

NANNE BUURMAN

Northern Gothic: Werner Haftmann's German Lessons, or A Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction

This essay by the documenta and exhibition scholar Nanne Buurman traces the discursive tropes of nationalist art history in narratives on German pre- and postwar modernism. In Buurman's "Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction" we encounter specters from the past who swept their connections to Nazism under the rug after 1945, but could not get rid of them. She shows how they haunt art history, theory, the German feuilleton, and even the critical German postwar literature. The editor of *documenta studies*, which we founded together with Carina Herring and Ina Wudtke in 2018, follows these ghosts from the history of German art and probes historical continuities across the decades flanking World War II, which she brings to the fore even where they still remain implicit. Buurman, who also coedited the volume *documenta: Curating the History of the Present* (2017),¹ thus uses her own contribution to *documenta studies* to call attention to the ongoing relevance of these historical issues for our contemporary practices.

¹See *documenta: Curating the History of the Present*, ed. by Nanne Buurman and Dorothee Richter, special issue, *OnCurating*, no. 13 (June 2017).

Let's consider the Nazi exhibition of so-called *Degenerate Art*, presented in various German cities between 1937 and 1941, which is often regarded as documenta's negative foil. To briefly recall the facts: The exhibition brought together more than 650 works by important artists of its time, with the sole aim of stigmatizing them and placing them in the context of the Nazis' antisemitic racial ideology. The term 'degenerate' in the title is already a biological and racialized metaphor. The rhetoric of the exhibition was likewise steeped in antisemitism. Postwar attempts to renounce Nazism and reconnect with the 'ostracized' art [*verfemte Kunst*] in the 1950s were, however, not concerned with the exhibition's antisemitism. The popular expression 'ostracized art' was mostly used to rehabilitate the work of German

artists who were not Jewish. Nevertheless, this compensatory focus on 'ostracization' created the impression of a radically new start, an innocent modernism, which covered up the continuities between the Nazi era and the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The first *documenta* (1955) provided a crucial context for this. Under the discursive leadership of the art historian Werner Haftmann, who had been a member of the Nazi party NSDAP,¹¹ *documenta* promoted a supposedly new 'history of modern art' – ostensibly breaking with explicitly fascist Nazi politics of representation, but still primarily dominated by Western, male, and non-Jewish positions. Discussing the biopolitical implications of Haftmann's historiographic practice in her recent text "The Exhibition as a Washing Machine?," Buurman analyzes how the myth of *documenta* as a counter exhibition to the *Degenerate Art* shows allowed its founders to avoid addressing the crimes of the Nazis or their own involvement in Nazism and its production of art and knowledge.¹² By situating the *documenta* artists within the genealogy of 'ostracized art' and presenting themselves as supporters of these mostly German 'victims' of Nazi cultural politics, figures like Haftmann provided narratives that opened the doors for German self-victimization, which sometimes included the histrionic or fetishizing overidentification with the actual victims.

The following essay by Buurman further elaborates on these "German Lessons" and offers readers an array of tools for localizing the violent histories of the country's modernism between the abstract shapes, charged words, and obscuring rhetoric, allowing us to analyze and reflect on them. Expanding on a talk about the philosophies of history and epistemological frameworks undergirding various installments of *documenta*, which Buurman delivered at Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome in 2018, and on her presentation "documenta as a Haunted Exhibition," which she gave in the context of the symposium *What System actually?* at Kunsthochschule Kassel in July 2020, her essay for *documenta studies* traces both the hidden and the revealing discourses as ghosts that continue to haunt us, even when they conceive of – or present – themselves as particularly antifascist. The text does not spare its author and its readers. What does this mean for our own discourses today? How do we position ourselves vis-à-vis the obscured art histories that informed modernism, the German post war discourse, and *documenta* in uncanny ways and remain yet to be written?

Editorial by Nora Sternfeld

¹¹ See Mirl Redmann: "Das Flüstern der Fußnoten: Zu den NS-Biografien der *documenta* Gründer*innen," in: *documenta studies*, no. 9 (June 2020), https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studien_9_Mirl_Redmann.pdf.

