



Invalidity and deformity in the art of Weimar Republic

Invaliditeti i deformiteti u umetnosti Vajmarske Republike

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Introduction

World War One (WWI) brought enormous losses to entire Europe. Eight million soldiers lost their lives and 7 million suffered untreatable injuries and were forced to spend the rest of their lives living with disability. Germany lost 15.1% of their active male population. It can be said that after the Great War, Europe was unrecognizable. It is hard to say whether people could even comprehend the tremendous losses they have suffered and to mourn their dead before they were forced to deal with the great crises and the rise of Nazi party.

Needless to say that the Great War has brought great loss to Europe and Germany especially and the consequences that Germany had to face were enormous. A society destroyed by war was incapable to retrieve its faith in life. The faith in life and the faith in the world were beginning to die in the hearts of men. Remarque's words best describe these feelings: *We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces. The first bomb, the first explosion, burst in our hearts*¹.

The Great War had wounded the minds of millions of people which later on produced a lot of opposing ideological movements. The war had caused political maturing of the arts, but also a great protest against the society from which a great cataclysm was born.

A war is a destruction force that destroys everything in its path, but out of all the ruins, art never fails to rise up and heal the souls of those who had survived the devastating claws of war. We must remember the importance of art and the role it plays in our lives, especially in times of crises.

Art after the war

What was Germany left with after WWI? Crises, poverty, decadence. However, in the art field, this period was

very productive. Many artists, confronted with the horrors of war, expressed themselves through their art. The artists who were working in Germany in the postwar period were surrounded with disturbing images which they presented in their work portraying a society of a war racked country.

George Grosz, having felt the devastating forces of war on his own skin, used his art as a weapon for criticizing the society. He had become an activist of the pacifist left wing. He published his satiric drawings in many periodicals and participated in different protests and social riots. In his 1946 Autobiography, Grosz remembers what had affected him the most after he was discharged from the army and had returned to Berlin: 'The Berlin to which I returned was cold and grey... The same soldiers who were seen in cafes and wine cellars singing, dancing and clinging drunkenly to the arms of prostitutes, were to be seen later dirty and unkempt, dragging their weary from station to station... My drawings expressed my despair, hate and disillusionment. I had utter contempt for mankind in general... I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crustacean-like steel arms; two medical soldiers putting a violent infantryman into a strait-jacket made of a horse blanket; a one-armed soldier saluting a lady decorated with medals who was putting a cookie on his bed; a colonel, his fly open, embracing a nurse, a medical orderly emptying into a pit a pail filled with various parts of the human body'². The drawings and the paintings from this period represent a severe criticism of what was seen by Grosz as one society's decay.

In the portrait of a society, the people in Grosz's work don't represent specific individuals. They are allegoric figures that represent different classes and different troubles that have rained on the German society. The use of allegory has enabled Grosz to criticize the society without moving to far away from the ideals of portraying a modern vision of reality. In the painting *Grey Day* (Figure 1) we can see in the foreground a well-dressed man, behind him a partially build

* At the time the study was conducted the author was employed at this institution



Fig. 1 – George Grosz: Grey Day, 1921, Oil on canvas, 115 × 80 cm (Staatsliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany).

wall and a worker. Far away in the background a war veteran can be seen. He is still in his uniform, a cane in one hand and without the other. He is walking down the street, his face expressionless. The main subject of the painting Republican Automatons (Figure 2) is the transformation of man into ma-



Fig. 2 – George Grosz: Republican Automatons, 1920; Watercolor on paper, 60 × 47.3 cm (The Museum of Modern Arts, New York, NY, USA).

chine, but the image of a war veteran is also present and painfully obvious. The two figures are obviously war veterans, invalids without their arms and legs. These two faceless automatons with prosthetics and cylindrical, machine-like

limbs stand in front of a background of rectangular buildings and empty streets. The automaton on the right is a war cripple, his arms amputated, but he is still a determined military man which is expressed by his Iron cross and the slogan '1, 2, 3, Hurra' which is coming out of his empty head. The clothes of the figure on the left label him as middle class, and his wooden leg and functional arm prosthetic reveal him to be a war cripple. He is holding a black, red and golden flag of the Republic with his metal claw. The flag is on shaky grounds if these crippled, mechanical men are viewed as its base.

