CONSTRUCTUING THE CATEGORY ENTARTETE KUNST: THE DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION OF 1937 AND POSTMODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

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CONSTRUCTING THE CATEGORY ENTARTETE KUNST: THE DEGENERATE ARTS EXHIBITION OF 1937 AND POSTMODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY (229 pp.)

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This study, utilizing Michel Foucault’s theory from which to interpret visual abnormality in art, analyzes the reasons why the Nazis believed visual dysfunction and mental illness were the operative forces behind modern art. In Munich, Germany in 1937 the National Socialist party, fearing that German culture was slowly degenerating into madness, sponsored two art events largely for the purposes of contrast. At the largely monolithic Great German Art Exhibition the Nazis hastened to forward their own aesthetic vision by displaying art works representing human forms in the language of classicism. The Degenerate Art Exhibition (held a day later) showcased early twentieth-century German avant-garde paintings, which, the Nazis claimed, were the products of abnormal vision and mental illness.

The importance of visual perception in art is first detected in the period Foucault identifies as the Classical episteme, a period that regards man’s capacity for representation as the primary tool for ordering knowledge about the world. The roots of this way of thinking about representation go back to the fifteenth-century theorist Leonbattista Alberti, who established rules in art for the normal and healthy perception of nature. Such rules, including linear perspective and an emphasis on line, continued to be supported after the advent of what Foucault calls the Modern episteme, which began
roughly around the late eighteenth century. The Modern episteme still regarded man’s
knowledge of the world as fundamentally representational, but, in addition, saw man’s
representational capacities as an object of knowledge. This line of thought contributed to
Immanuel Kant’s theory of knowledge, in particular his view on how the subjective
awareness of beauty opens up for the subject’s solidarity with others in judging beauty,
that is, a judgment of taste’s claim to universality. Kant’s aesthetics thus becomes a
space where a consensus about the visual perception of art is now possible. This type of
aesthetic consensus is shown to imply a rejection of anything perceived as being the
product of insanity or visual aberration, such as, for the Nazis, Impressionism, which
utilizes heavy impasto and bold striking colors to suggest form. This style, via Post-
Impressionists like Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, made a profound impact on the
early twentieth-century German Expressionist movement. The Nazis eventually
marginalized such modern art from German culture by maintaining that its practitioners
freely appropriated the formal language of the insane artist in their rejection of bourgeois
aesthetic values. The following study is a consideration of the Degenerate Art exhibition
of 1937 as a space where a prescribed aesthetic community could convene and attack the
modern artist as “other.”

Approved:

Charles S. Buchanan
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This work is dedicated to my wife Shuho. Her daily efforts at managing my life and the many hours she devoted as assistant editor to the dissertation were absolutely essential to its completion.
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Introduction

I. Historical Background

Under the guidance of Nazi minister Adolf Zeigler, president for the Reich Chamber for Visual Arts, the collection and final purge of modern artworks from Germany culminated in the large scale exhibition Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art), which opened in Munich, Germany on July 19, 1937. Historical accounts leading up to the exhibition describe how Nazis confiscated modern artworks from museums throughout Germany for the purpose of being publicly ridiculed (Barron 13-16). Nazi persecution took many forms of opprobrium, the most obvious found in Hitler’s inaugural address dedicating the House of German Art (1937). In it, Hitler outlined his plans for eliminating all forms of modern art from German cultural life on the basis of visual dysfunction. As a contributing factor to the creation of what Hitler believed was the modern style, visual dysfunction was part of a variety of intersecting discourses on mental illness and criminality. For instance, Hitler states:

From the pictures sent in for exhibition it is clear that the eye of some men shows them things otherwise than as they are—that there really are men who on principle feel meadows to be blue, the heaven green, clouds sulphur-yellow—or as they perhaps prefer to say “experience” them thus [see Figure 1]. I need not ask whether they really do see or feel things in this way, but in the name of the German people I have only to prevent these pitiable unfortunates who clearly suffer from defects of vision from
attempting with violence to persuade contemporaries by their chatter that these faults of observation are indeed realities or from presenting them as “Art.” Here only two possibilities are open: either these “artists” really do see things in this way and believe in that which they represent—then one has but to ask how the defect in vision arose, and if it is hereditary the Minister for the Interior will have to see to it that so ghastly a defect of vision shall not be allowed to perpetuate itself—or if they do not believe in the reality of such impressions but seek on other grounds to impose upon the nation by this humbug, then it is a matter for a criminal court. (Speeches 590-591)

Figure 1
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*, (1919).

For Hitler to speak generally about a group’s artistic output, and how the formal style of that art necessarily assumed a holistic orientation toward perceiving the world in a non-rational way, effectively marginalized any form of dissent from rationality. As a result, the Nazis excluded others on the basis of perceptual defects; but they were not the
first. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault describes an eighteenth-century definition of “mania” as the experience of objects that do not present themselves to the sufferers as they are in reality. Foucault writes: “The delirium of maniacs is not determined by a particular error of judgment; it constitutes a defect in the transmission of sense impressions to the brain, a flaw in communication” (*Madness* 127). An example from the *Dictionary of Psychology*, edited by Raymond J. Corsini, illustrates Foucault’s point with regard to vision (see Figure 2):

*Chimeric Stimulation* (R.W. Sperry):

A person with a brain split in half by cutting through the corpus callosum, looks through two lenses with both eye simultaneously and sees a face consisting of the left half of one person’s face joined to the right half of another person’s face. If the participant is unaware of the peculiarities about the stimuli, this indicates there are two separate spheres of conscious awareness running parallel to each other in each of the two hemispheres of the brain. (160)

Figure 2

Chimeric stimulation, as described and illustrated, apparently causes the sufferer to experience visually an asymmetry that has no basis in reality since it conjoins two halves of two different faces into the visual experience of a single face. Now certainly those of us who do not suffer from such a defect visually experience natural asymmetries in our everyday perception of the world. But “chimeric stimulation” approximates the type of visual defects Hitler claims afflict modern artists and his evidence is their artwork. The fact that most people do not recognize the world as depicted in Expressionist or Cubist art must mean, like the visual objects of chimeric stimulation, that the visual data informing such representations have no basis in reality and must therefore be the product of some defect in vision. If not, the artist sees the world normally but chooses to represent it otherwise thus deceiving the public, in which case it becomes a matter for the criminal courts.

II. Topic of Study

As a concept, “Degenerate Art” combines the meaning of two words into a single idea. The term “degenerate,” widely used during the 1930’s by western psychiatrists and psychologists, denoted members of an inferior racial, moral, or sexual type (Barron 11). Used in combination with the term “art,” its combined meaning refers to art that had degenerated so far beyond the canons of accepted taste that it was found to be “unclassifiable,” that is, essentially “non-art” (Barron 11).

In addition to these semantic issues, the topic under investigation concerns the material constraints placed on statements about “Degenerate Art;” but what do I mean by a “material constraint”? In a certain sense, grammar and logic function as rules
restricting what can and cannot be meaningfully stated. Their proper use, for instance, excludes certain linguistic formulations as either being gibberish or illogical. In addition, there are certain material constraints that place restrictions “on the range of thoughts” people can think in a given time period (Gutting, *Very Short Introduction* 32). Material constraints with regard to various modes of thought, for instance, make “unthinkable” human madness as anything but mental illness, or for centuries that heavenly bodies could be made of earthly substance (Gutting, *Very Short Introduction* 32). But like the rules of logic and grammar, such rules are not necessarily part of the consciousness of individuals who make use of them. Material constraints on thought are like that. They are rules that impose limits on the range of thought and exist at a level of analysis beyond the consciousness of the individuals using them.

The goal of this study is not so much to understand the meaning of Hitler’s statement about degenerate art as to uncover the rules that made such statements possible. The following study considers statements made by scientists, medical authorities, cultural historians, and fascist politicians, not for the purpose of reconstructing their deeper meaning, but to “understand the underlying structures that form the context of their thinking” (Gutting, *Very Short Introduction* 33). Hence, texts and statements will be searched for clues indicating “the general structure of the system in which [philosophers, physicians, and political leaders] thought and wrote [about degenerate art]” (Gutting, *Very Short Introduction* 33).
III. Methodology

The type of postmodern historical analysis that detects shifts among differing sets of material constraints is the archaeological method of Michel Foucault. Archaeology, as Foucault envisioned it, is a method designed to uncover rules that have escaped the attention of modern historians simply because of the assumptions inherent in their analyses. Whereas modern histories tend to trace the trajectory of their conceptual objects over centuries showing how form in art, for example, has continuously evolved and changed over time, e.g., from naturalism to cubism, archaeology analyzes knowledge and how it is first configured within a particular system of thought. Only then does it begin to consider how concepts are constructed within such a configuration. In the process, archaeology uncovers the rules that grant to those who are rightfully authorized to speak “the true” and have it count as knowledge within a temporal epoch.

This dissertation will use archaeology to map historically the discursive landscapes where madness and art converge into the concept “Degenerate Art.” Accordingly, such an analysis of history will not search for the emergence of concepts in the intentions of individuals using them or organizing exhibitions on the basis of them. A speaker takes up a position by the rules of a relevant discursive formation apart from his or her mental activity in such a way that when Adolf Hitler or Adolf Zeigler makes an individual pronouncement about “degenerate art,” it is not analyzed by way of their motives or intentions for stating it (no matter how hateful or reviling). Rather by making a statement they take up “a position […] already […] defined by the rules of [a] relevant discursive formation” (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 241).
What will be of chief interest to this study is how an individual’s statements acquire meaning through being part of a discourse. In the case of degenerate art, its conceptual constructs, its embeddedness in nineteenth-century psychological, psychiatric, and scientific discourses, its quasi-continuity level of ideas and themes related to Nazi art discourse, all assume a certain set of rules its practitioners and ideologues can hardly be aware of and yet must adhere to if their pronouncements are to be counted as knowledge. Archeology works to uncover these rules by charting a middle region between the knowing individual and the formal structures of his or her thought. With regard to this study, archaeological analysis will uncover “the modes of being of order […] [that is] anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures” and will describe a space between the already “encoded” eye and reflexive knowledge (Foucault, *Order* xxi). In the case of Nazism and its role in founding the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, it is the rules that configure the Modern episteme that will be of chief interest to us.

**IV. Defining Terms**

First, what does Michel Foucault mean by the term “discourse” and how does he use it? The term refers to a group of statements that cohere and combine with other statements in a predictable way. Let us take for instance the *Bible*¹ (Mills 54). There exist in the world many copies of the *Bible*, some of which are found homes, churches, and hotel rooms. The *Bible* is often quoted from, and is a literary source for teachers and politicians who regularly draw inspiration from it. There are also many college

¹ The use of the *Bible* as an example of a particular discourse is borrowed from Sara Mill’s text, *Michel Foucault* (54-55).
departments, universities, and seminaries devoted to the study of the *Bible*. In addition, there are scholarly journals that exist for the sake of analyzing the *Bible*, as commentaries on the *Bible* are constantly being produced to provide new interpretations of it. For Foucault, the *Bible* and all that is written and uttered about it constitute a discourse.

The term “practice” refers to the structures that keep in place and regulate statements within a particular discourse. Certain “practices,” such as rules, function to keep the discourse of the *Bible* in wide circulation while excluding others in the process, e.g., books of scripture that are just as important and of equal value to other religions such as the *Torah* and the *Koran* (Mills 54). In addition, practices constitute the rules that determine what can and cannot be said or count as knowledge. For instance, a scholarly journal on the *Bible* has certain rules and guidelines a scholar must follow in order to make a meaningful statement about the *Bible* and have it contribute to that particular discourse. Those who sit in positions of power (e.g., editorial boards, peer reviewers) ultimately control and determine what can and cannot be said within a particular discourse.

**V. Historiography**

The literature dealing strictly with the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 is unfortunately limited, since the topic “Degenerate Art” typically comprises single chapters from general works on Nazi art. Exceptional examples of this type of research are found in Jonathan Petropoulos’s seminal work *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996) and Bertold Hinz’s *Art in the Third Reich* (1979). Their analyses focus on the
dialectical relationship between “Degenerate Art” and the classical vision of Nazi art and architecture, and both contend that Nazi art policy grew out of a negative campaign against modern art. Consequently, by limiting the role of Degenerate Art to the formulation of the Nazi aesthetic, these works tend to reduce its importance as an isolated cultural phenomenon.

Historical texts dealing solely with the topic Degenerate Art are Franz Roh’s *Entartete Kunst* (1962) and Stephanie Barron’s outstanding collection of essays in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991). The former is a straightforward historical analysis of the political and cultural origins for the exhibition and is an invaluable historical source. Nevertheless, it is short on interpretive analysis of the Nazi hygienic move to cleanse German art of its undesirable elements. On the other hand, it contains valuable reproductions of primary historical documents, such as a printed reproduction of the originally published guide that accompanied the exhibition. *Degenerate Art* is organized around various and loosely related topics that fall within the orbit of the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937. Essays ranging from topics such as “On the Trail of the Missing Masterpieces” to the “Galerie Fischer Auction” are indicative of the wide variety of writings from this critical anthology.

The dissertation’s methodological literature is primarily drawn from the works of Michel Foucault and interpreters of his work. *Madness and Civilization* (1965) and *The Order of Things* (1970) constitute the primary texts on which the methodological approach is based, and will assist especially in the analysis of discursive practices from the Age of Enlightenment to the twentieth century. Finally, Gavin Kendall’s *Using Foucault’s Methods* (1999), Gary Gutting’s *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific...*
Reason (1989), and Hubert Dreyfus’ and Paul Rabinow’s Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (1982), will greatly assist in the explication of Foucault’s ideas and his application of them to the topic of madness and art.

VI. Structure of the Dissertation

The following study includes three parts. Each part is divided into sections that will trace the development of a single argument. Part One focuses on the discursive rules that define an episteme. Episteme is the term Foucault uses in place of traditional periodizations, e.g., “the Renaissance” or “the Enlightenment” (Archaeology 191). In part one, two major epistemes will be under investigation: the Classical (1650-1800 CE) and the Modern (1800-1960 CE), which are two moments uniquely constituted by the rules that transform their varying discourses into knowledge.

From an investigation of each episteme’s rules, we will quickly notice a radically different conception of language informing each episteme. In the Classical episteme the transparency of language maps onto our representations once it (representation) is understood as the determinate form of consciousness. Language, in a sense, functions as a transparent medium by which we “see” through the name to the thing itself. In contrast, language during the Modern episteme receives a density all its own once grounded in the forces of life, language, and labor that shape man as a knowing being. The crisis of language in both epistemes will be the object of some lengthy discussion, since it is through the medium of language that knowledge claims are configured and, most importantly, communicated.
Parts One and Two will investigate how the modern emergence of madness as mental illness is a product of the reordering of modern knowledge. It will be my argument that this epistemic reordering suggests a powerful thesis for the modern occurrence of Nazism and its condemnations of modern art. Clues of this reordering will be sought in Hitler’s inaugural address at the House of German art (1937) as well as statements of his. In them, we find Hitler and other leading Nazis constantly invoking medical and criminal practices in the treatment of insanity and modern artists. So it makes sense that an analysis of the rules that make these statements possible will be of premier importance. Again, we will search statements for clues indicating that a general structure of thought has been emplaced during the Modern episteme.

After analyzing the structural shifts between the Classical and Modern epistemes, Part Two of the dissertation focuses on the construction of the concept “Degenerate Art.” The term “constructed” is significant, for it implies an understanding of human conceptual development outside the processes of careful reflection and conceptual analysis. Concepts are “constructed,” as if to suggest that varying strategies went into their production and proposed uses in society. Conceptual systems are therefore subject to revolution, overlapping, and tectonic shifts, and yet, as we shall see, Foucault resists analyzing these shifts with recourse to an immanent rationality. The way intellectual history traditionally develops is in terms of theory replacement, and as such “immanent rationalities” have described past developments in terms of rational superiority and increased explanatory power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 69). Moreover, they are typical of the continuous and successful transitions described in intellectual histories. For instance, from David Hume to the systematization of Immanuel Kant, successful transformation is
measured by the degree to which Kant addresses and adequately resolves the
predicament of knowledge bequeathed to him by Hume. This movement is typical of an
immanent rationality.

Foucault, as we shall see, rejects these types of immanent rationalities as
uncritical presumptions embedded in intellectual history. He does this by showing how
the very codes, language, and concepts historians use are regulated by the rules that
“operate not only in the mind or consciousness [of Kant, for instance…], but in discourse
itself,” rules which function in a pre-conceptual space and where the laws determining
the statements of practitioners are unbeknownst to them (Foucault, *Archaeology* 63;
Dreyfus and Rabinow 70). It is in this spirit that Part Two of the dissertation partakes. It
is an archaeological analysis that purports to uncover: one, the rules of a particular
discourse on madness; two, the conditions that make possible a discursive field on
madness and art; and three, the rules governing an individual’s speech, that is, if they are
to speak authoritatively about art and madness.

Part Three of the dissertation specifically discusses the Degenerate Art exhibition
of 1937. In this section, the exhibition will be contextualized within a particular
historical and political matrix as key artworks are assumed to be emblematic of the
exhibition generally. The spatial architecture of the various rooms housing the exhibit
will be explored as well as the thematic order of paintings from room to room.
Slanderous statements printed on the walls next to specific artworks will be a focus of the
archaeological analysis as well.

Themes and variations established in Part Two are picked up in Part Three.
Modern art as a manifestation of cultural decay and degeneracy establishes matters
related to consensus building. While addressing such issues, Nazi pressure is brought
to bear on the German people in the form of consensus building. With regard to aesthetic
matters, where the worship of beauty in German cultural history has always been strongly
communal, consensus building and its most noticeable effects will be sought and found in
the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Here within Kant’s transcendental field, the
subjective and disinterested awareness of beauty in art opens up before the initiate
solidarity with others, where the denial of interest in the beautiful object means affirming
its public reference. Aesthetic consensus will therefore be an object of archaeological
analysis as it betrays the conditions for a transcendental project to begin with and further
show how the eventual encroachment of positivism on the forms of Kantian knowledge
naturalizes epistemology. This naturalizing process is shown to extend to aesthetics as
well, where a psychological science of beauty is established in the wake of positivism’s
encroachment. Such a science is found to underlie the presumptions of exclusion and
persecution of modern artists and art. In short, the problem of dissent from the aesthetic
community, once understood and resolved through what Kant believed were persuadable
means, is now understood in clinical and medical terms; persuasion is replaced by
sterilization or imprisonment.
Part One: Excavating the Limits of the Classical Episteme

Prologue

A caveat! Part One is fundamentally groundwork that circuitously arrives at various ports of interest that may not appear at all connected with the topic under discussion. Nevertheless, Part One sets up the arguments later presented in Parts Two and Three and is therefore critical to the study as a whole. To this end, an archaeological analysis of the period identified as “modern philosophy” will set the temporal parameters of the Classical episteme (1650-1800 CE). Texts will be scrutinized ranging from René Descartes’ *Meditations* to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*; but rather than construct and interpret their deeper meaning they will be searched for indicators of a fundamental shift in the way knowledge is configured. To assist in this type of archaeological analysis, Part One spends time explicating its terminology, historical assumptions, methodology and techniques. Our discussion will begin with the Enlightenment, calling into question its essential aspects with regard to reason, its assumptions informing modern historiography, and lastly its methods of philosophical reflection. Much of the critical work of modern philosophical texts will be guided by Foucault and his commentators.

In addition to analyzing texts, Part One consists of image analysis. Foucault, in *The Order of Things* (1970) famously begins his study of the human sciences with an analysis of Diego Velasquez’s monumental painting *Las Meninas* (1656-57). For Foucault the work functions as a visual metaphor representing the inner working and logical structure of the Classical episteme. To unpack fully the significance of this claim,
Part One rigorously assesses the impact of Renaissance art theory on Velasquez’s artistic imagination. Analysis of artworks and Renaissance art theory will further reveal the material constraints limiting the artist’s imagination to conventions such as single point perspective, foreshortening, diminution, and overlapping. Similar to David Hume’s devastating attacks on Rationalist philosophy, Velasquez’s painting will be cast as a visual expression of the rules establishing the extreme limits of the Classical episteme. Thus, at the conclusion of Part One, we stand at the precipice of the Classical episteme looking out over the vast “break” it surrenders to in the form of the Modern episteme.

I. The Legacy of the Enlightenment

According to scholar Terry Eagleton, critics often deride the age of Enlightenment as a precursor to Auschwitz, while proponents credit it for the unlimited progress felt in western society (92). No doubt the divisiveness, Eagleton suggests, is premised on the role and function of reason, since a “narrative of progress” assumes its sovereignty over prejudice, custom, tradition, authority, and superstition (91). Critics contend otherwise, citing reason’s “tyrannical” support of the Enlightenment’s prejudice for truth. However, today neither characterization has proven definitive. Consequently the meaning of the Enlightenment remains a highly contested issue in contemporary academe and an ever enigmatic moment in occidental history (Dupré 1).

Most would agree that when human reason is “pressed into the service of emancipation,” the era will be one of progress (Eagleton 91). History bears witness to the claim. The American Revolution, the legal prohibitions against slavery and child labor, the Civil Rights movement, are all signs of man’s moral development progressing
toward some ideal vision of social utopia. The tenets of classical liberalism set society on the path and point the way, and once society commits to them the aspects of a secular religion begin to emerge. Among its laity, Jürgen Habermas suggests that only an unwavering commitment to its principles of rationality, the value of individual freedom, and the human capacity for reasoned action can ever prevent the horrors of fascism from happening again (Best 197-198).

Contrast this with the view that reason is not a basis on which to found an enlightened society; rather experience shows reason to be a slave to the passions rather than a principle of first philosophy. When implemented in the affairs of men, for instance, reason functions more like a “mechanical procedure,” once it is activated by appetitive desires and instincts, such as sex and self-preservation (Eagleton 91). As a result, enlightened bonds of solidarity among rational thinkers are now replaced by economic and material self-interests. Atomized subjects exist in a void of colliding interests, conflicting values, and competing desires. For those who insist the Enlightenment was “a ghastly blunder,” they now declare its alienating effects to reside at all levels of society; that is, between other individuals, and what they produce, and with nature itself (Eagleton 91). Ultimately within such a culture, technology becomes severed from values, the intellect from the heart.

II. Rational Reflection

Freedom, equality, and justice: these are the key concepts of enlightened liberalism not to mention the focal points at explaining away these erstwhile contradictions on the nature of “enlightenment” reason. And yet as explanations take on
the subtle shades of positive and negative programs, we slowly become aware how questions start to resemble the philosophical. What, for instance, is the nature of justice? Is freedom a timeless form existing in Platonic heaven? Are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” self-evident truths bestowed on human beings by a loving creator?

What curiously emerges from all of this theorizing is the philosophical tendency toward methodology. With regard to matters of justice, once poised against the Socratic elenchus, for instance, justice is known by what it is not, as Platonic freedom is reduced to a harmonious relationship among the parts of the soul once ruled by reason. For Immanuel Kant, freedom becomes an idea of pure reason that cannot be known or given content through synthetic cognition; however, to think ourselves under the idea of freedom becomes a matter of rational faith; and finally, for Thomas Jefferson, epistemology takes the form of self-evidence, the apprehension of truth being intuitive and man-centered.

In short, the philosophical method prizes the intuitive and reflective capacities of man as the sole means for accessing metaphysical truth, supposing that “men and their ideas have given birth to what is known” (Macdonnell 86). But no matter how convincing a method, philosophical reflection must be cautiously dealt with, since it assumes the reality of key concepts designed at generating its program and giving it lift, concepts that, prior to the 1950’s, had gone virtually unchallenged (e.g., subjectivity, essence, continuity, and teleology) (Best 94). As a result, the lack of critique has unduly culminated in a prodigious outpouring of totalizing meta-narratives as the question of human freedom demonstrates. Whether it is Kant’s concept of autonomy, or the metaphysics informing Jefferson’s self-evident truths, a historian of ideas would assume
an essential nature to freedom, human knowledge as a reflection of that nature, and Kant or Jefferson’s notion as reflecting it most of all. Once armed with these epistemological assumptions, the historian is now able to accurately interpret past events. The mindless, directionless thrust of history now betrays purpose as it continuously strives and reaches toward such humanistic ideals. History no longer appears as a random series of chaotic moments but of caused events outwardly manifesting an inward telos of rationality.

III. Historical Essentialism versus Archaeology

If we position philosophical reflection against Michel Foucault’s archaeology, the conceptual assumptions of modern historiography immediately drop out. For those who take seriously the study of madness, for instance, it is at present impossible to imagine it as anything other than mental illness. In contrast, the archaeologist makes no such essentialist presuppositions, and as a result of doing so, shows how varying conceptual formations of madness come into being through changes in the institutional rather than conceptual order (cf. Macdonnell 90). Such institutional changes are the types of objects archaeologists focus on and study, especially when a concept is constituted through a particular institutional experience of it (but more about this later). Consequently the intended meaning of a concept is not nearly so important to the archaeologist as the concept’s sudden emergence from within a changing and radically transformed institutional order.

Archaeology analyzes the ways institutional structures and spaces have changed over time and their resulting “primacy over forms of knowledge” (Macdonnell 90). As
counterintuitive as it seems, institutional upheaval provides the conditions for the release of new knowledge as the history of madness illustrates. It was not the emergence of a new form of psychiatric discourse that effected the successful transition from confinement (1790’s) to the birth of the asylum (1800) but rather the opposite. It was the change from one type of non-discursive spatial organization of bodies (confinement) to another (the asylum) that created the conditions for the possibility of a modern psychiatric discourse (Macdonnell 89-90). Consequently, the lack of any over-arching conceptualization of madness between transitions proves increasingly problematic for the historian of ideas. Why? Because the seamless and progressive development of discursive madness from classical “unreason” (ca. 1650-1800 CE) to modern “mental illness” is no longer possible since the unpredictable and contingent character of an institutional upheaval has supplanted it. As a result, a history of madness is no longer cast as a progressive refining of human conceptual development toward greater levels of accuracy and truth. Rather the deliberate and coercive spatial positioning and management of bodies has created a discontinuity along with the subsequent release of new forms of knowledge.

Madness provides an excellent example of discontinuous history by rejecting many of the dogmatic presumptions of modern historiography, and serves equally well the critical nature of this study—how so? The notion of mental degeneration and its relationship to modern art, as we shall see, is bound up in a number of connections between key nineteenth-century discourses that to date have not been articulated. Archaeology works to uncover the conditions that make these discursive relationships possible as well as their convergence and eventual configuration into concepts like
“Degenerate Art.” Before commenting, however, on these strikingly new discursive spaces, historical analysis of the elementary units of discourse requires consideration of statements and institutional transformations in an altogether novel way. What Foucault means by history, especially historical analysis, proves elusive if not counterintuitive, and so let us now consider what is meant by archaeology as a form of “historical analysis.”

IV. Archaeology as Historical Analysis

“The archaeological description of discourses is deployed in the dimension of a general history,” which stands in sharp contrast to its reckoning in any “totalizing” sense (Foucault, Archaeology 130). First, what does Foucault mean by totalizing histories and are there any examples we might point to? The previous discussion on freedom is one but there are many others, such as Marxist theories of “class conflict.” When understood as an overarching principle, “class conflict” provides a sense of historical cohesion, as each being of a historical phase is identified and determined by its internal telos, viz., the set of material and economic relations among classes in any given society. Functioning thus as an a priori principle, “class conflict” makes coherent empirical multiplicities, which in effect “totalizes” phenomena, that is to say, as a meta-discourse it subsumes and gives legitimation to all forms of minor discourse. For instance, questions why an individual holds a particular moral, political, religious, or aesthetic opinion can always be referred back to the grand narrative of class conflict found residing at a meta-level of discourse. History now appears meaningful, directed, and full of purpose, as “class conflict” functions as the motive force operating behind all social, political, and economic change. Consequently, future historical transformations
are, as a matter of principle, predictable as the past and present become necessary to their fulfillment. This is what Foucault means by the term “totalizing;” moreover, science can describe these changing social (class) relations of production and does so against a backdrop of causality and necessity.

General history resists positing architectonic ideas, stories, or principles that subsume and legitimate all other forms of local discourse (Dean 93-94). Lacking reference to a meta-discourse, general history regards historical periods as contingent, expressing no underlying cause from one period to the next. Nor do general histories consider events as being directed toward some ultimate purpose or goal on the basis of an internal telos inherent in the historical event. As a result, history changes but does not necessarily progress.

An example from Dianne Macdonnell’s text *Theories of Discourse* helps to further distinguish between the two. According to Macdonnell, total histories assume knowledge “is a reflection of the essence of things” (84). For instance, in the case of “madness,” modern psychiatry lays claim to a true knowledge of it as mental illness; so a modern historian proceeding to write a history of madness would start by tracing “a pure circle from the present to the past to the present,” charting a continuous progression toward the “truth” (84). As a result, modern conceptualizations of madness become increasingly precise and accurate, given time, while past conceptualizations, in comparison, are judged increasingly inadequate and mistaken, e.g., the ancient conception of madness as “possession.” Progress and continuity are marked by greater degrees of truth, and in the particular case of madness its conceptual history progressing toward a “true” understanding of itself as mental illness.
General history does not proceed from the initial premise that madness is in reality mental illness and then asks how well this identification was reflected, for instance, in Classical thought (1650-1800) (Macdonnell 84). Rather, it “brackets” idealist assumptions to knowledge by first considering the Classical experience of madness, [institutionally speaking], that is, according to the notion of “confinement.” According to Foucault, madness was subsumed in Paris in 1656 under the general category of Classical unreason along with other forms of social uselessness, e.g., mendicancy, unemployment, and prodigality (Madness 65). At the same time, perceived idleness of a segment of society was produced by a “nascent investigation” that ineffectually treated the idle through confinement (Foucault, Madness 65). The idle mad, in other words, were confined along with the debauched, spendthrifts, and unemployed simply because idleness and labor were concepts “derived” from religious doctrines. Individuals were confined on the basis of the law of labor, which was not derived from nature or economics “but [from] the effect of [Adam’s] curse” (Foucault, Madness 55). In a sense then religious discourse creates a new space called confinement, a place for those who transgressed the law of labor.

As Classical madness cast and confined the mad individual as one lacking “work,” it came to represent something more than just a radical misunderstanding of madness in modern terms. It was to constitute its own unique experience of madness that bore no resemblance or relation to its modern conception; and it is this insight that I should like to argue marks the essential difference between totalizing and general histories (Foucault, Madness 116). Whereas in total histories knowledge reflects essences, general history describes ideas such as madness against non-discursive
institutional backgrounds (e.g., confinement). General history is therefore non-reductive since it does not attribute nor explain the changing phenomena in society or politics according to a singular unchanging idea or overarching narrative. Each period, or what Foucault will call an *episteme*, experiences things such as madness differently. Discontinuity results, as a distinct break with previous epochs emerges from that uniqueness of experience, it being the very quality demarcating various phases or historical “epistemes” from each other. Consequently, in its rejection of the idealist assumption of knowledge, general history denies a key tenet essential for the coherent transformation from one historical period to the next (Madonnell 116).

**V. The Notion of Episteme**

When a primary intellectual tool organizes various and disparate knowledges into a particular moment, Foucault calls this moment an “episteme” (*Archaeology* 191). Each intellectual tool is unique and as such defines the set of relations among a variety of different types of knowledge; moreover, as one intellectual tool replaces another, the set of relations among various types of knowledge are redefined. Thus what comes into being is another episteme for no apparent reason or cause.

