patches of nostalgically faded color and the intrusion of unrecognizable forms that

border on the abstract. The works of the *Para* series, created specifically for his debut

American museum exhibition at the Met in 2007 represented a newfound painterly

richness. Among the fourteen works of this exhibition, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, stands

out as one of the richest examples. In it, the cheery, nearly cloudless illumination of a flat

cerulean sky is betrayed by the enigmatic yet threatening and urgent activities of the

people assembled in the right side of the painting. As in all of Rauch's compositions, the

purpose of the actions of the figures remains an obdurate mystery, but specific actions can

be recognized. In the central foreground a hybrid birdman (or perhaps an early modern

European plague doctor) prods a female figure lying across a grassy embankment with a

flame-tipped orange stick. Holding a shiny orange ball, she extends her arm and hand

above her head and gazes out toward the viewer with a sickly, blank stare. Just beyond her, another figure reclines on their stomach with their head raised like a sphinx, gazing toward an empty courtyard or square formed by two long, whitewashed buildings to the right, in the center of which is a minotaur-like figure tied to a stake; the wood piled against the base of the stake suggests that this figure will soon be burned.   While the setting appears to be a quiet rural village, those typical of the East German countryside, the activities of the villagers betray a dark side to the mundane enough locale. Assembled on the right along a street that extends towards a loosely painted forest edge, the villagers distribute weapons and assemble near a stage on which a shirtless, rotund figure stands, as men over his head a large, black, bull's head. The relationship between the left and right sides becomes a bit clearer, as the viewer recognizes this as the head of the isolated figure tied to a stake on the left. If these bull-headed people are being punished, who are the barbarians for whom the assembled are waiting? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the violence implied throughout the work will only become worse.

While violence is made explicit in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, most of Rauch's works at least hint at some sort of dark transgression having taken place, taking place, or about to take place, even if the figures themselves seem incapable of movement or action beyond the ones in which they are frozen. Whether in the men who seem to be loading a carcass into a wheelbarrow against an ominous red sky in *Goldmine*, or in the white tuxedo-clad brooding smokers in *The Next Train*, Rauch's figures' only salvation from their demise comes in the form of their own inertia. While they seem at first sight to be performing important tasks, given their apparent determination, it is hard to imagine these tasks amounting to anything. They are the iconographic antipodes of the workers and peasants

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of Socialist Realism, and as such, represent a continuation of the project of Neo Rauch's

Leipzig School predecessors. As Eisman writes,

> Critics and art historians frequently point to the Surreal quality of Rauch's
> paintings—the dislocations of scale and combinations of disparate
> elements—which they interpret as unintelligible, a reflection on the
> incomprehensibility of modern life. When looked at in context, however,
> these qualities have long been associated with the 'old' Leipzig School that
> first emerged in the mid-1960s.[39]

But beyond the general sense that these characters and spaces are at least partially culled

from Rauch's socialist past and integrated in the form of the *Simultanbild*, there is

something more specific being deployed in these works, and it has deeper implications not

only in the context of the experience of socialism, but also in the broader category of

German history, implications that carry forth into the present, in the ways by which

national identity and collective experience have been framed in the public imagination.

This has taken place most prominently and problematically, at least since the formation of

the German state in 1871, in the visual culture of the myth of *Heimat*, or "homeland," which

served as, according to Alon Confino, "a symbolic manual that allowed [Germans] to feel

German under any political ruler."[40]

Despite the fact that presently *Heimat* will most likely bring up strong associations

with Nazi ideology, the term's history and its visual representations have a much longer

and more complex history, one from which the GDR was by no means excluded. As Confino

shows, the concept of *Heimat* was best represented in visual culture, as majestic virgin

forests, fecund fields, picturesque and tidy villages, powerful factories, and healthy,

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[39] Eisman, "Painting the East German Experience…", 248.

