

George Grosz, “Among Other Things, a Word for German Tradition” (1931)

Abstract

The painter and graphic artist George Grosz (1893-1959) was best known for his sharp-witted, satirical depictions of society in the Weimar Republic. He was part of the Dada scene in Berlin and became one of the most important representatives of New Objectivity in the 1920s, whose often provocative works repeatedly became the subject of court cases. Grosz, whose real name was Georg Groß, anglicized his name in 1916 out of disgust at the nationalism that had spread in Germany during the First World War. Immediately after Hitler came to power, Grosz emigrated to the United States. His works were defamed as “degenerate” and destroyed by the National Socialists or sold abroad. Just as his artistic work expresses the artist’s criticism of the Weimar Republic’s society and politics as corrupt and decadent, this article, which appeared in the magazine *Kunstblatt* in 1931, reflects this social criticism. Like many other left-wing artists and intellectuals of his time, Grosz was critical of the social, economic and political changes brought about by the machine age with its rationalization and the perceived harmful influence of America. For Grosz, the vacuousness and standardization he observed everywhere also had an effect on contemporary art, especially abstract painting. In contrast, he called for a return to a genuinely German art, which should reflect the tradition of German painting instead of trying to imitate stylistic trends, especially from France.

Source

Among Other Things, a Word for German Tradition

Certainly we live in a transitional period. All ideas have gradually become dubious and have begun to totter, and dusk falls on a superannuated liberalism. No one knows anymore what to do with the “freedom” that dates from 1793. Everywhere reorientation and determined reaction appear toward what was universally valid the day before yesterday.

Right and left become ever more sharply divided in preparation for the final battle for power. Both have the common will to receive commands en masse from above and to snap to attention when the order is called.

How quickly it moves! After the war—I believe—not a single person was willing to think of uniforms, standing at attention, and such.

Whatever the case may be, I regard Germany now as the most interesting and most puzzling country in Europe. I have the feeling that our country has been called, as if by fate, to play a great role. It often seems to me as if we are living in an epoch similar to that of the closing Middle Ages. Then, too, there was tremendous pressure on everyone. Nevertheless that terrible time feared its artists; [Hieronymus] Bosch and [Peter] Bruegel painted their cosmogonies, which are unrivaled in the history of painting.

Perhaps we are now facing a new Middle Ages. Who knows? In any case, humanistic ideas seem to me to be in the process of dying out, just as no one any longer places much value on the human rights announced so ecstatically a century ago. Civilization is instead marching ahead on all fronts with a healthy disdain for human life. This makes no sense in the context of the socialism we apply to nearly everything and even carry out practically. But it is so.

The masses and the little man are trump. Frequently encountered at the top is his counterpart, a former worker—proclaiming to the man below the miracle of his rise. The purest materialism reigns. Work, work, work ... the alpha and omega of the operation. The dream is romantically offered and endlessly propagandized: life in comfort, bathtubs, sports, mass-produced automobiles, and when things are good, a weekend with cocktails and a beauty queen.

America led the way; we—set back a bit by the war—and by nature a little slow—follow surely after. In Marxist Russia, America is also the model and hotly desired goal. Goal means the rationalized exploitation of all raw materials to create comfort for the little man on the basis of mechanized mass production.

The precondition of culture, raising the standard, eating, sports, clothes, no more unemployed ... culture then comes along on its own ... from out of the working classes. So say the official theoreticians. America might present a different picture, but nevertheless.

I do not much believe in the official savants who can prove and disprove everything with economic statistics and tables. One thing is true: we lack today order and a plan.

Hundreds of thousands who would like to work find no employment. Every new machine pensions off so-and-so-many from their work. Eventually it all becomes too stupid even for the most self-satisfied capitalists, and they bust their thick-necked heads about how to overcome the evil. The talk of dictatorship is making the rounds. But will that make them master of the machine, which everyone knows is endlessly voracious? I have my modest doubts. As always, needs are blithely cultivated just so the beast does not stop. For that would mean death to production and prosperity. It is impossible to conceive ... that tomorrow no more forests would be turned into paper, impossible to imagine a civilization without artificial silk stockings and sweaters. No. Needs have to be cultivated—always go after the masses. Comfort in the name of progress. Raising the standards before all else. It is funneled into us daily through a thousand press channels. To live without a vacuum cleaner and a car ... is not worth living. Then one takes a look at American magazines. True documents of unchecked civilization. Three-quarters advertisements; ever-new needs. Scattered among bits of a novel, in which thinly-veiled propaganda, even to the point of surfeit, is made for this doubtful life of comfort. Ceaselessly the machine swallows and spits ... ready-made goods, more and more. It will not rest until the North Pole is artificially thawed and the Eskimos bound to an assembly line.

The big city, real water on the brain: trade city, sales city, marketplace. After work, doubtful amusements ... rushed, noisy ... fake sparkle, to rev up tired businessmen for a couple of hours. Just do not think ... money, women, champagne. Cheap theater. Not to be had for anything serious outside their nerve-grating businesses. A revue and the endlessly cute, predigested cinema pictures. The women, made-up, manicured, highheeled, and neglected, with gigolos in the hotels and at the tea dance. What life?

The crowning achievement: a big villa in a safe place, stuffed full of ancient artworks as financial investments ... expensive cars and a storehouse of fancy shirts. Ghastly materialism and boredom.