¹² The essay is based on a lecture delivered on December 14, 2019 in the context of the Thessaloniki Biennial. See Nanne Buurman: "The Exhibition as a Washing Maschine? Some Notes on Historiography, Contemporaneity and (Self-)Purification in *documenta*'s early editions," in: *Stasis: Taking a Stance*, Reader of the 7th Thessaloniki Biennial of Contemporary Art, ed. by Syrago Tsiara and Louisa Avgita, Thessaloniki: MOMus 2020, pp. 103–108.

d is for...? Preface by Nanne Buurman*

This two-part essay is a fragment from a larger study on the continuous political re-signification of abstraction. During the Wilhelmine Empire, the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era, abstract art was alternatively discussed as a nationalist expression of ‘Nordic character’ or a sign of ‘Jewish-Bolshevik degeneracy,’ as a communist revelation of the ‘contradictions of capitalism’ or a formalist reflection of ‘bourgeois decadence.’ Under the working title *documenta as a Haunted Exhibition, or A Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction*, I examine the ways in which pre-1933 and pre-1945 discourses continued to inform curatorial and art historical practices after World War II in the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), whose formal autonomy from the Allied Forces coincided with the first documenta in 1955. In this context, I argue that documenta not only functioned as a “weapon of the Cold War”¹ but also as a kind of “washing machine”² for laundering the history of modern abstraction. By covering up its ‘Germanic’ genealogies, which have been rendered questionable by National Socialism, and overwriting the nationalist idea of Nordic abstraction with a dehistoricized notion of abstract art as a democratic ‘world language,’³ documenta’s ‘founding fathers’ contributed to the emergence of a curatorial dispositive, within which the empty signifier of abstraction eventually came to be seen as an emblem of US-style-liberal democracy, or as an abstract equivalent of its increasingly immaterial mode of capitalist value production and financial speculation.

In light of the recent (2019) revelation that several of documenta’s founders – including its spiritus rector, the art historian Werner Haftmann (1912–1999) – were members of the Nazi Party (NSDAP),⁴ the uncanny echoes of nationalist rhetoric permeating Haftmann’s documenta catalogue introductions, which I started to scrutinize in 2018 for a presentation at Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, can no longer be excused as mere resonances of the existentialist “jargon of authenticity” fashionable at the time.⁵ They should be understood as traces of more explicit National Socialist (NS) entanglements of some of the promoters of modern art, who later framed documenta as a counter-exhibition to the so-called *Degenerate Art* shows. One year ago, I discussed how documenta functioned as a kind of detergent for Haftmann, removing the stains of the Nazi past from German art (history) and whitewashing not just the lives of Emil Nolde (1867–1956) and other artists, but also his own biography. Nevertheless, the Germanic spirits live on between the lines of his stories, as well as those of others. In the following, I will therefore engage in a speculative close-reading of Siegfried Lenz’s *Deutschstunde* (The German Lesson, orig. 1968) to suggest that the

*All translations from the German in this essay are mine. Where published translations are available, I added references to the respective English edition.

¹I am borrowing Eva Cockcroft’s term from “Abstract Expressionism as a Weapon of the Cold War,” in: *Artforum*, vol.12, no.10 (June 1974), pp. 39–41.

²See Nanne Buurman: “The Exhibition as a Washing Machine? Some Notes on Historiography, Contemporaneity and (Self-) Purification in documenta’s Early Editions,” in: *Stasis: Taking a Stance*, Reader of the 7th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, ed. by Syrago Tsiara and Louisa Avgita, Thessaloniki: MOMus 2020, pp. 103–108.

³Although this expression is frequently attributed to Haftmann, who is said to have coined it in the context of *documenta II* (1959), it already appeared one year earlier in the title of a 1958 publication by Georg Poensgen and Leopold Zahn: *Abstrakte Kunst - Eine Weltsprache* (Abstract Art - A World Language), Baden Baden: Woldemar Klein 1958.