Foucault christens the Classical epoch the episteme of *analysis*, or representation, since both terms are used to define the set of relations among a variety of “epistemological figures” (*Archaeology* 191). As examples, their epistemological effects elicit a general accounting of the term:
By episteme, we mean […] the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems. (Archaeology 191)

It is the way the Classical episteme regards the representational function of language that endows its unique epistemic character, specifically the way language represents ideas about an inherently ordered world (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 193). God created and ordered that world and it was man’s responsibility to clarify it. The challenge was devising an artificial language that could describe the “order that was already there” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 19-20). Language, if it attained to truth, provided a correct representation, or mirror of that reality, and so was therefore assumed to be transparent. Language was also the medium by which things were named, and one “saw” through the name to the thing itself. If it accurately represented the ordered reality God had set into motion, the gap between nature and human nature was successfully bridged epistemologically; “nature and Human nature [were] linked together [in] the human activity of knowing” and represented through the power of discourse (20).

VI. The Classical Episteme: A Cartesian Example

Foucault goes to great lengths in demonstrating how Rene Descartes’ philosophical method and Classical assumptions about language were emblematic of the Classical episteme (cf. Order 50-57). For Descartes, clarifying the inherent order in nature consisted in analyzing an object’s complexities into its fundamentally simple natures through the mental activity of intuition (Descartes, Selected 13). This mental activity constituted the basis of Cartesian knowledge, which consisted in the free assent
of the will in accepting what the mind intuited with clarity and distinctness (Descartes, *Selected* 29). Examples abound of this type of mental activity, for instance, the intellect’s capacity for ordering the purely mathematical world. Upon comparing a square and a triangle, for instance, there is a very clear sense in which a square is simpler than a triangle since the idea of a square does not prompt the added question of type. The idea of a triangle, however, is relatively less simple since the additional information of “type,” e.g., equilateral, isosceles, or obtuse, would provide greater clarity and distinctness to it. Hence the intellect’s capacity to compare squares and triangles reveals a basic patterning from simple to increasingly complex ideas.

To borrow a better example from Norman Melchert’s *The Great Conversation*, let us consider a straight as opposed to a curved line (291). Again we can see there is an obvious sense in which a straight line is simple and a curved line complex. For instance, it does not make sense, as Melchert points out, to ask whether a straight line is more or less straight. If it is straight, we know something definite about it; however, a straightforward knowledge of a curved line is not so simple. Curves can come in many degrees, and as any geometer will tell you, a curved line can be analyzed “into a series of straight lines at various angles to each other” (Melchert 291).

For Descartes, the intellect’s power for discerning order is especially important when it comes to understanding the essence of a substance. This process is best illustrated when perceptual judgments are shown not to constitute knowledge for Descartes, precisely because they are founded on sense perception. From the *Second Meditation*, Descartes shows through the very compelling example of the ball of wax, how ideas based on sense perception are confused and obscure while ideas intellectually
intuited are clear and distinct. Most of us are aware of the sensible properties of wax, e.g., its hardness, its smell, and taste, and the potential for these properties to change and vanish from one moment to the next. Let us imagine, for instance, a hard ball of wax set next to a fire. As it reacts to the heat, we begin to notice how the properties the wax once possessed begin to change and go out of existence, e.g., it loses its shape, becoming a hot, odorless, puddle of tasteless liquid (Descartes, *Selected* 84). And yet we still conclude the same wax is there, that it exists, thus prompting the question: what really constituted our knowledge of the wax to begin with? Is it what we learned through sense perception?

Descartes says no, and claims what the intellect intuits with clarity and distinctness is what constitutes knowledge of the wax. As the intellect concentrates solely on those mathematically determinable simple natures of extension, figure, and motion, knowledge of the wax becomes possible. Why? Because whether the wax is cold or hot, soft or hard, scented or odorless, its essential and defining property never comes into or goes out of existence, that is, its extension. As an unchanging idea that remains a part of the wax throughout its transformations, extension for Descartes is an object of knowledge.

Once the essential attribute of an object and the intellect’s power for discerning it come together, a substance is clearly and distinctly perceived as a simple nature. In the case of bodies, it is extension (Latin *extensio*), and in the case of mind, it is thought (Latin *cogitatum*) (Descartes, *Selected* 177-178). Yet for Descartes there is more than one type of simple nature “that the intellect recognizes by means of a sort of innate light […]” (*Selected* 13). There are purely intellectual, simple natures, e.g., volition, doubt, ignorance, knowledge, etc. In material bodies there are the “purely material” simple
natures, such as shape, extension, and motion, of which extension is the principal attribute, since shape and motion are unintelligible except in an extended thing (*Selected 13, 177*). Thus it follows that simple natures are simple, precisely because they are “known so clearly and distinctly that they cannot be divided by the mind into others which are more distinctly known” (*Selected 13*).

Here, in these moments of analysis, we detect the Cartesian order of comparison Foucault identifies as emblematic of the Classical episteme. A method for discovering certitude follows from the previously stated principle in which a simple and complex nature are identified not according to isolated natures but “by discovering that which is the simplest, then that which is the next simplest,” and so on (Foucault, *Order 53*). We can gain some sense of this analytical progression by discovering the relative simplicity and complexity of the following three concepts: extension, shape, and limit. For instance, in the proposition “*shape* is the *limit* of an *extended* thing,” we notice how “extension” is more basic and simple when compared to “shape,” since the latter is unintelligible without the former. Finally, the term “limit” is relatively more complex than either “shape” or “extension,” since in its generality it may equally apply to a duration, a motion, or the shape of a thing (Descartes 13). Foucault characterizes this analytic movement as “enabling us to pass from one term to another, then to a third by means of an absolutely uninterrupted ‘movement’[…]whereby] one can progress to the most complex things of all […]” (*Order 53*).

This Cartesian detour has sufficiently demonstrated, I hope, how certitude during the Classical episteme was possible given the assumption that God ordered the universe and man could “represent” that order through language. As divinely created simple
natures are intuited with clarity and distinctness, chains of inference are ordered and
arranged from simple to complex knowledge about the world. The role of language was
to simply name and represent the preordained order that was already there (Dreyfus and
Rabinow 20). That the term “extension,” or extensio in Latin, for instance, was a
linguistic artifact—or group of signs—(or suppositio materialis for the schoolmen, see
Mill 13) that referred to the principle attribute of bodies was a metaphysical truth
established by God; and since God had created bodies and minds in potential harmony
through the simple natures that defined them both, He naturally became “the
transcendental source of signification” for the words representing them (Dreyfus and
Rabinow 20).

One of the great ironies of Cartesian doubt is that it never called into question the
representative function of language to begin with. It seems a perfectly legitimate subject
to doubt, given doubt’s universality. For instance, the English term “extension”
supposedly represents the timeless essence of bodies, a simple nature created by God.
But let us suppose one truthfully believed the meaning of the word “extension” to
represent the essence of bodies at time t1, but then at time t2 the same person is deceived
by the “evil genius” into believing “extension” represents (falsely) the essence of mind or
thought. Given such a hypothesis, Descartes’ method of universal doubt questions the
very constancy of linguistic meaning essential to the heuristic communication of his
method.

I would suggest this criticism inconceivable given Descartes’ theoretical
understanding of the representative function of language. According to Dreyfus and
Rabinow, the Classical episteme brought representation and being together in discourse
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(language); i.e., human nature and nature itself “[were] linked together” in the “human activity of knowing” (20). Language “insofar that it [accurately] represented” this pre-established and divinely ordered world was the nexus between thought (representation) and things (beings) (Dreyfus and Rabinow 20). Since this privileged position of language made possible successful representation to begin with, it precluded any doubts about the representative meaning of words. Why? Because doubts can only be raised linguistically to begin with, and it is apparent, even before Descartes can put pen to paper, that he must make this assumption regarding language and representation (Dreyfus and Rabinow 20). Apparently the rules of Classical discourse and language already place restrictions on what Descartes can or cannot doubt, whether he is aware of it or not. Not until Kant does it finally become possible to derive a genuine and meaningful analysis of the conditions for the possibility of representation. Only then does language lose its transparency and becomes an object of knowledge itself in the form of linguistics.

Another way of looking at the problem of semantic continuity is metaphysical. Subsequent to dismissing the evil genius hypothesis through an act of self-reflection, any ordering of an artificially arranged series of signs could be constructed to represent a pre-established order as long as two things held: one, God was the transcendental source of signification for that arrangement of signs; and two, the use of those significations were consistent throughout discourse. Descartes’ method met both requirements as the great chain of being was first, intuited clearly and distinctly, and second, linguistically represented in correspondence with that pre-established order (Dreyfus and Rabinow 20). As long as the linguistic sign was consistently used from context to context, the clear and
distinct idea it represented was, consequently, no source for concern or doubt in a Cartesian sense.

The argument against doubting semantic continuity ultimately rests on the uniqueness of the linguistic sign itself. For the Renaissance episteme, the conception of the sign required an explanation for the link between the sign and what it signified. In some cases the link was founded on “resemblance,” e.g., Foucault identifies the medicinal value of the aconite plant in treating diseases of the eye because its dark seeds, seated in skin-like coverings, resembled the eyelids covering an eye (Order 27). Renaissance resemblance, however, as a justification for sign and signified is no longer thought of as necessary in the Classical episteme, and in a sense the reasons why are truly definitive of the Classical age (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 150, 151). Whereas the Renaissance required a tertium quid in the form of resemblance the Classical episteme did not, and the reason why was due to its unique conception of the sign. According to Gary Gutting, the Classical sign “directly represent[ed] what it signifie[d] and, moreover, present[ed] itself as so representing. [Hence…] there [was] no basis for doubting whether it in fact signifie[d] what it seem[ed] to; the ‘transparency’ of the sign guarantee[d] it” (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 151).

As Classical representation prioritized the use of conventional sign systems, it eschewed the Renaissance proclivity toward natural signs (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 148). This is, as Gutting points out, due to the mind’s inner workings. A sign, in a sense, is an idea insofar that “it manifests […] the relation that links it to what it signifies” (Foucault, Order 64). For instance, the scratches and scrawls of letters to form the word “extension” must not only represent the idea of the essential attribute of all
bodies, but must also represent the simple nature in material bodies, if it is to be a
regarded as a meaningful set of signs.

Foucault derives from this unique conceptualization of the Classical sign the
added notion of its existence as being only for a knowing mind. He states, “There can no
longer be an unknown sign, a mute mark,” which is another way of saying that
meaningful signs “are no longer antecedently present objects given to our knowledge but
[are] rather intrinsic parts of knowledge itself” (Foucault, Order 59; Gutting, Foucault’s
148). As a result, natural signs, such as a rainbow denoting God’s promise never to flood
the earth again, or gathering clouds as an augury of impending doom, all of which
purportedly explain the ordered reality of things, are now replaced by conventional sign
systems that are ordered according to the workings of the mind. As Gutting points out,
the sign is both the “result of analysis […] and the instrument of analysis,” provided that
the determinate form of consciousness is representational (thought) (148, 151). Since
Classical signs represent the activities of thought, the construction of an artificial
language that described and clarified that order also shares, ipso facto, “the same logical
structure as the world” (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 149). In other words, the added
cognitive capacity to analyze and order the relative simplicity and complexity of
representations is mirrored in the language used to represent that reality.

But how the Classical sign represents is a mystery in itself and attempts at
explaining it are greatly assisted by exegetical accounts of realistic art. A portrait by
Albrect Dürer, for instance, is meant to represent its object as every line, color, and shape
of the portrait corresponds to some visual aspect of what it represents (see Figure 3).
Similarly, the Classical sign “represents the content of the object it signifies,” although transparently (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 150). As a realistic portrait painting presents itself “as” a representation or sign of something else so likewise does the Classical sign. But the classical sign also “double[s] over on itself” (Foucault, *Order* 65) as it draws attention to its representative function in the act of representing. Hence, the Classical sign, states Foucault, performs a “duplicated representation,” which is an idea thematically treated in his tortuous yet brilliantly insightful examination of Diego Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656) (65).

**VII. Las Meninas Revisited**

As we confront this monumental work, it appears “to be a simple yet spectacular representation” of the members of the Spanish royal family from the court of Phillip the IV (Searle 251; see Figure 4). The interior space is probably the painter’s atelier or some
other room in the royal palace. The foreground of the painting is bathed in light as it
streams in from an invisible window to the viewer’s right. The light becomes dimmer in
the background as well as within the deeper recesses of the represented space. Left of
center, the painter Velasquez has represented himself with brush in hand as if just
emerging from behind a cropped full-length canvas on our extreme left. He, along with
the majority of others represented in the foreground, stare at what appears to be the
subject of it. The model occupies the same space as us, the viewer, but is invisible. The
remaining cast is comprised of the infanta and the “maids of honor,” courtiers, dwarfs,
and other waiting attendants who surround her (Foucault, Order 19).

According to John Searle, it is the resemblance between the “representation” and
the visual aspects of the objects the artist paints that constitutes classical pictorial
representation (251). Las Meninas strictly adheres to this axiom, which is readily
noticeable in the heightened realism of each figure represented. They are meant to be recognized, as experts on the painting have exhaustively enumerated and identified the various royal personages of the Spanish royal court on the basis of this feature in the work. In this regard, the work’s lack of fictional or fanciful elements runs counter to the Renaissance inclination for allegory, and yet, Renaissance artistic conventions still continue to exert a powerful influence over the Baroque imagination. Space, for instance, in *Las Meninas* is configured along the lines of single point perspective emblematic of an Albertian program of pictorial representation (see Figure 5). A strong sense of spatial unity is created through parallel and orthogonal lines proceeding from the edges of surfaces and the corners of the canvas. These recessional lines converge at the same angle toward the work’s vanishing point: the mirror (roughly speaking). When experienced thusly, the spatial illusion of the painting is complete as it appears to be a continuation of the real space occupied by the viewer.

![Figure 5](image)

Diego Velasques, *Las Meninas* (perspective), (1656-57).
Other means for suggesting spatial depth in the work, which are also the product of Albertian mathematical reasoning on nature, are the principles of diminution, foreshortening, modeling and chiaroscuro (Alberti 44-59). While modeling and the use of chiaroscuro were certainly understood by Renaissance artists, their perfection as compositional elements was the distinguishing feature and hallmark of the Baroque painterly style (Wölfflin 41-49). According to Heinrich Wölfflin, “[I]n a general way we can go so far as to say that it is in an even stronger combination of light and shade which prepares the way for the definitely painterly conception” (44).

For Foucault, *Las Meninas* is emblematic of the Classical episteme for a number of reasons. First and foremost the work functions as a visual metaphor; it is representative of what Foucault calls the “internal logic” of the Classical episteme. Let us see how.

While the painting purports to be a representation of the infanta, one “subtext” of the work is representation itself, and it is understanding this “subtext” which produces a number of interesting if not paradoxical issues related to the painting (Foucault, *Order* 16; Hall 59). For instance, the work functions as a matter of “pure reciprocity,” that is to say, “we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us” (Foucault, *Order* 4). And yet as we begin to view the work, scrutinize its narrative, and raise the question of its subject matter, a disorientating feeling sets in: who or what is meant to occupy the same space as we the viewer?

What *Las Meninas* provides is a discourse on the nature of representation itself, and the underlying assumptions of Searle’s theory are a starting point from which to ascend to this understanding of the work. For Searle, any painting purporting to be a
representation, Classical representation demands a resemblance between the painting and the visual aspects of the object it represents. For instance, when an artist’s point of view before a work of art is substituted for the viewer’s, the viewer’s gaze is naturally directed outward toward what the artist originally intended the viewer to see (Searle 251). What endows the painting with the power of representation is the viewer’s perceiving a resemblance between the representation and the object represented, and part of the success of *Las Meninas* is to be found in the convincing manner it renders this likeness.

The real genius of *Las Meninas*, however, is not measured in terms of resemblances, but in the way it plays with the theoretical possibilities of the spatial position before the work (an accurate assessment of which is not to be found in Searle’s discussion). According to Foucault, the space conflates three different positions by its serving a “triple” function “in relation to the work” (*Order* 15). What Foucault means by “triple” is that as one (1) looks at the work, one slowly becomes aware of the space one occupies as being identical to the space once occupied by the artist (2), who, in the act of painting a self-portrait represents the painter (the self-portrait) in the act of painting a model or models (3), which, interestingly, occupies the same space as himself, that is the artist (2), as well as the viewer (1) (Foucault, *Order* 15). Who then is, or are, the model[s] occupying the theoretical space of the viewer as well as the painter? A clue is found in the mirror, the object that roughly occupies the vanishing point of the painting. Interestingly, its reflection bears not the image of the viewer, or of the painter, which it normally should have according to northern Renaissance conventions in mirror painting.
What the mirror represents is the personage of King Philip the IV and his wife (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Diego Velasques, *Las Meninas* (detail), (1656-57).

According to Foucault, this identification makes sense given the work’s narrative structure. Most of the individuals of the Spanish court deferentially look at the models, thus making the viewer (1) in one sense seen but also unseen. The viewer’s invisibility would suddenly materialize if s(he) could somehow imaginatively enter into the foreground of the painting; under such imaginative circumstances, the viewer might even make his way back far enough to look upon the painted canvas of the artist and to directly see who is being represented, but this is obviously not permitted. The viewer might also directly know who the models are if s(he) were among the entourage of courtiers, dwarfs, or attending maidens, but this is obviously not permitted as well. The only clue suggested to the viewer that the models might be the King and Queen of Spain is their represented image in the mirror of the work.
What Foucault wishes to underscore is how coming to know the identity of the models is founded on “representation.” *Las Meninas*, Foucault believes, thematizes Classical representation as it becomes a visual discourse on knowledge as representation (*Order* 16). For instance, all aspects of representation are “dispersed into three separate figures” occupying the same space and position before the work: one, the painter himself (the producer of *Las Meninas*); two, the object represented by the artist’s self-portrait (the models and their gaze); and three, “the viewing of the representation (by the spectator)” (*Order* 15-16; Dreyfus and Rabinow 25). And just so there is no confusion on these points, Foucault identifies three corollaries to the triple function of representation. Respectively, they are the self-portrait of the artist, the models represented in the mirror, and the spectator/viewer standing at the back of the doorway viewing the entire scene (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 153). Each represented figure exists in indirect correlation to one of the three functions the viewer occupies spatially before the work. The spatial logic of the painting, for instance, positions the models in the place of the viewer but are only present as reflections in the mirror, not the objects of the painter’s or viewer’s direct gaze. The painter and viewer “appear, but not in front of the picture, where they must be when actually painting or viewing” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 153). They appear in the work as the self-portrait of the artist and the spectator/viewer represented standing at the back of the doorway (see Figure 4).

The upshot of Velazquez’s painting is the spectacular way he successfully thematizes all the aspects that go into representation but at the expense of producing an “instability” and “tension” within the work. This “tension” is brought about through representing all aspects of representation except for the activity of representing itself
(Dreyfus and Rabinow 25). For instance, the viewer of the work gazes at the center of
the painting that depicts the artist who is pausing from the activity of representation, i.e.,
the viewer does not directly view the activity of representation itself (Dreyfus and
Rabinow 26). The “surrogate” spectator enters at the back of the room, witnessing the
painting of the artist, and becomes an object of representation, but he does not actually
witness the activity of representation, since the painter (the self-portrait) has paused from
the activity of painting. Finally, the King and Queen are not directly represented in the
act of modeling, but are “dimly” and “peripherally” caught in the mirror and the gazes of
the entire cast, where they too have become the objects of representation and not a
witness to its activity.

In sum, what Las Meninas illustrates for Foucault is the central paradox of the
Classical age; while it illustrates the ordering of representations in the uniquely human
activity of knowing it is the activity of representation itself that can never be configured
into such an ordering (Foucault, Order 16; Dreyfus and Rabinow 25).

VIII. David Hume and Immanuel Kant: Reaching the Philosophical Limits of the
Classical Episteme

One of the central aims of Foucault’s The Order of Things is to investigate the
various and unique ways language has ordered knowledge within varying epistemes. In
the Classical episteme the role of language is conceptualized as representation, its
ontological character being essentially different from the status of the things and ideas it
is meant to represent (Foucault, Order 43). Intuition, analysis, and language identified
and ordered simple natures whether they were purely material, as Descartes described,
and “recognized to be present only in material bodies—such as shape [or] extension;”
or in the intellect, such as thought or imagination. There were, in addition, simple
natures that were common to both, e.g., existence, unity, and duration (Descartes,
Selected 13).

By responding to skeptical challenges, Descartes discerns whether or not our
ideas truthfully correspond to the way the world really is, and uses language merely as a
tool for representing those ideas and describing that order. Language is therefore
assumed to be “coextensive” with representation (thought). While ideas based on sense
experience can be successfully doubted, notions of God’s existence, and the
mathematical descriptions of the quantitative properties of objects are proof enough of an
actual existing world. Language simply represents knowledge of that world. But just as
Las Meninas demonstrates the limits of Classical representation, David Hume
philosophically demonstrate the limits of Cartesian representation, language, and the
philosophy of mind they are founded upon.

For Hume the contents of the mind are strictly limited to impressions and ideas.
Impressions, Hume maintains, are the product of consciousness’ direct contact with the
world; moreover, all human knowledge in the form of matters of fact have their source in
this original interaction between the conscious mind and the world (Hume 455-456, 458-
460). Language simply represents matters of fact in the form of propositions, their
content originating in the mind’s direct awareness of impressions (457). On the other
hand, simple ideas are the faint, lingering traces of the mind’s direct confrontation with
sense data, viz., impressions (455-456), and this conclusion would have devastating
effects on the status of innate ideas.
An innate idea would be our ideas of God, substance, or causation, anything that could be regarded as “what is original or copied from no precedent perception” (Hume 457 n.). By limiting the contents of the mind to just impressions and ideas, however, Hume demonstrates the meaninglessness of such ideas. Since for Hume all simple ideas are founded on impressions and the repeated investigation of observable facts, our idea of causation, for instance, as being a necessary relation between two events is not what we think it is. Quite the contrary, causation is nothing more than a perceived regularity and constant conjoining of one state of affairs with another; more precisely, it is a mental habit born from the repeated observation of one event following another (Hume 458-459). Why? Because our only justification for causation in the world is observation, and observation can never show a necessary relationship occurring between two events that succeed one another in time. Hume states:

[... we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality which binds the effect to the cause, and renders one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other [...] Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connexion. (qtd. in Melchert 350)

Thus to endow causation with necessity, and to further claim that the idea actually describes the way the world really is, in itself, is dogmatic and meaningless for Hume.

Hume’s skeptical insight means that any idea claiming to have its original source outside or beyond immediate impressions must certainly be the product of dogmatic metaphysics and so ought to be treated skeptically. Given his conceptual framework of
the mind and its contents there is no other conclusion he can come to regarding the status of innate ideas. Hume therefore directly challenges and successfully undermines Descartes’ claim to innate knowledge established on the basis of clarity and distinctness.

Like Velasquez’s painting *Las Meninas*, Hume’s analysis of impressions and ideas demonstrates, at the same time, the limits of Classical representation. Even though it appears that language represents the truth about how the world must be, for Hume linguistic propositions can at best only describe a contingent and changing world, not knowledge of it. When a stated proposition, for instance, describes one billiard ball as striking another and thus “causing” it to move, this state of affairs cannot be made sense of according to the universal law of cause and effect, since causation is really a mental habit, a constant conjoining of one state of affairs with another, or what Hume calls “custom” (464-465). In Hume then, Classical discourse loses its power to represent the pre-established order God had set into motion, of which it was man’s function to discern. Why? Because in the wake of Hume, language can at best only represent an association of ideas that appear to the memory and imagination with a certain degree of repeated seriality. It cannot, in other words, represent intuited preexisting truth about how the world must be, since innate ideas such as causation, the soul, and God are shown by Hume, at least he thinks so, to be ill founded notions. As a result, language can only represent the content of experience since there are no longer any *a priori* ideas we normally think of as constituting the *form* of experience.

Arguably then, Hume’s skeptical conclusions about knowledge and representation create the possibility for Kant, for one can either respond to Hume’s skepticism by agreeing with it, or regard the conditions for knowledge and the structure of thought as
existing outside representation, consequently “bring[ing] into question [representation’s] foundation, its origin, and its limits” (Foucault, *Order* 242). That is Kant’s proposal, and his transcendental project is, in part, an inquiry into those foundations. He does this by demonstrating the conditions for the possibility of representation, and by doing so, shows how some representations have a synthetic and *a priori* character. Further reflection on the nature of such propositions also leads him to discover what he thinks are the conditions (i.e., the foundations, origins, and limits) for the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Ultimately Kant shows how all representations (either pure or empirical) are the result of a synthesis of the mind and that such a synthesis is not entailed from the nature of consciousness as representational, “[but…] only a mind, which is properly structured [to begin with,] according to the forms of sensibility and categories of understanding [can] represent objects [either pure or empirical]” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 152).

In demonstrating then the conditions for the possibility of representation itself, Kant radically expands upon the notion of the determinate form of consciousness being representational. Consciousness may be representational but there are underlying structures making it so. Consequently, the transcendental nature of Kant’s project was to mark a structural shift, and his texts are an indication that a transformation has occurred.

**IX. Structural Shifts and Renaissance Art Theory**

Because it was impossible for Classical thinkers to conceive of consciousness as anything but representational, they were unable to explain how consciousness managed to represent anything at all. On the other hand, Kant’s transcendental project demonstrated
the possibility for successful representation and how it initially required an appropriate
structuring of consciousness according to the pure forms of intuition as well as the
categories of the understanding. Only once a successful synthesis of sense data had been
structured within the limits of a priori intuition, could consciousness begin to represent
things in the world, at least for Kant (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 152).

For Foucault this critique of a transcendental field beyond the data of
consciousness points to an archaeological mutation, or a rupture and discontinuous break
between the Classical and what Foucault calls the Modern episteme (Foucault, Order
242). If we refer back to Las Meninas the point is made clear. As we look at the work,
we notice how the illusion of space is convincingly handled (see Figure 4). A compelling
sense of spatial depth is conveyed through the recession and convergence of orthogonal
lines at a single point as the rate of diminution in the size of objects is kept regular and
consistent throughout the work. What we are convinced of is a proper and rational
representation of spatial depth that is only possible given certain geometrical rules and
restrictions placed on perceptual experience to begin with. Remember, it is how well the
artist represents the perceived aspects of the object that constitutes classical pictorial
representation. What the nature of perception is for the Renaissance artist is constituted
by the rules or axioms of classical pictorial representation.

The ordered visual aspects of Las Meninas are, however, no accident easily
arrived at. They are the product of the artist’s painstaking and strict adherence to the
principles and methods of single point perspective as discussed by the Renaissance art
theorist Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti’s theories of perception were the basis for a
scientifically accurate method of representing three-dimensional space on a two-
dimensional surface. Alberti, like Leonardo da Vinci was similarly convinced that the natural world was mathematically ordered, and this unquestioned presumption, especially on the mathematical behavior of light, consequently shaped and informed the perceptions as well as the technique of many Renaissance and ultimately Baroque painters. The rigors of Albertian theory and practice were, to say the least, demanding. For instance the eyes and the intellect of the painter were trained to see and understand the mathematical behavior of light and how its effects upon objects created the perceptual experience of foreshortening, diminution, overlapping, recession, and spatial depth (Alberti 45-47). The important thing for the artist to realize, and remember, was how the ideas operating behind single point perspective were initially derived from sense experience (43). For instance, the greatest of Renaissance painters Leonardo da Vinci speculated on the perceived regularity in nature (e.g., foreshortening, diminution, and overlapping) and ultimately concluded that the nature of visual rays were “elucidated by means of demonstration which derive their glory not only from mathematics but also from physics” (qtd. in Kemp 5). Hence, theorists, such as Alberti and da Vinci, tended to generalize on the repetition and consistency of such perceived “facts,” only to then speculate on the nature of light as a mathematically ordered phenomenon.

Alberti’s insights, however, were not meant to suggest that some rigorous mathematical system be applied to the representation of the surfaces of objects. Renaissance and Baroque painters were not laying out Cartesian coordinate systems in order to represent the surfaces, shapes, and contours of objects. Rather, such mathematical theories of perception were meant to reinforce in the mind of the Renaissance painter the importance of combining the senses with the intellect in the
activity of sight and art. As the result of the artist’s mathematical understanding of nature he discovered a method for better representing space and creating more convincing spatial relations between objects and their relative sizes to other objects (Kemp 234-235). That their representations were accurate in their illusionistic resemblance to the things represented only affirmed their belief (though dogmatic in the Humean sense as we shall soon see) in the mathematical ordering of nature.

The Renaissance art theorist limited his speculations on the basis of what experience revealed, which was the contingent relationship between the experience of natural phenomena and the certainty of the mathematics ordering it. While their conclusions were sufficient to guide the artist’s “realistic” depiction of space, they still lacked universality and necessity. But questions regarding the apodeictic certainty of mathematics in the artist’s perceptions and representations of space may not have concerned early theorists such as Alberti or da Vinci. According to Martin Kemp, rules of art founded on mathematical rules of linear perspective, despite their epistemological uncertainty “still provided the only effective way for the painter to operate” (234-235). Even though scientific experimentation discovered a universe that was mechanistic and mathematically governed, and though this fact seemed compelling, what entertained the mind of Renaissance artists and theorists rather than the speculations of philosophers,² was how best to represent spatial relations between objects, or depict objects with more well-defined contours (Kemp 46, 234). It just so happened that the rules of mathematical

² Anti-philosophical sentiments are noted in Alberti’s lack of concern for the philosophical debates on color at the time of the early Renaissance (Alberti 49-50).
perspective offered one credible and rhetorically compelling method for persuading the viewer of a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface.

**X. Renaissance Art Theory and *Las Meninas* Re-interpreted**

The crisis of the Classical episteme, which was the failure of representative discourse to represent the conditions for its own possibility, is now explainable in the context of Renaissance art theory. At least one connection between Renaissance pictorial theory, and *Las Meninas* as a realization, in part, of a Renaissance aesthetic program, is in the pictorial representation of space. *Las Meninas* is a painting that purports to represent the perceived space of the triplet, that is, the artist, viewer, and the model. All see the illusion of space as a convincing continuation of the space they occupy, and the models especially so, since it is their reflection in the mirror that roughly constitutes the central point through which the spatial unity of the work is firmly established. That unity’s most compelling feature is produced through the repeated and consistent use of orthogonal and parallel lines proceeding along the surface edges of objects and from the four corners of the composition to their vanishing point (see Figure 7).

What *Las Meninas* cannot represent, however, are the conditions for the possibility of representing space as such. All the Baroque artist can represent is the appearance of an ordered space without any understanding of the conditions that make its experience and representation possible as a mathematically ordered phenomenon. As a result, the painter’s conscious perception of space and the physical laws describing it is only a contingent one and as a result he can never know whether his perception of space and its eventual representation in art is of necessity a mathematical one. Recalling Hume,
justification for the belief that nature is mathematically ordered is limited to the artist’s experiences of it (*a posteriori*), and as Kant states, experience can never be the basis for universality or necessity (*Critique of Pure Reason* 43-44, 69).

