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Reinforced Chaos

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Merrick, Hailey, "Reinforced Chaos" (2015). *Writing Programs*. 16.

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Reinforced Chaos

By Hailey Merrick

Essay written as part of the Writing Programs

Academic Resource Center

Loyola Marymount University

Fall 2015

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Reinforced Chaos

Early twentieth century Germany was on the brink of one of the largest and most impactful wars in history: World War I. The war prompted mass emotional distress and feelings of instability among citizens. There was a broad sense of unhappiness with the current state of the German society, which Expressionist artists captured in their depictions of societal upheaval. Within the Expressionists, a prominent group emerged known as Die Brücke, striving to bridge the gap of modernity and reality through art. Their anti-modernist perspective produced artworks that criticized the day of their time, reflecting their search for a new reality within the urban scene. Carol Eliel, LACMA's curator of modern art, in *The Apocalyptic Landscape of Ludwig Meidner* reinforces the preoccupation of desolate suburban landscapes in German Expressionist artworks such as Meidner's *Apocalyptic Landscape*.

Eliel reiterates Meidner's self-affirmed intentions for paintings to project his apocalyptic views of German society. In Eliel's comparison to fellow German Expressionists, "Meidner reflected the social, artistic, philosophical, and emotional state of Germany in the brink of war perhaps better than any of his colleagues."¹ This idea that Meidner was superior to his peers was the result of the intense mental distress that the external world inflicted upon him. The terror of the imminent outbreak of World War I in Berlin evoked heightened fright and panic within Meidner since he was living in the heart of the city. This intense fear is the

¹ Carol Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscape of Ludwig Meidner* (Los Angeles: LA County Museum of Art & Berlinische Galerie, 1990), 11.

real painter. Addressing Meidner's mental state as he completed his works of art allows the onlooker to understand the "brittle nature of Berlin society in the prewar years."² Meidner's firsthand experiences of societal dissatisfaction were echoed in scenes of urban German construction and industrialization: "His barren views of urban Berlin and his relatively meager output are an indication of his distressed state of mind."³ The bleakness of society is conveyed in *Apocalyptic Landscape's* storm-like clouds looming over a fear-stricken metropolis, foreshadowing violent energy to come. Additionally, Meidner illustrates his inner feelings of confusion and nervousness with intertwining, sporadic surges of light. The mercilessness of Meidner's implications of light were just as merciless as the world he viewed he was living in. Meidner's scenes of urban ruin proved that unstable pre-war German society was the cause of the Expressionists' troubled mental state.

Eliel attributes Meidner's fixation of tumultuous cityscapes to the agitated, dissatisfied societal perceptions of Die Brücke. The extreme chaotic energy of *Apocalyptic Landscape* is expressed through Meidner's abstraction of defined, harsh and sporadic colors to convey that there is no order within this doomed urban landscape. Due to "his awareness of *Die Brücke*,"⁴ Meidner viewed society as "Apollonian – intellectual and rational – and believed that its only hope for salvation lay in the return of the Dionysian – the vital and irrational, the primitive and emotional."⁵ In *Apocalyptic Landscape*, the terrified, frantic motions of faceless figures are the focal point, concentrating the viewer's eye on the Apollonian concept

² Ibid., 14.

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

that the modern day is ruining society and in need of a cure. Thus, in Dionysian fashion, there are small figures attempting to escape their disaster-prone day. The faces are generic – ghostlike – to convey a sense of societal alienation that modern advancements created. The rejection of modernity is the foundation of Die Brücke ideology. Therefore, the only way for a new modern scene to be born is to destroy the existing one, as claimed by Eliel: “regenerative apocalypse, creation through destruction.”⁶ Meidner paints the necessary downfall of society through crumbling, skewed industrial towers, suspension bridges and sky. Change is necessary for societal evolution. Eliel claims that Meidner and Die Brücke depict apocalypses in a contemporary context to illustrate their analogous criticalness of German society.

Eliel juxtaposes Meidner’s *Apocalyptic Landscape* with artworks of his Die Brücke to reiterate their corresponding desire for independence from the destructive pre-war Germany. Their negative perception of the uniqueness of their modern day is attributed to technological advancement. To escape the hindrances of a bourgeoisie-imperialized Germany, these critical artists demanded a societal shift towards the spiritual and primitive. Eliel strengthens my understanding of Meidner’s *Apocalyptic Landscape* to be a representation of his day – projecting his mental strain of the horrors of war onto his metropolis. Eliel’s analysis of the emotional toll produced from an unstable world on the verge of collapse clarifies Meidner’s fixation of struggling urban landscapes and the chaotic techniques used in his painting.

⁶ Ibid.