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Confounding Dystopian/Utopian Vision: Otto Dix, Walter Benjamin, and the Allegorical Mode

Abstract

Much of Otto Dix's (1891-1969) artistic practice reflects the traumatic effects of distinct socio-historical experiences: the brutality and inhumanity of the First World War, the depravities of a decadent Weimar society, the oppressive cultural policies of the Third Reich, the horrors of World War II, and the post-war division of Germany into two states, East and West. This paper explores Dix's late works, considering his use of allegory following the National Socialists' rise to power and through the postwar period. In order to surmise the functional significance of allegory, it reads Dix's paintings in light of Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) influential book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925). Benjamin theorizes that allegory is not merely an "illustrative technique" but rather "a form of expression"; it is not simply a representational mode of modernism but also a modern sensibility.¹ Allegory is both the literal and symbolic representation of subject matter that illustrates the chaotic present and attempts to identify the ideal future by referring to, and appropriating, the past.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1977), 162.

Because Benjamin's text is itself a commentary not only on baroque plays but also "on the state of emergency that marked modern Germany from 1918 onwards,"² that is, since it blurs the distinction between art and life, it can serve as an effective lens for a social-psychological character study of Dix. Many of the artist's post-1933 paintings reveal his incongruous emotional state, echoing Benjamin's dialectical sense of allegory as both a melancholic and redemptive mode. Perhaps they allude to Dix's dystopian foresight about the devastation of humanity and culture to come, yet they can also be interpreted as his conviction in recovery. While at times doubtful of any transformation of contemporary social and political life, Dix maintained faith in the gradual fulfillment of his utopian vision.

Keywords: Dix, Otto; Benjamin, Walter; late paintings; utopia; dystopia; allegory; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*; *Trauerspiel*; retrospection; melancholy; redemption; dialectical imagery

² Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 17.

The man known simply as “Otto Dix” was born Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix (1891-1969), often noted for his first-hand involvement in both World War I and World War II. When WWI broke out in 1914, he enlisted voluntarily and enthusiastically for military service, carrying into war the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900).³ Like thousands of other young men of his generation, including artists such as Max Beckmann (1884-1950) and George Grosz (1893-1958), Dix’s enlistment was profoundly motivated by Nietzschean concepts of *die Wille zur Macht*, or “the will to power,” and self-transcendence.⁴ Nietzsche argued that the only way to cope effectively with an intense situation was through “affirmation,” or the acceptance of life in all of its aspects, including death.⁵ Anxious to assert his strength and manliness, Dix joined the Dresden artillery regiment, training at various points as a machine-gunner, platoon leader, and pilot in Bautzen, Flanders, Poland, Russia, France, and Silesia.⁶ Yet, the horrors of the so-called ‘Great War,’ the economic and political tensions of the Weimar Republic, and the oppressive cultural policies of the Third Reich dampened his initial enthusiasm. At the end of WWII and against his will, Dix was conscripted into the *Volkssturm*,

³ It is generally understood that Dix read and was influenced by Nietzsche from 1910 until his death in 1969. At the age of twenty, he created his only work in sculpture, a life-size plaster portrait bust of the philosopher (confiscated by the Nazis as “degenerate” in 1937 and since lost). Dix owned copies of *The Will to Power* (books 3 and 4), *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Anti-Christ*, *The Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, *Dawn of Day*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *The Gay Science*, confirming that Nietzsche was an important intellectual source. The consensus is that Dix had some of his writings with him during WWI, but it is not certain if he carried *The Gay Science* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. See Sarah O'Brien Twohig, “Dix and Nietzsche,” in *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, ed. Keith Hartley and Sarah O'Brien Twohig (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 40-48.

⁴ Sabine Rewald, “Dix at the Met,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 31 (1996): 219-224.

⁵ Philipp Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 29-30.

⁶ Eva Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous”* (New York: Taschen, 2010), 211.

or German militia, and was soon taken prisoner by the French at Colmar in the Alsace region of northeastern France.⁷ Although he was released unharmed, as a consequence of the Allied defeat of Hitler's regime, Dix's homeland was divided by two opposing ideologies, the democracies of the free West and the Communist system of the Soviet bloc. Understandably, then, his personality, philosophy, and artistic practice reflect the traumatic effects of these distinct socio-historical experiences.

Although Dix's career spanned both World Wars and beyond, most contemporary scholars have tended largely to ignore the works he painted following the rise of fascism in 1933 up until his death in 1969.⁸ Art historians and critics have been primarily interested in the prints, drawings, and paintings that date from the 1920s and early 1930s and treat the brutality and inhumanity of the First World War as well as the depravities of a decadent Weimar society.

I want to propose that Dix's late works, which perhaps at first glance seem to have retained very little from those done previously, have an important connection within his broader development. The artist employed and continuously recycled a "hybrid and citational" allegorical mode throughout his extensive career."⁹ Early on, even before World War I began, Dix had

⁷ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: "I'll either be famous – or infamous,"* 214.

⁸ The most recent full-fledged retrospective of Dix's work, *Otto Dix: retrospektiv. Zum 120. Geburtstag: Gemälde und Arbeiten auf Papier*, was staged at the Kunstsammlung Gera-Orangerie in late 2011 and early 2012. Previously, in late 1991 and early 1992, a comprehensive exhibition was held at the Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, the Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, the Tate Gallery, London, and the Kunstgalerie, Gera.