The palaces of our time: office highrises with seven floors, warehouse cathedrals, radio palaces, cinema temples ... consecrated to the unknown deities of senseless production.

The mighty of the earth glued to money. Their fate: sales and the purchasing power of the little man.

Work scientifically organized to the last detail. What is the meaning of craftsmanship in that? Cheapen ... cheapen. Tackle that job. A few hours more and even the dullest fellow will get it ... and become part of the production process. Tighten his screw from early to late. Faster, faster; as grotesque as it sounds, of all the junk the machines mass produce, there is still far too little. Frantically the people compete and produce against each other. Frenzied race for markets. Cheapen ... Raising domestic purchasing power ...

the catchwords. That all of this rubbish from pressed metal, enamel, ... pressed glass, and reinforced pasteboard is utterly superfluous to life occurs to no one.

Endless wage battles. Apparently inescapable eternal circulation. The workers banded together in mighty organizations. Union popes ascended from below and became almost more powerful than kings. Pompous union palaces in the latest style; statues symbolizing power on display in the vestibules ... heralds of splendor and progress. Mile-long resort facilities and vacation colonies on the sea. Who would have suspected all this in 1830 as simpletons in prophetic transport were destroying the first English machines? ... But it is real progress, is it not?

So it is in 1931, in the age of socialism.

Artists are scattered, leftover crumbs of a past time.

Isolated from the people. The best of them lost in an intellectual fog. Only formal problems, frenzied abstracts. Objects the property of photography. Formal problems that the average mortal lacking special empathy or snobbism can scarcely comprehend. Ascendancy of an equally boring take-anything photomania. The ivory-tower dwellers shunned and frightened behind locked doors, eavesdropping on their mathematical ego. T-square and compass ready for abstraction. Speculating oddballs and superstitious sorts at every turn. Driveling art historians. Stereoscopic novelties, new material as well as magical, mechanical catchwords. Sometimes under the banner of the proletariat and so on. Today, however, less than yesterday. Boom in peculiarities. Psychoanalysis and other patent medicines have to bear the brunt. A great divide between art of this sort (avant-garde) and the people. Only a few moody, rich people with bad habits retain an interest today in artists' experiments. And this great love is usually exposed afterward as the stale speculation of undercover art dealers. What a *juste milieu*; what a deterioration of art in contrast to the truly dark Middle Ages. Eyes to the rear, not ahead.

Now no medieval artist preached praise of ready-mades, of keep smiling; standard concepts and comfort were unknown to him. Making money was not valorized, celebrated, nor painted. Compass and ruler, in a correct hierarchy of values, led a subordinate existence.

Today, the best painters are estranged from the people. Occasionally there comes a simple man from the people, a dilettante who suddenly has everything the elite, intellectual avant-garde lacks: simplicity, soul, and feeling. Characteristics, incidentally, that the elegant art snobs and enemies of the people since Henri Rousseau have been discovering and claiming for themselves.

The art of our time is pale. A child with an overgrown head and horned-rim glasses. Anemic and very contemplative ... a proper big-city stay-at-home. It is obvious from his looks that he broods a lot. Estranged from nature and reality, he creates from within himself exact circles and mathematical-looking figures. And takes all of this terribly seriously. Observers from a later time will smirk in genuine astonishment at what today's clever propaganda has passed off to the gullible people as the "latest" art.

There was even a certain Malevich back then, who (he was dead serious about it) once exhibited a painting, an empty white square. Praised, likewise dead-seriously, by a critic as the "deed of the epoch."

One can certainly no longer live today as an old "Dutch master." But in this faithless and materialistic time one should use paper and slates to show people the devilish mug concealed in their own faces. Let us tear down the storehouse of ready-mades and all the manufactured junk and show the ghostly nothing behind them. Political convulsions will influence us powerfully. Do not fear looking back to your ancestors. Look at them, [Hans] Multscher, Bosch, Bruegel, and Mäleßkircher, [Wolfgang] Huber, and [Albrecht] Altdorfer. Why then the usual pilgrimage to the philistine French Mecca? Why not return to our ancestors and set forth a German tradition?

Just among ourselves, better to be ranked second class but at least to have expressed a little of our national community. And besides, the French are not at all interested in followers of their three schools.

Naturally, no Matisse is going to prosper in Outer Pomerania or Berlin. But what's the difference! The air and everything is hard, a little unpleasant and graphic. It is easy to get sniffles and cold feet ... this is not the tempered, calm soil of the south.

Now, in order not to be misunderstood, I in no way mean here an art program à la Schultze-Naumburg. [...] When I say "German," I do not mean those neat little painters, devoted more or less to kitsch and pleasing the public, who are always parading their softly agreeable, pathetically vague way of dressing things up as "German." These salon painter sorts, incidentally, are to be found wherever painting is done.

I am only saying quite modestly: we should devote more reflection to our good and not inconsiderable tradition of painting and drawing. I consider a return to the formal power of the great medieval masters to be precisely as appropriate ... as what the French do, training their people and cultivating their tradition by drawing inspiration from old Neapolitan frescoes, from Oriental tapestries, from [Jean Auguste Dominique] Ingres or African sculpture or Bushman paintings. Howgh! I have spoken.

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