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Backwards Romanticism or a Glimpse of the Future? The Visual Language of Reactionary Modernism in National Socialist Landscape Painting

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**Backwards Romanticism
or a
Glimpse of the Future?**

**The Visual Language of Reactionary Modernism in National
Socialist Landscape Painting**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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ABSTRACT

In 1935, two years prior to the opening of the House of German Art in Munich, Adolf Hitler declared the following during a speech to the German people in Nuremberg:

“Art, precisely because it is the most direct and faithful emanation of the *Volksgeist*, constitutes the force that unconsciously models the mass of the people in the most active fashion, on condition that this art is a sincere reflection of the soul and temperament of a race and is not a deformation of it.”

Numerous scholars have noted the importance and necessity of art in the creation and molding of the Third Reich, from the establishment of the *Reichskulturkammer*, or Reich Chamber of Culture under Alfred Rosenberg (and later famously run by Joseph Goebbels) in 1933 to the opening of the House of German Art four years later to Hitler’s ultimately failed plans for the creation of an even grander complex of German art in Linz. Some contemporaries of the Third Reich, including Thomas Mann, noted the direct link between the Wagnerian Romantic doctrine that “German art should not be content simply to aspire but must realize its German essence,” and Nazism. As Robert Scholz, a Nazi art theorist, described it, “the desire to create of the German people is always born from two roots: a strong sensitive inclination toward nature and a deep metaphysical aspiration.”

These lofty Romantic ideals seemingly manifested themselves deeply in the artistic policies of the Third Reich as it attempted to reestablish and cement a thoroughly German *Volksgemeinschaft*, notably in the prevalence of idyllic German landscapes present in most major Nazi art exhibitions under the Third Reich.

Nazism’s propensity for Romantic and Realist-inspired landscapes depicting the connectedness of the German people to their land and representing a longing for an idyllic, communal past belied a worldview that was both modern and regressive. Indeed, those drawn to the movement and its leaders themselves viewed it not as a refuge from the twentieth century, but a revolutionary movement intent on forming a new type of nation-state. This paper explores the tensions between the brand of perverted and philistine Romanticism that the Third Reich exploited and the technology-driven modernism necessary as a driving force behind the mass movement, tensions that Jeffrey Herf characterizes as forces of “reactionary modernism.”

The means of exploring these tensions are the landscape paintings that were produced under the *Reichskulturkammer*. Though painting subjects favored by the Nazis ranged from images of women to genre scenes to heroic images of the leaders, landscape comprised the largest portion of painting output, representing 40 percent of the paintings displayed in the House of German Art in Munich. Though Hitler aimed to create and foster a new, “eternal” brand of Nazi art, these paintings (rarely studied seriously by art historians) have been derided as “second-rate” and derivative. They visually embody the leadership’s nineteenth century tastes as well as an empty brand of Romanticism that the Nazis used to exploit their own nihilistic goals driven by racism and a desire to destroy in order to create a New Order. These horrific goals were sold to the German people visually through comforting landscapes and rural-scapes that touted the purity of the

German soil, and strength of the German peasant, and celebrated the “sublime” and superior beauty of the specifically *Nordic* landscape.

However, another less familiar type of “landscape” emerged around 1940, deemed the “heroic landscape” by architect Paul Schultze-Naumberg. These scenes juxtaposed the unique beauty and appeal of that Nordic landscape with scenes of worksites – from granite quarries to bridges to the *Autobahnen* – in a manner that more aggressively stated Hitler’s progressive and modernistic goals for Germany’s future. They gained popularity during the “peak” years of the Third Reich, that is, post-1938, all and pre-1943, when victories from the *Anschluss* (1938) to the Fall of France (1941), all stemming from the notion of *Lebensraum*, bolstered confidence and made the creation of a New Order seem possible. It was at this time, it seems, that visual depictions of the more modernistic, and often disturbing (one painting depicts slave laborers from Dachau mining a granite quarry for another labor camp at Mauthausen-Gusen) were fed to the German public. These “heroic landscapes” disappear for the last two years of the Reich’s existence (according to evidence in *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, the official National Socialist arts publication), and are again replaced by an abundance of comforting, benign landscapes and farm scenes.

Ultimately, although these landscapes have been dismissed by art historians, their subject matter has much to say about National Socialist ideology and its mode of indoctrination. In spite of the derivative nature of the landscapes, in the words of historian Roger Griffin, “the Nazi exploitation of...Romanticism is not the archaism of a society nostalgic for the past, but the modernism of a regime which was nostalgic for the future.” The arts program “pulled the wool over the eyes,” so to speak, of the German people with comforting, appealing landscapes that had a deep-rooted tradition in the German collective consciousness. Following the stunning successes between 1938 and 1942, the most modern, radical, and criminal impulses of the Reich revealed themselves in painting, in the form of the still-beautiful, sanitized “heroic landscapes.” This more modern subject matter was abandoned as the possibility of German victory disappeared, replaced once again by a preponderance of those affirming landscapes and rural-scapes.

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The First Great German Art Exhibition and National Socialist Painting

In July 1937 two landmark art exhibitions opened across the street from each other in Munich, Germany with the intention of creating a confrontation between conflicting styles of art for the ages. On one side, held at the Archaeological Institute, was the now-infamous exhibition of “degenerate art,” that is, post-1910 artwork deemed by Adolf Hitler to “insult German feeling....and reveal and absence of adequate manual and artistic skill.”¹ This show was a blockbuster event, drawing nearly one million visitors in the first six months and eventually traveling to twelve other cities between 1938 and 1941. Across the street was another curious, if less incendiary, exhibition. In the grand House of German Art, described by Hitler as “a temple for genuine and eternal German art”² were displayed some 900 works of art chosen from more than 15,000 entries.

This Nazi art was meant to educate the German people about the perfection and purity of a new wave of German artistic prowess, and embody all of the qualities valued by Hitler, and by extension the *Volk*, in art. The show, comprised primarily of landscapes, idyllic genre scenes and still life, did not elicit the passionate feelings evoked by the exhibition just 100 yards away from it, drawing just one-third the crowd.³ In fact, Hitler was vastly disappointed with the turnout and quality of art submitted for and displayed in this grand artistic history – nineteenth-century German Romantic art, lauded for its “clear and simple” style

¹ Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook Press, 2002), 162.

² Spotts, 168.

³ Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York: Random House, 1979), 1.

and subject matter, celebration of all things “healthy and beautiful,” and “German [not] international style,” a style that, in Hitler’s mind, was easily grasped by the public and could serve a social purpose.⁴ This was art that shunned urban scenes and the “degeneracy” associated with industrialization and modernization and extolled the values symbolized by nature, the simplicity of the peasantry and an idealized rural lifestyle best appreciated by working closely with the German soil and landscape.

Hitler deemed the submitted artworks unworthy, fuming that “the paintings demonstrate that we in Germany have no artists whose works are worthy of being hung in this splendid building.”⁵ Joseph Goebbels, a one-time proponent of the modern style that was denigrated in the exhibition across the street, disgustedly echoed Hitler’s reaction, labeling the works “Munich-school kitsch.”⁶ Modern art historians have repeated these sentiments, noting that Nazi painting was rooted in the mentality of the petit bourgeois, whose taste was “mediocre and provincial, fanatic and brutal, narrow-minded and sentimental, refined and introspective.”⁷ What had resulted from Hitler’s call for Nazi painting was an essentially imitative and derivative style, hollowly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Romantic and *Biedermeier* movements that Hitler so admired (styles that he attempted to emulate as a young artist in Vienna). Most of these painters (roughly eighty percent) were middle-class artists who studied at the

⁴ Spotts, 176.

⁵ Spotts, 172.

⁶ Spotts, 177.

⁷ Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, eds. *High and Low Culture: German Attempts at Mediation* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 48.

conservative Munich academy at the turn of the century.⁸ Hitler himself apparently could not bear to surround himself with the artworks for his own personal collection, and his own purchases were ostensibly meant to encourage young painters and perhaps provide a façade of satisfaction in the production value of Nazi art. Most of his personal residences were filled instead with works by his favorite nineteenth-century artists, including Runge, Spitzweg, Markart, and Feuerbach. Works of this kind were scattered in the halls of subsequent exhibitions at the House of German Art.⁹

What was it exactly, then, that drew Hitler to these nineteenth-century landscapes and rural scenes, and incited his attempt to adopt the genre as the “official” style of Nazi art? Other aspects of Germany’s cultural legacy were often invoked, as in the spectacular parade that preceded that opening of the 1937 exhibition. The gaudy affair traced the “purified and distilled” artistic history of the people from the German gothic to other artistic “heroes” of the Third Reich, notably Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein, and finally ended with the *Wehrmacht*, SS and *Arbeitsdienst* reaping the final waves of applause. However, it was the Romantics and Realists of the nineteenth-century the Nazi painters attempted to follow, and it was this art that Hitler invoked when he proclaimed in a 1937 speech at the opening of the House of German Art that “the Romantics...were but the finest representatives of that German search for the real and true character of our people...for it was not only their choice of subject which was decisive but the

⁸ Spotts, 176.

⁹ Spotts, 180.

clear and simple mode of rendering these sentiments.”¹⁰ According to German cultural historian Hermann Glaser, “manifestations of Nazi painting are in Philistine romanticism, unsophisticated *Gartenlaube* literature, neurotic idylls, blood and earth bombast, and national kitsch, all of which served to raise a façade behind which there are no genuine feelings.”¹¹ Art historian Helmut Lehmann-Haupt derisively noted in 1954 that the works of the exhibition were a study in retrogression: what the visitors saw were the kind of paintings their parents “would have looked at in the *Glaspalast* [the major art museum in pre-Nazi Munich] exhibitions thirty or forty years earlier on their way through Munich to a holiday in the Bavarian Alps.”¹²

Berthold Hinz and other historians point specifically to the dominance and importance of landscape painting to the National Socialist arts program. As previously mentioned, landscapes, often specifically *German* landscapes, comprised 40 percent of the exhibition held in Munich in 1937. Nazi art aimed to embody visually the eternal soul, a vision that attempted in some ways to invoke the Romantic sublime, though ultimately failed because of the hollowness and nihilism of the Nazi movement itself. Painting, according to Michaud, “presented an opportunity for the genius to don the mantle of landscape to reveal itself to the people,” reflecting Nazi professor and architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s belief in a “culture of what is visible” (*Kultur des Sichtbaren*), incorporating “not only houses and monuments, and bridges and roads, but also clothing and social forms,

¹⁰ Adolf Hitler. “Opening of the House of German Art, 1937,” in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922-August 1939*, trans. Norman H. Baynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 586.

¹¹ Hermand, 49.

¹² Helmut Lehman-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 88.

forests, and stockbreeding, machines and the defense of the territory.”¹³ Thus, the overwhelming inclusion of German landscapes in exhibitions was a way to provide the public with an image of the world that they had fashioned with their own work – in short, the landscape was used as a self-portrait of the soul. However, whereas the Romantic artist of the nineteenth century treated the landscape as a portrait of his own individual genius, National Socialist ideology shifted this link between landscape and spirit to apply to the collective spirit of the German people, race, and nation.¹⁴

How was it, then, that the Nazis sold these naïve, primitive, idealistic and perhaps “empty” themes and codes to such a technically advanced society? What specific role did the leaders’ own tastes play in the development, or attempted development, of a Nazi painting style? And how, if at all, did the artworks, specifically landscapes, commissioned and produced under the Third Reich visually embody the often contradictory ideas of German fascism, which at once slammed the “moral decay” of the city and praised the pure simplicity of rural life, but simultaneously embraced modern technology for the advancement and expansion of the Reich? Were these modern and technologically progressive impulses present in Nazi painting, or were they purposely buried beneath a veneer of “philistine Romanticism” and idyllic scenes of rural life?

The first, and most important source for this discussion is the paintings themselves, all produced during the twelve year-period of the Third Reich (1933-1945). Although landscapes are the focus, as they comprise the largest single

¹³ Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 112.

¹⁴ Michaud, 115.

category of painting during the time, a brief exploration of the other significant genres of painting is helpful. Most of the works, from images of women and the nude to portraits of party leaders to later images of soldiers, exalt the simplicity and superiority of the German race and culture in a style that is distinctly bourgeois, at once rustic and highly idealized. However, a detailed study of all genres of Nazi art is not the focus of this investigation; rather, it is a careful historical and art historical analysis of Nazi landscape art, a feat that has not yet been undertaken (though scholars such as Hinz and Eric Michaud allot the category some portion of study in their books). Examination of these landscapes reveals works that are, against the stated desires of Hitler, derivative and pedantic. Most are adamant in their “Germanness” and site-specificity, and all attempt to convey a universal message regarding the connection between German racial purity and the beauty of the Nordic landscape. Ultimately, all are mediocre and hollow aesthetic exercises in expressing and reinforcing a familiar feeling of nationalism that comforted the viewing public as the Third Reich gained military, industrial and territorial momentum, and again as this momentum was lost following crippling military defeats that began in 1942.

As previously noted, many of these paintings have been stored away in warehouses (out of the public eye), indicative of the general attitude towards Nazi art: that displaying it openly lends it an unwarranted and dangerous validity. The paintings themselves have been subject to a strong emotional response since 1945. More than 6,000 paintings were confiscated at the end of the World War II and brought to the United States. Most have remained in Army custody, though portions have been released for public display at traveling art exhibitions. Others

remain on permanent display in Federal military complexes, the Pentagon included.¹⁵ Exhibitions featuring Nazi art draw controversy and coverage (between 1974 and 1991 *The New York Times* covered many of these exhibitions), and consistently renew that difficult-to-assess question: Is it Art? While it is certain that qualitative remarks will be made concerning the art, it is necessary to examine it from a combined art historical, cultural, and political standpoint.

By its very nature, the art of the Third Reich, whether the grand, Fascist facades of Albert Speer, the nudes of Alfred Ziegler or the landscapes of lesser artists from Erich Mercker to Karl Alexander Flügel, was political. A key part of understanding the ultimate goal of these works is to examine for what reason they were commissioned, which some historians, such as Joan Clinefelter, believe marks the arts program as thoroughly modern: exhibitions, display in factories and government buildings and sometimes for leaders themselves. Another important aspect is examining how this art was marketed and presented to the public, a task that aided by looking at the official arts journal of the time *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, later *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich* (which was published from 1937 to April 1944 with a circulation of 25,000) and a subsidiary journal, *Kunst und Volk*. Additionally, looking into contemporaneous reviews of Nazi art and art exhibitions from America and Britain provides a larger cultural context: foreign critics were apparently just as disappointed as Hitler by that first “great” exhibition of German art. In spite of art historians’ and journalists’ dismissive treatment of the paintings and their taboo ties to a horrific period in world history, their mass appeal is still remarkably striking: one only has to look

¹⁵ William E. Schmidt, “Army Displays Nazi Art at Colorado Warehouse,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1981.

at, for example, WPA-era murals commissioned by the U.S. government around the same time to understand the draw of this easy-to-digest mélange of comforting genre scenes and idealized landscapes and rural-scapes, all rendered with stark nationalist realism. In 1974, a curator at a museum in Aachen boldly stated that the paintings were “the Pop Art of the 1930s,” apparently commenting on their popularity with museum guests in an exhibition of the same year.¹⁶

As this investigation is not merely aesthetic, it is necessary to look into the larger context of how the arts program was set up, which undoubtedly influenced the abundance of landscape paintings produced. For this aspect, Jonathan Petropoulos’s study of the bureaucracy of the arts program *The Faustian Bargain* and Alan Steinweis’s detailed summary of the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chamber of Culture, or RKK) reveal a program that was bound by convention, one that aimed to produce a timeless, “eternal” German art, but instead shunned innovation and strongly encouraged artists to paint stylistically derivative works of monotonous subject matter. Most of this tired subject matter was inspired by the personal tastes of the most influential party leaders, who tended to favor works of the Romantic and *Biedermeier* periods. For Hitler the artist, according to Frederic Spotts, art and aesthetics were of the utmost importance – even political leadership should be regarded as *Staatskunst* (“state craft”).¹⁷

In spite of the popular belief that Hitler’s – and for that matter other party leaders’ including Goebbels’s and Goering’s – art sensibilities were vacuous and

¹⁶ Ruth Bersenson, “An Anti-Nazi Exhibit of Nazi Art,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1974.

¹⁷ Spotts, 43.

ill-informed, these top members of the Nazi bureaucracy had a great interest in the arts, even modern art in the case of Goebbels. Henry Grosshans has noted that “Hitler saw himself as the protector of what he regarded as the genuine European artistic image” and that “Hitler as an artist in politics should be taken seriously [as one who was] devoted to what he thought of as high culture.”¹⁸ Hitler, famously, was a failed artist whose idyllic Viennese watercolors reflected his preference for traditional nineteenth-century German Romantic and Realist art. By 1945, Hitler’s personal collection of art comprised primarily nineteenth-century German-Austrian painters, from Lenbach to Spitzweg. Additionally, his collection of Old Masters was impressive, including at least fifteen Rembrandts, two Vermeers and works by artistic giants from Titian to Botticelli to Rubens. According to Spotts, as was typical of an autocrat, Hitler regarded these works as trophies of power and wealth, but he was enough of a painter to appreciate them as precious objects in themselves.¹⁹ Goering was a “voracious” collector of art²⁰; Goebbels was a failed novelist and playwright who initially displayed a relatively liberal attitude towards the arts, attempting to make room in the movement for modern and Expressionist artists like Fritz Lang. On the other end of the spectrum was Alfred Rosenberg, the self-styled “party philosopher” who wrote *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, in which art and its relationship to society was explored, and who was a strong proponent of the *völkisch* art of the Romantic period.²¹

¹⁸ Henry Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 14.

¹⁹ Spotts, 183.

²⁰ Grosshans, 14.

²¹ Grosshans, 8.