![Diego Velasques, Las Meninas (perspective), (1656-57).](image)

All of this was to change, of course, with the development of Kant’s transcendental philosophy. Foucault states:

> The Kantian critique, on the other hand, marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation […] on the basis of its rightful limits. Thus it sanctions […] the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation. That space is brought into question in its foundation, its origin, and its limits. (*Order* 242)

How does Kant’s critique manage to call into question the foundations and origins of representation while at the same time establishing the transcendentally ideal nature of
space? The short answer is quite simple and has largely been stated already. Since Kant’s transcendental method is an attempt to plumb the depths, limits, grounds, and origins of representation by considering the different types there are (pure and empirical), representation, as the determinate form of consciousness, is no longer taken for granted. Transcendental reflection now seeks a space outside consciousness from which to speculate on the necessary conditions that make representation possible. This would include both the Baroque artist’s experience of space and its artistic representations as such in Las Meninas. By demonstrating how any experiential claim about the world is possible specifically synthetic a priori propositions, Kant ultimately grounds both pure and empirical spatial perception on a mathematical footing.

The successful grounding of the origins of spatial perception outside representation itself is both intriguing and complex. If we recall, Hume’s theory of mind strictly limited the contents of the mind to “impressions” and “ideas,” thus forcing an understanding of space within impressions (Kemp 230). For Hume, only through a repeated investigation of sensible objects does our ordering of their relations with other objects lead to an understanding of spatial relations generally. Space in other words, like causation, is a Humean “idea” that has its traceable origin to sense impressions, specifically in the abstraction of spatial relations from outer appearances.

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3 At this point, it is important to recall John Searle’s axiom of classical pictorial representation. According to Searle, it is the resemblance between the “representation” and the visual aspects of the objects the artist paints that constitutes classical pictorial representation (251).
In contrast to Hume, Kant’s notion of space is not “empirically obtained from the relations of outer appearance,” but is viewed as a transcendentally ideal intuition that is fundamentally Euclidean, “which lays the foundation for sensory intuition but cannot be conceptually touched by perception of the external world” (Kemp 238; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 67-68, 91). Kant, in other words, maintains that space is not an idea derived from repeated investigations of the world, nor is it an impression comparable to sense impressions like the color “blue” or the feeling of “cold.” Space, for Kant, is capable of being envisaged in the abstract without the existence of objects, and, consequently, any empirically spatial judgment must presuppose the existence of space to begin with thus establishing its a priori character (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 68).

Kant claims geometry is the type of science that determines spatial properties synthetically, and yet a priori. Why? Because geometry is a universal science whose “propositions are bound up with the consciousness of their necessity” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B41, 70; A24 68). Furthermore, it is synthetic knowledge since it is ampliative, which means the truths of its propositions are not merely arrived at by analyzing its concepts. It is also a priori, since the objects of geometrical determination are “extension” and “figure” and belong to pure intuition, “which, even without any actual object of the senses or of sensation, exists in the mind a priori as a mere form of sensibility” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 66). For instance, “a straight line is the shortest distance between two points” is a synthetic proposition since the concept “short” can never be known by merely analyzing the concept “straight;” moreover, it is a priori since it is not known by inspecting all the straight lines we may perceive in experience. Its truth is therefore known independent of experience.
Given then the synthetic a priori character of geometry, what is it that we are forced to admit? For one, added reflection shows space to be a subjective form since if it was a feature of the world the possibility of another non-Euclidean geometry could be raised, thus challenging the apodeictic certainty of Euclidean geometry. Geometrical truths would be merely probabilistic if space were just a feature of the world; and, consequently, as a science geometry would only have comparative universality. All we could say in the end, according to Kant, is “that, so far as hitherto observed, no space has been found which has more than three dimensions” (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason 69). Accordingly, the truths of Euclidean geometry would be neither necessary nor universally true for all actual and possible experiences of space.

Space must therefore be transcendentally ideal, and as an outer intuition of the mind precedes the objects themselves, the concepts of which are “[geometrically] determined a priori,” that is, provided the intuition has its seat in the subject only (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason 70-71). According to Kant, it is the only explanation (i.e., space as transcendentally ideal) that “[…] makes intelligible the possibility of geometry, as a body of synthetic a priori knowledge” (Critique of Pure Reason 71).

**XI. Kant and Renaissance Art Theory**

Given the transcendentally ideal nature of space, the positive consequences for a Renaissance theory of linear perspective emerge. To restate, the Renaissance theorist could only speculate about natural phenomena strictly within the limits of representational content, that is, he could only theorize on the basis of perception (or a posteriori). But this practice has been shown to demonstrate at best comparative
universality between the appearances of space, light, and objects (i.e., the external things that produce our sense impressions) and the physics describing their behavior. Kant, on the other hand, demonstrates how any experiential claim about the world is possible only through showing how representations are first constructed within the limits of a priori intuition. Kant’s project of transcendental reflection thus demonstrates the conditions for the possibility of spatial representation itself, space being something the Classical episteme dogmatically accepted as unquestionably the determinate form of “outer” consciousness.

Kant argues to the contrary. Representations of sense impressions (either pure or empirical) are the result of a synthesis of the mind and as such are not entailed from the nature of consciousness as representational. “[O]nly a mind, which is properly structured” to begin with, according to the forms of sensibility and categories of understanding, “will be able to represent objects [either pure or empirical]” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 152). Consequently, in his search for the conditions that make representations possible Kant opens up a “space” outside of representation and one of those conditions is the transcendently ideal nature of space. In the Transcendental Exposition, from *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant shows space to be a form contributed by the knowing subject, thus allowing for the perception of the external world as outer intuition. Furthermore, geometry is the science of that space, and as a subjective pure form of intuition “explains the binding necessity of Euclidean geometry: its three-dimensionality is a perceptual condition of ours the world must conform to [in the form of both pure and empirical intuitions] in order to be perceived by us” (Rauch 44).

Whereas the Renaissance theorist’s mathematical speculations on the essence of nature
were derived from representational content alone, Kant goes outside representation to show the certainty of what Alberti and da Vinci could only guess at: the binding necessity between phenomenal perception and the mathematics ordering it.

**XII. Degenerate Art and Renaissance Art Theory**

Had Alberti witnessed some of the choicer examples of modern art, he probably would have scratched his head wondering what the artist’s problem was. He would conclude that the artist needed retraining on how to see the world correctly and represent it accordingly. If, for instance, we compare two landscape paintings, Alberti’s point is made visibly explicit. Bracketing for a moment the theoretical assumptions of modern art, there is a clear sense in which the Kirchner work grossly falls short in its attempt to “realistically” portray the natural world (see Figures 8 and 9). In contrast, Claude Lorrain presents a stunning visual depiction of the natural world. His is a beautiful landscape that smoothly transitions from fore to middle to extreme background, which, when compared with Kirchner’s work, demonstrates even more the technical ineptitude of Kirchner as an artist. Given Kant’s exegetical work on the nature of human perception the charge of degeneracy against Kirchner is made even more transparent. If as Kant suggests, the binding necessity of Euclidean geometry is a perceptual condition of ours the world must conform to in order to be perceived by us, Kirchner is obviously deranged, assuming he really sees the world as it is depicted in his painting. Indeed, if we were suddenly to wake up seeing the world similarly depicted we would think ourselves mad.

Of course this conclusion is based on the assumption that painting ought to represent the visual aspects of the objects represented. Modern artists reject this
assumption. If, as they believed, art is a free expression, then the artist has every right to throw off convention by freely rejecting the past, and they do. Kirchner, along with many others, freely declined to accept the axiom of classical pictorial representation and decidedly created art deliberately at odds with tradition. Their goal: to violently disrupt the smooth transition

Figure 8
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*, (1919).

Figure 9
Claude Lorrain, *Pastoral Landscape Morning*, (1651).
between art and life, “challenge the imperatives of predictability […] and consistency of view” and to introduce “alien perceptions into the value-system of the bourgeoisie” (Taylor 139). On the other hand, the Nazis and German folk painting accepted the assumption of classical pictorial representation without exception casting it as the theoretical bedrock of all art. Their collision would come at the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937.

XIII. A Brief Summary

“[I]n any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge […]” and for the Classical episteme it was representation (Foucault, *Order* 168). As a determinate form of consciousness, thought was conceived as intrinsically representational. For Descartes, this meant that human consciousness was always consciousness of some idea, whether it was caused by the appearances of external things, or simply presented to consciousness by the careful and deliberate powers of reflection. The real challenge was discerning which representations were true on the basis of clarity and distinctness.

It was a similar case for the Renaissance and Baroque artist. Empirical consciousness of a rationally ordered space would never be called into question since the mathematical formulas and physical laws describing space and its objects were, in a Cartesian sense, based on clarity and distinctness. The content of the artist’s perceptions and artistic representations, the resemblance of which is the key axiom of classical pictorial representation, had an unquestionable coherency to it, assuming of course representation was conceived as being foundational and the determinative form of artistic
consciousness. *Las Meninas* proves the latter, as Foucault convincingly demonstrates in *The Order of Things* how representation is discovered as the defining theme of rationalist philosophical inquiry (310-311). What binds both together is the presupposition that “thoughts at least represent the sense impressions that we ordinarily regard as of material things” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 152).

This is how an intellectual tool comes to define what Foucault calls an episteme. In the case of the Classical episteme, representation and the role of language is counted as the epistemological tool for ordering any number of different types of knowledge into tables. Why? Because the ordering of representation into analytic grids, whether expressed in a theory, or silently invested in an artistic practice, is identified as the regulative principle commensurate with the age of rationalism and empiricism and is the condition making possible any number of other scientific configurations, among those briefly being general grammar, natural history, and the analysis of wealth (*Order* 81, 128, 166).

But the singular philosophical achievement of Kant was to indicate a structural shift between knowledge strictly as representation versus knowledge and conditions for its possibility. Given the limited understanding of thought as representation, a transcendental inquiry into the possibility of representation was not possible, making Kant’s project, in a sense, unpredictably transformative. He successfully articulated a transcendental field by showing how a distinction between analytic and synthetic knowledge is not entailed from the nature of consciousness “as representational,” but by further demonstrating how all representations of sense impressions (either pure or empirical) are the result of a synthesis of the mind (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology*)
“Only a mind, which is properly structure[d],” according to the forms of sensibility and categories of understanding, will be able to represent objects (152).

Accordingly, Kant’s transcendental project addresses the apparent crises of the Classical episteme emblematic of Hume’s skepticism. By showing how determinative forms of consciousness cannot be restricted to just representation alone, he shows that a synthesis of the mind engages other forms and categories in the activity of knowing, which are unbeknownst and presumed by artists and philosopher alike working within the Classical episteme. As a result, Kant’s philosophical upheaval was to usher in a new set of theoretical principles and inverted postures that radically transformed previous forms of Classical knowledge in unpredictable and discontinuous ways, e.g., general grammar into philology, natural history into biology, and the analysis of wealth into economics. The discovery of a transcendental field described an archaeological mutation, and thus marked a rupture and discontinuous break between Classical thinking and what Foucault calls the Modern episteme (Order 242).

**XIV. The Emergence of Man**

Representation during the Classical episteme was the determinate form of consciousness, and knowledge consisted of analyzing and ordering the properties of “things” given in representation. *Mathesis*, the general term Foucault uses to describe the ordering of representational content into analytic grids or “tables,” ordered the variety of substances into the identities and differences among their properties; moreover, the varieties of knowledge, whether mathematical or empirical, constituted an absolute unity depending on their placement within an ordered “mathesis” or table (Foucault, *Order* 53-
55, 73; Gutting, *Foucault’s* 155). Classical discourse was a linguistic representation “of things […] in series according to the identities and differences among their properties” (Gutting, *Foucault* 155). Man’s epistemic access to the great chain of being defined his nature as discerning the “table,” or mathesis, of Beings and discourse as a linguistic representation of that reality. On the other hand, what a general science and ordering of representations could not represent or classify was man as a representational being himself. Granted, man possessed extraordinary cognitive abilities that penetrated deep into the heart of a divinely pre-established and ordered reality, but the problem was that…

In Classical thought, the personage for whom the representation exists, and who represents himself in it, recognizing himself therein as an image or reflection, he who ties together all the interlacing threads of the ‘representation in the form of a picture or table’—he is never to be found in that table himself. (Foucault, *Order* 308)

Foucault’s compelling insight merits attention for he seems to make the following argument very convincingly. Once representation is reduced to the sole determining form of consciousness, representation can never “fold” in upon itself and conceive the grounds for its own possibility. Stated differently, representation could only become an object of knowledge if it were treated as a species of thought among others and then related by a table of identities and differences to those other species. This maneuver however contradicts the Classical reduction of all thought to representation, since if thought were only representation it could never become an object of knowledge by any Classical epistemic standard. As Stephen Best observes, “[T]he knowing subject grasped
the totality of natural relations without itself figuring in the representing process as a representing subject or an object to be known” (101). Such an epistemological space does open up as Kant questions the “origins and legitimacy of representation,” which up until now has only been anticipated in Renaissance and Baroque art theory as well as rationalist philosophy (Best 101).

What I now want to consider are the transformative qualities of what Foucault calls an archaeological mutation and the Modern episteme that unpredictably and discontinuously emerges in the wake of it. One of the striking features of the Modern transformation is how the source and origin of representational content stands outside the Classical mode of immediate consciousness. As Best puts it, which should sound very familiar to us already:

In the classical era words and things were assumed to stand in a perfect, God-given correspondence and language was a translucent mirror of reality. All classical thought […] attempted to provide an exhaustive systematization of the world. In the modern framework [however], representation no longer involves the autonomous power of the mind to order reality according to analytic grids. The data of representation are now given to thought from sources outside of immediate consciousness, buried within the finite conditions of human existence, within the dimensions of its biological life, its productive activity, and its communicative processes. (101)

This positioning of the data of representation within the swift “eddies” of historically changing discourses (e.g., economics, biology, and philology) promotes man both as a
subject and object of discourse; but in a sense man’s emergence as such is quite recent, since before the eighteenth century he did not exist, at least according to Foucault (Order 308). How this emergence occurs is discoverable within the Kantian critique of analytic and synthetic judgments, since the differences between the two ultimately present man as both the subject and object of discourse.

Prior to Kant, Classical representation primarily identified the limits of thought and knowledge as the limits of representation wherein the unity of analytic \((a \text{ priori})\) and synthetic \((a \text{ posteriori})\) representations went unquestioned. Why? Because the aim of the Classical episteme was to “construct” ordered tables on the basis of identities and differences irrespective of the type of judgments assumed, e.g., metaphysical, mathematical, or empirical. This meant that within Classical representation, analytic statements \((a \text{ priori})\) and synthetic statements \((a \text{ posteriori})\) possessed an absolute correspondence with the reality they described, that is so long as language remained a translucent mirror of reality.

Emblematic of Kant’s philosophical program was the questioning of Classical representation from all perspectives, and his critique of the analytic—synthetic distinction (representations) was just another way of looking at the skeptical problems presented by Hume. With Kant, the questioning of the semantic relationship between the subject and predicate of synthetic judgments challenged the strict reduction of human conscious thought to representation. For instance, the character of mathematical propositions was ampliative, thus posing a challenge to its supposed strictly analytic status and tautological nature under Hume. Mathematics, Kant reasoned, did more than
merely explicate or analyze its concepts; it was informative, and yet its truths were known independent of experience, thus making it an *a priori* body of knowledge.

This epistemic peculiarity of mathematics led Kant to reject the strict analytic *a priori*/synthetic *a posteriori* bifurcation by creating a third category of representation, synthetic *a priori* judgments. By questioning the grounds for its possibility through reflective inquiry, Kant ultimately concludes that space is not a representation or thought, but a pure form or intuition that must be presupposed in the very act of formulating certain types of representations. As Kant showed how pure space, though lying outside the space of consciousness, is a necessary presupposition in the formulation of synthetic *a priori* judgments, Foucault speculates there are other potential forces existing outside the immediate data of consciousness as well, that play a part, like space, in structuring the content of representation. For instance, some post-Kantian metaphysical systems developed on the “basis of transcendental objectivities” such as the realities that shape and mold man as a living, speaking, and laboring being (Foucault, *Order* 245). These are forces that stand outside consciousness, yet cause the representational capacities “of humans as living organisms (e.g., perception), economic agents (e.g., valuing), and users of language (describing) (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* Archaeology 199-200). At the same time these forces that form man as a finite being are the objects of scientific study and are presented to him as objects by his body. Foucault states:

> The mode of being of life, and even that which determines the fact that life cannot exist without prescribing its forms for me, are given to me, fundamentally, by my body; the mode of being of production, the weight of its determinations upon my existence, are given to me by my desire;
and the mode of being of language, the whole backwash of history to
which words lend their glow at the instant they are pronounced, and
perhaps even in a time more imperceptible still, are given to me only along
the slender chain of my speaking thought. (Order 315)

It is the fact that man possesses a finite body, which occupies a space shared by other
things and is full of desires and a drive to express itself, that constitutes man’s own
“finitude.” In each of these capacities, man learns that he is finite, at the same time
realizing how each capacity constitutes an object of the empirical sciences, e.g., biology,
economics, and philology, respectively, not to mention his body being the conduit for
experiencing empirical reality in the form of representation.

The nuances of man’s finitude are again made clear with comparisons to Kant.
The factors limiting our knowledge, i.e., space and time as pure forms of intuition, as
well as the categorical framework that logically order the sensuous manifold into
representations, are also the conditions that make knowledge about the world possible
(Gutting, Foucault 200). Likewise, the forces that create and form man as a living
organism (the object of biology) are provided by a body; the forces of production that
shape man as an economic being (the object of economics) are provided by his desires;
and forces that shape man as a speaking being (the object of philology) are provided by
his need for expression.

These sciences constitute the study of man as an empirical being and as existing
as a part of nature. Man is an object of empirical investigation precisely because of these
human qualities. The empirical sciences analyze and investigate the representational
capacities of humans as perceiving, valuing, and speaking beings. But they are also the
product of the forces of life, labor, and language, once detached from a metaphysics of
the infinite. These forces precede man; they stand outside his immediate consciousness,
molding and shaping him. They constitute his finitude and impose factual limitations on
his existence as a representational being, just as Kant’s pure forms of intuition. And yet
they are the conditions for the possibility of all facts.

On the other hand man is not merely the product of these world forces. He is also
the subject that constitutes that world and all that is in it. One way of understanding how
this problem has been addressed is through Kant again. While man exists as an empirical
being among others, his awareness as such is the product of synthetic cognition, an *a
$posteriori* representation derived, in part, from the pure forms of intuition and categories
of understanding, both having their seat exclusively in the subject. Man’s finite existence
is therefore not only an object of study but also the condition for the possibility of these
sciences. As such, man becomes both the subject and object of his own understanding, as
language in the form of “Classical discourse is […] eclipsed” (Foucault, *Order* 312). As
a result, “man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a
subject that knows” (312). The analysis of man’s mode of being is no longer limited to
just representation, but through reflexive analysis he comes to know “how things in
general can be given to representation, in what conditions, [and] upon what ground,” that
is, the limits of representation demonstrate an altogether new conception of human nature
(Foucault, *Order* 337). It is in this epistemic embryo that “man,” Foucault argues, is
conceived and comes to the fore (337). In contrast to his birth, however, “man” is said
not to have existed prior to the eighteenth century; but what exactly does Foucault mean
by this cryptic saying? As a statement it appears on the horizon of man’s knowledge as a
rather odd pronouncement, for did not human beings exist prior to the eighteenth century? Certainly they did, especially as biological, psychological, and social beings.

We must endure Foucault’s histrionics with patience especially in the face of a type of expressive bravado that must have dazzled and overwhelmed much of the 1960’s French intelligentsia. To be sure, the term “man” acquires a highly nuanced meaning in Foucault’s usage, for to claim that man did not exist prior to the eighteenth century is simply to state that man’s mental capacity for representation was not an object of knowledge itself. In the Classical episteme, man is precisely the being for whom representation exists, but once it becomes an object “among others” it becomes a “species of thought” rather than its Classical reduction to thought (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 199). As a result of its newfound status, questions can now be raised about representation’s origin; and it is this transcendental maneuver that constitutes for Foucault the emergence of “man.” Wherever man’s power to represent is counted as an object of knowledge, “man” is said to exist (199).

XV. The Transcendental “Turn”

The results and consequences of Kant’s “transcendental turn” in philosophy resulted in consequences so numerous I will forbear listing them all. But for the purposes of this dissertation one must be expounded upon at length. It is generally believed that Kant’s critique of the limits of representation destroyed forever rationalist metaphysics; moreover Hume showed how the rationalists’ acceptance without scrutiny of the identification of knowledge with representation produces dogmatic systems of truth. But in Kant’s awakening from these dogmatic slumbers and in his intellectual flight from
Humean skepticism, whether he intended it or not, his system ironically opened up “the possibility of another metaphysics,” thus making “possible those philosophies of Life, of the Will, and of the Word, that the nineteenth century […] deploy[ed] in the wake of criticism” (Foucault, *Order* 243).

In questioning the source and origin of knowledge outside the space of representation, Kant discovers in the subject the conditions making the representation of empirical objects possible. Consequently, one direction the new metaphysics looks towards is inward, at the hidden structures of the subject. What Kant discovers is an unknowable “I,” an indexical with no determinate content, something that resists objectification, and an idea that stands in stark contrast to the rationalists who discover a substantive thinking thing. Through this philosophical gambit, Kant creates a uniquely modern response to the issue of Classical representations of the self, as the history of philosophy and every interpreter of Kant is apt to remind us.

It is important to remember that Kant addresses the challenges of man’s finitude by reconfiguring the relationship between the subject and the object; specifically, he builds his Copernican revolution on the subjective limits the world must conform to in order to be perceived by the subject. But another direction at explaining the central concerns of man’s “emergence” is from the side of the object, and it is these transcendental objectivities that give birth to the various philosophies of Life, of the Will, and of the Word referenced earlier.

Again, Kant presents the possibility of metaphysically theorizing along these lines. The positing of a noumenal realm in order to prevent his entire theoretical system from collapsing into idealism, presented an altogether new and irresistible
epistemological challenge. Of what must this noumenal realm consist, Hegel queried? Many post-Kantian schools of thought, from the romantics to Arthur Schopenhauer, on through to Julius Langbehn’s occult theories of the Germanic cosmic-life force, made attempts at defining some noumenal position “on the basis of transcendental objectives,” which Foucault identifies as Life, Will, and the Word of God (Order 244-245). These metaphysical doctrines corresponded, in a sense, with those “transcendental” forces that defined man’s finitude, that is, life, labor, and language, and which Foucault introduces as the non-representational sources of representational systems, such as the empirical sciences (Order 244; Gutting, Foucault's 185). Similar, states Foucault, to the Idea in the Transcendental Dialectic was designed to explain and “totalize phenomena and express the a priori coherence of empirical multiplicities” (Foucault, Order 244). As transcendental objectivities, however, they “avoided any analysis […] as […] may be revealed at the level of transcendental subjectivity,” and yet were possible only in so far as the “domain of representation ha[d] been previously limited” by Kantian criticism (Foucault, Order 245). According to Foucault, they therefore “have the same archaeological subsoil as Criticism itself” (Foucault, Order 245).

The strong claim forwarded here is that the Modern episteme is characterized by scientific and philosophical attempts at resolving the predicament and emergence of man inaugurated by Kant’s discovery of a transcendental field. For Foucault, it is no coincidence that the founding of nineteenth-century systematic sciences see the predicament of man as a challenging object of inquiry. Such sciences reduce man strictly to an empirical being, e.g., biology, and then attempt to provide the ground for man’s possibility as a representational subject outside of representation. As Gutting points out,
Foucault identifies these non-representational forces of life, language, and labor, as fields of transcendental objectivity that develop into metaphysical systems designed at providing the principle of synthesis for a posteriori truths (Foucault’s 184-185; Foucault, Order 244). Gutting suggests that Schopenhauer’s philosophy of Will is an example of this type of transcendental objectivity, which as an example may seem at first a retreat to pre-critical metaphysics. But Foucault and Gutting assure us that such is not the case, and that the conditions for the possibility of a field of transcendental objectivity can only be found in the transcendental “turn introduced by Kant” (Foucault, Order 245; Gutting, Foucault’s 184-185).

The fallout, of course, reveals the entire range of nineteenth-century empirical sciences, especially scientific positivism, not to mention the philosophical and metaphysical systems of Life and Will, to be born from and genetically related to Kant’s transcendental project. The resulting emergence of man and his finitude and the attempts at resolving the problems of the origin of representation make possible those philosophies that emerge in the “wake of criticism” (Foucault, Order 243). Moreover, these problems and their philosophical and scientific resolutions constitute the Modern episteme’s distinctive landscape; they are, in essence, the cultural themes that characterize our unique experience of modern “man.”

**XVI. Conclusion**

Much of our discussion has centered on explicating the theoretical parameters that outline the transition from the Classical to the Modern episteme. To this end, we have extensively discussed representation and its ordering of objects according to identities
and differences and how it becomes the primary ordering tool of various practices within the Classical episteme, such as the analysis of wealth, general grammar, and natural history (Foucault, *Order* 243).

Beginning with Kant, we soon witness a rejection of the Classical assumption “that all thought (and hence all knowledge) is by its very nature representational,” since his critique of representation “sanctions for the first time […] the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation” (Gutting, Foucault’s *Archaeology* 182; Foucault, *Order* 242). Classical representation (mathesis), thus becomes another species of knowledge in need of a more fundamental grounding (Foucault, *Order* 242; Gutting, Foucault’s 182).

Finally, our discussion has centered on and around archaeological descriptions of past theoretical transformations, specifically in regard to the “break” between the Classical and Modern episteme. We have relied extensively on *The Order of Things*, a work described by Foucault as concentrating on the ways representation and “networks of concepts and their rules of formation” are located and embedded within Classical discursive practices (*Order* xi). What we wish to proceed with now are a series of archaeological analyses that reveal the rules informing various modern discourses on madness and art. The question to be asked and answered is whether or not modern art, cast and labeled under the concept of “Degenerate Art,” is a thematic and visual expression of the rules constituting the Modern episteme, or the birth of man. In parts two and three of the dissertation, we will present a descriptive space where various examples of modern art can now demonstrate in a fashion similar to Foucault’s analysis of *Las Meninas*, the inner workings and logical structures of the Modern episteme.
Part Two: The Modern Episteme and the Human Sciences

I. Nineteenth-Century Psychology and Art Criticism

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the scientific study of mental illness and art had been conducted by a number of well-respected criminologists, psychiatrists, and art critics. In the 1870’s for instance, the famed criminal psychiatrist Caesar Lombroso outlined a theory of the artistically creative yet mentally ill patient in accordance with his own theories of atavistic (hereditary) degeneration. Madness in art, Lombroso noted, was characterized by “distortion, originality, imitation,” and combined with an overriding eccentricity of form that was informed by a high degree of symbolism (208).

Ironically these same stylistic features were found in the artwork of some of the most renowned modern artists of the time, a fact that did not escape Lombroso’s notice. The question he raised was whether or not some forms of insanity might be informing the artworks of supposedly “sane” artists, and if so, should modern art be investigated under the broader rubric of the pathology of art (208; Porter 178-179). Lombroso concluded that this was so (208).

Eminent psychologists were to follow Lombroso’s lead by making his point visibly explicit. Dr. Theodore Hyslop, senior physician at the Bethlehem Royal Hospital in London, juxtaposed the artworks of lunatics with the artwork of Aubrey Beardsley noticing that their formal similarities were indeed compelling enough to suggest a link (Hyslop 504-506; Porter 178-179; see Figure 10). Was modern art the creation of an insane individual, Hyslop queried? The answer seemed obvious enough even if Hyslop’s
logic was flawed: if this is the way the insane painted art, then, those who painted similarly must be judged equally insane (Hyslop 504-506; Porter 179).

Lombroso and Hyslop were not the only respected nineteenth-century authorities on art and insanity. The fin-de-siecle art critic Max Nordau effectively argued for similar conclusions in his “ponderous” yet “vilifying” text Degeneration (1892). Firmly convinced the Impressionists, Paul Cézanne, and the Cubists all suffered from a neurological eye disorder called nystagmus (quivering of the eyeball), Nordau assumed modern artists painted what they saw and the strange effects of their art were evidence of hysterical artists whose retinas were partly diseased (Nordau, Art in Theory 802; Porter 179; Hyslop 502). Formal contrasts between the strongly developed contour line of

Figure 10
academic art and the skewed forms of modern art showed the extent to which macular
degeneration occurred, and nystagmus, so Nordau concluded, was the pathology
explaining it. Consequently he attached stigmas to anything negative in avant-garde art
by judging it to the degree it deviated from academic standards. Distorted zigzag lines
and “a want of firmness in outline,” were evidence of defects in the artist’s perceptible
capacities of line, shape, and color; but most importantly, Nordau’s censures were given
scientific cachet through psychiatric discourse (Nordau, Art in Theory 802-803; Hyslop
502).

Around the 1920’s Nordau’s ideas were experiencing something of a revival in
Germany. During the Weimar period many discouraged Volkish painters believed that
German realistic genre painting was being overrun by “degenerates, Jews, and other
insidious influences” (Barron 11). Nordau’s opinions, though he was a Jew, were to be
highly regarded by such racist factions and his attraction lay mainly in appearances.
Nordau’s pseudo-scientific pretensions extended far beyond the appearance of hate and
so early Nazi art theorists naturally co-opted his research into the pathology of art.
Hatred sought the veneer of scientific legitimacy as one such Nazi art critic and racial
theorist, Paul Schultz-Naumberg proved. Schultz-Naumberg exploited Nordau’s
popularity by castigating modern art as “degenerate,” and then proving it by comparing
photographs of physically deformed individuals with representative samples of modern
art (Barron 11). His objective was obvious, and his comparative method proved
singularly effective. The sensitive German viewer, so it was hoped, would forge a link
between physical degeneration and the modern art masterpieces formally resembling
them. Schultz-Naumberg in essence created a spirit of consensus by letting the German people vote with their eyes and come to their own conclusions.

II. Entartete Kunst Aktion and the Concept Degenerate Art

Nazi confiscation of modern art was largely viewed as a hygienic measure. It was an effort to purify German culture of its degenerative elements and was largely guided by a clear conceptual understanding of what was deemed degenerate at the time. The concept implied that art had changed so radically as to become essentially “non-art” (Barron 11). Excising it was therefore a matter of surgical practice and instituted usually at the behest of folkish art groups such as the Defense Guild for German Culture (Hinz 27-28). This hateful group regarded the skewed perspectives and distorted human forms of modern art as an augury of impending doom. They would use words like cultural “decay” to describe the state of modern art movements, a word which was to become a modish petit-bourgeois term of opprobrium. All art appearing to deviate from naturalism or the formal standards of academic art was declared by the Defense Guild as degenerate.

In response to the perceived onslaught of modern art, principles were designed and manifestoes written (Hinz 27-28). In them, the Defense Guild demanded that cosmopolitan and international art not be allowed into the German state and that the public be prevented from viewing such works in private and public exhibitions; moreover, they complained and recommended that museum curators and directors responsible for the collection and purchases of modern art, especially at a time when the nation was starving, be forcibly removed from office (27-28). Entartete Kunst Aktion was the legal means by which modern art was eradicated and purified from German art
culture. Adolf Zeigler led the movement often referring to modern art as “monstrocities of insanity, insolence, degeneracy, [which showed] a complete lack of talent” (qtd. in Hermand 38). Empowered by the policy *Entartete Kunst Aktion*, Zeigler and his cohort essentially forced their way into the most important German galleries and anything appearing “inept […] merely sketched, or unfinished,” was immediately stolen (Taylor 135).

