

Versions of Public Art: National Self-Representation in the Iconography of Nazi Germany and the New Deal

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American cultural historians, Lawrence Levine among them, have frequently emphasized the profound, almost traumatic impact the Depression had on the American imagination. "Half a century after [it] ended Americans still sing about it, write and read about it, make and watch movies depicting it..., attend to the testimony of its survivors, revive its music, its drama, and its fashion."¹ Indeed, the Thirties are generally remembered as a period of hardship collectively endured. Whether they are celebrated as a period of social faith, of commitment to public causes and the common weal, or denounced as a period of un-American flirtation with collectivism: they are, in any case, seen as a crucial period of transition in which the insistence on a unique national culture and the appeal to American values and traditions went hand in hand with profound changes in the economic and political structure of American society, specifically, with the redefinition of the function of the State, the "extraordinary expansion of the role of the federal government."² In short, the Thirties not only demonstrate how the appeal to a memory of things past helped to invigorate a sense of national purpose, they have themselves entered the storehouse of collective memories from which the consciousness of

1 "American Culture and the Great Depression," *The Yale Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Jan. 1985), pp. 196-223.

2 John A. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Oct. 1973), pp. 907-944.

national identity constantly supplies itself. No matter how radically new or different the Thirties once appeared to be, it is not difficult for us to also see them from a vantage point of tradition, continuity and usable past.

All this is obviously different in the case of Germany. There was, surely, an equally traumatic experience of economic crisis and, for a brief historic moment, a sense of its collective mastery. There was a similar if more rigorous and elaborate attempt to mobilize the "psychic energy of the people"³ and to forge a national identity by reasserting and enacting the legends of a mythic German (or Germanic) past. It was an identity, however, at once national, cultural and racist, that not only defined itself through the exclusion of the ideologically and racially Other but, from the very beginning, tied its fulfillment to the destruction of the Jews. Its catastrophic collapse made German national identity once again an unsolved (and perhaps still unsolvable) issue and the question of continuity a highly problematic one. Nostalgia for the Thirties can therefore be admitted only with a bad conscience; or after much selective repression of memory; or through the aggressive denial of historic fact (the strategy of the extreme Right); or through the separation of culture from its ideological and political foundation (as became apparent in a discussion of several years ago on whether Nazi art should be exhibited in West German museums or not⁴).

Comparing the iconography of American and German art during the Thirties may therefore seem to be a rather dubious enterprise since it runs the risk of either stating the too obvious or of falling into the trap of apology by comparing what would seem to defy comparison. However, to understand certain similarities in topic, style and function is also to clearer understand their differences. The arts in the new Deal and the Third Reich should be regarded as related, if diametrically opposed, symbolic responses to a common experience of crisis: as related in their ideological function, in their emphasis of (native) subject matter over form, in their insistence on the communal or public nature of art. Yet they should be seen as different in everything else: in the nature and origin of their respective ideologies (the one claiming the heritage of the Enlightenment, the

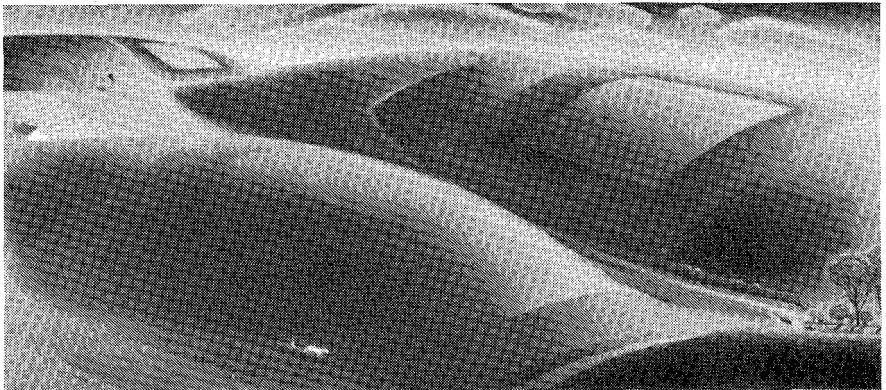
3 *Ibid.*, p. 943.

4 The argument arose when, in 1986, the well-known art collector Peter Ludwig contracted the notorious Arno Breker (one of Hitler's favorite artists) to do a sculpture of him and his wife. In the ensuing public discussion Ludwig complained that no museum in the Federal Republic dared exhibit artists of the Nazi period; see Hilmar Hoffmann, *Es is noch nicht zu Ende* (Frankfurt, 1988), p. 9.

