Spatial Construction in the Work of Max Beckmann:
Weimar Prints and Exile Triptychs

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Introduction

Thanks to funding from the Germanic Languages and Literatures Department and the Residential College at the University of Michigan, I had the exciting opportunity to travel for the purpose of visiting several of Beckmann's famous triptychs, one of which I have written about in the second chapter. I viewed *Schauspieler* in Boston and *Der Anfang* in New York City. When I first approached *Schauspieler* at the Harvard Fogg Museum, I was taken aback by the sheer size of the triptych—at this moment I realized how prolific Beckmann was as an artist. To create even one painting in this scale is impressive, however it is truly amazing that he was able to paint nine triptychs of this measure and produce countless other paintings, prints, watercolors, and drawings before his death at the age of 66. Also massive is Beckmann's source material for his paintings. While in the Weimar era, Beckmann stuck mostly with popular themes and motifs. However, in his triptychs he alludes to plays; films; other paintings; Greek, Roman, Nordic, and Christian mythology; his biography; and the current events of his time. Together, he fuses these fragments into scenes of mystery that elude their own meaning.   When I first began my research with Beckmann, and again as I stood before these paintings, I asked myself, "What could this painting mean? What do all these fragmented elements amount to?"

I first encountered Beckmann in a class during my third year in my undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The class, titled Political Modernism, dealt with representations of society in turmoil during World War II. We focused not only on German artists like Beckmann and his contemporaries like Otto Dix and George Grosz, but also on Russian, British, French, and American artists, writers, and political philosophers ranging from modernist photographer El Lissitzky to the famous Pablo Picasso, and from the stories of Franz Kafka to *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot to the political critique of authoritarian governments in

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* It was in this class that I was first exposed to Beckmann and his triptychs. Immediately, the complex allegorical structure that Beckmann laid out, and his borrowing from aspects of theater, literature, philosophy, and the historical context of his time mesmerized me.

The semester after this course, I studied abroad in Germany. While traveling, I sought out museums where I could see first hand the works of artists I had studied in class, including the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, where I saw an exhibit of Beckmann's portrayal of women and the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, to where I made multiple trips to visit the massive collection of Beckmann's paintings.

After my return to the United States, I began to work more closely with Beckmann's artworks in two different contexts. For the first chapter, I worked intensively with Beckmann's works from the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA). Numerous visits to the paper study room gave me the opportunity to spend several hours face to face with the prints in the collection. These occasions gave me time to think about the construction of space in Beckmann's works from the times before, during, and after the First World War. The excellent collection at UMMA provided me with a wide breadth of prints to choose from. I was initially struck by Beckmann's commitment to the representation of the human form in connection to the surrounding space. With each visit, I narrowed down my range of prints until I arrived at the selection I have used in the first chapter. As I went deeper into my research with the prints, the significance of allegory began to fade in favor of spatial construction. I started to read the images in terms of interior and exterior spaces, and the framing techniques used by Beckmann to create atmospheres that compress the figures within. Allegory, while sometimes present in the prints, comes through as a manifestation of these spaces.

During the writing process, I found that allegory plays a smaller role than I had

previously thought. The closer I looked into the triptychs and read Beckmann's personal

theories of art, the less inherent value I saw in the allegories themselves, but rather in the

metaphoric relationship between Beckmann's conception of space and the events surrounding

the construction of these works. Space is the ultimate metaphor in Beckmann's work—the

importance of which stayed with him from the early 1910s until his death nearly 40 years later.

In his now famous speech, *On my Painting*, given in London immediately following his exile in

1938, Beckmann claims that a mastery over space is the tool that allows him create the reality of

his paintings.

> My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into
> painting—to make the invisible visible through reality…What helps me most in this task
> is the penetration of space. Height, width, and depth are the three phenomena that I must
> transfer into one plane to form the abstract surface of the picture, and thus to protect
> myself from the infinity of space…When spiritual, metaphysical, material, or immaterial
> events come into my life, I can fix them only by way of painting. Therefore I hardly need
> to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal that I can make it
> real only by means of painting.[1]

Beckmann states that his goal is to turn the invisible visible by depicting reality. But this reality

is inherently distorted because it is the transmission of the three-dimensional plane of the human

senses onto a flat canvas surface. The three formal elements of space are his tools to do this, and

also his tools to "protect [himself] from the infinity of space", as if space is a dangerous force

that one must be careful with as to not be totally consumed by it. Additionally he says that he

can "fix" all events he counters "only by way of painting." Beckmann's canvas is a space where

he does represent the world around him, but not in the traditional sense of cultural criticism.

Rather, by depicting the things he encounters in life, Beckmann weaves a personal world-view

from a combination of biographical, historical, and metaphysical fragments. The allegorical

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[1] Beckmann. "On my Painting." 302-303.

narrations he creates speak to the society in which he lived, but also serve a purpose much more personal to Beckmann—his painting is where he "fixes" things. Beckmann's commentary on his own art is useful for me, because it is here where he explicitly outlines his beliefs about the power and significance of space itself.

I began to read into the space in the context of the time these works were created. In his prints, Beckmann reflects the anxieties of his time through the effects of spatial construction. This is what he means when he says he "fixes" things—for Beckmann, painting served as a practice that allowed him to find truth and to work out complex problems in his own life and in current events. In this thesis, I historicize his works' societal commentary and Beckmann's biography.

I have organized my thesis around the two world wars. Beckmann served as a medic in the First World War. For him, and many other enlisted men, this war was a pivotal moment of violent destruction. For many, there was no returning to the old ways of life after the war. In the first chapter, I trace Beckmann's prints chronologically beginning with the time before the war, moving into the war, and reflecting on post-war moments. I read the prints from these times as representations of collective anxieties experienced under the destructive threat of the First World War. These collective anxieties are central to the dark, thick, and compressed spaces evident in Beckmann's early prints.

Beckmann claims in the quoted excerpt that despite an inherent distortion involved in the process of transmission from the three- to the two-dimensional, he need not abstract the depiction of his figures, for they are "unreal enough already." The figures familiar unfamiliarity is summed up with the term central to the work of Sigmund Freud, *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny. These two concerns—with space and with the uncanny—come together in the work of

Anthony Vidler, an architectural historian at Cooper Union. For my theoretical backing of the first chapter, I consequently use Anthony Vidler's book, *The Architectural Uncanny*, in which he lays out his interpretation of modern spaces. Vidler combines literature, philosophy, and elements of psychoanalysis to analyze these all-too-unfamiliar spaces of modernity. I borrow from him the idea of "dark space" and elaborate on it to explicate formal, stylistic, and compositional aspects of Beckmann's early prints. Dark space is the space that hides, obscures, and harbors the unseen. I analyze Beckmann's works with a careful eye for dark space and interpret it as manifestations of collective anxieties surrounding the First World War. But dark space is not the only manifestation of these fears. I develop a notion of thick space, which I define as compression of the composition resulting in a claustrophobic effect. Beckmann used dark, thick, and compressed spaces in various degrees in all of these prints to create the visual effect of unease.

I also use fragments from an essay by Stefan Jonsson, a contemporary scholar in the field of German Studies, to explain the significance of the individual and the masses in Weimar-era modernity. He asserts that no individual is totally autonomous and no group is without individuals. Jonsson's commentary on this topic is especially useful for the comparison that I set up between Beckmann's street scenes and those of George Grosz, one of Beckmann's contemporaries. This is important in my research because of the lack of subjectivity in Beckmann's early figures. This is where I raise the problem of subjectivity in an ongoing discussion of internality and externality. I use Jonsson's analysis of subjectivity in the Weimar era to read into the lack of interiority in these works and how the individual functions within a mass composed of many individuals. Jonsson's work additionally enables me to argue that the

street scenes by Beckmann and Grosz are both expressions of pure externality that consist only of empty figures that hold no interiority.

I supplement my argument about the subjectivity (or lack thereof) of Beckmann's printed figures with a section from the "The Hotel Lobby," a 1927 article by Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer was cultural critique contemporaneous with Beckmann who wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of the most popular daily newspapers during the 1920s and early 1930s. During the same time, Beckmann also lived in Frankfurt. The writings of Kracauer, a founding member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, are useful not only to me, but to other Beckmann scholars for his motifs and ideas of space. Sabine Eckmann, a contemporary scholar of German art, begins her essay "Max Beckmann: From Space to Place" with a quote from Kracauer. "The images of spaces are the dreams of society. Wherever one deciphers the hieroglyph of any image of a space, there the basis of social reality comes into sight."[2] As is clear from this quote, Kracauer and Beckmann shared similar ideas of space. Although it is unclear if Beckmann knew Kracauer directly, it can safely be said that Beckmann was aware of Kracauer's published writings. Beckmann spent time at the office of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where he

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[2] Eckmann. "Space to Place." 267.

made this pencil sketch.[3] "Hotel Lobby" is a useful source for my research, as it helps me to

compare Kracauer's analysis of the subjectivity of the hotel visitors to the construction of

subjectivity in Beckmann's prints.

In the second chapter, I move forward to the years before and during the Second World

War, using a similar structure to that of the first chapter. I begin with Beckmann's first two

triptychs, which he created while living in a perceived sphere of exile: Beckmann did not leave

Germany permanently until 1937, however in the years leading up to his exile the Nazis

disregarded him and attempted to erase his significance in the canon of modern German art.

Dismissed from his professorial position at the art academy in Frankfurt and prohibited from

exhibiting, Beckmann found his career prematurely halted by the authoritarian rule of National

Socialism. At the beginning of the second chapter I call up Stephan Lackner's retelling of his

visit to Berlin to visit an exhibition of Beckmann's in 1933. He arrived to find the exhibit

banned. He recalls his experience after convincing the museum to let him see the works in the

storage room. He writes, "The windowless room was lighted by a solitary, strong bulb dangling

from the ceiling, casting shadows like bat wings over the canvases leaning against the walls.

Beckmann's art had gone underground."[4] In my second chapter, I am partially interested in

Beckmann's exile, both perceived while still in Germany, and officially in Amsterdam, and the

impact this experience had on his art. I also focus on the way in which Beckmann uses his

triptychs as a stage to play out, or "fix", the current events surrounding his exile and the onset of

the Second World War.

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[3] Max Beckmann, Editorial office of the Frankfurter Zeitung (1924).
Levin. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. 7.
[4] Lackner. "Shared Exile." 108.

I analyze these first two triptychs before I move into the historical context of Beckmann's exile and the eminent threat of the Second World War. In this chapter, I read into one triptych painted during the war, however I purposely omit the triptychs painted post-war when Beckmann was in the United States. In these late triptychs, some of the last works Beckmann created before his death in 1950, he withdraws somewhat from society, both in his personal life and in his painting. Because of this, these paintings do not reflect in the same ways on society as the preceding works, and thus, they are not as pertinent to my argument. For this reason, I have not included them in my discussion.

In the second chapter, I bring the central ideas of space from the prints into the triptychs. Highlighting essential themes such as dark space and compression, I analyze the triptychs as a continuation of earlier constructions of prints. The treatment of space contributes in part to the theatrical effect of the triptychs, particularly the dark space in the scenes of torture in *Abfahrt (Departure)*. I include a discussion of the format of the triptychs themselves, and their imitation of the stage. Elements and motifs of theatricality had already been implicit in the prints, but the triptychs now make them explicit with specific references to the stage and performers.

I base much of my argument for this chapter in the secondary literature of two Beckmann historians, Charles Kessler and Reinhard Spieler. Kessler, who wrote in the 1970s, provides commentary on each of Beckmann's nine triptychs in chronological order. Although problematic at times because of his outdated idea of German nationalism, Kessler nonetheless provides a valuable narrative of Beckmann's personal life and creation of the famous triptychs from his persecution in Germany to his death in New York.

Reinhard Spieler wrote the essay "Pictorial Worlds, World Views: Max Beckmann's Triptychs" in the 1990's for the catalog accompanying the exhibition *Max Beckmann in Exile* at

the Guggenheim in New York. I rely heavily, admittedly perhaps too heavily, on Spieler's

interpretations of Beckmann's characters, their origins, and their differences in depiction

throughout all of Beckmann's paintings. I expand on Spieler's idea of the master and the lackey

to the master and the slave, where I discuss Beckmann's reoccurring figure, the bellhop (the

personification of fate, as indicated by Beckmann in a speech) and the warrior, the legalized

executioner for the state. In this section, I point out the diametrical oppositions that Beckmann

sets up: women and men, the master and the slave, and redemption and condemnation.

Beckmann composes his triptych paintings around sets of opposites which he pins against each

other as a form of personal or social commentary.

Additionally, I argue that the triptych format itself is an allegory for the artificial

construct of reality under totalitarian regimes. It is important to note that I refrain from

describing Beckmann's characters as "figures" in the second chapter. I call them "characters"

instead to emphasize that they hold a subjectivity that the figures of his prints lack. Using my

observations about the theater as a reflection of society and a section from Hannah Arendt's *The

Origins of Totalitarianism,* I argue that Beckmann's triptych characters project their subjectivity

because of their position as actors on a stage. Using Arendt, I draw comparisons between the

actor on the stage and the citizen under totalitarianism.