These overlapping but still somewhat digressive views towards art within Nazi leadership resulted in a lack of direction, at least initially, for the arts program. At a 1934 rally, Hitler finally lashed out against both extremes (Goebbels's lenience towards modernistic and Expressionist tendencies in art and Rosenberg's solely *völkisch* persuasions and "backward Romantic" tastes), declaring himself the sole perpetrator of taste. The result of this, according to Jost Hermand, was the dominance of the "realistic" genre painting of the nineteenth-century favored by Hitler, leading to a "strengthening in traditional art and [consequently] a victory for the mediocre, third-rate artists."²² Other historians, such as Clinefelter, argue that though Hitler's 1937 decision to abolish cultural modernism signaled a turning point for art in the Third Reich, the positive answer to the question 'what is German art?' was never truly answered: "the content would be accessible to the masses and avoid any negative social commentary....[but beyond that] Nazi officials had no one aesthetic in mind."²³

In Goebbels's own words, cultural regulation had to be accomplished not by "control through laws and the police but rather through the 'intellectual leadership' of the state...[its basic mission] was to promote German culture on behalf of the German *Volk* and Reich, regulate the economic and social affairs of the cultural professionals, and to bring about a compromise between the groups belonging to it."²⁴ The ideal German artist was described as a hardworking, "modern" person whose "heart and soul [were open to] questions of [Germany's]

²² Hermand and Grimm, 47.

²³ Joan L. Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany* (New York: Berg, 2005), 99.

²⁴ Alan Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 41.

national and political experience.”²⁵ The official arts publication of the Third Reich, *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* (published from 1937 to April 1944 with a circulation of 25,000) reproduced works by approved artists, including Ziegler and Adolf Wissel, and most issues also featured a section devoted to “Masterpieces of German Art,” highlighting artists with an “eternally Germanic sensibility,” especially Dürer, Holbein, and nineteenth-century artists like Hans Thoma, Wilhelm Liebl and Spitzweg, whose tranquil domestic and genre scenes were so favored by Hitler.²⁶

So was the art purely retrogressive, as Lehmann-Haupt claimed, reflective of Hitler’s own need for scenes of the *gemütlich* lifestyle he longed for but lacked as a child?²⁷ The genre of painting is noticeably absent from some art historians’ discussions of developments in German art, or is treated as pure kitsch. For example, Gottfried Lindemann’s 1968 *History of German Art: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture* echoes the words of Nikolaus Pevsner, that “every word about [Nazi art] is too much,”²⁸ apparent in the glaring exclusion of the art as a legitimate artistic movement of the twentieth century. Indeed, for many years following the fall of the Third Reich, National Socialist art, especially painting, was viewed as “alien” and a “fluke,” a disruption in the course of German art history. In the views of many Germans, it was believed, like regime itself, to exist outside of history. Hinz’s landmark *Art in the Third Reich* (published 1974 in German under the more descriptive title *Die Malerei im Deutschen Faschismus*, or *Painting under German Fascism*) was the first to fill the gap in German art

²⁵ Steinweis, 73.

²⁶ Clinefelter, 101.

²⁷ Lehmann-Haupt, 90.

²⁸ Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 7.

history between 1933 and 1945.²⁹ He notes that art produced under National Socialism was unique from that made under other contemporaneous dictatorships, notably Futurism in Fascist Italy (Futurism was banned in Germany, and the Futurists were derided by Hitler as “canvas smearers”³⁰) and the Socialist Realism of the Soviet Union. According to Hinz, the structure and content of art of the Third Reich was not nearly as rigidly controlled as some later commentators have thought. In fact, according to him, the public purchase of art as well as the “opportunism” of many artists were major determinants of the structure of the art.³¹ Hinz argues against the notion that the Third Reich created an art unmistakably its own: pointing to the fact that painting exhibitions in Munich before 1933 drew primarily on Munich artists, but those from 1937 on included German artists in the Reich and abroad. These figures “show clearly that National Socialist cultural policy did not stimulate creativity but instead merely built on existing traditions and continued the trends established long before the German fascist assumption of power.”³²

Reactionary Modernism, Steel Romanticism, and the “Nazi Revolution”

In order to gauge the importance of landscape painting to the Nazi movement, it is necessary to examine the artistic, historical and political questions surrounding Hitler’s, and his minions’, relations to art, the past, and modernity. One of the primary issues manifested in Nazi painting, that of the tension between

²⁹ Hinz, i.

³⁰ Hinz, 10.

³¹ Hinz, 13.

³² Hinz, 15.

regression and modernity in National Socialist thought, has inspired debate amongst historians ever since Thomas Mann declared that the Hitler phenomenon stemmed from the German Romantic tradition (albeit perversely). Jeffrey Herf's name for what Mann went on to characterize as Nazism's "dangerous...mixture of robust modernity and an affirmative stance towards progress combined with dreams of the past – in other words, a highly technological romanticism"³³ is "reactionary modernism." Herf defines this uniquely German occurrence as a reconciliation of reason and unreason and a paradoxical rejection of the liberal values of the Enlightenment coupled with an embracing of technology.

Within the early stages of the reactionary modernist movement existed a group of *völkisch* ideologists, notably Alfred Rosenberg, who greatly favored looking to a pre-industrial past. Ultimately, the "reactionary modernists" succeeded in "incorporating technology into symbolism and language of *Kultur* – community, blood, will, self, form, productivity and race – by taking it out of the realm of *Zivilisation* – reason, intellect, internationalism, materialism, and finance."³⁴ All of this provided a cultural framework that appeared to restore order into what reactionary modernist thinkers saw as a chaotic and nonsensical postwar reality.³⁵ Under the Third Reich this manifested itself in the form of an "irrationalist" embracing of technology, which deemed the Nordic race the only one suited to its uses and praised the "German genius for invention" (in Goebbels's words). Hitler was also an unabashed proponent of technical advance,

³³ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

³⁴ Herf, 16.

³⁵ Herf, 16.

especially as Germany's technology was inferior to that of its enemies at the outset of the war. This was clearly evidenced in his 1936 "four-year plan" of economic development (cited as "an act of liberation of technical workers from the tentacles of Jewish finance," and a way for German engineers to place their skills in the service of the *Volk*).³⁶

The subject of man interacting with, and often conquering, nature, with the help of technology was made explicit in National Socialist works depicting outdoor worksites established by the Third Reich. According to Michaud, "From the images of the huge quarries that yielded blocks of German stone destined to give body to the monuments of the eternal Reich, to those of the bridges and roads that composed the routes of the *Führer*, the 'heroic landscapes' [a term coined by Schultze-Naumberg in 1941] depicting these worksites clearly constituted a most sovereign affirmation of the theory of the landscape as a self-portrait and also of its validity."³⁷ These heroic landscapes, which Ernst Jünger characterized as exemplifying the ideal fusion between organic and mechanical forces (as illustrated by Herf's "reactionary modernism"), did not necessarily stand in opposition to the idyllic images of country life and pure landscapes that were so prevalent in the arts program. Instead, they visually asserted the very fluid link between artist and engineer, technology and the "pure" and "wholesome" German spirit. They embodied the duty of National Socialist painting to "preserve and repeat the images of the past [while also] appropriating the new industrial

³⁶ Herf, 201.

³⁷ Michaud, 116.

landscape in order to show technology how to affirm at last its fidelity to its artistic origin.”³⁸

The heroic landscapes also depicted an organic and inextricable link between the German land and the burgeoning building plans of the Third Reich, from the *Autobahn* to bridges to quarries. The popularity of these scenes (gauged in large part by looking at issues of *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*) corresponded directly with rising Nazi confidence, which arguably peaked with the Wannsee conference in early 1942. It is at this moment that Hitler’s plans for a New Order are most explicitly, and horrendously, imagined; it is also during this time of growing confidence that these heroic landscape scenes, which balanced idealism with a depiction of the *reality* of German modernity and industrial prowess, were most popular.

So it is within the National Socialist landscape paintings, from the “tired” and derivative landscapes exhibited at that first show at the House of German Art to the heroic landscapes that emerged later, that these tensions between an idyllic, “timeless” past, the reality of the present, and the desires for the future appear to have manifested themselves visually. The ubiquity of the thoroughly Nordic landscape during the Third Reich’s embryonic stages (they could be viewed everywhere from museums to government offices to factories to issues of *Die Kunst*) suggests that the leadership relied on presenting comforting and timeless images that reinforced the Germans’ confidence in their superiority as a race. However, as the Third Reich began to achieve military success and expand (beginning with the *Anschluß* in 1938), and Hitler’s more radical, impressive, and

³⁸ Michaud, 118.

modern policies (especially *Lebensraum*) revealed themselves as successful, many of these paintings took a turn away from “pure” landscape and moved into a more interesting realm: the heroic landscape. The juxtaposition between the pure, “Romantic” landscapes that were so popular at the House of German Art and the new “heroic” variety, which appeared as early as 1939, but gained immense popularity after being endorsed by Schultze-Naumberg in 1941, reflects the struggle between looking to an idyllic past and reaching toward a modern, industrial future that Nazism embodied. It also, perhaps, is indicative of the purpose of painting under the Third Reich as indicators of morale: while pure landscapes aimed to inspire and comfort the public with pleasing images of a “Romanticized” German, heroic landscapes revealed Hitler’s increasingly extreme policies of expansion at a time when public confidence in the success of National Socialism was high.

These two visual viewpoints were not necessary at odds with one another. Historian George Mosse views the Nazi revolution as one that emphasized both the “dynamic of the movement and the ‘taming’ of that dynamic through an appeal to tradition and sentiment.”³⁹ The Nazi movement was primarily opposed to the cultural degradation of “artificial” modernity. The idea of living close to nature was seen as proof that the Germans remained in touch with the roots of their race and culture, which is clear in both the “pure” landscapes as well as the heroic landscapes, which harmoniously combine technology with Nature. Mosse notes that in their staunch traditionalism, extolling the purity and puritan

³⁹ George Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), 23.

simplicity of the German landscape, Nazis “believed they were pursuing the ideal of the German race of ancient times, but in reality they had embraced merely bourgeois ideal[s] of the nineteenth-century...[and] this bourgeois morality served to tame the activism, to channel it against the enemies of the Reich.”⁴⁰ In short, the Nazis could appeal to “the good old days” and at the same time provide an outlet “for the activism so vital for the dynamic of the movement.”⁴¹

Mosse also highlights the New Romantic movement of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, which retained the framework of the mystical status of the *Volk* of earlier Romanticism, but sought out more concrete ways of overcoming the rampant materialism of the time. Coined by Eugen Diederichs, the term implied neither a return to a peasant utopia nor a toleration of increasing industrialization but instead entailed that belief that Germany’s revitalization would come about through “the adoption of an irrational, emotional, and mystical world view by each individual German.”⁴² Much of this was driven, according to Mosse, by a “need to transcend a banal bourgeois world,”⁴³ which interestingly stands in contradiction to the claims of some historians and art historians that the painting produced under the Third Reich was “rooted in the mentality of the petit bourgeois.”⁴⁴ Mosse concludes that the final realization of National Socialism was indebted to the absorption of the anti-modernity of the *völkisch* ideology into the modern mass movement techniques of Hitler’s movement.

⁴⁰ Mosse, 22-23.

⁴¹ Mosse, 23.

⁴² George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 55.

⁴³ Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 56.

⁴⁴ Grimm and Hermand, 49.

Roger Griffin and Modris Eksteins address the conundrum of modernity and anti-modernity in the context of Nazism. Aesthetically speaking, even the most anti-modernist manifestations of Nazi aesthetics reveal upon closer inspection a “futural, time-defying dynamic....producing art that [fused] future and past into a timeless present.”⁴⁵ which Hitler aimed to accomplish with those landscapes and rural-scapes that celebrated the German spirit. This stands in stark contrast to the once widely held belief touted by Henry Turner: that Nazism (in contrast to the “pro-modernist” Fascist Italy) was a form of “utopian anti-modernism pursuing a fanatical and ultimately suicidal pursuit of an unattainable, archaic utopia.”⁴⁶ The very nature of the heroic landscapes defies this definition of the movement, as they combined modernity with visions of a timeless and idealized present. Nazi technocracy attached great importance to historical, cultural and biological rootedness that would grant all Aryans a sense of belonging and “allow technology to be geared exclusively to the needs of the *Volk* as interpreted by the *Führer*.”⁴⁷ Thus, there is nothing inherently contradictory about a technologically advancing racial state endlessly invoking visuals of nature, grand and bucolic landscapes, and rural idylls and that mythical German *Heimat*, even if these images were meant to comfort and inspire. By extension, those quaint, archaic and kitschy paintings seemed to have masked something far more sinister than a desire to return to an Arcadian past: they provided the public with comforting affirmations of German superiority while

⁴⁵ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 288.

⁴⁶ Griffin, 312.

⁴⁷ Griffin, 312.

Hitler rallied for international respect (in the years leading up to the *Anschluss*), and when German confidence began to wane in the face of defeat on the eastern front (post-1942).

It is important to remember the disconnect between Nazi policy (often propagated visually) and practice. As Eksteins points out, the Aryan peasantry was “heralded as the ‘lifeblood of the nation,’ but depopulation of rural areas continued and Germany actually become more urbanized during the Third Reich.”⁴⁸ Eksteins argues that Nazism took full advantage of “residual conservative and utopian longings, [paying its respects] to these Romantic vision,” but its goals were distinctly “progressive.”⁴⁹ Like the final intention of all fascist movements, from Spain to Italy, Nazism was concerned with the creation of a new type of man from whom would spring a “new morality, social system....and international order.”⁵⁰ The urge to destroy *then* create was placed front and center, a goal that once again manifested itself in the heroic landscapes with images of workers destroying the landscape in order to create and expand the reaches of the Third Reich. At the same time, Nazism represented the ultimate form of kitsch, in which deception and aesthetics replaced ethics,⁵¹ a theme that appears time and time again not only in art historical criticism of Nazi painting, but even Goebbels’s critique of the art produced under National Socialism.

“The Finest Representatives of the Character of Our People”: A Brief History of Hitler’s German Artistic Inspirations

⁴⁸ Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 317.

⁴⁹ Eksteins, 328.

⁵⁰ Eksteins, 328.

⁵¹ Eksteins, 304.

In 1935 Hitler claimed, “What [the German people] during the history of two thousand years has achieved in heroic greatness is numbered amongst the mightiest experiences of mankind [and] there were centuries during which in Germany...the works of art corresponded with this greatness of the human soul.”⁵² But what exactly was this great German art whose “sublimity,” and “beauty” were invoked time and time again in the writings and speeches of the *Führer*? In a 1935 speech in Nuremberg, Hitler specifically cited the paintings of the nineteenth century as the best manifestations of the “purity” of the German spirit:

“When on 6 June 1931 the Glass Palace [an exhibition hall in Munich] was burned down there perished with it an immortal treasure of German art. The artists were called Romantics, and yet they were but the finest representatives of that German search for the real and true character of our people.”⁵³

Though emulating the glory of Ancient Greece and Rome was of the utmost importance to Hitler, who sought to connect Germany’s artistic lineage and future with that of Western antiquity, it was evidently the Romantics who best captured the very spirit – the *Geist* – of Germany, at least according to Hitler’s rhetoric.

Most art historical research – and exhibitions – have been reticent to trace a line from the works of great German artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, Anselm Feuerbach and Hans Thoma, to the output generated by painters under the Third Reich. The hesitation is understandable; connecting the undisputed “greats” of nineteenth-century German painting with art whose inherent purpose was political (and whose politics generated the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth

⁵² Adolf Hitler. “Address on Art and Politics at the Nuremberg Parteitag on 11 September 1935,” in Baynes, 583.

⁵³ Baynes, 587-8.

century) legitimizes Nazi art and elevates it beyond its generally-accepted status: third-rate and derivative. Whether the painters working under National Socialism were able to capture the sublimity of the German soul in the same way that Friedrich did, or whether they merely, in the words of Eric Michaud, “filled in the gaps and incompleteness of the Nazi world vision as they would have done on a Romantic sketch, [invoking] the sublime to justify [the movement’s] failings”⁵⁴ remains beside the point for the moment. Interestingly, and as will be noted in the next section concerning the development of the National Socialist arts program, Hitler himself was publicly opposed to the “backwards Romanticism” touted by his most traditional followers (led by Alfred Rosenberg), in spite of clear references, to the loaded landscapes and genre scenes of both the Romantic and subsequent *Biedermeier* movements referred to by Shearer West as *Heimatkunst*. Therefore prior to understanding the painting that developed out of National Socialism, regardless of whether it be regarded as a “true artistic movement,” it becomes necessary to examine in some detail the artistic movements to which Hitler was drawn that came before.

A rare 1994 art exhibition in Glasgow entitled “The Romantic Spirit in German Art” provides a solid overview of how this enigmatic *Geist* manifested itself visually in German painting from the late eighteenth century up through the Nazi movement, though the link between the former and the latter may be less straightforward than it appears. According to Robert Scholz, an editor and critic for *Der Völkischer Beobachter* and later Chief of the Special Staff for Pictorial Art (which was in charge of seizing works from neighboring countries during

⁵⁴ Michaud, 110.

World War II), “the desire to create of the German people is always born from two roots: a strong sensitive inclination toward nature and a deep metaphysical aspiration.”⁵⁵ This connection to Nature and the landscape was somehow believed to be a reflection of the German soul, a soul whose beauty was often bared through annihilation or the exploitation of the feelings of terror invoked by representations of the sublime. As Keith Hartley, Chief Curator of the exhibition in Glasgow noted, in Germany Romanticism became closely linked to “perceptions of national characteristics,” a link which, under the Third Reich, “became synonymous with the unthinking irrationalism of Nazi ideology which placed feeling and intuition above reasoned analysis and moral enlightenment.”⁵⁶

The Romantic Period is a broad term that can be loosely applied to art (literature and philosophy as well) produced as early as the 1770s. It was then that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe first praised German painting that was not interested in the “debased classicism” borrowed from the French and associated with the Enlightenment, but rather *inner* truths: the perceived divine spirit of Nature, man’s longing for companionship with like-minded individuals, and a yearning to reacquire a certain lost Paradise of the past.⁵⁷ The Romantic movement in German art had few identifiable unifying styles, though thematically-speaking, among the most important (and relevant to this thesis) subject matter was the empirically-observed symbolic landscape, favored by two familiar names in art history: Caspar David Friedrich and Phillip Otto Runge, both of whom were greatly admired by Hitler and were cited as inspiration in his

⁵⁵ Michaud, 99.

⁵⁶ Keith Hartley, ed., *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1990* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1994), 14.