[40] Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), xiv.

productive German citizens, among other motifs. *Heimat* was a fiction of course, but one that served to project an image of an unchanging, peaceful, and intimate German nation in the face of a chaotic and violent historical reality; Nazis, West Germans, and East Germans alike employed it to help formulate a vision of social and cultural cohesion throughout a twentieth century filled with past disasters and future uncertainties. In a sense, it was a set of immediately recognizable yet empty signifiers, free-floating allegorical fragments that could be adapted to suit the demands of any ideology.[41]

One of the clearest sets of motifs to emerge in Neo Rauch's work is the adoption of *Heimat* imagery. And while Rauch does much to disrupt, empty out, and recode it, the easily recognizable "German-ness" of this imagery has proved problematic to a number of critics and historians. While for Eisman, it generates specific references to Rauch's experience in East Germany, for others, it represents a troublingly reactionary turn. In a review of Rauch's 2005 show at David Zwirner, titled *Renegades*, Jan Verwoert writes that "his work seems to aim less at the deconstruction of an obsolete ideology than, in fact, at the restoration of a questionable sense of German identity."[42] For Donald Kuspit, Rauch's work "remains committed to—bogged down in—the (East) German past. It seems that sport rather than art is the path to the future. Germany needs a new generation of forward-looking, optimistic artists; it is no longer possible to play the art game by the old emotional rules. Mourning and melancholy—suffering and shame—are no longer

[41] Confino, 98. Chapter 4 of Confino's book deals specifically with the role of *Heimat* in the formation of East German national identity.

[42] Jan Verwoert, "Neo Rauch," *Frieze Magazine*, October 13, 2005, accessed February 19, 2015, http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/neo_rauch1/.

emotional credentials for making German art."[43] However troubling Rauch's vision or

whatever the current "emotional credentials for making German art" might be, I think both

critics are partially right while also missing much of what is operating in Rauch's work.

While Germany does seem to be finally coming to terms with its Nazi past, the

socialist past of the former GDR still survives, albeit in ever-diminished ways, in the

memory of those who were born and grew up in it, as well as in the cityscapes of Berlin,

Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, and other former socialist urban centers. More often than not,

coming to terms with the socialist past meant its erasure, as in the case of Berlin's Palace of

the Republic, razed to make way for a reconstruct of the old Prussian City Palace, which

had been destroyed in World War II. What does such a gesture say about the "confident

contemporary Germany" of which Kuspit writes? That a symbol of militaristic imperialism

is more acceptable in the present context than a structure that served as the cultural heart

of the GDR? Perhaps Rauch recalls some of the most troubling aspects of German identity

from across the range of history in order to show that the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is not

as complete as some may want to suggest.   This may be especially true in the present,

when Germany is confronting its identity on multiple fronts, from immigration to

Islamophobia, from right-wing nationalism to its status as Europe's economic and political

powerhouse, all within the context of what was supposed to be a new, post-historical form

of utopia, the European Union. For Confino, those like Neo Rauch, who spent much of their

lives up to the present in the GDR, had a specific experience of life that it is important to

remember. However, as he writes, these images of the past will not outlive those who

experienced them. "The nostalgia for the GDR is generation-specific. Economic and social

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[43] Donald Kuspit, "The Truth about Germany?," *Artnet Magazine*, June 26, 2007, accessed
March 6, 2015, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit6-26-07.asp.

differences between the western and eastern parts of united Germany will remain for decades, as will cultural and identity divides. But the East German Heimat—whether constructed by the regime or by its people—will not survive its own historical and chronological boundaries."[44] In contemporary Germany, Cofino's assessment may prove true, as the material history of socialism is put out with the garbage with little concern for historical remembrance. But as Charity Scribner argues,

> The cultural remains of the second world register the dialectics of collective memory that wind from nostalgia to mourning to disavowal. In the strongest of these texts and artworks, remembrance resists repudiation—but not in the simple sense by which the work of mourning would complete our view of the past. Any narrative that claims to reconcile socialism's gains with its foregone losses obliterates our own complicity in its forfeiture. The pretense of mastering second world history, in fact, enacts the most perfidious disavowal—that of disowning the wounds that form the crux of experience. Authentic memory does not reconstitute a homogenous image of the past. It reawakens antagonisms that thwart the resolution of—and in—any narrative.[45]

This perspective seems particularly apt in relation to Neo Rauch's wounded, disjointed montages of history. Just as they draw our attention to certain vestiges of Germany's as-of-yet unresolved past, they may also point toward a future, in which collective identity is not founded on some mythic consensus that is itself based on exclusion, but rather an open, groundless agonistic multiplicity that, like Neo Rauch's work, forfeits nothing and offers no easy resolution to the question of what is to come.