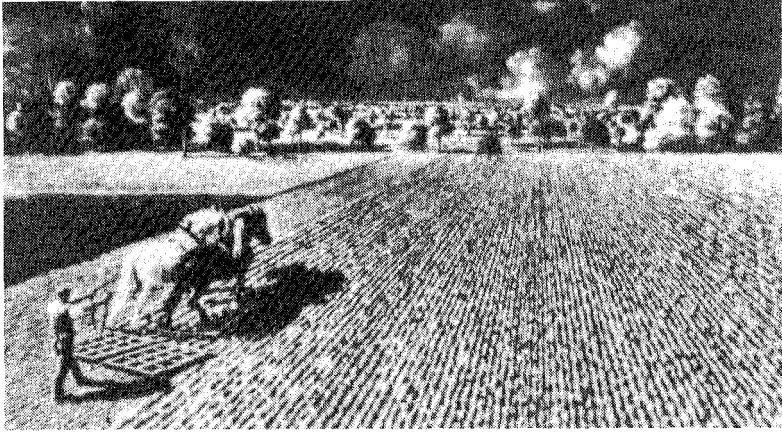
other aiming to destroy it); in the radically divergent interpretations of shared concepts like soil, People, community; as different also in their institutional basis and thus in their dependence on official aesthetic doctrine and cultural policy.

II

Let us begin by briefly looking at four paintings which in form and subject matter are representative of major tendencies in the artistic expression of both countries. Grant Wood's "Spring Turning" of 1936 is one of his many idyllizations of American farm life—removed from history, a fairy-tale image of pastoral existence. It is, however, more interesting than others because it seems to combine an ideological statement with a poetological one. Wood's agrarianism is most obvious in the mythification of earth as woman or goddess whose largesse is accentuated by the minuteness of the farmer ploughing it (or her; the painting invites such sexual punning). And yet, Wood's commitment is not primarily to nature but to culture. For it is work, the act of ploughing, that converts submissive and corporeal nature into abstract design and artefact. The spring turning thus becomes a symbol of the creative act as an act of mimesis: It brings out, from the unshaped physical stuff, the ideal (art-)form that is already inherently there in the American soil, in the American material.



Grant Wood, "Spring Turning," 1936. Oil on masonite panel, 18 1/4 x 40 1/4 inches. Private coll.



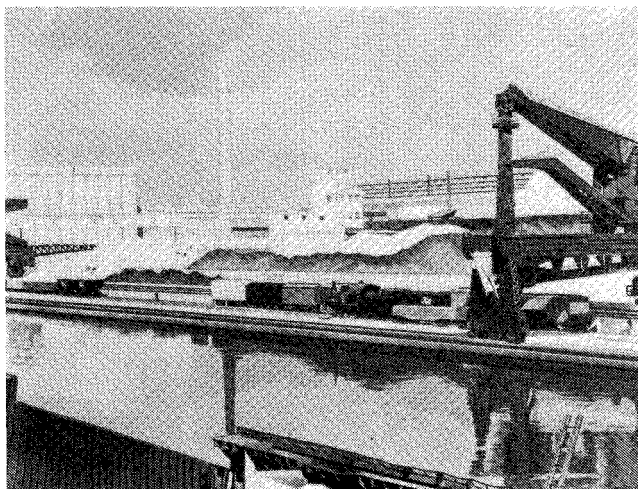
Weiner Peiner, "Deutsche Erde," 1933.

Werner Peiner's⁵ painting of 1933, "German Earth," although less openly mythological, does not, at first glance, seem very far in spirit from Grant Wood. (In fact, his pastorals — like those of his colleagues Fritz Eler, Carl Bantzer, Sepp Hilz or Walter Schmock — share Wood's artful naivité and show him as similarly influenced by *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the Flemish masters, or medieval iconography.) Through his arrangement of perspective, the soil — as signalled in the title — becomes indeed the symbolic center of the picture: drawn along the meticulously painted furrows, the eye of the viewer is completely 'filled' with it. There is again the structural opposition between artefact and nature — as visible in the rectangular patterns of the field and the farmer's harrow, on the one hand, and the rounded shapes of trees and clouds, on the other — but it is de-emphasized by a title that would seem to subordinate the category of the native soil, as if production was an innate quality of it. This is also noticeable in the formal arrangement of the painting. Through its peculiar handling of