⁹ Matthew Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 40 (Autumn 2001), 175. Biro notes that Dix's "stylistic eclecticism" has been cited by many scholars— "See Dietrich Schubert, *Otto Dix* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwohlt, 1980), 18 and Eva

already defined allegory as a dominant theme, as confirmed by some of his earliest paintings, including *Wachstum und Verfall*, or “Growth and Decay,” from 1911, *Pietà* from 1912, and *Sonnenaufgang*, or “Sunrise,” from 1913 (Figures 1-3). Dix created these works while he was enrolled at the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts from 1909 to 1914 in Dresden. His pictures were especially inspired by the artist Ludwig Meidner, a German Expressionist who visited Dresden briefly during Dix’s studies and who was known for his images that united the harsh reality of the metropolis with his own visionary aspirations. Dix was also exposed to Symbolist tendencies while visiting art galleries and exhibitions in Dresden, and his *Sonnenaufgang*, with its bold color and emphatic use of brushstroke, attests to his familiarity with, and reverence for, the work of Vincent van Gogh. According to Philip Gutbrod, Dix recognized in the Dutch painter “an existential imperative to paint, no matter how hard life’s circumstances and irrespective of peer approval.”¹⁰

In her book, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War*, Linda M. McGreevy argues, “allegorical allusions had sporadically recurred in [Dix’s] work since the advent of his Old Masterish approach,” but one should note that Dix’s allegorical paintings have never been discussed systematically in terms of a particular aesthetic position.¹¹ While it is true that Matthew Biro addressed the allegorical nature of Dix’s art in essays such as “Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix” and “History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy,” his analyses focused solely on the artist’s works from the

Karcher, *Otto Dix*, translated by Doris Linda Jones and Jeremy Gaines (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1992), 20. Andreas Strobl treats this issue at length; see Reimer, 1996) 180-183, 200-201, and 204-215.” Biro adds that Dix’s use of allegory was “post-stratigraphic” or “citational.”

¹⁰ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 24.

¹¹ Linda F. McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 366.

Weimar era, specifically his *Dada Triptych* from 1920. Fixed on its three partially collaged oil paintings, *The Skat Players*, *The Barricade*, and *Prague Street*, Biro did not conduct further research into Dix's continuation of the allegorical mode well after the 1930s, acknowledging that "the focus remains on Dix's art during the Weimar Republic or the years just before."¹² I want to pick up where Biro left off, considering Dix's use of allegory following the National Socialists' rise to power and through the postwar period. This paper examines the dystopian/utopian currents running through a selection of Dix's late works, employing contextual and formalist analyses to preserve integral parts of his visual legacy.

Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*

In order to surmise allegory's functional significance, I identify intersections between visual art practice and critical theory, reading Dix's paintings in light of one of the most highly acclaimed thinkers of the twentieth century, the German-Jewish essayist, theorist, translator, historian, and unofficial member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), who also investigated visual art, photography, architecture, and mass culture.¹³ While dystopia and utopia are not usually considered central concepts in Benjamin's works, these impulses might be said to be underlying aspects of his overall project.¹⁴

¹² Matthew Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix," *Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (2000), 57.

¹³ Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," 155.

¹⁴ I am currently preparing a publication that will elaborate on the ways in which Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* was transcribed into Dix's work. The artist's Nazi-era paintings were produced to adapt to or comply with the regime's demands, while those from 1945 until his death reflect a different impulse—the artist's negotiation or compromise with the two German states. One should thus read the entirety of Dix's post-1933 allegorical paintings as melancholic aesthetic engagements, since he accepted, albeit critically, the dominant paradigms of artistic production.

Although he does not discuss Dix in any of his critical texts, Benjamin belonged to the same generation as the artist, who may have had access to his collected writings, widely published and read during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵ Benjamin Buchloh mentions in his essay, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” that Benjamin’s influential book, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, or “The Origin of German Tragic Drama,” is “one of the key works for postmodernist aesthetics and the central reference for any contemporary theory of the return to allegory in aesthetic production and reception.”¹⁶ Because Dix’s paintings noticeably exhibit strong parallels with this work, wherein Benjamin presented a complex inner tension between two seemingly incompatible perspectives (an optimistic utopianism and a pessimistic dystopianism), one should consider the general affinity between them.¹⁷

Written between May 1924 and late March or early April 1925 and published in Berlin in January 1928, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* developed out of an analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German theater. Arguably the most complex of Benjamin’s writings, it examines the peculiar stage-form of the royal martyr drama called *Trauerspiel*, literally

¹⁵ Ibid, 163.

¹⁶ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francina Francis and Jonathan Harris (New York: Icon Editions, HarperCollins, 1992), 224. Buchloh discusses a “breakdown of the modernist idiom” that first occurred at the beginning of World War I with the end of Cubism, Futurism, and Pittura Metafisica. The German critic mourns the collapse of the idealist model of a teleological progression of art and sees the return to traditional artistic styles as regressive.

¹⁷ Birgit Schwartz has recently argued that “Nietzsche’s dialectics of opposites provided the basis for the antithetic character of Dix’s art.” See Birgit Schwartz, “Long live (occasionally) tendency in art!”: Dix and the Dialectics of Modernism,” *Otto Dix and the New Objectivity* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 68-71.

“mourning-play,” which refers to a baroque genre used by Lutheran writers and dramatists meditating upon the Thirty Years’ War.¹⁸ At the onset of this text, Benjamin explains, “Baroque drama is inherently emblematic-allegoric [...] *Trauer* [...] signifies sorrow, lament, the ceremonies and memorabilia of grief [while] the *Trauerspiel* is a ‘play of sorrow,’ a ‘playing at and displacing of human wretchedness.’”¹⁹ Detecting its ultimate transitoriness, the baroque allegorists understood history as violent and fragmented. They perceived the effects of cultural decay—man’s inhumanity and capacity for evil—and diagnosed the vanity and futility of human aspirations. Longing for the extinct values of a classical world that they could never attain or repeat, they experienced pervasive melancholy. For Benjamin, then, allegory is not merely an “illustrative technique” but rather “a form of expression”; it is not simply a representational mode of modernism but also a modern sensibility.²⁰ It refers to one’s historically-situated perception and interrogation of the problems and contradictions of the contemporary moment, and as Bainard Cowan indicates, it is “the intuition, the inner experience itself.”²¹ In referencing “the allegorical way of seeing” (*Betrachtung*) or of “looking at things” (*Anschauungsweise*), “the allegorical attitude” (*Anschauung*), “the allegorical intention,” as well as the “allegorical intuition,”²² Benjamin judged that allegory was “the expression of a subjective intention on the part of an individual author.”²³

¹⁸ Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: The Late Medieval and Shakespeare* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2004), 15.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1977), 17.

