

**VANITAS AND THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE  
IN THE ART OF OTTO DIX**

by

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**VANITAS AND THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE  
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## VANITAS AND THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE IN THE ART OF OTTO DIX

Life within the magic circle of eternal return makes  
for an existence that never emerges from the auratic.

Walter Benjamin

This cryptic remark appears in Benjamin's unfinished *The Arcades Project*. It refers to his own writings and alludes to the philosophical concept of the eternal return or recurrence proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche. Whereas for some, the eternal return could be life-affirming, for Benjamin it was a nightmare. He viewed it as a non-spiritual doctrine supporting man's desire for repetition. Unfortunately, this overwhelming desire for repetition discourages questioning in a society bent on progress. The mythical status of progress creates an aura that encourages passive entrancement and dissuades active examination, deliberation and manipulation. Benjamin warns that life without investigation leads to a society shackled by passivity and conformity; such a society will eventually be subjugated by fascism. However, society may avert domination if it actively pursues a new form of historical materialism which recognizes that fragments of the past can form dialectical images that illuminate the present moment, thus preventing a blind fall into conformist repetition.

Whereas Benjamin utilizes literary montage to advance his philosophy of history, Otto Dix asserts a similar critique, but with a visual means. Contemporaries born a year apart, their formative years were quite different. Dix grew up in a proletarian household, the son of a foundry worker in Untermhaus, near Gera. He enthusiastically volunteered for the military in 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, serving as a machine gunner all four years. Benjamin, on the other hand, grew up in an upper-middle class Jewish family in the affluent neighborhoods of Berlin. He evaded conscription into the military three times, instead spending the war years

studying at universities in Freiburg, Munich and, eventually, Bern, Switzerland. Despite the difference in background between Dix the artist and Benjamin the philosopher, their work can be related. Benjamin's oeuvre is eclectic and ranges from treatments of seventeenth-century Baroque *Trauerspiele* (German mourning plays) to the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to literary criticism and historicism. Benjamin was not widely published or read during the 1920s, and it is not known if Dix read anything by him, nevertheless, many of Benjamin's concepts are helpful in understanding why Dix painted some of the motifs he did.

Dix is best known for his images representing the horrific conditions he faced in World War I, his grotesque parodies of humanity in the faces of prostitutes and disabled veterans, who are often referred to derogatorily as whores and cripples, and his unconventional approach to portraiture. Throughout his career, Dix also looked to the past, not only for his celebrated oil-tempera *Lasurtechnik*, but also for motifs borrowed directly from Northern Renaissance allegories and still lifes reminiscent of Dutch Baroque masters. Dix interrupts the sequence of history by refusing to conform to progressive modernist trends in art. He used Renaissance motifs to produce dialectical images of admonition. This essay will look at two such paintings – *Girl in Front of a Mirror* (1921; fig. 1) and *Vanitas* (1932; fig. 2) – which serve as bookends to his Weimar era oeuvre. I will compare them to artworks by Dix's sixteenth-century predecessor, Hans Baldung Grien, demonstrating how Dix employs Northern Renaissance iconography to anchor his art firmly in the past. By doing so, the paintings resonate with the modern exhortation of his contemporary, Benjamin, who advocated a new historical materialism, resulting in dialectical images, which caution society against decadence brought forth by progress that blinds itself to the past. While Benjamin may not have approved of the use of such a traditional technique, the painted Renaissance motifs were apposite themes for the modern Weimar era.

Dix adhered to a steady course of representation rather than follow the modernist trajectory towards abstraction. His oeuvre is characterized by what Matthew Biro calls “allegorical modernism”: a “mode of appropriationist representational practice that attempted to identify the future of the contemporary moment, the new world that was emerging out of the old.”<sup>1</sup> Biro is not specifically speaking of the Renaissance motifs in Dix’s art, but of Dix’s work generally. Dix essentially created allegories that correlated with modern Weimar life. Scholars frequently recognize the socially critical nature of Dix’s contemporary subjects, however, beyond acknowledging the sources for his Renaissance themes, little has been said of their meaning in the context of his career during the Weimar Republic. But the Renaissance motifs cannot be ignored precisely because Dix was so critical with his modern subjects. There must be more to the Renaissance-themed paintings than mere artistic regression. They require a deeper look.

Dix discounted the idea of originality or innovation in art. In an article he wrote for the *Berliner Nachtausgabe* in 1927, he stated that the “newness in painting derives from ... heightening forms of expression whose essence is already present in the Old Masters.”<sup>2</sup> He even compared new forms of expressionistic painting with recently found Egyptian mummies, observing that they are uncannily similar. “What was new thousands of years ago is old today, but it is nevertheless new once again. How shall we decide where the old stops and new begins...?”<sup>3</sup> This outlook helps to explain his return to Renaissance motifs as well as his adoption of the *Lasurtechnik*, a technique of painting that applies an opaque egg-tempera base

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Biro, “Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix,” *Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (2000): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Whitford, “Revolutionary Reactionary,” in *Otto Dix 1891-1969*, ed. Keith Hartley and Sarah O’Brien Twohig (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 14. The full article can be found in German in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis: mit 128 Abbildungen, 43 Farbproduktionen und einer Sammlung von Schriften, Briefen und Gesprächen* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1981), 205-06.

<sup>3</sup> Whitford, 14.

covered with multiple layers of thin, transparent oil glazes. The *Lasurtechnik* was the method used by many of the sixteenth-century masters whom Dix admired on his visits to the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden.<sup>4</sup> However, this is only a partial explanation for why he returned repeatedly to motifs essentially perfected in the Renaissance. A fuller exposition is needed.

Before and during the Weimar era, Dix studied many Renaissance German, Dutch and Italian artists, including Albrecht Dürer, Pieter Breughel the Elder, and Leonardo da Vinci, and he borrowed a range of secular Renaissance motifs. An early self-portrait (1912) in which he holds a carnation parallels Bernardino Pinturicchio's *Portrait of a Boy* in Dresden, a painting Dix explicitly named in a later interview as a source of inspiration for his early art.<sup>5</sup> In 1923, he painted *Old Couple* (fig. 3) which derived from representations of Unequal Lovers, a theme popular in sixteenth-century Northern, particularly German, art.<sup>6</sup> Lucas Cranach the Elder and his workshop, having produced over forty paintings of the theme (fig. 4), demonstrate the subject's popularity. The subject typically depicts an old man with a young woman, who is frequently portrayed taking money from him, though a few representations show an old woman with young man. It is a moralizing and often titillating theme that plays on old age, lust, folly, greed and vice. Dix's representation of Unequal Lovers differs visually from Renaissance

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Maria Wetzel, Dix stated that he learned the technique from records left from artists such as Albrecht Dürer, however, conservator Bruce Miller of the Cleveland Art Museum states that Dix was not entirely truthful. Through an investigation of *Portrait of Josef May*, which the Cleveland Art Museum owns, and correspondence with Ursus Dix, Otto Dix's son, Miller discovered that Dix's technique was nearly identical to a method outlined in Max Doerner's book *Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting*, published in 1921. Ursus Dix confirmed that his father did indeed have a 1921 copy of the book in his personal library. Miller suggests that the switch from *alla prima* oil painting to the oil-tempera *Lasurtechnik* was made for logistical reasons (i.e., oil-tempera is more stable than oil alone) rather than artistic reasons. While that may have been a consideration, it seems impossible that logistical reasoning was the sole motivator in the change from oil to oil-tempera. See Maria Wetzel, "Otto Dix: Ein harter Mann, dieser Maler," *Diplomatischer Kurier*, 14 (1965): 731-745; Bruce F. Miller, "Otto Dix and his Oil-Tempera Technique," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74 (October 1987): 332-355. For a view of the changeover to the *Lasurtechnik* as socially critical, see Travis English, "Otto Dix's *Lasurtechnik* and the Dialectics of Tradition," *Art Criticism* 22, no. 2 (2007): 21-38.

<sup>5</sup> Wetzel, 740.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth look at the theme, see Alison G. Stewart, *Unequal Lovers: A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977).

versions in that he has given both the man and woman an aged, almost corpse-like appearance, overlaying the painting with a theme of transience and decay. He repeated the Unequal Lovers motif numerous times, as well as other traditional Renaissance themes, in particular those of vanitas and memento mori. His initial depictions of Renaissance themes, however, are not quite as obvious or melodramatic as his post-1933 allegories.

From 1927 until 1933, Dix held a professorial post at the Dresden Art Academy, before being dismissed in accordance with National Socialist cultural policies. His art, particularly his depictions of war and its consequences, was deemed demoralizing to the German people and thereby degenerate. After leaving the academy, Dix responded by painting several large allegorical paintings. *The Triumph of Death* (fig. 5), a complex painting with several traditional iconographical attributes, depicts the Ages of Man: a baby crawling through lush grass and spring flowers, a young, amorous couple standing near rose bushes in full bloom and an old bent-backed woman poking through spiny thorn bushes. The specter of death crowds the figures both figuratively and literally. A World War I soldier stands with his bayonet rifle ready to inflict death while a double amputee sits pitifully on the ground awaiting it. Above all stands the figure of Death, wearing a magnificent jeweled crown and wielding a scythe, whose point draws a line across the soldier's neck. The figures representing the Ages of Man are carefully and meticulously painted using thin oil glazes, while Death, with his former vestiges of flesh hanging in tatters is rendered in much a broader, almost expressionistic manner.