⁵⁷ Hartley, 13.

speech at the opening of the House of German Art in 1937.⁵⁸ Friedrich and Runge shared an interest in capturing the mystical, enigmatic, even dangerous beauty of the landscape, German or otherwise. In many of Friedrich's canvases, including the well-known *Monk by the Sea* (finished in 1809; see image 1.1), "an overwhelming Nature threatens to swallow up the human being, who becomes mere *staffage* within the landscape."⁵⁹ This theme is one that National Socialist artists would later attempt to capture in scenes ranging from pure landscapes of the German land in the *Blut und Boden* tradition to the "Heroic Landscapes" (a term coined Paul Schultze-Naumberg) in which man is dwarfed by the enormity of a modern worksite imposed into the already imposing landscape.

The landscapes of the German Romantics were not always explicitly German. The titles of the works and the landscapes themselves – *Morning Mist in the Mountains*, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (Friedrich; 1808, 1818; images 1.2 and 1.3) – imply an imaginary setting, composited for maximum enigmatic, introspective, and mystical effect. In short, the Nature conceived and rendered by the artist becomes a reflection of the *individual* soul, its purity, spiritualism and strength, and even its loneliness and longing for community with others of the same mindset.⁶⁰ This sense of yearning and longing was transferred to the Romantic view of man as a being guided by emotion and intuition, not rational intellectualism. In this sense, according to Vaughan, the artist himself took on a near-heroic role, a vision that encouraged the now-popular perception of the "artist as outsider." Individuality was valued, though the desire for the security of

⁵⁸ Adam, 129.

⁵⁹ Wieland Schmied, "Faces of Romanticism," in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art*, 31.

⁶⁰ William Vaughan, "Romanticism," in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art*, 210.

a community still manifested itself in the warm, idealized genre scenes of painters like Georg Kersting, a theme that would reappear (though perhaps with different intentions) in many popular National Socialist paintings.

A desire to capture the sublimity of the soul through Nature also instigated an idealization of the past in Romantic painting. In Germany, this past was specifically a utopian vision of the Middle Ages, a time when the German states (the Holy Roman Empire) were remembered as at their height of power.⁶¹ The medieval revival associated with Romanticism was also associated with a sort of *Volk* culture, which countered the fiercely individualistic leanings of the leading painters with an appreciation of art *of* the people *for* the people. For this, many of the graphic techniques of *altdeutsch* sixteenth century masters, notably Albrecht Dürer, were revived, as was the popularity of depictions of genre scenes and legends painted in a “lyrical” and “folksy” manner.⁶² Another subsidiary of the Romantics in painting, the Nazarenes, combined this love of the past with a desire to connect Germany with Italy, regarded as the historical seat of civilization. This interest was continued into the latter half of the nineteenth century by the so-called *Deutsch-Römer*, including Arnold Böcklin and Anselm Feuerbach, named by Hitler as another favorite artist.⁶³

Landscapes by German artists took on an increasingly nationalistic tone as the nineteenth century progressed, according to William Vaughan. Following the 1806 occupation of Germany by the French and the subsequent Wars of Liberation against Napoleon, “landscapes full of yearning and [specifically]

⁶¹ Vaughan, 211.

⁶² Vaughan, 211.

⁶³ Adam, 45.

northern imagery could be seen as a kind of national resistance.” In many senses, Germany’s unification (1870-1871) and the founding of the Second Empire finally satisfied the aspirations of the Romantic Generation, though the Romantic movement in painting as practiced by Friedrich and Runge had lost popularity by the 1830s. According to art historian Shearer West, the spiritually-infused rural imagery and landscape of the Romantics of the early part of the century gradually gave way to the painting of the *Biedermeier* period, which produced genre paintings focused on idealized facets of peasant and country.⁶⁴ This period will become an important reference point as well for Nazi painting, notably in the “Blood and Soil” genre scenes celebrating not only the purity of the German landscape (and by extension, the German soul), but presenting an idyllic and peaceful image of German rural life. The idealism that underlies the images in both the Romantic and *Biedermeier* movements, according to West, lingered even after unification. Images of rural life became even more prominent “as economic and industrial changes transformed a predominantly agricultural country into an urban one.”⁶⁵ Post-unification painters tended to concentrate on aspects of the landscape and by the turn of the century, artists’ colonies (a pan-European phenomenon) were springing up and churning out romanticized views of the country, which contrasted sharply with the modern reality of the increasingly urbanized cities.

It is in this tradition, perhaps more so than in the “pure” Romantic tradition of Friedrich, that the National Socialist painting program found

⁶⁴ Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 33.

⁶⁵ West, 33.

inspiration. Hans Thoma, Arthur Langhammer, Wilhelm Leibl and Böcklin embraced the lingering Romantic notion that the rural landscape was an “embodiment of lost cultural values and a disappearing way of life,” ideas expounded upon by Wilhelm Riehl’s *Natural History of the German People*, written between 1851 and 1869.⁶⁶ Riehl’s book derided the city as a center of decay and artificiality and extolled the “natural” life in the country, drawing upon Rousseau’s theory of the “noble savage” and using the “immoral” city dwellers as scapegoats for the lost rural paradise. This commentary helped foster an ongoing post-1871 debate concerning the nature of the “true German character”; that is, what is exactly makes the German Fatherland so special? Writers and artists alike were both nostalgic and vague in their evocations of their homeland, often using the term *gemütlich* (which translates as “good-natured” or “comfortable”) to express their feelings towards Germany. In painting, this meant images of happy peasants performing their duties in pure, uncorrupted landscapes. Art historian and cultural critic Julius Langbehn, whose 1890 work *Rembrandt as Educator* would be extremely influential for followers of Alfred Rosenberg’s *völkisch* movement, held that German art should “comprise a symbiotic relationship of soul and style.”⁶⁷ True German art, like the true German soul, should concern itself with landscape and peasantry. The paintings of Thoma and Leibl in particular came to visually embody these “essential” qualities of the German character. Thoma took his stylistic inspiration from the realist landscapes of Courbet (he studied in Paris). As Shearer notes, “[his] sweeping panoramas of the Black Forest and Taunus mountains [image 1.4] both echoed and updated the

⁶⁶ West, 34.

⁶⁷ West, 35.

Romantic landscapes...and were identified as ‘genuinely national’ by his contemporaries.”⁶⁸ Leibl, on the other hand, saw the German *Geist* as embodied primarily by the figure of the peasant. Some contemporaries were concerned with the lack of idealization in his figures, but his painterly style harkened back to Rembrandt, who was (as the title of Langbehn’s book attests) greatly admired by proponents of German nationalism.

It seems to have been a sort of hybrid of Romanticism and Realism that Nazi landscape painters favored, clearly indicating the tastes of Hitler and other leaders of the Third Reich. Hitler’s own brief and unsuccessful foray into art as a postcard painter in Vienna displayed his partiality towards the nineteenth-century *Biedermeier* painters, though he himself admitted that his paintings were third-rate. However, the idea that the paintings produced under the Third Reich were simply failed attempts to emulate the Romantic artists of the past is to dismiss the entire Nazi movement as retrogressive. As Roger Griffin noted in a review of the 1994 exhibition in Glasgow, and as Jeffrey Herf has posited in his notion of “reactionary modernism,” the movement was *not* concerned with a return to a simple, pure, utopian past. Converts to Nazism saw in it “not a refuge from the twentieth century, an anti-modern utopia, but a revolutionary, modern mass-movement bent on creating a new type of nation-state.”⁶⁹ Aspects of these tensions, notably the way in which the arts program utilized art, specifically paintings inspired by the Romantic and *Biedermeier* artists to “sweeten the bitter pill” of the absolute modernism of National Socialism will be explored further.

⁶⁸ West, 35.

⁶⁹ Roger Griffin, “Nazi Art: Romantic Twilight or (Post)modernist Dawn?” *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1995): 106.

Before an in-depth analysis of these paintings produced during the twelve years of the Third Reich, it is necessary to understand the intricacies of the arts program, which had complete control over the style and content of the output of its painters.

“Nazifying” the Arts: The *Reichskulturkammer* and National Socialist Artistic Policies

The artistic output of the Third Reich, however derided it may be by contemporary and modern scholars, was a product of a carefully monitored bureaucratic program. In Nazi Germany, arguably more so than in any modern state, art was politics and politics was art. At the very foundation of the movement lie the notions of aestheticization and beautification. All problems, from medical to logistical, were related back to an ultimate need to re-beautify the world, a need that could only be satiated by protecting the once-pure and glorious German spirit and people from the destructive and ugly corruptions of those people and ideas that had infiltrated the *Volksgemeinschaft* – the Jews, the mentally-ill, and the “decadent Liberalism”⁷⁰ believed to characterize modern Europe. Aesthetic problems became medical problems, the physician became the aesthetician and Hitler became director, “set-designer,” and lead actor of this visually oriented political movement. He was a self-proclaimed “artist-prince” modeled after Richard Wagner, whose unification of anti-Semitism, obsession with the cult of the Nordic legacy, and belief in art as the basis of a new civilization could “herald the advent of a new state.”⁷¹ Indeed, for the *Führer*, art was not “a luxury which ought not to be indulged while material needs are still unsatisfied,” but rather “an

⁷⁰ David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (London: Routledge, 1993), 33.

⁷¹ *The Architecture of Doom*, videocassette, directed by Peter Cohen (Sweden: Poj Filmproduktion AB, 1989).

expression of the soul and the ideals of the community.”⁷² The *Gesundheit* of the German *Volk* is even linked explicitly to art as “the Prophetess of Sublimity and Beauty...[and sustainer of] that which is at once natural and healthy.”⁷³

Cultural policy – *Kulturpolitik* – was an intrinsic part of the Nazi movement, but was an important part of German life prior to Hitler. Even before the Nazi takeover in 1933, soon-to-be leaders and influential *völkisch* thinkers had begun to put into motion an idea that would become one of the bases of the Nazi arts movement, as articulated by Hans-Friedrich Blunck, who would become head of the Reich Literature Chamber: that the government knows the people’s inner longings to which only the artist can give form.⁷⁴ The government, then, must dictate to the artist what the people want and need to see. The government thus becomes a stand-in for the will of the people (in National Socialism’s case, Hitler becomes this representative). In 1929 Alfred Rosenberg, the self-proclaimed Nazi “philosopher,” and the party’s chief “Racial Theorist,” took charge of cultural policy with the foundation of the Combat League for German Culture. Along with Heinrich Himmler’s Defense Guild for German Culture, the Combat League made searing attacks on the degeneracy and “mental-illness” of artists painting in the modernist style, from Klimt to Franz Marc.⁷⁵ Although it harnessed much of the budding nationalism of the time, Rosenberg was, in Hitler’s eyes, erratic and “bureaucratically inept.”⁷⁶

⁷² Adolf Hitler. “Speech at the Reichstag on 23 March 1933,” Baynes, 577.

⁷³ Baynes, 577.

⁷⁴ *The Architecture of Doom*.

⁷⁵ Welch, 32.

⁷⁶ Steinweis, 33.

It was in 1933 that the cultural policies that would have the greatest influence on the art and artists of the Third Reich were put into place. The Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*, or RKK) was established by a law promulgated in September of that year, and ambitiously stated its task to both encourage and supervise all aspects of German *Kultur* through seven chambers dedicated to literature, theater, music, films, the press, broadcasting, and fine art. The law, signed by Hitler, represents the first of numerous triumphs for the new Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, over Rosenberg, whose previous position as arbiter of German culture was usurped. Goebbels was given organizational control over the RKK and eventually named President, allowing him appointing power over presidents of the subsidiary chambers (even though he was, in Rosenberg's eyes, a less-than-qualified authority on German culture, with "only one" doctorate in German literature).⁷⁷

Goebbels outlined the role of German art under the Reich in one of his first speeches as Minister of Propaganda, claiming that contemporary German art's role "is not to dramatize the Party program, but to give poetic and artistic shape to the huge spiritual impulses within us,"⁷⁸ complementing Blunck's previous assertion. He wasted no time making the National Socialist policy of *Gleichschaltung*, or coordination, a primary concern, working hard to subsume all cultural aspects of Germany under state control.⁷⁹ The RKK provided a vital tool for the RMVP (Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) Minister to exert firm control over all aspects of cultural life, including painting, sculpture

⁷⁷ Welch, 190.

⁷⁸ Welch, 33.

⁷⁹ Adam, 53.

and architecture. The primary function of the subordinate chambers was the regulation of work conditions in their respective fields, which involved the issuing of work permits and the keeping of a register. Those who were refused work permits could not be employed in their profession. In short, “to be refused membership of the chamber...spelt professional ruin [and conversely] to those sympathetic to the regime...enforced membership of such an immense organization represented financial security and public recognition.”⁸⁰ The RKK also retained the right to refuse an artist entry, or even expel artists, “when there exist facts from which it is evident that the person in question does not possess the necessary reliability and aptitude for the practice of his activity.”⁸¹ For painters, disqualifying characteristics included “nonmastery of balanced composition,” lack of the ability to “express oneself” and absence of “sensitivity to color balance,” vague criteria that was flexible enough to exclude artists on personal or political reasons.⁸² Despite these vagaries, specific action was taken against some individual (and mostly Expressionist or Modernist) artists immediately: Max Liebermann and Käthe Kollwitz were expelled at once from the Prussian Academy of arts; Otto Dix, Paul Klee and Max Beckmann were promptly dismissed from their teaching positions, and some, including Heinrich Ehsem (a well-known radical painter in the years following World War I), were simply arrested.⁸³

Yet Goebbels, whose interest in art even extended to an appreciation for Expressionism (he owned a few works by Emil Nolde, early on expressing

⁸⁰ Welch, 33.

⁸¹ Steinweis, 45.

⁸² Steinweis, 86.

⁸³ Grosshans, 72.

interest in retaining him as a painter under the Reich, and once wrote Edvard Munch a birthday telegram describing him as “the spiritual heir of the Nordic nature”),⁸⁴ initially asserted a more liberal attitude toward the fine arts that he oversaw. During the early stages of the RKK’s existence, he argued that though the state should promote and guide culture, it should steer clear of narrowly dictating artistic output. In exchange for this alleged flexibility in which art would supposedly be allowed to develop within the “framework and borders of the laws of national life,” Goebbels hoped for a “magnanimity on the part of the art world.”⁸⁵ This perceived notion of self-administration, in spite of the Reich’s complete control over the direction of the arts program, proved popular with artists, even those who did not support the Party. This approval was reflected by the willingness of numerous prominent non-Nazis to accept positions in the new chambers (including composer Richard Strauss as the first president of the Music Chamber).⁸⁶ However, Goebbels and Visual Arts Chamber president (and architect) Eugen Hönig came under sharp attack from rigid Nazi ideologists in the art world including Rosenberg and Paul Ludwig Troost (who designed the House of German Art). Their complaints included Hönig’s and Goebbels’s “permissiveness” in allowing Jewish members into the chamber and their lenience toward Expressionist artists such as Nolde and Ernst Berlach.

Both men were eventually cleared of the charges, but attacks signaled a larger divide within the Nazi art world: on one side stood Rosenberg and his band of traditionalist followers, who championed regression to the *völkisch* art of the

⁸⁴ Adam, 56.

⁸⁵ Steinweis, 47.

⁸⁶ Steinweis, 47.

Romantics; on the other was Goebbels and a group of young National Socialists, who hoped to help more avant-garde artists develop a “Nordic Expressionistic style.”⁸⁷ The divide became so distracting to Hitler that in a speech at the party’s annual meeting in September 1934, he was forced to take a firm stand and more clearly define the official party policy on art. The result: a staunch rebuttal of both extremes, each derided as “cultural dangers that threatened National Socialism.”⁸⁸ Hitler declared there to be absolutely no place under the Third Reich for the futurists, Dadaists, cubists and Expressionists, noting that the modernists represented a “cultural auxiliary to political destruction...[who are] mistaken if they think the creators of the Third Reich are foolish...enough to let themselves be intimidated by their chatter.”⁸⁹ However, Hitler also attacked Rosenberg’s retrogressive agenda, condemning “those backward-lookers who imagine that they can impose upon the National Socialist revolution...a ‘Teutonic art’ sprung from the fuzzy world of their own romantic conceptions.”⁹⁰ Whatever the ultimate result of the paintings that Hitler’s art policy produced (they have often been derided as retrogressive, second-class schlock), it is clear that initially, he aimed for a non-derivative style.

One of the reasons that Nazi art remains so difficult to classify today was Hitler’s lack of specificity in officially refining this policy. While he made sure to define what Nazi painting was not to be – Modernist, contorted, unclear, ambiguous; or merely copied and pasted from the past – his only official stylistic concerns were that painting be straightforward (and presumably non-elitist),

⁸⁷ Adam, 57.

⁸⁸ Grosshans, 74.

⁸⁹ Grosshans, 74.

⁹⁰ Grosshans, 74.

figurative, and in the realist fashion. In short they were to be everything the modernist movement in painting, at least according to Hitler, was not. However, Hitler's obsession with nineteenth century painting, notably the works of the Romantics and *Biedermeier* traditionalists such as Makart, Feuerbach and Spitzweg clearly manifested itself not only in his own "failed" artistic career, but also in much of the subject matter turned out by officially sanctioned painters. The specific implications of these stylistic concerns, as well as Hitler's preference in subject matter, contemporary and past art, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Hitler's 1934 speech cemented his intolerance for art that he deemed too retrogressive or too modern, making firm statements to Goebbels and Rosenberg and their respective followers as well. As previously noted, forced registry with the RKK greatly shaped the artistic output under the Third Reich. In spite of the artistic "brain drain" in the painting community that was spurred by Hitler's hatred for modernism, painters seemed eager to join the official arts program. In 1933, there were 14,750 artists in Germany. When the Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts was formed, there were 35,060. As Jonathan Petropoulos notes, "the readiness of several prominent non-Nazis to accept important positions in the new chambers reflected broad approval, or at least acceptance, of the new institutional framework for the arts professions."⁹¹ There were also temptations beyond those of the mere monetary variety: Hitler rewarded those especially faithful to his services with honorary professorships (as he did with sculptor Arno Breker in 1937 and later many painters, from Adolf Wissel to Wilhelm Petersen). As Peter

⁹¹ Petropoulos, 216.