At the beginning of this thesis, I underestimated the significance of space as a metaphor

in Beckmann's work. I did not consider that space itself might function as a metaphor in

Beckmann's work. When I first started research, what entranced me the most about Beckmann's

work was the magnitude of his painting and the air of mystery that surrounded his art. Now what

fascinates me is Beckmann's ability to so easily incorporate metaphors from not only his

construction of space, but the material format with which he paints. The transformation of three-

dimensionality onto a flat canvas was, for Beckmann, not only a practice of power over the natural world, but also later in his career, perhaps an acceptable outlet for the temptations of political power that he recognized (and possibly empathized with). Beckmann's true artistic ability lies not only in his technical abilities, but more importantly, in his expert recognition of the world around him and so smoothly represent it metaphorically. I hope that in this thesis I have portrayed Beckmann as the accomplished allegorist he truly was.

Alienation of Beckmann's Figures through Spatial Constructions

In his early years between 1898, at the age of 14, and the mid 1920s, the German artist

Max Beckmann produced over 300 prints, a vast oeuvre that has been overshadowed by his

famous later paintings and triptychs.[5] Space, in these works, plays a leading role in the way

figures interact with each other, or with the viewer, through metaphors constructed in spatial

terms. In this chapter, I outline the spatial constructions featured in the prints, ranging from

1912 to 1922, from the collection of Beckmann prints found at the University of Michigan

Museum of Art (UMMA). These images are exemplary of Beckmann's prints from his pre- and

post-war career. I will examine prints from this collection in comparison with other prints and

portfolios by Beckman from this period, as well as with prints by George Grosz, a contemporary

of Beckmann. Additionally, I attempt to historicize the individual works or groups of work by

situating them in their relevant contexts, namely, the times before, during, and after World War I.

This chronological approach will show the progression and complication of Beckmann's spatial

construction over time. Compression of the image is present in prints as early as 1912, but

becomes increasingly more cramped at the onset of the war. Additionally, Beckmann

complicates the idea of dark space by the increasing focus on compression in what I call thick

space.

I argue that relationships between figures in the works of Beckmann are determined by

the space in which they exist. Spatial construction always reflects something about the society in

which they were created, and thus exhibit particular historical anxieties. Furthermore, I argue

that these misgivings were experienced collectively. Through an understanding of "impending

tragedy," amplified by the uncanny, I argue that Beckmann does three major things with his

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[5] Selz. *Max Beckmann.* 9.

spatial construction. Firstly, he de-familiarizes clearly identifiable space by creating what architectural historian Anthony Vidler describes as "dark space" and by creating compositions of chaotic containment, obscuring the social spaces previously well-known by his contemporaries. Secondly, Beckmann objectifies the figures by omitting their interiority, which in turn dismisses the human relationships as shallow ones. And most importantly, through de-familiarization and the division into subjects and objects, he alienates and estranges the figures from all human interaction, effectively representing the collective anxieties of the wartime period. In a shift of degree from the de-familiarization of the pre-war dark space, Beckmann began to draw more heavily on compressed space as a representation of the changing collective anxiety. He does so by incorporating the two concepts, dark and thick space, both of which draw from ideas of the uncanny.

Pre-War Dark Space

  Maison Close (1912), named after a well-known Parisian brothel, features two nude women who sit opposite a darkened figure, who wears a large brimmed hat covering most of his face. A third, partially drawn woman sits to the far right, simply observing. The male figure is ostensibly Beckmann himself, as he often included himself in his prints.[6] The attention of the two main female figures is focused on the Beckmann-figure, but we are unsure of his role. Perhaps he is a pimp, or maybe he is a customer—maybe he is even the owner of the brothel.

  Beckmann creates an ambiguous relationship between these figures by withholding context that would make the interaction directly understandable—a technique he employed even more dramatically in his triptychs. Beckmann surrounds the figures with rough, dark lines that

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[6] Lackner. *Memories.* 35.

emanate from all around the figures—perhaps the antithesis of a halo. He slices through the head of two women and the man. Together, these elements explain the compression of this print, however the dark incision lines surrounding the figures are the more notable element. *Maison Close* exhibits the darkened space of the brothel by way of these lines. The backs of two nude women are emphasized. The only face we see in this print is the third woman in the right corner—the emphasis on the women's backs and the darkness of the man's face heighten the non-encounter between these four figures.

Contemporary architectural historian Anthony Vidler, in his book entitled *The Architectural Uncanny*, explores aspects of spatial and architectural uncanny as depicted in literature, philosophy, and psychology. Using psychoanalytic terms, he discusses the haunting architecture of domestic spaces as well as the labyrinthine spaces of modern cities.

Etymologically, *das Unheimliche* might be literally translated as *the unhomely*. In his essay *The Uncanny*, Freud writes, "*Unheimlich* is clearly the opposite of *Heimlich, heimisch, vertraut*, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar. But of course the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. All one can say is that what is novel may well prove frightening and uncanny; some things that are novel are indeed frightening, but by no means all. Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny."[7] Borrowing this concept from Freud, Vidler poses the unhomely in a discussion that is particularly useful for my research with Beckmann's prints in relation to Beckmann's depictions of dark space and domestic environments. Dark space, especially in the context of Beckmann's representations of society, is the "something" that is added to Freud's idea of uncanny that turns it frightening and eerie. In this book, Videler dedicates a chapter to his concept of dark space. He writes:

> …space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness. Indeed, space as threat, as harbinger of the unseen, operates as medical and psychical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being. The body, indeed, has become its own exterior, as its cell structure has become the object of spatial modeling that maps its own sites of immunological battle and describes the form of its antibodies.[8]

"Outside" spaces, meaning the spaces of exile and confinement, spill over into the "normal" space of the city according to Vidler. The result is spilling over of dark space into light space; "In every case 'light space' is invaded by the figure of dark space,' on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the

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[7] Freud. "The Uncanny." 124-125.
[8] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny.* 167.

homeless."[9]   The organic space of the body and the social space in which the body exists are merged together. Dark space, the opposite of light space and transparency, is opaque and vague—it is the space of the "harbinger of the unseen" and the force that merges the body and the social space surrounding it.   It is precisely the force of dark space that intrudes a well-known space and transforms it into something familiarly unfamiliar and dreadful; for example, the space of a brothel that once was a home and the invasion of the outsider in the parlor of a house. This is the effect of the unheimlich uncanny in Beckmann's early prints.

The male figure in *Maison Close* hides himself behind the shadow of his large hat, shielding his eyes from the gaze of the viewers and the women around the table. The dark space, here indicated by the dark, incisive lines surrounding the figures on all sides, effectively encompass the figures within the anticipation of the destruction of societal life as it was known then. This is due partially to the subject matter. The scene of the brothel and women brings about questions of the power relationship between the man and the women, as well as a contradiction between prostitutes and domestic wives. Is the depiction of prostitution a representation of the fusion between the externality of the females' bodies and their social situations? Their nude bodies are treated as an exterior by Beckmann and admired by the visitors of the brothel as such. The bodies, in the case of *Maison Close*, are only surface—the women are present for their nudity and the man for his almost threatening position of authority over the women. Although the print is not exclusively commentary on the social hierarchy of the man and women and "possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being,"[10] one can rightfully say that one interpretation of the metaphor of space seen here is the representation of threat.

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[9] Ibid. 168.
[10] Ibid. 167.

Vidler concludes his chapter on dark space quoting Roger Caillois. "[One] tries to look

at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where

things cannot be put…"[11] Vidler then states about the quote:

> …'dark space' [is] a space that is lived under the conditions of depersonalization and
> assumed absorption. [Eugene] Minkowski, distinguishing between 'light space' and
> 'dark space,' saw dark space as a living entity, experienced despite its lack of visual
> depth and visible extension, as deep: "an opaque and unlimited sphere wherein all the
> radii are the same, black and mysterious."[12]

It is precisely this dark space that gives Beckmann's pre-war prints a sense of mystery and

disillusionment. The shadows around the figures on either side engulf the subjects, turning this

scene into something clandestine and sinister. Freud writes, "As witness the passage from [Karl]

Gutzkow: 'We call that *unheimlich*; you call it *heimlich*.' This reminds us that this word

heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually

contradictory, but very different from each other—the one relating to what is familiar and

comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden. *Unheimlich* is the antonym of

heimlich only in the latter's first sense, not in its second."[13] Dark space contributes to the

uncomfortable feeling of these prints by concealing its contents, for example the shadow from

the man's hat that obstructs his face in *Maison Close.*

As Minkowski points out, the lack of depth in dark space emphasizes the mysteriousness

of the aesthetic. While *Maison Close* is limited in depth, there are still strong indicators of

spatial depth, including the darkness that Minkowski argues flattens space. Two years after the

creation of this print, at the very beginning of the war, Beckmann published a manifesto of sorts

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[11] Ibid. 174. Quote by Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia.*
[12] Ibid. 174. Quote by Eugene Minkowski, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*.
[13] Freud. "The Uncanny." 132.

titled *Das Neue Program* (1914) indicating a change in his understanding of spatiality. He

writes:

> It makes me sad to have to emphasize this, but thanks to the current fad for flat paintings, people have reached the point where they condemn a picture a priori as naturalistic simply because it is not flat, thin, and decorative. I certainly don't want to deprive decorative painting of its right to exist as art…As for myself, I paint and try to develop my style *exclusively in terms of deep space*, something that in contrast to superficially decorative art penetrates as far as possible into the very core of nature and the spirit of things.[14]

The publication of *Das Neue Program* is the marking point for a change in spatial technique for

Beckmann. Although the technique for portraying space changes at the start of the war, the goal

is the same. As is the case in *Maison Close*, the dark space is significant in de-familiarizing the

represented space. A brothel is reduced to a business meeting and in *Abendgesellschaft*, the

home is stripped of all its domestic qualities.

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[14] Beckmann. "The New Program." 132.

Abendgesellschaft (Evening Party) (1913) follows with an analogous setting to *Maison Close*, however the scene unfolds in a parlor, or perhaps kitchen of a house instead of a brothel. The dark space of *Abendgesellschaft* is even more dramatic than that of *Maison Close*. The scene seems to unfold on a stage due to the theatricality of the lighting and its contrast to the darkness.[15] Another Beckmann-figure stands behind a table while a man and woman, presumably a husband and wife, sit across from him. The kitchen light hangs in front of the Beckmann-figure, and shines upon his face from below to create menacing shadows as he smirks slyly. The contrast between Beckmann's face and the darkness of the room sets an ominous tone. In the introduction to his book, Vidler says, "At the heart of the anxiety provoked by such alien presences was a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home."[16] This quote embodies the mood of the print—the man and woman are not masters of their own domain. Instead, a menacing figure acts as the ringleader and appears to be in total control of the situation—he is the alien presence that objectifies and alienates the previously comfortable space of the home.

The alienation is closely tied to structures of power in the figural relationships in Beckmann's prints, and later in his paintings. The man in *Maison Close* estranges himself through a mask of darkness, while the standing man in *Abendgesellschaft* establishes his alienation through the ominous light and the surrounding darkness that indicates his power over the objects at his control—he is the subject and people at the table his objects. The objectification that is set up by Beckmann in these pre-war prints involves a complex relationship between the viewer, who can be seen as the objective observer of the scene; the

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[15] Beckmann loved the theater and often composed his prints and paintings as if the canvas was a stage and he was the director and choreographer. Although his prints, for the most part, lack an obvious stage, they are clearly theatrical.

[16] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny*. 3-4.

actor, or the subject, who in these instances is played by Beckmann himself; and the object, or the acted upon. Beckmann often includes observers and what I deem "lurking observers" in many of his works, whose presence even further complicates the relationship between the subject and the object.

This is what I believe Vidler means when he says that the "body [becomes] its own exterior." Through dark space, there is an alienation of the bourgeois class as the home becomes subjected to violence and insecurity, which in turn de-familiarizes the space from spaces previously known. The alien presence changes the dynamic of the household and reduces it to structures of power. The body of the alien presence serves here as the embodiment of threat and destruction of the bourgeois class by disrupting the power dynamic of the household and as a result, disillusions the previously well-known space of the house and family. This estrangement demolishes the domestic sphere, and leaves the body as the border between the exterior and interiority of the individual subject. The physical body creates a border between the interiority of the human and the exteriority of outside influences. The body, then, becomes a neutral object that Beckmann draws. The body becomes its own exterior through the representation of only its exterior properties, as Beckmann does in these prints.

Although the nature of the interaction between the subject and the object may be difficult to determine, it is nonetheless obvious that in these pre-war prints, interaction between figures is still possible. This is no longer the case after the start of the First World War. Alienation prior to the onset of war is only seen as a threat, it is not yet manifested. While interaction in these prewar prints is still possible, all possibility of relationships will be eliminated and replaced by isolation during and after the First World War.

Thick Space – Confinement of Chaos

Amongst the main motifs Beckmann used in the works produced during this time period

is a thickness of space, filled with figures and constricted within architectural spaces. The figures

in his print, *Gesellschaft (Community)* (1915), are pushed together by the narrow frame and

overcrowded by the sheer number of figures in view. The result is the paradoxical duality of

confined movement and stifling immobility, paralyzing any motion. The woman in this print

who first captures our gaze stares straight ahead from her position just left of center as if she is

trapped in this motionless chaotic space, unable to move, unable to connect with others, and

unable to escape. She stares directly into space out of the frame, but avoids direct connection

with the viewer. The woman cannot engage with any other being—she is locked within herself,

perhaps as a result of her stagnated movement due to both the cramped space within the image as

well as the confinement of the frame. Just as alienation is closely tied to the disaffected

relationships in Beckmann's pre-war prints, the estrangement of figures in Beckmann's prints

during and after the war are closely tied to the de-familiarization of spaces, which is manifested

in the violent destruction of World War I. Recognition and communication in this world are no longer possible.