²⁰ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 162.

²¹ Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory.” *New German Critique* 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter 1981), 110.

²² Cowan, “Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory,” 112.

Because Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is itself a commentary not only on baroque plays but also "on the state of emergency that marked modern Germany from 1918 onwards,"²⁴ that is, since it blurs the distinction between art and life, it can serve as an effective lens for a social-psychological character study of Dix. Although Benjamin does not claim outright that allegory is imposed on individuals because of modernity's repression, he still saw it as an inevitable result of the culture in which it was produced, approaching the mode from an aesthetics grounded in Marxist thought.²⁵ He considers "the allegorist's gaze, which falls upon the city...the gaze of alienated man."²⁶

Just two years after Benjamin's text was published, Dix painted *Melancholie*, or "Melancholy" (Figure 4). Surely the title suggests a link with Albrecht Dürer's famous 1514 engraving *Melencolia I* (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe), "with which Dix would have been familiar from several books in his possession."²⁷ As Jeremy Tambling notes, "Dürer's engraving is at the heart of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*."²⁸ Like the baroque allegorists' mourning plays, Dürer's winged personification of Melancholy reflects his mental turmoil. Many have suggested that *Melencolia I* is autobiographical, asserting that it is actually a self-portrait of

²³ Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix," 163.

²⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 17.

²⁵ See Eli Friedlander, "Commodity as Allegory," in *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 152-156.

²⁶ Tambling, *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: The Late Medieval and Shakespeare*, 20.

²⁷ Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 178.

²⁸ Tambling, *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: The Late Medieval and Shakespeare*, 11.

Dürer.”²⁹ Can we say the same about Dix’s rather diabolical painting? Does the artist associate himself with the male figure that is transfixed by an apocalyptic conflagration outside the window? Does the voluptuous female nude, the personification of melancholy, contribute to Dix’s own lamentation and world-weary disillusionment with his historical moment? The woman’s pose recalls that of Michelangelo’s *Dawn* in the Medici Chapel (Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo, Florence), which suggests a bitter irony—dawn does not imply the promise of a new beginning but rather the coming of the end. Was Dix conveying a growing sense of futility in German society? Pino Blasone, who argues that there is a relationship between “psychological imagery” and “psychological moods,” claims that *Melancholie* is an index of Dix’s traumatic experience of the Nazi rise to power.³⁰

Dix refrained from formulating a theoretical explanation of his art, yet, as Biro explained in 2001, Carl Einstein (1885-1940), “perhaps the greatest German art critic of the 1920s,” wrote two texts on Dix.³¹ He saw the allegorical, by which he meant the retrospective, melancholic, and redemptive character of his artistic production, and thereby discussed issues similar to those explored by Benjamin in his theory of baroque allegory.³² Einstein described Dix’s allegorical paintings as both the literal and symbolic representations of subject matter that illustrated the chaotic present and attempted to identify the ideal future by referring to, and appropriating, the

²⁹ *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, “Albrecht Dürer: Melencolia I (43.106.1),” last modified October 2006 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/43.106.1>.

³⁰ Pino Blasone, “Philosophical Imagery and Philosophical Moods,” in *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, ed. Hagi Kenaan and Ilit Ferber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 9.

³¹ Biro, “Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix,” 46.

³² *Ibid.*, 57.

past. He argued that Dix's allegories specifically indexed his experience of, and response to, the Weimar Republic's cultural and economic turmoil and political chaos on the eve of the advent of National Socialism.³³ Biro shows that Einstein's two critical texts on Dix, an article for Paul Westheim's *Das Kunstblatt* in 1923 and a paragraph for his encyclopedia of twentieth-century artists in 1928, emphasized that the artist's early allegorical paintings reflected his present moment in relation to an assemblage or constellation of multiple and interrelated historical memories of World War I.³⁴ Benjamin, too, emphasized that allegories were forms of dialectical imagery, in which the "spirit of the age seizes on the manifestations of past or distant spiritual worlds, in order to take possession of them and unfeelingly incorporate them into its own self-absorbed fantasizing."³⁵ Synthesizing Einstein's and Benjamin's ideas, Biro concludes that "in Dix's art [...] elements of the real, of modern life, and of the new were intermixed with fragments and signs of history to create complex allegories of the now."³⁶

As we will see, much like Dix's allegorical works from the 1920s, many of those done after 1933 consist of a series of disparate moments of history along with elements of modern life brought together to reveal an internalized retrospection, a general mood of despair, but also a faith in improving social conditions, all of which were similarly suggested by Benjamin's theory of baroque allegory. The artist's paintings reference fragments of his memories working under

³³ Ibid, 46.

³⁴ Ibid, 64. See Carl Einstein, "Otto Dix," *Das Kunstblatt* 7, no. 4 (April 1923): 97-102. For an English translation see Anton Kaes, et al., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 490-491. See also Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts. Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte, XVI, 2. Auflage* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1928), 147-175.

³⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 53.

³⁶ Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," 155.

fascism, during World War II, and as a prisoner of war in France. Yet, as Dix once said, “all art is exorcism. I paint dreams and visions too; the dreams and visions of my time. Painting is the effort to produce order; order in yourself. There is much chaos in me, much chaos in our time.”³⁷

While at times doubtful of any transformation of contemporary social and political life, Dix maintained faith in the gradual fulfillment of his utopian vision.