Adam notes, under the Third Reich policies, the artist was no longer a private person but a very public figure whose sole purpose was to act as a visual public educator for the state⁹²

Not only were painters, and artists in general, required to earn permits in order to work, but other professionals related to the arts were also forced to register with the RKK. Museum directors, art critics (referred to as “art reporters” by Hitler), and art dealers were carefully selected and watched by the Culture Chamber bureaucrats. The emigration of preeminent art historians, notably Aby Warburg, hurt the profession’s international renown. Regardless, those who stayed were expected to provide a key component of the cultural underpinning for the Nazi movement with their “scholarly” investigation into the roots of the Great German Culture. Museum directors, according to Petropoulos, comprised one of the “most Nazified” professions in Germany. Although some directors, including Ernst Buchner (who oversaw several museums in Germany), initially criticized the state-sponsored art shows as “banal,” most ultimately became “partners in the ideological aesthetic program from beginning to end.”⁹³ Art dealers played an equally important role, and were professionalized and bureaucratized under the Union of German Art and Antiques Dealers, which was incorporated into the Chamber for the Visual Arts soon after its inception.

Perhaps most vital for cementing the popularity and legitimacy of the arts program were art critics. As noted above, the profession was renamed “art reporting” in 1936 (following doubts expressed by some magazines that true and great National Socialist art style would ever emerge) and reporters were required

⁹² Adam, 53.

⁹³ Petropoulos, 61.

under a decree that same year to attain certification from the Chamber for the Visual Arts. Editors wishing to write reviews of shows needed to prove a record of National Socialist service. Reviews of shows were often printed in the official Nazi arts publications, the most important of which was *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* (renamed *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich* in 1939). The publication was printed in an edition of 50,000, considerable for the time, and despite lip service that the Nazis paid to populism, was clearly intended for an elite, well-educated audience. The most important art reporter was Robert Scholz, who was a critic for *Der Völkischer Beobachter* and later founded the arts magazine *Kunst und Volk* with Rosenberg. Like other art reporters, Scholz's position was powerful: not only could he promote the artists he favored, but he could also contribute to the visual articulation of National Socialist ideology.⁹⁴

In a speech in 1937, Goebbels painted a rosy picture of the life of the state-employed artist, claiming “the artist of today is a serious, working, modern person.”⁹⁵ Though this statement masked the reality of unemployment even in the official arts community, the government did its part to employ artists to their fullest extent, with the Defense Ministry promoting the commissioning of art to adorn their facilities, and the NSDAP and local governments sponsoring vast amounts of exhibitions. These exhibitions were purposely not limited to museum settings. For example, in 1935 Rosenberg's Combat League for German Culture sponsored 144 exhibitions in German factories, allowing workers to purchase paintings and sculpture on display. Instances like this not only brought art closer to the people but also proved financially rewarding to artists. Officially sponsored

⁹⁴ Petropolous, 123.

⁹⁵ Steinweis, 73.

art shows also accomplished these goals, though generally in museums. Ministry and chamber funds sponsored competitions for artists every year, and also commissioned works on a regular basis, generally used to decorate ministry offices throughout Germany (from 1934 to 1935 purchases of Party-commissioned works totaled 100,000 RM).⁹⁶ Subsidiary organizations meant to fund artists and indoctrinate one of Hitler's most important bases of support, the worker, were founded with the same funds. For example, in 1934 the German Labor Front founded the Beauty of Work division (*Schönheit der Arbeit*, or SdA) under the direction of Albert Speer. The SdA's goal was to beautify and embellish the workplace, and provided many of the new factories and canteens with German art, specifically paintings that encouraged communal work and harvesting and lauded the purity of the German land.⁹⁷

In spite of the high-turnout rate of artistic projects, the Nazi leadership, Hitler included, remained dubious as to the quality of art until the very end. Speeches are rife with promises that a new German art worthy of the quality of the German people and spirit would emerge eventually, even if it took "decades or centuries." Hitler's anger and impatience with the quality of the National Socialist art, specifically painting, can be seen in his personal collecting habits as well. Though he always publicly supported the art exhibitions by purchasing works to occupy government offices (in 1941 he purchased nearly 1,000 paintings), his own personal space was adorned with works of masters past: he once bragged "I have the best collection of Spitzwegs in the world."⁹⁸ What was it, exactly, that

⁹⁶ Steinweis, 78.

⁹⁷ Adam, 76.

⁹⁸ Grosshans, 67.

made the creation of a new, great style of painting for the Nazi party so difficult? Certainly it is clear that in spite of the purported freedom allowed to painters, style and subject matter were limited greatly by the way Hitler desired to propagate the myth of his new empire. Under the Third Reich, art was first and foremost political because Nazism is intrinsically linked to aesthetics. The Nazification and bureaucratization of the discipline rewarded and necessitated conformity and was reflected by the subject matter and quality of the paintings that were subsequently produced.

“A Cow is No Longer Just a Cow”: The Paintings of the Nazi Arts Program

The first exhibition of “Great German Art” in Munich in 1937 provides a cross-section of the common themes in National Socialist painting. Though Hitler and Goebbels made their displeasure at the quality of the turnout evident, the newly minted “art reporters” propagated otherwise to the general public. Bruno Werner, a reporter for the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote:

“...The paintings show the closest possible ties to the Munich school at the turn of the century. Leibl and his circle...[are] the major influences on many paintings portraying farmers, farmers’ wives, shepherds, etc...and on interiors that lovingly depict many small and charming facets of country life. Then there is an extremely large number of landscapes that also carry on in the old traditions...we also find a rich display of portraits, particularly likeness of government and party leaders...National awakening is allegorized in a reclining male nude...[and] the female nude is strongly represented.”⁹⁹

As Berthold Hinz notes, the report is written from a rather detached viewpoint and clearly states the perceived influences and favored genres within the Nazi painting program. Landscape, the primary concern of this paper, represented an

⁹⁹ Hinz, 16.

estimated 40 percent of the paintings at the exhibition in 1937 (a number which may cautiously be extrapolated to the painting output in general). However, the remaining portion of this statistic must not be disregarded entirely, and include the themes that Werner dutifully reported. Hinz notes that the most popular themes after landscape included “Womanhood and Manhood” (15.5 percent); animals and still life (ten percent) and farmers and artisans/craftsmen (7.5 percent). Interestingly portraits of functionaries and views of new public buildings represented, at least initially, only about three percent of the works displayed at the exhibition. These exact numbers are subject to change because they were based on painting titles and descriptions, which were often misleading. However it seems safe to assume that the primary categories of painting, in order of popularity, were landscapes, nudes, pictures of farmers, animals and still life, portraits and industrial subjects.¹⁰⁰

The most notable piece of information from these statistics is that the absolute focus of the arts program as the Third Reich was gaining power and popularity was extolling the virtues of the land and old-fashioned hard work. The art reporter noted that the works seemed to hearken back to the nineteenth century Munich school, specifically Wilhelm Leibl and the *Biedermeier* painters, and that the landscapes also emulated styles of the Romantic art historical past. Yet both of these observations, even if made by an employee of the Reich, contradict Hitler’s firmly stated stance on Nazi art as mentioned earlier: that the new German art avoid modernism, but also *derivation* (in simply copying the art of the nineteenth century, as Rosenberg touted).

¹⁰⁰ Hinz, 17.

Consistent promises that the art would improve and eventually come into its own as a true National Socialist style “deserving” of the German people became hallmarks of speeches at the opening of exhibitions. At the 1939 Exhibition at the House of Great German Art, Hitler blamed the slowness for a new style to emerge on “the Second Reich’s...exclusive concern with the State and political affairs” and noted the difficult task faced by the Third Reich of “prevent[ing] art which has not kept pace with the development [of the *Weltanschauung*] from becoming farther and farther removed from the real lives of peoples.”¹⁰¹ However, the theme and style of the major painting exhibitions seems to have deviated little from nineteenth-century styles, with the exception of heroicized wartime images post-1939. The very nature of the RKK stipulated anti-modernism (and thus anti-innovation) and encouraged the same redundant themes that were so popular at the turn of the century. The names of exhibitions spanning 1935 to 1942 attest to the incessant obsession with the landscape, animals and genre scenes, and the traditional values of motherhood and hard (rural) work: “Seafaring and Art” (Berlin, 1935); “The Forest” (Berlin, 1937); “Nordic Land” (Berlin, 1940); “Nation of Workers” (Gelsenkirchen, 1941); “The Sea” (Berlin, 1942). The other notable exception to these themes was that of the “heroic landscape,” which combined the technological and building advances of the National Socialists with scenes of the *Heimat*, and will be discussed in-depth in the next section.

What was it about these specific genres – landscape, scenes of the worker and the farmer, animal scenes, male and female nudes, portraits, and still life –

¹⁰¹ Adolf Hitler. “Speech at the Opening of the Third Exhibition of German Art, 17 July 1939,” Baynes, 607.

that proved inescapable by the arts program, no matter how Hitler lamented the second-rate paintings that were produced? In a 1941 essay by F.A. Kauffmann, the nature and allure of National Socialist painting is described, with the artists themselves depicted as “spokesmen for the positive side of life, [no longer interested in] painting absinthe drinkers and roulette players...heavily made-up prostitutes or...the grim uniformity of slums, urban desolation and dives.”¹⁰² One must bear in mind that these “spokesmen” were not so much painting what they *saw* and *felt* but what they were *required* to under the guidelines of the RKK. Art historically, as the last chapter demonstrated, landscape, homey rural genre scenes, and still life have a deep-rooted tradition in Germany. The aforementioned essay mentions “pure landscape” and representations of the *Vaterland* as the most important themes in painting, citing them as portraits of the “quintessential individuality...of our all-nourishing mother earth”¹⁰³ and therefore reflections of the German soul. As Henry Grosshans observed, the glories, sublimity and purity of the landscape also provided a facile counterpoint to the ugliness of the city, which was derided by Hitler as the breeding ground for degeneracy. In other words, the landscape was synonymous with *Gemeinschaft* (the traditional, homogenous, inward-looking, folk community), which stood in “righteous” opposition to *Gesellschaft* (the modern, heterogenous, individualistically oriented society).¹⁰⁴

The appeal of the farmer and rural scene is axiomatic, at least according to the author of the same essay:

¹⁰² Hinz, 77.

¹⁰³ Hinz, 78.

¹⁰⁴ Grosshans, 21.

“Guided by a true instinct, our artists find their models [of the German figure] primarily among those fellow citizens who are...still sound by nature. They set to work where closeness to the native soil, the restorative powers of the landscape, the protection of the race from impurities, the force of deeply rooted tradition, and the blessings of beneficent labor have kept the human substance healthy. [Thus] our contemporary painting frequently portrays the faces and figures of men who follow the old callings close to nature: farmers, hunters, fishermen, shepherds, and woodcutters....simple artisans are [also] models of edifying integrity...[together with women and girls] they form the rugged stock of our people...and the importance of our folkish substance...Again and again we see the farmer on his land. We see him plowing, sowing, reaping... We see him against a background of earth and sky with the fruitful soil under his heavy shoes, a modest but proud ruler over his dutiful animals and his own well-tended fields.”¹⁰⁵

All of this seems to imply that the goal – the obligation – of the painter, and by extension the National Socialist arts program, was to somehow convince a completely industrialized and modern society that its best models could be found in the pure timelessness of rural Germany. Whereas the subject matter of earlier genre and landscape painting from the previous Romantic and *Biedermeier* periods was subject to the individuality of the artist, this new form of painting was bogged down with the task of visually declaring essential truths propagated by the Third Reich. These ultimately hollow truths, words and phrases such as *blut und boden*, “eternal art,” and “life force,” which comprised the rhetoric of almost every Party Speech concerning *Kultur* had to make themselves clear in painting that was hailed by Hermann Göring as “true art that the ordinary man can understand.”¹⁰⁶ These idealistic and comforting scenes became masks of National Socialist ideology. A cow is no longer just a cow; a farmer is no longer merely a

¹⁰⁵ Hinz, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Adam, 96.

farmer. All were meant to embody, as Hegel once described it, the “sacred mysteries of the natural order.” One only needs to glance at the grandiloquent and eternalizing titles of seemingly benign works to see this idea at work: *Blood and Soil* (Erich Erler; image 2.1); *Time of Ripeness* (Johann Vinzenz Cissarz; image 2.2), to name a few. To borrow Hinz’s statement, then, “it [is] clear that painting under German fascism had nothing to do with realism, no matter how much it depicted the material world.”¹⁰⁷

Just as a cow is no longer just a cow in National Socialist painting, a peasant or farmer is no longer merely a human being. Instead, as Peter Adam notes, every peasant in every rural-scape or farm scene becomes the incarnation of the *true* German. R. Walther Darré’s 1934 essay (written for the 700th anniversary of the “Stendinger peasantry” struggle for freedom, a well-known story in German *völkisch* lore) captures the importance of the peasant figure in German tradition:

“The precondition for *Volkdom* was exclusively bound up with the existence of the German peasantry. Traveling through the German countryside today, one still finds among our peasants customs which have survived for a thousand years. In this we have clear proof that it is here that the ground of *Volkdom* is to be sought, rather than in the bloodless abstractions of the scholar’s desk...Despite the thousand-year effort to alienate the German peasant from his nature. The common sense and the deep blood-feeling of the German peasant knew how to preserve his German breed.”¹⁰⁸

This literature echoes the tradition of painting the peasant heroically that was popular in southern Germany and Austria, and practiced by many of the

¹⁰⁷ Hinz, 80.

¹⁰⁸ R. Walther Darré. “Rede des Reichsbauernführers und Reichsministers, 27 May 1934” in *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Culture and Social Life in the Third Reich*, ed. George Mosse (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968), 148-9.

Biedermeier painters just after the turn of the century, especially Thoma, Leibl, and Spitzweg. National Socialist painters, including Michael Kiefer, Franz Xaver Wolf, Hans Ebner and Oskar Martin-Amorbach extolled the simple values of country life and the sturdy, earthy peasantry, all products of German blood and soil. The farmers in these works, from Julius Junghanns's *Hard Work* (image 2.3) to Martin-Amorbach's *Harvest* (image 2.4), remain untouched by the reality of the increased mechanization of agriculture. Instead, these scenes emphasize the timeless and primitive nature of a farmer's work (sowing, plowing, scything), attempting to imbue them with a quasi-religiosity.

All aspects of nature appear to be in harmony in these works, from the landscape in the background to the peasant to the often-present animals. Animal paintings comprised nearly ten percent of the works hung at the first Great German Art Exhibition, as previously noted. Nature was lauded as a fighting ground in which the strong dominated the weak, an appealing metaphor to the Nazis for obvious reasons. As in Romantic painting, animals were appreciated as sharing a life-giving force allotted to them by Nature, so images of animals took on a monumental stance. The eagle was a favorite subject, its courageous but threatening gaze seen in works like Michael Kiefer's *Meadow near Chiemsee: Eagles* (image 2.5), and was often equated with imperialism and the Nazi claim to rule.¹⁰⁹ And again, even horses and cows became more than just farm animals in these heroic paintings; they became symbols of strength and "oneness" with the soil. Hitler took a particular liking to the animal paintings of Junghanns, whose work was lauded by *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* as a tribute to animals as

¹⁰⁹ Hinz, 107.

“monuments of a speechless, heroic attitude and strength, the most dignified witnesses of our time.”¹¹⁰

Images of the family and the German woman ranked next on the list in terms of popularity, though both remained tied intrinsically to the themes of landscape, rural life, and the peasantry. The theme of family, specifically that of mother and child, was equated by the Third Reich to that necessary “folkishness.” The family was propagated in painting as the nucleus of the German nation, and images of the ideal mother and father were generally linked to images of harmonious living with Nature, again two common themes from nineteenth century painting. If the family was regarded as the nucleus of the nation, then the German woman was upheld visually as the nucleus of the family. The ideal representatives of Aryanism – blonde, tall, blue-eyed – corresponded to an individual who was physically, mentally, and politically sound, and thus fit for carrying on the German race. Because the woman was meant, above all, to be a mother and preserve the life of the *Volk*, Madonna-like images of mother and child became extremely popular (see Fritz Mackensen’s *The Baby*, image 2.6, or Alfred Kitzig’s *Tyrolean Peasant Woman with Child*).¹¹¹

In addition to “wholesome” paintings of the dutiful peasant family, heroic nudes, many in the classical tradition, were another favorite genre of National Socialist artists. If the rugged and sturdy peasants of Nazi art were clearly influenced by the earthy portraits of turn-of-the-century *Biedermeier* and Romantic painters, the nudes seem to be of a different tradition. The smoothness and monumentality of the so-called “Master of Pubic Hair” Alfred Ziegler (who

¹¹⁰ Adam, 132.

¹¹¹ Adam, 150.

became the president of the RKK) recall the sculptural qualities of Renaissance, and even French classical, art. Though Ziegler was one of Hitler's favorite artists (one of his triptychs hung in the living room of Hitler's Munich residence, see image 2.8), modern art historians deride his style as "flat and boringly executed...[like many of the] National Socialists' slick celebrations of the human figure."¹¹² The male nude was painted as a representation of the perfect athletic form, while female nudes were most often depicted as allegories of faith, honor, and purity, the potential sensuality rendered passive and impenetrable, as in Ziegler's *Judgment of Paris* (image 2.7), painted for the 1939 Great German Art Exhibition.

With the exception of strong, heroic images of the Party leaders and the German soldier, as well as the "heroic landscape" which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, Nazi paintings avoided the topic of modernity. When portrayed, even modernity was generally idealized and "cleaned up." The Nazis themselves never claimed to produce "realistic" art. In fact, the notion of painting "realistically," according to Peter Adam, rarely even figured into the vocabulary of art "criticism" of the Third Reich. A realistic picture of the world, they believed, presented too limited (and perhaps far less-flattering) image. Instead, they insisted that the new German artist paint for eternity. As Baldur von Schirach, a Nazi Youth Leader, wrote, "the artist who thinks he should paint for his own time has misunderstood the *Führer*. Everything this nation undertakes is done under the sign of eternity."¹¹³

¹¹² Adam, 153.

¹¹³ Adam, 138.

