ETERNAL RETURN: THE RECURRING EMPLOYMENT OF THE GREEK AND ROMAN CLASSICAL TRADITION FOR IDEOLOGICAL PURPOSES IN WESTERN ART HISTORY

العود الأبدي: تكرار استخدام العناصر البصرية للتقليد الكلاسيكي الإغريقي والروماني لأغراض أيديولوجية في تاريخ الفن الغربي

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-- Paper Extracted from Thesis –

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to map out "The eternal return of the classical tradition", tracing its origin to the Italian Renaissance, built to a large extent on the rediscovery and revival of classical Greek philosophy, and how, the revived visual motifs and art techniques of the Greco-Roman tradition came to symbolize, and communicate changing and sometimes contradictory identities. Highlighting how the classical lives in a cycle of eternal revival in which it is only invoked to be denounced or to suffer a decline, then be revived with new readings. This paper moves through various stops in western Art History, starting from the Renaissance (the unearthing and defining), moving to the late Renaissance (sometimes called anti-classicism), then the first revival with Neoclassicism, moving towards Modern Art and then the complex relationship between Fascism and Classicism. The paper moves chronologically but creates small interventions and moments of reflection, drawing comparisons and bringing up similarities that emerge across centuries, comparing both artistic practices and the way these practices were read and received.

KEYWORDS

Classical Tradition; Propaganda; Political Art

الملخص

يتتبع البحث "العود الأبدي للتقليد الكلاسيكي". يبدأ بعصر النهضة، حيث إعادة إحياء التقليد الكلاسيكي الإغريقي والروماني، وينطلق عبر تاريخ الفن الأوروبي ليلاحظ كيف أن هذه الموتيفات البصرية والعناصر الفكرية استخدمت للتعبير عن أفكار وهويات مُختلفة ومتناقضة، رجل عصر النهضة ورجل التنوير والثورة الفرنسية، ثم لاحقًا، استخدمت لتعبر عن أفكار الفاشيات الأوروبية. يشير إلى البحث إلى كون التقليد الكلاسيكي محبوس بشكل أبدي في دائرة من الإحياء والازدهار، ثم الرفض أو الانحدار، فقط ليعاد إحياءه مرة أخرى، بقراءة جديدة، للتعبير عن قيم جديدة. يتحرك البحث بشكل خطي بداية من عصر النهضة (الاكتشاف والتعريف وإعادة الإحياء)، ثم عصر النهضة المتأخر وظهور النزعات المضادة للكلاسيكية، ثم الكلاسيكية الجديدة وأول إعادة إحياء في عهد الثورة الفرنسية، ثم مضيًا نحو الفن الحديث ورفض التصور الكلاسيكي للفن، ثم العلاقة المركبة بين الفن والفاشيات الأوروبية. يتحرك البحث بشكل زمني بالأساس لكن يخلق مساحات وتدخلات صغير لعقد المقارنات وإظهار التشابهات والممارسات وأيضًا القراءات المشتركة التي تظهر أحيانًا على بعد قرون طويلة من الزمن.

الكلمات المفتاحية

التقليد الكلاسيكي؛ الفنون الدعائية؛ الفن السياسي

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to map out what it calls "the eternal return of the classical tradition", tracing its origin to the Italian Renaissance, built to a large extent on the rediscovery and revival of classical Greek philosophy, and how, the revived visual motifs and art techniques of the Greco-Roman tradition came to symbolize and communicate the new identity of the Renaissance Man and, later, the 'Enlightened' man. Likewise, how a couple of decades later in France, Jacques Louis David attempted an artistic revolution, by seeking refuge from the frivolous Rococo in the morally superior "Neo-classicism" that will become the foundation of the art of the French Revolution, the Republic, and Napoleon's regime. Fulfilling purposes of art that could be called patriotic, revolutionary, or propagandistic, depending on where you stand.

Building on this, the paper tracks patterns of recurrence in relation to the classical tradition, as well as how changeable it is, embodying multiple sometimes contradictory identities, and symbolizing increasingly shifting ideals. At its worst, Classicism provided a justification and an (art) historical narrative to support ideological ideas of white superiority and supremacy, claiming a connection to the great ancestors and promising a continuation to these glorious days. It also provided an antithesis to modern art and a tool to eradicate or marginalize these subversive and threatening artistic practices. This is most stark in the art of Hitler's Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy, especially in the complicated relationship between the modernist "Futurists" and the fascist regime.