*The Triumph of Death* was one of Dix's last secular allegories. When the Nazis labeled him degenerate, his allegorical subjects shifted from secular to religious. He painted various versions of *St. Christopher*, *The Temptation of St Anthony* and *Lot and his Daughters*, among others. With the rise of National Socialism, it became too dangerous for him to continue with the

imagery he had previously employed. Throughout the years of the Weimar Republic though, he was able to paint what he wanted, and he did so, creating a body of work that is essentially a montage of subjects and motifs, jumping from frighteningly realistic interpretations of war to unflattering portraits to representations critical of modern life. Interspersed among these works were the Renaissance-themed images. The two paintings *Girl in Front of a Mirror* and *Vanitas*, one painted at the beginning and the other at the end of the Weimar era, show that although he was selectively picking themes from the past, he never strayed from social critique.

*Girl in Front of a Mirror* was one of a series of portrayals of prostitutes from the early 1920s. In the painting, a woman stands with her back to the viewer, admiring herself in an oval standing mirror. Leaning in towards the mirror where she sees her reflection, a shocking duality is revealed. Whereas from the back she looks decidedly young, with smooth shoulders and back and youthfully rounded buttocks visible through her split-crotch bloomers, the reflection shown in the mirror is disturbingly different. The mirror shows a much older looking woman with wrinkles marring her face, possibly missing teeth and a skeletal sternum visible above deeply sagging breasts. The woman leers at herself, applying lipstick to her grinning mouth. She wears a lightly striped corset decorated with lace trim at top; its garters hold up a barely visible stocking. She stands with her legs slightly apart, displaying stringy pubic hair through the open bloomers. Her right hand holds what appears to be a powder puff or a rouge brush. Beyond the woman and the mirror, nothing else is visible in the painting.

In the 1930s, the Nazis confiscated this painting and it is now presumed destroyed. Only a black and white photographic reproduction remains, making it impossible to analyze the painting's color. However, a written description exists. In 1923, shortly after the painting was displayed in a Berlin exhibition, Dix was charged with obscenity. Following a trial in which

several prominent artists and colleagues testified on his behalf, Dix was acquitted. A written summation of the acquittal includes important details of the painting that cannot be discerned in the black and white reproduction:

The painting, *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, depicts an old prostitute, standing in front of a mirror, painting her lips. Her back is turned to the viewer so that her front is seen in the mirror's reflection. The pictured woman is clothed only in a corset and bloomers, which are open in the front and the back, so that one can discern her pubic hair and the curvature of her buttocks. Owing to a band of the corset casting a deep, dark shadow over the genitals, the pubic hair is at first not clearly recognizable. The body of the prostitute clearly carries the signs of degeneration produced through her trade; her entire body is bony and withered, her breasts are completely limp and her skin color is a foul grayish-yellow tone.

In stark contrast to the downright repugnant, hideous and emaciated body of the prostitute is the portrayal of the few garments she wears. The corset is a sky blue color, adorned with lace and pink bows; the bloomers are decorated with lace ruffles and bows of a pink color. Garters are indicated through similar straps with bows. The painting concludes shortly below the knee.<sup>7</sup>

Two things are learned from the above description. One is that the surviving photograph of the painting is slightly incomplete. In the photograph, the image ends at the bottom edge of the woman's bloomers, not below the knee. The other aspect concerns color. Describing her skin as a "foul grayish-yellow tone" and listing the sky blue color of the corset and pink bows on her daintily embellished lingerie demonstrates its similarity to another of Dix's paintings of prostitutes from the same year.

*Salon I* (fig. 6) depicts four prostitutes sitting around a table in a brothel. Dix painted the flesh of the women in such a grayish monochromatic manner that the skin tone nearly appears to be in grisaille. The grayness of their flesh creates an almost deathly appearance that is especially

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<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, 201-02. My translation.

apparent on the woman on the right who fondles her breasts; a very slight yellowish tinge keeps the women's skin from being completely gray. The only real color on the four prostitutes occurs in their hair, garishly applied makeup and clothing. The bright colors of the negligées contrast sharply with the paleness of their skin. Various shades of a bright pink rouge color their faces under the eyes and the three women in the back have their lips colored to match. Yet the overdone cosmetics cannot hide the physical toll of their harsh existence, from the deeply etched lines in the face of the elder blond woman to the dark circles under the eyes of the brunette in the back corner. The colors utilized in *Girl in Front of a Mirror* were apparently similar. The contrast between the grayish-yellow flesh tones and the brightness of make-up and attire in *Salon I* produces a disconcerting image; *Girl in Front of a Mirror* must have had the same effect.

Unlike the brothel setting of *Salon I*, no elements specify the setting of the *Girl in Front of a Mirror*. The singular focus on the woman and the mirror implies the vanitas motif. Originating in late medieval graphic art, vanitas, Latin for “emptiness,” became a frequent allegorical theme in Renaissance art. In Northern art, after the Reformation extinguished much of the demand for religious imagery, vanitas, viewed as a secular subject, grew in importance and popularity. It served to warn viewers away from sinful vices and to remind them of the transience of life. During the Renaissance, vanitas imagery often included a woman looking at herself in a mirror, such as in Hans Memling's *Vanity* panel of the *Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation* (fig. 7) or Bernardo Strozzi's *Old Woman at the Mirror* (fig. 8). By concentrating on surface beauty, the figure personifies the vices of vanity and pride. Vanitas motifs were frequently combined with elements of memento mori such as the figure of death, a skull or an hourglass. Mirrors themselves were sometimes incorporated with memento mori, through skulls appearing in the mirror's reflection, or as in the case of many of Hans Baldung

Grien's works, with Death standing behind the figure, as in *Three Ages of Woman and Death* (fig. 9).<sup>8</sup>

Despite its long tradition in history, vanitas was an appropriate motif for Dix as a modern artist. Raymond J. Kelly identifies three elements of modern and contemporary vanitas that are recognizable in Dix's paintings. The first is nostalgia, or the passing of time.<sup>9</sup> While the literal passing of time may not necessarily be visible, such as in the hourglass Baldung used, it is suggested allegorically in the aged woman's body. The second element Kelly identifies is specificity: an image that leaves the viewer with no ambiguous feelings about the end.<sup>10</sup> This is manifested in the body of the withered prostitute in *Girl in Front of a Mirror* and later in the shadowy figure in *Vanitas*. Both images point demonstratively to the end of life that approaches. The final element of modern vanitas is significance. Kelly defines significance as "a sense that the objects of vanitas all point to a meaning beyond themselves."<sup>11</sup> Although Kelly writes more in regard to vanitas still lifes, his description applies aptly to Dix's figurative works. The painted figures are not merely representative of the individual viewer's impermanence, but as we shall see, their implications are much broader, beyond one person: it is that of all society.

Throughout his career, Dix frequently referred to Old Masters who influenced him, from Pinturicchio to Dürer and Cranach to Breughel. Hans Baldung Grien, however, seems to be the most influential. In 1920, a year before *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, Dix stood in front of a Baldung

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<sup>8</sup> The mirror had an extraordinarily complex and at times contradictory array of meanings in art. It was frequently iconographically linked with vice, as in the examples above, but it was also at times linked with the virtue of prudence and could even allude to the Immaculate Conception when portrayed with the Virgin Mary. See James H. Marrow, "'In desen speigell': A New Form of 'Memento Mori' in Fifteenth-Century Netherlandish Art," in *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Egbert Haverkamp Begemann (Netherlands: Davaco, 1983), 154-63, 407-11; Jan Białostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting: Reality and Transience," in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, ed. Irving Lavin and John Plummer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 61-72; James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979): 210-11.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond J. Kelly III, *To Be or Not to Be: Four Hundred Years of Vanitas Painting* (Flint: Flint Institute of Arts, 2006), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 48.

Crucifixion with Otto Conzelmann, an early biographer and friend, and told him that he wished to be like Baldung.<sup>12</sup> Fritz Löffler, another biographer and friend, frequently cited Baldung in relation to Dix's work, while George Grosz nicknamed him "Otto Hans Baldung Dix" and "Hans Baldung Dix," in addition to "Altmeister Dix," in several different letters.<sup>13</sup> The frequent link made between the two artists, in addition to the obvious pictorial similarities, confirms Baldung's influence on Dix.

Dix drew inspiration from Baldung's work, such as *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, but he utilized elements in his own way. In *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, Baldung portrayed the three stages of life, from infancy to maturity to old age. The maiden figure holds a mirror up to her face to gaze upon her reflection and pulls her hair away with her other hand. Behind her stands Death with one hand cradling the veil that covers her and the other holding aloft an hourglass. The old woman blocks Death's arm with her hand and with the other turns the mirror so that the young woman cannot see the hourglass reflected. Below, the infant child, covering her face with the transparent veil, gazes up to the young woman; her hobbyhorse and ball lie forgotten on the ground. The three generations of women demonstrate the inevitability of aging and although the old woman tries to hide the final fate of aging by deflecting Death's arm, she fails to deceive the viewer. However, Death is not here to claim the maiden; he is here to expose her to her own mortality and transience. He is, as Joseph Koerner has pointed out, hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup>

In his *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, Dix evokes Death through the blending of the young and old woman. From behind, she appears young, but the mirror reveals something else, the

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<sup>12</sup> Linda F. McGreevy, *The Life and Works of Otto Dix: German Critical Realist* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 45.