By the time Dr. Joseph Goebbels commissioned Adolf Ziegler to begin confiscating modern artwork throughout Germany, the concept of “degenerate art” had achieved pseudo-scientific respectability (Petropoulos, *Politics* 55; Barron 11). At the same time however, its conceptual formulation was something of a mystery, for it empowered Zeigler to confiscate “anything insulting German feeling, or destroy[ing] or confus[ing] natural form, or simply reveal[ing] an absence of adequate manual and artistic skill” (qtd. in Barron 19). In other words, matters of confiscation could be, and were at times, left entirely up to the subjective whims of Zeigler or his cadre of art looters. Such was not always the case though. For the Nazis, conceiving a well articulated notion on any artistic matter meant devising a working concept in accordance with academic formalist principles, and indeed such was the case. The aesthetic criteria by which Zeigler adjudicated the legalized confiscation of modern artworks were largely formal and consistent with the clinical diagnoses of Lombroso and Hyslop, and the criticisms of Nordau (Petropoulos, *Art as Politics* 56-57; Barron 11-12).

In addition to psychology and criminal psychiatry, art history proved a most useful discourse as well. “The formlessness, the defamation of the religious […] and practically all the expressionist criteria for form and content” in degenerate art were
identified and defined on the basis of the art historian Carl Einstein’s work *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Hermann 38; Hinz 24-25). The work constituted for Nazi cultural leaders a *locus classicus* on the topic of modern art and a self-definition of their enemies. The leading Nazi architect Paul Troost, for instance, relied extensively on the work when exposing Hitler and Goebbels to the Marxist elements inherent in modern art (Hinz 25).

Although Einstein devoted entire chapters specifically to the Cubists, Futurists, and Expressionists, he essentially conceived the unity of “modern” on the basis of formal and aesthetic criteria, and this unifying principle was found to be at work in the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937. While the exhibit was organized around various iconographic themes, the aesthetic criteria for confiscating and exhibiting modern art were largely formal, and initially involved a viewer’s intuited visual impressions. Perceived asymmetries, abstraction, skewed perspectives, distorted human forms, the non-figurative, and violent color contrasts were visual aspects in all of the artworks confiscated and later condemned as degenerate (Hinz 40-41; Petropoulos 56-57).

**III. Beyond Conceptual History to Archaeology**

It is apparent that the Nazi’s conception of degenerate art borrowed liberally from art history and nineteenth-century psychology and psychiatry. Answering the question of specifics though becomes a bit of a problem. For instance, when and why does the discursive convergence in art and madness occur and is there a particular historical principle that might assist in understanding how the convergence was possible to begin with? A principle such as *Weltanschauung* could be used to articulate points of convergence between varying discourses like modern art and mental illness. Such a
device seeks answers to historical questions by first asking why the concept “degenerate art” first appeared in 1920’s German cultural discourse, and then proceed to explain its emergence by means of a collective spirit or world-view, e.g., nineteenth-century positivism. The previous discussion would be counted as exemplary in its attempts along these lines to trace a causal line from the scientific positivism of the middle nineteenth century, e.g., psychology, criminal psychiatry, to Nazi art criticism, for instance.

Such modern historical methods will not be used in this study; rather, a descriptive archaeology will be used to locate and identify the conditions for the possibility of theoretical knowledge about the human subject (e.g., psychology or psychiatry), or what Foucault claims to replace the Classical subject: modern man. Only then will efforts be made to historically map the discursive spaces and landscapes where mental illness and art converge. Accordingly, such an analysis of history will not seek the discovery of meta-narratives, nor will it search for the emergence of concepts in the intentions of the subjects who use them, or commit actions on the basis of them. To be sure, this tack is fraught with many difficulties for in truly understanding a concept like degenerate art might we not want to know the reasons why Hitler or Zeigler used the term? Do we not especially want to know what Hitler meant by the concept and what his intentions were in wielding the term politically? On the other hand, if we limit our inquiry to just the subject’s intended meaning, would we not overlook the conditions that dominate and overwhelm the subject, conditions determining the subject’s situational context, “its function, its perceptive capacities, and its practical possibilities” (Foucault, Order xiv)?
Foucault’s archaeology avoids exploring moments entirely from the perspective of the historical subject or from the point of view of the formal structures of what they were saying at the time. What is of chief interest here is not so much an understanding of the intentions behind a subject’s statement or utterance rather than to ask how a subject’s statements acquire meaning through being part of a discourse. A speaker, whomever it may be, takes up a position by the rules of a relevant discursive formation apart from his mental activity; such that when Hitler, Goebbels, or Adolph Zeigler make an individual pronouncement it is not analyzed by way of their motives or intentions for saying so (no matter how hateful or revealing) but how in making such a statement they take up “a position that has already been defined by the rules of the relevant discursive formation” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 241). In this case, the discourse of degenerate art, its conceptual constructs, its embeddedness in nineteenth-century psychological, psychiatric, and scientific discourses, its quasi-continuity level of ideas and themes related to Nazi art discourse, assumes a set of rules its practitioners and ideologues can hardly be aware of, and yet must adhere to if their pronouncements are to be regarded as knowledge, in this case specifically the rules and configurations characteristic of the Modern episteme.

Archaeological analysis will bring these rules into focus by charting a middle region between the knowing subject and the formal structures of its thought. It manifests “the modes of being of order […] [that is] anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures” (such as the transparency of language, or representation as the determinate form of consciousness in the Classical episteme) and describes a space between the already “encoded” eye and reflexive knowledge (Foucault, *Order* xxi). Some of these discursive rules have been elaborated upon already, such as the means by which any Classical
discourse (e.g., natural history or the analysis of wealth) is transformed into knowledge, e.g., the linguistic ordering of representations according to analytic grids or tables, such as a *mathesis universalis*.

In the Modern episteme, what Lombroso and Hyslop claim to scientifically discover, practice, and forward by way of statements now fall within the diverse domains of the empirical and human sciences. Yet these discourses can only emerge as knowledge (I shall argue) “from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourses” (Foucault, *Order* xiv) especially in accordance with and in the wake of the discontinuity brought on by the emergence of man. What are those rules and configurations that somehow provide the conditions for the possibility of nineteenth-century positivism, specifically psychology and psychiatry? Apart from nineteenth-century empiricism’s rational value and the “objective forms” grounding its positivity, we must first ask what are the various modes of being in which things appear; in short, what rules must a nineteenth-century scientific discourse adhere to in order to count as knowledge?

The Classical episteme was limited to a specific domain of the human subject, where the empirical content of knowledge was situated within the space of representation; moreover, language was able to represent a divinely pre-established order of things. But upon man’s appearance, finding himself “enmeshed in a language with a density and history all its own,” language no longer functioned as the transparent medium it was during the Classical episteme (Dreyfus and Rabinow 28). Man’s mode of being, as developed since the late eighteenth century, now resides in showing how “things in general can be given to representation, in what conditions, and upon what grounds […]”
(Foucault, *Order* 337). “The job of making representation possible is taken over [in other words] by man” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 28). Modern philosophy, for instance, takes up the critical study of man’s being, and while Foucault resists attributing any causal factor to man’s sudden emergence, certainly Kant’s critical philosophy is essential to his descriptive account of this epistemic shift. Man exists not as a biological *species*, nor does the term “man” refer to his psychological or social reality “except insofar as it involves representation” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 198). It is at the moment man’s representative capacities become an object of empirical knowledge, that “man” is said to exist (Foucault, *Order* 308).

Once this moment occurs, a psychology of the human subject becomes conceivable, since the object of the human sciences generally speaking is man. Psychology precisely does this by appropriating as its methodology dimensions and aspects consistent with modern knowledge (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 198). The human sciences, for instance, has as its constant aim the borrowing and “employment of mathematical formalizations [and] models taken from the empirical sciences” (Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology* 198). So, we may initially cite then as a rule for the emergence of nineteenth-century psychological discourse the necessary deployment of models appropriated from the empirical sciences, specifically formalizations from mathematics, and, as an object of inquiry, the being of man, whose emergence was requisite in the transformation from the Classical to the Modern episteme (Foucault, *Order* 357-358).
IV. Setting the Stage

The forces that give representational content and shape man as an empirical being precede and anticipate him “as though he were merely an object of nature” (Foucault, *Order* 313). It is within such a world where man discovers his finitude or concrete existence, and how it is shaped and limited by forces “older than his birth,” forces that stand outside him and cause his appearance as a finite being. Because of these forces, man exists as part of an empirical order existing among many other empirical objects in a world studied by biology, economics, and linguistics. In essence, the empirical sciences seek to discover and understand the factors determining man as a living, expressive, and valuing organism.

And yet the very forces of life, language, and labor, which impose their factual limitations, “would not be there in the light that partly illumines them, if man, who discovers himself through them, [were] trapped in the mute, nocturnal, immediate and happy opening of animal life” (Foucault, *Order* 314). Man, in other words, is part of the equation; he is the constituting subject of that world of factual limitation, and as such the limiting forces of life, language, and labor are brought to “life” because of his authorship. Hence, the paradoxical circumstances wherein man now finds himself, proffer the most challenging aporia posed to modern philosophy: how is it possible for the subject to constitute a world in which it finds itself existing as an empirical object among others?

Foucault believes Kant was the first to acknowledge this problem and provide a solution to it. By first assuming man possesses scientific knowledge about the world, Kant asks what is it he is forced to admit? The specific answer to this question is laid out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which, in a very general and cursory sense, argues among
other things, that objects of scientific inquiry must be partially constructed—as objects—by a rational mind, i.e., within the limits of *a priori* intuition and the categories of understanding. Now, given that objects of scientific knowledge are only conceivable within limits having their seat in a knowing subject, such limits Kant argues become the very conditions for their appearance and by extension become the conditions for the possibility of science. If I were to experience the perception of a tomato, for example, I would notice upon reflection certain distinctions between its material content (that is, its color, smell, taste, etc.) and the more determinate forms those sensible intuitions must be structured in (time, space, and the categories), if scientific knowledge is to be possible at all, that is, if science is to have an object, and for there to be scientific knowledge of an object, like a tomato.

It is a similar case with man. He only becomes aware of himself as an object of biological, economic, or linguistic inquiry by limiting his appearance as such to the cognitive processes entailed in the conceptual construction of any object, processes that have their seat in the knowing subject. To these empirical sciences man appears as a finite being, “limited by the environment, forces of production, and linguistic heritage that have formed him,” and yet each “positive” science by which man learns he is finite is given to “him only against the background of its own finitude [the living, desiring, and valuing human body]” (Foucault, *Order* 314). Foucault states:

At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man’s existence, we discover a finitude—which is in a sense the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is
radically other: in this sense, the limitation is expressed not as a
determination imposed upon man from outside […] but as a fundamental
finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens
upon the positivity of all concrete limitation. (*Order* 315)

Significant to the Classical episteme was an understanding of man’s finitude
against a metaphysics of the infinite. God, the creation, the fall—all were conceptual and
mythic frameworks implicit within the infinite and thus negatively explained the finite
circumstances wherein man found himself, specifically as a living, speaking, and laboring
being. The infinite in essence founded the possibility for man’s finitude and gave the
finite character of his being meaning, but, and this is very important, *only* if the empirical
content of life, labor, and language remained within the space of representation
(*Foucault, Order* 317). Once detached from representation the idea of infinity was to
eventually become useless as the reasons for the existence of labor, life, and language
were sought for within themselves and not through religious or metaphysical discourse.
As a result, the finitude of man ceased referring to the infinite (317).

In their detachment, life, language, and labor were discovered as having their own
historicity, existence, laws, and a foundation existing outside and anterior to man. At the
same time, however, man constituted the positive foundation for the possibility of
empirical knowledge about these forces. As a result, the metaphysics of the infinite is
now replaced by what *Foucault* calls an “analytic of finitude” (*Order* 312, 316-318).
With the emergence of man, the analysis of representation is transformed into an analytic
that attempts to “show on what grounds representation and analysis of representations are
possible” (*Dreyfus and Rabinow* 28-29).
For reasons discussed already, such an analytic was impossible in the Classical episteme, since the role of ordering representations limited man to an intermediate position in the great table of being. With the advent of man, however, and all that is entailed by such a notion, factual limitations are still imposed but no longer from transcendence (e.g., the metaphysics of the infinite). Man’s finitude now unceasingly refers back to itself. It becomes “an analytic […] in which man’s being will be able to provide a foundation in their own positivity for all those forms [life, language, and labor] that indicate to him that he is not infinite” (Foucault, Order 315).

In the space of Modern man’s own finitude his being is now defined and constituted by a series of “doubles” that emerge and nowhere is this notion more clearly illustrated than in the double: “The Empirical and the Transcendental” (Foucault, Order 318). Foucault states, “Man, in the analytic of finitude, is a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible” (318). This particular “doublet” describes man’s factual limitations (the positivities) as being “both distinguished from and equated with” those conditions that make knowledge possible (the fundamental); moreover, Foucault’s use of Kant to illustrate the empirical/transcendental distinction is no accident (Dreyfus and Rabinow 30). The factual world of life, language, and labor, are in short the sources of man’s factual limitation, where the contents of their empirical representation are given order and structure through what the transcendental subject provides by way of time, space, and the categories: “here the idea [found in Kant] is that the mind is a transcendental reality that constitutes the objects of representative knowledge” (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 184). But as Foucault points out, the Kantian project fails to
solve the problem of positivity since the forms of empirical knowledge can be seen as subject to empirical forces as well; and yet in this failure, psychology and psychiatry along with other various forms of positivism have their birth (Foucault, *Order* 319; Dreyfus and Rabinow 32). Foucault states:

> The threshold of our modernity is situated not by the attempts to apply objective methods to the study of man, but rather by the constitution of an empirico-transcendental double which was called man. Two kinds of analysis then came into being. There are those that operate within the space of the body, and—by studying perception, sensorial mechanisms, neuro-motor diagrams, and the articulation common to things and to the organism—function as a sort of transcendental aesthetic; these led to the discovery that knowledge has anatomo-physiological conditions, that it is formed gradually within the structures of the body, that it may have a privileged place within it, but that its forms cannot be dissociated from its peculiar functioning; in short, that there is a *nature* of human knowledge that determines its forms and that can at the same time be made manifest to it in its own empirical contents. (*Order* 319)

Nineteenth-century positivism was to eventually reduce, as Foucault states, the transcendental to the empirical and thereby develop a naturalist account of the forms of human perception, logic, and knowledge and it is this appropriation, I shall argue, ultimately produces a normative set of conditions for defining deviancy in artistic creation (Lombroso 184-190; Gilman 179-180; Dreyfus and Rabinow 32-33; Stewart and Mickunas 16-18).
It is primarily within psychology where this naturalization process occurs, for if we were to clear the ground of its positivity through questioning it on an archaeological level what we discover is an “historical a priori” or condition that made these naturalizing processes possible (Macey, Michel Foucault 73). A “historical a priori” is simply the unconscious substratum of rules that scientists, thinkers, and writers belonging to a particular episteme use without really knowing it (73). For instance, nineteenth-century philosopher-scientists such as Hermann Helmholtz and Johann Friedrich Herbart rejected Kantian “apriorism” in their efforts to articulate an empirical theory of perception in the field of aesthetics. For them, aesthetics consisted of an investigation into perceptual form and the law-like correlations between form and aesthetic pleasure (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 10-12, 14-15). However, their naturalist reductions unconsciously assumed a stratum of rules that allowed for the emergence of their very own discourses. Such rules have been discussed already, such as the emergence of man, the analytic of finitude, the doublets, mathematical formalizations, and the appropriation of empirical models. What archaeology has brought to light are those conditions or historical a prioris that as a rule account for the configuring of the positivity of the empirical sciences to begin with and the ultimate founding of a psychology of human perception.

To begin with, it is important to remember that the emergence of psychological discourse and its appropriation of a particular aspect of man’s being (e.g., aesthetic awareness), is not merely driven by the uniquely human desire for scientific certainty and predictability. Foucault’s archaeology makes a much bolder claim about the human sciences. Psychological study of a topic, which once fell exclusively under the purview
of modern philosophy, could only have come about through the reconfiguring of knowledge according to the rules set forth in the Modern episteme. Life, labor, and language being the sources of empirical representation were given order, under Kant’s schema, through pure forms of knowing. With the advent of positivism, however, these pure forms are now subject to a thoroughgoing empiricism itself; accordingly, psychological discourse becomes a unique product of the Modern episteme with no historical antecedents prior to the nineteenth century.

Positivism, or what has been commonly referred to by phenomenologists as Scientism, sets for itself the rather ambitious task of scientifically explaining the psychic life of man (Stewart and Mickunas 17-18). This view, commonly referred to as Psychologism, basically reduced the content of man’s mental life to quantifiable, law-governed physico-chemical processes (Stewart and Mickunas 17-18). Man as a result becomes a mere datum of science and the mental and spiritual aspects of his existence, e.g., his ability to think logically, cultivate perceptions and aesthetic consciousness, are reduced in toto to psychic processes in need of investigation through the methods of the physical sciences. Here, in the field of aesthetics, the norm becomes a scientific investigation into the correlations between the objects of perception and the regularities eliciting aesthetic responses to them (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 15-17). Aesthetic pleasure and pain are given thoroughgoing empirical reductions as the formal features of objects are studied by the degree to which they “trigger” the mind’s “lawfully determined affective processes” (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 10-17). The outcome is a theoretical understanding of beauty appropriated by the human sciences ultimately becoming a category and branch of psychology.
VI. Nineteenth-Century Psychology of Aesthetics

The scientific investigation of perceptual form and aesthetic reaction replaces Kant’s freely taken pleasure in beauty, and a good example of this type of substitution is seen in the works of German psychologist Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) and the German formalist Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 10-17; Podro 61-79). Herbart, laboriously speculated on the structures of perceptual form, and like the formalists who he would later inspire, derived a system of “law-like” relations describing the multiplicity and variety of aesthetic events (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 12).

But these speculations are not what distinguish Herbart’s aesthetic theory as a positive account of beauty in the wake of “man.” It is to be found in his speculative psychology, and how it subjects Kant’s doctrine of spatial intuition to an empirical investigation and, as a result, “corrects” the Kantian insight on its subjective and necessary condition for all experience (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 10-12; Podro 80-81). His conjectures on this matter are perfectly consistent with other empirical theories of the mind that regard space in its conception of three dimensions “as an abstraction [made] on the basis of many particular spatial judgements […]” (Podro 81). This reversion to classical empiricism was meant to deny Kant’s injection of space “into our awareness […] and to deny [that] the mind has any innate ideas or conceptions […]” (Podro 81).

On the other hand, Herbart was unable to eradicate all forms of a priorism from his theories as conspicuously seen in his belief that all phenomenal experiences of the world, including space, are the mind’s “striving to maintain its own coherence” (Podro 81).

And yet the “sin” of Herbart’s positivism was to extend its field of inquiry beyond the synthesis of a posteriori truths to the synthesis of all possible experience by
subjecting the Kantian forms to empirical analysis. In short, positivism appropriated that which was outlined in the transcendental/empirical doublet (Foucault, Order 318-319; Dreyfus and Rabinow 32). While positivism may appear to revive pre-critical empirical doctrines their adopted forms of neo-empiricism have, in reality, the same “archaeological subsoil as Criticism itself” (Foucault, Order 245).

As a member of the German Formalists, Wilhelm Wundt, along with other intellectual luminaries, such as the musical critic Eduard Hanslick and Robert Zimmermann, were to build upon Herbart’s speculative psychology by developing it into a quantifiable and comprehensive science (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 15-17). Wundt’s research was the first to inaugurate psychological investigations into the nature of aesthetic awareness, and his lectures and texts were truly examples of interdisciplinary scholarship. Artists, aestheticians, or anyone interested in the physiology of aesthetic perception, which was the focus of Wundt’s research, attended his lectures. At the lectures, he examined “musculature sensations and reflexes, binocular vision, and the neural activity of the eye in perceiving color,” and contended there was a relative comfort in the physiology of visual sensation once attended by the experience of pleasing forms4 (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 15).

4 Herbart’s and Wundt’s psychologism is, in its importance, essential to an empirical revivalism in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, especially the field of psychology of aesthetics. The entire formalist school was caught up with the problem of how to deal scientifically with aesthetics and the possibility of human perception, two notions originally grounded in the a priori synthesis of all possible experience. But to hastily
VII. Brief Summary and Conclusion

With the advent of the Modern episteme and the release of our understanding of the positivities of life, language, and labor from a metaphysics of the infinite, the positivities (life, language, and labor) now stand outside knowledge—not in any transcendent sense, but in the fact of their own existence, historicity, and laws (Foucault, *Order* 316-317). They now become the conditions of empirical knowledge as they function like so many other transcendentals that make “possible the objective knowledge of living beings” (Foucault, *Order* 244). At the same time “life, language, and labor” provide a foundation “in the form of a being whose enigmatic reality constitutes, prior to all knowledge, the order and connection for what it has to know” by way of synthetic *a posteriori* truths (Foucault, *Order* 244). Life, language, and labor, in other words, concern themselves only with “the domain of *a posteriori* truths and the principles of their synthesis—and not the *a priori* synthesis of all possible experience” (Foucault, *Order* 244).

As a result of the commencement of the Modern episteme and the displacement of being in relation to representation, we discover nineteenth-century positivism at rest upon a “foundation which it is not possible to bring to light” (Foucault, *Order* 245). From this epistemological perspective, the human sciences are now able to know phenomena, but not noumena, appearances but not substances, “laws but not essences, regularities but not the beings that obey them” (Foucault, *Order* 245). The various ways the human sciences construe either one of their ventures as a retreat to pre-critical or Humean empiricism would be, according to Foucault, wrong and premature.
appropriate the forms of knowledge and develop a science of human perception are founded on Kant’s articulation of the conditions of spatial experience and how it factors into his overall aesthetic views. It is to an investigation of Kant’s theory of space and art we must now turn.

VII. Kant, Space, and Neoclassical Art

The Kantian view of spatial experience being at its base geometrical appealed to an academic art style already disposed to the use and the valuing of delineated form over color. Kant, for instance, would have readily appreciated Jacques Louis David’s artistic representation of space in *Oath of the Horatii* (1784; see Figure 11). Rendered according to principles of Euclidean geometry, Kant would have regarded the work as a truthful representation of how the world appeared. David’s technique always incorporated a method for locating figures in three-dimensional space, which was often simply a matter of ordering individual objects according to a strict geometrical pattern as clearly seen in the rectilinear shape of the tile floor design (see Figures 11 and 12). Although it is uncertain whether David ever read Kant, his intuitions on the priority of line shows a remarkable anticipation and consistency with Kant’s philosophical and aesthetical exegesis on form in painting (cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 75).

Whether deliberate or unintended, the incorporation of Kantian views of space into Neoclassical aesthetics was most apparent in the influential teaching systems developed in the studio of David. In the studios, ideas on classicist design were brought into conformity with Kantian ideas (Kemp 239). Peter Schmid and Alexandre Depuis, for instance, were both protégés of David and advocated for the practice of drawing from
specifically designed geometrical solids in “order to activate the inherent propensities of our mind” (qtd. in Kemp 239). Initially the student would begin with the most elementary bodies, training the eye and hand in drawing straight lines and progressing to more difficult curves and compound forms (Kemp 239).

Figure 11

Figure 12
Gaspard Monge—very much in line with the French academic tradition—in his *Géométrie descriptive* (1799) advocated drawing objects with the most elementary shapes first. He claimed that it served an epistemological purpose since it described “a passing from the known to the unknown […] and since it [descriptive geometry] is a means of investigating truth [it] should be introduced into the plan of national education” (qtd. in Kemp 225). Along with painting, Monge claimed drawing induced “a sense of high philosophical principles, a formal dimension requiring scientific exactitude in execution” (qtd. in Kemp 227).

Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic from *The Critique of Pure Reason* demonstrates how objects can be represented in abstraction through the use of line. And yet, not all types of geometrical representations would, for Kant, qualify for the attribution of beauty. While the pleasure derived from the disinterested stance of the observer of nature and fine art is, in part, induced by an intellectual awareness of the underlying delineated form that geometry represents, geometrical representations of nature are the product of synthetic cognition. That is they reflect an epistemological rather than aesthetic directedness toward the world, for we only come to know the objective world through the use and application of concepts, e.g., mathematics, physics, etc.

Geometrical representations not only possess an epistemological aspect to their being however. They are capable of being visually perceived, and thus may possess the quality of *purposiveness of form* necessary in producing the aesthetic pleasure essential for judgments of taste. This is the reason why not all geometric representations are worthy subjects of aesthetic judgments. The judgment of beauty depends on our
conscious awareness of a pre-arranged harmony, or a design existing in the representations of the technical artist, or of nature as well.

The principle on which reflective judgments of taste are based according to Kant is design (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 69-70; Gilbert and Kuhn 333). While design has been discussed already in the context of formal representation, Kant defines the term in a connected but slightly different way. The principle of design, once considered a regulative supposition that guided the intellect’s drive to make nature more intelligible, is in the *Critique of Judgment* now understood as the constitutive a priori principle of judgments of taste (Gilbert and Kuhn 332). Design, or subjective purposiveness, is the idea that nature seems pre-adapted to our mind, i.e., there exists a successful adaptation between the mind and what is given in perception, “[…a] delicate and suspended bond which implies the suitability of nature to us” (Gilbert and Kuhn 333). Such experiences occasion the positing of an intelligent being, or Architect, responsible for the profound sense of pre-arranged harmony “but without the logical implication that such a being actually exists;” moreover, speculative metaphysics and theology seem to have had their source in the “pattern-loving” habit of the reflective judgment by assuming the appropriateness of the following question behind every subjectively purposive experience: “What is the unitary meaning or purpose of this situation before me?” (Gilbert and Kuhn 333). Although it seems to be a question to which given the scope and limit of human knowledge, we can never provide an answer, it does seem to be an appropriate one, for it guides the intellect to a belief in a harmony between the mind and nature “which it cannot prove” (Gilbert and Kuhn 333).
Connected with the term design is the aesthetic pleasure we feel as the result of a supposedly pre-arranged harmony existing between the mind and nature (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 97). In reality the aesthetic pleasure we feel upon looking at a beautiful flower, tree, or landscape painting is the result of a particular subjective harmony existing within us rather than the result of any supposed harmony in the natural universe. As Kant claims, the nature of reflective judgments is always subjective, and while at times seems to be a process of actual property ascription, they are, in reality, merely characterizing the existing harmony between various cognitive faculties: sense perception and reason (*Critique of Judgement* 64-65, 71). According to Gilbert and Kuhn:

> Although the purity of the esthetic state of mind requires the absence of any owner’s pride or reformer’s iconoclasm, the same purity requires the presence of a definite state of affairs in the subject’s mental machinery. [...moreover] The authority for the assertion of the universal validity of esthetic pleasure inheres in a soul-state which we have a right to presuppose in all men under given conditions. This subjective condition is the harmonious interplay of reason and sense-perception. (337)

As we assent to the universal validity of aesthetic pleasure, i.e., when we assert an object as being beautiful, our claim is really about the pleasurable feelings caused by the subject’s cognitive faculties entering into free-play once occasioned by the disinterested stance of the subject before the object (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 64-65, 70-72).

For a judgment of taste to claim universal assent, Kant states that it must initially be disinterested (*Critique of Judgement* 46-48). He defined disinterested as a stance
untainted by any selfish concern for the object, nor does the stance consider the object’s existence but rather its appearance (Critique of Judgement 46-48). The disinterested pleasure we feel upon viewing a Greek vase, for instance, is not caused by our desire to own it, but instead by the “stimulating and exhilarating” play of the mental faculties when in the presence of the vase (Gilbert and Kuhn 335). An object’s appearance is a space of exclusion where the denial of all private interests allows us to assert that the same pleasurable feeling can be applied equally and universally (Gilbert and Kuhn 335; Kant, Critique of Judgement 65). The pleasure we derive from judgments of taste therefore depends on the proper functioning and use of our cognitive capacities, and since we all possess the same capacities necessary for having experience to begin with, we may assume the pleasure is universalizeable, i.e., “the judgment of taste is comprehensive over all subjects” (Kemal, Kant on Beauty 32).

Design in art is related to the appearance of delineated form in art. While the discussion in the Transcendental Aesthetic demonstrates the possibility for representing natural objects in abstraction, not all representations are capable of producing the disinterested pleasure necessary for judgments of taste. The appearance of design that pre-adapted harmony, or purposiveness of form, existing in nature and art must be present in the object as well. Our sense for beauty in art arises from the perceptual intuition of an object’s form, and extending form to all its associative meaning includes the structuring and organization of its elements. As Salim Kemal points out, a judgment of taste is disinterested because it assesses the presentation of the object itself, either natural or artistic:
[I]t considers the structure of elements, their order, complexity, and unity, their coherence, meaning, and expression, the balance between the elements of the presentation, and the features that make up these items.

*(Kant on Beauty 31-32)*

What Kemal underscores is the ordering of abstract forms in nature and fine art that constitute the pre-arranged harmony necessary for judgments of taste. The one feature that allows for the universal assent to the beautiful is the object’s delineated form, a quality of art that allows not only for the expression of contour but the planned spatial organization of a composition as well, thus contributing to the unity and coherence of an art work generally *(Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 73).*

On the other hand, color plays no essential role in aesthetic judgments according to Kant because the pleasure derived from its experience is sensual; moreover, color is an object of empirical intuition. Consequently, it is not an object worthy of pure contemplation and therefore cannot be the object of disinterested pleasure since our appreciation of it is bound up with interest for the object. Essentially, color lacks the *a priori* character of line, which is a feature of nature and art worthy of universal communicability, specifically because of the transcendental constitution of the mind and its comprising space as a necessary form of intuition. This conclusion follows because space has geometry as its primary tool of inquiry, and it has already been shown how its synthetic nature is both universally and necessarily binding for all rational beings.

Judgments of taste, unlike geometry however, do not have as their goal knowledge of the spatial nature of objects, but merely the derived aesthetic pleasure resulting from the mind’s awareness of an apparently pre-arranged harmony or design.
existing between the mind and what is perceived in art and nature. Design is to be found in the object’s appearance, not in its existence. But the only element in the object’s appearance that we can be certain of being universally communicable is its delineation of form, not color, because we cannot assume “that the quality of sensations [color or tone] is the same in all subjects” (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 74). On the other hand, the quality of delineated form in art is experienced similarly among all subjects since necessary to all rational beings is the possession of space as a pure form of intuition. This conclusion is born out by the following thought experiment.

Let us suppose a block of wood is cut in the shape of a square and is painted green. Two individuals sensibly perceive the object, yet one of them is color-blind. The result is that the color blind individual perceives a red square where the other individual perceives a green square. Kant would explain the differences in color experience because of the obscurity and confusion of sense perception, since the physical universe as we experience it is in a constant state of flux and the viewer who merely perceives the object as red is simply a victim of dysfunctional sense perception. Kant therefore concludes that anything learned through sense perception cannot be the basis for universal assent, or agreement.