The other figures in *Gesellschaft* cluster the area around the central woman. Many of the figures have their backs turned to the viewer in a manner similar to the nude women in *Maison Close.* Their eyes do not meet, but are instead shielded from the other figures. It is impossible for the figures to have an encounter. Beckmann draws the interior space of the room by indicating the corner of two walls and a ceiling. He centers the corner of the room between the figures in such a way as to give the impression of impossible number of figures in a very small space in order to heighten the effect of compression. Furthermore, the title, "geselleschaft" is literally defined as "company," but in this context, Beckmann uses it to indicate it society as a whole[17]. The double entendre of the title points to the crowded company of the assembled figures, however the larger meaning of society indicate Beckmann's message of social anxieties and the claustrophobia surrounding Germany at the beginning of the First World War.

Spatial tension and the constriction of space, along with dealings of exterior and interior space additionally contribute to the unification and disconnect of the figures in Beckmann's early prints. In *Gesellschaft,* the frame, along with the composition, and sharp inward angles of the figures, forces the denial of interaction between the depicted figures. The figures, pushed together by the frame, must deal with the lack of space, which limits their movement. Over stimulation from the busyness of the scene creates apathy for the figures who are faced with no options for escape.

The thickness of space as demonstrated by this print is hardly an isolated phenomenon in Beckmann's work. In *Trinklied (Drinking Song)* (1920), Beckmann configures the subjects off-kilter in the shape of a diamond within the rectilinear frame of the print. The scene depicts bourgeois men drinking and eating in excess. Beckmann is quite critical of the men and the

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[17] Perhaps the odd size relationships of the figures represent a social hierarchy: men are larger than women.

society they represent: the largest man has empty eyes behind his spectacles; another is animal-like, devouring his food with his sharp teeth; and another man is upside down. Like in so many of Beckmann's other prints, the men do not acknowledge one another—it appears as if they have no connection other than their compressed presence within the print. Beckmann breaks down and rearranges the architectural elements of the chairs, table, and the bar to indicate the unsettling atmosphere of the thickness of this space and the drunken rowdiness. A rectangular border frames the work, and Beckmann keeps the composition level, yet he portrays it within an internal frame that is rotated 45 degrees. This diagonal frame extends past the even larger rectangular frame into the margins of the page, penetrating the frame on all four sides. Carla Hoffmann, in a 1984 illustrated exhibition catalogue of a retrospective on Beckmann's life works at the Saint Louis Art Museum, comments on the print in a brief excerpt. "Beckmann has drawn a border around the composition, visually reinforcing the sense of confinement."[18] Still, the border does not contain the image without breakage. Instead, the scene spills out of its containment into the

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[18] Hoffmann. *Retrospective.* 407.

limits of the paper, perhaps representative of the ways that wartime anxieties have spilled over

into all aspects of social life during the Weimar Republic.

Thus, this signifies a shift in the manifestations of anxiety present in Beckmann's pre-

and post-war prints. Before the war, the dark space is seen as the metaphor of societal

disintegration—"the possible erosion of bourgeois bodily and social well being[19]," whereas the

prints created during or after the war are crowded, cramped, and thick with claustrophobia. The

wartime anxieties in his prints from 1914 onwards can perhaps be read as a manifestation or

breakthrough of the foreboding anxieties depicted in Beckmann's pre-war prints. The prints post

1914 make more explicit what was previously implicit—the crammed spaces of Beckmann's

prints after the First World War imply the destruction and disintegration of society in ways that

his previous prints only hinted at.

Thick, cramped spaces never become obsolete for Beckmann until the very end of his

life. In fact, many of his later paintings surrounding the time of the Second World War depict

space in a similar manner to these early prints. In this light, Peter Selz, in his book *Max

Beckman*, quotes art critic Hans Eckstein, who comments on Beckmann's 1942 triptych

Schauspieler:

> The heavy forms, powerful yet cramped, the confined, claustrophobic space, which
> pushes in on all sides, and from the back and front, the discontinuity, the paradoxical
> combination of the motionless and the violent, the opposition of the pattern and
> modeling, these go through the whole work, regardless of subject. From these constant
> elements, Beckmann constructs his style of impending tragedy.[20]

The spatial compression of Beckmann's prints during and after the First World War is his

starting place for the sense of "impending tragedy" that continuously shows in his art for most of

his life. Thick space created either through the enlargement and distortion of figures, as is the

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[19] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny.* 168
[20] Selz. *Max Beckmann.* 81. Quote by Hans Eckstein.

case in *Schauspieler,* or through the over-crowdedness of prints like *Gesellschaft* contributes to

the sense of an imminent social destruction. The confinement of thick space gives the

impression that it could break at any moment and usher in an age of terror. Unbeknownst to

Beckmann and his contemporaries, this new age of terror would manifest in the destruction of

the Weimar Republic and the rise of a totalitarian government.

However, the spectrum of anxieties depicted during the Weimar Republic is unique to the

war and post-war periods. Beckmann's pre-war prints, through the dark space, depict the

estrangement of familial life, however there is a shift in the configuration of space and shadow at

the onset of the war. Selz, using Beckmann's own words, admittedly argues that the containment

of space was for Beckmann a post-war phenomenon, and afterwards rejoiced in "not having

filled up the foreground with junk."[21] However, contrary to Selz's argument, the degree of

containment in Beckmann's pre-war prints was novel. Beckmann's experience in the war most

likely exposed him to assembled masses in small tight spaces, with many soldiers, in trenches or

in army vehicles. The cluster and chaos of war, in terms of exploding dynamism and condensed

groups of people, and perhaps the massive amounts of casualties, had a devastating impact on

Beckmann, and, whether consciously or not, affected his style. Having served in the medical

corps during the war, Beckmann witnessed firsthand the wounding effect of the war. During his

service, Beckmann suffered a serious mental breakdown and moved to Frankfurt after his

discharge.[22] Beckmann's demeanor after the war was very much more solemn and introverted.

Beckmann's personal transition during the war might have influenced the depictions of

compressed space in the prints that immediately following his service. This containment of space

seen in the post-war prints is absent completely from his pre-war ones. I argue that although the

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[21] Selz. *Max Beckmann.* 25. Quote by Beckmann.
[22] Ibid. 25.

mechanism with which Beckmann creates anxiety transitioned from dark space to thick space during the pre- and post-war periods respectively, Beckmann constantly depicts the anxieties of his time.

Wartime Anxieties and The Street in Weimar Republic (Internalization of the Exterior)

The end of the First World War left Germany devastated and fearful. Involved nations experienced unprecedented fatalities and injuries during the First World War, and Germany was hit especially badly in terms of fatalities. The citizens of the Weimar Republic encountered a loss of personal security and inadequate food, as well as the burden of economic reparations. With the onset of modernity, the space of domesticity quickly moved to metropolises rather than rural areas. The street, a facet of the city, became symbolic of the Weimar Republic, and modernity more generally, by representing the historical disorientation following a war period of unforeseen violence and death.

As was typical of his time, Beckmann created a number of street scenes, the most important of which is *Die Straße (The Street)* (1919). It was created as a part of the *Die Hölle (The Hell)* portfolio, which

represents hell on earth during and after the end of the First World War. The architecture in the street scene frames the figures on the top and left side and also threatens disaster; the precariously leaning buildings appear as if they could collapse inward at any moment, squashing the crowd. The right side spills into the margin to signify that the chaos cannot be contained— exterior influences are spreading and encroaching on all aspects of life in the Weimar Republic. The distorted size of the figures does not indicate linear perspective; the farthest figures appear the same, or larger, in size as the figures in the foreground. Distortion of the figures and the framing architecture plausibly indicate the distortion that war causes to the human body, society, and to the entire nation. The architectural features in *Die Straße* frame the print within the context of city life during the republic, through which Beckmann was able to demonstrate both extremes of human interaction: Unreserved, intimate engagement of the figures and the impersonal interactions of autonomous strangers, which was becoming the norm rather than the exception. Just like the body becoming its own exterior in the pre-war prints, *Die Straße* represents the externalization of the interior space in the post-war world. The street becomes a symbol of the dominant externalism that encroaches on the internal, domestic space.

The figures in Beckmann's *Die Straße* are depicted in stacked perspective and are jumbled together in a chaotic cluster. It is so chaotic that no one notices anything else—the figures do not even appear to notice that Beckmann, depicting himself in the scene,[23] is dragging a dead man through the streets. In the lower right corner of the print, Beckmann, wearing a bowler hat, bends down to ask a veteran for directions. He represents himself as a part of the bourgeoisie, however juxtaposes his own class with that of the poor, disheveled veteran. Beckmann also signifies this class divide in terms of style. He, and the other members of the

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[23] Ibid. 19.

bourgeois class are drawn naturally, while the disabled veteran is a sketch; he is angular, unrefined, and without shading.

Comparably, *Friedrichstraße,* a lithograph from Grosz's book of lithographic prints, *Ecce Homo* (1922-23), depicts overlapping figures on a bustling sidewalk in Berlin. The figures are superimposed upon one another as if they were invisible or empty within. Stefan Jonsson, in his essay about the collective in Weimar Germany, argues that Grosz presents a "visual diagram of the dividable nature of the human subject, and the agglomerative nature of the collective."[24]

> The unity of the pictorial plane is exploded by a dissonant play of horizontal, vertical, or diagonal lines that appear to extend beyond the frames of the image. No individual is so autonomous that he or she may be set apart from his or her fellows by means of an unbroken line of contour. Instead, the outlines of one person intersect with those of his or her neighbor, and both of them are dissected by or merge with the jagged lines of the tilting cityscape. Shapes are superimposed upon one another. Forms interconnect in one great social chain. Neither individuals nor masses: what Grosz presents is an agglomeration of subindividuals—*Teil-Ichen*—in the process of splitting away from or fusing with other similar subjects.[25]

No individual is totally autonomous and no group is without individuals. The organization of the masses in Grosz's and Beckmann's Weimar-era prints indicates the loss of individual identity through becoming part of the mass and the simultaneous gain of a new identity precisely through this new grouping.

Jonsson's analysis of Grosz's print also shines new light on the idea of the individual and mass, as well as interaction and disengagement of individuals in Beckmann's work. The "agglomeration of subindividuals" seems particularly relevant to the way Beckmann groups the individual figures within his prints to create a "mass".

> The importance of the masses represented here is not that they destroy a person's individual identity, but that they present a social situation in which the human subject re-experiences the entire course of its concurrent socialization and individualization, sensing both what it is like to lose one's individuality by becoming part of the swarm and what it

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[24] Jonsson. "Representations of the Collective in Interwar German Culture." 294.
[25] Ibid. 294.

is like to shape one's individual identity by adapting to, or deviating from, the norms and forms offered by the collective. In this view, the masses signify not a fall from social organization to disorder, but an ongoing reorganization of social passions.[26]

The individuals of the mass internalize the identity of the mass as a collective whole, and then reinstitute themselves as a part of said mass. As Jonsson points out, the street depictions are neither a whole mass nor a set of individuals. Rather, through "Teil-Ichen," the grouping of subindividuals together in the street reconstitutes them as a completely different form—that is neither fully subjective nor objective.

The street represents the transition in the Weimar Republic of individual subjects to the collective object—the sum of all individual subjects. Jonsson says that the street represents what it is like to simultaneously lose ones individuality while adapting this individuality to the "norms offered by the collective." The street, thus, is significant as the marking point for the exteriority of society and the collective invading and assuming the interiority of the individual.

The street, an exterior space, moves into the interiority of homes and individual spaces. The claustrophobia of the street mirrors the space of *Gesellschaft*, resulting in a seemingly

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[26] Ibid. 293-294.

exterior space, but is nonetheless a constriction, and not, as it may seem, an opening up of space.

The externality of masses encroaches on the interiority of the individual just as the external,

violent world encroaches on the interiority of the home.

Domesticity and The Uncanny

Ostensibly the symbolic opposite of the street, the home becomes a battleground for the

encroachment of the exterior as represented by the street. Beckmann represented the eerie nature

of the household and its disruption by an alien force in his pre-war print *Abendgesellschaft*.

However, as discussed above, the dark space of *Abendgesellschaft* is similar, but still patently

different, from the representations of anxiety that occurred in Beckmann's works after the start

of the war. Still, we can see elements of the "uncanny" in this print, which are then further

developed by Beckmann in his prints during the following years. Vidler says:

> Themes of anxiety and dread, provoked by a real or imagined sense of 'unhomeliness,'
> seemed particularly appropriate to a moment when, as Freud noted in 1915, the entire
> 'homeland' of Europe, cradle and apparently secure house of western civilization, was in
> the process of barbaric regression; when the territorial security that had fostered the
> notion of a unified culture was broken, bringing a powerful disillusionment with the
> universal 'museum' of the European 'fatherland.'[27]

He adopts Freud's construction of *"das Unheimliche"* to signify moments of anxiety and war.