<sup>13</sup> Fritz Löffler, *Otto Dix: Life and Work*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 59, 87, 91; George Grosz, *Briefe: 1913-1959*, ed. Herbert Knust (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1979), 202, 324, 420, 504. These nicknames were mentioned in four letters spanning two decades: October 12, 1934, November 8, 1943, December 13, 1948, May 25, 1957.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, "The Mortification of the Image: Death as a Hermeneutic in Hans Baldung Grien," *Representations* 10 (Spring, 1985): 94.

reflection of an old woman. The woman in the mirror is not just merely old, she is deathlike in her appearance, from her bony sternum to the high cheekbones above her sunken cheeks and sharp chin. The grayish-yellow flesh tone would have reinforced the deathly appearance. It could be her true image, her as an old woman vainly trying to recapture her youth through futile primping or it could be the traditional iconography of memento mori with Death appearing in the mirror. In all likelihood, the reflection is both: vanity and mortality.

The old woman's exposed pubic area, visible in the reflection, resembles Baldung's Death. In *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, a dangling vestige of shredded flesh appears to be hanging down from behind the veil that covers Death's genitals. It does not appear to be a phallus, but it is difficult to ascertain what exactly it is, until compared with Baldung's earlier drawing *Death with an Inverted Banner* (fig. 10). The drawing depicts Death as a soldier holding a military banner upside down. Death is a decaying figure, with flesh still hanging on his bones. Slivers of flesh hang where his genitals should be. War has emasculated him and his power to contribute in the reproduction of life. In Dix's painting, it appears that the woman's genital region and pubic hair are rendered in much the same way as Death's genitals in the Baldung drawing and painting. It is difficult to ascertain from the black and white photograph if this is exactly the correlation for which Dix was striving, however, the written account of the painting stated that even in person, the pubic area was difficult to discern. A shadow crosses the opening in the bloomers, hiding the area in darkness. Nevertheless, the transcriber stated definitively that a graphic rendering was recognizable. The anatomical similarity between the prostitute looking at herself in the mirror in Dix's painting and Death in Baldung's works conflates the maiden from *Three Ages of Woman and Death* with the figures of Death into a single body.

The presentation that Dix offers the viewers is one both overtly erotic and manifestly repellent. This dualism of desire with decay appears in many of Baldung's works, such as in *Death and the Maiden* (fig. 11) and his several other versions of the theme. Imagery that links death with eroticism puts the viewer in a distinctly uncomfortable situation: memento mori makes arousal perverse. The image condemns not just the figures portrayed but the complicitous viewers as well.

Admonishment of the viewer is present in *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, too, and even though Dix has used a Renaissance motif, he has anchored it firmly in the post-World War I world in which the viewer lives. Prostitution was rampant in Germany during the war years and into the Weimar era. It had been growing since the middle of the nineteenth century, paralleling the rapid industrialization of Germany, until nearly 330,000 prostitutes plied their trade at the start of World War I.<sup>15</sup> Prostitution was tolerated within strict guidelines in city-regulated brothels, however, the regulations so restricted the lives of the women that unregulated street-walking prostitutes outnumbered the legal prostitutes by a ratio of 10:1. The unintended consequence of unregistered street-walking prostitutes was a visible problem in most cities. During the war, military instituted mobile brothels also followed the troops;<sup>16</sup> as a soldier for four years, Dix was surely aware of them. With the advent of the republic, the country moved to deregulate prostitution, which did not officially occur until 1927.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Evans, "Prostitution, State and Society in Imperial Germany," *Past & Present* 70 (February, 1976): 107-08.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Evans, 128. See also Julia Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies," in "Sexuality and German Fascism," special issue, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (January – April 2002): 69-70. The Law for Combating Venereal Diseases (Reichsgesetz zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten) in 1927 eradicated state regulated brothels due to the failure of the regulation system to combat venereal disease, as well as to the rise of feminist criticism against state regulation. They hoped that by decriminalizing prostitution, more prostitutes would seek medical treatment for venereal disease.

The visibility and availability of prostitution provoked a moral outrage over the degeneration of society caused by loose morality. A fear of venereal disease also agitated the public; prior to the war, sexually-transmitted diseases were the second most treated diseases in hospitals after tuberculosis.<sup>18</sup> After the war, the fear of venereal disease was fed by a propaganda campaign aimed at reducing sexual licentiousness and prostitutes were the target.<sup>19</sup> Prostitutes were believed by many to be working out of their own sexual depravity and immorality. The truth was more complicated.

Most of the prostitutes in Wilhelmine Germany were young women under the age of twenty-six, from the lower classes of families in which the fathers were experiencing diminishing wages and the daughters were needed to help the family stay afloat economically.<sup>20</sup> Many of the prostitutes attempted to find jobs as domestic servants, factory workers or in restaurants, but were unable to find steady work or unable to live on the earnings. Prostitution was a temporary solution for a year or two until they found higher paying employment. During the war, many prostitutes in military-run brothels had little choice of being there: women accused of having sex with more than one man, whether it was commercial or not, were involuntarily incarcerated in the brothels, as well as any women who had contracted a venereal disease.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, most other women were able to find employment by taking over positions that men vacated to join the military. The number of women workers in industry rose by fifty-two percent during the war years.

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<sup>18</sup> Beth Irwin Lewis, "Lustmord: Inside the Windows of the Metropolis," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 210.

<sup>19</sup> Ute L. Tellini, "Syphilis in Weimar: Prostitution, Disease and Retribution in the Art of Otto Dix and George Grosz," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 13, no. 4 (1999): 366.

<sup>20</sup> Evans, 115-16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

The years immediately following the war were devastating for Germany. The defeat at the hands of the Allies and the capitulation at Versailles were humiliating for the German psyche. Over 1.8 million dead and 4 million wounded and a civilian public hampered by years of food shortages, inflation and war fatigue led to intense shame and rage in a nation that had sacrificed so much for nothing.<sup>22</sup> The Weimar Republic, formed after the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, was racked by nearly calamitous political instability. In the first five years, the republic went through several presidents, chancellors and parliaments, prominent political figures were assassinated, various putsches were attempted, and violent confrontations between right- and left-wing groups broke out in city streets.<sup>23</sup> Wartime economic inflation continued to balloon in the early post-war years. The wholesale price index for the mark went from 1 in 1913 to 2.17 in 1918, to 4.15 in 1919, to 14.86 in 1920, to 341.82 in 1922, to 2,783 in January 1923, until it reached a catastrophic peak of being 1,261 thousand million times higher in December 1923 than it had been in 1913.<sup>24</sup>

Added to the turbulence were the demobilization of soldiers, their reintegration into society and the displacement of women workers. Able-bodied veterans went back to their old jobs and disabled veterans were also reintegrated into society through the workforce. Rather than provide disabled veterans with pensions sufficient to live on, the military pension system granted pensions on a graduated scale depending on the severity of their disability.<sup>25</sup> This forced many veterans back into the labor market, where it was believed that by being a productive member of society, the veterans would regain the dignity lost by their disability. In April 1920, a new law

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outside as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 147.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-155.

<sup>24</sup> Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 62-64.

<sup>25</sup> Young-Sun Hong, "The Weimar Welfare System," in *The Short Oxford History of Germany: Weimar Germany*, ed. Anthony McElligott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 184.

went into effect that required public employers to hire a certain percentage of disabled veterans.<sup>26</sup> Widows were also given a military pension, but it was only thirty percent of what a totally disabled veteran would receive; this achieved the goal of encouraging remarriage or employment. Demobilization decrees made it legal for women to be summarily removed from men's jobs to make room for returning soldiers. Many of the women were placed in underpaid "women's" positions such as typists, assistants, teachers and social workers, but some women were not relocated at all.<sup>27</sup> In the face of rising inflation, lack of employment or of a sustainable wage pushed many women into prostitution. Mothers with no way to feed their children often had little other choice. With the consequences of war present everywhere, a return to pre-war normalcy was impossible.

A war veteran who had served all four years of the war, Dix returned first to his parents' house in Gera in 1918, and then moved to Dresden where he entered the Dresden Art Academy. Judging from the sheer number of drawings, prints and watercolors depicting prostitutes, Dix was familiar with the brothel scene. He was also a fan of the jazz and cabaret nightlife that was often the haunt of unregistered street-walking prostitutes. Given prostitution's high visibility, it is not surprising he so often portrayed sex workers in his early Weimar work. However, how he portrayed them has generated much recent discussion among feminist scholars.