On the other hand, Kant would explain each individual’s agreement that the shape of the object is square, not because of anything learned through sense perception, but because such agreement is based on an object of pure intuition. Shape or figure is a quality of the object intuited only by the mind. Since for Kant the transcendental nature of the mind is universal, our justification for such agreement is *a priori* and therefore binding on all rational beings whose sensibility is like ours. By analogy, this is how we
are certain delineated form in art and nature is universally communicable and color is not. It is the object of an *a priori* intuition.

In judgments of taste, the experience of color or the tone of a musical instrument can hardly be assumed to have the same quality of sensation in all subjects because as Kant maintains we can hardly judge the pleasantness of a color or tone to be preferable to another by everyone similarly (*Critique of Judgement* 74). Kant thus relegates color to the function of indicating form and making it more exact, intuitable, and definite (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 74-76). It is merely a pleasant quality found in art and nature, and because of its lack of universal communicability it is an inessential ingredient to beauty, hence reinforcing its ontological status as a dependent universal, a quality that inheres in both natural and art objects discoverable only in experience (Russell 51-52).

On the other hand, delineated form in art is the object of disinterested pleasure, and we are justified in asserting that such pleasure would apply equally to everyone. We may, in other words, demand universal assent (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 56). Thus it becomes increasingly apparent why Kant underscores delineation of form in fine art as the hallmark of aesthetic pleasure and the foundation for all pure judgments of taste:

> In painting, sculpture, and in all the formative arts—in architecture, and horticulture, so far as they are beautiful arts—the *delineation* is the

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5 Various sciences of being describe “substance” as a concrete particular and generally assign color the status of a dependent universal, a property of objects discovered only in experience in contrast to extension and shape, which are essential to substances (Russell 51-52).
essential thing; and here it is not what gratifies in sensation but what
pleases by means of its form that is fundamental for taste. (*Critique of
Judgement* 75)

**VIII. Kantian Art Theory and Neoclassical Art Standards**

The Neoclassical artist J.L. David’s adherence to classical standards, such as
delineated form, is clearly consistent with, if not informed by, a Kantian intuition
regarding the nature of good art generally. The pure contemplative beauty of Kantian
form is, for instance, clearly present in *The Death of Socrates* (1787, see Figure 13). This
work clearly demonstrates how the role of line and the limited use of color make
intelligible their parts down and adorning accessories. According to George Hamilton,
“tables and benches are reduced to the barest cubical volumes, emphasizing the
geometrical character of the shallow space with which the characters are placed as in an
antique bas relief” (Hamilton 23; see Figure 13). Closed outlines or figures set apart by

![Figure 13](image)

**Figure 13**
Jacques Louis David, *Death of Socrates*, (1787).
the uniform color of their drapery reflect David’s strong predilection for local color. But here color is subordinate to line, being used merely to enhance or suggest form as well as reinforcing “the solemnity of the drama” by not drawing attention to itself (Hamilton 23). It is as if David anticipated the aesthetic nature of the work to be primarily communicated through the Kantian quality of design.

David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), a paragon of academic standards in art, is a painting whose planned spatial organization, unity, and complexity of parts seem to extol the Kantian virtue of design (see Figure 14). As we confront the work, our feelings of aesthetic pleasure do not emerge from its profound subject matter or the significantly revealing historical context in which it was painted, but from the strictly formal features the mind intuits. For instance, the classical elements of closed outline and compact composition give a powerful sense of unity to the composition. All forms, both masculine and feminine, achieve through line “a hallucinatory clarity going beyond anything demanded by Poussin” (Hartt 790). The figures move in a “strict relief plane” against a background David argued as historically accurate Roman architecture (Hartt 788). Its plan is basically pyramidal, the apex being the point at which all receding parallel lines converge. The spatial structure conveys to the viewer a sense of continuous space. The paved floor is founded on a particular linear organization, the implied lines receding to and converging upon the painting’s focal point: the father’s upheld hand.

The dramatic tension is further heightened by the strong vertical and diagonal lines of the men, which successfully “eclipse the soft, curvilinear shapes” of the mourning women; however, “the coloring is inert,” confined only to individual areas
within the painting, suggesting form and making more complete and intuitable the presence of shape (Hartt 790).

For the French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, drawing and adherence to principles of design, which he soberly declared as “the probity of art,” positioned him as the chief “conservator of the principles of good and true art” (Croix and Tansey 678). Found in Ingres’ work is the visual representation of what Kant described as pure judgments of taste: artwork that exalted delineation of form, which is the quality in fine art that is only worthy of pure contemplation (Critique of Judgement 75). And indeed Ingres’s early work would seem to indicate some partiality to the type of aesthetic formalism characteristic of David. Always partial to the lucid geometric stylization of the ancients, Ingres demonstrates a “refreshing flatness” and “linear purity” in his Venus Wounded by Diomedes (Croix and Tansey 678-79; see Figure 15). Clearly this painting

![Figure 14](image)

celebrates, not to mention echoes, the French Academy’s beliefs in traditional artistic values: “supremacy of antique art, the secondary position of color as a minor embellishment to a drawn form, and the need to conceal the evidence of manual labor as revealed in sketchy, impetuous brush strokes” (Rosenblum 35).

The compositional organizations of David and Ingres evince a style that sought to capture visual reality through the use of line and color (Croix and Tansey 677-79). They sought attempts at visually persuading the viewer of a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface through the depiction of objects as they actually appear in physical space and largely on the basis of representing their essential features, i.e., shape, extension, relative size, rates of diminution relative to position, etc. Indeed their Kantian emphasis on delineation of form relegated color to the status of making form more intuitable. Consequently the use of color as a Neoclassical convention in art was viewed in much the same way Kant believed it to be: “as mere sensations and not intuitions […]They] do not of themselves yield knowledge of any object least of all any a priori knowledge” (Critique of Pure Reason 66; 73).
This philosophical account had the effect of devaluing color, leaving artists such as Ingres to confine their opinions on the issue within the scope of an object’s local color. His artistic faithfulness to this principle is seen throughout his career as a painter and draftsman (Rosenblum 8). It is also worth noting that Ingres’s belief in the object’s possessing a true color independent of its natural atmospheric surroundings is what firmly positions him against Delacroix, Géricault, and ultimately Claude Monet.

IX. The Neoclassical Style and Nazi Tastes in Art

Adolf Hitler endorsed a Classical and Neoclassical style and formal paradigm for Nazi art and his intentions for doing so were partly motivated for reasons of contrast (Taylor 135-141). He liked to see a nice contour line where the Impressionists saw nothing but diffuse porous surfaces, and he vehemently castigated anything resembling it in art. Impressionism, he called “inept,” “unfinished,” and “merely sketched” (Taylor 135). “Smoothness” and “proportion” were the principle values in Hitler’s aesthetic universe, and they were primarily derived from his obsession with antiquity. Its function in Hitler’s world view was a standard from which to judge modernity. Hitler, for instance, states:

Never was humanity closer to antiquity than today. […] It is the marvelous fusion of the most splendid physical beauty with the most brilliant intellect and noblest soul that makes the Greek ideal of beauty eternal. […] As a rule the spirit dwells, if healthy, only in the healthy body with any degree of permanence. (qtd. in Taylor 136)
These principles of health and beauty did not originate with National
Socialism. They were partly informed by a long-standing tradition in German cultural
history referred to as “the cult of the body,” a movement having its roots in a much older
and earlier German society (Taylor 137). From the gymnastic movement of the early
nineteenth century to the writings of German poet Stephan George, smoothness of skin
was an outward indicator of a healthy soul residing in a healthy body (Taylor 137).
Moral strength and character were identified with outward signs, such as the whiteness of
skin functioning as a symbol of “inner purity” (Taylor 137-138). Correct proportions in
the human form “effortlessly substituted for intelligence or culture” and represented
“inner wholeness” and “completeness of being” as seen in the art and sculpture of Franz
von Stück (Taylor 137-138; see Figure 16).

Figure 16

In a society where the cult of the body was ardently worshiped, the human body
was the location for much “sensual euphoria…[and] craving for physical beauty” (Taylor
This type of aesthetic worship along classical lines translated itself into eternal laws of art. Germany’s Wilhelm II (1859-1941), for instance, was a major proponent of the polished smoothness of classically sculpted forms and warned German artists about any technique that deviated from the eternal laws of beauty and harmony (Taylor 138). This deviation was most apparent in modern art’s “breakage” of the surface, which eventually morphed into a predilection for abstraction, sketchiness, and formal looseness (Taylor 139). According to Brandon Taylor, its first occurrences were detected in Impressionism, an essentially anti-establishment art movement and evolved into a modern technical convention by the turn of the century (Taylor 139). The explosion of delineated form through impasto layering characterized this “breakage” as intense, striking colors broke free of the constraining limits of contour, thus evincing resistance to classical shape and proportion.

For the Nazis, modern artistic style expressed overt political meanings. The German public was now being suddenly introduced to “alien perceptions” not in keeping with the eternal laws of health, beauty, and harmony advocated by theorists of the Bismark era. By the time of Germany’s Weimar period, “the surface” of German art had become the location for much vitriolic political debate that eventually culminated in later Nazi attacks (Taylor 138-139). Art that was merely sketched, unpolished, inept, showing looseness in form and using colors not approximating the actual colors of things was criticized by Hitler as either being the product “of someone who could not see, or a liar” (Taylor 135):

From the pictures sent in for exhibition it is clear that the eye of some men shows them things otherwise than as they are—that there really are men
who on principle feel meadows to be blue, the heaven green, clouds sulphur-yellow—or as they perhaps prefer to say “experience” them thus. […] [T]hese pitiable unfortunates […] clearly suffer from defects of vision. […] Here only two possibilities are open: either these “artists” really do see things in this way and believe in that which they represent—then one has but to ask how the defect in vision arose, and if it is hereditary the Minister for the Interior will have to see to it that so ghastly a defect of vision shall not be allowed to perpetuate itself—or if they do not believe in the reality of such impressions but seek on other grounds to impose upon the nation by this humbug, then it is a matter for a criminal court. (Speeches 1: 590-591)

These statements about modern art could be easily dismissed as insignificant gibberish if the Nazis had not so fully and brutally realized their logical implication. For already outlined in them, as we shall soon see, were the presumptions for medical confinement, sterilization, and imprisonment.

**X. Kant and the Culture of Beauty**

In many ways the communal aspects of taste are sought for in the singular difference between aesthetic and cognitive judgments. If, as a naturalist, my object of study is a finch, my scientific judgments constitute a relation between an individual consciousness and its object (Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art* 151). As I consciously observe its behavior my most immediate concern for the object is characterized by the use and application of concepts. But were I to suddenly shift my perspective and just regard the
finch’s appearance, I would notice a welcome pleasure in the successful adaptation of parts given to me in perception, a perception still made possible through the receptive capacities of sensibility. In changing my perspective, I also notice a corresponding change in contexts as well. In playing the role of the naturalist, the context situates me with an object, but in aesthetic awareness appreciation of the object opens up to a community of other subjects through the inter-subjective validity of disinterested pleasure. In other words, a communal space is established through aesthetic judgments.

For Kant art was a communal affair and consensus of opinion on matters of beauty in art was a cultural matter (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 170). The bridge between art and culture was the aesthetic judgment that targeted the suitability of an object’s appearance to the viewer. If judged disinterestedly, the judgment asserted that the same aesthetic pleasure must be had by all. Aesthetic meaning, in the form of genuine aesthetic pleasure, therefore entailed a community striving to interpret and understand art and its purpose in culture and society (Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art* 151). And even though the construction and composition of a work of art could be described as a series of physical causes producing an effect, its cumulative meaning was irreducible to such causes. Hence, the act of seeking inter-subjective agreement, or validity, automatically engaged others in a meta-dialogue as to the function and essential role of the fine arts in culture (Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art* 151).

Communal accession through aesthetic appreciation created a place that guaranteed consensus, or unanimity, in the visual perception of the aesthetic object (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 170-171). For instance, if we consider a community of rational beings and their judgment of a painted landscape as beautiful, then we could reasonably
assert that first, all its members derived the same feelings of disinterested pleasure upon viewing it; second, that all had the same visual experiences of the painting, that is with regard to its illusionistic properties, e.g., its delineated form, the symmetry and proportional relationship among its represented parts and depiction of space; and finally, that the communal experience is a freely accepted beauty where the corrective for dissent is a matter of persuasion (Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art* 150, 151).

**XI. Marginalizing Dissent from the Aesthetic Community**

As modern man became an object of knowledge and the search for the nature of aesthetic representation sought for outside representation itself (in this case the harmonious interaction of the faculties that produce representations: sensibility and understanding), Kant’s aesthetic idealism was to anticipate the eventual marginalization of madness from German cultural life.

According to Kantian aesthetic theory, as the subject senses a successful arrangement of parts in an object and becomes absorbed with the disinterested pleasure caused by it, the subject discovers an activity worth enjoying for its own sake. When appreciated as such, arguably the experience of beautiful art becomes the experience of moral freedom wherein the subject now finds itself liberated from the interests, appetitive desires, and natural causality governing most men’s lives. This acquiescence to moral freedom, however, is only assured to those rational beings that possess the properly functioning aesthetic capacities necessary for disinterested pleasure. On the other hand, dissent is constituted by one’s inability to rise above one’s own interest, and as a result
such unfortunates are prevented from entering into the communal activity of aesthetic worship.

Art for Kant is a phenomenal object worthy of becoming a moral symbol and consensus builder, as individual dissent from the aesthetic community takes the form of ethical segregation, a place where persuasion becomes its corrective (Kemal, *Fine Art* 150-151, 248). With the advent of psychology and psychiatric discourse, aesthetic dissent, persuasion, and ultimately ethical segregation, are now replaced by confinement and institutionalization. Madness partially construed in aesthetic terms is now recognized by the patient’s inability to acknowledge the beauties in nature surrounding them, either through communal awareness or artistic expression (Gilman, “Mad Man” 594). Hence, the mad are defined as those individuals unable to experience beauty, or if they do, are unable to at least effectively communicate their aesthetic experience to the community at large. In the realm of culture, German art, poetry, music, philosophy, or artistic composition (essentially those activities that constitute *Bildung*, or the "self-cultivation" of the German male) are equally inconceivable to the insane; and once barred from the aesthetic community, Nazi practice replaces ethical segregation with confinement, sterilization, and eventual extermination (Gilman “Mad Man” 594; Dumont 19). The introduction of aesthetic consciousness into medical practice and psychological discourse therefore underlies the Nazi presumptions for mass sterilization and mass murder of the mentally insane (Gilman, “Mad Man” 594). Although it is the spirit of communal unanimity of taste from which psychology of aesthetics takes its lead, dissent from the aesthetic community is no longer dealt with by persuasion, but by medical discourse (Podro 72-74; Hyslop 501, 508). Dissent from healthy aesthetic evaluation becomes
viewed through the encoded eye of the pathology of art and psychology, two
discourses that appropriate the subject of man and his capacity for aesthetic judgment,
and through which a scientific reduction now views dissent from the community in
pathological and, in Nazi Germany, criminal terms.

XII. Madness and Art: Psychologizing the Aesthetic Community

The scientific understanding of man’s mental life led philosophers like Robert
Zimmerman (1824-1898), to conceive aesthetic consciousness as essentially law-
governed and the search for and investigation of nomological correlations between
perceived form and aesthetic reactions to them become the norm (Mallgrave and
Ikonomou 15-17). The notion of disinterested pleasure is not abandoned, but the
qualitative aspect of what it is like to be affected by perceptual form is now given a
scientific basis, eventually becoming a subject of empirical investigation and scrutiny—a
transcendental/empirical double “facelift” so to speak. As a result, beauty and human
sensitivity to it becomes an inquiry into the law-governed interaction between mental and
physical events, and any individual deviation or dissent from these scientifically
understood regularities is to be treated medically as degeneration (Hyslop 501, 508).
While these ideas are certainly pregnant in the speculative works of Herbart, Lombroso,
and Nordau, they become full blown medical realities in the town of Heidelberg
Germany, a major research center for the study of the art of the insane during Germany’s
Weimar period.

Tradition was maintained in Paris and Vienna, where J.M. Charcot and Sigmund
Freud, respectively, relied exclusively on the study of human emotions to understand
mental illness; indeed, tradition was maintained to such an extent that by the 1890’s *dementia praecox* was the dominant diagnostic category in the pathology of madness (Gilman, “Mad Man” 582). But by the 1920’s, Heidelberg Germany too had become a major research center for the study of the mentally ill, where a contrarian attitude toward Vienna prevailed among its physicians. German psychologists resisted applying the traditional definitions of madness proffered by Charcot and Freud, opting instead for an examination of the artistic and literary products of mentally ill patients as a source for understanding schizophrenia. Hans Prinzhorn, a leading physician at the institute, took seriously its formal properties by categorizing and diagnosing art of the insane on the basis of pathological identity (Gilman, “Mad Man” 585). He analyzed the form and the style of some 5,000 works by 450 individuals, deriving six major formal criteria that he believed directly pointed to the nature of psychological disruption in the mentally ill patient (Gilman, “Mad Man” 585). They were: one, the compulsive need to express inner feelings; two, the playfulness in expressing them; three, the need to ornament (as expressed in the horror felt at leaving any corner of the paper undecorated); four, the need for order; five, the drive to copy or imitate; and finally six, the self-conscious development of complex systems of visual (and literary) symbols or icons (“Mad Man” 585).

Prinzhorn categorized artistic evidence according to this classification system, which he understood as a mirror reflection of the sufferer’s schizophrenia (Gilman, “Mad Man” 585). But he did not consider what he studied as being art in any traditional sense, since it was not the product of what he called free creation. What the mentally ill patient produced was “a direct result of the process of illness” and Prinzhorn stressed their
formal structure as revealing some hidden insight into the mental world of the schizophrenic, not the mind of the modern artist (“Mad Man” 587). Interpreting artwork of the insane for Prinzhorn thus constituted a doctor-patient relationship. With the mentally ill person and his artwork present before the physician, the goal of diagnosis as Prinzhorn envisioned it was to discern how and in what ways the thing created reflected a diseased process; and yet the doctor/patient context did so much more (Gilman, “Mad Man” 586). Commitment to it not only maintained integrity in methodology but also warned physicians away from a potential flaw Prinzhorn believed to be built within it. Earlier studies with comparably similar effects, for instance, had fallen into the illogical habit of labeling any given art work possessing similar formal features as the product of the mentally ill (“Mad Man” 585). For instance, a 1918 study conducted by Paul Shilder drew parallels between the art of the insane and avant-garde art, “especially Kandinsky,” and concluded that modern art must be the product of insanity (“Mad Man” 585). To avoid such potential abuses, Prinzhorn argued for: one, the maintenance and integrity of diagnostic contexts (e.g., doctor/patient); and two, the previously stated assumption that a work of art by the insane be seen not as a freely created product, but as the direct result of illness (“Mad Man” 585, 587).

Two groups chose to ignore Prinzhorn’s strictures. The German Expressionists saw in the mad man “the model artist” whose need to create emerged from a conscious opposition to society’s institutions (Gilman, “Mad Man” 587). In freely donning the mask of the schizophrenic, Hugo Ball, the Dadaists, and the Expressionists, sought to comment on the false and illusory values of bourgeois society. Indeed, they were romantics hell-bent on expressing their conscious disapproval of society and to this end
freely adopted the aesthetic language of primitive cultures, the insane, and the child-
like, for shock value. Finally they measured their successes by the degree to which they
exasperated and surprised their audiences.

The other group was a fledgling political organization whose attempts at
overthrowing the Bavarian government had recently landed its major leaders in
Landsberg prison. While in jail, Adolf Hitler dictated to Rudolf Hess his political
philosophy as it related to matters of culture and, more importantly, his refusal to see the
insane pretensions of the avant-garde as anything but a pose (Gilman, “Mad Man” 591):

\begin{quote}
Even before the turn of the century an element began to intrude into our
art which up to that time could be regarded as entirely foreign and
unknown. To be sure, even in earlier times there were occasional
aberrations of taste, but such cases were rather artistic derailments, to
which posterity could attribute at least a certain historical value, than
products no longer of an artistic degeneration, but of a spiritual
degeneration that had reached the point of destroying the spirit. In them
the political collapse, which later became more visible, was culturally
indicated [\ldots] Anyone to whom this seems strange need only subject the
art of the happily bolshevized states to an examination, and, to his horror,
his will be confronted by the morbid excrescences of insane and
degenerate men, with which, since the turn of the century, we have
become familiar under the collective concepts of [C]ubism and Dadaism,
as the official and recognized art of those states. Even in the short period
of the Bavarian Republic of Councils, this phenomenon appeared. Even
\end{quote}
here it could be seen that all the official posters, propagandist drawings in the newspapers etc., bore the imprint, not only of political but of cultural decay. (Hitler, *Mein Kampf* 258-259)

For Hitler, madness in art is typified by the Cubists in the fragmentations of space that defy traditional German sensibilities on matters of artistic form (see Figure 17). They must therefore suffer from some type of visual dysfunction, especially when compared to German artists and traditional German art, which Hitler believed always should approximate the way the world actually looked (see Figure 18). Due to illness, modern art abandoned these guiding principles and rejected the qualities of art the German folk ought to expect from its artists (Hitler, *Theories* 478; Hinz 27-28; Grosshans 67).

Cubism presented a confused and alien world that defiled these standards by

![Figure 17](image)

Figure 17
substituting clarity of form for confusion, familiarity for obscurity, and beauty for the ugly and the misshapen. Thus, the freely chosen impulse toward subjective expression was rejected by Hitler and labeled as “artistic degeneration” (Gilman, “Mad Man” 591).

![Perchtoldsdorg Castle and Church](image)

Figure 18

**XIII. Discursive Conclusions**

Hitler’s speech delivered on 18 July 1937, dedicating the House of German Art in Munich, pilloried the various avant-garde art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries labeling them as international, transitory, and ultimately meaningless:

Art was said to be “an international experience,” and thus all comprehension of its intimate association with a people was stifled: it was said that there was no such thing as the art of a people or, better, of a race: there was only the art of a certain period [....] Art is a ‘time-conditioned phenomenon.’ So to-day there is not a German or a French art, but a “modern art.” This is to reduce art to the level of fashions in dress, with
the motto “Every year something fresh”-Impressionism, Futurism, Cubism, perhaps also Dadaism. These newly created art phrases would be comic, if they were not tragic. (Hitler, *Speeches* 585)

Under Hitler’s definition, modern art becomes a time-bound phenomenon subject to the passing fancy of an industrialized and urbanized bourgeois society. As “un-art” (Barron 11), it stood in direct opposition to the one true eternal art Hitler, in a conversation with Otto Strasser on 21 May 1930, is reported to have called “Nordic-Greek:”

There is no such thing as a Revolution in art: there is only one eternal art-the Greek-Nordic art, and all such terms as ‘Dutch Art’, ‘Italian Art’, ‘German Art’ are merely misleading and just as foolish as it is to treat Gothic as an individual form of art—all that is simply Nordic-Greek art and anything which deserves the name of art can always only be Nordic-Greek. (*Speeches* 567)

“Eternal, health, and beauty,” are the adjectives often used to describe the Nordic-Greek ideal whereas “decay, corruption, and degeneration” are the terms defining opposition to it. Both polarities give content to Hitler’s Manichean world-view, and both explain the constant life and death struggle he believed existed in all spheres of life and culture. The cult of the primitive and its significant role in the modern art scene is one example where the dualistic struggle between health and beauty is compromised by the culture of degeneration. Hitler states:

That which poses as a revelation of the ‘cult of the Primitive’ is not the expression of a naive, unspoiled soul but of a degeneracy which is utterly
corrupt and diseased. He who would seek to excuse the pictures and the sculptures-to take a particularly flagrant example-of our Dadaists, Cubists and Futurists or of our vainglorious Impressionists by a reference to the form of expression of primitive folk has not got a suspicion of the fact that it is not the function of art to remind men of the forms taken by degeneracy but rather to combat those forms by pointing to that which is eternally healthy, eternally beautiful. When destroyers of art of this type presume to desire to give expression to ‘the Primitive’ in the consciousness of a people they should remind themselves that our people at least, some thousands of years ago, had already long grown out of such ‘Primitivism’. Our people not only rejects this nuisance, but it regards its manufacturers as incapables, cheats or madmen; and, in the Third Reich, we have no longer any intention to let these last loose on the people.

(Speeches 577, 578)

Noteworthy among this vitriol is the intersection of three modern discourses on art that provide the conditions for Hitler's stated position on modern art. First, are the discourses identifying the emergence of Primitivism in art as a sign of cultural degeneration. Here the meaning of the term not only refers in its strict English sense to the biological deviation of a specie, but connotes in German the untranslatable aspects of racial, sexual, and moral deviation; an important semantic fact when understanding how Nordau and Hitler politically *use* the term, not necessarily what they meant by it (Barron 11; Bussman 113).
The second discourse is discovered in the practices of artists genuinely inspired by the cult of the Primitive and the modern art styles that revive it. Hitler’s argument, though compelling, completely ignores the free spirit permeating modern art discourse, which is an essential aspect distinguishing it from the art of the insane individual. Ignorance of, or the deliberate refusal to accept this aspect, made Hitler’s statement authoritative, i.e., knowledge takes a position already defined by the rules of modern discourse, specifically psychology and the art of mental illness, especially in its misreading of Prinzhorn (Gilman, “Mad Man” 587).

The third and final discourse takes the form of repression. Modern art in the form of modern bourgeois alienation, introduced bizarre, alien perceptions that constituted an attack on the normative sensibilities of mass German society, and as we have seen, consensus and unanimity of taste transposes its ideal in the form of Kantian beauty, specifically as the sensus communis of bourgeois life (Bussmann 116). Accordingly, dissent from beauty, once tolerated and then eventually welcomed in Weimar Germany, became a target for political attack, and finally resulting in the various forms of Nazi confinement, sterilization, and eventual extermination. Hitler says:

[art] that cannot rely on the joyous, heartfelt assent of the broad and healthy mass of the people, but depends on tiny cliques that are self-interested and blasé by turns, is intolerable. It seeks to confuse the sound instinct of the people instead of gladly confirming it. (qtd. in Lüttichau 47)
XIV. Nazi Art Theory and Impressionism

A strong candidate for this type of intellectual degeneration, which has been mentioned already, is Impressionism. It was the target of much vitriol and a source of consternation for the Nazi elite. While Herman Goering was partial to it, most of Hitler's cronies and fellow ideologues singled it out as emblematic of the cultural degeneration of modern European art society (Taylor 139). For Alfred Rosenberg, Impressionism presented an “atomized world” within the scope of a “decomposing intellectualism” (*Art in Theory* 394). It was enough for Impressionism to invert the hierarchical ordering of subject matter in the visual arts, but to essentially “atomize” an already empty and vapid world bereft of myth and sensuousness was enough to label it degenerate; Rosenberg states:

> Impressionism, which originally was borne by strong, talented artists, became a battle-cry of decomposing intellectualism. An atomistic world-view atomized even the colors; the dull level of understanding of natural science achieved its apogee in the practitioners and theoreticians of Impressionism. A mythless world procreated a mythless generation. Men who inwardly desired to break free from this were broken. Van Gogh is a tragic example of one who longed and went mad. (*Art in Theory* 394)

Whether Hitler or Rosenberg’s disparaging statements are true or not is not the right question. Rather the question the archaeologist asks is what are the rules defining such a position and what are the conditions that make Rosenberg’s statement possible? Stated differently, how is what he says, which clearly assumes some biases against modern industrialization, capitalism, modern science, and materialist society, even made
at all? A good place to search for these rules is within Impressionism itself. It is the earliest form of modern art violently disparaged by the Nazis and it functions as a spatial and temporal nexus to the subsequent art movements of the twentieth century the Nazis desperately sought to quash.

To begin the search, some of the words and significant phrases in Rosenberg's polemic are telling—for instance “atomizing.” It seems the most startling and quizzical term along with “mythless;” but what about the phrase, “the dull level of understanding of natural sciences”? Combined with Hitler’s general and frequent accusations of modern art as “unfinished,” “merely sketched,” or “unpolished,” Rosenberg’s statements come into greater focus. I would suggest to atomize a perceptual field is to apply the terminology of the physical sciences to a particular visual understanding of nature. How then might an artist represent an atomized world to begin with?

Dr. Theodore Hyslop’s analysis of degenerate art relates in many substantive ways with Rosenberg’s use of the term “atomize.” One way to “atomize” a pictorial field, according to Hyslop, is to represent the visual experience of color through primary colors, not as they are “normally” perceived in combination with an idea, but as "merely masses of color and light in varying qualities and degrees of intensity" (504). Consequently, the Impressionist painter’s skill at analyzing optical sensation and painting what he sees at the level of pure color perception merely suggests form. Only once these “atomized” color patches are reassembled in the viewer’s imagination do they vaguely begin resembling something in reality.

Interestingly, Hyslop's research into visual derangement describes how optical perceptions may occur without the slightest conceptual content; where the highest centers
of ideation are completely forsaken for the experience of pure visual sensation. More importantly, he counts this perceptual experience as a sure sign of mental illness (Hyslop 502-504). This type of visual experience describes a sufferer as being overwhelmed by nothing more the pure blasts of visual sensation as the madman as artist seeks to represent that visual experience through painting gross blobs of primary colors and crude lines (502-504).

Impressionism’s theoretical underpinnings are interestingly consistent with the aspects and descriptions of mental degeneracy in art as outlined by Hyslop. For instance, the reduction of visual experience to nothing more than sensation is revealed in a telling conversation between Lilla Perry and Claude Monet. Monet said,

When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you—a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you. (qtd. in Smith 27)

This statement is one of the few theoretical insights ever proffered by Monet about his work and, as a statement of principle, is in perfect keeping with his wish he had been born blind and then suddenly gained his sight so that he “could have begun to paint […] without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him” (qtd. in Smith 27). By such accounts, Monet freely seeks an awareness of a world filled with color that is liberated from rigid conceptual schemes, a notion that in fact finds its very conditions for artistic expression in the positivist works of John Ruskin (Hyslop 504). Ruskin in his *Elements of Drawing* (1857), admonishes the painter:
The whole technical power of painting [depends] on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of [these] stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify,—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight. (qtd. in Smith 28)

Ruskin and the art of Impressionism both aim for a theoretical understanding of painting more connected to the doctrines in the Transcendental Aesthetic than the *Critique of Judgment*. In Kantian terms, Monet seeks to represent the manifold of visual sensation before it is synthesized by the categories of understanding into a recognizable object; moreover, the nature of impressions appear on the horizon of a Kantian struggle arising between the riotous nature of visual sense data and its resistance to and containment within the limits of “figure” and “extension” of pure intuitive space (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 66). Sometimes this struggle gives way to the intractable nature of empirical sense, often resulting in a want of firmness in outline so typical of Monet’s work (see Figure 19).