Contributing to this is the inherent selectivity with which this tradition has been approached, received, and understood, and how it appeared in subtle and not-so-subtle ways over the course of Art History; French and American revolutionaries carefully selected and reinterpreted images and concepts from the classical tradition to create the iconography that represents their nations and their leaders. Through inspecting and studying this brief account of various stops in Western Art and History, a cyclical pattern unveils itself; a pattern where the classical tradition is continuously invoked, only to be denounced later for more contemporary approaches, to be then later revived and utilized as a radical (or oppressive) anti-thesis to the contemporary. This paper seeks to shed light on this pattern by following artistic trends in major cities in Europe, analyzing them and connecting them to the larger socio-political contexts under which they operated and thrived. This concept of eternal return is clearly echoed in what Michael Fried has referred to as “the repetition-structure of European painting from the early Renaissance on,” as virtually every such historical painting must also engage with the history of painting to which it is heir (Bear, 2019). It is used to describe a tendency -albeit a little cruel- towards noticing the narrow number of combinations that European artists tend to draw from. Jordan Bear, suggests it can be useful in examining “the elevation of originality at the heart of modernist mythology.” (2019) In the context of this paper, it can be used as a background theme, tracking this cyclical return to classic ideals.

Building on this notion by Gombrich that “the main historiographic pattern which classical antiquity bequeathed to the Western tradition is that of progress towards an ideal of perfection” (Gombrich, 1966). The advantage of this pattern in giving coherence to the history of any art was demonstrated by Aristotle for the story of Greek tragedy, by Cicero for the rise of oratory and, of course, by Pliny for the rise of painting and sculpture. For the late-born critic, however,

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the pattern had a grave drawback. It lies in the nature of this conception of the gradual unfolding of an ideal that it must come to a stop once perfection is reached. Within the pattern the subsequent story can only be one of decline-which may be bewailed in general terms but hardly chronicled as an epic of individuals each making his contribution to this dismal story. There is only one way in which a great individual or group can be introduced into this post-classical sequence: by recourse to a second historiographic pattern of even more mythical origin, the idea of rescue and restoration, the return of the golden age through some beneficent agency." (Gombrich, 1966) The paper moves chronologically but creates small interventions and moments of reflection, drawing comparisons and bringing up similarities that emerge across centuries, comparing both artistic practices and the way these practices were read and received.

2. THE RENAISSANCE: UNEARTHING AND DEFINING THE CLASSICAL

The Italian and European Renaissance in its own narrative, largely owes itself to the unearthing and the re-discovery of the Greco-Roman tradition, with all the fascination that came with this long process of attempting to decode and comprehend. A process that ushered in an era of philosophy, economics, science, and of course art. The Renaissance offered new ways for men to understand their position in the world and made way for a very specific very linear understanding of history and human development: it began in antiquity, then along came the Middle "*Dark*" Ages where culture and art supposedly declined, then the Renaissance-the rebirth that the contemporary new man is experiencing.

The Renaissance man positioned himself firmly against the man of the "*Dark*" medieval ages - a problematic term in itself and deconstructing it could help solidify our understanding of how narratives are formed and perpetuated. Because "the continuity of history rejects such sharp and violent contrasts between successive periods, and that modern research shows us the Middle Ages less dark and less static, the Renaissance less bright and less sudden, than was once supposed." (Haskins, C.,1971) Nevertheless, it was obvious that the Renaissance artist slowly but surely moved away from the medieval framework of art and aesthetics and ventured into a new (albeit revived) understanding of art and visual representation. The Renaissance in this sense defined the classical, through their understanding and interpretation of the literature, mythology, and philosophy of ancient Greeks and Romans. The visual interpretation and application of these concepts became the blueprint for the classic in art, and sometimes even embodied it completely. From this framework, Classicism emerged as a communication of values such as absolute harmony and rationality-key values in Western culture's conception of itself that will sustain for centuries to come. Visually, these values manifested as illusionism and perspective (Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509-1511) that in addition to its subject matter depending on Ancient Greek philosophy used one-point linear perspective to convey three-dimensional architecture), simplicity, clarity of structure, ideal proportions, restraint and balance both in expression and composition. In essence, the Classicism that emerged in the Renaissance informed and gave way to the definition of the "classical" in the coming centuries, adding an extra layer of interpretation. In the Nineteenth century, Neoclassicism would seek to counteract the Rococo style by emphasizing symmetry, precision, and restraint, as well as borrowing subject matter from Classical Antiquity.