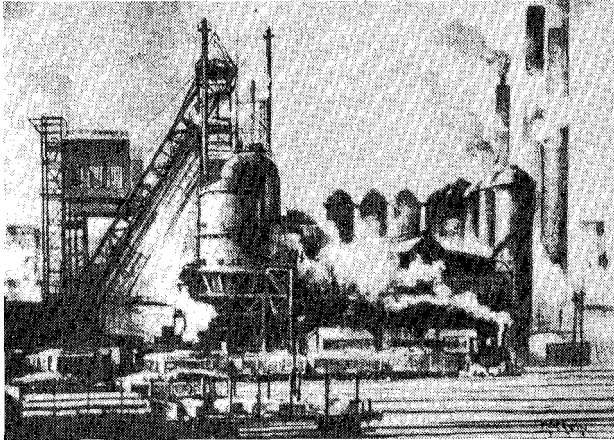
5 Werner Peiner, born in 1897, was first associated with "Neue Sachlichkeit" and its conservative wing, the "New German Romanticism," integrating into his early style the Dutch and German masters of the 15th and 16th centuries. He made his career during the Nazi period and became director of the Herman-Goring Meisterschule für Malerei at Kronenburg in 1937. He painted patriotic murals and designed monumental tapestry (like "Battles of Destiny in German History") which earned him the rank of "irreplaceable artist" (and saved him from being drafted during the war). Cp. Reinhard Merker, *Die bildenden Künste im Nationalsozialismus* (Koln: Dumont, 1983), p. 31f. and Klaus Volmer, ed., *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künste des 20. Jahrhunderts.*, Vol III, p. 563.

perspective, the foregrounded farmer is in fact passed over by the pull of the background: the eye absorbs him into the larger order represented and embodied in German earth.

Charles Sheeler's "American Landscape" (1930) is the earliest of several versions of Henry Ford's River Rouge Plant that he painted during the decade. Its pastoralization of industry is explicit, almost programmatic since the pervading stillness of the picture, the representation of machinery as power in repose, would seem to disallow any ironic reading of the title. The industrial object is treated as aesthetic object—as idealized and purified form. By investing the man-made with the dignity and beauty of the natural phenomenon, Sheeler expresses a veneration of the finished product that connects the craft of his own painting with that of the well-made industrial object. (Indeed, Sheeler's painted space is usually filled with objects of human production, be they hand-made or industrial.) His paintings, therefore, do not thematize disruption but continuity: between mind and a world of the mind's production, between America as "Nature's Nation" and as nation of modern industry—just as their abstract design is quasi-naturally given in the geometrical shape of the objects themselves. Sheeler's aesthetization of the industrial product has provoked his detractors on the Left into calling him "the Raffael of the Fords," and it should indeed be noted that the process of production as much as the agents of this process are absent from the painting.



Charles Sheeler, "American Landscape," 1930



Franz Gerwin, "Hochöfen," 1938

Franz Gerwin's "Blast-Furnaces," of 1938, is clearly painted in the same tradition, although the elements of detachment and stillness, which Sheeler had emphasized in the mirror-like surface of the foregrounded river, have been replaced by the massiveness of the painted object. It is nevertheless tamed by a pattern of vertical and horizontal lines that seems to suggest the essential correspondence between industrial order and aesthetic design. Yet in contrast to Sheeler's "American Landscape," an abundance of steam signals the dynamics of production—in fact, the painting might be regarded as an emblem of (and advertisement for) a production going "full steam." But here, too, there is no sign of the human agents that keep the system in motion.