George Grosz didn't include the war cripples in his work by accident. As a portraitist of a society who tries to present the cruel reality of the world in the most satirical way, Grosz incorporates in his work elements from reality which surrounds him. War cripples were the reality of the German cities. They could be seen on the streets of the cities all over the country. After the war, Germany fell into a crisis, and the government couldn't take care of the people who had fought for it and became invalids in the process. Unfit to work, powerless and helpless, they were rejected by their own country and were forced to live on the street as bums and beggars filled with the feeling of nonsense that was surrounding them as they wondered the streets aimlessly.

Otto Dix also portrays war cripples who were forced to live on the street and to make their living by begging. The war veterans in his works are crippled by war, ignored and pitied by passers-by. They are drowning in poverty. In the painting The Match Seller (Figure 3) we can see a war vet-

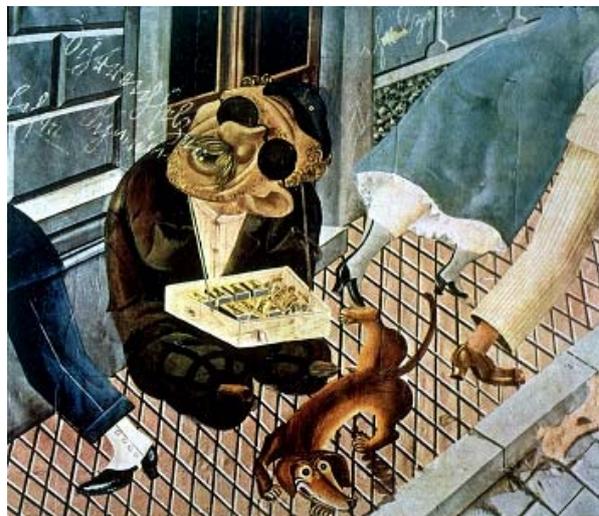


Fig. 3 – Otto Dix: The Match-box Seller, 1920; Oil and collage on canvas (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany).

eran, recognizable by his old hat that was once a part of a uniform, sitting on the curb. Black glasses indicate that he is blind. He has also lost both his arms and both his legs which are replaced by two wooden ones. His amputated legs are made much more conspicuous because of the contrast they form with the long legs of the passers-by who are trying to bypass him. The only living thing that acknowledges the man's existence is a dog urinating on the stumps of his legs. This painting evokes pity in the viewer because of the isolation and the poverty of the portrayed man who is not pre-

sented as an officer decorated with medals, but as a homeless person trying to make a living by selling matches on the street. His wooden legs only emphasize his helplessness and his vulnerability.

Another street scene is presented in Dix's Prague Street (Figure 4) where two cripples are presented. In the back-



Fig. 4 – Otto Dix: Prague Street, 1920; Oil on canvas (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany).

and his left arm is a strange mechanical composition. His right arm is outstretched, awaiting charity. The other veteran who is wearing a war medal is missing the entire lower part of his body. He is set up on a platform with wheels which he moves with two sticks. While the first veteran has a lonesome gaze, the pretentious military posture of the other half-man expresses a grotesque effect of the painting³.

Dix was familiar with postwar mass demonstrations organized by war victims and these images served as inspiration for his painting War Cripples (Figure 5). Four grotesque war invalids are presented in the painting. They are wearing their medals and parading down the street in front of a shoemaker's shop. They all have primitive or fantastic prosthetics with the exception of the third man who is a torso in a wheelchair pushed by the fourth man. The wavy lines and blurred image of the second man mark him as a 'shiverer'. This is a rare opportunity where a psychologically traumatized person can be seen, especially a World War I veteran, but these people could be seen on the streets and Dix found a way to show his suffering as well. In the background of the painting a hand points to Dix's own profile with crosshairs over it, perhaps indicating that it was only by chance that he had escaped a similar fate during his military service. The subtitle of the painting, Four of These Don't Add up to a Whole Man, makes explicit Dix's passionate critique of the inhuman uses of technology. At the same time, the pomposity of these wrecked figures and their absurd attempt to keep their military dignity and to keep marching makes them appear as worthless remains of the Prussian army. The war machinery has produced these human wrecks but Dix's portrait of their grotesque prosthetics shows that the peace machinery