The Nazi Era

Upon initial inspection, the artist’s powerful anti-war paintings from the early to mid-1930s seem to confirm that strictly dystopian notions preoccupied his thoughts. After all, during this period Dix was dismissed by the Nazis from his teaching posts without notice, labelled a “degenerate,” and forbade from exhibiting his artwork. He had no choice but to relocate, becoming an artist of the so-called ‘inner emigration,’ a term coined by the novelist Frank Thiess to describe writers, in particular, who elected to remain and work in Germany after 1933.³⁸ Meanwhile, numerous German artists and intellectuals, motivated by the threat of persecution, dispossession, incarceration, deportation, and death, had no other choice but to seek refuge abroad. Benjamin joined these exiles, himself a Jew stripped of German citizenship and barred from civil service on account of the anti-semitic Nuremberg Laws. He recoiled from the recognition of his powerlessness and fled the country in 1932, only to find himself trapped in occupied France. Deeply troubled by the thought of being captured and imprisoned by the

³⁷ Swide Magazine, “Otto Dix Comes to North America,” last modified March 17, 2010, <http://www.swide.com/luxury-magazine/Faces/Artists/Otto-Dix-comes-to-North-America/2010/3/17>.

³⁸ Stephen Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 98.

Gestapo, Benjamin committed suicide on the French-Spanish border on the night of September 25, 1940.³⁹

Certainly, Dix shared Benjamin's melancholic outlook, feeling increasingly alienated from his surroundings, but he did not go so far as to take his own life. Instead he retreated from Dresden in 1934 to Schloss Randegg in Singen, then in 1936 to the small town of Hemmenhofen near Radolfzell on Lake Constance, "not far from the Swiss border, so that he could escape across it if the Nazis came for him."⁴⁰ There he submitted to the German climate of desperation and passivity and adopted allegory as a strategy for coping with the censorship imposed by the Nazis. Throughout the Third Reich, this mode allowed him to hide his defiance and assume a stance of aesthetic neutrality. Dix, reminiscent of Benjamin's baroque allegorists in the *Trauerspiel*, had an instinct for self-preservation, and allegory was his means of social and economic survival.

Die Sieben Todsünden, or "The Seven Deadly Sins," an allegory of National Socialism from 1933, allowed him to express his opposition in a somewhat veiled fashion (Figure 5). It also gave him the ability to reveal, like Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, the growing disenchantment of the modern world and his fundamental negation of the era.⁴¹ Dix's painting bears an inscription on the obscured ruined building at the right, a line from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "The desert grows. Woe to him who conceals deserts."⁴² Like the philosopher, Dix was aware of constant cultural decay and was able to acknowledge deceit. To the left of the destroyed building

³⁹ Clive Cazeaux, ed., *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 429.

⁴⁰ Donald Kuspit, "Critical Dix," *Artnet Magazine*, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/otto-dix3-24-10.asp>.

⁴¹ Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," 163.

⁴² Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 209.

is a desolate “landscape of craters and lakes not unlike the battlefields of Flanders and northern France.”⁴³ By presenting a famous quote from one of the German philosopher’s books and illustrating a devastated setting, Dix sensed that nature as well as human beings were being devalued and destroyed. *Die Sieben Todsünden* illustrates the seven vices and vanities, rendering base human behavior in grotesque caricatured form: Greed (the witchlike, haggard old woman leaning on her cane), Wrath (the horned demon holding a knife), Lust (the semi-nude woman, whose dress takes on the shape of the female genitalia, who clutches her right breast and licks her upper lip afflicted with a syphilitic sore), Sloth (the figure in the masked posture of a swastika wearing a skeleton costume and wielding a scythe), Gluttony (the child with a cooking pot on his head giving a Hitler salute), Pride (the figure with the swollen head raising his nose in the air), and Envy (the dwarf holding up a mask, to which Dix added the infamous Hitler mustache after World War II).⁴⁴ Partially disguised references to Hitler resonate with the absolute rulers or tyrants who caused endless suffering in Benjamin’s mourning plays. The painting ultimately seems to resonate with Benjamin’s suggestion that the “onset of an arbitrary rule over things...is the origin of all allegorical contemplation.”⁴⁵ As Biro explained, “by focusing on the figure of the sovereign, the baroque allegorists represented the fate of both the fallen individual and the now secular or profane human community.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,”* 170. As a matter of precaution, the artist did not paint in the Hitler mustache until after the Führer’s death in 1945. However, a preparatory drawing from the collection of the Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart, dated 1933, which shows a black mustache anticipating the final composition, offers evidence that the painting is indeed an allegory of the Third Reich.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 233.

⁴⁶ Biro, “Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix,” 48.

Die Sieben Todsünden was followed in 1934 by *Triumph des Todes*, or “The Triumph of Death,” through which Dix also detected man’s degeneration and the world’s eternal transience (Figure 6). In a preliminary drawing for this painting Dix included the caption, “In the Midst of Life We are Surrounded by Death”⁴⁷ In the final painting, he places a soldier in World War I uniform within the composition. Because this figure has the artist’s facial features, it is understood to be a self-portrait, and the painting assumes a personal dimension. It tells us that as a veteran of the war, Dix recognizes that the German militaristic attitudes that sacrificed the previous generation still survive in the Third Reich. He suggests that the Great War continues beyond its purported end. On the twentieth anniversary year of the start of World War I, Dix is still surrounded by violence and general misfortune: the church in ruins, the lustful semi-nude woman and her emptily sensual lover recalling Adam and Eve, the blind and crippled war veteran begging for alms, and the stooping old woman either planting the seeds of the future or digging her own grave. The crowned skeleton brandishing a scythe takes on an altered form of a swastika and is meant to signify Nazi terror. Insanity still prevails in the present moment. Yet, Dix’s inclusion of a baby crawling through a patch of flowers in the foreground points to the ambivalent quality of the painting’s message. It suggests the possibility of biological survival in the devastation of postwar Germany.⁴⁸

Begun in 1934 and finished in 1936, *Flandern (zu Henri Barbusse ‘Le Feu’)*, or “Flanders (After Henri Barbusse ‘Le Feu’),” equally condemns German rule (Figure 7). The

⁴⁷ Hartley and O’Brien Twohig, *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 198.