III

This would seem to confirm the general consensus among German art historians that there never was a generic Nazi style in art.⁶ Not only did the painters who became prominent during the Third Reich develop artistically within the cultural context of the Weimar period. Their preferences

⁶ Cp. Berthold Hinz, *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus* (München/Wien, 1974); translated as *Art in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979); Reinhard Müller-Mehlis, *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* (München, 1976); or Erich Steingraber, ed., *Deutsche Kunst in den 20er und 30er Jahren* (München, 1976).

for traditional forms and native themes was part of an earlier international movement away from modernism back towards representation which had an impact also on American art. "A return to order," Linda Nochlin called it in her review of "Les Réalismes," the Paris Exhibition of 1981 that brought the various neo-realisms in European and American painting together, thus documenting—in the words of another critic—a last moment of transatlantic unity before the war.⁷ This new and highly eclectic order of representation (as culled from, and mediated through, techniques of cubism, folk art, the Italian Renaissance, the German and Dutch masters of the 15th and 16th centuries) defies easy ideological rubrication. It was, in any case, used more often against fascism than in its name. Nazi art—and that is perhaps its really distinctive feature—is the result of a brutal process of selection which eliminated modernism and most of the neo-realisms (including *Neue Sachlichkeit*) and only allowed an idealizing or mythologizing realism as official style. An early attempt of Nazi students and intellectuals (half-heartedly supported by Goebbels) to legitimize German Expressionism as the aesthetic equivalent of the National-Socialist cultural revolution was attacked by fanatic ideologues like Alfred Rosenberg and his "NS-Kulturgemeinde" and quickly suppressed by a bureaucratic apparatus bent on the liquidation of the modern. The establishment of an official style began, still in 1933, with the foundation of the Reichskammer für Bildende Kunst (one of several subsections of the Reichskulturkammer) which made membership obligatory for everybody wanting to practice art and at the same time allowed membership only to those racially and artistically agreeable to the regime.⁸ It culminated in two infamous Munich exhibitions of 1937, one exposing

7 "This fixation on the new reached its climax before World War I in a simultaneously liberating and unstable abstraction that was cosmopolitan in its reach and universal in its ambitions—an art at once ambiguous, dynamic and difficult. In its stead [the new realisms of the 20s and 30s] offered a return to the sober rendition of things in the world within the context of a narrowly conceived national heritage," Linda Nochlin, "Return to Order," *Art in America*, Sept. 1981, pp. 74-83. For a similar interpretation, see Gottfried Knapp, "Die andere Seite der Moderne," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Jan. 31/Feb. 1, 1981, Feuilleton, 1.

8 On the controversy about German expressionism, see Müller-Mehlis, p. 156f. Especially interesting are the cases of Emil Nolde and Ludwig Kirchner, both party members and firm believers in Nazi myths, who therefore could not understand why their paintings were officially banned as "entartet." On the organization of culture and the arts by the National Socialists, see Merker, *Die bildenden Künste im Nationalsozialismus*; Joseph Wulf, *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich*, (Frankfurt/Berlin: Ullstein, 1966); and Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus*. (Reinbek: rowohlt, 1963).

the despised products of "degenerate art" to the ridicule of what was called the "sound popular instinct," the other dedicated to the "new German art." In his address to the former, Goebbels denounced the works of modernism as degenerate expressions of an epoch "that we have, by now, spiritually and politically, outgrown." In his opening speech to the latter, Hitler called "cubism, dadaism, futurism, impressionism etc." the artistic "stammering of people to whom God has denied the gift of true talent" and attacked the historization of art (by which he meant its inclusion in the general process of modernization). What mattered was not the question of modernity but that of truth. True art was classic and timeless—a classicism based on racial purity and rooted in the judgment of the people.

The question of the ahistorical and timeless may bring to mind again the magic realism of Grant Wood. But beside the dimension of playfulness and self-irony always present in Wood's work, there is, even within American regionalism itself, a tendency to confront its own mythologies with the experienced real. Paintings like Alexandre Hogue's "Erosion Nr. 2—Mother Earth Laid bare" (1936) satirically transform Wood's pastoral language into a language of destroyed pastoral. Such tensions between the ideal and the real, between the timeless and the historical is, in fact, a common element of the rivalling forms of realism that dominate the American art scene of the Thirties. Whereas in Germany, art with its idealizing rhetoric screened itself off from a reality which it served at the same time as an accomplice, the evocation of shared ideals and the documentation of common life were the two essential elements in the cultural policy of the New Deal. This attempt at creating a sense of collective interdependence, of the People as community, is evident in the government's stupendous efforts to document common American life. From the FSA photography project to the "Index of American Design," from the FWP's travel guides to its various oral history projects: in exploring geographically as well as socially unknown territory, the New Deal constructed (or tried to construct) as part of its policy a consciousness of national coherence across class and racial lines. (The only German equivalent to this American urge for documentation that comes to mind are the minutely kept secrets dossiers of the NS-state on the everyday life of its citizens.) Perhaps one can even say that documentation was the other side of idealization; for it measured the distance between experience and social faith, and implicitly appealed to bridge the gap through social practice.