Ironically, the one defining feature of Monet’s Impressionism is also the central insight of Hyslop’s pathology of Impressionism. As a somatic condition, Hyslop believes mental illness consists of a disconnection between the patient and the reality that constitutes his world. The form it takes in Monet’s artwork is the absent concept that leaves nothing behind but the representation of pure simple visual stimulation, which, when represented according to the Impressionist style, is judged as having overt political meanings for the Nazis (Taylor 139). The “incursion” of alien perceptions constitutes a
direct assault on the aesthetic value systems of the bourgeoisie, that is, Monet in his attempts to represent pure visual blasts of color prevents “the imperatives of predictability, ease of movement, comfort of transition from one experience to another, consistency of view, and the uninterrupted ‘illusion’ of a situation or character” (Taylor 139). Hitler’s criticisms about “sketchiness” and “unpolished” form therefore appear to be no vain quibble since they establish a position through their relation to other statements within a broader psychiatric discourse. Rejection of external reality in the form of resistance to higher levels of ideation constitutes one form of degeneration, at least for Prinzhorn, Nordau and Hyslop. Moreover, as a psychiatric discourse on degeneration, it establishes the rules by which Hitler disparages modern art as a violation of the premier aesthetic quality embedded in German art: “to be German is to be clear” (Speeches 587). For the Nazis a lack of clarity and recognizable forms were seen as a
cultural threat, since it was only through the artist’s proper balancing of form and matter that an intuitive connection could be established between the artwork and the folk (Hermand 40-41). Moreover, such a connection need not depend on the tiny cliques of self-interested blasé art critics essential to the viability of modern art. According to the Nazis, the experience of true beauty in painting should be like listening to Wagner; do we really need critics telling us why the music is great? “Works of art should be so ‘meaningful,’” Goebbels stated in 1936, “that they cannot be criticized, but merely appreciated” (Hermand 41).

Finally, the structural relationship between modern psychiatric discourse and Nazi art criticism lies in the experience of nineteenth-century madness as deviation from social norms (mental illness). Accordingly, its control and treatment fell under the purview of the medical profession. In spite of the medical professions veneer of scientific objectivity, and unbeknownst to its medical practitioners, modern psychiatry was really based on a moral disapproval of madness, and sought in its attempts at rehabilitating the mad the coercion of a particular segment of society. This type of medical orientation must therefore preclude an understanding of madness as free rejection, specifically as a rejection of the rational framework defining those social norms to begin with and in whatever form or expression it may take, especially art. Consequently, Monet’s refusal to conceptually order his canvas as a free rejection of bourgeois aesthetic values is medically inconceivable, since any manifestation of visual aberration or deviation in art, at least for Hyslop and Nordau, must be construed as pathologically determined.

On the other hand, Ruskin’s statement on painting the innocence of the eye is an aesthetic maxim to be freely chosen and applied by the artist, and indeed Monet’s
paintings are visual attempts impression without any regard for the conceptual ordering of sensation. But was Monet’s art a freely chosen pose? According to Hitler, Monet must have really perceived the world as “atomized” and so must be suffering from some visual defect. On the other hand, if it was a freely chosen pose the Monet must be deliberately and falsely distorting the perceived image in art. Given Hitler’s condemnations of modern art, either situation does not bode well. But to arrive at a better understanding of these observations requires a detour through Impressionism and Positivism, where an archaeological investigation shows not only their structural connection but legitimates the free rejection of bourgeois artistic convention typical of the modern art movement.

**XV. Impressionism**

The Impressionist art movement was comprised of a number of artists united by a singular desire to produce art opposed to the conservative, classical style of the French academy (Smith 12). Among them there was general disaffection with traditional methods of painting, but Impressionism’s radical stance toward academic art was particularly acute. Academic conventions such as design and style in painting were rejected outright, but not merely as antithetical responses targeting an aesthetic tradition firmly entrenched for over one hundred years. Behind the appearances of opposition were radically new ideas informing Impressionist technique, the consequences of which the Impressionists themselves could never have imagined. For instance, artistic inquiry into the nature of light and its effects on atmosphere were radically different priorities than those of academic artists. Impressionists sought to capture forms submerged in light
and naturally this difference in subject demanded radical alterations in style. The unique brush stroke, so often regarded as the trademark of Impressionist artwork, was a product of preferences in subject but also of shifting sensibilities in art. Loose, spontaneous brushwork with heavy impasto layering was the stylistic device used to capture the immediacy of fleeting atmospheric conditions, color, temperature, and moisture.

The Impressionist style resulted in vehement accusations from critics and academic painters. They were often accused, especially Monet, of dissolving form for the sake of capturing light and atmospheric conditions. Apologists for Impressionism countered by expanding the notion of artistic form to include not only compositional design but the rendering of the artists’ visual sensations of light and atmosphere, which were for Monet the proper form of painting (Croix and Tansey 695). Accordingly, the Impressionists sought to give form to their own sensations of color and light by depicting subject matter out of doors as opposed to the indoor studio works created by academic painters.

The practice of painting plein air never would have been realized, however, were it not for speculations over what an impression was. According to “long-standing tradition” an impression was the immediate sensation a scene made on the mind of the artist; this usually meant artistic expression often resulted in “unfinished” detail, implying that Impressionist art work was too hastily done and then “fobbed” off on the public (Smith 19). But mainstream criticisms regarding what an impression was often ignored the richer, fuller meaning of the term the Impressionists worked with, thus making it a misunderstood art form from the start (Smith 19-22). These mistakes were largely the
result of not understanding a radically new interpretation of sense perception. For the
Impressionists the objective world was communicated through the artist’s visual
sensations, and only then did the process of representing an impression start.
Representing an impression often entailed an artistic consideration of its bi-modal
character, where “the impacts of stimuli below the level of awareness,” triggered certain
effects in consciousness caused by visual sense data, such as pain, taste, smell, and sound
(Smith 26).

Expressive of two qualities or characteristics, the naïve impression was therefore
broader in its associative meaning than its time-bound, limited understanding of “fleeting
light and atmospheric conditions” (Smith 21). The term was tinctured, so to speak, with positivist ideas, specifically those of Hippolyte Taine and John Ruskin. Both men
believed an impression belonged to the consciousness of the individual experiencing it;
and since each individual was psychologically unique, they equally inferred that its
experience was a highly subjective conscious process itself (Smith 21, 27-28).
Moreover, the cognitive processing of an impression was not strictly speaking limited to
just the experience of perceptual stimuli and emotional content. The process could
extend beyond immediate visual responses and summon other mental states as well, such
as feelings associated with past events, or concepts including “substance,” “cause and
effect,” “shape,” or general ideas such as “book” or “chair.” In short, an impression was
perceived both by the eye and the mind of the Impressionist. Its explication,
nevertheless, was largely a philosophical and scientific matter (Smith 27-28).
XVI. Impressionism and Positivism

Impressionists were indeed eclectic incorporating into art the most cutting-edge ideas of nineteenth-century philosophical and scientific discourse. They read, borrowed, and artistically investigated the theoretical foundations of visual perception, specifically the scientific nature of impressions. Monet especially adopted the double action/reaction process based on positivist speculations, which held an impression to exist at the physical level of bodily impact caused by an outside stimulus. The process culminated in an emotionally charged conscious reaction to the stimulus, a point at which “the interior self connected with the outside world” (Smith 22).

Pregnant within the radical re-conception of the impression was a resistance to higher levels of ideation, a philosophically compelling idea that went straight to the heart of Neoclassicism and Kantian aesthetic theory. By the mid-nineteenth century the mental role of cognizing sense data was being re-assessed, specifically with respect to the extent to which innate ideas played a role in the acquisition of knowledge. Positivist reassessments on the topic of human knowledge retreated to the bastion of eighteenth-century empirical thought and invariably raised doubts about the role of Kantian understanding in knowledge acquisition. But to hastily construe Positivism’s venture as a retreat to pre-critical empiricism would be, according to Foucault, wrong and premature. Though as a movement it scientifically dealt with the problems of human perception,
Positivism was another clear example of an appropriation and incursion into the forms of knowledge in the wake of the transcendental/empirical doublet (Schapiro 30).  

Positivist knowledge of the world was grounded on raw, unarticulated sense data, a stance locating their thought within the empiricism of John Locke and David Hume. For Hume impressions were the first things that made an impact on the mind’s conscious encounter with objects and were more reliable than the abstract ideas shaped by reflection or fantasy (Schapiro 25). Locke anticipated Hume by explaining that primary and secondary ideas—comparable to the concepts of Kantian understanding—were based on and had their origin in sense experience and that conceptual knowledge was built upon it. 

Kant, on the other hand, maintained the central role of the mind in the cognition of sense data. Sensation was strictly controlled and given coherent order within two pure forms of intuition brought to experience: time and space. As forms they were purely receptive in nature, whereas the understanding was an active power of the mind; yet both worked together to yield knowledge. Kant’s faculty of understanding constructed a representation of objects using concepts while the passive power of sensibility received pure and empirical sensations (Critique of Pure Reason 93). 

Before applying color, the painter J.L. David always represented the limits of extended objects by first drawing them and then transferring the formal design of his models to the canvas. Only then was the ébauche “completely obliterated by the final 

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6 It must be remembered that any direct link between positivism and eighteenth-century empiricism is merely apparent. Positivism draws its same subsoil from the structural shift initially marked by the advent of Kantian criticism.
layer of paint,” a practice indicating a Kantian understanding of the roles of line and color and a sense for visual perception and its representation within the limits of a priori intuition (Lee 561). If we recall, for Kant shape and extension are objects of pure spatial intuition, and even though they exist in the mind a priori as mere forms of sensibility, and do not instantiate sensory content, their representation cannot “transcend some degree of material instantiation itself, as spare as ink or [pencil lead] may be” (Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* 66; Barzman 150). Whether David was aware of it or not, by first implementing a drawn design in his compositions, he evinces a Kantian metaphysical assumption about the form of visual experience and how it ought to be represented in art.

On the assumption that the mind was restricted to only the content of visual experience, e.g., color and light, this in itself precluded understanding innate forms that made possible the reception of empirical elements, such as color and light. According to empiricists, innate ideas, such as time and space, were merely abstract ideas derived from repeated observations and reflections upon what was given in sensory perception, not a priori forms that made possible the reception of sense data. The stylistic conventions of most Impressionists were therefore motivated by a desire to show how color was primitive and prior to anything else given visually, and how things we subsequently come to know through impressions, such as “three dimensions,” “line,” “trees,” and “dogs,” could be represented through organizing color on a two-dimensional surface only. Accordingly, Impressionist responses to underlying Kantian themes as manifested in academic art (e.g., design, delineated form) represented more than just another dialectical response in the ongoing debate between line and color. According to Meyer Schapiro,
the Impressionist style was informed by the notion of what an impression was, and this idea had extreme philosophical implications (25-35).

The Impressionists completely rejected Kant’s view of the mind in theory and practice, and adopted one wholly consistent with empirical philosophy and the positivism of Ruskin. This conclusion is suggested in their representing shape through the use of color and light; moreover, this practice certainly implied a rejection of the Neoclassical conventions of design and delineation of form for which David was especially praised in his preparatory drawings and design techniques. One consequence of rejecting the notion of visual sense data that is given shape and form within the limits of *a priori* intuition was the apparent lack of form and design in Impressionist paintings. Directly traceable to the spontaneous brush stroke of Impressionism was the three-dimensional effect created solely on the basis of color organization. From the viewer’s perspective, once the light interacted with the painting itself, the eye, from a proper distance, fused the various tonal arrangements into a visually discernible three-dimensional object, and this technique represented a remarkable consistency with Classical empirical thought. For the empiricists, visual perception of the world did not consist of lines, solid bodies or three-dimensional space but only of color and light (Kemp 234; Schapiro 30). George Berkeley, for instance, argued in his treatise a *New Theory of Vision* (1709) that there exists nothing prior to an immediate object of sight other than light and color, and that a “perception of space and volume is a result of a correlating impression between the eye and the sensations of the hand and muscles in bodily movement” (qtd. in Schapiro 30; Berkeley sections 129-130, 191-92). John Locke argued similarly when he claimed visual impressions were solely of color and light with neighboring and varying shades of
hue interpreted as “the outlines of objects and as signs of their solid forms only after being connected with touch and bodily experiences” (qtd. in Schapiro 30).

By depicting form and space according to the theoretical assumptions of the color patch, the Impressionists rejected the notion of space and time as innate ideas. Underlying every visual experience was not the reality of space envisaged in the abstract like Kant had held. In keeping with the nineteenth-century positivist views of Taine and Ruskin Impressionist visual theory was founded on the idea that an impression was the immediate impact of visual sense data on the mind not yet “reworked” or made coherent by an idea (Schapiro 25).

**XVII. Ernst Mach and Neo-Empiricism**

This idea was strikingly consistent with the philosophical work of Ernst Mach. If positivism represented a philosophical strain initially at odds with Kantian systematization, Mach represented its nineteenth-century scientific equivalent, whose theoretical conclusions stood in sharp contrast to Kantian epistemology. His views, for instance, bore a striking resemblance to the empiricist tradition of Lock and Hume, and his analysis of visual perception directly challenged the Kantian epistemological role of substance by first calling into question its transcendental idealism. But this consequence was merely incidental. By challenging the idea that substance was the primary substrate or carrier “of the qualities of things as characterized by bulk and weight and definite form,” Mach objected to the notion that empirical qualities of objects were universals ascribed to particular substances (Schapiro 33). This conclusion had far-reaching
implications for Kant’s theoretical foundation of knowledge, not to mention Impressionist attempts at liberating color from a metaphysics of substance and quality.

Kant argues that the transcendental character of substance is a necessary principle for the possibility of knowledge. Schematically as various types of sense data are received by sensibility, the content of experience is given coherent and meaningful form through the mind’s application of substance (Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* 92-93; Höffe 66). Substance for Kant functioned primarily as a logical rule structuring and organizing sense data into particular things to which qualities are then predicated in the form of propositional judgments (Höffe 66). Knowledge of the world took the form of propositional judgments where the understanding worked in conjunction with sensibility, but it is within this conjunction that Mach takes issue with Kant.

For classical empiricism generally, knowledge begins in elementary sensation. By adopting this old empiricist assumption, however, Mach and the new physics challenged the transcendent role substance played in the formulation of propositions (Schapiro 33). This move was indicative of the incursion of positivism into Kant’s forms of knowledge in the wake of “man’s” emergence according to Foucault (*OT* 318-321; Dreyfus and Rabinow 32-33). In the nineteenth century, physicists were explaining the behavior of the phenomenal world strictly in terms of ideal points with measurable charges and velocities, rather than as distinct objects cognized according to the Kantian schema of intuition and concept (33; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 92-93). These theoretical entities went far beyond the macrocosm of visible awareness, and were therefore resistant to Kantian cognition. Over time, evidence for their existence was eventually based on the fruitfulness of the theories positing them as theoretical entities.
Greater universality and predictive capability were achieved as a result of doing, and so Mach and the others seemed justified in positing their reality even though such entities were denied successful cognition within Kant’s epistemological schema. But how does this conclusion threaten the epistemological role of substance as originally conceived by Kant?

For Kant, pure sensibility, time and space, only made possible the acquisition of empirical sensations that the mind could successfully synthesize into meaningful objects. But since the quantitative and qualitative attributes of atoms existed well beyond the level of sensible awareness, there were no originary intuitions in the sensory manifold from which to successfully construct a representation of an atom, or a molecule, or an electron; in short, such entities were denied successful cognition within Kant’s schema (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 92). On the other hand, as scientists of the nineteenth century still used the lexicon of substances in terms of charged particles, atoms, and molecules, “substance” was still found to be a useful tool, but only linguistically and not as a transcendental condition for the possibility of knowledge. In the final analysis, the only thing both positivists and nativistic empiricists could agree on was the reality of the sense impressions made on the mind when confronting the physical world (Schapiro 33).

Mach’s characterization of transcendental notions such as substance as possessing no reality beyond the status of an artificial construct implicitly denied a Kantian understanding of it. But underlying Mach’s position was an even more radical empiricism. His belief in a world “not composed of things […] but of colors, tones, pressures, spaces, times, in short what we ordinarily call individual sensations,” forced a re-assessment of Kant’s theory of the nature of sense experience as being the primitive
source for the knowledge of empirical substances (qtd. in Schapiro 33). Mach argued, contrary to Kant, that “sensations are not signs of things; but a thing is a thought symbol for a compound sensation of a relative fixedness” (Schapiro 33). For Mach, what is fundamental is sense data, and only in our repeated awareness and observation of sensations do we begin attaching the idea or name to some sensation of relative fixedness; understanding, in the Kantian sense, plays no essential or active role in knowledge. Why? Because the cognitive unity and determinacy of Kantian understanding is no longer given the supportive role of synthesizing material content into knowable substances; so, like substance, the faculty of understanding becomes unessential to the production of knowledge (Schapiro 33). What is fundamentally real is sensation, or those originary impressions made on the mind.

These positivist speculations opened up for the Impressionist painters limitless artistic possibilities, ultimately allowing them to break free of the constraints of Neoclassicism. Impressionists were no longer limited to representing the world according to the supposedly perceived qualities of objects whose role seemed to indicate or function as signs of things. Sensation itself, Mach claimed, is more “pronounced” than the “relatively fixed compound sensations [of things]”, i.e., the distinct, identifiable picture-thing, “like the paintings in a style with definite outlines and local color” (Schapiro 33). The ways of coming to understand visual experience and, more

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7 Kant claims that material content can only suggest or hint at conceptual forms especially in the case color in painting (cf. *Critique of Judgement* section 14).
importantly, the role of color in representing visual experience was now identified with sensation as the primitive category of knowledge.

**XVIII. Impressionist Perception and Style**

Since traditional ways of metaphysically carving up the world into substances had been reduced to the level of pragmatic constructs, the idea of sensation as serving to indicate the existence of a thing, or substance, had to be re-evaluated. Traditionally, color served to indicate the form of an object and was thus seen as a natural sign denoting the features and effects of objects (Schapiro 47; Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 75-76). Ideally, the experience of color should trigger the recognition of a represented object, e.g., green indicating the grass in a landscape or blue in the upper portion of a painting denoting the sky, etc. But the idea that sensations did not function merely as signs or a cue for recognizing an object was the intellectual basis of Impressionism (Schapiro 33-34).

Impressionists went beyond such traditional sign systems by “abstracting colors from their function as signs [of something]” (48). Only through focusing on the less stable properties of objects, which required a sensitive and discerning eye, could the Impressionists manage to eschew recording the constant properties that clearly singled out the unity of an object, such as figure and extension (48). For instance, Monet did not generally interpret sensations of color when perceiving the weather, or the blushing of an individual in discomfort, as features or effects of an object but as subject matter itself.

Once again, the aesthetic move to capture the ephemeral and evanescent qualities of weather had the effect of challenging traditional ways of looking at color.
Impressionist color was not interpreted as functional signs or features that the mind unified with other sensations into the cognition of a particular thing. Rather Impressionists saw the sign itself as an appropriate subject worthy of pictorial representation (Schapiro 48). Moreover, the style informed by such a scheme rejected notions such as local color and its signative presumptions in the identification of a particular object, e.g., “blue” for sky or “green” for grass. As a result, this artistic gambit opened up a new order of significance when representing nature. Particular colors were now seen as self-referential signs serving various roles within a corresponding tonal system (Schapiro 65-69). The picture as an ordered tonal system was like a melody, according to Schapiro, where individual tones only became meaningful through a relationship with other tones (Schapiro 48). Their spatial relationship and positioning create a sense of compositional unity, as when complementary colors when positioned contiguously tend to intensify one another.

In contrast to Kant, Impressionist interpretations of visual sense data opened up a new way of looking at the world (Schapiro 47-48). In trying to capture light, color and atmosphere, Impressionists were no longer limited to merely recognizing an object and painting its local color. Rejection of color as a sign of an object consequently made possible the discovery of a new set of signs for features that “had not been closely observed before” (Schapiro 48). For instance it was possible now to explore other signs such as the various modalities of light and atmosphere (Schapiro 48). Meyer Schapiro points out that, when painting snow in *The Magpie* (1869), Monet not only attempted to capture the perceived whiteness of the snow—a visual quality presumably of the snow itself—but also the brightness of the light reflecting off the snow through painting blue
shadows (Schapiro 67-70; see Figure 20). To capture this sensation required painting a quality of visual sensation —blue shadows—that did not belong to the snow itself.

Schapiro suggests

![Image](image_url)

Figure 20

this effect could only be achieved by Monet thinking of the brightness as an accidental color, a sign that is not inherently a part of the snow—nor any other object in the composition for that matter—but one that belongs to a complex of signs that evoked the brightness of sunlight in a clear sky above the snow (Schapiro 67-70). The brilliance of the light reflecting off the snow, while not being an attribute of the snow itself, is a quality of sensation that is created by a number of other sensations functioning as signs—such as sunlight, atmosphere, air, etc.—independent of the objects they are most closely associated with. This artistic effect, however, was impossible under a Kantian transcendental scheme of visual experience because the role of color in painting was limited to that of an inherent property of things, and thus could only be understood as
making the object it inheres in more intuitable and recognizable (Kant, *Critique of
Judgement* 76). In short, color needed liberating to realize these new systems of
signification.

This innovation in style was not readily accepted by the public and in fact resulted
in society’s general unease (Taylor 139). Representing what was contrary to traditional
tastes was considered offensive, and, likewise, to depict shadow with color, a sure sign of
sunlight in shadow, was an offense to common sense and a subversion of academic
convention. Nevertheless, Impressionist style provided “a considerable element of fresh
and frank realism” as seen in Monet’s *The Magpie* (Schapiro 69; see Figure 20). And
yet, aesthetic attempts at elevating color to the level of subject matter were not, however,
original with Monet or Cézanne. The idea was initially affirmed by Gustave Courbet
(Schapiro 47).

As a realist, Courbet claimed to paint what he saw as opposed to what he knew
(Schapiro 47). In Kantian terms, he focused only upon what the faculty of sensibility
provided by way of visual sensation, and deliberately eschewed any methodology that
claimed only what is recognized can be represented (Schapiro 47). Courbet’s early
technique was thus informed by the idea that un-interpreted sensations can be structured
in such a way that others will recognize familiar objects in their organization. This
technique need not require any prior epistemological understanding on the part of the
painter toward the world. The artist in other words could produce recognizable shapes
and forms without any prior knowledge of what the painter intended to portray. Hence,
Courbet’s sentiments were remarkably consistent with Monet’s explanations to American
interviewer Lilla Perry regarding how the world can be merely represented on the basis of color organization:

> When you go out to paint try to forget what objects you have before you—a house, a tree, a field merely think here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and just paint it as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives you your own naïve impression of the scene before you. (qtd. in Smith 27)

In essence, Monet claims that the physical mode of the *naïve impression* corresponds most closely with the world in terms of color patches. The viewer does not visually sense “trees,” for instance, or “chairs” or “houses” in the world, nor does he perceive three-dimensionally extended objects (Smith 27). These general ideas are merely conceptual constructs that in no way correspond to anything in the world, at least at the level of visual sensibility, which are pure color and shape. For Monet seeing is perceiving color and light, not things, and what we really perceive are raw, unarticulated, two-dimensional color patches, not lines, three-dimensional space, nor objects with well-defined contours (Schapiro 30, 47). Visual experience is limited to the sensible perception of light and color in their successive and eternally changing flux, not of objects (Smith 22). But Monet was not the only one to argue in support of *color patches*. Cézanne is reported to have said “I see in stains,” and once instructed another painter “to see like a man who has just been born” (qtd. in Smith 27).

Given Impressionist assumptions regarding the use of the color patch, the result would be the categorizing of Euclidean geometry with the other cultural and philosophical biases that inform human perceptual experience. As it so happened, by
elevating color to the level of subject matter and liberating it from its traditional role of denoting a conceptual object, Impressionism implicitly challenged the role of other traditional categories of thought believed necessary in the production of knowledge. Space, time, quality, substance, were all ideal constructs, and understood by Kant as giving form to the material content of experience. In the wake of Impressionism and Positivism, however, they are now reduced to habit-informing values that instruct the individual how to visually perceive the world, i.e., as normative *a priori* values (Schapiro 38; Sallis 40-42). Unfortunately, the Impressionists offered no systematic argumentation on behalf of these conclusions; rather it is merely hinted at in their artwork and in brief anecdotal communications, like Monet’s with Lilla Perry:

> The whole technical power depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of [these] flat stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight. (qtd. in Smith 28)

**XIX. Impressionism and Phenomenology**

The theoretical principle of the color patch posed serious challenges to Impressionists and thus raised practical stylistic concerns for their art. Some of those concerns have been addressed already, namely the possibility of communicating a sense of three-dimensional space strictly in terms of color organization. John Sallis suggests that Monet’s painterly style was designed to prevent “the second” invitation of vision “cast behind the surface” of things “in order to discover what is painted, [or] what is
finally presented in the image” (40). Traditionally, painters incorporated rules and principles prescribed by theory to allow viewers to apprehend the second sense operating behind the mere shades of color. The organization of pigment tones according to theory allowed for the classical doubling of sense where color functioned as a signifier of something else transcending the sensible presentation (Sallis 40). Monet’s ability to capture just the surface contours of things by stopping at the surface of nature prevented this doubling of sense between the color signifier and what it supposedly signified: a meaning existing beyond the merely sensible image (Sallis 41). This feature so typical of Monet’s work, Sallis suggests, inverts the hierarchical and oppositional subjection of the sensible to the intelligible. As a result of the inversion, the viewer’s passage to meaning is inhibited. In essence, the inhibited passage is made possible by the “sensible” twisting free of the “intelligible,” thereby liberating color from the role of a signifier of something other than the contoured surfaces it was meant to represent (41).

What does this reveal about the nature of the perceived image in Monet’s work, Sallis queries? Again, by rendering just the surfaces of objects, Monet assumes there was “nothing beyond painting or behind [those] surfaces,” thereby discovering a space, depth, and “palpable thickness” to the sensible (Sallis 42). Sallis correctly identifies the depth of the sensible order—which Cézanne spent his whole life trying to render—according to “the envelopment and mutual dependence of things,” a location where, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “width, height, and depth are abstracted, of a voluminosity that one expresses in a word by saying that a thing is there” (qtd. in Sallis 42). Sensible space is therefore not simply the depth of perspectivism derived from the “conceptually determined objective space that from within the sensible, could only be simulated and not
truly represented” (Sallis 42). Sensible space only comes about, Sallis claims, when theories are dispensed with, and “things are to be rendered as they show themselves,” but only after “leaving the concept aside” and confronting the world visually according to what only sense reveals (42). Once again, the underlying assumption Sallis finds inherent in Impressionism is the sensible perception of light and color, which are anterior to any objective conceptualization of space along Euclidean lines.

XX. Conclusion

The Impressionists had questioned the traditional canons of art and style by elevating color to the status of a self-referential sign. No longer was color a quality or property predicated to substances in the normal declarative statement, nor was it merely an empirical intuition discoverable in objects through experience. The only thing experienced in the physical mode of an impression was the color patch or, rather, pure visual sensation that had not yet been reworked by nor subjected to the “manifold of thought and past experience” (Schapiro 38). Hence the epistemological fall-out of statements presented by Monet and Cézanne are readily apparent. In essence, conceptual knowledge is problematic and intrusive when attempting to artistically render the so-called naïve impression; moreover, painting what a person recognizes in contrast to what he sees inevitably leads to differences in how one views the world. Apparently Monet wanted to rid himself of any conceptual construct that might entail a normative view, or metaphysical schema that dictated how one ought to see the world, namely in terms of substances possessing qualities, especially color. Thus Monet’s rejection of the use of design and linear perspective was not merely a reaction to the academy, but was rather
informed by a profound philosophical insight that challenged traditional epistemological ways of coming to know the world, i.e., according to the Kantian schema of intuition and concept. In short, the French academy, with its emphasis on visual perception according to knowable substances, rules of linear perspective, and the rendering of objects according to local color, was prescribing a method that determined how the artist “ought” to see the world. Consequently the academic method afforded a normative view and manifested an entire conceptual stock in the artist’s compositional works. The Impressionists defied the academy on this point not only in their opposition to technique but in offering a different way of seeing the world, namely, as color patches in place of a world composed of delineated substances.

On the other hand there are dire psychological consequences entailed behind the Impressionists belief in theory and practice in art. Nystagmus, according to Max Nordau, causes the degenerate artist to perceive the "phenomena of nature trembling, restless, [and] devoid of firm outline […]" (Art in Theory 802). What arises from such a nervous disability are works of art that have no basis in objective observable fact, since defects in color perception are the result of physical disease, a diagnosis that does not bode well for the Impressionist painter, especially Monet (Art in Theory 803). Theodore Hyslop concurs. Higher centers of ideation establish the external realities of perception, but in disease purely optical perceptions “may occur” as a result of its inactivation (502-504). Artistic products resulting from this type of disease Hyslop and Nordau condemn as being “pseudo-art,” whereas the Impressionist painter has at least the choice of pretending to see before him “merely masses of color and light in varying qualities of degrees of intensity” (Hyslop 504). Hyslop chooses not to consider the possible reasons
why an artist might make this choice. In his attempts to derive scientific laws of aesthetic perception, the modern psychologist cannot conceive of artistic license nor deviation as anything other than mental illness, let alone a free rejection of the framework of rationality informing those laws (504).

Our Impressionist detour shows the extent to which early modern art attempted to artistically reject psychological claims about healthy functional perception. I have gone to some lengths in showing how such a rejection was operating behind the Impressionist aesthetic, and indeed it is this principle of free expression that undermines the legitimacy of positivism, in the form of modern psychology, which emerges in the wake of the Modern episteme. According to Foucault, nineteenth-century science presumably took over the form of empirical knowledge as well as its content, which meant in Kantian terms, that the transcendental was now an object of empirical investigation. Stated differently, what was once previously known by reflection in the form of transcendental and metaphysical expositions now becomes the object of scientific scrutiny. Arguably then, the science of human perception and the psychologizing of aesthetics are the discursive byproducts of this reduction as its Nazi practitioners construct the rational framework from which deviation will eventually be seen as illness and degeneracy in art.
**Part Three: The Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937**

**I. Historical Prelude to the Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937**

During the 1920’s German museums and municipal galleries were quite intuitive about modern artists and their work (Barron 11-13). The Berlin Nationalgalerie, for instance, was the first museum in Europe to acquire paintings of the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne and with time it would house the “most representative sampling of contemporary German art,” as other German museums followed suit (Barron 13). The Folkwang museum in Essen, for instance, was a very early proponent and champion of the works of Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh. The same fervor and excitement for things modern was also detected at Mannheim’s *Kuntshalle* (Barron 13). From 1909 to 1923, Fritz Wichert, Mannheim’s director and one of modernism’s staunchest supporters, acquired masterworks from the French and German Impressionists as well as German Expressionists such as Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Lovis Corinth (Barron 15). In 1923, Gustav Hartlaub replaced Wichert as director in Mannheim and continued the practice of acquiring modern art, developing it into one of the major contemporary art centers in all of Germany (Barron 15-16). Mannheim’s *Kuntshalle* was so highly regarded for its modern art collection that when the Nazis absconded with its collections, Goebbels regarded its plunder as one of the most successful raids on behalf of the Degenerate Art exhibition (Barron 16).

A large number of these museum purchases were made with government tax dollars. It made sense then that if confiscations were to have the appearance of
government legitimacy, Nazi propaganda should target those museums and curators who made purchases and acquisitions of questionable artistic merit. In total, some 650 paintings, purchased with taxpayers’ dollars, were ultimately confiscated from museums between the years 1936 and 1937, many of which found their way to Munich in July of 1937. German museum directors and curators mounted counterattacks against the confiscations, but met with little success (Barron 15). The status of their dwindling funds combined with Hitler’s desire to curry public support from an already distrustful public was to signal their death knell. Interestingly, Hitler held off confiscating modern artworks until the late 1930’s. With world attention focused on Germany during the 1936 summer Olympics, he had to wait; but as early as 1933 modern art had been exhibited and pilloried in the form of mini-exhibitions traveling throughout Germany called the “Chambers of Horror of Art” (Barron 15).