⁴⁸ Robert Rosenblum, *The Romantic Child: From Runge to Sendak* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 53.

“ultimate anti-war statement,”⁴⁹ its title is homage to the French writer and soldier Henri Barbusse, who wrote a powerful indictment of the horrors of World War I in his memoir *Le Feu*, or “Under Fire,” published in French in 1916 and in German in 1918.⁵⁰ Because Dix’s large painting (6 ½ x 8 ¼ ft.) is a depiction of the aftermath of the 1918 German offensive in Flanders,⁵¹ like *Triumph des Todes* it follows Benjamin’s call for the remembrance of history. It is truly a gloomy, dismal scene, reflecting the repercussions of one of the worst battles on the Western Front; two soldiers on the right of the composition seem to have survived, but it is almost impossible to differentiate the living from the dead. These figures are surrounded by battered earth, flooded trenches, and scorched trees, not to mention their comrades’ dead bodies, which float in the stagnant water. Yet, there are other aspects of this desolate, dystopian landscape which illuminate Dix’s belief in recovery, confirming that like Benjamin’s, his outlook was at once harshly materialistic, pessimistic, and expectant. The sky clears and the moon sinks on the right while the sun rises on the left; the tree stump behind the seated soldier in the foreground is crowned with barbed wire and refers to Christ’s crown of thorns; and new catkins sprout from the burnt tree next to the man’s left hand. Obviously, these visual motifs have positive connotations of resurrection.

In *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*, or “Temptation of St. Anthony” from 1937, Dix comments on the character and consequences of Nazism in the present⁵² (Figure 8). A scantily clad, young Aryan woman’s cloak is rendered in lurid candy colors. The provocative female and five diabolical monsters surround St. Anthony, the old hermit in the foreground who

⁴⁹ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 79.

⁵⁰ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,”* 201.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 79.

is shrouded in a deep blue fabric, symbolizing his spirituality. These unruly figures correspond with the *Trauerspiel*'s notion of human beings as "creatures." Benjamin argued that the creature was "animal-like, in the sense of instinctive, base, enslaved, material, passionate, or bodily."⁵³ His ideas about man's depravity are in keeping with Dix's. In an interview in 1965, the artist expressed that he "was delighted that life is as it is, that not everything is sugary sweet and wonderful. It all depends; you can see mankind as great—but also as really small, even like an animal. It's all part of his natural disposition."⁵⁴ "Animality"⁵⁵ surrounds Saint Anthony, who tilts his head forward, evoking sorrow, but above all resistance to temptation. His gaze is fixed on Christ on the cross above him, and he reaches toward the Lord with an open hand. Dix presents a dichotomy between irrationality and intuition on the one hand and reason and reserve on the other. Dix's painting and Benjamin's text emphasize the fundamental opposition between humanity's capacity for both good and evil.⁵⁶

If we pause for a moment to review *Triumph des Todes*, *Flandern*, and *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*, we recall that they appear to be visual equivalents of Benjamin's textual articulation of allegory as a cultural reflection of apocalyptic vision. Just as Benjamin perceived in allegory "the world's perishable nature during the Baroque," Dix distinguished the evils, suffering, and destruction of all living things in contemporary life.⁵⁷ Yet, as Benjamin describes, the notion that allegory is simply melancholic is incorrect:

⁵³ Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix," 49.

⁵⁴ Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*. London: Tate Gallery, 1992, 139.

⁵⁵ Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix." *Art Criticism*, 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

⁵⁷ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," in *Art after Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge: MIT, 2006), 28.

“For it is to misunderstand the allegorical entirely if we make a distinction between the store of images, in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and that grim store which signifies death and damnation. For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgatha...is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In its transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory, as the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem.”⁵⁸

Therefore, while it seems that *Lot und seine Töchter*, or “Lot and his Daughters,” from 1939 alludes to Dix’s dystopian foresight about the devastation of humanity and culture to come,⁵⁹ it can also be interpreted as his conviction in recovery (Figure 9). The artist illustrates the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to comment once more on the wreckage of World War I. Eva Karcher suggests that Dix’s painting also sends a foreboding warning for the burning of Dresden, since the buildings of the Brühl terrace, the cupola of St. Mary’s church, and the tower of the court church built by Gaetano Chiaveri are clearly recognizable. In 1943 Dix wrote:

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 232.

⁵⁹ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 79.

“I hope the shit will soon be over...I hope with all my heart that the puke will be over before it’s Dresden’s turn, which means most to me as a city, it’s my second home. If it doesn’t end soon, there would be no reason for the enemy to spare Dresden.”⁶⁰

The city did indeed go up in flames at the hands of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) during the final months of World War II. In his allegorical painting, Dix’s reference to Lot’s seduction by his two daughters can be extended to the German population’s temptation by the National Socialists. Dix portrays a righteous man amongst the wicked. Lot, like the German people, appears to be the victim of their dastardly deed. His inebriated state was caused by his daughters, one of whom resembles the naked Aryan woman in *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*. Ultimately, Dix expresses his own belief in moral and spiritual rectitude, continuing to reveal affinities with Benjamin’s interest in transcendence and redemption within the midst of tragedy.