If documentation was one of the most important impulses of the period, participation and commitment, therefore, was another. The need for and satisfaction of belonging, the eagerness to help shape a community-in-the-making, not only find formulaic expression in official letters and reports but enter into the personal memoirs of the decade. In 1934, Edward Bruce, the head of the Public Works of Art Project, commented on the effect of that government program on the artists employed by it: "It has, as many expressed it, broken down the wall of isolation and brought them in touch and in line with the life of the nation." In a similar if more personal vein, Ben Shahn remembers almost thirty years later: "I felt in complete harmony with the times. I don't think I've ever felt that way before or since. I was totally involved. I was totally committed."⁹

Participation in the unions, in the organizations of the Communist Party, or in the relief programs of the New Deal thus provided a new sense of personal freedom precisely by giving each a sense of place and function in society. However, documentation and participation do not only represent the dominant drives at least of the intellectual life of the period, they also enter into the structure of its artistic expression as a tension (verging on disruption) between mimesis and message, between a reverence for the objective and a subjective urge to express and intervene. This is evident in many paintings of the Thirties, different in style and topic as they may appear. They record or stylize elements of the American environment, but also—be they regionalist or social realist—push beyond their frame, have a story to tell to the point almost of allegory. (This is even true of a politically committed abstract painter, like Stuart Davis, whose "American Painting" [1932-51] would seem to illustrate the point.) If, therefore, as Joshua Taylor once remarked about the period, "reality itself was in crisis,"¹⁰ the art of the Thirties in America is characterized by its struggle to achieve a new consensus on a reality still to be shaped in ongoing processes of communicative interaction. To understand this peculiar pragmatic or public quality implied in the idealizing tendencies of almost all American "realisms" of the Thirties, I would like to briefly look at what came closest to an American official or public art: the murals of the Section and the WPA/FAP.

9 Garbett McCoy, "Poverty, Politics and Artists, 1930-1945," *Art in America*, 53 (Aug./Sept. 1965), pp. 89-107.

10 *America as Art* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian, 1976), p. 220.

The art program of the New Deal, in contrast to those of the Reichskulturkammer, were not primarily meant to control artistic expression but to create jobs for unemployed artists. Although officials and participants stress the comparative freedom of the individual artist (there was no a priori banning of styles or subject matter except for the overly sexual or the overly Marxist), one had to be conscious nevertheless of the tastes and political interests of the public. This awareness was felt as a more or less gently pressure toward the 'positive,' the truly American: "to paint what you see, paint what you know," "depicting," as President Roosevelt remarked after a visit to one of the program's exhibitions, "American life in an American way."¹¹ "To most project artists America meant the workingman, on the farm or in the city, the factory, the street scene," and it meant local history or the local event.¹² It implied a more or less subtle form of censorship especially in mural painting where the aesthetic and political opinions of the public had to be faced most directly — often, as Karal Ann Marling has shown in her *Wall-to-Wall America*, with humiliating consequences for the artist. Yet the Project's organizers, Edward Bruce and Holger Cahill, accepted such compromise of aesthetic principle as part of a historic reeducation of the artist alienated by industrialization (i.e. as a price to be paid for "belonging"⁷) and as an unavoidable part of the public function, of the community-building power that had been, at all times, an element of mural painting. "During the painting" — thus Cahill — "the artists usually work in public places where people congregate. Mural painting is not studio art; by its very nature it is social. In its great periods it has always been associated with the expression of social meanings, the experience, history, ideas and beliefs of a community."¹³ Or, as Forbes Watson, assistant director of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture phrased it: "Back of all great mural painting is a belief. The painter shares this belief with his audience. The belief may be religious as in the 13th century in Italy, or it may be social as in the 20th century in America."¹⁴

11 Belisario Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), p. 46.

12 Francis O'Connor, ed., *The New Deal Art Projects* (Washington, D. C., 1972), p. 322.

13 Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York, 1936), p. 32.

14 Karal Ann Marling, "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," *Prospects*, 4 (1979), pp. 421-440, (424).