For many soldiers and Europeans, the First World War was an uncanny movement. Freud

argues that the idea of death, self-mortality, corpses, and spirits and ghosts are perhaps the most

notable manifestations of the uncanny. He writes:

> To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death,
> dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts…We might in fact have begun our
> investigation with this example of the uncanny—perhaps the most potent—but we did not
> do so because here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly
> overlaid by it. Yet in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so
> little since primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in
> our relation to death…It is true that in textbooks on logic the statement that 'all men must

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[27] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny*. 7.

die' passes for an exemplary general proposition, but it obvious to no one; our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality[28]
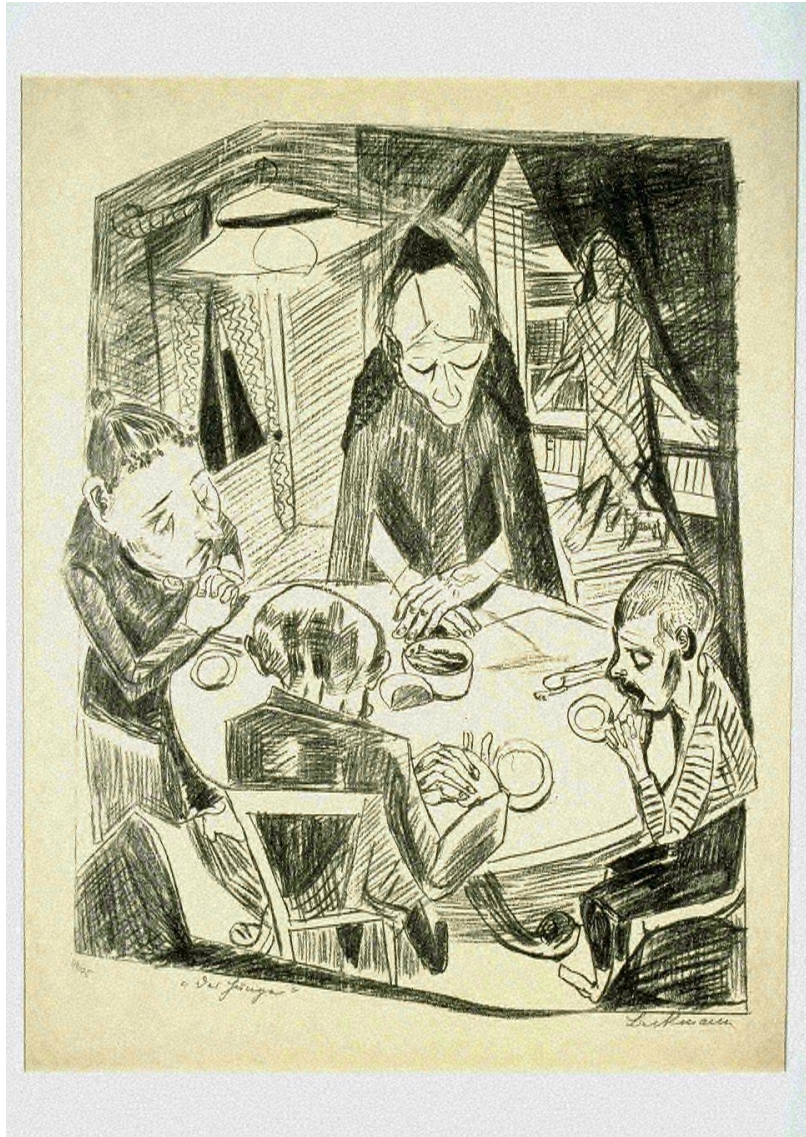
The moment of war and mass European destruction forced soldiers and civilians alike to face their own mortality. The mass deaths experienced during the First World War forced the confrontation of their inherent death. This realization of human fragility resulted in uncanny space that was uncomfortable and unlike the European homeland before the war. The destruction of cities and families during the war left Europe in a state of anxiety. Vidler says further, "'The Uncanny' seems to incorporate, albeit in an unstated form, many observations on the nature of anxiety and shock that he was unable to include in the more clinical studies of shell shock."[29] The First World War is the marker that indicates the point in time when the "unified culture [of Europe] was broken," thus ushering in the age of a compilation of fragments. Destruction of familial life due to the many causalities of war and the realization of self-mortality broke Europe and changed its mood in ways that could not be reversed.

We can see the beginning of this anxiety manifest as early as 1913 in Beckmann's *Abendgesellschaft.* The uncanny de-familiarizes the space that was previously recognizable, resulting in an invasion of all aspects of life and the alienation of subjects from homely comfort by plunging them into a world where evil lurks around every corner. Among these collective anxieties were economic fears. In the time between the wars, Germany's economy was faced with hardships, including hyperinflation. Due to this, many families lost everything, and many people starved.

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[28] Freud. "The Uncanny." 148.
[29] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny.* 7.

In *Hunger* (1919), part of the portfolio *Die Hölle*, Beckmann illustrates the hellish conditions of the Weimar Republic, namely, the all-too-familiar hunger experienced by the many impoverished families. He depicts the figures within the interior kitchen of a house, seated at the table as they pray before the meager meal. The struggles of a whole nation are epitomized in the family. Unable to make ends meet, the youngest boy on the right side is emaciated to the point where his jaw protrudes grotesquely from his face—the personification of dark space.

Windows have a long tradition in romanticism as a portal from the interior to the exterior, however Beckmann corrupts this tradition. In this print, the window is impenetrable, blocking space rather than opening it up. On the far wall of *Der Hunger* is a window with curtains parted and black nothingness beyond—it encloses the figures inside the kitchen with no possibility of an "outside." To quote Selz, "…we stare at a blank [black] area, which, like a closed door, shuts
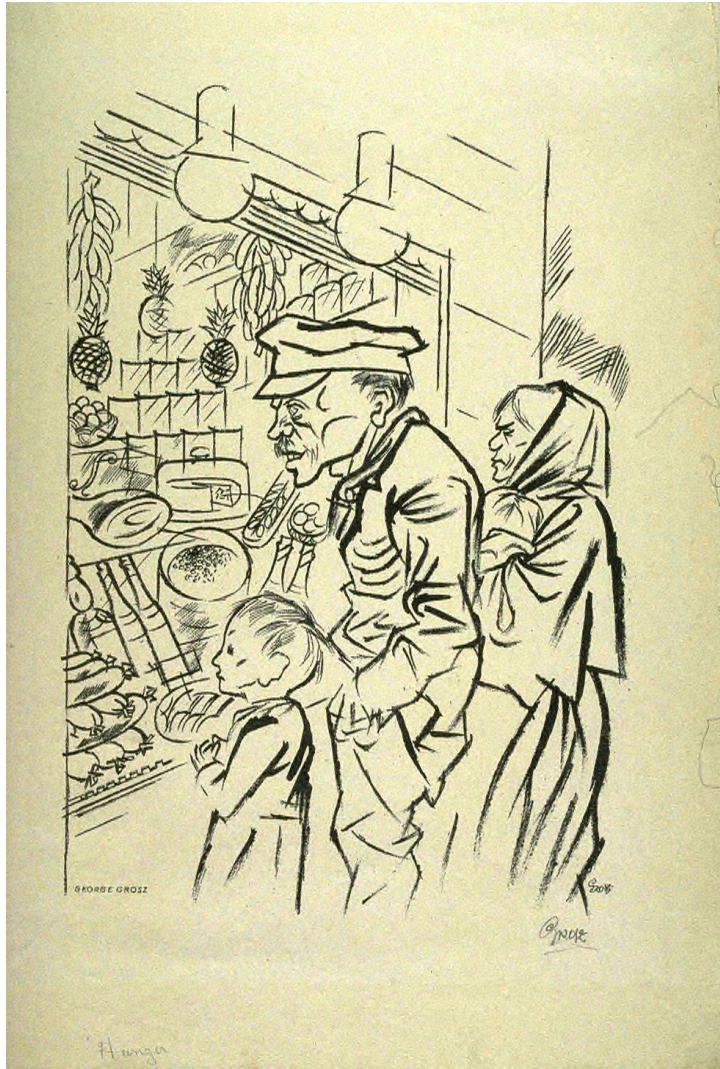
out space."[30] In Beckmann's *Hunger*, the window acts as a closed door to "lock" the space of the kitchen and to undermine the earlier function of the window in romantic art as a way to amplify the uncanny effect. In this print, the exterior to the interior of the kitchen is black void.

In a print by the same title (1924), George Grosz depicts a starving family looking into the window of a grocery shop full of cuts of meat and exotic fruits. The ribs of the father are exaggerated and defined through the fabric of his thin jacket. A young boy stands to his left, hands folded under his chin. The woman, with a baby in arms and a look of distain upon her face, stands behind the man. They all stare intently at the cheese, bread, fruits, meats, and wine bottles displayed in the shop window. Hunger was a part of daily life for the Germans who lived through the Weimar Republic, and thus, it became a theme for many

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[30] Selz. *Max Beckmann.* 25
This quote is regarding *Self-Portrait with Red Scarf* (1917), Beckmann's first postwar self-portrait. Selz compares the window in *Red Scarf* with *Self-Portrait, Florence* from 1907, where he depicts a luscious garden in an impressionist style behind Beckmann as a young painter. I have replaced "yellow" in this quote with "black" to relate it more accurately to *Der Hunger* and *Umarmung,* as these prints are black and white.

German artists of this time. Both prints are critical of society, but while Grosz's print is literal about his criticism, Beckmann's print is allegorical and less direct. Beckmann's *Hunger* addresses the impending destruction of family life as a symbol for the destruction of civilization as we know it through use of the uncanny and introduction of religious motifs. For these reasons, Beckmann's print is, in my opinion, more powerful.

Both prints also depict the family, but Grosz places the family on the street, while Beckmann frames the family within the interior of a house. In his print, Grosz also splits space into the interior and exterior by placing the family clearly outside as they look into the glass window shop. The glass window here acts as a partition between economic classes, resulting in distain for the "have-ing class" by the "have-not class". Although Grosz makes use of the glass window of the shop to amplify the division between the poor and the shop full of goods, he only does so to further the socially critical tone, while Beckmann's division between the exterior and interior serves to portray the threat of societal disintegration. Although the scenes represent the same subject matter, and even hold the same title, Beckmann's depiction, the more radical of the two, does not suggest the same social critique that Grosz's print does, but rather suggests mystery and eeriness of the uncanny, wrapped in with vague religious allusions. The lurking Christ observer in Beckmann's *Hunger* complicates what might otherwise be considered a standard critique of society by introducing mysterious elements. The radicalness of Beckmann's print, as opposed to Grosz's, consists of the merging of social critique with allegorical allusions.

In *Hunger,* Beckmann draws the viewer into the intimate scene of a starving family through the use of the black shape at the bottom of the print that might indicate an armchair, or other piece of furniture, seen from the perspective of the viewer sitting in the chair. This positions the viewer directly in the room with the family, as one would see the scene from the

spot of the figure-observer, intensifying the already intimate atmosphere of the work and adding

an eerie sense of prurience. The reassignment of the viewer to the position of the observer-figure

within the work itself amplifies the voyeuristic feeling of this print. However, we, the viewers,

are not the only voyeur. Vidler writes of the significance of the familial home in the uncanny:

"The house provided an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent

domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate

shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits."[31]

Beckmann inserts a Christ-figure as the observer in the background, unbeknownst to the

family—Christ, the lurking observer. Is Christ this invading alien? Perhaps he appeals to the

viewer. Matthew 25:42 reads, "For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty

and you gave me nothing to drink."[32] Therefore the starving family is the embodiment of Christ

in need. The inclusion of the Christ figure with the lamb, a metaphor for the sacrificial

dimension of Christ, may function as a commentary on the image of the starving family.

This eeriness creates a space where the homeliness of the kitchen is impossible—the

emaciated family is not safe from the outside problems of the world in which they live. The

home is no longer a safe-zone, but rather is transformed as the symbol of societal conflicts and

anxieties. This is the same effect of *Abendgesllschaft.* As early as 1913, domestic life was

already being threatened by the alien existence of the standing man. Simply his presence is

enough to de-familiarize the space of the parlor for the man and wife at the table.

Elements of dark space are still visible in *Hunger*. The Christ-figure hides in the

shadows along the wall, while the family remains oblivious (or possibly just habituated) to his

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[31] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny*. 17.
[32] The Holy Bible. Matthew 25:42.

presence. The dark space is the "threat, as harbinger of the unseen,"[33] yet, ironically, Beckmann

inserts Christ as the threat, while the family prays before their meal. Christ has transcended his

position as the savior and taken on new meaning as the alien that epitomizes the uncanniness of

the household. It is also possible that Christ is not at all this alien threat, but is simply himself—

emaciated and in need. In this case, the appeal is to the viewer of the print to act. Blending

social criticism and religious mysticism, Beckmann calls on the viewers to answer the lesson of

Matthew 25:42 because they are the instantiation of Christ himself in a specific historical

context.

But perhaps the biggest indicator of the "darkest recesses and forgotten margins"[34] of

dark space is the black window—it functions similarly to the lines surrounding the figures of

Maison Close by encapsulating the
family in black exteriority. It defies
the traditional representations of
windows by creating a barrier
between the internal and external
worlds instead of an opening to the
outside world, as a window would
normally function.