During the same year in which Dix painted *Lot und seine Töchter*, he became a focus of nationalist attack and was arrested by the Gestapo on a charge of complicity in an assassination plot on Hitler’s life in the Munich Bürgerbräukeller.⁶¹ He was briefly detained because “his name appeared on a secret list held by the Reich Central Security Office identifying the ‘leaders of the Weimar system.’”⁶² After fourteen days of interrogations, which yielded no evidence, he

⁶⁰ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969*: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,” 190.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 173.

⁶² The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, “Exhibition Layout.”

was released and charges were dropped. A year later, after being treated for injuries sustained in a car accident, Dix returned home to more obstacles—the *Schutzstaffel*, or the “SS,” looking for incriminating documents.⁶³ They found none, and the tenacious artist would no longer be politically suspect to the regime, though his career was still derailed.

Despite Dix’s run-ins with the National Socialists, *Aufbrechendes Eis (mit Regenbogen über Steckborn)*, or “Ice Breaking up (with a Rainbow over Steckborn)” from 1940 articulates the promise of a bright future (Figure 10).⁶⁴ In the very center of the painting, against the dark night sky, the artist depicts a colorful rainbow that descends vertically upon the church and surrounding Swiss town across from where he lived on the German side of Lake Constance. The cracking ice divides the two regions and emphasizes their distance but also their opposition. Neutral Switzerland, illuminated by Dix’s rainbow, alludes to the possibility of liberation from wartime Germany, which is shown in the dim foreground.

The Postwar Period

Still, Dix was at times skeptical of positive change, much like his own generation of leading members of the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) diagnosed the ills of their society, but they demonstrated their pessimistic stance on existing social conditions when they proposed negative critiques that avoided the affirmative illusions of the present.⁶⁵ As Fred Rush explains:

⁶³ Sabarsky, *Otto Dix*, 30.

⁶⁴ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 109.

⁶⁵ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

“Adorno, who, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, [began] to articulate a more “anesthetized” and guarded view of Critical Theory’s systematic potential. In a much more developed form, this view of Critical Theory [would] come to dominate the Frankfurt School from the mid 1940s until Adorno’s death in the late 1960s.”⁶⁶

Adorno’s *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, composed in the United States between 1944 and 1947 and completed in 1949 while he lived as an exile in America, entered the West German book market in 1951.⁶⁷ The book exhibits his overarching skepticism; the title itself is a telling inversion of Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia*, or “Great Ethics.” Nonetheless, Adorno’s doubts were accompanied by his hopes; in Aphorism 153, he concluded his volume in a fairly optimistic tone, clearly influenced by Benjamin and thus worth quoting at length:

“The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.

⁶⁶ Fred Rush, ed., “Conceptual foundations of early Critical Theory” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8.

⁶⁷ Jakob Norberg, “Adorno’s Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism,” *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011): 398.

To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”⁶⁸

Adorno found himself and others in the “face of despair” because the project of the Enlightenment had become dubious. Yet, he reconciled his objection to idealistic rationalism with his anticipation of the transformation of the social structure, settling on contemplating German society “from the standpoint of redemption.” Natalia Skradol’s article, “Homo Novus: The New Man as Allegory,” reminds us that despite the dismal picture of the modern era presented by some theorists, “the twentieth century saw the appearance of quite a few landmark

⁶⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 247.

works on political dimensions of utopia.”⁶⁹ She cites the close friend and colleague of Benjamin and Adorno, Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), the German Marxist philosopher and perhaps the greatest modern utopian thinker. Writing during the 1930s in the United States, where he lived in exile from Nazi Germany, Bloch “optimistically spoke of the invigorating ‘principle of hope’ as the essence of Utopian impulses.”⁷⁰ Earlier, in his first book *Geist der Utopie*, or “*The Spirit of Utopia*,” published after World War I, he promoted an “anticipatory consciousness.”⁷¹ Thus, while it is true that some members of the Frankfurt School’s inner circle were doubtful of any transformation of contemporary social and political life, it must be remembered that there were in fact Critical Theorists, such as Georg Lukács (1885-1971) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), among others, who had faith in the gradual fulfillment of their vision of redemption. Indeed, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno likened his performative writing, essentially a negative dialectic, to “messianic light.”⁷²

Certainly, Dix’s painting, *Hiob*, or “Job” from 1946 reaffirms that he “was an ingrained optimist and believed that life would always spring up again out of destruction”⁷³ (Figure 11). Job, the central character of the Book of Job in the Old Testament, is depicted in the foreground. His skin, exposed by tattered clothing, is afflicted and overcome by boils. Job lolls backward seemingly in pain and attempts to relieve his itchy skin by scraping it with a pottery shard. He is surrounded by an empty war landscape with crumbled buildings and lies underneath a charred

⁶⁹ Natalia Skradol, “Homus Novus: The New Man as Allegory,” *Utopian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2009): 44.

⁷⁰ Skradol, “Homus Novus: The New Man as Allegory,” 44.

⁷¹ Pino Blasone, “Philosophical Imagery and Philosophical Moods,” in *Philosophy’s Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, ed. Hagi Kanaan and Ilit Ferber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 17.

⁷² Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, 247.