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2.1 Early Renaissance to High Renaissance

In his account of the "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century" Charles Haskins describes "the medieval renaissance" as "The epoch of the Crusades, of the rise of towns, and of the earliest bureaucratic states of the West, it saw the culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic; the emergence of the vernacular literature; the revival of the Latin classics and Latin poetry and Roman law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities. The twelfth century left its signature on higher education, on scholastic philosophy, on European systems of law, on architecture and sculpture, on the liturgical drama, on Latin and vernacular poetry." (Haskins, C.,1971). Over the coming centuries, texts by Aristotle, Homer, and then later down the line Plato, and Cicero will be extensively translated and studied, becoming relatively more accessible. The classical tradition satisfies the ideological aim of the Renaissance man to separate himself, and his era, from everything that happened before.

While on a strictly chronological illustration of Art history, it is the beginning of Gothic Art, the unearthing and revival of the theoretical material that will shape the classical understanding of art had already begun. And throughout the long stretch of time that is the European Renaissance (1400-1500), followed by Mannerism and Baroque, the quest to define, perfect (and even contest) a model of the classical persisted -arguably reaching its height in the High Renaissance-. With artworks such as "The Athens School", a Fresco painted by Raphael between 1509 and 1511, which embodies both the logical/mathematical rules like the one-point perspective, *Chiaroscuro* the strategic use of shadow and light to illude three-dimensionality, and sometimes even draw direct inspiration from Greek mythology or Philosophical figures. Central also to classicism is the conception of idealism or "idealisation", the omission, where an artist omits things that betray the essence of the subject painted. Borrowed from antiquity's understanding of the purpose of art being to portray the idealized "essence" of the subject rather than how we actually perceive it. The first thing to keep in mind when analyzing the ways that antiquity formed classical ideals is the inevitability of interpretation. When Greek philosophy was translated, there was already an established framework of what constitutes art in the Renaissance mind. For the Greeks, painting wasn't the primary form of art, but rather poetry and theatre, sculpture and painting were regarded as artisan skills and most aesthetic theories like Aristotle's theory of mimesis based on theatre and poetic tragedies (Euron, 2019). In that sense, art was "the reproduction of nature- the re-presentation of reality- the imitation of nature" and "mimesis (imitation)" a distinguishing quality of the artist. In 1437, Leon Battista Alberti wrote *De Pictura,* as his account of Western painting as he witnessed it in his contemporaries. Exploring Alberti's account, Nadav-Manes argues it is an account of one genre: *Historia,* furthermore, he highlights that "The "nature" that Alberti uses for his *historia* is an ideal nature that cannot, in fact, be observed in nature [reality]…." Concluding that "Alberti's *historia* is not meant to convey a meaning, but rather to create a reality, it is not a representation of an action, but the execution and performance of one. Alberti promotes the use of an artificial system of signs, linear perspective, in order to promote controlled social interactions that in their turn will create an ideal social artefact: a decorous community." (2006) These statements serve to illustrate two key points in the Renaissance understanding of painting which be used to draw comparisons with the ancient understanding of art: first, the purpose of the artwork as modelling the ideal reality, the ideal man - on the inside - which can be seen in Aristotle's argument of mimesis (art) as the "the principle of Art is not the imitation of a real

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thing, but the imitation of a possible thing, "what is possible as being probable or necessary." (Euron, 2019) On the outside, we can see this understanding of beauty as getting close to the ideal (in human form and nature), beauty in symmetry, in perfect perspective, in a balanced composition, in getting as close as we can to an ideal, in a sense of calmness and wisdom, of "restrain and moderation… of decorum" (Nadav-Manes, 2006). And the beauty in omitting anything that disrupts this vision. As represented in *Polykleitos's Doryphoros* (c. 450-440 BCE) and echoed in a sculpture like Donatello's *David*, 1496–97 centuries later. (Figures 1 & 2).

We see how works in the Hellenistic period (starting 323 BCE) that choose to highlight different things in the artwork; producing works that contain a sense of emotional intensity, while maintaining the natural/ideal form, most notably, Laocoon and His Sons, first century BCE (Figure 3). These subtle differences, which make the "repetition-cycle" of Western Art history almost inevitable, are also seen in the late Renaissance in both Mannerism and Baroque.