In her illuminating studies of New Deal mural art, Karal Ann Marling has pointed out that the murals of the period should not be read as false representations of crisis but as expressions of social faith, as incantations against crisis, or, as the painter Wendell Jones put it, as evocations of spiritual resources for "survival, continuity, and stability."¹⁵ The painters were supposed to become part of the local community whose experience, history, and spirit they were commissioned to express. "While the aesthetic quality of each completed sign rests upon the personal interpretation and ability of the artist"—Cahill suggested in a manual of the FAP—"the content is determined by the community for which he is working."¹⁶ Very often, their murals were thus chronicles of pioneer experience from the archetypal moment of foundation to the present: a quasi-mythological history of trial and survival. Jones and a host of others like him "at work on a native epic" wanted to develop a pictorial language that was, on the one hand, rooted in local experience and, on the other, "universal" so that it "may be easily read." Such a language would function like a pictorial shorthand of mythic figures and symbols: national and local founding fathers, Lincoln, the heroes of frontier settlement or of the labor movement.¹⁷

Although the impulse is clearly ahistorical, its mythification is still in reference to a known and shared history. Nazi murals or public paintings lacked such historical foundation if only for the reason that their evocation of national and racial unity never had a clear referent in the German past. (Thus they were representations of a tradition of myths, legends, dreams, prejudices, falsifications of event.) Since a Germany of geographic, historical and spiritual wholeness ("sacred Germany") did not exist as a historical fact or as a tradition of political practice, it was largely faith and metaphysics which the National Socialists attempted to force symbolically and physically into history.¹⁸ By typologically relating the ancient and the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 425f.

¹⁷ "In expressing himself through the portrayal of his ideas on a limited wall space the artist has a very real need for a universal language in order that his work may be read. He therefore invents symbols—a shorthand or phonetic language—through which to convey his thought," James M. Newell in O'Connor, ed. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 61; see also Mitchell Siporin's contribution to the same volume, pp. 64-67.

¹⁸ See Klaus Vondung, "Autodafé und Phoenix: Vom Glauben an den deutschen Geist," and Rainer Stollmann's comments, both in Horst Denkler and Eberhart Lammert, eds., "*Das*

modern, their murals project a quasi-sacred history of prefiguration and fulfillment: the apocalyptic anticipation of the Third Reich. Accordingly, battle scenes depicting Germanic victories over invading Slavic hordes in the early Middle Ages are linked to similar heroic representations of modern battle: in repeating itself, history approached its final resolution (e.g. Werner Peiner's "Ungarnschlacht König Heinrich I." or Ferdinand Spiegel's "Tank"). Both painting and sculpture thus take frequent recourse to type and allegory insinuating generic timelessness, the mythological essence of the "real," or continuity with the tradition of the "classic:" to models of male or female beauty (Aryan heroes, Greek nymphs); to types of the German worker, farmer, soldier; to allegorizations of the life-cycle centered in ever reproductive mothers etc. In their abstract posturing, their denial of a concrete and recognizable history (be it national or local), in their distance from everyday experience they are indeed mere decor, but even in their insubstantiality they were still, at least by implication, norm and model for practice. As one critic phrased it: "Art gave an outward existence to the imaginary of race and subjection. It gave to that particular discourse one part of its reality, just as the policy of destruction provided the other. It is the beguiling appearance of annihilation ("der schone Schein der Vernichtung"), hiding behind a façade of simplicity, wholeness, classic beauty its essential aggression against anything that did not comply with the normative power of its self-definition."¹⁹ Thus its true context—as was recently argued in a passionate debate—was and is not the museum but the concentration camp.

IV

The crucial concept here is that of the People which figures prominently in the rhetoric of the New Deal as well as of the Third Reich. If American artists and intellectuals responded to an experience of social crisis by exploring the meaning of America, they did so by reconceiving it in terms

was ein Vorspiel nur ... "Berliner Colloquium zur Literaturpolitik in "Dritten Reich" (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1985).