⁷³ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,”* 206.

roof, which takes the shape of a broken Nazi swastika. Dix cites the past by depicting a wasteland that might refer to Dresden, which had been heavily bombed in February 1945, killing more than 30,000 people in the process.⁷⁴ The wheel to the right of Job's head, in keeping with the theme of physical decay, is a metaphor of life's cyclical nature and ultimate transitoriness. In all of these motifs, Dix uses Job as allegory for the German nation after a dozen years of Nazi rule and six years of war.⁷⁵ In the biblical story, God allowed Satan to take Job's children, wealth, and physical health to test his faithfulness. Yet, Job remains steadfast to his creator, committed in daily prayer. Accepting that one receives "good" at the hand of God but should also expect to receive "evil," he patiently endures his difficult circumstances.⁷⁶ In Dix's painting, Job's bright blue eyes look up at the swastika, indicating the artist's contemplative, critical perspective. Yet, they also stare heavenward in concrete anticipation for the future, symbolized in the plant that grows directly above him. Job is thus an allegory of perseverance in suffering and of faith in providence in the midst of destruction. He perhaps functions more specifically as a stand-in for the modern artist oppressed by the Nazis, yet anticipative of justice. Job's resolution is rewarded, as God returns to him his family, fortune, and well-being. *Hiob* thus seems in keeping with Benjamin's notion of "melancholy immersion":

"Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the

⁷⁴ Hartley and O'Brien Twohig, *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 213.

⁷⁵ Eckhart Gillen, *German Art: From Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1997), 508.

⁷⁶ Crossway Bibles, "Satan Attacks Job's Health," in *The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version)* (2001), Job 2:10, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://bible.cc/job/2-10.htm>.

supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this *one* about-turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection.”⁷⁷

Dix, too, alludes to the idea that devastation is a necessary precondition for his own transcendence. While *Hiob* conveys an apocalyptic mood, it is not totally devoid of hope.

Dix continued to paint religious allegories throughout the postwar period. *Selbstbildnis als Kriegsgefangener*, or “Self-Portrait as Prisoner of War,” from 1947 was done from memory after his release from detainment after nearly a year in a French prisoner-of-war camp (Figure 12). Dix had been drafted into the *Volkssturm*, or “Home Guard,” during the WWII’s last few months on March 15, 1945 at the age of fifty-four. Deployed to the Western Front, Dix was captured by French forces a month later.⁷⁸ In his self-portrait, Dix appears in a prisoner-of-war uniform, his face prematurely aged, with unruly white facial hair, downtrodden eyes, and sunken cheeks. These rough characteristics reveal the artist’s psyche—his interiorization, anguish, and

⁷⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 232-233.

⁷⁸ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 106.

broken spirit. Directly behind the stoic artist are two other prisoners-of-war in conversation. One's back faces the viewer, while the other's face is partially obscured. Their disregard for Dix heightens his sense of isolation and abandonment. The intertwined barbed wire that surrounds the three figures' heads is an allusion to Christ's crown of thorns. Set across the background, the barbed wire gives the impression of blue stained-glass supported by black rigid frames, forming a window much like one in a Christian church. The bright blue color of the glass is in stark contrast with the gloomy black hue of the frames and has long symbolized heaven. Yet again, in this allegorical painting we see similarities with Benjamin's contradictory notions of misery and the possibility of deliverance.

In *Grosse Auferstehung Christi II*, or "Large Resurrection of Christ II," from 1949, Dix seems to retain his melancholic outlook but also reveals the idea of nascent vitality (Figure 13). The composition is divided into two halves, the bottom portion symbolizing Christ's suffering, death, and burial, the top portion denoting his life and resurrection from the tomb. The dark color scheme and skull in the bottom half of the picture are differentiated from the bright colors, angels, stars, and planets that belong to the upper half of the painting. By showing the body of Christ halfway between the realms of death and life, Dix creates a striking contrast. *Grosse Auferstehung Christi II* informs us that the death and resurrection of Jesus was for the redemption of man. Conveying allusions to his contemporary experience, Dix suggests that despite Germany's traumatic experiences, it has the possibility of rebirth and renewal. His allegorical painting illustrates traditional Christian beliefs and further underscores his fervent hope in the promise of deliverance. As Benjamin put it, even "the human body could be no

exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments.”⁷⁹

Dix’s message of liberation is repeated in *Alemmanische Masken*, or “Alemannic Masks,” from 1954 (Figure 14). Four mythological figures dressed as demons, witches, and dreadful animals are shown dancing. They participate in the annual Swabian-Alemannic *Fastnacht* or *Fasching*, essentially a “Mardi Gras” celebration and street parade that occurs during January and February and continues to this day in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Dix was fully aware of these carnival rituals, as they were mostly commemorated in the predominantly Catholic southwestern parts of the country.⁸⁰ In fact, the *Konstanzer Fastnacht* was and still is celebrated near Lake Constance. Like all of the *Fastnacht* festivities, it consisted of several pre-Lenten events which combined both pagan beliefs and Christian morality. According to pagan tradition, carnival symbolically expelled the evil spirits and death of the winter season so that spring could recur and the perennial life cycle could start over again. Hence Dix’s elaborately costumed figures wear masks: to scare away these bad spirits so that good ones can come into existence. Once more we see links with the *Trauerspiel*; Benjamin argued that the allegorists’ mourning plays “presented the intrigues of courtly life as a metaphor for the battle between primordial forces of good and evil.”⁸¹

Krieg und Frieden, or “War and Peace,” from 1960 similarly resembles Benjamin’s theory of allegory because it renders the horrors of history—fascism and World War II in the narrative zone on the left—but it also sends the Christian message of salvation, as suggested by

⁷⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 216-217.

⁸⁰ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,”* 196.

⁸¹ Biro, “History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy,” 163.

the section on the right (Figure 15). This five-by-twelve-meter mural was a commission from Theopont Dietz, the mayor of Singen in West Germany. Dietz was a Catholic politician and member of the Christian conservative party, *Die Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, or the “Christian Democratic Union.” Dix was uninvolved in party politics, stating in 1920 that he was “neither political nor tendentious nor a pacifist or a moralist or anything else,” and again in 1933 that he “never belonged to a political party or organization.”⁸² Certainly, Dix illustrated German social conditions in an analytical manner, but he never strove to change them through his work. He was critical of the increasingly entrenched polarization of politics in divided Germany—both the West’s capitalism and the East’s Soviet socialism— but often reiterated his stance of neutrality.