Figure (1) (left): Donatello, Marble David, 1416, Florence, Italy. Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Figure (2) (right): Polykleitos, Doryphoros (c. 450-440 BCE), Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy. Source: smarthistory.org

2.2 Late Renaissance: Mannerism as an Artistic Revolution

In itself, The Renaissance comes with its own artistic rebellion. The late Renaissance bore witness to the rise of Mannerism, which in both art and architecture strived towards subverting classical ideals, sometimes called a post-classic or an anti-classic tendency. However, Mannerism did appear time and time again during high renaissance. Michelangelo showed tendencies of Mannerism, not only in the figures adorning the Sistine Chapel, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (1550) but as far back as *David* (1504). In his introduction to Walter Friedlaender's writings on mannerism as anti-classicism, Donald Posner makes a remark very relevant to this paper's case, linking the relatively late "discovery" of the anti-classical tendencies of Mannerism to Modernism, specifically the rise of Expressionism and Abstraction, because "Certainly, the experience of the contemporary artistic revolt against naturalistic representation

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contributed greatly to an appreciation and comprehension of the apparently similar intentions of Mannerist artists" (Posner, 1965), which speaks both to the centrality of interpretation and highlights the notion of inevitable repetition.

Mannerism's tendencies show in Parmigianino's *Madonna* with her "unusually long neck" (1530-1533), the distorted figures in Pontormo's *The Deposition from the Cross* (1528), and Bronzino's *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (1545), among others. For some scholars, these examples symbolize how "The High Renaissance's regular, symmetrical harmony of parts becomes unbearable to the anti-classical style." (Friedlaender, 1925) but others saw Mannerism as essentially a continuation of Renaissance exploration. Another double-edged sword for Mannerists is depending on copying the masters' works for artistic training, either used to state the decline or to defend the artists against the "complex relationship" (Hauser) they had for the High Renaissance, stuck between admiring their techniques but feeling completely alienated from the philosophies behind them. In these descriptions of complex relationships, paired with the description of the political, intellectual, and social changes, a narrative of distrust and despair with the old ways emerges (despair possibly comparable to that the Dadaists felt in the 1920s, centuries later when faced with a contradiction between art and their brutal reality of the war.) Regardless, and in all the cases, made for or against Mannerism, there is no doubt it is in conversation with Classicism and the Renaissance's interpretation of Classicism, as well as its own contemporary reality.

Figure 3: Hagesandros, Athenedoros, and Polydoros, Lacoon and his sons, 1 BCE, copy after a Hellenistic original from ca. 200 BC. Source: Wikipedia.org

Figure 4: Doménikos Theotokópoulos (El Greco), Laocoön, c. 1610/14, oil on canvas, 137.5 x 172.5 cm, The National Gallery of Art. Source: Smarthistory.org

3. FRANCE: ROCOCCO, NEO-CLASSICISM AND THE REVOLUTION

In her account of the fragmented body through Western art history, Linda Nochlin leads by Johann Heinrich Füssli's *The Artist Overwhelmed by the Magnitude of Antique Ruins* (figure 5), shows the stark visual contradiction between the artist and the fragment of a leg from antiquity, where the artist feels small, his incompetence highlighted and contrasted by the grandiosity of the threatening presence of an almost perfect fragment. This brilliantly revealing

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example can be used as an entry point to think through the reception and the revisiting of the classics, over the course of history but especially during the 1700s and the 1800s. The artist here is haunted by a feeling of having fallen short, unable to match what the ancients have done.

"The artist is not merely overwhelmed, but is in mourning, mourning a terrible loss, a loss state of felicity and totality which must now inevitably be displaced into the past or the future: nostalgia or Utopia are the alternatives offered by Fuseli's image, ten years before the outbreak of the French Revolution" (Nochlin, L. 1994). This metaphor encompasses a lot of the understanding of Jacques Louis David's artistic revolution, and the Neoclassic especially early in his career; Mostly read as a reactionary to the frivolous Rococo style, Jacques Louis David's artistic revolution is loosely linked to a second unearthing of classical Pompei in Italy, and becomes increasingly ideological with time, especially with the emergence of the French Revolution. Although it is widely believed that before leaving to Italy in 1775, David declared, "The Antique will not seduce me, it lacks animation, it does not move." (Bordes, 1998)

Figure 5 J.H. Fuseli, The Artist Overwhelmed (moved to despair) by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins, 1778-79

In *Oath of the Horatii (1786)* and *Death of Socrates (1787),* Jacques Louis David's appropriation of classical themes moved beyond just working towards serious and noble subject matters, but also towards a more balanced composition, generally harmonious and dependent on straight lines, with relatively restrained characters (even the emotions shown in the images aren't displayed by the main character, and are not extravagantly dramatic in any way, i.e. the weak, feminine women in *Oath of the Horatii*, and relying on Classic architecture. Interesting to note how during his years of study, David studied the classics and roamed the newly excavated city, but also heavily studied the works of both High and late Renaissance masters, namely Raphael, and Caravaggio, both of which provided their own visual interpretations of classical ideals. If we are thinking through cyclical modes of excellence, decline, and then revival, it is worth noting how every time the classical is revived, it is revived with some new additions in each cycle. *Oath of the Horatii* is a story about honour told through

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the myth of two Roman families, but at its core, it's meant to stand for the values of a new ethical man utopian inspired by the values of a founding and metahistorical classicism.