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[44] Cofino, 113.

[45] Scribner, 165.

Conclusion

Painting History Today

> I always preferred to just let the world in all its complexity impress itself
> upon me. I've tried, and I'm still trying—via a precisely-aimed reach into the
> immeasurably flow of thing—to perform a kind of bundling. This bundling
> then is the artwork.
>
> <div align="right">—Neo Rauch[1]</div>

Bundling the immeasurably complex flow of the world into the work of art; this is how Neo

Rauch describes his intangible and paradoxical paintings. Presenting disparate figures,

events, and pictorial styles as a simultaneous accumulation is something that perhaps only

painting can accomplish, or at least accomplishes more successfully than other artistic

media. Elsewhere, Rauch describes painting as, "a medium primarily good for shaping the

unnamable into forms which can face us with magnetic plasticity, even though they might

correspond with the facts of our current situation in only a limited way. That is the

direction from which I approach things, more or less from behind the mirror of the times."[2]

As much as this sentiment applies to his own work, Rauch's notion of painting "shaping the

unnamable" "behind the mirror of the times" is certainly apt for all of the artists discussed

in this study. From Grosz's dialectical realism to Dix's renaissance allegories of modern

destruction, from Richter's implosion of modern painting's categories to Rauch's explosion

of history painting, painting condenses and brings forth the "felt outrageousness of

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[1] Sabine Russ, "Interview: Neo Rauch," *Bomb Magazine* (December 12, 2014), accessed
March 19, 2015, http://bombmagazine.org/article/57851210/neo-rauch.

[2] Quoted in Holzwarth, 280.

history," to borrow a phrase from Jacques Ranciére.[3] But while other modern artists delved

into the abstract sublime to present a glimpse of what was unrepresentable in the human

experience of the twentieth century—Kandinsky's spiritual forms, Mondrian's universal

geometry, Newman's sublime "zips," and Klein's void being just a few among the myriad

examples—the artists discussed here found their challenge not in an escape from material

reality but through a leap into its absolute heterogeneity.

Their realism is not one of mimesis and they do not simply mirror the world; rather,

it finds its expression in a double sense: in the material substrate of the images themselves,

which always declare their presence and autonomy as painting, and in their evocation of a

world beyond, through a diverse use of recognizable yet reconfigured figures, symbols,

motifs, and texts. As Potts writes about the heterogeneous strategies of twentieth century

realism, "it is the structurally unintegrated character of such work, its incompatibility with

any stable sense of symbolic or aesthetic wholeness, that enables a viewer engrossed in it

to apprehend it as being resonant with the fabric of things beyond an art environment."[4] In

this, it creates a new type of aesthetic autonomy, one similar to what Ranciére delineates

when he describes contemporary aesthetic concerns, one that "asserts the absolute

singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this

singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms

with the forms that life uses to shape itself."[5] By putting everything into their work

through diverse methods and across a century, these painters create a model for figural

[3] Jacques Ranciére, *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 93.

[4] Potts, 401-02.

[5] Jacques Ranciére, "The Distribution of the Sensible," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2010), 23.

painting that addresses the often painful and always complex history of modern German life in a way that only painting can; by opening their art up to the world of lived experience accumulated across time and almost forgotten in modernity, Grosz, Dix, Richter, and Rauch give us a glimpse of painting's ability to not only transform life beyond the brute utility of the political, but to keep alive the vision of art's autonomy that is the locus and the promise of a modernism that may indeed still be alive and well in a place least expected: in painting's age-old figurative tradition.

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