The purpose of this painting, it seems then, was to first and foremost market itself to the German people as art *for* them, a goal that was carried out by attempting to recreate “popular” art of the nineteenth century. Most of the themes, from peasantry to landscape to animals, were meant to evoke nostalgia as well as feelings of a sort of unchanging universal truth – that of the collective folk memory. Hitler himself was drawn to these scenes of domestic tranquility, in spite of his apparent and consistent disappointment in the quality of art produced by National Socialist artists, conceding once that the aim of the first Great German Art Exhibition in 1937 had been to “open up the way for the decent and honest average, which gave hope for greater talents in future times.”¹¹⁴ The arts program as was not meant to be an intellectual appeal or even a mirror of society but rather a visual transmission of the National Socialist idea. Thus harmony, perfection, idealism and nostalgia comprised the key components of the painting schemes. The utter discrepancy between reality and art under the Third Reich is perhaps one of the reasons that art historians look back on National Socialist paintings as “wooden and lifeless” and at best, second-rate. For their own livelihoods, the artists painted and propagated a lie.

The Landscapes: From Philistine Romanticism to Heroic Industrialism

Kurt Karl Eberlein, an art historian in Germany under the Third Reich, wrote in his 1933 essay “What Is German in German Art”:

¹¹⁴ Adam, 118.

“German [painting] is homeland and homesickness and therefore always landscape. Even in the picture, the land of the soul becomes and grows into soul, it is the language of the homeland even in an alien atmosphere...of foreign lands as well as in the alien atmosphere of animals, flowers, things.”¹¹⁵

Eberlein’s quote illustrates the deeply-imbedded beliefs concerning the German soul and psyche that explicitly made their way to the surface during the era of German Romanticism. As discussed previously, the great painters of early nineteenth-century German Romantic painting, from Runge to Schinkel to Friedrich, imagined haunting, mystical landscapes which embodied the true German *Geist* – individualistic, intuitive, pure, complex, often irrational and contradictory. Though the German soul according to the Romantics was a powerful and timeless force whose lifeblood was often connected to the soil, the key to the Romanticism of the nineteenth century was individual *feeling*. As art historian Hugh Honour stated, “to the Romantic artist – by nature essentially and intimately a passionate *individualist*, a spontaneous creator – any norm was deeply antipathetic.”¹¹⁶

Noting the date of his essay and the fact that Eberlein was an art historian employed under the Third Reich, his statement is also a reflection of the National Socialist doctrine on art.

The neo-Romantic trend in National Socialist landscape painting (and at the same time, the *retardataire* style of the rural and genre scenes) did not indicate a desire to return to an idyllic, pastoral, pre-modern past. Instead, as historian Eric Michaud has noted, it seems that the National Socialist arts program exploited the

¹¹⁵ Kurt Karl Eberlein, “What is German in German Art?” Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Culture and Social Life in the Third Reich*, 163.

¹¹⁶ Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 24.

Romanticism of the nineteenth century both in doctrine and visually. The landscape paintings produced in those twelve years, which comprised just less than half of the exhibition space at the first Great German Art exhibition, used, strengthened, and abused the emotionally charged Romantic longing for the pure and the eternal.¹¹⁷ Where the Romantic artists of Germany's past were concerned with the complexities of the individual's – the artist's – soul, National Socialist thinkers reinterpreted the philosophy to fit their own needs, a reinterpretation that was manifested visually in painting. The Nazis derided the metropolis as the root of degeneration and a “perversion of Nature,” and preached their own brand of *religio*: a return to the “essential greatness and profundity of the German spirit.”¹¹⁸ As Michaud notes, the Nazi concept of *Kultur* was an adoption of the Wagnerian ideal that “German art should not be content simply to aspire but must realize its German essence.”¹¹⁹ The statement is both perfectly and purposely vague. The lacunary nature of the notion of an essential, eternal and pure German “essence” provided a rallying point for intellectuals and politicians from Rosenberg to Dietrich Eckart to the *Führer* himself. They “filled in the gaps and incompleteness of the Nazi world vision as they would have done on a Romantic sketch,”¹²⁰ invoking the notion of the sublime in rhetoric and in art to justify the essentially empty and abominable nature of their political and “philosophical” programs.

For the Nazi leaders, then, the sublime power of the German landscape was an invaluable part of the National Socialist painting repertoire. As noted in

¹¹⁷ Grosshans, 67.

¹¹⁸ Jost Hermand, “Art for the People: The Nazi Concept of a Truly Popular Painting,” in *High and Low Cultures*, 40.

¹¹⁹ Michaud, 107.

¹²⁰ Michaud, 110.

the previous section, entire exhibitions were built around the visual “sublimity” of the German soil, not just the soil in the rural or agricultural sense, but in the distinctly Teutonic forests, mountains and seas. While the style of these works purposely emulated, say, Friedrich (compare, for example, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, with Nazi artist Hugo Hodiener’s *Permanence and Change*, image 3.1), the purpose and message are shifted. As Honour points out, one of the primary tenets of Romantic landscapes is that they acted as subjective portraits of an individual’s soul. This subjectivity and individuality were at odds with proclaimed National Socialist goal of the subsuming of the individual. Thus, as German art historian Oskar Hagen (who moved to the United States in 1924) proclaimed, “as in every domain subjected to the Nazi ideology, what Romanticism declared about the links that united a landscape to an individual’s spirit was shifted to apply to the collective spirit of the race, people, or nation.”¹²¹ Instead of glorifying the “elitist,” individualistic artist and art (associated by the Nazis with modernism, though interestingly a key characteristic of the Romantic art Hitler so admired), Nazi landscape aimed to shift glorification to the entire *Volk*.

As has been previously mentioned, Hitler himself called the Romantic painters the best embodiments of “that German search for...an honest and decent expression of this law of life divined by our people,” lamenting the loss of numerous Romantic works of art when the *Glaspalast* in Munich burned to the ground in 1931. Even in the form of copies and reproductions, he proclaimed, “the works of these masters are removed by a great gulf from the pitiable products

¹²¹ Michaud, 114.

of our modern so-called creative artists [the Modernists]. These masters felt themselves to be Germans, and consequently they created works which should be valued as long as there should be a German people to appreciate them.”¹²²

In theory the painting program post-1934 was supposed to take a new direction, one that avoided both modernism and obvious emulations of the *völkisch* styles of the past favored by Rosenberg. In reality a fairly direct stylistic line can be drawn back to the Romantics and bourgeois realists of the nineteenth century. Though Hitler’s intention was for the RKK to commission paintings that rose above simple appeals to the past, instead evoking the timelessness of a “future that is ours and to which we belong,”¹²³ the results were decidedly unrevolutionary and derivative. Upon examination of the landscape paintings themselves that were created in the twelve years between 1933 and 1945, the predominant theme and style seems to be an amalgamation of the sublimity of the pure Romantic landscape and the comforting, homey realism that marked the *Biedermeier* works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the primary reasons National Socialist artists ended up employing these nineteenth-century styles so often was because of their supposedly inherent proximity to the people.¹²⁴ The populist tendencies in the painting program were clearly on display pre-1937, as there were numerous instances of RKK-sponsored programs in which artists were sent to factories to establish a sense of camaraderie with the workers. In 1936, for example, the county of Mayen in the Eifel Mountains invited a group of painters to live for a year with its peasants and farmers to

¹²² Adolf Hitler. “Address on Art and Politics at the Nuremberg Parteitag on 11 September 1935,” Baynes, 584.

¹²³ Michaud, 98.

¹²⁴ Hermand, 41.

establish a sense of solidarity between the artist and the “common man.”¹²⁵

Hermant notes that after 1937, however, the Nazi leadership cut back on these populist programs, and increasingly hid under a “gibberish of Nazi phraseology”¹²⁶ and rhetoric. Though the program was immensely popular with the people, as the steadily increasing number of visitors to the House of German Art each year attests, the term “populist” is misleading, and was in actuality another way to disguise the *Führer’s* authoritarian control. What mattered ultimately was not what the people wanted, but what Hitler wanted, for he fashioned himself into the embodiment of the will of the German nation.¹²⁷

Works depicting farming and agricultural scenes, as well as genre scenes, women, heroic nudes and animals were briefly outlined in the previous section. The focus here will be the paintings that depict the German soil and land in more non-agrarian contexts. In addition, a new type of landscape – the industrial landscape – will be introduced and analyzed. These so-called “heroic” landscapes popularized in the early 1940s provide an interesting addendum to the empty Romanticism and purposely-oblivious nostalgia of other landscapes and rural scenes. In other words, they reinforce the “steel Romanticism,” and “reactionary modernism” of Jeffery Herf that characterized National Socialist ideology.

These two types of National Socialist landscapes, which constituted the largest subgenres of painting under the Third Reich, best illustrate the incessant tug-of-war between regression and modernity that characterized the basis of Nazism’s cultural program. Landscapes evocative of the nineteenth century greats

¹²⁵ Hermant, 43.

¹²⁶ Hermant, 43.

¹²⁷ Hermant, 42.

provided a visual accompaniment to that infamous cry for a new, mythical awakening that was rooted in the German *Volk*, and thus the German soil: *Deutschland, erwache!*. Like the nostalgic genre scenes discussed in the previous chapter, many of which bordered on kitsch and *Blut und Boden* bombast, the landscapes provided a façade of “Philistine” Romanticism (according to cultural historian Hermann Glaser) and nationalism that was meant to be comforting, populist and even inspiring. Glaser suggests that Nazi painting and the leaders’ penchant for landscape was rooted in the mentality of the petit bourgeois, whose taste was “mediocre and provincial, fanatic and brutal, narrow-minded and sentimental, refined and introspective.”¹²⁸

Most of the landscapes commissioned by the RKK were placed in exhibitions, notably the annual Great German Art Exhibitions, and smaller “themed” exhibitions (with titles such as “The Sea”; “The Forest” and “Nordic Homeland”). One of the reasons that landscape dominated these exhibitions, besides the clear connection in the German psyche between the homeland and the soul, was that it appealed to artists, especially those wary of declaring too close an allegiance to the Nazi Party. As Peter Adam posits, landscape was often the one genre artists could paint without explicitly expounding National Socialist theories.¹²⁹ The Romantic painters of the nineteenth century created landscapes that reflected their contemplative and individualized existences, a mood again best exemplified perhaps by the eerie and personal canvases of Friedrich, such as *Two Men Observing the Moon* (1819) and *Monk by the Sea*. But in the context of National Socialist doctrine, the landscapes of the new art that filled the halls of

¹²⁸ Hermand, 48.

¹²⁹ Adam, 130.

Germany's museums, factories, and leadership offices did not just represent a place for meditation and contemplation. While the landscapes of the Romantics were imaginary, according to Hinz and Adam, the landscapes of the National Socialists were meant to be specific. Landscape is not just anything – it is always *Germany*. This site-specificity is evident first and foremost in the titles of many Nazi landscapes. For example, Werner Peiner's (renowned for his rural-scapes amongst the Nazi leadership) 1933 work depicts an expansive farm-scape complete with trees and fields that stretch into the distance, leading to a vast horizon full of ominously roiling thunderheads. The work is titled *German Land* (image 3.2), leaving no confusion as to the place depicted. The art reporters of the day claimed that these works bested German Romantic landscapes because of this site-specificity: "The painters of today are nearer to nature than the Romantics. They do not look for a religious mood but for elementary existence. Each landscape is a piece of the German homeland...Above all art today stands the law of the people."¹³⁰

Stylistically, this work, like others before and after it, evokes the realism of the nineteenth century and the mysterious, evocative color palette characteristic of many Romantic landscapes (even though Peiner began his career as an Expressionist). Though it is important to note, as Peter Adam has pointed out, that specific questions of style did not concern the National Socialists in the way they do modern art historians. Instead, the publicly asserted goal of the new landscapes was to find some way to "reject the virtuosic rendering of the impressions of light and air...and search for the unity between man and landscape" according to art

¹³⁰ William Westecker, *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, March 1938.

reporter Walter Horn in an April 1939 issue of *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*.¹³¹ *Die Kunst* did not shy away from loudly stating artists' indebtedness to the Romantic landscape tradition. In an article lauding Josef Anton Koch, a German Romantic painter, Dr. H. Weber proclaims that Romantics brought in a new era, a new worldview (*Weltanschauung*), of the German fixation on Nature.¹³² In another celebratory article, this time on Friedrich, Dr. Werner Kloos announced, "In Friedrich's work are the essential elements of the German soul made clear, a comparable achievement by other artists of which has not yet been made."¹³³ This supreme attachment to the Romantics is further evident in the reaction of a former director of the *Glaspalast* to the news that the famed museum in Munich was on fire in 1931: "Everyone, to the room of the Romantics!' I cried, and we all ran back into the burning building [to save the works]."¹³⁴ Admittedly, this insistence on connecting the National Socialist artistic aims to the accomplishments of those great German nationalists (as perceived by the Nazis), the Romantics, served a clear propagandistic goal. In spite of Hitler's desire to avoid the "backwards-looking" Romanticism touted by Rosenberg, attachment to the Romantic painters via the arts publications and exhibitions helped to solidify the "genuine" interest of the RKK in quality art, as well as forged a clear line from, say, Friedrich to Peiner.

Other landscape artists, such as Michael Kiefer, placed heroic and allegorical animals, notably the eagle, within specifically cited German

¹³¹ Adam, 130.

¹³² H. Weber, "Josef Anton Koch," *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, March 1939, 73.

¹³³ Werner Kloos, "Deutsche Innerlichkeit: Zum 100. Todestag von Caspar David Friedrich," *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, May 1940, 158.

¹³⁴ *Kunst und Volk*, 1937 (Vol. 1), 22.

landscapes. For example, his 1943 work *Meadow Near Chiemsee: Eagles* (noted in the previous section for its monumental treatment of the powerful bird), which was created for the Great German Art Exhibition of that same year, again places the viewer in a specific German locale, this time even more precise than Peiner's *German Homeland*. (The *Chiemsee*, also known as the Bavarian Sea, was a well-known recreational and vacation locale for Germans and Austrians at the time). Wilhelm Wilke's *Templin Canal* (date unknown; image 3.3) accomplishes the same goal with a pure landscape, uninterrupted by looming birds. Here, the specified canal (just outside of Berlin) is rendered monumental and imbued with a sense of that Romantic mysticism and spirituality, implying the collective soul of the German *Volk* finds its power in the purity of the German landscape. Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, a National Socialist "race theorist" and psychologist, illustrated the growing belief in the superiority of the Nordic – specifically German – landscape in his 1932 pseudo-scientific opus *Die nordische Seele: Eine Einführung in die Rassenseelenkunde* (or *The Nordic Soul: An Introduction to the Study of the Racial Soul*):

“The area that contains regions suitable for landscape formation in the accomplishment-oriented style is the “Nordic” geographical area...In the Nordic landscape everything points to places beyond and tempts the soul, born of it, to cross the borders of this landscape. The northern region – past the St. Gotthard range – is...enveloped in a thick fog, so that from the train [one] can see only the trunks of the mountains. The light of the south [as one travels to the borders of the Nordic landscape] is like a benediction to the Nordic soul...[but] fatal, like the light of the candle for the moth...”¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss. “Die nordische Seele: Eine Einführung in die Rassenseelenkunde, Munich 1932,” Mosse, 66-67.

According to the National Socialist intellectuals then, there existed a strong union between the specifically German landscape and the collective soul of the race, the people, and the nation.¹³⁶ For the Nazis, this *markedly German* land was of the utmost importance. The most effective landscapes, those best believed to transmit the timeless purity of the German *Geist*, were those that bore a specific sign of either Germany or the German people. In the case of the previously mentioned works by Peiner, Wilke and Kiefer, this indication came in the work's title. In other works, otherwise neutral scenes were transformed into "portraits" of the German soul visually. Many of the landscapes that did not have specifically German references in their titles also included Nordic peasant figures, even if small and de-emphasized, to reinforce the myth of the landscape as a manifestation of the nation's creative genius. In Michaud's words, "once landscape was defined as the self-portrait of the genius of a creative people, any landscape became acceptable provided that it had manifestly been worked on by man, who had remodeled it."¹³⁷ Take, for example, Gustav Traub's *Mountain Spruce* (3.4). Though the title makes no reference to the "Germanness" of the landscape, a clearly Aryan farmer or shepherd sits under the spruce, perhaps taking a pause from his work.

A 1938 painting by Karl Alexander Flügel entitled *The Harvest* (3.5) may be considered an amalgamation of landscape and peasant genre scene, attempting to achieve two goals at once: in the foreground, a small, innocuous peasant family has a picnic, dwarfed by the fruits of their labor (stacks of hay, which dominate the rest of the foreground). The middle and backgrounds expand into a vast

¹³⁶ Michaud, 114.

¹³⁷ Michaud, 115.

Nordic landscape, complete with rolling hills, suggestions of thick forest, and foreboding but magnificent mountains which soar in the distance. Flügel's work suggests not only a spiritual, but also a harmonious physical connection between the German man and the German land, at the same time providing a nostalgic vision of idyllic countryside living. The same can be said for Herman Gradl's *Mittelgebirge* (one of a series of six landscapes painted in 1939 for the *Reichskanzlei* in Berlin; image 3.6). Here again, the vast, rugged landscape, clearly Nordic, is the focus. However, further inspection reveals a medieval village tucked naturally and inconspicuously into the rolling hills, as well as two workers and their horses lugging a cart of logs up the dirt road in the foreground. Oskar Graf's 1939 *Limburg an der Lahn* (3.7) crams even more elements suggestive of this spiritual and literal harmony between the German man and Nature. Nestled perfectly into the natural contours of the rugged, Nordic landscape (forested hills and foreboding mountain peaks) are a charming rural farm-scape and a medieval village, complete with a Gothic church, evoking Germany's Teutonic heritage.

Examination of issues of *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* and later editions, *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, only reinforces this obsession with landscape even outside of the context of painting exhibitions. As was mentioned in the previous section, this official National Socialist arts journal (whose board of editors included both Albert Speer, the Third Reich's official architect and Fritz Todt, who was Inspector General for German Roadways) was an intrinsic part of the very modern and very complex propaganda program. Every issue from 1939 to 1944 contained at least two large features on either past "great" landscapists of

the Romantic era. Friedrich received a five-page spread in a May 1940 issue commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of his death. Other featured artists included Koch, whose works are highlighted prominently in a February 1939 issue and other contemporaries in the Romantic landscape tradition. Although genre and peasant scenes (as well as architecture and sculpture) featured heavily in the content as well, these landscapes are particularly incessant theme.