The French Revolution is the moment where Neo-classism shines, particularly because it was called upon to fix a specific dilemma. As Lyn Hunt notes, the French Revolution was born without a specific lineage or ancestry, unlike the American Revolution with the founding fathers. This lack of lineage, paired with the radicalism the republic embodied, and the heated debate and complete departure from any tradition they want to execute. The French Revolution depended on speech, and terms like the people, the revolution, and the state, but a state without a history, apart from its present. "When leafing through the book of history, or rather register of the unhappiness of humanity, the young man will continually encounter kings, great nobles, and everywhere the oppressed." To counter that history of unhappiness, the Republicans could only offer isolated examples of republican Rome, Athens, and Sparta" (Hunt, 2004)

If we assume this narrative of a dilemma within the representation of the republic, then none other than Jacque Louis David sought to mend that. David, who was largely active and close to Maximilien Robespierre, created works like the *Death of Marat* (1793), and the *Death of Young Bara* (1794) that speak directly to the revolution and honour its martyrs. But perhaps it is more fitting and descriptive of this moment the works that were never complete. In 1790, David proposed *The Tennis Court Oath.* As things go in turbulent times, two years were enough to deem the project unfit. During the age of terror, those who once were the loyal protectors of the Revolution were soon killed or cast off as enemies. Another project that has to do with both classical imagery and the politics of representation was the unexecuted large colossal statue of *Hercules* first proposed by David at a festival he organized in the year. Hercules was proposed to be the symbol for the French seal. Hunt notes that this wasn't the first time, "The Herculean metaphor had appeared in radical discourse before David ever thought of using the image. At the end of June 1793, Fouche described the victory of the people of Paris over the Girondins in this fashion: … This formidable colossus is standing, he marches, he advances, he moves like Hercules, traversing the Republic to exterminate this ferocious crusade that swore death to the people." (Hunt, 1986)

Through the work he did execute, the works he didn't, and his official work on the ground, David sought to find the visual iconography of the revolution and the new republic, creating the image of the republic as it sees itself, and wanting the French people to see it. The state of affairs of representation during the French Revolution, and moving after into the Napoleonic era posed some of the most important questions: What does it mean to remove and destroy all the colossal monuments of the fallen bourbon kings? What metaphor does it enforce to use the remains of these very same statues? to create the stand for the new Hercules statue? Why symbolize France with a woman? A man? Which woman and which man? What difference does it make when France is a Greek goddess as opposed to a middle-class woman? Why would Napoleon keep the official seal of France his first few years and then slowly turn his own face into the seal of France? All these questions speak to the multitude of ways authority creates and utilizes images and symbols. In this case, Greek and Roman representations were among a limited number of tools that could be used to construct a past and a present alike and to communicate a newly emerging and still unstable set of values, which at times were completely at odds with one another.

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Figure 6: Eugène Delacroix, Liberty Leading the People (July 28, 1830), September – December 1830, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris
Source:Smarthistory.org

3.1 From Romanticism to Realism

Through *Liberty Leading the People*, we can see a different employment of elements from the classical tradition than the Neoclassic tradition, almost rendering them visual motifs and signals to be used by the artist as they see fit. The woman figure is clearly reminiscent of classical ideal beauty, and is in stark contrast with all the individuals around her, all dressed in accurate contemporary clothes, showing, age, profession, and class differences. This emphasis on the contemporary is of course above else evident in the subject matter, the revolution of 1830. The allegorical figure's head is shown in profile—like a ruler on a classical coin—and she wears atop her head a Phrygian cap, a classical signifier of freedom.