Most of Dix's early artworks depicting prostitutes display grotesque parodies of women, as in *Girl in Front of a Mirror* and *Salon I*. While apparently no feminist criticism regarding these depictions occurred during the Weimar period, the prevailing feminist sentiment today is that his images of prostitutes are evidence of his misogyny, a characteristic seen as shared by

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<sup>26</sup> Hong, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Günter Berghaus, "Girlikultur – Feminism, Americanism, and Popular Entertainment in Weimar Germany," *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3/4 (1988): 194, 197; Peukert, 96-97.

many of the modern artists of the period.<sup>28</sup> The portrayals are certainly not flattering, yet, most of the scholarship that takes this point of view fails to take into account his equally demeaning portrayal of disabled soldiers and veterans. An exception is Dora Apel. In a discussion that finds a disparity in the similarly degrading representations of veterans and prostitutes, she states that the very nature of the broken man connoted a feminization that made one less than a man.<sup>29</sup> Dix portrayed the disabled war veterans to exemplify the meaninglessness of war and ideology by showing their loss of masculinity. Apel argues that whereas war emasculated men, the degradation suffered by prostitutes was not a result of their own deprived social situation, but was simply because they were women and therefore a perceived threat to Dix and other men of his generation.

The arguments that Apel and other feminist scholars make regarding his misogyny are almost convincing, but they neglect another aspect of his oeuvre, his images of women who are not prostitutes. In the early 1920s, Dix portrayed working class women and mothers who, though depicted in his own unique style, were quietly dignified. *Woman with Child* (fig. 12) pictures a weary, pregnant, working mother holding her child in front of an urban dwelling. Although she looks haggard and overworked with slightly sunken cheeks and prominent eyes, she displays a noble equanimity. The pale skin on her arm is marked by bulging veins as she holds onto her staring child. Her life, like so many lives in Germany during the early post-war years, is hard, but she perseveres. *Woman with Red Hat* (fig 13) is a painted bust portrait of a young, almond-eyed woman looking out from under her bright hat. Her large eyes stare intently at the viewer, exuding

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<sup>28</sup> For more discussion on his images of prostitutes as evidence of his misogyny, see Dora Apel, "'Heroes' and 'Whores': The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imagery," *Art Bulletin* 79 (September 1997), 366-384; Matthias Eberle, *World War I and the Weimar Artists: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Dorothy Rowe, "Desiring Berlin: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Germany," in *Visions of the 'Neue Frau': Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, ed. Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West, 143-164 (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 159-162; Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Tellini, 362-372.

<sup>29</sup> Apel, 375.

awareness. Her cheeks are flushed with pink and her red mouth curves into a small smile. She appears to be confident in her life and time. These two paintings, as well as others, demonstrate that not all of Dix's representations of women exhibited female degradation and misogyny. This suggests that his images of prostitutes were not necessarily engendered by anxiety over the status of women. Any anxiety Dix may have had was not about women; it was about the profession of prostitution and the resultant ignominy. He purposely aligned his disturbing portrayals of prostitutes with depictions of emasculated war veterans to symbolize the failures of society.

It is to this failure of modern German society that *Girl in Front of a Mirror* alludes in its condemnation of the viewer. Just as the images of disabled and dismembered veterans show a link between a militaristic society and death, so, too, do the images of prostitution. In a society that prized male virility so highly, male disability signified failure for men. That same society valued female purity and reproductive ability, therefore a rendering of a corrupt and purposelessly sexual, i.e. non-reproductive woman, was a prime demonstration of failure for women. Society had abandoned these women and, by forsaking them, it drove them into a life defined by depravity and shame. Taken together, the failures for both veterans and prostitutes, men and women, signify a much greater breakdown: that of society itself.

Dix's use of a vanitas motif for such a representation was appropriate for the work because of its long tradition in painting. He knew how people would respond to a work that so forcefully and repulsively blended a debased eroticism with human mortality: at his obscenity trial, he explained that he wanted to show the effects of the business of prostitution on the human body.<sup>30</sup> When asked about the shame the portrayal could project onto the viewer, Dix compared his interpretation to that of the Old Master paintings hanging in museum galleries that were not found offensive because people knew the moral messages that the Renaissance painters were

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<sup>30</sup> Schmidt, 202-03.

conveying. He thereby definitively links *Girl in Front of a Mirror* with allegorical works by early masters. It was difficult though for his modern viewers to make the same connection in a modern painting; they were not used to seeing a modern figure in such an allegorical light.

Dix continued to develop allegorical themes in his oeuvre, but on the eve of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, he turned away from injecting Renaissance motifs into his modern representations. Dix's 1932 *Vanitas*, even in its title, offers a much more traditional allegorical representation than *Girl in Front of a Mirror*. The picture features a voluptuous woman proudly and smilingly displaying herself. The artist shows the woman at slightly more than half-length, by provocatively cropping the composition just below her pubic region. A greenish-blue undertone can be seen under her skin, which glows on top with a peachy-pink radiance; her fleshy curves are illustrated by softly modeled shadows. She rests her right hand lightly on her hip, further drawing attention down to a pubic area covered in tufts of downy, brownish-red hair. Her face is smooth and she smiles broadly, baring filmy teeth highlighted at the edges with bright white, pushing her plump pink cheeks up under her bluish-hazel eyes. Light eyelashes sweep down softly from her eyelids. Her golden hair has undertones of red and brown and Dix attempted to paint the yellow and white highlights with individual strokes, reminiscent of the finely crafted hair of women by Dürer or Cranach, however in some areas the paint clumps together. Bouncy curls rest just above her shoulders. Unbeknownst to the beaming woman, a decrepit form stands behind her. The shadowy figure – a very old woman, her skin darkened with age – slumps dejectedly, holding her left hand up at chest height. The bones of her sternum are visible above her pendulous breasts. Loose bluish-silver and white hairs sparsely cover her mostly bare scalp above her sunken face and white and orange wisps form her eyebrows. A jutting, hooked nose points to her chin, which is speckled with white wisps of hair and is

protruding out below her edentulous mouth. Dark shadows cover her eyes, making it nearly impossible to see the small, black, beady eye, looking stiffly away from the young woman in front. Dix used no white in his depiction of the old woman's eye, thereby producing a menacing stare. Deep, dark lines flow from her eye down her cheek. Her aged skin is such a dark shade that she nearly blends in to the orangish-brown background, only lightly modeled highlights of gray and blue differentiate the shape of her body.

Only two traditional iconographic elements occur in *Vanitas*: the beautiful young woman and the corpse-like old woman. There is no mirror like the one in *Girl in Front of a Mirror* or earlier renditions of vanitas motifs like Baldung's *Three Ages of Woman and Death*. Also, no hourglass is included. Nevertheless, Dix has again combined Renaissance figures to make a focused point. Whereas in *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, the young maiden and Death have been fused in the figure of the prostitute, in *Vanitas*, the young maiden stands in front of a composite figure: Death and the old woman have melded. The girl ignores the aged form of Death behind her, much as the girl in Baldung's drawing *Death and the Maiden* (fig. 14). In the 1515 drawing, a young nude woman holds a mirror close to her face as she brushes her long hair. Behind her stands the skeletal figure of Death with a long shroud wrapped around his body. He grasps her with his clawed hands, one bony hand on her waist as he looks out from around her, his other hand gripping tightly under her breast on her other side. Despite his physical contact with her, the woman appears unaware of his presence. She is so consumed with her own reflection in the hand mirror that she is completely oblivious to anything else. As in *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, the figure of Death has not come to claim the woman, but rather to present her own mortality. Peeking around her, he could be attempting to insert his reflection into the mirror, but

the woman is so preoccupied that she does not see it. Instead, Death presents her transience to her and the viewer. In doing so, he reminds the viewer of his or her own impermanence.

In Dix's *Vanitas*, the young woman is likewise oblivious to the deathly figure behind her. It is almost as if she is also absorbed in looking at her own reflection in the mirror. If that were the case, then the mirror would be positioned outside the picture; it would be where the viewer stands and could even be the viewer. The possibility that the viewer is the mirror or conversely, the young woman as the reflection of the viewer, may seem a bit of a stretch, but the concept is not new. In his discussion on the hermeneutic meaning of Death in Baldung's works, Koerner interprets Adam's gaze in Baldung's *Adam and Eve* (fig. 15), as that of one looking into a mirror.<sup>31</sup> He watches himself as he touches Eve and in turn brings the viewer into the scene. The viewer becomes the mirror as Adam perverts the viewer's gaze into that of the scopophilic voyeur. The voyeur then shares the sin of lust, which was the true cause of the Fall of Man.<sup>32</sup> That Dix titled his painting *Vanitas* reinforces the possibility that he intended the painting to present the same interpretation as if there were a mirror pictured in the image. As though before a mirror, the woman stands proudly, grinning ostentatiously at her own curves. Simultaneously, she presents herself as an object for adoration, locking the viewer's gaze onto her body. Gazing upon the body of the woman in the same way that she gazes at herself, the viewer can overlook, just like the woman, the specter of Death. But the viewer can also, unlike the woman, actually see the image of Death.

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<sup>31</sup> Koerner, 82.

<sup>32</sup> The concept of the viewer sharing the sin of the figures in Baldung's work is not new. Bob Scribner referred to it as the 'sensual gaze.' Bob Scribner, "Ways of Seeing in the Age of Dürer," in *Dürer and his Culture*, ed. Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109. See also Bodo Brinkman, "Witches' Lust and the Fall of Man," in *Hexenlust und Sündenfall: Die Seltsamen Phantasien des Hans Baldung Grien/Witches' Lust and the Fall of Man: The Strange Fantasies of Hans Baldung Grien*, ed. Bodo Brinkman (Petersberg: Imhof, 2007), 13-202.