⁴At the symposium *documenta: History/Art/Politics*, organized by the German Historical Museum in Berlin on October 15, 2019, Bernhard Fulda and Julia Friedrich called attention to Haftmann’s party membership. See their contributions in the journal *Historische Urteilskraft*, no 2 (March 2020). Mirl Redmann also calls attention to the NSDAP membership of several other founding figures. See idem.: “Das Flüstern der Fußnoten,” in: *documenta studies*, no. 9 (June 2020), https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studien_9_Mirl_Redmann.pdf.

⁵According to Theodor W. Adorno “Language granted [fascism] asylum” when the “jargon of authenticity” became omnipresent after the war, with “formalities of autonomy replacing its contents.” See Adorno: *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1964, pp. 9 and 19. (English edition: *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will Evanston, Northwestern University Press 1973)

fictional art critic Bernt Maltzahn, who appears as a turncoat character in the best-selling novel, may have been at least partially modelled on Haftmann.

Encountering ‘specters of Haftmann’⁶ in one of the most famous examples of West German postwar literary production, and following the trope of the spook I found in Lenz’s text, drew me further into an intellectual endeavor of ‘ghost busting’ that eventually lead to the discovery of an anonymous article on “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst” (The Spooky in Art). Even though I will use the second part of this essay to argue that the article, which was published in 1940 in a propagandist Nazi art journal, might have been ‘ghostwritten’ by Haftmann, the main focus of my argument is not to establish a definite attribution of authorship. Like my discussion of *Deutschstunde*, it is more exemplary in scope, treating Haftmann as a figure who is representative of the country’s postwar art field, where the legacies of nationalism and Nazism still permeated professional networks and narratives. Digging deeper into the history of German art and thought, my archaeology of the trope of the spook as a prefiguration of abstraction thus seeks to excavate the epistemological remains of the Nordic and Germanic spirits that keep haunting not just Haftmann’s specific historiographic practice – and documenta in particular – but also the legacy of modern abstract art in general (up to its most recent recurrence in the guise of so-called ‘zombie formalism’⁷).

The intention for presenting these fragments from *documenta as a Haunted Exhibition* is twofold: On the one hand, my *Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction*⁸ deals with the specters of the political past, which Haftmann and other cultural actors tried so assiduously to bury, and which must be unearthed further to better understand how the ideological continuities between the Nazi era and the West German Federal Republic were sustained by personal networks of those involved in the country’s (cultural) reconstruction and spiritual resurrection in a context where, due to the so-called Cold War, denazification quickly gave way to anti-Communism only a few years after the Holocaust. On the other hand, my essay examines the persistence of ambiguous aesthetic theories and art historical narratives and their structural undeadness, which continues to haunt art-related discourses and practices today. In the following, I will therefore tune into an un/timely Nietzschean *Geistergespräch*⁹ to better understand how abstract art – perhaps because of its spectral quality – was able to continuously shift its shape and assume different ideological guises before, during, and after Nazism.

Following a ‘hauntological’ approach, which considers the entanglement of different temporalities,¹⁰ I would like to go beyond the important

⁶ This is an adaptation of Jacques Derrida’s title *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge 1994.

⁷ Walter Robinson: “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism,” in: *Artspace* (April 3, 2014), www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184

⁸ The title *Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction* blurs the German concepts of *Geistesgeschichte* (intellectual history/history of thought) and *Geistgeschichte* (ghost story), which differ only in one letter. G.W.F. Hegel’s idealist *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Phenomenology of Spirit, orig. 1807) was highly influential for the historiography of Haftmann and other art historians of his time. For a theoretical discussion of its relations to abstraction, see Adorno: *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973, pp. 35–42. He also draws on Karl Marx and Edgar Allan Poe to describe the uncanny abstractions of the commodity form and art’s non-identitarian and non-historicist mediation of its spirit (*Geist*) beyond reification.

⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche: “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben,” in: *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft [1874] 1997, p. 219. (English edition: *Untimely Mediations*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press 1997)

¹⁰ I take my cue from the emancipatory hauntologies developed by post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist, and post-humanist theorists such as Derrida (*Specters of Marx*), Gayatri Spivak (*Ghost Writing*) and Karen Barad (*Hauntological Relations of Inheritance*) as well as from Southern Gothic literature by US authors such as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, whose literary procedures reveal that “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” as Faulkner put it in *Requiem for a Nun*, London: Chatto & Windus 1919, p. 85.

question of how Haftmann's NSDAP membership should be interpreted in light of contemporary history. To avoid the pitfalls of individualizing, relativizing, or diminishing the problem as a thing of the past – a tendency I currently perceive in both critical and apologetic responses to last year's confirmation of the art historian's party membership – my intention is to shift the perspective from an identitarian essentializing of Haftmann's biography to the social relationality of his practice, and from a narrow historicist focus on cultural conventions of bygone times to their legacies which still haunt us today. More precisely, by laying out the ways in which the *documenta* founder's historiographic practice spanned different political systems, I will situate Haftmann's specific linguistic and narrative choices within the discourses and social contexts of his time to trace their resonances beyond them. Within this deliberately speculative reframing, my analysis of the conditions and effects of his stories about abstraction in the postwar cultural field will hopefully help to grasp how Haftmann, Arnold Bode and their colleagues used *documenta* to curate a very selective German and Northern European "history of the present"¹¹ in the geopolitically unique situation of the Federal Republic's integration into the transatlantic West, thereby contributing to the birth of a curatorial governmentality, whose socially reproductive dimensions and historically shifting biopolitical implications I analyze in the context of my dissertation on the gendered economies of curating.

¹¹ See *documenta: Curating the History of the Present*, ed. by Nanne Buurman and Dorothee Richter, special issue, *OnCurating*, no. 13 (June 2017). On Michel Foucault's concept of a "history of the present" and its relation to his archeological and genealogical approaches, see David Garland: "What is a 'history of the present'? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions," in: *Punishment and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2014), pp. 365–84.

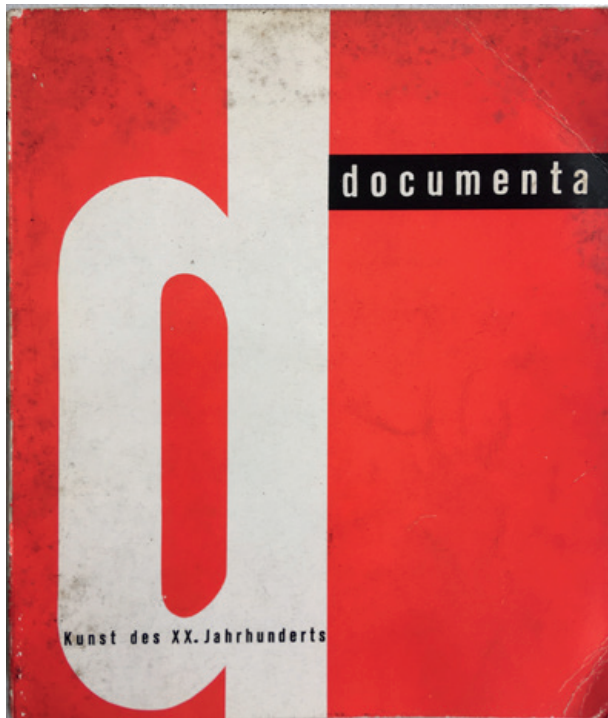


Fig.: Cover of catalogue of the first *documenta*, Munich: Prestel 1955.



Fig.: Cover of Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* (The German Lesson), first edition, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe 1968.

I German Lessons: Specters of Haftmann in *Deutschstunde*

Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* is set in the borderlands between northern Germany and Denmark and tells the story of the expressionist painter Max Ludwig Nansen's heroic resistance to the Nazi persecution of his artwork. Nansen's story is narrated retrospectively through a framing device, the after school 'detention essay' written by the juvenile delinquent Siggy Jepsen, whose father, a local police officer, had monitored the professional ban against the painter during the NS regime. In the compulsory text on the assigned theme of "the joys of duty," the first person narrator Siggy recounts how shortly after the end of the war, the artist Nansen receives a visit from the art critic Bernt Maltzahn.¹² A few years earlier, the latter had described Nansen's work as "painted witches' spook and pamphlets of degeneration" in the fictional Nazi journal *Volk und Kunst* (Nation and Art). Now, however, he is interested in publishing the artist's so-called *Unsichtbare Bilder* (invisible pictures) in the new monthly journal *Das Bleibende* (The Remaining).¹³