Both Romanticism and Realism (despite obvious differences) present an alternative view of reality and fiction to the Classical and the Neoclassical. Each in its own right has offered an artistic practice that ventures away from Classical ideals. In terms of ideas, Romanticism moved away from some key ideas of Classicism, or at least deemed them less important, they sought to abandon reason, rationality, and order for the sake of a more accurate chaos capable of capturing the human psyche and inner life. When Romanticists used Classical imagery, it was in a much more lyrical sense, almost humanizing the once-distant models. They also reinterpreted and glorified the Middle Ages, breaking from the Renaissance notion of the "dark" ages. The Realists on the other hand were breaking away from the grandiosity and idealism of the classic tradition, seeing it as ill-fitted to accurately describe their rapidly changing world. They slowly shifted away from ideals and into life as perceived, drawing individuals from daily life, and documenting the architecture and wonders of the modern world. The realists chose to put their best efforts into creating images as close to the human perception as possible, and that meant including and sometimes emphasizing imperfections, normalcy, and mediocrity, as essential parts of the human condition. This can be seen in paintings such as Gustav Corbet's "The Stone Breakers", Francois Millet's "The Gleaners", or in a more urban context, Edouard Manet's depictions of life in Paris.

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4. MODERN ART AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

European Modern Art situated itself relatively "against" the classical tradition, proceeding to experiment with the foundations of the artwork: first, the subject matter, abandoning history painting and mythological stories in favour of depicting inner life, and the everyday. Eventually, line, perspective and colour will fall victim to this seemingly endless experimentation and pushing of boundaries. Creating art movements like Fauvism, where colour is completely detached from reality, and Cubism with the deconstruction of perspective. In Futurism, the movement was incorporated in two-dimensional paintings and abstraction, where a work of art is for the first time completely devoid of subject or story. For a relatively long time, artists have seemingly ignored classical images and were only marching forward with experimenting and drawing inspiration from the rapidly changing realities around them rather than the myths of the great past.

Later down the line and after WWII, at a certain moment, through Greenberg's formalist theories, boundary-pushing will become the one and only doctrine of true art, creating this (ideological) narrative where the classical (and figurative) is linked to a lower form of art "kitsch", while artists should seek art in its purest form. This assumption is directly connected to Greenberg's bashing of Soviet art and Soviet Realism as inferior to American art.

4.1 Modern Art Under Fascism

Throughout the late 20s to the 30s, Fascist regimes were undoubtedly taking over Europe's social and political landscape, and once power was seized, Art was called upon to "illuminate the masses" as anthropology, history, art, architecture, and literature, occupied "supplementary (yet) crucial" ideological function" (Roche, 2018). Despite pointing out several differences in how both regimes approached and appropriated the classical, a similarity appears, the lack of a coherent unifying narrative (due to the relatively late unification of a German Empire, that only took place in the Palace at Versailles, Paris in 1871 after the Franco Prussian war) so to say, a narrative complete with sufficient mythology and metaphors to pick and choose from, flexible enough to accommodate subtle alterations, and a stretched canvas upon which to lay the ideals of the new age. For most of history, both Roman and Greek traditions have been lumped together, but as Helen Roche points out, both Hitler and Mussolini sought out different myths, where the myth of Rome for Mussolini, and the myth of Sparta for Hitler, both served as a concrete history to prove the legitimacy of the connections to the greatness of the ancients.

4.2 Fascism's Disdain for Modern Art

In Nazi Germany, Sculpture and painting played a giant role, and before the Third Reich rose to power, German Expressionism was in a boom, with artists like Otto Dix, Wassily Kandinsky, and Emil Nolde, producing interesting and new work. However, "Having grown up in provincial Linz, Austria, Hitler never developed an appreciation for modernist culture and instead developed affinities for more traditional historicist styles" (Petropolous, 2014) and during the Third Reich, Modern Art was generally perceived as a threat to society, to the German values, and history. The anti-modernist tendency was developing prior to the 30s, after WWI, but by the mid-30s it was becoming absolutely unhinged. Amidst a wave of political persecution for artists of Jewish descent, books were burnt, schools were shut down, and artists were forced to stop working or into exile. According to Grosshans, Hitler's regime saw Greek and Roman art as uncontaminated by Jewish influences. Modern art was [perceived by him as] an act of aesthetic violence by the Jews against the German spirit. Such was true of Hitler –

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wrote Grosshans – even though only Liebermann, Meidner, Freundlich, and Marc Chagall, among those who made significant contributions to the German modernist movement, were Jewish. But Hitler ... took upon himself the responsibility of deciding who, in matters of culture, thought and acted like a Jew." (Grosshans, 1983) The supposedly "Jewish" nature of art that was indecipherable, distorted, or that represented "depraved" subject matter was explained through the concept of *degeneracy*, which held that distorted and corrupted art was a symptom of an inferior race.