With its reflective intricacies, *Vanitas* allegorizes German society at that time. After economic devastation in the early post-war years, the “Golden Twenties”<sup>33</sup> exemplified superficial optimism, bolstered by increased mass consumption, which was fueled by the growth of advertising as well as regulated workdays and higher wages. The advent of the eight-hour workday led to more leisure time for the German worker, which allowed people more time to spend consuming goods and entertainment. Advertising power grew with the increased availability of consumers. Advertisements could be found on the street, through display windows and signs posted on advertising columns or walls, as well as in all of the numerous new illustrated magazines and newspapers.<sup>34</sup> Images of women in advertisements proliferated, showing her as the “*Neue Frau*.” She was portrayed as a woman fashionably dressed in short, straight-line dresses with short, bobbed hair. Perceptions of the *Neue Frau* and the infiltration of American jazz music and dance added to the flashy, modern feel. Modern Germany moved forward exuberantly through the post-inflationary years.

The glittery surface of the Weimar golden years could not, however, conceal the troubles that led it to its destruction. In the late 1920s, the leaders of the Reichswehr Ministry, which oversaw the military, began a subtle remilitarization of the country. The army began to form reserve units in a circumvention of the Versailles Treaty. Growing nationalism inculcated the military values of obedience, self-discipline and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for one’s country.<sup>35</sup> Later, in 1928, in direct violation of the Versailles Treaty, the Reichswehr began a rearmament program. The remilitarization was to soon gain strength in the face of the collapsing economy. After the stock market crashed on Wall Street in the United States, economic

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<sup>33</sup> The “Golden Twenties” generally refers to the years 1924-1929.

<sup>34</sup> Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 93.

<sup>35</sup> William Mulligan, “The Reichswehr and the Weimar Republic,” in McElligott, *The Short Oxford History of Germany: Weimar Germany*, 94.

reverberations were felt around the world, with Germany being hit especially hard.

Unemployment escalated in the early 1930s and Germans were again faced with another economic catastrophe less than ten years after the hyperinflation of 1923. Anti-republican politicians tried to take advantage of the economic crisis in order to destroy the fragile and increasingly unpopular republic. Democracy was proving futile and a widespread desire for authoritarian government began to grow. The Reichstag became increasingly deadlocked and ineffective. Radicalization of political ideologies accelerated and many fractious parties feuded so aggressively that violence spilled out into the streets and countryside. By 1932, a tangible fear of civil war took hold.<sup>36</sup> Within the midst of this unrest, the National Socialists increasingly accrued power.

With the rise of far-right ideologies came intolerance for the unconventional or even blatantly modern, especially in the cultural realm. Judging by his graphic depictions of war, Dix apparently had, however, no fear of controversy and he did not temper his work to reflect the growing anti-modernist views. It was not until 1933, when he was dismissed from his professorial post in Dresden and forbidden by the Combat League of German Culture to create and exhibit scenes of modern life or war, that he completely abandoned modern themes. However, prior to then, he had begun to use allegorical motifs that derived directly from the Renaissance without visually aligning them to specifically modern figures, as he had done in *Girl in Front of a Mirror*. His use of traditional allegory enables the viewers to see their own selves and coming fate. This is exemplified in *Vanitas*. The exuberantly smiling young woman is explicitly not the *Neue Frau*. Rather than the modern, urban woman complete with a boyish figure that was seen in advertisements, this woman looks more like a generic rural farm girl,

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<sup>36</sup> Anthony McElligott, "Political Culture," in McElligott, *The Short Oxford History of Germany: Weimar Germany*, 41.

flaunting her curvaceous body. Her stereotypically Aryan features stand as a caricature of the nation's misplaced optimism as she blissfully ignores the specter of mortality behind. The pride she displays parallels the rise of the all-consuming nationalistic arrogance of the German nation as Weimar society itself crumbled.

Dix's employment of Renaissance motifs are allegories that can be regarded as a type of dialectical image. Walter Benjamin discussed allegory extensively in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.<sup>37</sup> Allegory, especially as Dix used it, consists of imagery appropriated from the past on to which he, the interpreter, has overlaid a cultural significance that is applicable to the modern viewer. As an allegory, the vanitas motif is modernized, and is no longer solely bound to its original Renaissance meaning; it thereby becomes fragmented. It is through its fragmentary nature that the vanitas allegory Dix painted becomes a dialectical image.

The dialectical image is a concept that Benjamin espoused in many of his philosophical writings, particularly in his essay "Central Park" and later through various parts of his unfinished *The Arcades Project*.<sup>38</sup> After he fled Germany in 1933, he took up residence in Paris and during the last few years of his life, he spent much of his time in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, where he gathered fragments of literary, philosophical, political and economic writings for *The Arcades Project*. Unfortunately, when Germany invaded France, Benjamin had to flee, leaving behind sheaves of notes. In a moment of despair on the French-Spanish border in 1940, he committed suicide. Contained within the notes he left behind were the handwritten, unfinished manuscripts for "Central Park" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as well as the

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<sup>37</sup> Benjaminian allegory is cited in discussions on modern avant-garde and post-modern theory. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 68-73 and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, et al. (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 52-69.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," trans. Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, *New German Critique* no. 34 (Winter, 1985), 32-58; Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

collection of an organized montage of fragments that comprise *The Arcades Project*. Since 1927, Benjamin had been working sporadically on *The Arcades Project*, which was intended to be a prehistory of modernity, set in the capital of the nineteenth century: Paris. Both *The Arcades Project* and “Central Park” focus on the work of Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth-century poet and flâneur, but they also serve as backdrops for Benjamin’s criticism of the march of progress which, for him, provokes violence on the mind and spirit of the proletariat. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin provides a theoretical model for a new approach to history that can lead the proletariat out of the subjugation that is blind progress.<sup>39</sup> Together, his late works on history form what he calls a “materialist presentation of history [that] leads the past to bring the present into a critical state.”<sup>40</sup>

The critical state is the condition of awareness that allows for examination and deliberation. Dix’s art brings the present into a critical state via select fragments of the past. While it is quite clear in his images of war, it not so obvious in his works that draw from the Renaissance, either in technique or motif. Carl Einstein, a Weimar critic who hailed Dix’s work in 1923, decried his work three years later as banal and reactionary.<sup>41</sup> While it is true that a return to Renaissance subjects can be perceived as being regressive, it does not fit with the critical thrust of Dix’s oeuvre or even his professed Nietzschean beliefs. An avid reader of Friedrich Nietzsche, Dix adhered to Nietzsche’s search for the truth in art, no matter how ugly.<sup>42</sup> Yet the

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, 253-264 (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 471.

<sup>41</sup> Biro, “Allegorical,” 61.

<sup>42</sup> In her essay “Dix and Nietzsche” (42-3), Sarah O’Brien Twohig lists books by Nietzsche that Dix owned and what sections or passages that he notated or otherwise marked. At the time of Dix’s death, she identifies “volume ten of the 1906 Naumann edition which contains four different texts: *The Will to Power* (books three and four), *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Anti-Christ*, and the *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, signed twice but without dates; *Dawn of Day* (Kroner, 1908), signed twice ... *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Kroner, 1908), signed and dated 1914; and *The Gay Science* (Naumann, 1906).” Her description of the passages he marked enable the student of Dix to see what interested him, since he was a much more laconic figure than many other artists of the day. See Sarah O’Brien

pursuit of truth does not negate the possibility of allegory; Nietzsche's own *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is an aphoristic allegory. It is through allegory, or more precisely, his "allegorical modernism," that Dix brings to the fore a critical state. This achievement can best be understood as a type of dialectical image about which Benjamin wrote.<sup>43</sup>

The critical state can only be brought about by an image that forms a constellation of fragments of the past and present that appear in a quick and instantaneous flash. Past and present meld and are no longer temporal, rather they are dialectical and this enables the image to be identified in its "now of recognizability." Benjamin calls it "dialectics at a standstill" because it has become the dialectical image. It can be understood in now-time, but not in the historical moment from which the fragments that formed the constellation emerged. Recognition and comprehension of the image illuminates the present moment in which the image occurs and this can expose the dream-world nature of the now in which society lives. Exposing the dream-world of the now gives the potential to revolutionize the present political or social systems. Dialectical images are necessary to conceive of a new present and to think critically about the now and about progress.

The fragmentary nature of the dialectical image disrupts the historical continuum, which is essential in order to recognize not only the modern moment, but also to know the "true"

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Twohig, "Dix and Nietzsche," in *Otto Dix 1891-1969*, ed. Keith Hartley and Sarah O'Brien Twohig, (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 43-45. In addition, sometime in the 1920s, his wife Martha gave him a complete set of Nietzsche's works, published between 1924 and 1928. See James A. van Dyke, "Otto Dix's Philosophical *Metropolis*" in *Otto Dix*, ed. Olaf Peters (Prestel: Munich, 2010), 183.

<sup>43</sup> The majority of the discussion on dialectical images is drawn from Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, "Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," 456-488, and "Central Park," 49. However my understanding of Benjamin's work in general has also benefited from the following texts: David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); David Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Martin P. Steinberg, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), as well as in art historical/critical essays by Owens, "Allegorical Impulse" (see note 38); Matthew Biro, "Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix," *Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (2000): 46-70; Matthew Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," *Res* 40 (Autumn, 2001): 153-176.

history, which is not necessarily “the way it really was.”<sup>44</sup> It is through ripping them out of the fabric of the past that they are assigned a new meaning and because they are fragments, they are appropriate for the present. The meaning of the image must be recognized at the moment that it emerges out of the past or it may be lost forever.<sup>45</sup> Historical materialism is the process that deciphers the meaning. It does so in order that the present is able to recognize the eminent danger of complacent conformism to the desires of the ruling class. This is an ongoing struggle, for each era must continually recognize the dialectical images that emerge from a materialist history.