When the skeptical painter asserts that he would rather stay in the "chamber of horrors," where he has been relegated by the critic, Maltzahn tries to convince Nansen by explaining that the term "witches' spook" was not derogatory, but rather referred to the "relationship between real world and image world" and to the "political spook happening outside."¹⁴ The fictional artist then introduces Maltzahn to a friend, ironically calling the fictional critic "my benevolent supporter and unknown defender" who "has risked a lot, which none of us realized, as it turns out now."¹⁵ After Maltzahn has left, Nansen and his friend discuss their surprise about the fact that "they" have come out of hiding so soon, obliquely referring to former Nazis by the third-person plural pronoun rather than calling them by name: "You would think, they keep hiding and remain silent for a while, dead with their shame alone in the darkness [...]. I knew: one day they would return, but [...] that they would be back so quickly comes as a surprise. You can only ask yourself what is worse: their forgetfulness or their shamelessness."¹⁶

In addition to using the expressionist artist Emil Nolde as a model for his protagonist Nansen,¹⁷ Lenz's passage directly refers to a number of historical events and measures of Nazi cultural politics. Already before the first opening of the infamous *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) travelling exhibition in Munich in 1937, Alfred Rosenberg's *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kunst* (Battalion for German Art) had opened so-called Schreckenskammern (chambers of horror) to display the art that the organization vilified as degenerate. While the persecution of modern art

¹² Siegfried Lenz: *Deutschstunde* (1968), Munich: dtv 2016. (English edition: *The German Lesson*, trans. by Ernest Kaiser & Eithene Wilkins, New York: New Directions 1986)

¹³ Ibid., p. 412. The published translation is at times rather loose and obscures some of the points I will discuss later, which is why my own translations are more literal. For instance, while the titles of the two journals are translated as "Art and the People" and "Abiding Things" in the English edition, I wanted to highlight the unusual use of the nominalized verb, which is characteristic for the German title "Das Bleibende." The word "Hexenspuk" is translated as "witches' sabbath" in the 1986 New Directions edition, while I translate it as "witches' spook."

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 414.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 415.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 416. Instead of referring to the Nazis as an unspecific "they," the translators of the English edition decided to insert the sentence "The rats are boarding the new ship" to refer to them metaphorically as a plague.

¹⁷ In the field of German literature studies, Wilhelm H. Grothmann has shown that the pictures described in the novel and their titles bear clear resemblance to actual paintings by Nolde. Nolde's "Lemon Garden," for instance, became Nansen's "Lemon Woman." See Grothmann: "Siegfried Lenz' *Deutschstunde*: Eine Würdigung der Kunst Emil Noldes," in: *Seminar*, no. 15 (1979), pp. 56–69.

in Nazi Germany and the history of its defamation in the *Degenerate Art* exhibitions provides the well-known historical foil for the novel, it is less well known that, in the early years of the regime until about 1934–35, some of its elite members, including Joseph Goebbels, propagated expressionism, especially Nordic expressionism, as a style they believed to be compatible with the Nazi ideology of Germanic superiority, thereby antagonizing Rosenberg and Hitler, who were dedicated to *völkisch* realism.¹⁸ In this context, the journal *Kunst der Nation* (Art of the Nation) was initiated by the Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studenten Bund (National Socialist German Student Union) to promote selected examples of Nordic expressionism as the truly German art, or to “nationalize the avant-garde,” as Stefan Germer put it.¹⁹ Besides contributions by propaganda minister Goebbels and the Nazi art history professor Wilhelm Pinder, among others,²⁰ the journal also featured articles by several documenta founders, including Werner Haftmann.²¹