Fig. 5 – Otto Dix: War Cripples, 1920, Oil on canvas (location unknown).

ground of this popular shopping street in Dresden are two shop windows: one is that of a cosmetics shop (representing women's sphere) and the other is a window of a shop selling prosthetics (representing men's sphere). This juxtaposition indicates a feminized and passive position of crippled veterans. One of the men is sitting on the ground in front of the shops. He has absurd prosthetics, his legs look like two sticks

was not able to put these men together³. After the Nazis came into power, the painting was confiscated and exhibited at the Entartete Kunst⁴ exhibition in Munich in 1937 under the title Slander against the German Heroes of the World War. After the exhibition the painting went missing and it is presumed to have been destroyed together with many other works of 'degenerate art'.

The painting *The Skat Players* (Figure 6) portrays three German officers mutilated by war who are playing cards. Two of them have lost their legs, while the one portrayed on the left

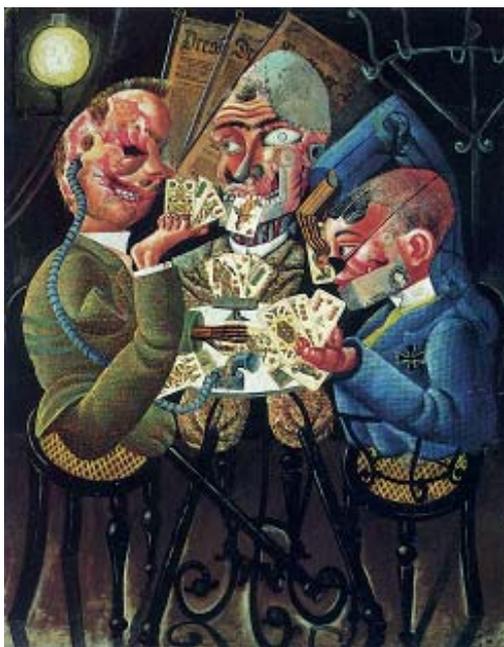


Fig. 6 – Otto Dix: *Skat Players*, 1920; Oil on canvas with photomontage and collage, 110 × 87 cm (Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany).

and pain that overflowed German cities. He felt all the horrors that were surrounding him and he felt the need to express them.

Berlin of the 1920s was a city of contrasts. On the one hand, it was the city of leisure, fun and entertainment, and on the other it was a city full of pain, misery, poverty, homelessness and prostitution. *Metropolis* (Figure 7) is a representation of exactly this Berlin. In the middle part of the triptych a typical cabaret scene is presented. Loud music and ladies dressed in silk and gentlemen in flawless suits with bowties are dancing Charleston. This is only an illusion of the big city. The reality is depicted in the right wing of the triptych where a street scene in a rich neighborhood is presented. Here, we can see well-dressed ladies with rich makeup on their faces, ugly and stupid, with arrogant expressions, obviously of less than reputable nature. Under the feet of these morally gray passers-by we can see a war cripple sitting. He is dressed in rags. He is without a nose and without legs. He is the central figure of the scene. Pushed into a corner, hidden in the shadows he is a reminder of the social injustice that is the foundation of the big city. The left part of the triptych finally reveals the ugly truth: it depicts the poor neighborhood. In an ugly street, between modest houses, daughters of beggars are selling their love. A war cripple who is still wearing his ragged uniform waddles on his crutches, another war veteran is lying on the street drunk or dead while a small dog barks at passers-by. *Metropolis* shows the capitalist Weimar. On one hand we can see the illusion of the easy life, on the other we can see the reality based on social differences