The window is a common
motif in Beckmann's works and
occurs often in his triptychs. Several

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[33] Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny*. 167.
[34] Ibid. 67.

years after *Hunger,* Beckmann depicted a shattered window in his print *Umarmung (Embrace)* (1922). As is the case in *Hunger*, this window denotes an interruption of space between the interior and exterior worlds, but the window in *Umarmung* is shattered. The figures hold one another in a deep embrace, be it violent or sexual, relate to one another in the process, showing that intimate interaction is still possible. I suggest that the shattered barrier between the internal and external worlds, indicated by the broken window in *Umarmung*, is shattered by the actions of the figures within—it is precisely the embrace and unification of the figures that shatters his and her metaphoric "window," and allows passage between the interior and exterior, resulting in the amalgamation of the two figures. The intimacy is an inseparable aspect of the home, and now, with *Umarmung,* the violent intimacy is not discernable from the sexual intimacy. Still, the mere fact that intimacy exists, even in its violent form, shatters the barrier between the exterior and the interior of the individuals; this is encoded in the image as the entwinement of the two human beings. Beckmann constructs the spatial metaphor of the broken window to further support this.

Disengagement and the Impossibility of Human Relationships

The following prints, made one year before *Umarmung*, are examples of figurative estrangement in Beckmann's Weimar era prints. *Der Neger (The Negro)* (1921), from Beckmann's series *Der Jahrmarkt (The Fair)*, stands out as an interesting interaction between two

circus actors. The white circus clown speaks to the black man, as if giving an order, but the black man does not respond. The black man has a distraught look upon his face, as if he is being faced with an arduous task. The men's interaction demonstrates a power inequality. The white man looks directly at the black man's face, whereas the latter appears to look down, thus creating an interesting dilemma of one figure's attempt to engage, while the other one actively avoids it. Directly behind and to the left of the black man, a black woman in profile walks by. The woman in the background stares straight ahead with unwavering eyes, unengaged with either of the men.

Garderobe (Dressing Room) (1921) portrays the dressing room of a theater or cabarets performance. The print is composed similarly to the two figures in *Der Neger*. A male actor applies his makeup from behind a vanity, while a woman is seated adjacent to him, facing away from the viewer. Their positions are strikingly similar to that of the black man and white clown. The woman's head in *Garderobe* is framed by the mirror that sits in front of her, yet it extends beyond the top of the mirror, breaking the internal frame. The male performer is also framed in front of his vanity, with a stark black line directly above his head to signify the interior space of the dressing room. The two figures seem to not quite acknowledge the other—there seems to be no interaction between the two. Their eyes do not

meet, their mouths are shut, however the woman seems to be looking from her one eye directly

at the viewer, seeking recognition in a manner similar to the way in which the white man seeks

the attention of the black man in *Der Neger*. The scene is as if she was looking at someone who

had walked through the door, interrupting this ironically intimate scene between two non-

interacting figures. The woman's hand seems to touch the man's shoulder, however this is

merely a trick of perspective. This minor detail suggests the possibility of unification between

the figures, however it is a flat and shallow possibility.

Siegfried Kracauer, a writer for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and member of the Frankfurt

School of critical theory*,* wrote frequently about the subjectivity and interiority during the age of

modernity. This excerpt from his essay "The Hotel Lobby," written contemporaneously to these

prints, sums up the arguments I have presented in this chapter about the lack of interiority of

Beckmann's printed figures. By comparing and contrasting the members of a congregation of a

church with the visitors of a hotel, Kracauer writes:

> Remnants of individuals slip into the nirvana of relaxation, faces disappear behind
> newspapers, and the artificial continuous light illuminates nothing but mannequins. It is
> the coming and going of unfamiliar people who have become empty forms because they
> have lost their password, and who now file by as ungraspable flat ghosts. If they
> possessed an interior, it would have no windows at all, and they would perish aware of
> their endless abandonment, instead of knowing of their homeland as the congregation [of
> a church] does. But as pure exterior, they escape themselves and express their nonbeing
> through the false aesthetic affirmation of the estrangement that has been installed
> between them…And the fleeting exchange of glances which creates the possibility of
> exchange is acknowledged only because the illusion of that possibility confirms the
> reality of the distance.[35]

As Kracauer suggests, the expression of the pure exterior form of the figures indicates an

interiority that is locked in itself, but only if they possessed an interior. However, they contain

no interior whatsoever. The fleeting glances of Beckmann's figures shows the possibility, or

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[35] Kracauer. "Hotel Lobby." 183.

perhaps merely a longing, for human engagement, however the space in which he constructs his figures undermines this desire in favor of isolation. Beckmann's figures from his early prints are indeed locked inside themselves, unable to ask or to give recognition to one another—they are truly paralyzed by their existence in Beckmann's spatial constructions.   Through the processes of estrangement and alienation, the figures become pure exterior—"ungraspable flat ghosts." As Kracauer might put it, Beckmann's figures, which lack interiority, show some attempts at negating this estrangement, however, in doing so, their distance and alienation is further reinforced.

Space of Theatricality in Beckmann's Triptychs

The Weimar Republic, characterized by diametrical opposition of the bourgeois and working classes, German and Jewish, and other radical opposites, gave way to a society under Nazism that violently homogenized its citizens through racial cleansing and intimidation tactics. In the 1920s, Beckmann was at the height of his career to date. He held a teaching position at the Städelschule Academy of Fine Art in Frankfurt and was exhibited widely in Europe and abroad. Beckmann was famous at home and abroad, but this changed under the increasingly fascist environment of Germany during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Hitler's rise to power and the disintegration of parliament in 1933 mark the Weimar Republic's end and the beginning of the Third Reich. Beckmann's shift in style coincided with the rise of the Nazi party, and the actions that made his art *verboten*, forbidden, under the Third Reich. From 1933 until his emigration in 1937, Beckmann persevered through intense persecution by the Nazi Party, including dismissal from his professorial position, enduring the labeling of his art as *entartete,* degenerate, and pressure from his friends and supporters to leave Germany for his own safety. Still, Beckmann remained in Germany longer than most of his friends. Beckmann was not Jewish, communist, or politically active in dislodging the Nazi party, thus he did not face immediate persecution, which might explain why he remained so long in Germany. He was deemed a "*Kunstbolschewist*", a cultural Bolshevik[36] by the Nazis because of his art, although he was not politically active, and certainly no Bolshevik. Still, Beckmann did relocate from Frankfurt to Berlin following his dismissal from the Städelschule in an attempt to become anonymous within the large metropolis.[37] Nonetheless, he was prohibited from exhibiting. Lackner recalls his experience in June of 1933 when he viewed Beckmann's

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[36] Lackner. *Memories.* 18.
[37] Ibid. 16.

paintings in the storage room of a museum in Berlin after the exhibition was shut down for being

considered degenerate in "Shared Exile: My Friendship with Max Beckmann, 1933-1950" and

again in *Memories of a Friendship.* Lackner writes, "Beckmann's art had literally gone

underground. Perhaps a feeling of foreboding, even danger, augmented the impact. The

catacomb-like darkness was pierced by a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Fleeting

visions stormed in on us: strong, proud figures in landscapes glittering like jeweled mosaics.

The richness of these new works was overwhelming."[38] Beckmann's paintings, as described by

Lackner, seem to gain power in their subterranean context. By going "underground,"

Beckmann's art gained a new significance in its oppressed context.

On the 19th of July, the day after Hitler's announcement speech to open the *Haus der*

Deutschen Kunst, the Munich museum built to house the degenerate art exhibit set to open one

week later, and which displayed six paintings by Beckmann. The very next day Beckmann and

his wife, Quappi, packed their bags and traveled to Holland, where they would stay until the end

of the war. Finally, the insult and dismissal of his art became too much for Beckmann.

Although he did not know it at the time, he would never return to Germany.[39] Lackner and

Beckmann, both forced to leave their home country of Germany in the face of the Second World

War, remained close throughout Beckmann's exile in Amsterdam until his death in New York

City in 1950. With Lackner's patronage and support, Beckmann, free to work, lived in relative

comfort in Amsterdam even after the occupation, where he maintained a studio in an old tobacco

warehouse. He stayed here until 1947, when he relocated to America for the last three years of

his life.[40]

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[38] Ibid. 11.
[39] Ibid. 26.
[40] Selz. *Max Beckmann.* 91.

While still in Germany, Beckmann had begun working with a new genre of painting. The triptychs are by far his most well known works—and for good reason. During the war, and despite having been labeled as degenerate and forced to emigrate from his home in Germany, Beckmann produced a monumental number of paintings in exile. Nine triptychs in total, including one left unfinished, create a body of masterpieces that confirms Beckmann's achievements as an artist and allegorist. These paintings punctuate the last twenty years of Beckmann's life, having often been created at the most pivotal and challenging times. In this chapter, I will carefully examine the two triptychs from the time Beckmann was still in Germany and one from his exile in Amsterdam. I am omitting the last three triptychs painted in the United States from this chapter so that I may focus exclusively on those that serve as a reflection of society leading up to and during the World War II. In Beckmann's US triptychs, he withdraws somewhat from the portrayal of society in favor of biographical and personal themes.

Reinhard Spieler, in his essay "Pictorial Worlds, World Views: Max Beckmann's Triptychs*"* from 1996, provides excellent analysis of Beckmann's triptychs within his historical context. Spieler argues that elements from Beckmann's triptych paintings indicate a novel approach to problems in society surrounding the rise of the Nazis, increasing violence in both the streets and the eminency of the Second World War. Although I question the degree of innovation in Beckmann's triptychs that Spieler attributes to them, his research is valuable to me. His analysis of the character relationships and the lineage of recurring characters and their changes within the historical context is pertinent.. He states: "At the end of the 1920's, Beckmann arrived at a new pictorial vocabulary combining classical figuration with nonmimetic or nonillusionalistic means of constructing space, depth, and plasticity. This new pictorial language, which would not change through the end of his life, coincided with his discovery of

mythology as a primary source of subject matter."[41] Beckmann shrouds his particular world-view through use of classical allegory, which can be understood both literally and metaphorically, while maintaining many features of his works from before the Second World War. Shallow, constricted space, the mystery with which everything in Beckmann's constructed world is veiled and the investigation of human relationships, especially that between the actor and the spectator, constitute elements already established in his early prints. Unlike Spieler, I see Beckmann's triptychs not as a brand new pictorial language, but rather an extension and continuation of problems similar to those surrounding the time of the First World War.

Although the introduction of myth opens up new subject matter, many elements of his early prints are realized to their highest powers in his triptychs. Myth, for Beckmann, does not create a brand new visual language, contrary to what Spieler writes, but rather a new dialect of his previous language. The triptychs continue many of Beckmann's interests from before the 1920s, while developing their presentation of recurring themes. Especially significant are the dark, thick, and compressed spaces. This shift is particularly evident in Beckmann's abandonment of the his older printmaking method in favor of oil paints in the triptych format, a modern recapitulation of an old religious format.

While prints and watercolors were Beckmann's medium of choice in previous years, a shift in the mediums of his works is significant. The transition of prints in favor of oil paints indicates another shift during this time, namely, a shift in format. In the early 1930s, Beckmann introduced his triptych paintings with the unveiling of *Abfahrt*. Triptychs were popular in old Christian and Renaissance art because the format easily lends itself to multiple perspectives and

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[41] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 57.

"cross-referential iconography." In the introduction of his book, *Max Beckmann's Triptychs,*

Charles Kessler writes on the significance of the triptych paintings.

> [Beckmann] recognized the advantages of the triptych form in devising a complex, cross-referential iconography. It was particularly useful in presenting analogies, dramatizing antitheses, or staging juxtapositions that cut across the unities of time and place. Furthermore, the medieval and Renaissance triptych conveyed a mythic rather than a historical sense of time, and this traditional connotation of the form made it especially appropriate for one who was concerned to express a sense of the relation between the world in time and the realm of eternity. For Beckmann believed in the transcendental.[42]

The format of triptych painting allowed Beckmann to accomplish more than he could with just

one panel. As Kessler points out, Beckmann was able to juxtapose subject matter, depict

multiple scenes, and give an impression of infinite time all the while harping back to a religious

format.

While mystery has been an important element of his works since the early 1910s,

Beckmann was careful to not push interpretation of his paintings unto the viewers. When his

agent, Curt Valentin, asked for Beckmann's reading of *Abfahrt,* Beckmann famously responded,

> "Put the painting away or send it back to me, dear Valentin. If the people cannot understand it out of their own internal co-productivity, there is no sense in showing the thing. For me the painting is a kind of rosary or a chain of colorless figures that sometimes when the contact is there can take on a strong shine and tell me truths that I cannot express with words and did not know before either. It can only speak to people that consciously or unconsciously carry within approximately the same metaphysical code."[43]

Beckmann saw great potential for the multiple interpretations that his allegorical triptychs could

provide. In this quote, he makes it clear that while the paintings are at first glance wrapped in

mystery, the process of assigning a personal interpretation to his work speaks truth louder than

one could ever articulate with words.

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[42] Kessler. *Triptychs.* 5.
[43] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 77.

Introduction of Theatricality

At the heart of these triptychs, Beckmann continues his investigation into the complex relationships between his characters that began with his Weimar-era prints. The prevailing element of every triptych is that of the human figure. Using his new "dialect", Beckmann could now employ the ancient stories of Odysseus, Perseus, Calypso, and other Greek, Christian, and Nordic mythologies for his own purposes, intertwining elements of myth, biography, and history. As the final stage of his style and as the paradigm of Beckmann's maturity, the triptychs employ necessarily fragmented mythologies that are staged as if they were theater.