Haftmann’s contributions, such as “Geografie und unsere bewusste Kunstsituation” (Geography and our Conscious Art Situation), “Form und Wirklichkeit: Exkurs über die Einheit der modernen Kunst” (Form and Reality: Excursus on the Unity of Modern Art) and “Vielfältigkeit moderner Kunst” (Diversity of Modern Art), which he wrote in 1934 at the age of twenty-two, not only feature Emil Nolde, but also directly paraphrase (or even plagiarize) Pinder’s concepts of geography, diversity within unity and the specific destiny of the German situation to counter Hitler’s critique of the chaos of modernity.²² Haftmann would recycle these arguments again in his introductions to the documenta catalogues twenty years later, still without explicitly referencing Pinder.²³ What is remarkable here is that Haftmann – who was a frequent contributor to the feuilleton of the weekly *Die Zeit* after the war – worked as a critic of modern and contemporary art both during and after the Nazi regime, resembling the fictional critic Maltzahn from *Deutschstunde* in this regard. And just like the Maltzahn character, Haftmann later staged himself as a defender of the modern artists who were eventually declared ‘degenerate’ in the framework of official National Socialist cultural politics, adapting his earlier narratives to the new political demands of postwar Germany. Before elaborating on further reasons why I believe that Haftmann may have served as a model for Lenz’s ambivalent Maltzahn character, I will now briefly summarize his continuous curatorial and critical support of Emil Nolde.²⁴

¹⁸ See Hildegard Brenner: “Die Kunst im politischen Machtkampf der Jahre 1933/34,” in: *Vierteljahresheft* 2/1 (1962), pp. 17–42.

¹⁹ See Stefan Germer: “Kunst der Nation: Zu einem Versuch, die Avantgarde zu nationalisieren,” in: *Kunst auf Befehl? 1933–1945*, ed. by Bazon Brock and Achim Preiß, Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann 1990, pp. 21–40. The journal ceased publication in 1935 when Rosenberg asserted his and Hitler’s anti-modern tastes as the official position of Nazi cultural politics. *Kunst der Nation* was founded by Otto Andreas Schreiber, who was also a member of the artist’s group *Der Norden* (The North).

²⁰ Receiving a call from Munich to Berlin in 1935, Pinder was one of the leading art historians of the Nazi regime. His students Alfred Hentzen and Henry Nannen also wrote for *Kunst der Nation* and would become important promoters of modern art in Northern Germany after the war: The former SS and NSDAP member Nannen founded the popular magazine *Der Stern* (1948) and later the Kunsthalle in Emden (1983). Hentzen, NSDAP member and assistant of Ludwig Justi at the Nationalgalerie Berlin, curated the show *Die großen Deutschen im Bild* (Great Germans in Contemporary Portrait) in the context of the 1936 Olympic Games. After the war, he was responsible for rebuilding the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, became director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1955, and served as an advisor and curator for documenta.

²¹ The architect and art historian Stephan Hirtzel, who worked for the Reich Press Department in 1934 and for the Reich Ministry of Weapons and Ammunition during the war, is another documenta founder, who contributed to *Kunst der Nation*. Between 1948 and 1965, the former NSDAP member was director of the Werkakademie Kassel (today’s Kunsthochschule Kassel), so it seems that a part of the network that later gave birth to documenta was already knit in the context of *Kunst der Nation*.

²² See Martin Schieder’s comment on “Zur Vielfältigkeit in der Kunst,” in: *Gauklerfest unterm Galgen: Expressionismus zwischen ‘Nordischer’ Moderne und ‘Entarteter’ Kunst*, ed. by Uwe Fleckner and Maike Steinkamp, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 241–49.

²³ For a discussion of Pinder’s postwar reception by younger art historians, including Haftmann, see Sabine Fastert: “Pluralismus statt Einheit: Die Rezeption von Wilhelm Pinders Generationenmodell nach 1945,” in: *Kunstgeschichte nach 1945: Kontinuität und Neubeginn in Deutschland*, ed. by Nikola Doll, Ruth Heftrich, Olaf Peters, Ulrich Rehm, Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau 2006, pp. 51–65.

²⁴ Even though Nolde’s paintings are not ‘abstract’ in the narrow sense of ‘non-figuration,’ I follow Haftmann’s understanding of German expressionism as a mode of abstraction and an important step towards fully abstract art.