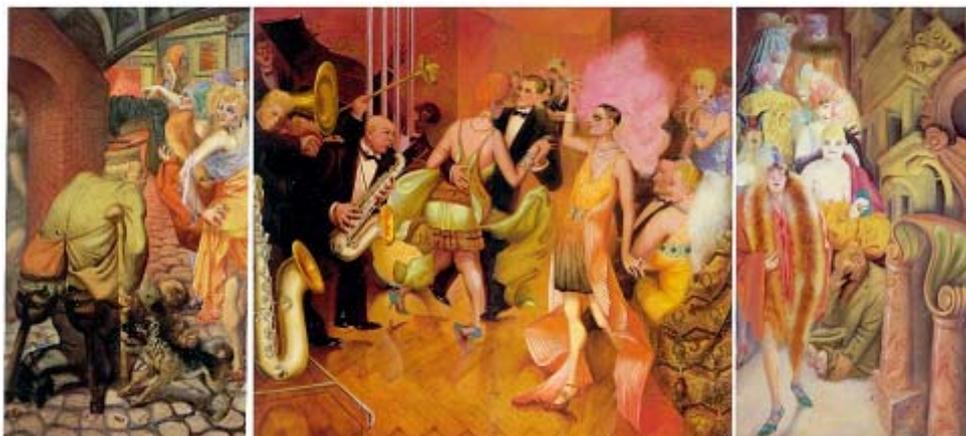


Fig. 7 – Otto Dix: *Metropolis*, 1927–28; Wood, distemper, 181 × 404 cm (Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany).

is using his leg to hold the cards, since he has lost both his arms. Their prosthetic limbs are intertwined with the table legs in the bottom of the painting. Two of the portrayed men have artificial jaws and one is missing an ear and instead of it has a long, snakelike ear trumpet. All the figures are very badly mutilated. The images of these people were very common in Weimar Republic during the 1920s, as well as in the rest of Europe. They were unfit, unwanted people who were a sore reminder of war and failure. Being reminded about death, loss and weakness were things everyone tried to avoid. The whole society was in a state of denial, turning their heads from the reality that was too horrible to bear. Otto Dix was one of the people who didn't turn his head away. His artistic eye noticed all the people's troubles

and injustices and also the horrifying poverty that runs deep in the core of the society. When presenting poverty, Dix does not hide anything. On the contrary, he presents everything as it is, he emphasizes the ugliest aspects of life trying to reveal the truth hidden behind the cabarets' lampions and that is the misery of the residents of the rich neighborhood⁵.

Max Beckman portrays invalids in his ten lithograph series named *Hell*. The first plate, *The Way Home* (Figure 8), presents the mutilated veteran, the pimp, the prostitute, the harsh lights and the symbolic snarling dog⁶. In the foreground we can see two figures facing each other beneath a street lamp. One is a veteran whose face has been largely blown away. He is without a nose and almost eyeless. The



Fig. 8 – Max Beckmann: The Way Home (Hell), 1919; Lithograph, 87.00 × 61.00 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA).

stump of his arm protrudes from his sleeve, which the other figure, Beckmann himself, grips with one hand while pointing 'the way home' with the other. In the background, two crippled veterans hobble along on crutches behind a prostitute. It is not clear whether the wounded veteran can see where Beckmann is pointing. The second plate, *The Street* (Figure 9), includes a disabled veteran using a clumsy



Fig. 9 – Max Beckmann: The Street (Hell), 1919; Lithograph, 87.00 × 61.00 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA).

wheelchair along with a blind beggar in the chaotic clinch of bodies on the street during the November Revolution. Disability becomes a formal organizing principle in this fragmented, compressed jumble of limbs. The viewer must look closely to discern where one body ends and another begins; where body and inanimate object merge.