In 1937, two art exhibitions were held in Germany that, juxtaposed, could serve to highlight precisely what terms such as *degenerate art* and *German Art* meant. The degenerate art exhibition included 650 paintings, sculptures and prints by 112 artists, primarily German: Georg Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Georg Kolbe, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Otto Dix, Willi Baumeister, Kurt Schwitters and others. The artworks were crammed in the narrow rooms of the Institute of Archeology in Munich, some without frames, some upside down with derogatory slogans written on the walls.

Figure 7: Goebbels views the Degenerate Art exhibition (1937), with two paintings of Emil Nolde hanging to the left.

Figure 8: View of sculpture exhibited at the Haus of German Art, n.d., part of the Great Aryan Art Exhibit, 1937. Source: Wikepedia.org

In a stark comparison, of course, the works and the artists at the *Exhibition of Great German Art.* Consisting of artworks by state-approved artists, the exhibition housed paintings and sculptures of Classic ideals, and a lot of emphasis is put on bodily perfection. Greek Mythology and imagery were heavily used, and the exhibition included Adolf Ziegler's *The Four Elements* (figure 9). Ziegler had been inspired by the words of Alfred Rosenberg, who had highlighted the importance of Greek mythology to the Nazi aesthetic, saying that "The Nordic artist was always inspired by an ideal of beauty. This is nowhere more evident than in Hellas's powerful, natural ideal of beauty". The other popular "genre" was idealized genre painting depicting working class, women, or children "The subject matter that is usually associated with this period in German history – steely-eyed, blond warriors, Hitler and his henchmen in uniform, muscular farmers and breast-feeding mothers." (Ginder, 2004) Adolf Wissel's *Farm Family from Kahlenberg* (1939) falls under the second category.

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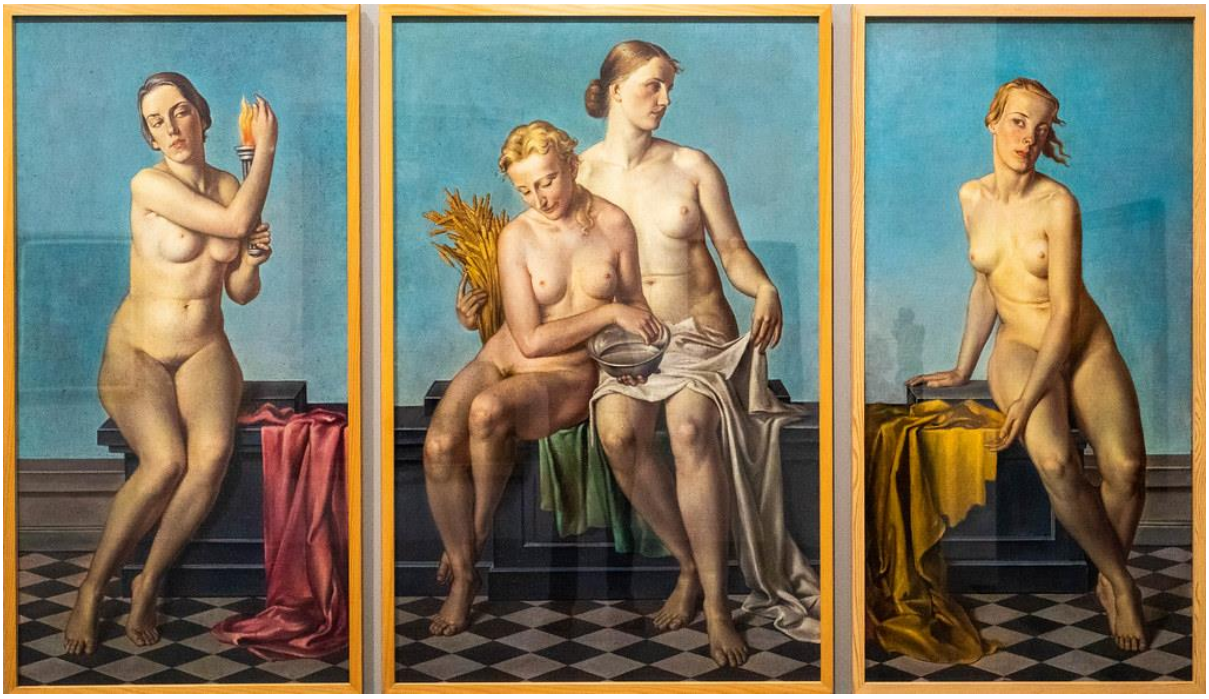