Professors, including William Horn and Schultze-Naumberg waxed philosophical on everything from the use of color in Romantic landscapes (“*Von der Farbe in der Natur*”)¹³⁸ to the genius of Reich painter Willy Kriegel, “a neo-Romantic painter” whose works were lauded as harkening in a new era of German landscape.¹³⁹ Nearly every issue of the publication also contained a “review” – though the heavily monitored critiques were inevitably always glowing – of a landscape-themed exhibition. These reviews will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, but once again, the pervasiveness of the Romantically-inspired landscape is telling.

Other works, such as Eduard Handel-Mazzetti’s *Mountain Landscape* (3.8), make even more explicit reference to the connection between the landscape and the Nordic *Geist*, specifically the National Socialist Nordic *Geist*. Upon first glance, Handel-Mazzetti’s painting appears to be a simple and pure landscape of sharp, snowy Alpine peaks and valleys. Further inspection reveals a Nazi flag raised high on a cliff in the composition’s right corner. It is touches like this, perhaps, that push some of the painting into kitsch territory; extremely self-referential, the work attempts to link National Socialism with the German soil,

¹³⁸ *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, February 1939, 63.

¹³⁹ *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, May 1944, 175.

landscape, spirit and mythology. In reality, it only heightens the emptiness of the movement and the Philistine and superficial nature of its Romantic trappings.

These idealized, derivative and somewhat anachronistic landscapes, which were so ubiquitously displayed in exhibition spaces, factories, and government offices throughout the Reich were countered by another more curious genre of “landscape” which perhaps better reflects Jünger’s notion of “Steel Romanticism” and Herf’s “reactionary modernism.” It is relatively difficult to trace the popularity of this genre in comparison to the ubiquitous landscapes. Again, a general examination of *Die Kunst im Dritten/Deutschen Reich* provides a rudimentary, if not foolproof, pulse on the way in which these worksite-landscape amalgamations were used. The predominance of pure landscape in the magazine remained fairly constant. However, the 1940 to 1942 issues prominently featured images of heroic nudes and a few idealized war scenes, presumably in correspondence to Nazi leadership’s confidence in the inevitability of German victory. As time wore on, the prospect of German victory slipped away and the size of the publication grew noticeably thinner. The escapism and comfort of landscape and genre scenes seems to grow more important during these last few years, suggesting that the idealism and forced nostalgia of these scenes may have acted as the candy coating of the bitter pill of German fascism, especially as it spiraled toward failure, for the general public.

The industrial landscape, or “heroic landscape,” seems to crop up primarily between 1940 and 1942, perhaps indicating again the growing confidence amongst the Party leadership. These paintings are a striking change from the landscapes that have been previously described. Instead of depicting a

sort of timeless “reality” (which both did and did not exist), untouched by the modernized and industrialized actuality of the period, the industrial landscapes show the quarries, the worksites, the bridges, and the roads – in short, the decidedly modern and progressive elements of Hitler’s program. Ever-present in the background of every one of these paintings, however, remains that distinctly Nordic landscape, once again visually convincing viewers of the harmony between the German land (and by extension, soul) and the real, physical goals of the Third Reich. These paintings, perhaps better than any, are visual reminders that the general drive of Nazism was futuristic. As Modris Eksteins posits, in spite of archaisms, and though “it used to full advantage residual conservative and utopian longings...and picked its ideological trappings from the German past...[Nazism’s] goals were, by its own lights, distinctly progressive.”¹⁴⁰

The most distinct (and most commonly cited) of these industrial landscapes involve quarries, bridges, and the *Autobahn*. In the Romantic tradition, landscape had a deep-rooted definition for the Germans as the self-portrait of both the soul, and genius, of a supreme people.

Those previously described landscapes that included small visions of farmers and villages gently hint at the notion that “any landscape became acceptable provided that it had manifestly been worked on by man, who had remodeled it.”¹⁴¹ This theme was then magnified in the tradition of the “heroic landscape,” a sort of neo-classical tradition formally revived and renamed by Schultze-Naumberg around 1941: in this tradition, nature is presented in its ultimate form as a forum for combat and victory. In an article in the July 1941 edition of *Die Kunst im*

¹⁴⁰ Eksteins, 303.

¹⁴¹ Michaud, 115.

Deutschen Reich about landscapist Hermann Urban, Schultze-Naumberg deconstructs Heroclitus's statement that "War is the father of all things" in the context of Nazi ideology:

"[This saying] acquires a new meaning in the light of our present *Weltanschauung*. We know that the whole of life is a battle, and the spectacle of nature as a whole shows us that no living being can keep on living without a battle."¹⁴²

This struggle, fought for the survival of those founders of *Kultur*, as Michaud asserts, manifested itself visually in the industrial landscapes and pictures of worksites, all set within the context of that great, symbolic, German landscape. Where previous landscapes either exalted the German soul and spirit vis-à-vis the land, or through combinations of this and the hardworking peasant, the industrial landscape exalted the engineer and the Reich's literal and figurative expansion into new lands and the future. All, however, provided affirmation of the landscape as self-portrait. And all, once again, have their roots in the *Blut und Boden* mentality, whether this *Blut* belongs to an archaic peasant or a Hercules-esque laborer, both dwarfed by the landscape (natural or artificial) surrounding them.¹⁴³

Numerous artists specifically between 1940 and 1942 painted this modernized peasant landscape, a few of which will be discussed here. Perhaps most well known (and most beloved by the Nazi leadership and arts publications) was Wilhelm Dachauer. Dauchauer's worksite-scapes appeared as early as 1939 in the May issue of *Die Kunst*. One was featured in an article entitled "Land und Menschen der Ostmark," which reported on works from an exhibition that same

¹⁴² Paul Schultze-Naumberg, "Hermann Urban: Der Meister der heroischen Landschaft," *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, July 1941, 197.

¹⁴³ Michaud, 116.

year in Berlin called “Berge, Menschen und Wirtschaft der Ostmark” (“Mountains, Men, and the Economy of the Eastern Territories”). The work, *Granite Quarry in Mauthausen* (image 3.9) appears upon first glance devoid of human presence. In fact, it is almost the opposite of the soothing escapism offered by the lush landscapes modeled after the Romantics. There are clear associations, however. Almost every inch of the canvas is filled with the craggy forms of quarry stones, evocative of that familiar Nordic geographic feature: the Alps. Shadows of men mining the quarry are visible upon further inspection, though they are not the focus. They are, in fact, completely dwarfed by their surroundings in the same way the peasants in other landscapes are dwarfed by the rolling hills and expansive valleys. It is the ultimate expression of destruction as creation: the great German land is mined for the sake of technological progress – it *provides* for the sake of progress, and here again is the fusion of the German land with the German *Volk* (in the form of engineer and worker).

Contextualizing this variety of “landscape,” in particular those such as *Granite Quarry*, which references the building site of a now-infamous Austrian concentration camp, becomes intrinsic to their understanding. In particular, *Lebensraum*, that drive for expansion or “living space” that became one of the central tenants of Nazi doctrine seems to have had an effect on the landscape subject matter, notably post 1940/41. This coincided with the desire to create a *Großdeutsches Reich*, that is, an inclusive German state that would bring ethnic Germans home to the Reich by expanding its borders, particularly to the east. The first successful drive for German expansion came in 1938 with the *Anschluß*, the annexation of Austria, which was met with very little resistance. The desire and

need to expand corresponded with Hitler's initial "mission" in entering politics: to restore national greatness through a sort of national rebirth, strength of arms, and racial purity.¹⁴⁴ Expansion of Germany to fulfill these goals was bolstered by the fear that bordering countries would take military action if not swiftly subsumed into the Reich. Expanding the *Heimait*, though clearly (according to Hitler) an intrinsic part of solidifying German dominance, is a curious concept considering how deeply attachment to the specifically *German* soil and landscape run. As has been previously examined, many of the pure land-and rural-scapes are recognizably Nordic even if it is not clearly stated in the work's title. (According to West, because one of Hitler's main problems was how to unify a country in which regional traditions were still strong, landscape paintings were often generalized, and it was "impossible to isolate a [specific] region by looking at them. [However] many had region-specific titles, allowing Hitler and his acolytes to appeal to regional loyalties of individuals, even while they equated distinct parts of Germany with the ideals of the whole nation.")¹⁴⁵

The relatively "flexible" treatment of the pure landscapes corresponds nicely with the post-1938 desire to propagate and celebrate the German *Heimat* as equally flexible, or make expansion seem more palatable and like a "natural" progression for the increasingly powerful German state. Expansion quickly became a reality, between the *Anschluß*, the remilitarization of Rhineland two years earlier. As Ian Kershaw notes, these early events contributed to "an elemental frenzy of enthusiasm" over these seemingly bloodless coups, an enthusiasm that was only magnified with the signing of the Munich Agreement

¹⁴⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 64.

¹⁴⁵ West, 196.

later in 1938 (annexing the Sudetenland) and the seizure of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in 1939. With these events, as Kershaw notes, “Hitler’s drive to war was unabated...[and] and potential limits...on his freedom of action disappeared.”¹⁴⁶ Though Schultze-Naumberg had not yet officially coined the term “heroic landscape,” it is noteworthy that some of the earliest quarry site paintings, notably those of Dachauer, first appeared in 1939. The title of the exhibition, which alludes to worksites in the *Ostmark* (the name of Austria while under Nazi Germany), is a pointed reference to the enthusiasm over the *Anschluß*, the beginning of German expansion. Interestingly, the scenes featured in the spread are *not* pure landscape, but *worksites*. Though the Alpine landscapes of Austria differ little in reality from those of Germany, it is perhaps telling that the pictorial renderings of the recently annexed land depict it as a work in progress of sorts. In other words, the new land acquired by the German people for the German people succumbs to destruction in order to help create a new Germany.

Granite Quarry in Mauthausen is even more fascinating in the context of expansion, *Lebensraum*, and that incessant National Socialist mantra of destruction for creation because of Mauthausen’s eventual role as a labor camp. Here again, the beauty of the quarry is highlighted as a bounteous gift from the earth, willfully provided to the workers for the continued expansion of the Reich. Implicitly, however, this is destruction and displacement of a sickening variety, considering that construction on the campsite began in May of 1938 using slave labor from prisoners at Dachau, and mining on the quarry would continue well into the 1940s, as a labor camp where inmates were used to mine the granite. In

¹⁴⁶ Kershaw, 125.

this image, then, is an amalgamation of almost every National Socialist theme, empty as they may be: the sacredness of the Romantic Nordic landscape, the supreme interconnectedness of the German man and Nature, the need to expand German borders and exploit natural resources to bolster the holdings of the Reich, and finally the need for annihilation before rebirth. The landscape is destroyed in order to create a labor camp that had as an ultimate goal the destruction of those “impure” races in order for the triumph of the Aryans. The image is, then, a willful beautification of the ugliness of the reality of slave labor and work camps.

As was previously noted, the frequency and popularity of these worksite “heroic landscapes” increased greatly between 1941 and 1942. This quarry theme in particular was played out by other later artists, notably Albert Janesch. A print of his painting *The Stone Quarry* (*Der Steinbruch*; image 3.10) was published in the January 1942 issue of *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*. Interestingly, this work was published in an issue that featured a larger-than-normal quantity of heroic nudes and idealized war scenes, again perhaps reflecting the confidence of the German leadership and people in their strength and victory. The Fall of France (which was secured with the armistice signed on June 25, 1940) and the capture of the Lowlands in particular seem to have been turning points in augmenting German confidence. In a July speech at the Reichstag in Berlin, Hitler referred to the victory in France as “the most tremendous series of battles in the history of the world,”¹⁴⁷ and openly stated his desire for a “new order” for Europe, a desire that seemed within reach following the events of 1940-1. The seemingly bottomless confidence brought about by the German takeover of much of western and eastern

¹⁴⁷ Raoul de Roussy, ed. *My New Order* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 822.

Europe (with the obvious exception of the Soviet Union) appears to have inspired more landscapes – heroic landscapes – that somehow dealt with the reality of expansion and building technology, as opposed to the timeless, backward-looking landscapes of the early and final years of the Reich. For example, Janesch’s painting, typical of the later quarry site scenes, is more explicitly an amalgamation of landscape and worksite. The vibrant blue, cloud-dotted sky is just visible in the painting’s corner. The stone quarry itself is even more imposing and “heroic” in appearance. The workers are still dwarfed by the mountain, but their harmonious interaction while mining it for its treasures is clear. Everyone is working together with each other *and* the landscape. The name of this work and its setting are rather ambiguous, implying again the necessary push outside of German soil for the sake of growth and expansion. Here is where we see the pictorial beginnings of the modernistic push of Nazism, one that, according to Eksteins, “paid its respects to romantic visions [of the past]” but was in the end a “headlong plunge into the future, toward a ‘brave new world,’”¹⁴⁸ a brave new order.

As quarry landscapes became popular, so too did paintings of bridge and *Autobahn* construction. These heroic landscapes are even more explicit in their allusions to progression and modernism. Bridges and roads were of particular importance to Hitler, who was apparently intrigued with the technology of transportation and its ability to allow “escape from the confines of reality.”¹⁴⁹ While their role as means of transportation were of great importance, their aesthetics carried equal weight. In particular, the roads were meant to compliment

¹⁴⁸ Eksteins, 303.

¹⁴⁹ Eksteins, 322.

the German landscape, providing optimal vistas and viewing experiences, much in the same way a landscape painting would. Of the *Autobahnen* Hitler remarked, “Even in the more thickly populated areas they reproduce the atmosphere of the open spaces.”¹⁵⁰ The importance of the landscape in the overall *Autobahn* experience is captured by a bit of prose printed in a picture book that commemorated the death of Fritz Todt:

“Like lightning the *Autobahn* now flashes far through the valley from this height here...It is the visual triumph of joint human-divine creation...we greet you, hills, we greet you, steeped city, you, villages in the green, you, stream...Germany, here it lies wonderfully laid out...Today we are after the melody of togetherness...it carries us onward, without borders, over time itself.”¹⁵¹

In fact, landscape architects worked hand-in-hand with engineers in order to create aesthetically sublime roadways that appealed not only to the “inherent” German artistic sensibilities, but embodied the spirit of *Deutsche Technik* (German Technology) as well.¹⁵² *Technik*, aesthetics, and that philistine Romanticism embodied by nearly every National Socialist painting came together in scenes like those of Erich Mercker and Carl Theodor Protzen, which once again simultaneously paid homage to the sublimity of the German landscape and the “progressive” aims of the Third Reich. Mercker’s *Autobahn Bridge at Teufelstal* (3.11) from 1941 exhibits again the melding of landscape and technology. While the intricate and thoroughly modern bridge dominates the composition (and pays homage to that new German hero, the engineer, without an actual human presence), it does not seem at odds with the gentle hills and thick forest that

¹⁵⁰ Eksteins, 322.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Zeller, *Driving Germany: The Landscape of the German Autobahn, 1930-1970*. (New York: Bergbahn Books, 2007), 161.

¹⁵² Zeller, 66.

surround it. Instead, once again, technology and nature are in harmony. The same can be said on a grander scale of Protzen's 1941 *Motorway Bridge Near Cologne* (image 3.12). Here, the entirety of the work scene is visible, with the bridge's imposing form dominating almost the entire canvas and the foreground consumed by debris and materials. The tiny shadows of three lone workers can be seen standing in the lower right corner, though again, they are not the focus. Once more, the whole work site is nestled comfortably *into* the Nordic landscape, which seems to envelop it from every corner. It is the destiny and duty of the German people, it seems to say, to destroy in order to create, and it is the purpose and the will of the land to accommodate the technological genius of *Volk*. Even Clauss mentioned this harmonious link between landscape and construction in *Die nordische Seele*, and the willingness of the landscape to succumb to destruction:

“The will for space awakens in the soul that is born in this landscape and truly lives in it. The Nordic space drags one along the distance. It *wants* to be overcome. The overcoming of space means speed...the Nordic landscape cries out to be traversed by rails over which express trains can speed. Rails that are already in existence and those that must constantly be constructed for ever newer, ever faster vehicles on which men who experience the world Nordically may strive toward ever new goals. The Nordic soul experiences its world as a structure made up of countless thoroughfares – those already at hand and those still to be created – on land, on water, in the air, and in the stratosphere.”¹⁵³

The prominence of these industrial landscapes seems to have waned as the war drew to a close and Germany's defeat became inevitable. As confidence wavered, perhaps the need to once again “pull the wool over the eyes” of the German public (whether successfully or not) returned, and *Die Kunst im*

¹⁵³ Clauss, in Mosse, *Nazi Culture*, 67.

Deutschen Reich once again featured almost solely comforting peasants and genre scenes, and those nostalgic and inspiring images of the *Heimat*. Whatever the case, it is clear that National Socialist artists (and by logical extension, the RKK and Nazi leadership) evoked the past in their Romantic landscapes in order to make statements about the future. These landscapes today ring false and philistine, and their messages – the superiority of the Nordic, Aryan soul, the right and need to destroy in order to progress – are eerie reminders of the ultimate outcome of National Socialism: annihilation.

“Nazi Art Has Inspired No One”: Past and Present Reactions to the Paintings

The Nazi leadership, if not the general public, seemed to recognize at some level the derivative quality of the paintings produced under RKK supervision. The new German painters – *Die neue Deutsche Malerei* – were supposed to be the ultimate visual manifestation of the German *Volk*, reflecting not only the anti-modernist values of figuration and “realism,” but also the “German” values of blood and land. As a 1941 propaganda pamphlet “elucidated” to the general public,

“[The models for New German Painting] can be found in areas where there is a particularly strong attachment to the soil, and strong regional continuity...when there is so much sensibility related to the earth in which we are rooted, it is only natural for us to see our occupation with landscape as the purest of artistic endeavors...For us today the landscape represents the territory of the Reich which demands our dutiful dedication...”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ F.A. Kauffmann. *Die Neue Deutsche Malerei* from *Schriftenreihe der Deutschen Informationsstelle, Das Deutschland der Gegenwart* no. 11, Berlin, 1941, Hartley, 392.