The disabled and the post-war society

The question is: where was the place of the disabled veterans in postwar Germany and its society? Did they have the same rights as the rest of the citizens and did they even have the right to exist? The 'cult of health and beauty' associated with the life reform movement since the late 19th century still flourished after the war, serving in many ways to create a hostile atmosphere toward those viewed as ill, disabled or ugly. Similarly, the discourses of degeneracy and eugenics had also begun in the late 19th century. The perception that the war had killed or disabled many of the healthiest young German men, however, gave a strong impetus both to postwar advocates of eugenics who opposed squandering the nation's resources on the 'unfit' and thus wanted to limit their reproduction and to proponents of outright 'euthanasia' such as Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche. The disabled were unwanted by society whether their disability was a product of war or not. People preferred not to see them. War invalids were mostly destined to live on the street and off of charity. Some lived hidden from the eye of the public, locked away by their families, while about 70,000 war invalids died of hunger in psychiatric facilities. Some appeared in 'freak shows' at fairs such as in Christian Schad's painting *Agosta, the Winged Man* and *Rasha the Black Dove* (Figure 10). In the picture, both *Agosta* and his



Fig. 10 – Christian Schad: *Agosta, the Pigeon-Chested Man, and Rasha, the Black Dove*, 1929; Oil on canvas, 1200 × 800 (Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom).

companion are looking out at the spectator with the serene expression of those used to public scrutiny. Our attention is immediately drawn to Agosta's deep pectus excavatum with outward deformities of the lower halves of the anterior rib cage. A long and thin thorax and a relatively long left arm can be observed. In addition, there is an obvious kyphosis or kyphoscoliosis affecting his shoulder girdle. The second and third fingers of his right hand are awkwardly positioned with hyperextension of proximal and distal interphalangeal joints suggesting joint laxity. His face is straight with slant-down eyes. His extraordinarily large arm span, chest and back deformities together with the possibility of joint and tissue hypermobility as well as his facial appearance suggest the diagnosis of Marfan's syndrome ⁷.

People with disabilities, whether they were the consequence of the war or not, were marginalized, both consciously and unconsciously and there was a tendency towards excluding these people from the social sphere. The term 'degeneracy' was coined in the late 19th century by Max Nordau in his book *Entartung (Degeneracy)* and it provided the theoretical basis for further marginalization of the disabled. Under the influence of Social Darwinism, Nordau was advocating the persecution of the 'degenerate' by the healthy. The degenerate were not only inferior, but were a threat for the upstanding society. Paul Schultze-Naumburg's *Kunst und Rasse (Art and Race)* criticizes modern art, including Expressionism and other art movements which he defamed as degenerate by comparing them to photographs of disabled people. Photographs of people suffering from Mongoloid idiocy, paralysis of eye muscles, microcephaly, idiocy, elephantiasis, rickets, anencephaly, acromegaly of hands and lower face, severe harelip, chondrodystrophy, obesity, cretinism, nervous disorder of late-stage syphilis and encephalitis were compared with the works of Picasso, Kokoschka, Modigliani, Hofer, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff and others in order to prove their degeneracy.

When the Nazis came into power in 1933, one of the first actions they took was the attack on contemporary authors, burning of books and the attack on modern art of the previous period. The Nazis discarded and censured everything that was present on the art scene of 20th century prior to 1933. Abstract and figural art, landscapes and portraits of August Macke, the expressionist works of the art group Bridge, Kirchner, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Beckmann were proclaimed as degenerate. The unwanted were George Grosz, Otto Dix, Kathe Kollwitz, because of their non-German way of representing the German people. The Nazis couldn't allow the presentation of weaknesses of the German, Arian society. Therefore, the first attack was pointed towards the art that represented crippled war veterans, prostitution and other unwanted aspects of the life in Germany from the period between the two wars ⁸.

The artists whose work was labeled as degenerate were forced to stop practicing their art, so they turned to alternative ways for making a living. Many had left the country, among them Georg Grosz who moved to the USA, while those who stayed were sentenced to isolation, constant pressure, threats and a life in fear and poverty. Otto Dix in his letter written to a friend in the USA describes the horrible conditions in which the artists lived in Nazi Germany: 'We live in very difficult conditions. I worry constantly how I am going to buy bread and heat... In Germany the painters do not exhibit, unless they are members of the *Reichskulturkammer*. I work and don't look around. I paint landscapes and self-portraits with children' ⁵.

The portrait of German reality after WWI and before the Nazi rule was labeled as degenerate and doomed. Not much time will pass before similar pictures will once again fill the streets of Germany after the monstrous act against humanity, WWII.

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