In the wake of the Olympics, attacks on Jews, Communists, and non-Aryans escalated and were aligned with attacks against modern art. The term degeneracy was leveled at any form of art, literature, music, sculpture, or architecture that seemed formally aberrant, unusually original, or deviated from traditionally established aesthetic norms. For the Nazis, modern art was a cultural manifestation that signaled “collapse” (Barron 15). Accordingly, German art was to be purified of this “humbug” and renewed beyond the aberrations of so-called “modern progress” by National Socialism. Once armed with the concept Degenerate Art, Hitler and the Nazis ruthlessly used the new designation to contrast art found seemingly at odds with their own stated policies on art and culture. When it came to art, the Nazis endorsed the language of Greek classicism (see Figures 21, 22, 23, 25), which, when compared to modern art, clarified even more
the conceptual meaning of Degenerate Art. Artworks by Emil Nolde, Max Beckmann, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, just to name a few, are about as anti-classical in form and style as an art form can be (see Figure 29). And so the Nazi’s were convinced that the concept “Degenerate Art” could serve as the basis for an exhibition that would further enhance their own aesthetic position by cleverly defining the “other.”

![Figure 21](image)

**Figure 21**

Any form of public support for modern art, especially in the form of museum acquisitions or enthusiastic museum directors was met with strong, virulent Nazi resistance (Barron 15). For instance, patterns are detectable in the careers of outspoken museum directors. Initially there was intense collecting of modern art among German museums in the early 1920’s. By the mid to late 1920’s, however, acquisitions slowed to a trickle such that by the early 1930’s summary firings and forced removals of museum directors became the norm (Barron 15). There are patterns in exhibitions as well. From
the mid 1920’s to the early 1930’s, for instance, exhibitions at Mannheim’s Kunsthalle ranged from Edvard Munch in 1925 to selected works from the Bauhaus in 1934; however, after 1931 there were no new acquisitions and only graphics were being exhibited (15).

The career of Gustav Hartlaub was typical of many German museum directors. By the late 1920’s Hartlaub’s power increasingly diminished along with other directors from other German museums, all of whom began feeling the heat of National Socialism as well as public outcry. Bourgeois Germans were especially incensed by the amount of tax dollars spent on museum acquisitions, especially when the country was experiencing massive inflation and what seemed like incurable social ills such as starvation, malnutrition, and massive unemployment. It did not take much to incite the population to demand that the Nazi government take action. Summary firings began with Hartlaub’s in 1934, and then spread to museum directorships in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Chemnitz (Barron 18). Vacated positions were filled by Nazi cronies and party functionaries who knew well the aesthetic tastes of the political elite. Nowhere were these tastes more visibly manifested than at the Great German Art Exhibition of 1937.

II. The Great German Art Exhibition of 1937

“[…] people will be astonished to find that at the very time when National Socialism and its leaders were fighting to a finish a heroic struggle for existence—a life-and-death struggle—the first impulses were given towards a revival and resurrection of German art […]” (Hitler, Speeches 569)
In Munich Germany there stands today the oldest civic building constructed by the Nazis (see Figure 22). Its architect, Paul Troost, declared that such a structure ought to evince a new German art and Hitler wholeheartedly concurred. The structure was to be a representative sampling of the monumental style typical of Nazi public structures, an aesthetic idea consistent with the sculpture that lay within its walls. Arno Breker and Joseph Thorak’s classicized nudes were exhibited abundantly throughout the exhibition and were a quotation of the Neoclassical structure in which they stood. The structure’s entrance, a columnar open air portico, echoed the formal symmetry of Thorak’s *Comradeship* (see Figure 23). In total, some 884 paintings and works of sculpture were exhibited at the Great German Art exhibition of 1937 (Grosshans 99). Portraits of Hitler and architect the Paul Troost adorned the museum’s wall space, along with a wide array of paintings and sculptures depicting militaristic themes, domestic and genre scenes, and female nudes (see Figure 24).
From the time the foundation of the museum were laid in 1933 to the museum’s dedication on July 18, 1937, Munich was regarded as the major cultural center of Germany (Grosshans 95-97). The city functioned as a type of spatial and temporal nexus between Germany’s great Romantic past and its modern revival. It was the scene of the ultimately ill-fated relationship between Richard Wagner and King Ludwig II of Bavaria, as well as being the birth place of National Socialism and the burial place of its first martyrs. It only seemed fitting that Munich function as the capital city of German art and be a house dedicated to the pursuit of everything noble about it expressed through its clarity of form.

Clarity was certainly the case. One need not contemplate much the monumentalized nudes of Breker and Thorak to understand the significance they held in...
the growing militaristic society Germany was at the time (see Figures 23 and 25). One sensitive German young man found them frightening. While Peter Guenther, age seventeen, attended the exhibition, he often paused to overhear other spectators commenting on the nudes, complimenting them for their sense of realism, their craftsmanship, and “technical achievement” (Guenther 34). For Guenther, they held no special “appeal” for Guenther, who found them “frightening” and intentionally designed to “imitate famous Greek sculptures” but lacking “the grandeur and quiet balance [Guenther] considered to be the hallmarks of that art” (34).

As a side note, Guenther’s statements of dissent take up a frighteningly real position that is already defined by the rules of a particular discourse. These are not just Greek imitations but rather statues emblematic of physical health, which we have seen is also the discursive location for psychological health. Communal accession to their beauty and clarity in art is therefore a matter of perceptual functionality and acuity, in
which dissent is not a matter of free choice but symptomatic of perceptual dysfunction. Psychologizing aesthetics produced strict scientific laws, where dissent is construed as a deviation from perceptual cognition, the proper functioning of which is manifested by communal assent. As a result, political power assumed the position of arbiter in art related matters by appropriating a pseudo-scientific discourse.

The monumental size of the rooms in the House of German Art was designed to intimidate its patrons and inspire them with awe and reverence. Hitler states the structure itself was a temple dedicated “in honor of the goddess of art” (qtd. in Barron 17). Sheer, unadorned exteriors signified eternal values in the face of a radically changing world through mechanization and industrialization. Strict functionality of parts and a sense of hyper-teleology also contributed to the aesthetic appearance of the building, which the
Nazis regarded as flawless. What was being submitted for exhibition to the House of German Art was an altogether different matter. Goebbels noted in his personal diary that when it came to adjudicating what ultimately would be exhibited, “the sculpture [was] going well, but the painting [was] a real catastrophe. They have hung works that make us shudder…The Führer is in a rage” (qtd. in Barron 17).

There is little indication in the historical record as to who submitted these artworks to be exhibited or what they represented, but we can reasonably speculate on their style based on Hitler’s reactions. As Stephanie Barron points out, Hitler abhorred “unfinished work” and on the basis of this criterion threw out a number of works previously judged acceptable for the exhibition (17). This is no surprise, however. Hitler’s reaction is performed on the basis of a position already defined within the discourses of perceptual and psychological cognition. Art, if it attained to the level the Nazis established, must properly balance the sensuous aspects of its medium with the properly devised inventiveness and creativity based on higher levels of ideation. Tilted toward either extreme, one could find the sketchy form typical of Impressionist visual blasts of colors, or perhaps the outlined but unrecognizable forms of abstraction. Clearly Hitler’s abhorrence of “unfinished work” is a rejection based on a judgment of taste, but bound up within his judgment is a position already defined by the rules of a particular discourse promoted by such pseudo-scientific authors as Theodore Hyslop and Max Nordau.

Hitler presided over the opening of the Great German Art Exhibition on July 18, 1937. The meeting constituted the inaugural exhibition of approved German art and set a standard for those artists who planned to go on creating in the Third Reich. Modern
artists who remained firmly committed to their aesthetic ideals received explicit threats once Hitler announced:

From now on we are going to wage a merciless war of destruction against the last remaining elements of cultural degeneration […] Should there be someone among [the artists] who still believes in his higher destiny—well now, he has had four years’ time to prove himself. These four years are sufficient for us, too, to reach a definite judgment. From now on—of that you can be certain—all those mutually supporting and thereby sustaining cliques of chatterers, dilettantes, and art forgers will be picked up and liquidated. For all we care, those prehistoric Stone-Age culture-barbarians and art-stutterers can return to the caves of their ancestors and there can apply their primitive scratchings. (qtd. in Barron 17)

Some artists were convinced to change their style, especially where favorable economic circumstances promised an increase in the value of their art (Barron 18). The Nazis determined what artists would or would not be exhibited and who would be able to sell their artworks to the public (Barron 18). German artists must convert and hold to a distinctly traditional and conservative sense of style for fear that their art may become the object of government censorship, and hence un-sellable.

Despite these totalitarian strictures, the exhibition and selling of contemporary art was not a new practice in Germany. Most German cities held regular competitive art events where local artists could exhibit and sell their works to the public. The only difference between these smaller local events and The Great German Art Exhibitions was the scale and the amount of governmental backing (Barron 18). Within these locally
operated and regionally held competitions, traditional folk subjects were represented in a conservative manner and popular style and consequently set the standards for the major exhibition held in Munich; moreover, provincial exhibitions stood in sharp contrast to the municipal and city oriented museums exhibiting modern art where things modern were all the rage. During the Third Reich, provincial art, if we may call it that, was created by the folk for the folk, and never was there a more perfect melding of market forces with a political vision of the future for German art:

The creative artist educates and perfects (veredelt) through his work the nation’s capacity for appreciation, just as conversely the general feeling for art thus developed and sustained creates the fruitful soil which is the condition for the birth, the growth, and the activity of creative forces.

(Hitler, *Speeches* 572)

Nazis perceived the cure to ailing cultural matters brought on by modernism in the most ruthless way, speaking of it in terms of “liquidation” and a ridding of German society of “chatterers, dilettantes, and art forgers” (Barron 17). The elevation of provincial genre painting to art subject supreme was one way of wiping out any remaining vestiges of modernism, Expressionism, Dada, Futurism, and Cubism (Barron 18).

III. The Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937: A First Hand Account

On July 19, 1937, the Nazis held up for public ridicule over six-hundred works of modern art (Zuschlag 87). Called the Degenerate Art exhibition, it showcased art works by German artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and Franz Marc. These artists were the standard-bearers of the German avant-garde and as a group
constituted the most original collection of German artists since the early Romantics of the nineteenth century. The exhibition “Degenerate Art” was opened in a Munich building space once occupied by the Institute of Archaeology. If attendance numbers are any indication as to the success of an exhibit, the efforts expended in producing the Degenerate Art exhibition were far more profitable than any other Nazi endorsed cultural event. Accordingly, Degenerate Art’s success inspired Goebbels to take the show “on the road” where it toured such venues as Berlin and Düsseldorf, where many of the art works returned to cities from which they were originally confiscated but no longer occupying the same dignified spaces of museums and art galleries they once had (Barron 20). Hung helter-skelter, many modern art masterpieces were exhibited without frames, in poor lighting, and so close together as to create a visual sense of imbrication (see Figure 26).

There was a general ordering to the exhibit along thematic lines, e.g., “religion, Jewish artists, the vilification of women”—but very little attention was paid toward accuracy specifically on matters of attribution (Lüttichau 48). Peter Guenther’s first hand account of the exhibit provides a deeply sensitive and poignant reaction; moreover, it shows the degree to which “the ideal viewer” is a constructed phenomenon, where individual spaces are revealed and determined by the situational context surrounding the exhibition viewer. Guenther’s interaction with the installation space and the

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8 It is reported that 420,000 people attended The Great German Art Exhibition of 1937 whereas over 2,000,000 were in attendance at The Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937 (Guenther 36).
environmental conditions surrounding the viewer are the subsoil from which a particular subjective point of view emerges. For instance, Guenther records how the exhibit was spatially designed to create a feeling of claustrophobia (36). Narrow corridors led to small, cramped rooms with low ceilings and a rickety staircase from where the viewer initially ascended to see ominously displayed Ludwig Gies’s *Crucified Christ* (1921) (see Figure 27). Confiscated by the Nazis from Lübeck Cathedral, Guenther describes Gies’s sculpture as being thematically located in that part of the exhibition labeled “Insolent mockery of the Divine under Centrist rule” (qtd. in Lüttichau 49). Guenther’s initial reaction to the work was fear and then a closely associated memory of his own experiences with the religious paintings of Matthias Grünewald. His tearful emotions upon viewing the latter might have been transposed onto the former had the spatial positioning of Gies’s work “[not] caused it to lose its impact” (Guenther 36). The insensitive positioning within the installation engendered a type of experience wholly
incongruent with the religious space in which the sculpture was originally meant to be
located and viewed.

Figure 27

Guenther reports that all spatial experiences of the exhibit were designed to
discredit the works on view (36-38). To this end, the lighting was poor and some of the
frames of paintings were missing. In addition, pictures were hung from disorienting
perspectives while provocative, incendiary, and derogatory statements were written
adjacent or near them for the purpose of stimulating ridicule (Grosshans 105; see Figure
28). Chaos was especially conveyed through the juxtaposition of paintings hung at times
from very low and unappealing angles as if to suggest the very qualities the Nazis sought
to disparage in modern art. A sense of claustrophobia, spatial disorder, and poor lighting,
were elements providing a supposed commentary on the very art the installation was showcasing.

Figure 28
*Degenerate Art Exhibition* of 1937.

Guenther’s sympathetic reading of other attendees’ reactions toward Gies’s sculpture underscores discount the fact of spatial context influencing the viewer’s experience and ultimate response to the art. He imagines the difficulty of appreciating Gies’s avant-garde representation of the crucified Christ in Lübeck cathedral, where soldiers of the First World War were laid to rest. Now it was callously located within the claustrophobic installation space of the Degenerate Art exhibition. In this context, the spatial positioning of Gies’s sculpture opens up a space where the term degenerate art can freely operate and find linguistic cachet in the statements of those who use it. For instance, Guenther describes a case in which dialogue, space, and artwork spatially opened up and systematically formed the objects attendees viewed and described as “degenerate.” Adjacent to Gies’s sculpture hung Emil Nolde’s spectacular nine paneled depiction of the life of Jesus Christ, which, according to Guenther, roused deep suspicion
and strong hostility from viewers and attendants (see Figure 29). Guenther recalls a number of deriding comments circulating around and near the paintings, the mildest being “blasphemy” (36).

According to Guenther, statements at the Degenerate Art exhibition also took the form of loud comments and blustering speech (36). One viewer’s opinions were vocalized to complete strangers, as the general tone of the exhibition was one of disparagement when compared to the feeling of reverence Guenther felt at the House of German Art. Uniformed Nazis mixed among German civilians, creating a sense of intellectual oppressiveness. On the assumption there was any dissent or opinions that challenged the exhibition’s condemnations, Guenther did not hear them, choosing to remain silent, deliberately avoiding the looks of those who made loud, angry comments (36).

On his second visit to the Degenerate Art exhibition, Guenther recalls meeting a man who by appearance and speech seemed educated but argued that the deliberately misshapen forms of nature “poisoned the viewer” and that abstract art was part of some massive Jewish conspiracy to undermine true German aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, the whole of the installation appeared to Guenther as a type of indoctrination and brainwashing of German attitudes toward art (43). To the uninformed viewer, intuitive response was enough to discern what was and was not art; and since their indifference and at times repulsion toward what was seen was uninformed and uneducated, a typical disliking of modern art lacked any sound basis for criticism. But there were some occasions when Guenther felt a strange and silent kinship with other viewers. Silence and quiet whispers often revealed a liking of some of the artworks and an understanding
of their significance (Guenther 43). When one woman, however, was emboldened enough to comment on the “loveliness” of some graphic works, she hastily departed upon seeing an eavesdropping Guenther (43).

Figure 29

**IV. The Discourse of Degenerate Art**

Like many other Germans, Guenther learned to keep silent and to keep from asking questions that challenged “official” Nazi opinions on art. The official discourse on degenerate art had firmly been established by Hitler and other party functionaries prior to the installation Degenerate Art. As an art policy, aspects of it were reflected in Zeigler’s inaugural speech, which set the tone and declared the official opinion regarding the contents of the Degenerate Art exhibition:
You see about you products of insanity, of impudence, of ineptitude, and of decadence [and] monstrosities [...] It is a sin and a shame that the institutes are filled with such trash while honest and sincere artists are ignored. [Then with a dramatic flourish, Zeigler announced] Let the German people decide! We have no fear of their verdict! (qtd. in Grosshans 107)

For Foucault, Ziegler’s utterances constitute statements, which are the elementary units of discourse; moreover, the forms of modern knowledge exist in a statement’s material enunciation, which is designated by “its substance, a support, a place, and a date” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 80, 100). These elements are constitutive of Ziegler’s statement in particular and essential to its identification as a stated political policy on matters of degenerate art (Foucault, *Archaeology* 101). However, the identification of a discourse generally is not sufficiently discerned by understanding these elements alone. Rules govern the transformative meaning of the term “discourse” into discursive “practices” where the rules supposedly “reside” in any given discourse (Foucault, *Archaeology* 74). In addition to unifying discourses, these rules are essential to its identification by systematically forming for it “groups of objects, enunciations, concepts, or theoretical choices” (181). In the case of enunciations, the rules decide who is accorded the right to speak authoritatively and from what institutional sites such statements may come from (50, 51).

We have seen already the constant assertion of academic and medical credentials to substantiate theoretical pronouncements from the fields of criminal psychiatry, and psychology on modern art. Cesare Lombroso, a cited authority in criminal psychiatry,
was essential to the comparative methodologies adopted by Theodore Hyslop, senior physician at the Bethlehem Royal Hospital in London. Max Nordau, an acknowledged cultural historian and critic on matters related to art and madness, wrote *Degeneration*, thus making possible the clinical researches of Prinzhorn, which was a critical discursive link to the Fascist melding of politics and art, especially the Nazi persecution of modern art. According to Foucault, these statements are enunciative modalities regarding who has the right to speak “the true” as an authority and are based on the institutional relations such statements share. The prominent ones we have thus far considered are primarily the university and the asylum.

Archaeological analysis uncovers the discursive rules that suddenly make objective the assertions of bourgeois authority and the morality they endorsed. The power of the nineteenth-century medical establishment and its scientists was sacrosanct. But doctors were moral authorities first and foremost. Only then did they cast their diagnosis of degenerate art forms under the guise of medical practitioner and authority. Accordingly, illness, rather than free expression according to modern aesthetic ideals, was the route pursued by many medical critics of avant-garde art, especially Hyslop. Modern knowledge of mental illness and art was therefore defined as a deviation from bourgeois norms and declared as such by those whom the rules of discursive madness accorded the right to speak truthfully on matters related to art and mental health. Foucault describes scenarios of group ascendancy as one group exerting power over another, especially where the felt effects of an arbitrary will to power marginalized individuals on the basis of their appearance and behavior. Degenerates were identified and eventually marginalized on the basis of physical deformities, feeblemindedness,
shattered nerves, atavistic abnormalities, behavioral and sexual excess, red eyes, and exhaustion (Mosse, *Beauty* 27). And where nervous dysfunction posed the most singular threat to mental health, Max Nordau was articulating the pathologies of Expressionist and Impressionist art.

Two works from the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 clearly show the “inabilities” of Expressionist and Impressionist painters to get things “right,” that is, according to the standard authorities on mental health and art. For example, the Viennese Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka’s *The Tempest* (1914), and the German Impressionist painter Lovis Corinth’s *Ecce Homo* (1925), both express modernist tendencies in the quickly handled brush-stroke typical of the Impressionist style (see Figures 30 and 31). Both works were exhibited at Degenerate Art and both depict

![Oskar Kokoschka, *The Tempest*, (1914).](image-url)
subjects the Nazi elite had no qualms with. Wherein the problems lie is their style. According to the Nazis, their major liabilities originate in a presumption about the mental health of their creators. Kokoschka and Corinth’s incompetence stems from an incapacity to see things accurately, and the resulting loss produces distorted and misshapen human forms that mirror each artists’ “own nervous deformities and stunted growth” (Mosse, Beauty 26).

V. Refracting Audience Reaction through Image and Text

A marvelous study has managed to reconstruct the spatial patterning of the original Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937. Through painstaking analysis of the photographic record, Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau has identified where most of the artworks were originally hung, the title of each artwork, the museums from which they were taken, and the precise dollar amounts museums paid for the picture (Lüttichau 45). The Degenerate Art exhibition was installed in such haste, that titles were often misquoted and paintings wrongly attributed; what was not ignored, however, were the quoted prices and the names of each director responsible for such municipal purchases (45). As Lüttichau points out, the net effect of this information was to incite populist hatred toward the directors who orchestrated these purchases (45). By notifying the working public about what their taxes were paying for, it was presumed that the current government must be a vast improvement over the previous political corruption that helped to sponsor such purchases.
Nine rooms housed the Degenerate Art installation (Lüttichau 45). While painting and sculpture dominated the exhibit, many books, collections of graphic prints, drawings, and photographs were to be found in equal abundance (45-82). The majority of paintings and sculpture occupied seven rooms of an upper story unit that was initially arrived at by stairwell. Again, the photographic record shows that paintings were overcrowded and hastily hung on walls, but the organizers tried to impose some sense of order through the use of iconographic groupings (45). The following list of titles organized Degenerate Art’s paintings and sculpture into thematic collections:

- *Insolent mockery of the Divine under centrist rule; Revelation of the Jewish racial soul; The cultural Bolsheviks’ order of battle; An insult to German womanhood; The ideal—cretin and whore; Deliberate sabotage of national defense; German farmers—a Yiddish view; The Jewish longing*
for the wilderness reveals itself—in Germany the negro becomes the racial ideal of a degenerate art; Madness becomes method; Crazy at any price; Nature as seen by sick minds; Even museum bigwigs called this “art of the German people.” (Lüttichau 46)

The didactic titles left little room for a serious and contemplative posture before each artwork and very rarely were they associated in any relevant way to the themes supposedly describing them (46). However, image combined with text in a most provocative and incendiary fashion, as demonstrated on the east wall of room three. Hitler’s statement introducing patrons to the section entitled An insult to German womanhood was extracted from a speech he delivered to an NSDAP party rally in Nuremberg on September 11, 1935:

It is not the mission of art to wallow in filth for filth’s sake, to paint the human being only in a state of putrefaction, to draw cretins as symbols of motherhood, or to present deformed idiots as representatives of manly strength. (qtd. in Lüttichau 57)

This statement’s material basis brings together its discursive presumptions with the works of art designed to reinforce them. For instance, most of room three was an Expressionist collection of female representations stylized in a very non-academic way. Nolde’s Nudes and Eunuch (1912) typified the striking and vibrant color contrasts and modeling the Nazis found particularly insulting (see Figure 32). Once combined with Hitler’s slanderous statements though the didacticism was complete. The explanatory remarks
Figure 32

and the object being viewed constituted a system where the psychological reaction of the viewer “achieved a political function” (Zuschlag 89):

Captions and pictures, juxtaposed or arranged in orderless confusion, are intended to stir the viewer’s emotions, triggering feelings of repulsion and indignation; these feelings in turn, like the opinions expressed in the captions, are intended to encourage a sense of satisfaction at the demise of this type of art and ultimately to inspire agreement with the “revolutionary” new beginning and political succession. (qtd. in Zuschlag 89)

The refracting of image, text, and audience reaction through Foucault’s remarks on statements and discursive practice constitutes the remaining section of Part Three.
VI. Emil Nolde: A Case Study in Degeneracy

Room one in the Degenerate Art exhibition was dedicated to art depicting religious and Christian subject matter. Max Beckmann, Ludwig Gies, and Emil Nolde were the principal artists exhibited here with the support of smaller works by artists such as Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Christian Rohls. The works depicted were largely scenes from the life of Christ as recorded in the New Testament. By far the most impressive was Nolde’s nine panel series from the The life of Christ (1911-12) (see Figures 33 and 34).

In this monumental work, the artist endows each panel with a striking array of tonal contrasts where the complementary colors of greens and reds stand out as the most dominant and boldest pairings throughout the series (see Figure 34). As is the case in many of Nolde’s strongest paintings, his use of color is one of the most significant aspects of the work. Symbolism, especially in the use of intense reds in the central panel
entitled “Crucifixion,” suggests to the viewer the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ through the shedding of His blood. Color symbolism is also designed to point the viewer beyond this world to the next, where the “primitive” aspects of the work are most telling. Flatness and a clear lack of modeling in the figures endow the lifeless work with a spiritual quality. It is difficult to resist citing as an obvious influence on Nolde’s style that is aside from its primitive influences, Paul Gauguin’s *The Yellow Christ* (1889) (see Figure 35).

![Figure 34](image)

Why the title *Insolent mockery of the Divine under Centrist Rule* should be surrounded by works indicative of a long artistic tradition stretching back to Germany’s Northern Renaissance is only made sense given the formal rendering of each panel. Clearly Nolde departs from the strictures pronounced upon German art by Hitler: clarity of form. The represented flatness of each figure, especially the lack of corresponding local color, shows the extent to which naturalism is sacrificed to the symbolic power of color, a fact warranting Nazi criticism. In defense of Nolde, there are historical precedents for this type of symbolism in art. Early Christian art emphasizes a flatness of form and an elimination of spatial depth through the severe overlapping of figures, an artistic convention designed to point the viewer beyond this world to the next. An ungraceful signative style likewise characterizes Nolde’s figures for the express purpose
of denying the viewer’s aesthetic consciousness. Being dazzled or awed by the
beauty of a strapping Greek male is not the focus here. Nolde’s form, like early Christian
art, is designed to lead the viewer to an extrasensory world through the highly symbolic
use of color and figure.

Nolde, however, is distanced from early Christianity by many centuries and at
least one epistemological rupture, according to Foucault. The rupture witnesses the
emergence of man, a space where knowledge no longer consists in the transparency of
language and its representation of a divinely pre-established order. Man is a subject that
knows and whose representative capacities become the object of knowledge, and Kant’s
philosophy is the first to treat the problem of representation in this way. Nolde’s panel
*Resurrection* can be said to function as a form of knowledge in its attempt to depict
divinity within Kant’s transcendental field (see Figure 36). Although as a material

Figure 36
symbol Nolde’s works are still cognizable according to a Kantian schema of intuition and concept, its representation of what is clearly non-cognizable must be a factor somehow imposing certain limits on Nolde’s artistic imagination. According to Kant, God as a divine object cannot be given representational content. Art can only provide, at best, then a material symbol of an unknowable reality. The sketched and unfinished forms of Nolde’s best work indicate the unique representational problems confronting the artist caused by the underlying structure of the Modern episteme.

The Nazi criticism of “insolents” in Nolde’s work arises from a limited perspective that casts the religious in art as the proper melding of classical form with Christian subjects, e.g., *The Christus* (1821) by Bertel Thorvaldsen (see Figure 32). But given the dilemmas of Classical analysis, and Kant’s uniquely philosophical response to the nature of representation posed by these dilemmas, recognizable form in art now becomes a product of the proper balancing of concept and intuition. But in Nolde’s painting *The Kiss of Judas* these higher centers of ideation (Kantian concepts) are nearly forsaken indicating for Hyslop some form of mental illness. In the work, Nolde sacrifices any sense of gestural clarity or recognizable form to pure visual blasts of color, as one is

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9 This conclusion closely approximates Kant’s discussion on adherent beauty as opposed to pure beauty. Often an object’s design is mingled with an awareness of the end it is to subserve (Gilbert and Kuhn 338; Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 81, 82). Granted, Kant’s discussion of adherent beauty focuses exclusively on nature, but the very possibility for a judgment of taste to presuppose a concept opens up an assortment of interesting speculations on recognizable form in art.
reminded of Hyslop’s diagnosis of Impressionist art. Color runs amok, and largely at the expense of form (see Figure 38). For instance, shapes are detectible, but at best are sketched and unfinished. Stylistic conventions such as these, so typical of Nolde’s exhibited works in Munich, earned him pride of place at the Degenerate Art exhibition.

Nolde’s life as an artist is rather tragic. In 1906, he joined Kirchner’s group of artists called *Die Brücke*, but quit his association with them after only a year. He was a lifelong German nationalist and believer in the superiority of German peoples, but these sentiments were revised after a trip he made to the South Seas in 1913. Among the indigenous peoples, Nolde found cultural artifacts possessing what he believed was artistic merit, and as a result he strongly encouraged German museums to collect and
preserve such relics as the last remaining vestiges of a dwindling primitive culture (Grimm 315).

Figure 38

In the wake of his sojourn, Nolde’s work takes on a strong sense of the spiritual and the symbolic, and one senses in it a heavy debt to such artists as Matthias Grünewald and Paul Gauguin (see Figure 35). Unconventional in style and subject matter, his work was the topic of much heated debate, especially in Germany in the early 1930’s. Alois Schardt, director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, attempted to defend Nolde’s Expressionist style to critics by comparing it to the “prophetic ecstasy of early German medieval work” (Grimm 315). Clearly standing outside the Neoclassical tradition, Nolde’s work not only quoted the style and form of Medieval art but also the darker primitive qualities of Polynesian art. Even Nazi art theorist Alfred Rosenberg praised his
seascapes as “strong and powerful” (qtd. in Grimm 319), but then later expressed a more derisive tone to Nolde’s other works.

Joseph Goebbels’ tolerance of Expressionism led many modern artists to think their artistic visions were reconcilable with National Socialist ideology (319; Grosshans 75). But in September 1934, Hitler’s stated cultural policies on art caused them to run for cover as Goebbels’ support quickly vanished (319; Grosshans 74-75). Nolde, unlike Beckmann, was one of the few modern artists who decided to stay in Germany. Persecution of Nolde was quick and decisive, however. In 1935, Nolde’s works were denied exhibition at major German art museums in Berlin and Munich. By 1936, he was denied the right by party leaders to practice or engage in any form of artistic activity and he was accused by the Nazi elite of “cultural irresponsibility” (qtd. in Grimm 319).

Of the 1,052 stolen works of Nolde’s, only twenty-seven of his paintings were exhibited in Degenerate Art. Nolde attended it, whereupon entering room one he saw his famous altarpiece conspicuously displayed as “a violation” of German religious sentiment (Grimm 319). Outraged and greatly distressed, he petitioned the Nazis to desist from persecuting him and to return all his confiscated works. The works were returned but he soon violated his loyalty oath to Adolf Hitler in 1934 by submitting works to a London exhibition protesting the Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich (Grimm 319).

Between 1938 and 1945, watercolor painting on scraps of rice paper was Nolde’s only artistic outlet for fear that suspecting Nazis might smell the oils and turpentine in or around his home. Out of these miniature prototypes came a steady stream of over one-hundred larger works done in oil after the war.
VII. Max Beckmann: Artist of the Modern Episteme

Along with Nolde’s religious paintings, Max Beckmann’s paintings of religious subjects occupied room one as well. Beckmann was a self-styled German artist, who in 1913 at the age of twenty-two first received national attention with his first exhibition in the Galerie Cassirer. The trajectory of his career was immediately halted upon enlisting in the German army in 1915 as a medical orderly (Grimm 203). He suffered a nervous breakdown, and the lingering traces of the war are palpably seen in the changes of his color palette. In Beckmann’s *Night*, for instance, sharp, angular forms dominate the richly textured surfaces of his postwar art (203; see Figure 39). The critics were favorable in their reviews, and once again Beckmann was catapulted to national fame and celebrity. Between 1924-1930, Beckmann’s fame spread internationally; his works were regularly exhibited in galleries in Basel, Zurich, Paris, and the United States (Grimm 203). Retrospectives of Beckmann’s work, a second monograph written in 1925, and a teaching position in Frankfurt, were all indications of professional success no other German artist experienced like Beckmann.