Figure 9: Adolf Ziegler, The Four Elements (c. 1937),
Source: Flickr.com

In Italy, where Mussolini, unlike Hitler seemed indifferent about art. "I do not know", said Mussolini in a speech of May 1924, "if one could separate the two names of Italy and Art." (Flint, 1980). The myth of Imperial Rome succeeded in filling the gap and fulfilling a role the futurists were never capable of fulfilling, it provided solid mythical and visual backgrounds upon which to lay the new ideal. The Regime utilized new archaeological discoveries and promised a return to the glorious days. “There was no concealment in the way in which the Fascist administration made art serve their state apparatuses. The Fascist fresco embodies all the qualities which most strongly characterise the art of the regime: the inseparability of painting and propaganda; reliance on national tradition in form and style, and a deliberately public function. The overt use of myth, an essential component in the transmission of values through any cultural means, was exploited by the Fascists to its fullest extent.” (Flint, 1980)

5. POST-WAR ART AND CLASSICAL IMAGERY

After WWII had ended, and Europe was left to tend to the damage it had caused, the world's map was changing and so the art world map was changing alongside it. With a great number of exiled European artists moving to America, new traditions were being formed, new masters, and a new understanding of (art) history. Most, if not all, art after 1945 is seen and interpreted through the lens of the war. Most notably, Anselm Keifer and Gerhard Richter's earlier works, where an attempt to reconcile one's own understanding of their identity with a shameful history is painfully obvious. Under the title *Heroic Symbols*, comes the earliest work by Keifer, first he created a series of photographs of art actions picturing him performing the Taboo *Seig Heil* Salut. Between 1969 and 1971 Kiefer created a number of oil paintings and watercolours featuring him giving the *Sieg Heil* salute in real and imaginary settings, titled *Heroic Symbols*. “*Heroic Symbol II* (figure 10) imaginatively fuses two elements already present in

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the *Heroic Symbols* book (figure 11), namely a Nazi magazine photograph of August Wredow's neoclassical sculpture *Nike Carrying a Fallen Warrior up to Olympus* 1857, a sculpture much admired by the National Socialists that can be found adorning the Schloßbrücke in Berlin-Mitte and one of Kiefer's original photographs of himself giving the *Sieg Heil* by a lake, which in the painting is positioned in such a way that he appears to be saluting Nike." (Weikop) Looking at this series, we see how Classicism took up another layer in the collective imagination through its heavy utilization by the Nazi regime, subsequently, using it ironically, sinisterly, or violently, is in a way not only a reading into Classic imagery, but Classic imagery and how it has been used so far.

Figure 10: Anselm Kiefer, Heroic Symbol II (Heroisches Sinnbild II) 1970 Würth Collection, Künzelsau © Anselm Kiefer Photo: Würth Collection, Source: tate.ora.uk

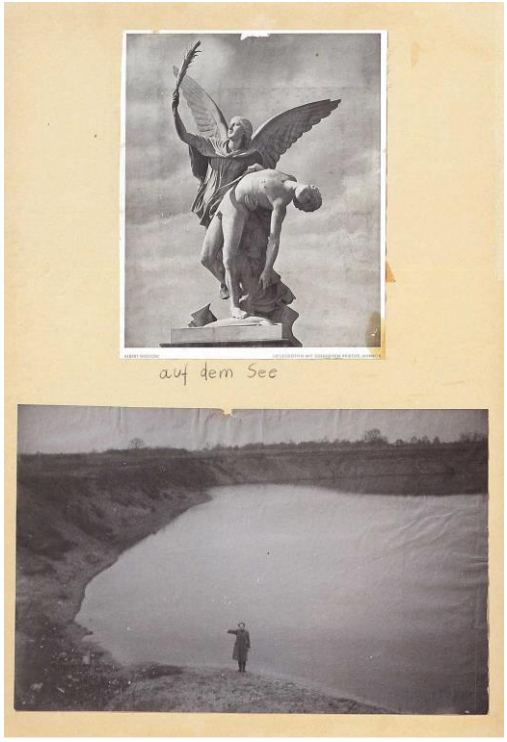

Figure 11: Anselm Kiefer, Heroic Symbol (Heroisches Sinnbild) 1969 © Anselm Kiefer Source: tate.org.uk

6. RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Further exploration of the classical themes in contemporary art could add hugely to this area of research, where the employment of classical themes beyond Western Art and within a globalized art world could point to different layers of the subject. Finally, the utilization of anti-classicism as a political stand could serve as a point of interest and connection between the early purposes of classical painting.

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