Kessler writes about the triptychs as a cohesive body, "The scene may or may not be overtly theatrical, but in either event the setting is always stagelike. The space is shallow, overcrowded, and constricting."[44] Beckmann saw theater as a perfect way to pictorially represent his own world-view, which includes the brilliant combination of the metaphysical, mythological, and contemporary. Kessler states:

> Beckmann's triptychs constitute an expressionist theater in paint. In these provocative and enigmatic tableaux, the artist communicates his deeply Germanic feelings[45] toward life in a way that disguises yet reveals what is private, exalts the personal to the level of the mythic, and thoroughly confuse biographical, topical, and metaphysical allusions. His manner of expanding into a mysterious personal mythology what pertains to private sensibility and of bringing fantasy and a metaphysical world view into a close aesthetic partnership places Beckmann in the symbolist tradition of Blake, Fuseli, Gauguin, and Munch.[46]

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[44] Kessler. *Triptychs*. 3.

[45] Kessler's use of the phrase "deeply German feelings" to describe Beckmann's attitude towards art is quite problematic. What constitutes German feelings? And how are these Germanic feelings towards life that he assigns to Beckmann quantified? Kessler, who is writing in the 1970s, uses this phrase in a different manner than the way Lackner does when he claims that Beckmann cannot be considered "un-Germanic." Lackner rightfully asserts that Beckmann is a leading German artist, thus it was untrue for the Nazis to deem his art un-Germanic. Kessler, on the other hand, assigns prescribed ideas of Germanic attitudes towards life to Beckmann by reading his nationality into his artworks.

[46] Kessler. *Triptychs* 1.

Beckmann's triptychs, while sometimes redemptive and sometimes condemning, always serve as

an articulation of his distinct worldview. Fascinated by the Baroque idea of *welttheater,* world-

theater, as a metaphor for life, Beckmann created complex representations of his worldview as

theater. As a director, choreographer, and conductor of sorts, Beckmann equates his status as an

artist to the godly position of the essential creator. It is in this *welttheater* that the world of

mythology and the world of the artist come together. Theater and painting are both places of

intersection for ritual, amusement, culture, myth, and contemporary history.[47] Beckmann utilizes

the theatrical elements of painting in conjunction with the imitation of the stage that the triptych

format lends itself to in order to create his *welttheater.*

Beckmann's exile from Germany following his dismissal only strengthened his artistic

power. Lackner claimed that the paintings Beckmann created after leaving Germany are "fruits

of his sense of homelessness."[48] While working almost exclusively in solitude in Amsterdam,

Beckmann managed to produce a great number of master paintings that present his personal

world-view as that of a stoic philosopher and demi-god creator. Historically embedded within

the context of the terror of National Socialism and the Second World War, Beckmann's triptychs

not only demonstrate his personal world-view, but also a sobering encapsulation of public,

heroic, mythic violence into the space of the individual human through torture. Beckmann pits

opposites against one another in his triptychs, often borrowing from mythology and reality, both

historical and biographical. Myth and history; artist and God; man and woman; master and

unconditional servant; the actor and the Self: Beckmann uses these themes, among many others,

in his triptychs to paint a picture of Germany and his changing world-view in the years leading

up to and during the Second World War. In his depictions, public violence is transferred to the

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[47] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 69.
[48] Lackner. "Shared Exile." 107.

individual subjects—this is what I mean by introversion of societal violence unto the individual.

To quote Spieler: "The figures in the triptychs comprise a population whose interrelationships

mirror a range of human behavior in the world; they enact diverse aspects of social reality,

particularly the distribution of power in society."[49] In this chapter, I argue that Beckmann

employs space similarly to the way he used it in his prints to exhibit the collective anxieties of

the time surrounding the First World War. I connect the concepts from the previous chapter,

namely, dark, thick, and compressed space into triptychs and expand on these ideas to

demonstrate the continuity of Beckmann's basic ideas even as late in his career as the 1940s.

Furthermore, I argue that Beckmann not only uses the theme of theater and performance as an

outward expression of the personal interiority of the Self, but as an allegory for the

totalitarianism ravishing Germany in the 1930s. Beckmann's triptychs serve as a metaphoric

stage for history to unfold.

In the late twenties, the political and social situation in the Weimar Republic grew worse

as inflation grew out of control and the increasing popularity of NSDAP increased. With the rise

of the Nazis, artists and writers began fleeing Germany for a variety of reasons: Jewish heritage,

socialist or communistic political views, or simply the desire to continue creating works of

modern art opposed to the Nazi's synthesis of neo-romantic themes with Hellenistic Greek

forms. This heroic combination constituted all that art should be, according to the Nazis.

Lackner, in his 1969 memoir, *Memories of a Friendship,* speaks to the conditions and

humiliation suffered under National Socialism by Beckmann and many of his contemporaries

such as, Kirchner, Grosz, Kokoschka, and others.[50] Formerly considered a key figure in German

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[49] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 59.
[50] Lackner. *Memories*. 20-21.

art, Beckmann had been subverted and was deemed "un-German"[51] in the eyes of the *Reichskulturkammer[52]*.

Lackner fled Germany in 1935 to his birthplace, Paris, until he eventually immigrated to America and settled in Santa Barbara with his wife. Beckmann stayed in Germany a while longer—after all, as Lackner puts it, "[objectively he] could not possibly be defined as un-German or an enemy of the state."[53] It is during these years of dismissal and persecution that Beckmann paints his first two triptychs—*Abfahrt (Departure)* (1932-1935) and *Versuchung (des Heiligen Antonius)* (*Temptation of Saint Anthony*) (1937).

Violence and Society in Beckmann's Germany Triptychs

Abfahrt consists of three panels of almost identical size, arranged symmetrically in terms of subject matter. The central panel features four main characters: A king, his wife and child, and a helmeted warrior. A fifth character is barely seen behind the woman. He reappears in many of the triptychs, becoming less and less hidden. Each side panel displays gruesome torture of the individual subject. Beckmann's symmetry of opposites is apparent even in the composition of this painting—the center panel exhibits an optimistic opening of space, the antithesis of his cramped, and anxiety-ridden spaces of his 1920's prints. As indicated by the title, the characters in the central panel are departing, but it is unclear where or why. It is difficult not to think about this painting in the context of rising violence brought about by National Socialism and Beckmann's eventual exile two years after the completion of *Abfahrt.*

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[51] "Now suddenly, [Beckmann] was redefined as un-German, a label that was even considerably more dangerous than the 'un-American' bugaboo during the fifties in this country."
Ibid. 18.

[52] In order for artists to produce work under the Nazi rule, they must first be registered with the *Reichskulturkammer*, a department of the Nazi party designed for censoring art, music, and theater. If an artist was unable to obtain this license, as was the case with Beckmann, he was faced with the decision to change profession, starve, or emigrate.

[53] Lackner. *Memories*. 15.
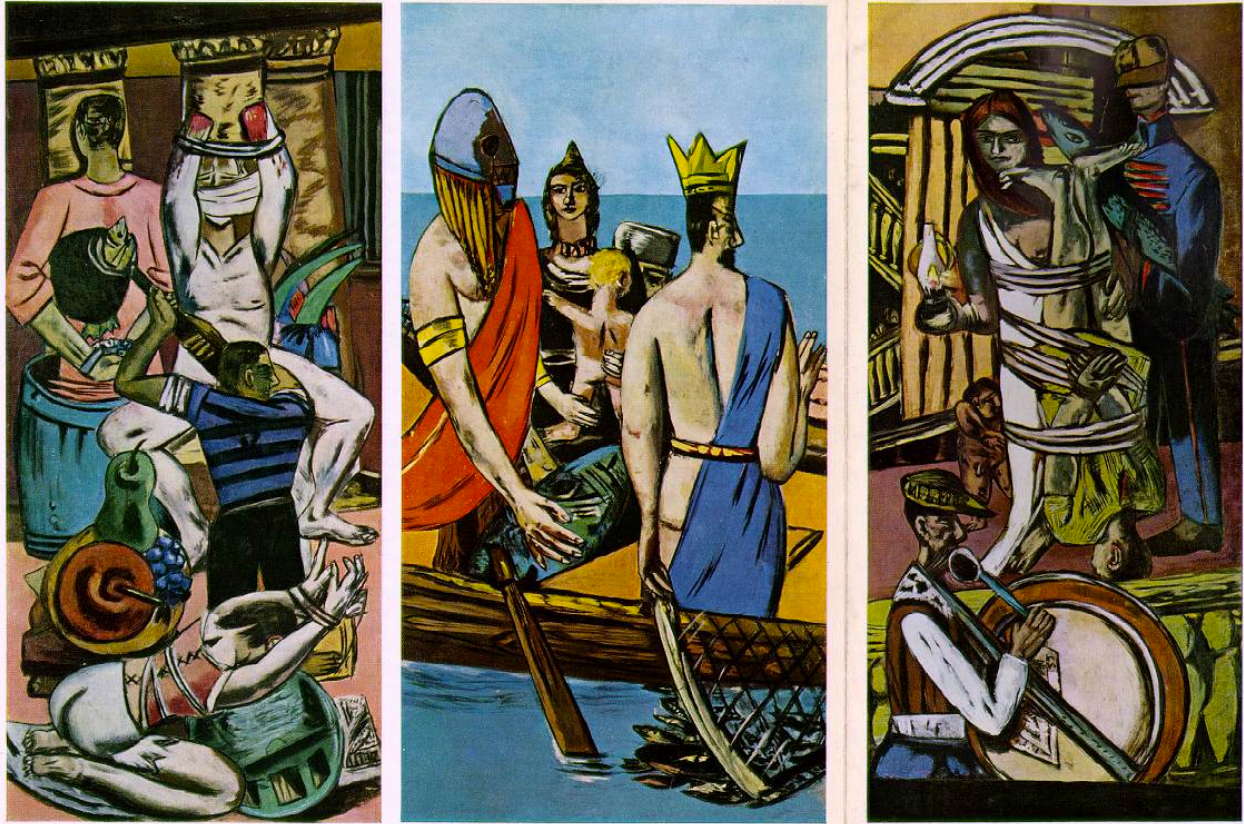
The central panel opens up space in a dramatic contrast to Beckmann's earlier works, and also in direct juxtaposition of the side panels, where he compresses and binds the characters in terrible acts of violence. The use of color is significant in the contrast between the middle and side panels. The bright sunny blue of the sky and ocean in the central panel are juxtaposed to the dull, darker colors emerging from the interior spaces of torture. The dark spaces in the two side panels suggest, without three-dimensionality, a labyrinthine recession into a void. This paradoxical space, both labyrinthine and blank, contrasts with the open sky of the center panel.

In the left panel, a woman awaits beheading by the executioner wielding an axe, while a man behind her has his wrists bound to a column and his hands cut off. Another man is bound with his hands behind his back, and faces away from the viewer. Meanwhile, in the right panel, a man and woman are tied together while a drummer passes in front of them. Behind them

stands the bellboy, seemingly offering the couple a fish.[54] He occupies an ambiguous position: that of possible aid, or the possible perpetrator. These scenes of execution, binding, and torture stand in strong juxtaposition to the relatively free, open space of the central panel.

Kessler writes about the side panels of *Abfahrt,* "Opposite this image of sadism and debasement [the left panel], the right panel presents a scene which, if less violent, is equally charged with an atmosphere of degradation and suffering…The brutal, bizarre scenes of the two side panels are staged within equally cramped and confining interior settings: a seedy, tarnished theater balancing an unholy temple of depravity."[55] Compression is still key to Beckmann's triptychs as it was in his earlier works. The space of violence on the two side panels crowds the central panel and entraps the exterior space of the central panel within the dark, compressed spaces of torture chambers, as if to indicate that redemptive value of open space is only an illusion. Although the stage-like appearance of the triptychs is not made explicit until *Akrobaten*, there are undeniable aspects of theatricality in the *Abfahrt.* The architecture of the side panels in *Abfahrt* alludes to the backdrops of a play. In the background of the left panel are three pseudo-Greek columns, to one of which a man is tied. The arch behind the bound man and woman in the right panel also seems to reference the set design of a play—the characters are posed directly underneath it as if marking a spot on the stage they seem to be standing on. The framing of the characters within the space of the arch and the bondage to the column amplify the effect of compressed space by literally binding the human to the architectural space.

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[54] The fish, a main motif in Beckmann's work, has sexual and redemptive significance. Kessler quotes Jungian critic Armin Kesser: "The symbol of the fish expresses perhaps not only fertility, lucky destiny, creativity, but at the same time one's own soul, Christ and the redemption." Kessler. *Triptychs.* 20.
[55] Ibid. 14-15.

A similar space to that of the side panels of *Abfahrt* is the dark attic of Beckmann's Weimar-era painting *Die Nacht (The Night)* (1919). Painted following an "abortive revolution" of 1918, Beckmann portrays the brutal rape and torture of a man and his wife.[56] During this time soldiers were returning from the trenches and adjusting back to civilian life. Scarred by the debilitating violence of the war, soldiers and many citizens of Germany were left unemployed, penniless, hungry, and angry. Many violent revolts and uprisings occurred between 1918 and 1919. The perpetrators of violence in *Nacht* are the representation of such unstructured, chaotic violence that invaded every aspect of society. They have no authority behind them—they are anarchic vagabonds. The warrior in *Abfahrt*, on the other hand, appears to be legitimized by the king. He holds the official position of an executioner, and thus carries out executions in the name of the state. The king turns away from the warrior, and behind his back, releases the fish. Perhaps the king is not a legitimizing force in *Abfahrt,* but instead a power that must act surreptitiously against the menace before him. The king has lost his power, and is acting to salvage something from a difficult situation; he turns his back on the force that is replacing him as the representation of the state and opens

[56] Selz. Max *Beckmann*. 32.

himself up to the possibility of something new.