While rhetoric such as this, which was plentiful in Nazi Germany, speaks volumes to modern readers about the aims of landscape and rural painting as propaganda (as has been examined in the last chapters), it tells us less about the general reception to the actual art in a more *artistic* context. Perhaps this was intentional. As has been mentioned, Hitler was less-than-impressed by the quality of paintings produced by his new arts program, though the painting style was apparently modeled after his beloved nineteenth century Romantics and realists. It remains unclear as to *what* exactly Hitler desired in terms of a “new” kind of “eternal German art.” Much of this can be attributed to the fact that Nazi painting was defined strictly in terms of what it *could not* be: it must stand in opposition to the “dangerous” degenerate art of the *avant-garde* and modernist painters, many of whom were forced to emigrate to the United States. As he made clear in 1934, however, the painting was also supposed to set itself apart from being reductive; that is, Hitler did not want to follow Rosenberg’s “backward Romanticism” in terms of the arts.

Where did this leave the quality of the painting, then? Dangerously close to kitsch, according to contemporaries and later audiences alike. In avoiding this “misguided and retrogressive Romanticism,” (and simultaneously that sublime and philosophical weight that permeated the canvases of Friedrich and other Romantics) but still desiring to exalt the traditional German values of the purity of the land and the soil, the result was inevitable: perfectly adequate yet repetitive and monotonous scenes that loudly reinforced positive feelings toward the German *Heimat* and *Volk*. As Lutz Becker notes, “The examples of Schinkel and Friedrich and Runge were cited by the regime as examples of pre-Nazi art, but

their magic evaded the usurpers. Newly created myths replaced the old without changing the appearance and surface of painting.”¹⁵⁵ Even works that are more interesting in terms of subject matter, such as the “heroic landscapes,” ring hollow and false in a discomfiting way because of their pedantic appeal to the familiar Nazi cry for a New Order, led by the pure and superior German people.

The Nazi leadership, Goebbels in particular, feared the devolvement of painting into kitsch. In fact, Goebbels wooed the artistic elite into the program with reassurances of his distaste for kitsch, fueled by his well-cultivated artistic sensibilities. Though the Reich prided itself on a mantra of “professional self-administration under the protective guiding hand of the state,” the “massive cultural purges”¹⁵⁶ that took place shortly after 1933 and the clear preference for a very specific type of painting – those described throughout this paper – left little room for the type of innovation prized by the annals of art history. However, the leadership reserved harsh punishment for kitsch. Steinweis notes that by 1940, SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) monitors observed a “disturbing increase in the availability of cheap, mass-produced decorative articles and art reproductions in German art dealerships and other retail stores.” The SD worried that the consequences of this trend were cultural and economic, maintaining that the “‘boundless stream of cheap kitsch’ threatened to inundate German homes with ‘trash’ at precisely the time when Germans should be aware of their ‘cultural mission in the world.’”¹⁵⁷ As a result, at the end of 1940 the Visual Arts Chamber issued an order with the intention of restricting the dissemination of this so-called inferior art.

¹⁵⁵ Hartley, 391.

¹⁵⁶ Steinweis, 42-44.

¹⁵⁷ Steinweis, 167.

The fear of kitsch and swift punishment for offenders is perhaps a reflection of what Hitler, Goebbels, and the rest of the “artistic” leadership knew in their hearts: that the paintings did not live up to the standards set by the greats of German past, from Runge to Spitzweg, let alone embody a superior and eternal new order of art. The paintings were and remain, in a word, average. There remains, as always, that strange dichotomy between critical and public appeal, however. That “averageness” is the visual manifestation of Hitler’s request for an art that appealed to the *average* German, not the “elitist” taste of the urban bourgeois. The easiest way to visually capture the interest of the working class, petite-bourgeois, and farmers was to appeal those broad, popular, and deeply entrenched ideas of nationalism and pride (through nostalgic images of land and rural-scapes), hard work, community, and racial purity in a style of painting that was readable, comfortable, and pleasant. Hitler himself said it best in *Mein Kampf*: “Only constant repetition can finally bring success in the matter of instilling ideas into the memory of the crowd.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, if art is to influence the masses, it must be both simple and obvious. One need only look at the murals created under Roosevelt’s WPA program to recognize that the popularity and effectiveness of realism and landscape was not limited to German, or Fascist, borders.

Internationally the art disappointed critics and reporters, who lamented the despicable treatment of *avant-garde* and modern artists and the stifling realism of the official painting program. The contempt is clear even from the headlines of *New York Times* articles between 1939 and 1945: “Art limps in Nazi Germany”;

¹⁵⁸ West, 184.

“Expert says Nazi art has inspired no one.” The international press even took to calling the House of German Art *Palazzo Kitchi*. One reporter from Berlin observed derisively of the arts program in general that “One gains the impression that the authorities wish to....keep [the peoples’ minds] off their troubles...” and that “cultural life under the Third Reich is one of blank destruction.” The general impression seems to have been that the Nazi’s artistic policies were “esthetically unattractive to most foreign observers” and successful only in “injecting political bias, censorship...and a racial-nationalistic culture” into the country’s artistic life.¹⁵⁹

A 1939 article, also from the New York Times, revealed Hitler’s displeasure with the trajectory of National Socialist art, noting that submissions to that year’s annual exhibition at the House of German Art were “not comparable to the artistic records of other great epochs” and quoting him as saying “I should like to express the hope that perhaps the individual artist’s true ability will turn inwardly to the experiences, happenings and philosophical bases of the times which in the first place provide the subjects for artists’ work.”¹⁶⁰ International critical reactions to the exhibitions in Munich fared no better than Hitler’s, with American critics lamenting that the Nazis “admire the monotonous work of German painters in the nineteenth century”¹⁶¹ and that the result of the censorship of subject matter was an “inexhaustible array of ‘blood and soil’ subjects.”¹⁶² Another critic writing in London’s *Fortnightly* observed “there is no future for art

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Wiskemann, “On the cultural front the Nazis drive,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1934.

¹⁶⁰ Wire services, “Lack of Nazi art mourned by Hitler,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1939.

¹⁶¹ Wiskemann, 11.

¹⁶² C. Brooks Peters, “Art limps in Nazi Germany,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 1939.

in Germany [because] the Nazis will never give up the fight against internationalism, individualism and intellect.”¹⁶³ Established artistic circles such as the American Artists Congress also made their understanding of the sinister propagandistic purposes of Nazi painting clear, issuing a statement in 1938 condemning the Metropolitan Museum of Art for their “continued patronage of fascist Germany.” (The museum had apparently been purchasing prints produced under the RKK.)¹⁶⁴

Art historians and critics have been careful to maintain this attitude of dismissiveness toward the “second-rate” paintings of the Third Reich. Immediately following the war’s end in 1945, Francis H. Taylor, Director of the Metropolitan Museum, declared, “I don’t think that the Nazi’s art has inspired anyone – even their own people,” in an effort to alleviate fear that National Socialist art would survive history as a legitimate movement.¹⁶⁵ Since the confiscation of more than 6,000 Nazi paintings from Germany in 1946 and their subsequent storage in U.S. military sites, including the Pentagon (though many of them were returned to the West German 40 years later),¹⁶⁶ they have become objects of contention, reflecting still-fresh fears about how to regard this type of art. No major American museum has held an exhibition of the paintings. International shows featuring National Socialist paintings tend to disregard them stylistically, and focus attention on their role as historical documents, not legitimate *objets d’art*. The paintings came under considerable debate in

¹⁶³ Gore Gonda, “Art in Nazi Germany,” *The Fortnightly*, August 1938, 216.

¹⁶⁴ Wire services, “Museum assailed on Nazi art buying,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1938.

¹⁶⁵ Wire services, “Expert says Nazi art has inspired no one,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1945.

¹⁶⁶ Serge Schemann, “West Germans debate disposition of Nazi art,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1988.

particular during a 1974 show in Frankfurt entitled “Art in the Third Reich,” a show whose merits were hotly contested by many Germans, though a reporter from West Germany stated “To modern tastes, ideological questions aside, much of the ‘art’ seems like kitsch in the most charitable assessment – or just ugly.”¹⁶⁷

In 1986, upon the return of several works of Nazi art to Germany, there was an increased public interest in viewing the works from an historical, not art historical, standpoint. Many continued to express concern regarding exhibiting the art, voicing fears that still apply today: what if public viewing encourages neo-Nazi propagandists and enthusiasts by legitimizing the artistic legacy of the Third Reich? Many scholars rightly maintain today that the works are vital historical documents, and constitute a part of both history and art history that cannot simply be swept under the table (or remain locked up in a customs office in Munich). As when they were first produced, the paintings are still derided for their triteness, however visually pleasant, and kitsch-value. A spokesperson for West Germany’s Green Party summed up the still-fraught attitudes toward Nazi art with an observation in 1988 with an interesting insight concerning the art’s broad appeal:

“There is still uncertainty in dealing with official Nazi art because the so-called ‘beautiful art,’ which was intended in those days to reflect the ‘healthy taste of the people,’ is closer to the taste of the broad majority of the public even today than the so-called modern art.”¹⁶⁸

Continuing Tensions: Retrogression versus Modernism, Derision versus Approbation

¹⁶⁷ Wire services, “Sponsors defend showing of ‘Nazi Art’ in Frankfurt,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1974.

¹⁶⁸ Schemann, 16.

The paintings that have been explored in this paper are frighteningly *normal*, a visual quality that pleased many under the Third Reich, and a quality which might continue to please many today, if not for the works' horrifying associations. It is art that gave answers, confirmations, and reassurances to questions of nationalism and racism, masking these disturbing beliefs with comforting and familiar images. Was it successful, in spite of international criticism, and even criticism from within the Nazi Party? Perhaps the answer to that question lay in the response of that complacently "silent majority" in Germany from 1933 to 1945.

Yet it also seems clear that there was something else at work in these paintings besides their familiar and pleasant subject matter and tired and derivative realism. In *Reactionary Modernism* Jeffrey Herf rightly pointed out that there was not a straight line from nineteenth-century German Romanticism to Nazism. Superficially, the landscape paintings of Nazi artists have elements in common with the works of those Romantic and Realist nineteenth-century masters that Hitler so admired, from Runge to Leibl, Friedrich to Spitzweg. But when art historians and critics past and present (the unsatisfied Nazi leadership included) criticize the art as second-rate, monotonous and, worst of all, kitschy, it is clear that the paintings are missing the deeper elements that made much of German art of the nineteenth century so renowned and influential. These paintings paid lip service to deeply seated anti-liberal notions of the German soul and its connection to the land, and placed, as Herf notes, "absolutes such as blood and race...beyond rational justification."¹⁶⁹ While nineteenth-century Romantic

¹⁶⁹ Herf, 13.

thought permeated all facets of the German political and philosophical spectrum, the Nazis exploited the darker aspects of the movement, wielding the State as a weapon to create a New Order, a *Kulturnation* whose realization was possible only through violence and absolute annihilation. Contrary to the “escapist Romanticism” (as visually manifested in the paintings favored by Rosenberg) of the *völkisch* movement, Nazism was focused on the future. This does not imply a single-minded concentration on modernity, as has been clearly demonstrated in the artistic subject matter. Instead, the movement combined elements of *völkisch* thought and Romanticism with a “cult of technological modernism.”¹⁷⁰

Why, then, did most of the paintings fail to escape the “false and saccharine Romanticism of the past,”¹⁷¹ as Goebbels derided it? Perhaps it was this “saccharine” nature, familiar and visually pleasing but empty of the thoughtful philosophies of the past, that provided the sweet coating to the bitterness of violence, destruction and nihilism that was at the heart of National Socialism. Paintings of the German landscape (which expanded along with violent conquest of *Lebensraum*) and rural-scape provided comforting reminders not only in museum settings, but factory and bureaucratic settings, of the superiority of the German race, the purity of the German soul, and promised an enduring legacy of cultural domination in the New Order. Elements of reactionary modernism became explicit in post-1941 heroic landscapes, which visually illustrate the “destruction as creation” mantra and overtly show Germany’s plans for continued modernization, engineering and expansion with the full compliance of the land.

¹⁷⁰ Herf, 195.

¹⁷¹ Herf, 196.

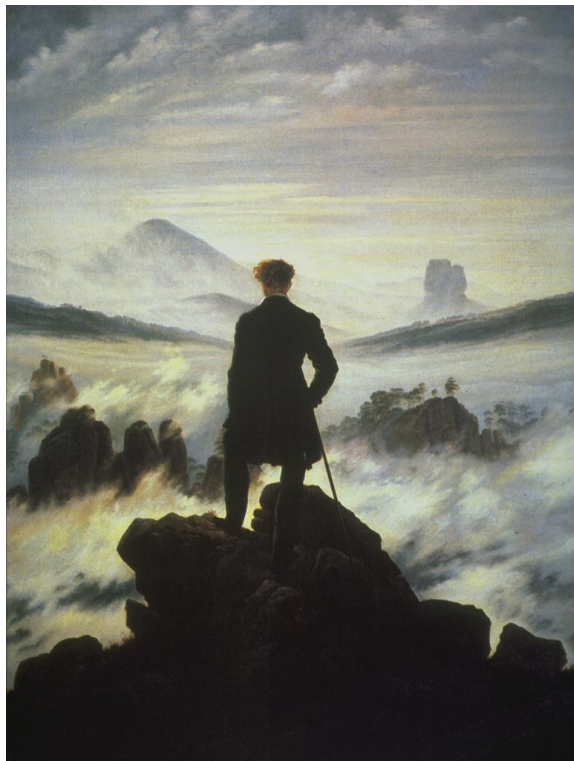
While the goal of this paper has not been to analyze the paintings produced by National Socialist artists from an aesthetic standpoint, it is detrimental to continued understanding of the movement that they have been disregarded and treated with contempt by art historians. But are the paintings art? Or are they just visual historical documents? While the paintings were and are inextricably linked to an abominable political and ideological movement (and should thus be examined within this context), art historical analysis helps reveal the way in which the “philistine Romanticism” of Nazism visually manifested itself. Though the paintings are qualitatively inferior to the works of the Romantics and other nineteenth-century painters, and did not even live up to Hitler’s own expectations, they illustrated *something* – a (frightening) sense of normality – that was attractive to and influential for a large portion of the German public. Art, whether the modern art prohibited by Hitler, or the works reproduced in *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, always serves a purpose. The paintings produced during the twelve years of the Third Reich reaffirmed traditional values that were sheltered from the brutal reality of the aims of the Nazis. Even when this reality was hinted at in the heroic landscapes, it was in a way that was reinforced by the comforting and unifying ideals of blood, soil, beauty, and Nature.



(1.1) Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809



(1.2) Friedrich, *Morning Mist in the Mountains*, 1822.



(1.3) Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818



(1.4) Hans Thoma, *Landscape in the Taunus*, 1890



(2.1) Eric Erler, *Blood and Soil*, 1937



(2.2) Johann Vinzenz Cissarz, *Time of Ripeness*, 1937



(2.3) Julius Junghanns *Hard Work*, 1939



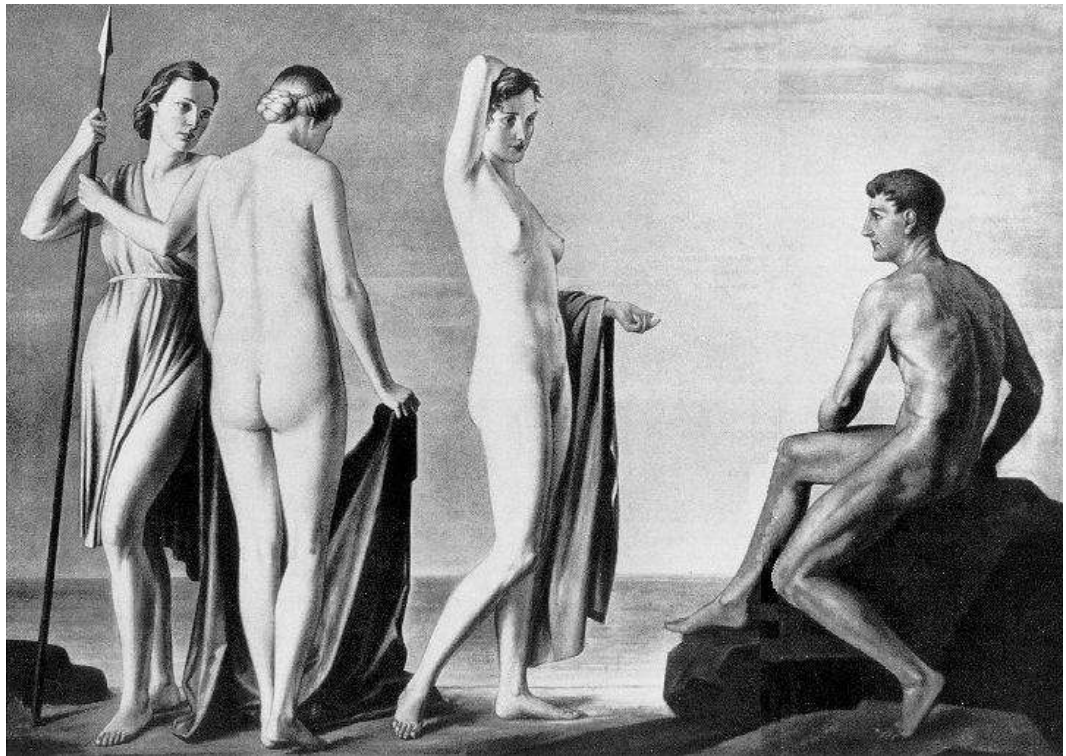
(2.4) Oskar Martin-Amorbach, *Harvest*, 1938