Upon the completion of Dix’s mural for the rear wall in the auditorium of the Singen town hall, the artist called it a “synthesis of what I have tried to do in my work my whole life long.”⁸³ His placement of Christ on the cross in the center serves to divide the mural into two halves with three scenes. On the left, a figure in the guise of Hitler and a man in uniform whip and club a shackled and wounded naked man who slumps forward in pain. To their right, a tank fires and drives on a bloodied earth over human corpses. Below this scene ghostly figures are portrayed in a crematorium. On the other hand, the image to the right of the crucified Christ is more optimistic. A radiant sun emerges out of the horizon, as a woman plays with her two children, a girl jumps rope, and a man constructs new buildings. The dove perched on the “tree of life” represents peace while the figure of Christ surfacing from a dark tomb alludes to his resurrection. In 1964, Dix explained that he hoped his allegorical mural would provoke questions

⁸² Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 43.

⁸³ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous”* 204.

about the course of German history: “In my opinion, the main question of our time is: Will mankind succeed in securing peace, or will it fall back into fascist barbarism and war? [...] That’s why I reminded people again of the atrocities of fascism and war and presented, as a contrast, the blessings of peace.”⁸⁴

Because it urges individuals to examine their contemporary moment in light of numerous past events, and since it likewise calls for viewers to arrest the linear, irreversible flow of “homogeneous, empty time,” *Krieg und Frieden* coincides very well with yet another work written by Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, or “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” a brief essay he completed before his suicide in 1940. In a famous passage characterizing Paul Klee’s drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920), Benjamin visualizes his historical materialist critical practice and describes his messianic concept of *Jetztzeit*, or “now-time,” which calls for the remembrance of history. He sees the incongruous figure as an allegory, an “angel of history,” who is caught in the present where there is disorder and chaos, who “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,”⁸⁵ but who is propelled instead into the future by modernity’s insistence on rational progress. Dix was like the angel of history. He was consciously aware of the buildup of catastrophe and called for a “dialectics at a standstill,” or a momentary cessation of ongoing historical movement, hoping to pre-empt further regression into barbarism.⁸⁶ Unlike the angel of history, however, Dix did not have his back turned to the future. He inverted the gaze, deciding to look forward even though his and

⁸⁴ Gutbrod, *Otto Dix: The Art of Life*, 112.

⁸⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *German 20th Century Philosophy: The Frankfurt School*, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher (New York: Continuum, 2000,) 74.

⁸⁶ David S. Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32.

Benjamin's messianic goal of salvation was yet to be realized.⁸⁷ *Krieg und Frieden* thus joins the numerous allegorical paintings I have cited that parallel Benjamin's notion of an unresolved balance between striving toward the ideal future and being stuck in the ruinous present.

Selbstporträt als Totenkopf mit Lorbeerkrantz, or "Self-Portrait as Death's-Head with Laurel Wreath," a print from 1968, is one of Dix's last works, and like many other paintings, it too reveals the artist's allegorical meditation on life and death and mixed feelings of transience and transcendence (Figure 16). He crowns his skull with a vibrant green laurel wreath, a motif symbolizing strength and traditionally worn after a victory or triumph. Perhaps a reference for this work, a photograph of the aging artist wearing a laurel wreath on his head was taken seven years prior, on the artist's seventieth birthday (Figure 17). Although the print suggests that Dix sees death as life's only victory, the cheery photograph upholds the idea that regeneration is still a possibility. Again, by looking at Benjamin's book, one can assess Dix's disposition during the last decade of his life:

"For even this time of hell is secularized in space, and that world, which abandoned itself to the deep spirit of Satan and betrayed itself, is God's world. In God's world the allegorist awakens. Yea, when the Highest comes to reap the harvest from the graveyard, then I, a death's head, will be an angel's countenance."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 232-233.

Benjamin further suggests that through the intervention of the allegorist, the “product of the corpse is life.”⁸⁹ Dix died the following year, on July 25, 1969, after a second stroke.⁹⁰ That the artist approached the end of his life in relatively good spirits and with at least partial confidence in the future is reflected in his final painting left standing on the easel, a bouquet of flowers, articulating the idea of budding vitality.⁹¹

Conclusion

Ultimately, because Benjamin and Dix shared a similarly esoteric worldview during Germany’s most tragic and tumultuous century, and since they employed an allegorical mode that referenced the past while attempting to externalize and redeem a terrible reality, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* can be used as a model for interpreting the bipolarity of the artist’s paintings after 1933. Dix, like Benjamin, recognized the contradictions of his haphazard age, saying:

“Yes it is wonderful that the world is so grotesque, so dialectical! So contradictory! On the one hand, solemnity, and on the other, comedy. That the two are so closely linked, is a kind of...well, it is not exactly something I discovered singlehandedly, but they seemed to me to be connected. No, I always took pleasure in the fact that life was like that. Human nature would not be

⁸⁹ Ibid, 218.

⁹⁰ Schick, *Otto Dix: Hommage a Martha*, 122.

⁹¹ Karcher, *Dix, 1891-1969: “I’ll either be famous – or infamous,”* 207.

complete without that. No, I was not at all troubled by realizing all this...After all, there is humor.”⁹²

Since this quote suggests that the artist upheld an enduring faith in society rather than a bleak resignation, his lingering optimism must be seen in tension with his pessimism. Certainly, the messy ironies in Dix’s allegorical paintings necessitate the need for a critical analysis of his dystopian/utopian vision.

⁹² Karcher, *Otto Dix*, 39.

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