The figures in *Nacht,* painted as unauthorized violent marauders, are transformed into warriors, authorized by the state, yet the king's authority has been marginalized—the warrior is the legitimizer and becomes the symbol of the executive hand of the state. The warrior has replaced the king as the symbol for the state. The warrior in *Abfarht* appears to the left of the king in the central panel. This warrior is very much different than the perpetrators of violence in the side panels of this triptych—these men resemble the vagabonds from *Nacht.* The ambiguous position in *Abfahrt* between the unauthorized proponent of fear and the legitimate warrior of the state suggests the replacing of anarchic torture with state-authorized terror.

In *Versuchung (des Heiligen Antonius),* Beckmann's second triptych, and last one made in Germany, he depicts most figures bound or enslaved in some way—those not in positions of slavery are in the position of ownership or control over the slaves. In the right panel of *Versuchung*, the queen with child (like in the central panel of *Abfahrt*) is locked in a cage and her child has been replaced by a weasel, who feeds from her breast—she is the desecrated image of Madonna. A monstrous, mythical bird places her into the cage. In the right panel, the bird and cage stand in a narrow boat close to shore. On the beach the bellhop carries a king's crown on a silver platter in one hand, and leads woman on a leash in the other, as if he were walking a dog. Degradation and dehumanization are notable elements permeate the triptych's side panels.

Between *Abfahrt* and *Versuchung,* Beckmann reverses the architectural spaces between the panels. In his first triptych, the outside, open space is surrounded by the dark interior spaces of torture, but in *Versuchung*, the central panel is the interior space of an artist's studio and both side panels depict outside space. The right panel very much resembles the open space and boat of the central panel of *Abfahrt*, however the boat that once carried the royal family and the

warrior now delivers the caged woman, guarded by the beastly bird, and the evil bellhop to shore. Both side panels in *Versuchung* repeat the sky and water from the central panel of *Abfahrt*, however the space is cluttered by the figures. Conversely, the central panel of *Versuchung* now takes on the open space—the reversal of the open and airy exterior space to equally light interior space in these triptychs might point to a shift of internalization and removing oneself from the claustrophobia of societal life during the pivotal years between which Beckmann painted his first triptychs. In *Abfahrt,* the characters achieve their removal by way of the boat—they are brought into the wide-open space of sky and sea. Although Beckmann also depicts the space of sky and sea in the two side panels in *Versuchung*, it is no longer the external that is open, but rather the interiority of the artist's studio functions as the exterior space of *Abfahrt*.

The central panel features the brightly clad Saint Anthony entranced by a semi-nude woman. Both figures are framed in mirrors, as if individual portraits similarly to the framing of the figures in Beckmann's print, *Garderobe* (1921). Unlike this print, however, Anthony gazes directly at the woman, who does not acknowledge his presence. The framing of their faces places them in the mirrors behind them. Anthony is surrounded by the light grey-blue reflection in the mirror, while the woman is encased in a fiery orange-red. The opposition of colors behind the figures indicates their antithesis—Anthony brings with him the peaceful action of the artist, akin to the king in *Abfahrt*, who releases the fish from his net. The woman holds a drooped flower in one hand.[57] Something about her demeanor is ominous and dark. She is partially hidden in shadow, as if Beckmann were marking her with danger and blackness.

With the easel, sculptures, and a model about, it is clear that they sit in the studio, posed as if Anthony were painting the woman, thereby assuming the position of the artist. By using Anthony as a stand in for the artist, Beckmann links together the temptations of the saint with the creation of art. Additionally, *Versuchung* lacks an explicit king, however the bellhop from the right panel drags the woman on the leash as he brings the crown towards the central panel as if he is going to crown Saint Anthony. The relegation of Anthony to the position of the artist and the implication that the artist is king reaffirms Beckmann's hierarchical positioning of the artist and creator.

Saint Anthony the Egyptian, a founder of Egyptian monasticism, lived around the time of 251-356 AD. Athanasius of Alexandria tells the story of St. Anthony's temptations in his book, *Life of St.* Anthony (360 AD). According to him, Anthony traveled deep into the desert to

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[57] One internet user, Franciscio Serrado, connects the depiction of the woman with a famous lyric by Lou Reed, "Vicious, you hit me with a flower." The woman's danger lies in her seemingly benign appearance.
http://sartle.com/artwork/the-temptation-of-st.-anthony-max-beckmann/

expose himself to the daemon spirits, who infest the vast uninhabited spaces. There, he was

assailed by these daemons, who attempted to terrify him, yet Anthony remained stalwart and

even ridiculed their attempts. His experience gave the average Christian a protocol to use to fend

off these daemons by declaring that there is nothing to fear—the daemons are nothing but empty

air. Perhaps at this time, Beckmann is portraying his own protocol to deflect the terror of the

Nazis; stay under the radar and remain quiet, for they are nothing but empty air. The Nazis did

not pose an immediate threat to Beckmann, and it is likely that he could have remained in

Germany safely throughout the war if he had abandoned painting and took up for a new

profession.

Many artistic depictions of St. Anthony's temptations punctuate the history of art, for

example, Hieronymus Bosch's triptych painted in 1490.   Perhaps more notable for Beckmann is

the slightly later *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1515) by Matthias Grunewald. This Christian triptych,

which can be arranged in three distinct positions, depicts Christ's crucifixion in the first view[58], the Annunciation in the second view, and the temptations of St. Anthony in the third view. The animalistic beasts in the right panel of the third position may have influenced Beckmann's "hell-birds" depicted in *Die Hölle der Vögel (Bird's Hell)* (1938), painted directly after *Versuchung*, where we can see a hell-bird prototype in the right panel. The left panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* depicts a meal enjoyed between St. Anthony and Paul. This meal, provided by the birds, is a moment of friendship and healing. In the altarpiece, the birds on the left, the enablers of friendship and healing, are juxtaposed strongly with the birds of hell on the opposite wing. But what, then, is the nature of birds in Beckmann's *Versuchung* triptych? By excluding the birds of healing that provide food to Anthony and Paul, it seems Beckmann is suggesting that there is no longer any possibility of redemption in his modern world.

Beckmann borrows from this traditional theme and transforms it into a sexual temptation in the form of the nude woman in the central panel. But the object of Anthony's desire is not only sexual, but also artistic desire. The setting in the artist's studio also implies equalization between that which is religiously holy and the sacred space of the artist. The female nude in the

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[58] Beckmann used this position of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* for his earlier painting, *Kreuzabnahme (Descent from the Cross)* (1917).

central panel is the only character in this triptych who escapes binding. She symbolizes the epitome of art and male sexual desire, and perhaps Beckmann lets her stand free as a statement of art's ever-persistent freedom in the face of oppression and censorship. Yet the "artist's" hands are bound—it makes sense that Beckmann left Germany within the year of the completion of *Versuchung*. He no longer could make his living as an artist. Not only is Anthony as the artist bound to the nude, but is assailed—and bound—to the daemons. Despite this, he remains calm and contemplative. Perhaps art itself had succumbed to the violence, the entrapment, and the mirroring ideologies of Nazism. Beckmann may be sensing that art can be and was itself corrupted. St. Anthony of Egypt had the spiritual resources to ward off the fictional temptations of the desert daemons; but are those resources sufficient in Beckmann's time? Has art itself become infected by the ideology, bound and gagged by it, so that resistance is impossible?

Versuchung poses sets of opposites together: the warrior and bound girl; Saint Anthony and the nude; the bellhop and the woman on a leash; and the bird and Madonna-figure. The essence of these diametrical relationships is the relation between the sexes. This too is a major theme in *Abfahrt*. The theme of bondage of the wings of *Versuchung* is relatively clear—the woman on the leash is bound to the bellhop, representative of male domination over females. The same can be said of the young girl in the left panel. However, Anthony is bound and shackled. The nude woman is dominant over him—she represents the seduction of ideology. The other women in this painting, however, are truly victimized. In the left panel, a warrior wearing a phallic shaped helmet stands alert with his sword drawn. Opposite him stands a young girl with her shirt torn and breasts exposed bound to a spear—she is the representation of an impaled martyr. On the opposite wing, the women are caged or leashed like animals. The clear phallic objects (the warriors helmet and the spear which the woman is bound to) are intertwined

with violence and the act of penetration, violently and sexually. Kessler writes: "The notion that everything, including the horror, is ordered and correct reminds one of Nietzsche's advice that history is to be accepted with a Dionysian outlook that submits joyously to tragedy. In Beckmann there is the same implication that tragedy and horror are not to be externally denied but may, through an inward force of ego, be surpassed."[59] Does the seduction of Anthony by the woman representing ideology suggest that the artist is compelled to replicate these acts of violence against art? When the artist submits himself to ideology, he is limited to the constraints precisely of this ideology—he is no longer free, but shackled like Beckmann's depiction of Anthony. In this triptych, Beckmann, probably countering the mandates of the *Reichskulturkammer*, makes it clear that he believes ideology symbolically does violence to art in the same way that the women in the side panels are victimized.

Gender and Societal Conflicts in Beckmann's Early Triptychs

In the right panel of *Abfahrt,* a woman an and upside-down man are bound together. As I discussed in chapter one, In Beckmann depicts two intertwined figures in his print *Umarmung* (1922), male and female, in an ambiguous struggle; perhaps the print is of sexual nature, but it is equally possible that it is a violent struggle. I suggest there that the intimacy of *Umarmung*, be it violent or sexual, shatters the interiority of the human relationship, which is further reinforced by the shattered window in the room. The binding of the man and woman in the right wing of *Abfahrt*, however negates all interaction. Kessler writes, "The wings of *Departure* present a pair of tragic alternatives: man bound to woman as her inverted and negated male, and woman as the object of a sadistic sacrifice by man."[60] Kessler reads the side panels as alternative endings if the departing, utopic journey of the central panel is not realized: torture, horror, confinement, and

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[59] Kessler, *Triptychs.* 19.
[60] Ibid. 21.

execution. In the left panel, it is the woman about to be brutally slaughtered by a male force, but in the right panel, the man is strung upside down and it is *he* who is bound to *her*.   The themes of gender and societal conflicts are mirrored in these works. Beckmann's portrayal of the domination of women by men has a reciprocal significance; gender conflict serves as a model for the larger social conflict of the time, and conversely, social conflict can mirror the gender conflicts. The destructive relationship of superficial attraction between the sexes serves as a metaphor for the degeneration of society. [61]

In *Akrobaten (The Acrobats)* (1939), Beckmann's third triptych, and the first triptych painted in Amsterdam, gender conflicts and social conflicts reach new heights as tensions rose in anticipation of another war. Beckmann depicts a young female vender flirting with a warrior in

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[61] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 71.

the right panel.[62] The warrior, who is the Roman god of war, Mars, claps in barbaric enjoyment

of the female attention. Spieler writes about the scene, "In *Acrobats*, the girl's flirtation with the

ghost of war seems a clear allusion to Hitler's fatal game."[63] Painting on the verge of war,

Beckmann predicts what is to come through the dangerous flirtation of the girl and the warrior.

The sensuality of destruction is too much for the girl to ignore—she actively seeks her

destruction by naïvely flirting with the embodiment of war. Like before, Nietzsche's proposition

that tragedy and horror be accepted with grace and readiness gives perspective on the interaction

between the young girl and Mars. The girl, with her youthful appearance, perhaps a depiction of

her naïveté, does not know the danger she is in, yet seduces the warrior.

The destructive relationship between the sexes is only one of the many diametric

elements that Beckmann sets up. Another important opposite is that of the king and the warrior,

as suggested by Spieler.[64] He writes, "In the central panel of *Departure*, Beckmann

paradigmatically sets king and warrior in opposition, with colors signaling the difference

between them: the king wears a cloth of cool blue, which represents the intellectual, rational

principle; in contrast, the warrior is clothed in intense red, the color of fire, passion, emotion and

instinct."[65] Like Spieler, I argue that the relationship between the warrior and the king serves as

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[62] I acknowledge that this is an ambiguous moment. Perhaps the vendor girl is not at all flirting, but trying to sell the warrior something. Either way, the girl does not truly understand who she is speaking with—Mars, the god of war. She greets him with crossed legs and a coquettish glance. The vendor girl is the "useful idiot" in the theater of ideology; she exists and interacts within the space without understanding it. Perhaps Beckmann is questioning the ability of his characters (and subsequently the people living in the theater of life under totalitarianism) to comprehend their historical significance.
[63] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds*.*" 62.
[64] Ibid. 60.
[65] Ibid. 60.

a reflection of the "violence seen in heroic, mythic terms"[66] represented by the Nazis in the form

of public rallies and the Aryan myth.

I might expand this relationship to a broader one between the master and slave. Along

with the king and the warrior, another important reoccurring character is the hotel bellhop.