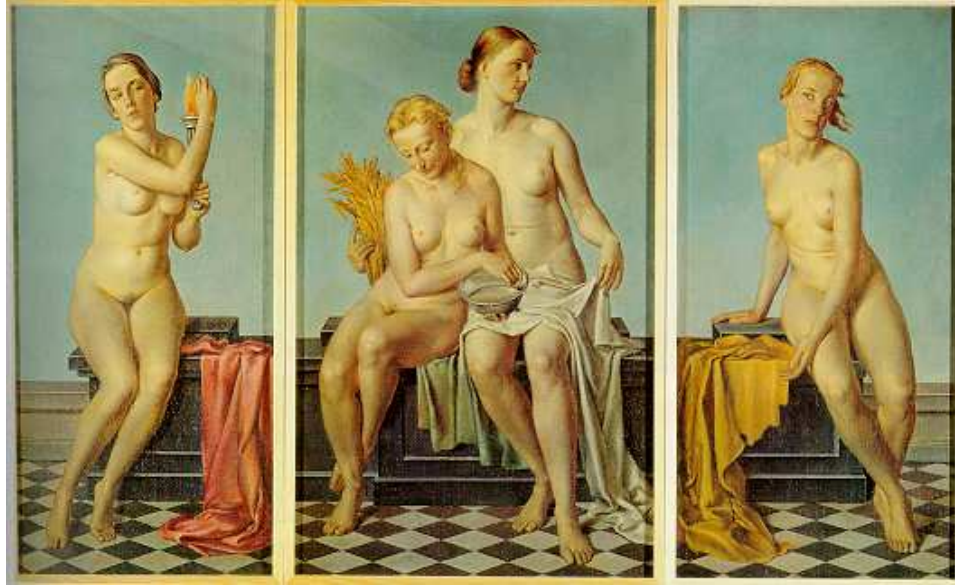
(2.5) Michael Kiefer, *Meadow near Chiemsee: Eagles*, 1943



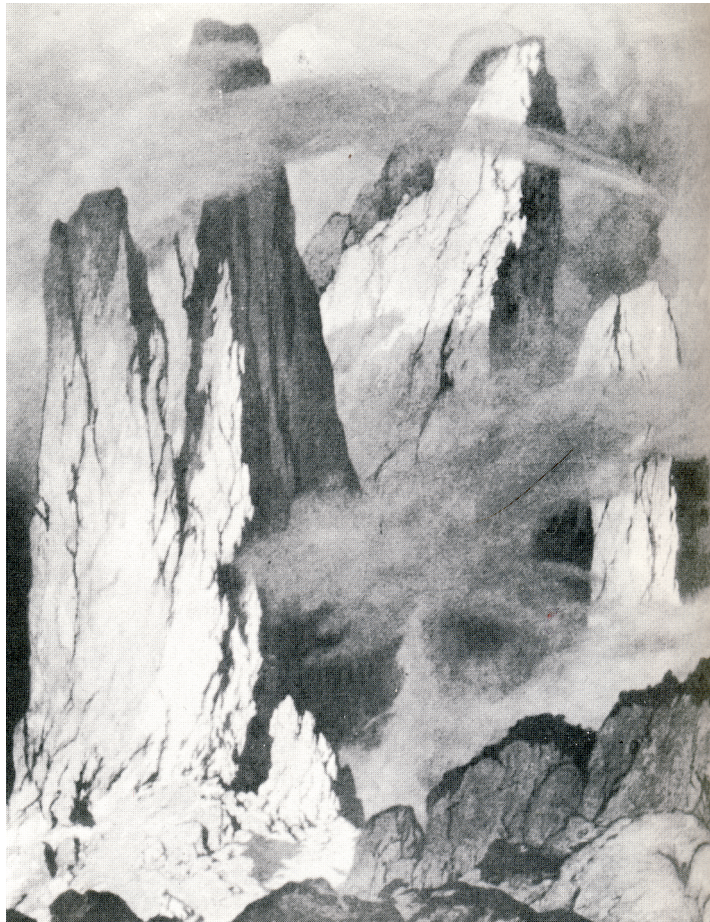
(2.6) Fritz Mackensen *The Baby*, no date



(2.7) Ziegler, *Judgment of Paris*, 1939



(2.8) Ziegler, *The Four Elements Triptych*, 1937



(3.1) Hugo Hodiener, *Permanence and Change*, 1939



(3.2) Werner Peiner, *German Land*, no date



(3.3) Wilhelm Wilke, *Templin Canal*, no date



(3.4) Gustav Traub, *Mountain Spruce*, no date



(3.5) Karl Alexander Fluegel, *The Harvest*, 1938



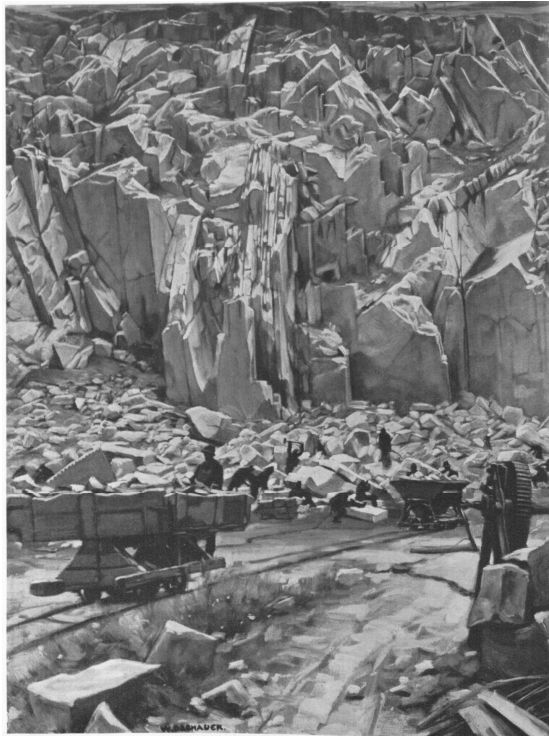
(3.6) Herman Gradl, *Mittelgebirge*, 1939



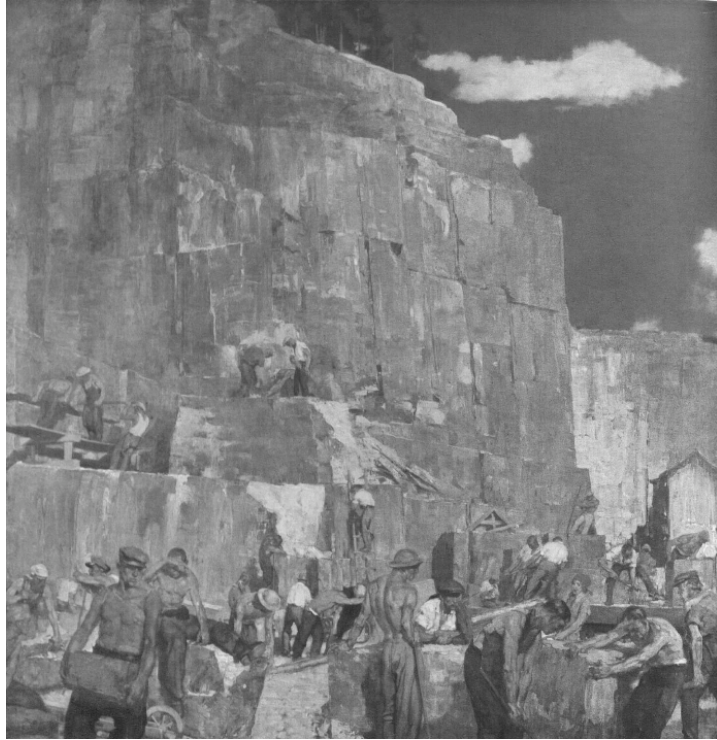
(3.7) Oskar Graf, *Limburg an der Lahn*, c. 1939



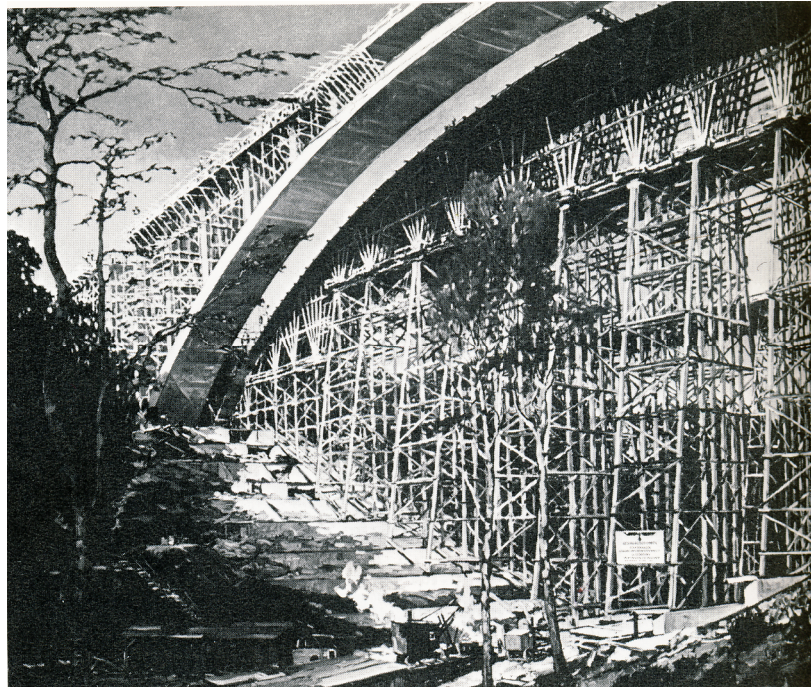
(3.8) Eduard Handel-Mazzetti, *Mountain Landscape*, 1940



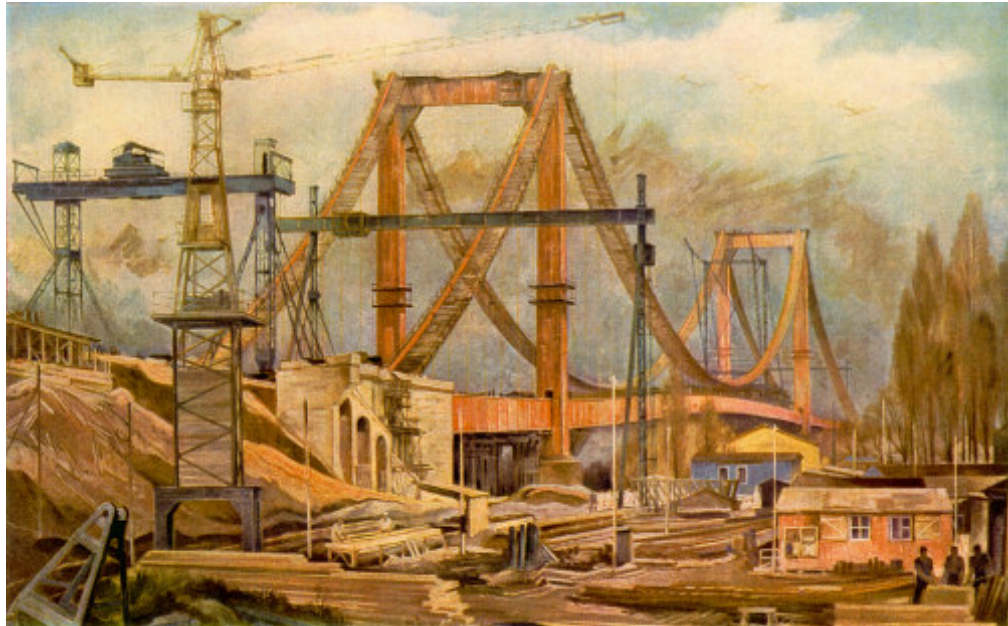
(3.9) Wilhelm Dachauer, *Granite Quarry in Mauthausen*, 1939



(3.10) Albert Janesch, *The Stone Quarry*, 1941



(3.11) Erich Mercker, *Autobahn Bridge at Teufelstal*, 1941



(3.12) Carl Protzen, *Motorway Bridge Near Cologne*, 1941

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SUMMARY

This thesis is a culmination of numerous areas of interest that fit into my History and Art History majors, including German Romanticism, landscape painting, and Nazi and Third Reich history. Art and politics are inextricable from each other in many contexts, from the Renaissance to the Pop Art movement of the 1960s. In the case of the Third Reich, a 12-year period in history that had an unbelievable impact on the modern era and revealed the most atrocious, destructive and despicable side of human nature, art was politics and politics was art. National Socialism was, in fact, an aesthetic movement, with a mantra of purification and beautification through destruction at its core. The arts in Nazi Germany have been the subject of considerable research, notably in the areas of architecture and film. Yet painting has been given less attention, especially by art historians, who seem to believe that, in the words of Nikolaus Pevsner, “every word about [Nazi art] is too much.”

The quality of painting produced under the Reich Chamber of Culture, or *Reichskulturkammer*, has been (perhaps rightfully) derided as third-rate and derivative. The director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art even declared at the end of the war in 1945, “I don’t think that the Nazi’s art has inspired anyone – even their own people.” The inferior quality and supposed banality of Nazi painting does not suggest, however, that it has nothing to teach us about Nazism. On the contrary the paintings produced in the 12-year period (and particularly between 1938 and 1944) hold interesting implications about the simultaneously retrogressive and modernistic thrusts of National Socialism.

One of the reasons that Nazi painting is difficult to classify and study is it lacked a completely definable style. Mussolini’s Italy had Futurism; the Soviet Union had Social Realism; Nazi painting was defined simply by what it was *not*: modernist. The Nazi leadership did, in fact, have considerable schooling and experience in the arts. Hitler, famously, was a failed painter. Alfred Rosenberg, a “Racial Theorist” and ideologically influential member of the Party leadership, was a great lover of nineteenth century art, especially that of the German Romantic painters like Caspar David Friedrich. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda, was initially a proponent of some modernist painters such as Emile Nolde and Edvard Munch. Rosenberg and Goebbels represented the two extremes in terms of proposed direction for the painting program under the RKK during its nascent stages in 1933. While Hitler found Rosenberg’s brand of “backwards Romanticism” distasteful, he firmly rejected Goebbels’s interest in expanding the program to tolerate modernists such as Nolde. The result of this was not a new, “eternal” style of art for the new Reich, but rather a return of sorts

to nineteenth century landscape and realism, notably the Romantic and *Biedermeier* period of Friedrich and Carl Spitzweg (two of Hitler's favorite artists).

In spite of his admonishment of Rosenberg's "backwards Romanticism," Hitler made his belief in the superiority of nineteenth century German painting clear. Of the Romantic painters, he claimed in a 1935 speech at the Nuremberg Parteitag that "they were but the finest representatives of that German search for the real and true character of our people." The preference for works of this nature is clearly reflected in the contents of the First Great German Art Exhibition in 1937. Of the paintings in the exhibition, over 40 percent were landscape, a number that seems to have been reflective of subsequent exhibitions and perhaps the painting output in general.

Because of their ubiquity and apparent popularity not only among the leadership but also among the German people, these scenes of either the specifically *Nordic* landscape or rural-scape are of particular interest. Most of the scenes encapsulate a sort of philistine Romanticism, drawing on Romantic notions of the sublime, the interconnectedness of the soul, man, and Nature and the divine purity of the German landscape. As art, the scenes are immensely lovely, comforting and *normal*, perfect for the mass-appeal the Propaganda Ministry sought to elicit. They served as affirming and appealing reminders to the people (and perhaps even the Nazi leadership, though most of the leaders recognized that the painting produced under the RKK was not first-rate) as to the superiority of the German landscape, and by extension, the German man and soul. They presented an ahistorical utopia that was free from the "degeneracy" of urban life

(associated with the modernists), but also clear of the *realities* of modernity, much of which was in actuality invaluable to Nazism. This was not a movement concerned with a return to a pre-industrial and Arcadian past; rather, it was a movement that aimed to use the tools of modernity to create a New Order through expansion and destruction.

Early art exhibitions and issues of *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* (the official arts publication, with a circulation of 25,000) show that paintings evoking the Romanticism of the German *Heimat* and landscape were of utmost priority during the beginning years of the Third Reich. However, around 1939/40, a new type of landscape emerged, named the “heroic landscape” in 1941 by Paul Schultze-Naumberg. These works still depict an idealized and picturesque Nordic landscape. However, working harmoniously within this setting are decidedly modern elements with decidedly modern implications. Most of these works features images of worksites that have connections to the notion of *Lebensraum* – Living Space, or expansion of the Reich – that was a key tenet of Nazi doctrine. For example, Wilhelm Dachauer, a favorite painter of the Nazi leadership, offered images of granite quarries set into a German landscape, notably one at Mauthausen. Though innocuous at first glance, the setting of the painting has horrific connotations. In fact, the workers visible in the work are most likely prisoners from the labor camp of Mauthausen (located in Austria, and incidentally constructed with the use of slave labor from Dachau). Here, their labor is employed to mine granite, which would ostensibly go towards other building/expansionist projects. Other worksites explicitly related to the notion of expansion, *Lebensraum*, and the creation of a *Großdeutschesreich* include scenes

of *Autobahn* construction and bridge building. All of these are, once again, nestled comfortably within a Nordic landscape, evoking the horrific mantra of destruction for creation's sake. The fact that these scenes emerged and gained popularity during the most successful and confident years of the Third Reich – between 1939 and 1942 – is noteworthy. Here, we see an aestheticized and beautified manifestation of the most criminal and modern urges of National Socialism, revealed as “art” at a time when German victory seemed inevitable, especially following the Fall of France and the creation of the Final Solution at Wannsee in 1941/2.

The popularity of the idyllic genre and landscape scenes returns again during the last few years of the Third Reich (using issues of *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* as a gauge), implying perhaps a desire to bolster the confidence of the German people through a reversion to those familiar themes of the sublimity of the Nordic landscape, the purity of the German soil, and the superiority of German blood. Here, the modernistic thrusts of the movement are once again buried beneath a coating of philistine Romanticism, pleasant nineteenth century Realism, and “Blood and Soil” bombast.

Though the Nazi leadership themselves seemed displeased with the mediocrity of the paintings, it is not so difficult to explain their popularity with the general public. As a spokesperson for the West German Green Party remarked (in the midst of debates surrounding the return of many of these paintings to West Germany in the 1980s following their storage at various American military sites),

“There is still uncertainty in dealing with official Nazi art because the so-called ‘beautiful art,’ which was intended in those days to reflect the ‘healthy taste of the people,’ is

closer to the taste of the broad majority of the public even today than the so-called modern art.”

That the paintings should be studied and regarded as historical documents is evident, especially as they hold visual implications for the incessant push-pull between regression and modernity within Nazism. Ignoring them as “art,” as many art historians have, is detrimental. Though they are derivative and were even derided in their own time by the international press as kitsch, investigating their art historical precedents also provides insight into not only the tastes of the leaders, but the workings of National Socialism. The works exploited the deep-rooted tradition of Romanticism, dangerously appealing to German nationalism in a way that disregarded innovation and praised the straightforward purity of the German soil and blood. While the Nazi leadership and the RKK cornered themselves into pushing a painting style that was reductive and old fashioned, it was just a thin veil for the violent and technology-driven goals for a modern and destructive New Order.