Not until 1932, however, did Beckmann realize the extent of National Socialism’s cultural agenda and what it meant for the avant-garde in Germany (Grimm 203). In 1933, he was dismissed from his teaching position in Frankfurt. That same year he saw his first gallery close in the Nationalgalerie of Berlin. In 1937, Beckmann numbered himself among the artists Hitler condemned in his inaugural speech dedicating the House of German Art. In 1937, Beckmann left Germany for good and eventually settled in New York City where he died in 1950.
In room one of the Degenerate Art exhibition, the placement and spatial positioning of Beckmann’s religious works were found alongside Nolde’s (Grimm 204). Indebted to German renaissance religious painting, Nolde, Beckmann’s religious work still represent, in many ways, the legacy they inherited from traditional religious themes. For instance, Beckmann’s *Deposition*(1917) represents the misshapen body of the crucified Lord with the stiffness of a mannequin, as if rigor mortis has already set in the body (see Figure 40). In addition, the skewed perspective, the jumble of figures, and the overall disorder of the composition, suggests a tragic sensitivity for the solemnity of the moment being depicted.
Within the Modern episteme, Beckmann’s work, however, emerges as a unique statement on the structural shifts between it and the Classical episteme. In the Classical episteme, the negativities of life, labor, and language are:

determination[s] positively constituted on the basis of the infinite. As long as these empirical contents were situated within the space of representation, a metaphysics of the infinite was not only possible but necessary […in other words,] the idea of infinity and, the idea of its determination in finitude, made one another possible. (Foucault, OT 317)

Human finitude and its determination within the elaborate matrices of the infinite was explicated in the form of divine myth, or religious narrative, and posited as anterior to man’s empiricity. At the same time, it provided a “foundation for the existence of bodies,
needs, and words” (Foucault, OT 316). The Modern episteme, on the other hand, was marked by the crisis of representation and the need to somehow ground its nature and power outside representation itself. Along with the crisis came the detachment of these empiricities from representation as well as their determination in relation to the infinite. Beckmann’s Deposition provides for us a visual dismantling of the infinite, where an idea once thought necessary to man’s conception of his own finitude is now found to be “useless” in the Modern episteme (Foucault, OT 317; see Figure 40). The futility of infinity is not discovered as a re-imagined setting of a popular religious subject, but rather symbolically, in terms of the theatrical “striking” of a set where a company of actors, or perhaps a movie crew, is visually depicted as deconstructing an altarpiece on a stage or movie set.

The Nazis’ warped puritanism was obvious on issues such as German domestic life and the family. On the one hand the family, and in particular the peasant family, was the nucleus of all that was great about things German (see Figure 41). As an institution, it must therefore be protected against the destructive forces of urban city life and the “Jew” who sought its destruction (Grimm 204). Beckmann’s Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery (1917) was, the Nazis claimed, one form of attack on the bourgeois institution of marriage and the family (see Figure 42). The painting represents a supreme act of forgiveness, but the Nazis saw it in quite different terms (Grimm 203-204). Rather than see marriage as a legal contract that created the possibility for forgiveness of infidelity, as it is here, the Nazis claimed the painting’s representation undermined the family unit. The weakness of adultery and its representation in art constituted an attack on an institution considered necessary to the “rebuilding of Germany” (204).
Figure 41
Adolf Wissel, *Farm Family from Kahlenberg*, (1939).

Figure 42
Max Beckmann, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, (1917).
Rejection on the basis of subject matter was mere pretext though. Already economically destitute and without any seeming political recourse to assuaging the depressed economy, the mass of German society felt increasingly alienated from the various cultural and artistic outlets designed at reaffirming life. In short, the German bourgeoisie was growing suspicious of modern art and Beckmann’s work, especially given its fractured forms and skewed spaces. These deviations from academic standards in art were just the type of alien perceptions being introduced into a firmly established aesthetic sensibility. It was therefore easy to castigate that which was essentially humane, simply because its formal meaning was inaccessible to most members of German society (Bussmann 116).

What was inaccessible though? World War I showed newer, more gruesome ways the human body could be torn asunder. And no doubt, the blood and carnage of mechanized warfare was to reveal these new shapes and colors to the artistic imaginations of the sensitive Expressionists. For instance, bombed earth, bloated rotting corpses, and the general chaos of life in the trenches are found in the works of Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner not to mention the formal structures of Beckmann’s art (see Figure 43). The claustrophobic and highly compressed figures of Beckmann’s religious works, for instance, come at the expense of a natural ordering of spatial depth and relations among figures. The scale is completely off in the size and shape of the central figure of Christ and the woman to whom He is offering forgiveness (see Figure 42). And though the harsh modeling and angular postures quote some aspects of medieval art, the flattened space and jagged angles that lead the eye to ambiguous unarticulated spaces denote the fractured forms Beckmann was a witness to in the trenches of Flanders.

(Grimm 203). The war, in other words, proffered Beckmann a new formal language from which he could reveal to Weimar Germany the terrifying realities of the present, not the beauties of its own glorious and romantic past (see Figure 39).

In the end, art for Beckmann functioned as social commentary and so must therefore possess a driving passion to confront the masses with its own potential for destruction. Indeed, awakening society to the horrific realities of mechanized warfare required a shocking visual language that could stir the masses from their bourgeois complacency and indifference. It was this point, most keenly articulated in the ungraceful lines, harsh modeling, and bewildering angularities of Beckmann’s work that society could not understand. Where polemically charged work was marked by a subversive tendency to provoke, there resided a radically new concept informing Beckmann’s art. Art was to function as social provocateur and advocate for the meaningless suffering of humanity, a vision seemingly at odds with the sentiments
professed by many Nazi elites such as Dietrich Eckart. Eckart believed, like many Germans, that art was rooted in German racial distinctiveness and “nurtured by German racial memories, and was a witness to the German right to existence” (Grosshans 66). Consequently, art that was tied to the folk that represented images connected with racial consciousness, or manifested the peoples’ longing for beauty in life, were not counted among the values informing Beckmann’s own aesthetic vision. Given Beckmann’s misgivings and lack of interest in German-racial art, Nazi elites were quick to criticize his work as the mad ramblings of an artist obsessed with formal chaos.

VIII. Oskar Kokoschka and Viennese Expressionism

Upon entering room three, viewers of the Degenerate Art exhibition were met by two of Hitler’s quotes. One statement was written along a projection emerging from the south wall and read:

It is not Bolshevist art collectors or their literary henchman who have laid the foundations for the existence of a new art or safeguarded the very survival of art in Germany, but we, we to whom this state owes its life…We shall now wage inexorable war to eliminate the last elements of our cultural decay. (qtd. in Lütichau 57)

“Bolshevist art” is an interesting term of opprobrium. It often denoted something that seemed culturally at odds, queer, or radically unorthodox. When for instance Siegfried Wagner witnessed a Cubist production of The Flying Dutchman he could think of no other word to express his bewilderment than to describe it as “cultural Bolshevism” (Grosshans 65). The term came into common usage in the wake of World War I and was
used to describe the success of the communist revolution in Russia and what the specter of this reality meant to twentieth-century Europe. A type of paranoid hysteria settled upon mostly working class Germans who saw the communist threat and the philosophy of Bolshevism as antithetical to all things German:

Atheism, the materialist interpretation—with its denial of spirit, will, and soul as historical realities—and the stimulation of class warfare throughout Europe characterized the dangers posed from the east.

(Grosshans 63)

These supposed materialist assumptions disregarded any superficial distinction among men that ran along racial or nationalistic lines. The Russian racial chaos was perceived by many German intellectuals as the result of its chaotic sense of history and its inability to produce lasting viable institutional forms (Grosshans 63). Especially disconcerting was German reaction toward the Bolshevik revolution. Exiled critics disseminated in Munich anti-communist propaganda outlining Bolshevik hostilities toward the concepts of racial integrity, the uniquely German heroic interpretation of life, and Germany’s right to one day govern Europe (Grosshans 63-65). According to German racists, artistic creation was bound up in the notion of racial consciousness as the politics of art became a discerning point between what was sound and what was confused, barbaric, or Bolshevik in art. Russian predilections for abstraction, Cubism, or Dada or any other art style deemed confused or nonsensical was the direct by-product of racial chaos and confusion itself (Grosshans 62-65). “Cultural decay” was the certain result of Germany’s failure to win the war and the success of Bolsheviks in governing the lands to the east.
Hitler’s second quote was located on the west wall of room three:

All the artistic and cultural blather of Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists, and the like is neither sound in racial terms nor tolerable in national terms. It can at best be regarded as the expression of a worldview that freely admits that the dissolution of all existing ideas, all nations and all races, their mixing and adulteration, is the loftiest goal of their intellectual creators and clique leaders. With innate, naïve effrontery this cultural equivalent to political destruction seeks to delight the state with a Stone Age culture, as if nothing had happened. (qtd. in Lüttichau 57)

Once conditioned by the quotes found in room three, the viewer was now ready to enter room four. Upon entering, the viewer as subject was contextualized within a vast discursive system of erroneous speculations on the politics of art. Corrupt government went hand in hand with artistic decay, where “inner experience” was no justification for the existence of works by the likes of artists such as Oskar Kokoshka. Of course, the role of the artist within Nazi society was popularized for propagandistic purposes, and so its function was constantly on the minds of those who attended and viewed both the House of German Art and Degenerate Art exhibitions. The aspects of madness the viewer was to derive from his or her comparative analyses with healthy art was never more formidable than in room four where the works of Oskar Kokoschka were exhibited.

As the viewers entered the space of room four, to their immediate left was found Kokoschka’s *The Tempest* (1914), a large composition masterly executed in the style of Viennese Expressionism (see Figure 30). In this work, Kokoschka carried on the principles of psychological realism demonstrated in the portrait paintings of Vincent van
Gogh. Van Gogh’s powerful efforts at representing personality and character created inroads for further psychological explorations by subsequent artists like Kokoschka, who embarked upon painting portraits that incorporate an aesthetic principle taught to him by the Viennese architect Adolf Loos called “privatism” (Schorske 340; see Figure 44).

Figure 44

According to Loos, the subject’s interiority was brought to life through dialogue with the sitter as illustrated in Kokoschka’s portrait *Lotte Franzos*. Evident is Kokoschka’s attempts at penetrating “deeply” into her soul finding a basis for self-knowledge (Schorske 340). In the process, the subject’s vitality suddenly emerges as her face becomes “luminous as consciousness, as spirit” (Schorske 340). The power of the subject’s consciousness was disposed through the facial expression and gestures of the body, and in turn would be expressive of “the soul’s nature and movement” (Schorske
340). Otherness was overcome as the artist imbibed from the overflow of vitality “transmitted” by the subject before himself; moreover, by channeling into the subject’s psyche, a “real presence” was established (340).

Art for Kokoschka was embodied in the effort to capture the vital character of the subject by treating the body as a conduit for the psyche. Emile Zola’s naturalism was rejected as external nature and the “symbols of dress, status, and occupation” no longer provided access to the “de-culturated, essential human being that became the Expressionist’s concern” (Schorske 341). The active spirit that emanated from within the living person created its own energy and animated his or her body in such a way that, if attentive to the clues of gesture and tone, revealed the subject “as [a] ‘real [presence]’ in an almost theological sense” (340). Behind the three-dimensional world existed a greater reality, and though the artist was unbounded by rules, he still managed to give shape to the boundless by concentrating on the faces, gestures, and animated vitality of the subject.

Terms like “real presence,” though an alien concept to the Nazis, is the key to understanding the style and expression in Kokoschka’s The Tempest (1916; see Figure 30). The most obvious feature of the work is the painted surface and the encrustations of impasto that create a sense of form. At the painting’s surface is where its meaning resides, a place where illusion is sacrificed to a style of painting that draws attention to itself. This stylistic convention, however, is not merely self indulgent. The lack of any single texture in the representation of skin and clothing represents “real presence” in each character. The transmission of the most subtle nuances of feeling through the subjects’ faces, where vitality and vibrancy is revealed, is translated by the artist into swirling
dynamic lines, a chaos of rioting color, and a wide variety of brush strokes, all signs of another reality the artist seeks to represent. For Kokoschka, vital character is not captured through photographic realism but through the artist’s concentration on what is both dynamic and static about the subject.

**IX. Nazi Interpretations of Modern Art**

Mental illness and the role it played in establishing a systematic knowledge of the insane artist subscribe to rules emerging in the wake of man, a space where positivism appropriates that which philosophy once claimed as its own: the forms of knowledge. As a result, scientific laws describe the proper functioning of higher centers of ideation in coming to know and experience external reality. As a result, health or deviancy could be determined by how one literally cognized the world. One discovers in healthy perceptions, for instance, a consensus among its member in the judgment of taste as dissent was castigated in the form of degeneration. It becomes apparent then why the Nazis advocated an essentially classical style in art (see Figures 45 and 46). The easy and healthy re-“cognition” of form was facilitated through an academic handling of the brush and chisel. Art that rendered beautiful illusions according to recognizable forms, symmetry of parts, and smoothness of skin was to say the least easily understood.

Opening the Degenerate Art exhibition only a day after the Great German Art exhibition proved significant for the Nazis. It assisted in defining the “other” through letting the German people vote with their eyes. For instance, at each viewing in the Degenerate Art Exhibition, Germans were oppressed by the ever-present threat: “if you don’t buy into
Figure 45
Ivo Saliger, Diana's Rest, (1940).

Figure 46
Arno Breker, Readiness, (1939).
our [the Nazis] sense of art, well, then this is the type of rubbish you have to look
forward to.” Upon leaving the exhibit, the message was clear: if modern art and its
rejection of naturalism were to be tolerated, bourgeois Germans could expect a disruption
in the beautiful illusions of art.

These attendant fears were reinforced by the Nazi sanctioned statements strewn
throughout the Degenerate Art exhibit. Some of the choicer examples were written on
the walls of room five, for instance: “Madness becomes method,” “Crazy at any price,”
“Nature as seen by sick minds,” and finally, “Even museum bigwigs called this ‘art of the
German people’.” As a result, theoretical principles that could possibly be used to justify
a style, like Kokoschka’s “real presence,” were reduced by the Nazis to the level of
meaningless chatter. The Nazi elite were having none of it; for them art which could not
stand on its own, art which was in need of “bombastic instruction for their use,” was not
art at all (Hitler, *Theories of Modern Art* 479). Consequently the situation of the viewer
in room four of the Degenerate Art exhibition denied any meaningful and thoughtful
consideration before the artworks. Why? Because any attempts at legitimating a
particular style was either misunderstood or ridiculed by the Nazis to begin with.

Ridicule took its most odious form in the unappealing proximity between Nazi
text and artwork. What Michel Foucault’s archaeology brings to light are the rules that
allow for such a combination of text and image to begin with. Although grounded on a
particular configuration of knowledge and a set of conditions that made possible the
conjoining of text with image, these conditions were now meant to dominate and
overwhelm the viewer, and to ultimately determine perceptive capacities and judgments
(Foucault, *OT* xiv). In the Degenerate Art exhibition, anyone with healthy perception
could see how the art revealed a world of foreign and alien perceptions. Nazi texts only underscored the mode or being of that experience, and as such the text’s message became indiscernible from the artistic message to the viewer. Indoctrination at such an uncritical level, once disguised as authoritative knowledge in the sphere of art and culture, proved to be a powerful tool of inestimable propagandistic worth.

**X. Constructing the Category Degenerate Art**

For Foucault an “event” such as the Degenerate Art exhibition is dependent upon a number of primary relations coming into existence, including among them political, institutional, psychological and psychiatric practices—diverse elements that could only coalesce into the exhibition because of an idea called “degenerate art” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 66). As a concept, it was used in any number of speech acts and to a large extent by members of a German society populated by psychiatrists and psychologists, politicians, party functionaries, and university professors. In short, it was a concept used in language and practice; and yet this notion, which people were to speak of and perform actions on the basis of, was conditioned by something else:

This final unifying factor cannot be described in objective nor in mentalistic terms. It is rather a certain currently acceptable way of talking (describing, discussing, demanding, announcing) which is taken seriously[....] This specific type of discourse [e.g., degenerate art] is no doubt related to what [doctors, politicians, professors, and laymen] think about [degenerate art], but these ways of *thinking* no more organize all the factors that make up the [exhibition] than do the various social and
economic forces. What organizes the institutional relations of the [exhibition] and the thinking is finally the system of rules which govern what sort of talk about [degenerate art...] can, in a given period, be taken seriously. It is these rules “governing” what can be seriously said that, counter-intuitive as it may first seem, ultimately “effect” or “establish” the [exhibition] as we know it. (Dreyfus and Rabinow 66)

Within the Degenerate Art exhibition what ultimately affects or establishes its systems of relations is not the concept degenerate art but the rules which decide what can or cannot be stated seriously about it. Among the rules, the enunciative modality is the most directly connected to the space of authority from which psychiatry, psychology, political and academic authority possess the right to speak what is true. According to Foucault:

Medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic power, and, generally speaking, their existence as medical statements cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them, and to claim for them the power to overcome suffering and death. (Archaeology 51)

One function of a statement’s modality is the context from which it originates (Gutting, Foucault’s Archaeology 235). For Foucault, a statement is not just a proposition analyzable according to the rules of logic, nor is it a sentential unit defined by the rules of grammatical usage. A statement has a material basis, a clear sense of the place and time of its utterance, where in its enunciative modality certain persons are granted the right to make a statement on the basis of their authority and have it count as knowledge.
When cast in this light, the combined texts with images strewn throughout the Degenerate Art exhibition constitute more than just disparaging and prurient comments about the art contained therein. They are sanctioned remarks given cachet by the political and medical authorities possessing the right through proper training and certifications to speak “the true” about the art (Foucault, *Archaeology* 51). In the cases of statements related to madness and its modern diagnosis, a veneer of scientific objectivity covers over the medical establishment’s real opposition towards madness, which is really based on moral disapproval. This scientific veneer is obliterated once the Nazis appropriate the language of modern mental illness by labeling avant-garde art as mad and degenerate, relying on the statements as texts adorning the walls of the exhibit to convince exhibition goers by their pseudo-scientific cachet. The works of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner illustrate exactly what the Nazis desired from the combination of text and image.

**XI. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Arch Degenerate Artist**

Of the 639 confiscated works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 32 were included in the Degenerate Art exhibition. Often depicting fractured human forms, Kirchner’s work presented a running commentary on the hectic urban life in 1920’s Germany. The works most singled out, however, by the Nazis were Kirchner’s landscapes. Conspicuously displayed in room five near the statement “Nature as seen by sick minds…” was Kirchner’s mountain landscape produced: *Winter Landscape in Moonlight* (1919) (see Figure 1). The painting is rendered in the classic Expressionist style, typified by a highly frenetic brushstroke. Kirchner’s emotional reaction to objective reality lies at the heart of his craft and typifies the subjectivity of Expressionism. His emotions are doing the
painting in that a highly spontaneous brushwork becomes an extension of the emotional states of the artist. The interaction of color, line, and plane heightens the painting’s emotive impact. For instance, striking tonal contrasts are complemented by the jagged and abrupt angular lines of the mountain landscape and trees in the foreground, the creation of which suggests a powerful psychological connection with the environment. The figure-ground relationships alternately changes from the mauve colored trees, to the blue tonal ranges of the mountains, to the sulfur-red yellow sky of the background. This transitioning suggests depth but not through traditional Renaissance conventions. The positioning of blues, oranges, violets, and yellows work together in a complementary relation affects the figure-ground relationship.

Kirchner was certainly influenced by Edvard Munch, and yet novel ideas that stood outside the mainstream avant-garde movement are informing his own work. His deliberate crudity and distortion of human form borrowed heavily from primitive art he observed in the ethnographic museum in Dresden (Hamilton 194). The power of primitivism was equally felt by other European artists who were discovering, independent of Kirchner, the art of Polynesia, such as Picasso (Hamilton 194). In addition to primitive art, floating in and out of Kirchner’s creative transom was the harsh and “emphatic” design of the medieval woodcut (Hamilton 194). Its simple outlines communicated a sense of raw emotional power through a minimal use of line. Kirchner quoted these two styles extensively, but only for the purpose of heightening the emotional impact of his earlier works. Filled with biting social commentary, Kirchner’s art reveals the sad, forlorn existence, of contemporary German society, which is a pervasiveness hypocritical materialism. Disenchantment bred disgust, and so he, along with the other
members of *Die Brücke*, led an attack on bourgeois tastes in art. They did this by disrupting the individual’s sense of continuity between life and the illusion of art. Harsh design, flat color, and a disorienting array of crude human forms offered society “a bridge” to a new world, where an acceptance of modern life, forged through the acceptance of new artistic forms, might release society from the entrenched values of academicism in art and materialism in society (Hamilton 194).

In 1913, *Die Brücke* disbanded and the following year Kirchner volunteered for service in the German army. While in boot camp, his bohemian lifestyle was at odds with the discipline and constant subordination of army life. As a result, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was later confined to a sanatorium. There his artwork flourished, and he completed many important paintings and woodcuts, including frescoes for the Königstein Sanatorium (Guenther 270).

Recovery took the form of a brief stint in Switzerland where he and his art were subsidized by family, friends and physicians. His work progressed amidst illness, but the slow recovery left him addicted to morphine and sleeping pills. Kirchner continued exhibiting his work throughout Switzerland and Germany, and in 1921 the Berlin Nationalgalerie held a showing of fifty of his works (Guenther 270). Critics responded with high praise, and by the early 1920’s Kirchner was largely regarded as the leading Expressionist artist of his time.

The works from room five are the products of Kirchner’s reemergence in the early 1920’s. They are mostly landscapes, which at the time was a very popular subject in German art. What set Kirchner at odds was his depiction of this subject in a way that could only incite hostility from Hitler and the Nazi elite. Such hostility was manifested
in room five. Here Kirchner’s works were deliberately positioned next to the text “Nature as seen by sick minds.” Their complementary relationship was designed to show that Expressionism, along with all its artistic manifestations, was a pathological symptom of mental illness that had a medical explanation. To view, for instance, the work *Winter Landscape in Moonlight* (1919) is to see exactly what Hitler meant when he stated in his speech dedicating The House of German Art:

>that there really are men who on principle feel meadows to be blue, the heaven green, clouds sulphur-yellow—or as they perhaps prefer to say “experience” them thus [see Figure 41]. I need not ask whether they really do see or feel things in this way, but in the name of the German people I have only to prevent these pitiable unfortunates who clearly suffer from defects of vision from attempting with violence to persuade contemporaries by their chatter that these faults of observation are indeed realities or from presenting them as “Art.” Here only two possibilities are open: either these “artists” really do see things in this way and believe in that which they represent—then one has but to ask how the defect in vision arose, and if it is hereditary the Minister for the Interior will have to see to it that so ghastly a defect of vision shall not be allowed to perpetuate itself. ([*Speeches* 590-591])

Inner “experience” was the effort to register the artist’s personal and emotional responses to the natural object, or to convey a sense of the object’s expressive character. What is rendered in Expressionist art therefore is not the product of photographic realism, but a sincere effort at capturing the unique essence of an object. If an Expressionist artist
desired to represent a tree, he would render its convulsive strength through the use of intense vibrant colors applied with an erratic and frenetic brushstroke. This is typified in Kirchner’s moonlit skyline where the clouds are indeed a sulfur-yellow and the pigment is applied with such apparent haste as to render the sidereal forms crude and indiscernible. Finally, the clouds and the moon exude vibrancy as suggested in the loose handling of the brush. Hitler’s statement completely disregards other Expressionist principles possibly at work in Kirchner’s painting by simply reducing it to a product of visual dysfunction.

In defense of Kirchner, the advent of Expressionism opened upon a new set of aesthetic categories such as sincerity, where integrity to the object constitutes a struggle for intimacy with the object. As a result of a highly romantic, even mystical awakening with the natural world surrounding them, the Expressionists depict a world at the expense of realism, or naturalism. Of course, the Nazis objected to this from the start, and deemed it as nothing less than “chatter” meant to disguise either the defects of vision the artist was suffering from or technical incompetence. Ungraceful lines, crudity of form, a childlike and prurient fascination with urbanity as registered in the deliberate misuse of color, line, and form, could only mean a retreat and descent into degeneration and eventual madness.
I. Conclusion

Adolf Hitler’s statements on the beauty of classical art and the degeneration of modern art acquire meaning by taking up a position already defined by the rules of at least two discursive formations: modern psychology and modern aesthetics. Some of these discourses have been briefly touched on already. Lombroso, Nordau, and Hyslop are part of a psychological and psychiatric discourse that applies empirical methods of investigation, comparison, and diagnosis, in its study of the being of man. At the turn of the century, their scientific discourses on madness as mental illness were increasingly understood under the broader rubric of an “objective value-free medical knowledge” and identified as such for the purposes of legitimating the physician’s moral authority over the mad (Gutting, Very Short Introduction 74). It is important to note, however, that the same rules and historical a prioris of psychology and aesthetics also open up the spatial field from which discourses on art and mental illness can and eventually do morph into a Nazi discourse on degenerate art.

German museums were the first to collect large quantities of modern art. The excitement over things modern, inspired directors to collect and exhibit artists like the German Expressionists through regular gallery showings and special retrospectives of their work. Money was spent and deals made to acquire the artworks of German artists who, at the time, were leaders of the avant-garde.
Once the Nazis assumed power, the national fervor for things modern was to radically change beginning in the early 1930’s. Slowly the Nazis encroached upon every aspect of German cultural life, eventually seizing control over the museums, a variety of municipal art collections, and the art schools. Why did this happen? Germany, the Nazis believed, must be cleansed of all aspects of cultural and political degeneracy and modern art was emblematic of such decay. To this end, the Nazis began ousting museum directors sympathetic to the modern art movement, and castigated their reckless and spendthrift attitudes when it came to government subsidized art purchases. Eventual suppression took the form of confiscation as the Nazis systematically confiscated the modern art holdings housed and exhibited in various galleries and museums throughout Germany. These initial confiscations were performed under the Nazi policy *Entartete Kunst Aktion* and the collected artworks constituted the nucleus of the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937.

To contrast with the Degenerate Art exhibition, and thereby conceptually sharpen what was regarded by the Nazis as degenerate in art, the Nazis staged their own exhibition. The Great German Art Exhibition of 1937, was inaugurated by Hitler one day before the Degenerate Art exhibition. Within its walls and standing bold and stark among the monumental works of art were the sculptures of Arno Breker and Joseph Thorak. Endowed with all the beauty of classical symmetry, balance, and proportion, the sculptures combined form with an emotive strength bordering on militaristic fanaticism. Much of the new art housed in Paul Troost’s Neoclassically designed structure possessed the same feelings of simple-minded sensuality indicative of the sculpture. Women were represented either as nude goddesses or as mothers holding, playing, or breastfeeding
infants. Political meaning and intentions were transmitted through artistic form, and health was its first principle of beauty. Accordingly, German men were naturally represented with healthy, lean bodies ready to protect the state in any time of emergency, and women were depicted as the bearers of culture; the creators of a new generation dedicated to the same tasks and duties as their mothers and fathers.

The Great German Art Exhibition of 1937, was not without problems though. While the building that housed the artworks was considered a technical marvel, the Nazis altogether regarded the artworks submitted for exhibition to be low grade kitsch and without merit, particularly the paintings. Pieces, for instance, were rejected and dismissed by Hitler pell-mell, especially if the style of the artwork seemed at odds with what he thought a completed artwork should be. Immediately he zeroed in on a painting’s style searching for flaws, such as sketchiness or looseness of form (Architecture of Doom). Apparently Impressionist sensibilities had even slipped into the language of German folk painting. If the artworks passed Hitler’s visual scrutiny they were guaranteed a place at the exhibition, but only if the work had the look and finish of a completed academic painting.

Adolf Hitler’s particular responses toward art represents more than the passing fancy of a dilettante turned art connoisseur. In his judgments and dismissive manner there was working a number of multiple discourses that informed the encoded eye. As Foucault states:

The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establishes for every man, from the very first,
the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. (*Order xx.*)

Hitler certainly felt at home judging what would and would not finally be exhibited in The Great German Art Exhibition of 1937. What is significant is how the same standards by which modern art was confiscated and finally exhibited a day later, was the same standard by which Hitler adjudicated art matters just described. His obsession with classicism constituted his core aesthetic belief about art and was the basis from which his criticism of modern art was marshaled. Hitler’s taste for antiquity extended not only to its artistic output but to every subsequent art movement it later inspired, ranging from French Neoclassicism to the art of the Bismarck era. His tastes tended to a strong adherence of naturalism in the content of any painting or work of art. This meant Cubism, Symbolism, abstraction, and the skewed perspectives of Expressionism were out, and not to be tolerated by the German nation, but not as ethical violations of an aesthetic standard freely accepted but as signs of cultural degeneration, “their creators being ripe for the madhouse” (*Architecture of Doom*). Sketchiness of form, the biggest liability an artwork could suffer, was for Hitler understood as either a perceptual defect brought on by mental illness or the product of deliberate criminality. In contrast, for Hitler a healthy mind perceives beauty in art and nature according to a certain standard, clarity. “To be German,” Hitler once stated, “is to be clear,” and the thoughtful artistic communication of logical, rational, and above all clear ideas should be indicative of the artwork of the German folk (*Speeches 1*: 587). Hence, a healthy mental awareness of beauty in art was sensitive to proportionality and the symmetry of classical forms, smoothness of skin, and a sense for color that approximated the actual color of
things, thus making form more recognizable, definite, and intuitable. On the other hand, postmodern thought makes an effort to see the subject as the effect of discourses, or, rather, as a “decentered” phenomenon in relation to its or a culture’s thoughts, desires, and actions (Foucault, Archaeology 13). Within this postmodern context, Peter Guenther’s interaction with the Degenerate Art installation space, its environmental conditions, its discursive contexts, and, most importantly, the constellation of modern artworks constituting the exhibition, are the subsoil from which a particular subjective point of view emerges. It is the subjective the Nazis sought to destroy.

Over the course of the dissertation, Kantian aesthetic theory and the Nazi endorsed classical school of art have provided insight into the rules governing the emerging discursive practices and their determination of the concept degenerate art. Operating behind the intended meaning of Hitler’s myriad statements on modern art, there exist the conditions that make his statements possible. We have sought for these conditions in the discursive practices between art and psychology. The works of Breker and Thorak, for instance, are not just Greek imitations but statues symbolizing physical health, which is the discursive location for psychological health. Communal accession to their beauty and clarity in art is therefore a matter of perceptual functionality and acuity, in which dissent is not a matter of free choice but symptomatic of perceptual dysfunction. Psychologizing aesthetics has produced strict scientific laws where dissent is construed as a deviation from perceptual cognition, the proper functioning of which is manifested by communal assent. As a result, political power has assumed the position of arbiter in matters related to art by appropriating a medical and scientific discourse.
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