It is a struggle because it is so easy to slip back into uncritical historicism. It is in the nature of historiography to give only a partial and biased reading of the past. History was written by the victors of each particular era who then established the ruling classes of the present. To resist conformism, people must learn this truth and recognize it for what it is when the image emerges from the past. At the same time one must be wary of not looking too far into the future so as not to ignore the present and to march carelessly forward towards progress. During a thoughtless advancement, people forget their past sacrifices and succumb easily to the seductive, yet catastrophic storm of progression controlled by the ruling elite.

To prevent such a transgression of memory, the historical materialist uses the dialectical image as a wedge in the historical continuum to break its flow. History is enveloped by an aura that distances it from comprehension. But by breaking it down into fragments, it becomes accessible as the distance separating it from understanding is eliminated. These fragments of the repressed past are brought forward to expose the phantasmagoria of a fetishistic modernity. The phantasmagoria of the modern is a dream of happiness promoted by the eternal recurrence. The eternal recurrence is a concept developed by Nietzsche in several of his books, including *Thus*

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 255. “The way it really was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) is a direct quote Benjamin borrowed from nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 255.

*Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Will to Power*. Benjamin borrows his concept, as well as a similar one by Louis-Auguste Blanqui,<sup>46</sup> to show how the modernity of the dream-world of the now is a phantasmagoria of happiness. In actuality, it is a living hell. Benjamin includes many quotations from both Nietzsche and Blanqui in Convolute D of *The Arcades Project*.<sup>47</sup> Their quotations, along with Benjamin's own interspersed commentaries, define progress as an eternally occurring repetition of the same routines. Only the aura of progress, of the modern, exists. The knowledge imparted by dialectical images enables society to break free of the eternal recurrence. This is the basis for Benjamin's statement that the eternal return is a magic circle that "never emerges from the auratic," because "the belief in progress ... and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed."<sup>48</sup> Only fragments can pierce through and break the aura that encloses society in its never-ending cycle of eternal return. Thereby, the dialectical can be and must be developed to liberate the people oppressed by a historicism that promotes conformism dictated by the ruling class. Left unchecked, the ruling class will lead society down the fatalistic path to fascism.

This digression into Benjaminian theory has been necessary to understand how Dix's Renaissance motifs work as dialectical images. His whole oeuvre can be considered a montage, as it is a collected assortment of themes in various works that come together as the sort of constellation that Benjamin talks about. In *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, Benjamin's notion of a constellation of past and present consists of the vanitas motif and a Weimar prostitute. The vanitas theme derives from a Renaissance society that grappled with life's impermanence and

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<sup>46</sup> The version of eternal recurrence Benjamin borrows from Blanqui is from his book *L'Eternite par les Astres* (1872).

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 101-119.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

was concerned about what may happen after people die. The Weimar prostitute emerges from modern society. She is the face of a culture that, beginning in the nineteenth century, pushed for progress at the expense of many of its own people. Industrialization left many families unable to survive without the help of daughters who were only able to find wages through exploitation. The trend continued through the war and into the new republic. She is a parallel to the broken men who walked the streets, forever corrupted by the war. Dix melds the vanitas theme and the prostitute to form an image of contemporary German culture. Following his reading of Nietzsche, he displays the truth – ugly though it is – of the decadence that has befallen society. Though Dix was neither a preacher nor a social philosopher, he nonetheless produces a dialectical image of admonition. His paintings suggest that he, like Benjamin, wanted society to recognize the moment in which they lived.

Throughout the Weimar era, Dix deployed Renaissance subjects, both overtly and subtly. It was in the early 1930s though that his painting became anchored much more firmly in historical tradition. With the rise of far-right radical ideology, rhetoric and conflict, Dix borrows a well-known motif from the past to form the image. He is in effect practicing Benjamin's historical materialism, though perhaps in a slightly different way than Benjamin would have approved. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin dismisses traditional forms of art such as painting as bourgeois and out of reach of the masses. However his later works, including the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," allow for traditional works of culture, provided that they are at the same time critical of the culture.<sup>49</sup> Dix's paintings function as critical commentaries of the Weimar society in which he lived. A motif popularized in the Northern Renaissance by revered Old Masters was certainly a traditional work

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 262-64; Michael Löwy, "'Against the Grain': The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (see note 44), 211-12.

of culture. While the themes are anchored visually in the past, Dix has altered the meaning to form an image that can be understood by the modern viewer. This is exactly what is required of a Benjaminian dialectical image. The meaning that the viewer deciphers from the fragmented image is altered; a Renaissance viewer would not understand or fully comprehend Dix's paintings, particularly *Vanitas*.

Renaissance allegorical themes, meant for personal introspection, aimed to remind a viewer of his or her own transience and mortality. The modern viewer of *Vanitas* can also be reminded of his or her own impermanence, however, Dix renders the motif for a much broader audience: Weimar society in general. The smiling woman personifies the shimmering Weimar culture consumed with its own excess. It does not know, or willfully ignores, the figure of Death looming behind. Consumption has blinded society to the growing malignancy of fascist elements within it. Dix's image epitomizes the decadence leading to its own demise. Benjamin cites Paul Klee's 1920 painting, *Angelus Novus*, as a personification of the angel of history who watches the catastrophic storm of progress destructively build.<sup>50</sup> Dix's return to history alerts the viewer to the danger of the storm. It is a storm that has occurred before and will recur, unless people are warned of the danger; then society can break free of the eternal cycle of submission.

The Nietzschean doctrine of the eternal return that Benjamin revived in *The Arcades Project* is a concept with which Dix was most likely familiar. In his own life, Dix experienced the cycle: war, rebuilding, societal deterioration. All the while, society had been seemingly marching forward, yet ignoring the consequences that reckless progress can cause. Just as the eternal recurrence was hell for Benjamin, so would it appear to Dix. Olaf Peters visually observes the hell of the eternal recurrence in Dix's *War* triptych (fig. 16), whose compositional

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin, "Theses," 257-58.

elements form a circle alluding to the cycle of the eternal return.<sup>51</sup> On the left panel, the backs of the marching men curve up and to the right, where the line continues through the steel girder in the central panel, which impales a disintegrating corpse. The dead man points with a skeletal hand to a blasted tree trunk and a wounded soldier being pulled out of the inferno of the right panel. His dragging arm points to the ground, which below and to the left, the predella takes up the visual cue with a drooping tarp covering the men below. It is unknown whether those men lie sleeping or if they are dead, but the tarp points back up to the marching soldiers of the first panel, completing the circle that starts all over again. Peters links the wheel of eternal recurrence presented in the painting not just to the historical events, but also to the unending cycle of life and death. This cycle of life and death which all living things participate in is a parallel to the eternal recurrence displayed in Dix's paintings. The difference between the two is that the cycle of life and death, as a natural law, cannot be avoided or halted, but the eternal recurrence can, if society is aware of its existence.

Dix's paintings of modern subjects demonstrate this awareness, but as society fails to realize its own predicament, Dix increasingly turned to history. Progress promoted modernity, but modernity was, as Benjamin believed, the new that resided in what had eternally existed.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, progress only existed in the repeated routines of society. As a way to reach the viewers, the return to historical motifs made sense. By creating a dialectical image with the vanitas motif, Dix's paintings show the impermanence and approaching death that will inevitably come to society if it continues on the path it was following. Unlike other contemporary artists who published manifestos, focused on the elements of the new consumer society and evolved

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<sup>51</sup>Olaf Peters, "Intransigent Realism: Otto Dix between the World Wars," in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 23. James A. van Dyke also links Dix's work with Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal recurrence. As in this paper, van Dyke links specifically the appropriation of Renaissance methods and motifs with the Nietzschean philosophy. See van Dyke, "Otto Dix's Philosophical *Metropolis*," in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 197, fn. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 916.; Frisby, 207.

towards abstraction, Dix maintained a representational approach that disrupts the historical continuum within art itself. His return to the Renaissance plays within the cycle of eternal return, yet it interrupts its flow. By interrupting the flow and bringing the fragments together, Dix forms a dialectical image that conveys a warning or admonition to the society from which it was created.

Vanitas allegories were not the only way he presented society to itself, but it was nonetheless a powerful, if sometimes contentious, one. Dix's use of Renaissance allegory was not as controversial as his graphic depictions of war or its consequences, yet it provoked unfavorable responses from art critics and historians. Nevertheless, for Dix, allegory provided an effective way to present admonition in a dialectical image comprised of historical fragments. Borrowing fragments from his favorite Renaissance artist, Hans Baldung Grien, was especially fitting given the ambivalent reception that Baldung's work had among early twentieth-century art historians, who criticized it as eccentric and inappropriately subjective.<sup>53</sup> The dialectical image produced in *Girl in Front of a Mirror* presents a decidedly uncomfortably representation. *Vanitas* was perhaps a bit more acceptable in terms of Renaissance appropriation; however, the caricaturistic manner in which Dix painted the woman eradicates any distance between the figure and viewer and mocks the viewer. Regardless, Dix never apologized or shied away from controversy or disapproval. It is through his allegories that he relates most closely to the critique espoused by his contemporary, Walter Benjamin. Whereas Benjamin tried to bring awareness to society in order to break from the magic circle of eternal return through literary montage, Dix does so with Renaissance-derived painting. He creates dialectical images anchored in the past yet joined with the present, which provide a path to emerge from the auratic.