While the bellhop occupies the ambiguous position in the *Abfahrt*, he actively degrades the

woman by treating her as an animal in *Versuchung*. The leash binds her to him physically, but

he too is bound. The bellhop answers to a higher order. To quote Spieler,

> Lackeys pursue no goals of their own, but only receive orders; they are, in short,
> conformists. They can observe much but are nonetheless always obliged to look away,
> for their function is acquiescent neutrality. 'Today fate appears as an elevator boy,'
> Beckmann reportedly said about the figure. Only a uniform grants the lackey an identity,
> but as the term 'uniform' implies, it is one of an unindividuated everyman. The uniform
> also alludes to the military.[67]

Beckmann's world is one of power relationships: power over women by men and the power of

the hierarchy upon the loyal warrior-servants and the lackey bellhops who identify themselves

superficially through their social or political positions.

Beckmann's triptychs are built on the pairing of opposites as a way of communicating his

own world-view: kings and their servants, bellhops and warriors alike, and the relationship

between the genders demonstrate power relationships in his paintings that mirror those in the

world Beckmann lived in. Beckmann himself plays a role in the power structure as the artist and

creator of his triptychs. Beckmann viewed the status of an artist equal, or almost equal, to that of

the ultimate creator—God. In his 1938 speech, "On My Painting", presented at the at the gallery

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[66] Ibid. 67-68.
[67] Ibid. 61.

opening of *Exhibition of 20th Century German Art*[68] in London, Beckmann states, "Space and

space itself is an infinite deity which surrounds us and in which we are ourselves contained."[69]

Beckmann saw space itself as the deity in which everything is contained, however it is the job of

an artist to establish a mastery over this space, the deity which constitutes the world, but which

can also be manipulated. He defines the manipulation and control of space as a godlike activity

that makes things magnificent and terrible, ordinary and grotesque, and that belongs exclusively

to the artist. In an essay titled "Space as Metaphor," Jay Clark suggests that notions of gender

embedded in Beckmann's conception of space indicate space itself as a metaphor for the

interaction between the sexes. "Beckmann gives a clear one-to-one association here with flat

space, color and weakness. Depth and spatial penetration for him was decidedly masculine, or in

his works, 'terrible', 'crude', 'magnificent', 'ordinary', and 'grotesque'."[70] According to Clark,

space, for Beckmann, is a visual and erotic phenomenon—he ascribes meaning to the notion of

space and to the artist's role as a demigod. Clark quotes Beckmann: "'Remember that depth in

space in a work of art […] is always decisive […] space and volume is identical with

individuality, or that which humanity calls God […] Time is the invention of humanity; space or

volume, the palace of the gods.'"[71] Clark, who is writing mostly on Beckmann's "unsuccessful"

paintings during his involvement with the Berlin Secession, states that "The importance of space

for [Beckmann] is both pictorial and sexual, a 'throbbing' needed on his part to open up the

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[68] This exhibition was conceived as the "antidote to the pernicious influence of Hitler's 'degenerate-art' exhibitions touring Germany's big cities" according to Lackner. Six paintings of Beckmann's were shown, including *Versuchung*.
Lackner. "Shared Exile." 110-111.
[69] Beckmann. "On my Painting." 302.
[70] Clark, Jay. "Space as Metaphor." 63. Quote by Beckmann.
[71] Ibid. 79

canvas to be ravished."[72] For Beckmann, space is inherently gendered with the metaphor of

sexual dominance. Beckmann's concept of masculine depth and penetration of feminine

shallowness indicates the control and mastery of deepness of space over the superficial surface of

two-dimensional space. The godlike power of the artist that lies in the skillful manipulation of

two-dimensional space that creates the illusion of three-dimensional space is itself a practice of

male dominance over the effeminate shallow space of the canvas.

Beckmann also saw his role as the artist much like a child playing with dolls or figures.

He stages the figures as if staging a scene of a play—he choreographs their positions and sets up

pairs of opposites as the ultimate controller of the space of his paintings. Perhaps Beckmann

recognized in himself the temptation to totalitarian control. Does he yield or participate?

Perpetrate or protect? As I referenced in the introduction, Beckmann, during his famous speech

in London after his exile, stated that "When spiritual, metaphysical, material, or immaterial

events come into my life, I can fix them only by way of painting."[73] Perhaps the process of

painting pictures, which is aligned with power, control, and manipulation, is a productive outlet

for these inner feelings—his way of "fixing" the things that come into his life.

Performance as Allegory for the "Fictional Truth" of Totalitarianism

The triptych format itself imitates the stage—it gives a wide view and is broken down

into different panels, much like stage directions might indicate stage-right or stage-left.

Elements of theatricality are less obvious in Beckmann's first triptychs, but they are still

theatrical. The front facing of the configurations and the stage-like background of his paintings

gives the impression of spectators witnessing a scene played out by his characters—even the

figures facing backwards have a certain "frontality" about them. The characters often stare at the

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[72] Ibid. 67
[73] Beckmann. "On my Painting." 302-303.

viewers, who are in the place of the audience. For example, the bellhop in *Versuchung* gives the audience a contemptuous frown—he glares at them as if he knows they do not approve of his actions.

Although there is a stage in the left panel of *Abfahrt, Akrobaten* is Beckmann's first triptych that makes its performance distinct through the theatricality of the circus motif. The central panel features a group of actors on a set with props, however there are no clear references to a single play, but rather there are many references to many performances. On the right is an actor, perhaps dressed as Hamlet. Next to him is a toga-clad man, perhaps a Greek—an allusion to ancient civilization. On the right, another actor holds a large, inscribed slab. It is not quite clear what these actors are staging—Beckmann gives only slight hints to his symbolism. He places them on a stage, yet there is something very evasive about the actors. It is difficult to discern what the point of the performance is. There is an ambiguousness and unreadability in the entire painting. Who are the performers and who are the spectators? For whom they are performing?

Beckmann's first triptychs make clear allusions to the contemporary events surrounding the creation dates of his paintings. It is in the world of the theater that Beckmann is able to stage the representations of contemporary events in Germany and Europe. Scenes of torture, violence against those assigned to the role of the inferior, and the bondage of the incarcerated are all obvious enough references of the totalitarian fascism and violence brought about by the Nazis.[74] Beckmann uses the theme of theater not only as a way of compounding visual, temporal, and "auditory" elements into his painting, but also as an allegory in itself. Seemingly, life under totalitarianism was not real, but rather centrally planned and every aspect of life served purpose

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[74] Spieler. "Pictorial Worlds." 75.

to the state. Hannah Arendt, a political theorist and philosopher contemporary to Beckmann, mentions fictional truth under totalitarianism in the preface from her magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

> The trouble with totalitarian regimes is not that they play power politics in an especially ruthless way, but that behind their politics is hidden an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power, just as behind their *Realpolitik* lies an *entirely new and unprecedented concept of reality*. Supreme disregard for immediate consequences rather than ruthlessness; rootlessness and neglect of national interests rather than nationalism; contempt for utilitarian motives rather than unconsidered pursuit of self-interest; 'idealism,' *i.e.*, their *unwavering faith in an ideological fictitious world*, rather than lust for power—these have all introduced into international politics a new and more disturbing factor than mere aggressiveness would have been able to do.[75]

For Arendt, who fled Germany due to her Jewish heritage, life under totalitarianism *is* a fictitious truth; while the world is "real," it is equally as "fake," because all areas of life are manipulated for the state's purpose. The division between reality and performance made the theater and act of performance the perfect metaphor to describe the society of Beckmann's time. Enforcement of the fictitious truth of totalitarian regimes forces citizens to take on the role of performers; instead of individually living their lives, they must reaffirm the state. This, an expansion on the master-slave relationship, is the world of the warrior, the bellhop, and now, the actor. To perform is to create an artificial scenario, however, the *artificial* scenarios are not always *untrue*. Citizens of totalitarian regimes live in a fictionalized "truth," therefore; the citizens also must accept the role of the actor.

Reality is a reflection of overarching ideologies that are themselves derived from reality. This logic seems to state that the ideologies are nothing more than themselves; they are derived from reality because they were a reaction to the injustices of capitalism, yet they create another reality out of nothing but ideology. This in and of itself is pure performance.

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[75] Arendt. *Origins of Totalitarianism.* 417-418.

When viewing a play, the audience is primed to understand that the actors are exactly that—*actors*. Without any explanations, the audience separates the actor from the role in the play. This separation is not usually afforded for the drawn and painted figure. In Beckmann's fifth triptych, *Schauspieler (The Actors*) (1942), the space on all panels is broken up into different registers, existing both above and below the stage. In the central panel, two actors stand on stage in the midst of performance, or maybe just rehearsal. The male character, who shares strikingly similar facial features with Beckmann, begins to pierce himself with a small dagger. He plays the role of the king, as indicated by his crown. The masked woman next to him sings and clutches her breast. The suicide of the king-actor in *Schauspieler* nullifies itself as a true tragedy because of the obviousness of theater; theater in this triptych acts as a wedge between the Self and the actor to display the Self of the actor and the role he assumes as the king

of a play. Beckmann gives the actors an interior subjectivity simply by using the concept of the actor, and specifically the use of his own likeness as the main character of a play, as if to say he is a character living in the play of life that someone else is writing.

Another indication of the characters' subjectivity is the mask. The face of singing woman to the left of the male actor is hidden behind a black mask. In the tragedies of ancient Greece, all staged actors wore masks. These rigid faces of the masks worn by the actors gave the impression that it was not a human being who performed, but rather a hollow shell of a human— the voice that spoke through the mask exposed the subjectivity. The modern actors in Beckmann's *Schauspieler* wear a metaphorical mask much in the same way the actors of ancient Greece wore physical ones. As I noted earlier, I use the term "characters" in this chapter in lieu of "figures" as I did in the previous chapter. This is because Beckmann's triptych characters do indeed contain a subjectivity that is separated from their external appearance. They are not simple "masks" of the human form, as the figures of the prints are. The actors themselves, even when not wearing a physical mask, are inherently masked by their role in the theatricality of the painting.

The dual nature of actors says something about the way in which Beckmann understood the Self. For Beckmann, there is a clear division of interiority and exteriority of personhood— actors make this distinction stronger as a result of their profession. The mask of darkness in Beckmann's prints *Maison Close* and *Abendgesellschaft* are now replaced by simultaneous physical and metaphoric masking of the actor-characters in Beckmann's triptychs. In Beckmann's world, what *appears* cannot be mistaken for what *is*. The division of the Self and the actor mirrors that of the individual and the citizen performer for the false truth of totalitarianism.

Conclusion

During the writing of this thesis, I have often wondered to myself if Beckmann's art served as a replacement for politics and religion for him. Time and time again he and others have declared that Beckmann was not politically active in any way, however his art is clearly politically loaded. By representing the society and the world around him, is Beckmann engaging in the politics of art or the politics of his time? Specifically in the context of his triptych *Versuchung*, I wonder if he is empathizing with the intoxicating sense of power that comes with political totalitarianism. Or in the context of *Akrobaten* (1939), is Beckmann questioning the ability of individuals to comprehend their space within the larger historical timeframe of the age of violence surrounding the Second World War? Additionally, my argument about Beckmann's place as the demi-god artist brings up questions about the "sacredness" of art, and the power of manipulation of space. In doing so, does Beckmann equate himself to the status of a political leader such as Hitler, der Führer? These are questions that can only be answered with speculation.

If provided with more time, I would have liked to write another chapter on Beckmann's oeuvre of self-portraits. From the young age of fourteen, Beckmann began to draw, paint, and print his own likeness. His many self portraits have been compared to the self-portraits of Rembrandt, who used the medium to inquire about his Self in relation to his biography and the social contexts in which he created them. Beckmann does the same thing with his self-portraits. In Beckmann's *Self-Portrait with Horn* (1938), he alligns himself with the performer by depicting himself in typical circus garb. Additionally, Beckmann paints the main character of his triptych *Schauspieler* (1941-1942) with his own likeness—he is ostensibly the actor king committing suicide.

It is clear from these self-portraits that Beckmann is "fixing" himself as he claimed to do in his speech "On my Painting," given the same year as *Self-Portrait with Horn* was painted. But where does Beckmann the man fit into his own paintings? "When spiritual, metaphysical, material, or immaterial events come into my life, I can fix them only by way of painting. Therefore I hardly need to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal that I can make it real only by means of painting…Art is creative for the sake of realization, not for amusement; for transfiguration, not for the sake of play. It is the quest of our self that drives us along the eternal and never-ending journey we must all make."[76] Through painting, Beckmann constructs an alternative reality that acts as a mirror to reflect aspects of society that more closely resembles reality than reality itself—this is Beckmann's *welttheater*.

In my opinion, Beckmann uses his world-view in his paintings to pose a world where all possibilities are open—Beckmann can become a circus performer or an actor committing suicide atop a stage. Beckmann can be the totalitarian leader and a "god" with total control over the natural world of space. The implications of these metaphors are huge, and a part of what makes

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[76] Beckmann. "On my Painting." 302-303.

Beckmann such an exciting artist to work with. What I first misidentified as allegory when I began my research is actually his use of poignant and subtle metaphor that effectively contextualizes his biography, the society and politics of his time, and the larger world context of the wars. In his painting, Beckmann not only provides us with this, but also with his subjective existence as a performer acting in the context of his own *welttheater*. Beckmann's approach, both subjective and objective, provides us with a introspective portrait, literally and metaphorically, of Beckmann as an artist and a man living in the turbulent times of the two World Wars.

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