¹⁹ Wolfgang F. Haug, "Entartung und Schönheit," in Albrecht Duenmeling and Peter Girth, eds., *Entartete Musik—eine Kommentierte Rekonstruktion* (Düsseldorf, 1988), p. 26; also Bethold Hinz, et al., *Die Dekoration der Gewalt—Kunst und Medien im Faschismus* (Giessen, Anabas, 1979).

of the pioneer past, by appealing to a collective memory of hardships overcome. After the evident failure of economic individualism they reconstructed America as created and maintained by the joint effort of the People, of individuals building a community. The rediscovery of and appeal to the "People" provided a common rhetorical and iconographical ground beyond all ideological differences. Thus the myth of the People was of special relevance for the various government relief programs for the arts which, besides providing for the unemployed, pursued what Jane Matthews has called the New Deal's quest for a cultural democracy. New Deal murals consistently evoke the People as a community of common purpose—a community, that is, beyond divisions of ethnic group or social class. (They can therefore be read as an ideological distortion of reality as well as an appeal to mend it by evoking shared ideals.) Indeed, the function of the murals was conceived of in terms of communicative interaction and, according to the project manuals, as forms of public art. They were to be rooted in community experience and kept alive through the participation of the common people, so that "official art and folk art are united."²⁰ For the idealistic bureaucrats of the Roosevelt administration, mural painting was a means to express and reenforce a quasi-religious belief in a democratic America of shared goals and values, based on the identification of the individual with the higher purpose of the social Whole.

For the Nazis, art—as Goebbels said—also was conceivable only as a "function of the life of the People" (but, thus he continued, "like all other areas of popular life" it must always be guided and controlled by the political elite.) However, "*Volk*" was not (even less than it was for the New Deal) a mere collective name for the members of a given society but a homogeneous community of race, or, in the official terminology, of "blood;" a collective unity built on the destruction of the Other, a phoenix (as Nazi ideologues liked to call the new spirit of national identity) that was to rise not from its own ashes but from those of its designated enemies.²¹ It was a community, not based on dialogue but on, the ecstatic

20 Cahill saw this as a characteristic of "coherent societies such as those of the Pueblo Indians of our Southwest" where "art tradition is rooted firmly in community experience, and is kept alive through participation by the whole people;" but he clearly hopes for a similar merger of "official art and folk art" in the United States. See his "American Resources in the Arts," reprinted as "Forward," in Francis O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973).

21 Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (München: dtv, 1988), p. 222.

experience ("Erlebnis") of oneness, and from such experience of unity (the emotional submission of one's whole being") came the promise of absolute allegiance to the Führer who represented the "Volk" and its collective will. For National Socialism, we read in the comment to the Nueremberg Laws, there was no separation between private and public spheres: the individual was a mere cell in the living organism of the People. Goebbels therefore valued the symbolic, for in the symbol individual and community became one. To represent and reproduce such unity, painting (even the public art of mural painting) was clearly not enough, although Hitler and his spokesmen never tired of emphasizing the public function and character of all art. Yet to have the People experience and constantly renew in their experience organic wholeness, to constantly reassert the nation as a "community of Faith," it needed an elaborate liturgy of rituals and ceremonies, a constant dramatization of collective life: mass rallies, parades, cultic plays, public and ceremonious dedications (of childhood, youth, marital life) to the social body as represented in the Führer.²² Although Roosevelt was acutely aware of the political importance of national symbols, apart from his famous radio "fireside chats" (enacting his public role as father of the national family)²³ and the marches of the NRA, or the renewed public emphasis on Thanksgiving, I know of no comparable liturgy of the New Deal. Since the People within the ideological frame of American self-interpretation could be conceived of in terms of the individual as well as of the community, in terms of diversification as well as of collective purpose, "People" referred to something quite different than "Volk," the mystic social body of the German nationalist religion. Nor did it need constant symbolic confirmation through an elaborate system of public rites, ceremonies, spectacles. Indeed, the only American equivalent that comes to mind are the parades, play festivals and pageants of the Progressive Movement before World War I which were enacted in anticipation of the "municipal art" of a future corporate society.²⁴

22 See here especially G. L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: Fertig, 1975) and Klaus Vondung's study of Nazi cults and rituals, *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult undpolitische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Gottingen, 1971).

23 On the function of political symbols in the New Deal, see Maurizio Vaudagna, "Dramatizzare l'America: i simboli politici del New Deal," in Maurizio Vaudagna, ed., *L'Estetica Della Politica Negli Anni Trenta* (Roma: Laterza, 1989), pp. 77-102.

24 I am thinking especially of the pageants and play festivals of the progressives at the turn of the century (and after) in Chicago, and the great hope Jane Addams, Graham R. Taylor and Luther H. Gulick staked on them as an antidote to the rising urban mass culture. Cp.