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Shestack, "An Introduction to Hans Baldung Grien," in *Hans Baldung Grien: Prints and Drawings*, ed. James H. Marrow and Alan Shestack (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 12.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1  
Otto Dix  
*Girl in Front of a Mirror*, 1921  
Oil on canvas, measurements unknown  
Presumed destroyed

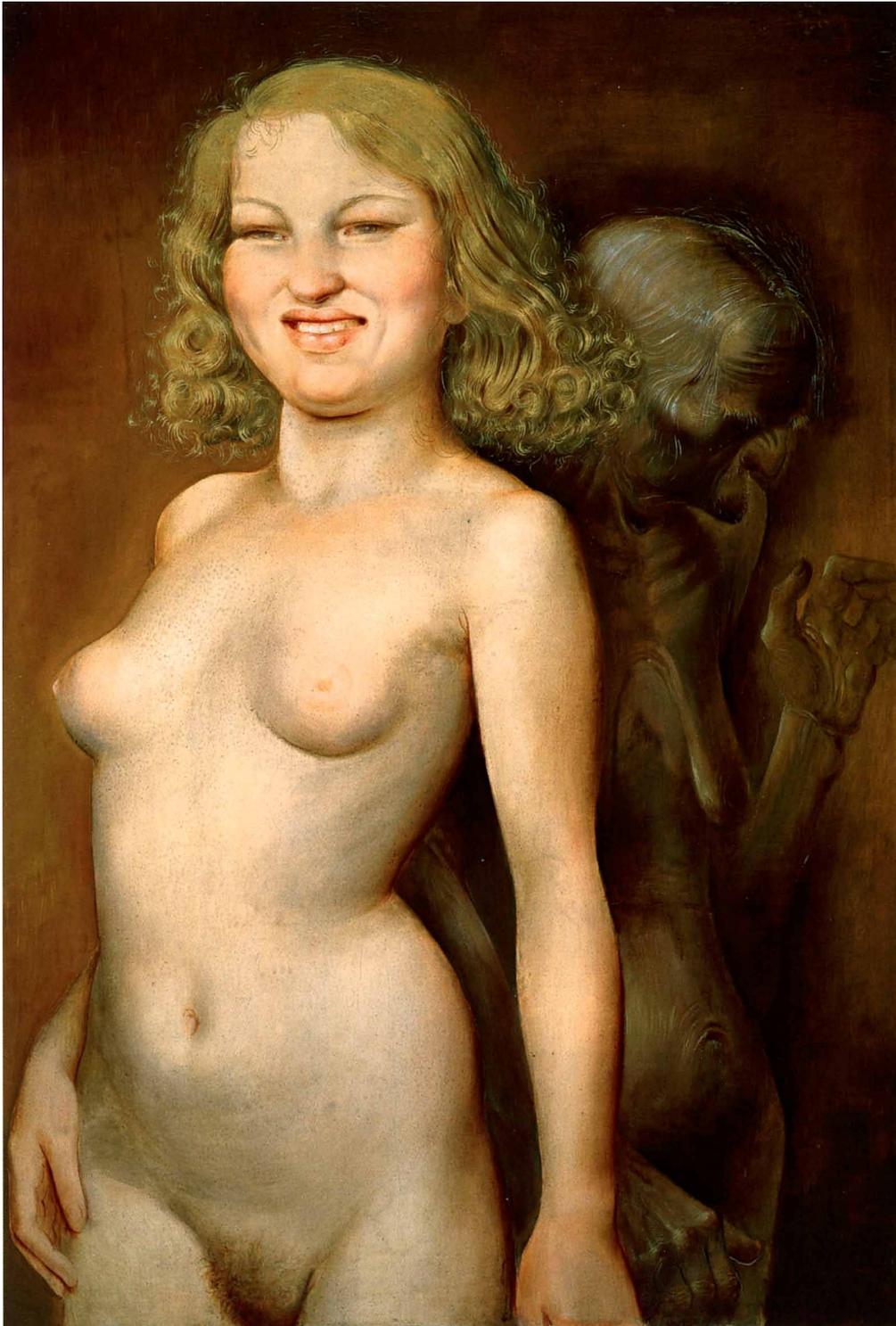


Figure 2  
Otto Dix  
*Vanitas*, 1932  
Oil-tempera on wood, 39  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 27  $\frac{5}{8}$  in.  
Zeppelin-Museum, Friedrichshafen



Figure 3  
Otto Dix  
*Old Couple*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 59 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 39 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Figure 4  
Lucas Cranach the Elder  
*Ill-matched Couple*  
Oil-tempera on wood, 15 ¼ x 10 ⅛ in.  
Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf



Figure 5  
Otto Dix  
*The Triumph of Death*, 1934  
Oil-tempera on wood, 70  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 70  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart



Figure 6  
Otto Dix  
*Salon I*, 1921  
Oil on canvas, 33  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 47  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart

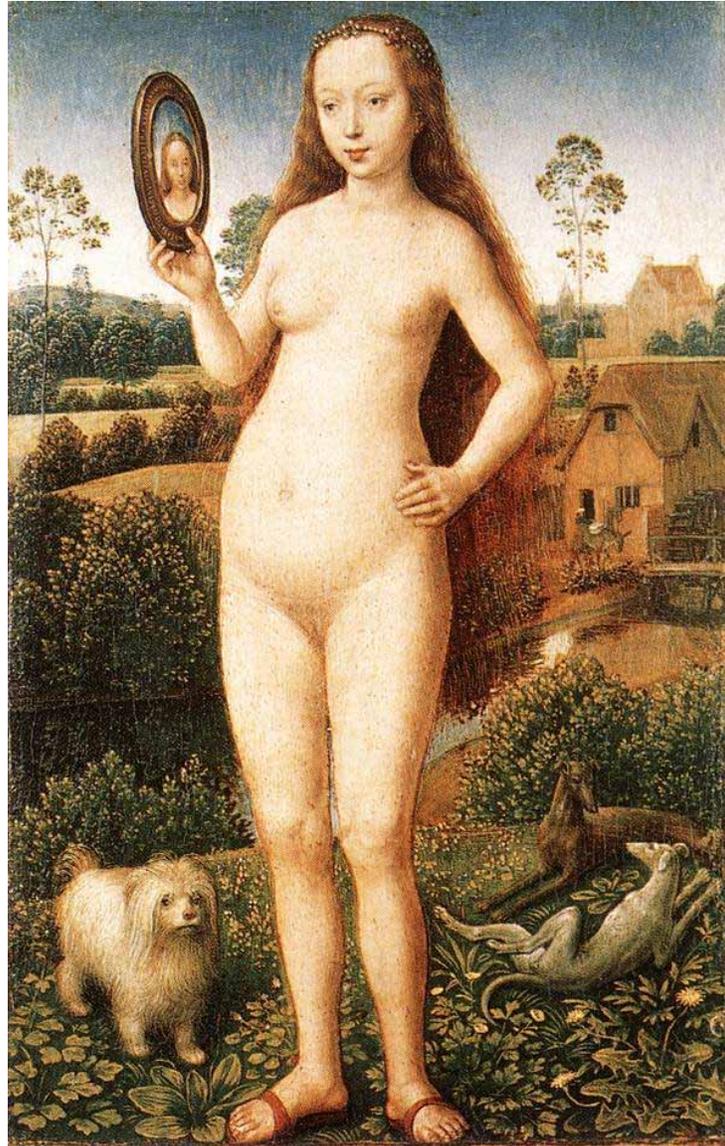


Figure 7  
Hans Memling  
*Vanity* panel, from the *Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation*, c. 1485  
Oil on panel, 8  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 5  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg



Figure 8  
Bernardo Strozzi  
*Old Woman at the Mirror*, c. 1615  
Oil on canvas, 51  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 42  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
Pushkin Museum, Moscow



Figure 9  
Hans Baldung Grien  
*Three Ages of Woman and Death*, c. 1510  
Oil on wood, 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 12  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