V

In his several books on modern nationalism George L. Mosse has interpreted fascism as a distorted version of a radical ideal of popular sovereignty: of "the people worshipping themselves:" It began with the French revolution, accompanied the processes of modernization, and "informed both the nationalism and the quest for social justice of the 19th century."²⁵ Especially in Germany, the failure of the revolution of 1848 and of the search for national unity under popular rule led to a number of social and cultural movements that in their rites and rituals symbolically enacted (and anticipated by enactment) a mythic *Volksgemeinschaft*. After the catastrophe of World War I and the chaotic years that followed, such yearning for national, cultural, spiritual, or racial unity against a modern experience of fragmentation became almost universal. Although such *volkisch* movements (i.e. not of a "Volk," this is, but of a "*Volk*" to be)—like the *Wandervogel* youth movement, the lay-theater movement, even the comparatively esoteric German Dance—with their ceremoniously enacted craving for organic wholeness were not, in any strict sense, part of National Socialism. They were nevertheless part of its ideological environment and could easily be absorbed by it (only to discover afterwards that their ideals had been "betrayed" and their true aims distorted). In America, such radical dreams of popular sovereignty have played a minor part. (Even if, as Robert Bellah has pointed out, there has always been an iconography of popular self-representation, the sign system of the social religion of democracy.) Yet around the turn of the century, when the philosophy of *laissez-faire* seemed to have run its course and the problems of the modern capitalist and multiethnic state had become visible, Progressivists and, later on, cultural nationalists like Walter Lippmann, Van Wyck Brooks and, especially, Waldo Frank attempted to reinterpret American individualist traditions in terms of cultural wholeness and public responsibility. The New Deal revived this dream of a new civic order (which identified national with cultural unity, community with nation) in order to survive social and economic crisis. For a brief historical moment, its public art occupied an aesthetic territory which had been present in

Heinz Ickstadt, "A Tale of Two Cities: Culture and Its Social Function in Chicago During the Progressive Period" in Harmut Keil, ed., *German Workers' Culture in the United States 1850 to 1920* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1988), pp. 289-315.

25 G. L. Mosse, *Masses and Man* (New York, 1980), p. 162.

American culture as a partially submerged tradition. Not yet propaganda (though it would become propaganda during the war), not quite popular culture (though most of its "pictorial shorthand" could be easily absorbed by the media or new genres of popular culture), it corresponds to a concept of democratic art which runs through the history of American self-expression from Whitman to the democratic realism of William Dean Howells to the Progressive era, and came to partial fruition during the New Deal's redefinition of American history and American ideals.

However, the recourse to the past was, in both countries, also a strategy to naturalize modern changes that, at least in Germany, the regime had been ideologically committed to resist. Thus the myth of the "Volk" went hand in hand with technological innovations (whose only *raison d'être*, to be sure, was the preparation for war) as well as with the gradual formation of a consumer society that eased the way into the postwar period.²⁶ In America, the verbal and pictorial rhetoric of the People was a turning backward in the name of going forward. It propagated modernization in the name of tradition; it projected the mythic image of a "new country to which all nations ... have contributed" and thus prepared the ground for a more radical interpretation of America as heterogeneous and multicultural society. At the same time, it clung to an idea of homogeneity and organic coherence that hid, as much as it secretly legitimized, an irreversible process of social, economic, and political transformation whose very dynamics rapidly outgrew the static concepts of wholeness and community.

26 "It follows that the success of the Nazis resulted not least of all from their ability to tap these ambivalent sentiments. They promised prosperity and work for all without the alienating effects of modernization. They succeeded in conjuring up the veil of national community that seemed to give protection from the cold winds that blew in the capitalism of the West. That the Nazis did not immediately enter into a propaganda confrontation with America ... seems astounding. But they were well aware of the advantages which Roosevelt's New Deal offered to their propaganda if they sold the American recovery from the depression as a venture of national and social concentration under a strong leadership similar to their own," Frank Trommler in Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, *America and the Germans*, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia, 1983), II, 338f. On consumerism and social control in Nazi Germany, see Hans Dieter Schafer, "Bucherverbrennung, staatsfreie Sphäre und Scheinkultur," in Horst Denkler and Eberhart Lammert, eds., *"Das war ein Vorspiel nur ... 'Berliner Colloquium zur Literaturpolitik im 'Dritten Reich'"* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste), 1985.