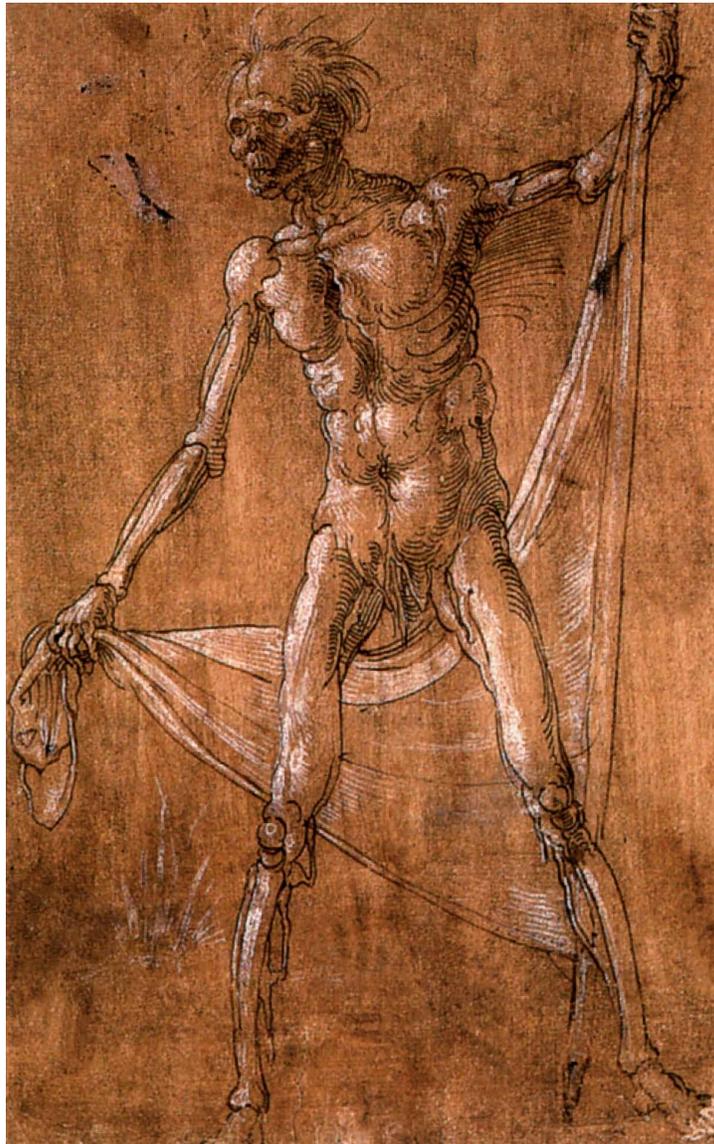


Figure 10  
Hans Baldung Grien  
*Death with an Inverted Banner*, c. 1505-07  
Pen and ink, heightened in brush with white, on light brown tinted paper, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 7  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.  
Kupferstichkabinett, Kunstmuseum Basel

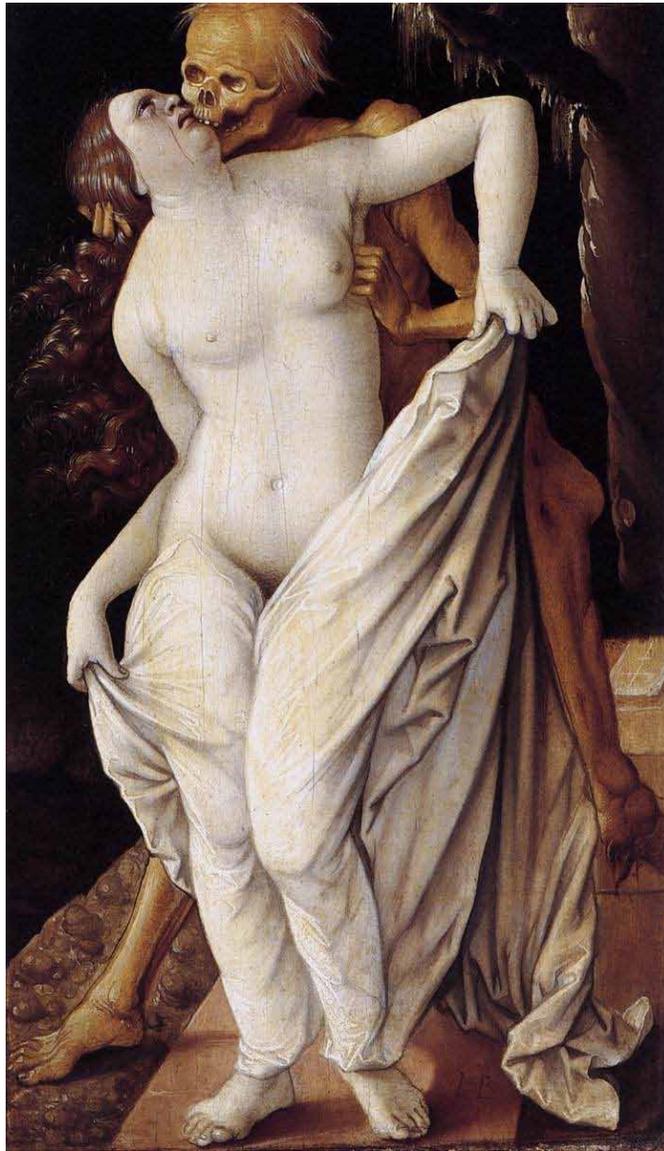


Figure 11  
Hans Baldung Grien  
*Death and the Maiden*, c. 1518-20  
Oil on panel, 12  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
Kunstmuseum, Basel



Figure 12  
Otto Dix  
*Woman with Child*, 1921  
Oil on canvas, 47 ¼ x 32 in.  
Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden



Figure 13  
Otto Dix  
*Woman with Red Hat*, 1921  
Oil on board, 18 1/8 x 17 in.  
Private collection

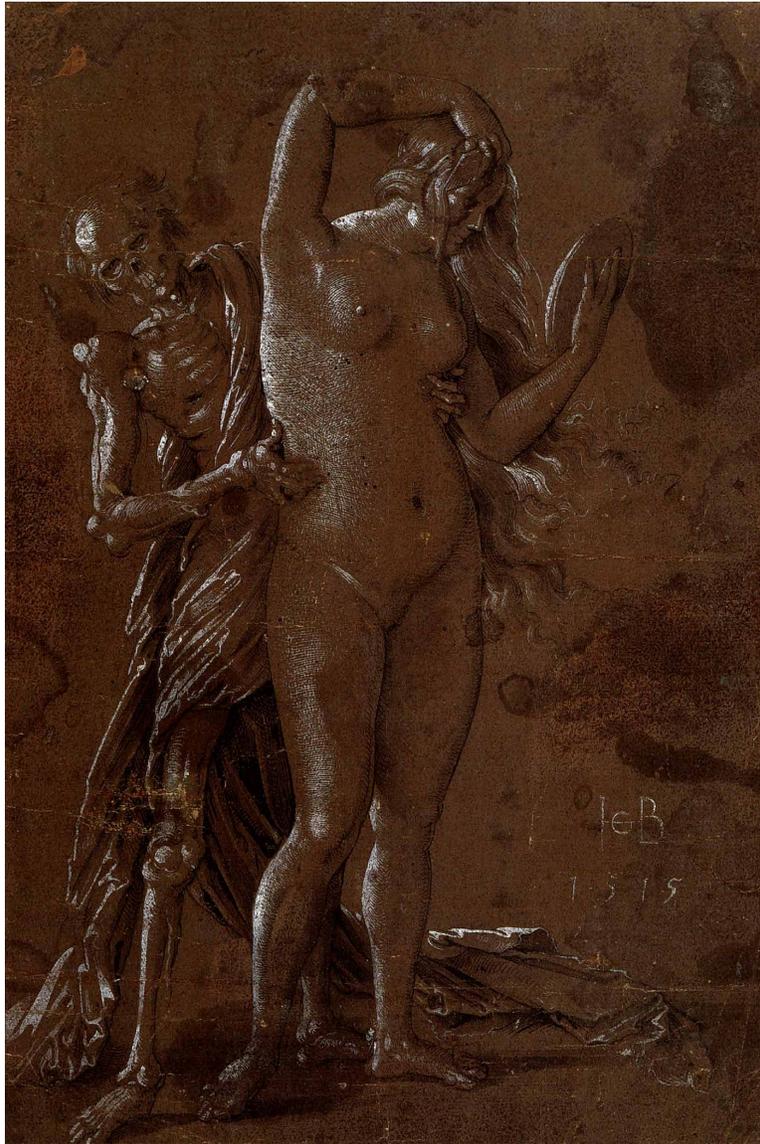


Figure 14  
Hans Baldung Grien  
*Death and the Maiden*, 1515  
Pen heightened with white bodycolor on brown prepared paper  
Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Figure 15  
Hans Baldung Grien  
*Adam and Eve*, c. 1531-33  
Oil on panel, 58  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 26  $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid



Figure 16  
Otto Dix  
*War*, 1932

Mixed media on plywood, 80 ¼ x 160 ½ in.  
Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden

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## ABSTRACT

Otto Dix, known for his graphic depictions of war and his critical images of Weimar society, also produced works derived from motifs popularized in the Northern Renaissance. He used the Renaissance subjects, particularly the vanitas motif, to produce dialectical images of admonition. This essay examines two such paintings – *Girl in Front of a Mirror* (1921) and *Vanitas* (1932) – which serve as bookends to his Weimar era oeuvre. Dix visually aligns his depictions with that of his sixteenth-century predecessor, Hans Baldung Grien. Comparisons between the two Dix paintings and works by Baldung demonstrate how Dix employs Northern Renaissance iconography, which anchor his art firmly in the past. However, by doing so, the paintings resonate with the modern exhortation of his contemporary, Walter Benjamin, who advocated a new historical materialism. The goal of Benjamin's method of historical materialism was to bring the present into a critical state by means of a dialectical image formed by fragments of the past. Dix's paintings form a constellation of the past and present, resulting in dialectical images that caution society against decadence brought forth by progress that blinds itself to the past.