Fig.: Exhibition view of paintings by Emil Nolde at the first *documenta* (1955), including “Familie” (Family, 1931) and “Der Herrscher” (The Ruler, 1914).
Photo: Günther Becker
© Günther Becker / documenta archiv



Fig.: Emil Nolde: “Familie” (Family, 1931).
© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll
Black-and-White-reproduction from the catalogue of the first *documenta*, Munich: Prestel 1955, fig. 2, n.p.



Fig.: 'Nolde Cabinet' featuring a selection of the so-called 'unpainted pictures' in the drawing section of *documenta III* (1964).

Photo: Horst Munzig

© Horst Munzig / documenta archiv



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Seltsame Dame" (Strange Lady, ca. 1930-50s), featured in *documenta III* (1964) and in Haftmann's monograph *Unpainted Pictures* (1963). © Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

Source: Catalogue of *documenta III*, vol. I: Malerei/Skulptur (Painting/Sculpture), Cologne: DuMont Schaumborg 1964, p. 91.

Nordic by Nature

Haftmann actively supported Nolde before and after World War II. He featured the artist not only in his 1934 *Kunst der Nation* articles and the first three documenta exhibitions (1955, 1959, 1964), but also wrote a biography of the artist, which was published in 1958 and deliberately factors out Nolde's racism, antisemitism and Nazi affiliations by portraying the painter as a victim of NS persecution, as a large number of his works had been included in the *Degenerate Art* exhibitions.²⁵ Perpetuating the myth of the *Ungemalte Bilder* (unpainted pictures) – allegedly painted by Nolde in 'inner emigration' – both the biography and the illustrated monograph *Ungemalte Bilder*, which Haftmann published in 1963, depict the artist as having suffered from the Nazi professional ban that allegedly prohibited him from painting.²⁶ In the very year in which the second Auschwitz trials (December 20, 1963 – August 19, 1965) began, Haftmann thus portrayed the highly antisemitic artist, who was one of the first to become a member of the Nazi party and used to have admirers among the regime's higher ranks, as one of the Nazis' main victims.²⁷

Just one year after Haftmann's book on Nolde's *Unpainted Pictures* was published, a selection of the artist's small watercolors was included in *documenta III* (1964) as the only monographic 'cabinet' in the survey of modern drawing presented on the ground floor of the Alte Galerie (today's Neue Galerie).²⁸ As Haftmann wrote in the catalogue:

We furnish it just for Nolde, in order to show, in a space of their own, the small late watercolors, sketches of never painted pictures, that he made in the dark years of war and ostracization. They are the poignant last words of a great German painter from the darkest times of German history.²⁹

To make Nolde's light shine even brighter, Haftmann described his paintings as if they were precious pieces of jewelry, setting their radiant colors against the backdrop of "the darkness of amorphous time."³⁰ In contrast to this celebration of the German painter's heroic suffering, the Holocaust remained the exhibition's unacknowledged blind spot. Instead of taking issue with Nolde's antisemitism, Haftmann defended the artist against such charges when they were raised in the catalogue of Nolde's 1963 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by claiming that the artist was "by no means antisemitic."³¹

As late as 1986, Haftmann wrote a study on 'degenerate art' and 'inner emigration', commissioned by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, in which the art historian perfected this victimizing story by claiming that the artist "was, when the massive attack reached him, the born, the

²⁵ Haftmann: *Emil Nolde*, Cologne: DuMont 1958. In the following I cite from the seventh edition, published in 1978. Kirsten Jüngling cites a letter from Haftmann to the collector Bernhard Sprengel, in which he admits that he deliberately kept silent about Nolde's Nazi past because Joachim von Lepel, Nolde's former assistant, estate manager, and first director of the Nolde Foundation, had pleaded with him to omit any reference to it. See Jüngling: *Die Farben sind meine Noten: Emil Nolde Biografie*, Berlin: Ullstein 2013, p. 292.

²⁶ Haftmann: *Emil Nolde - Ungemalte Bilder*, ed. by Ada und Emil Nolde Stiftung Seebüll, Cologne: Dumont 1963. For a detailed deconstruction of this myth, see Bernhard Fulda: "Die 'Ungemalten Bilder': Genese eines Mythos," in: *Emil Nolde - Eine Deutsche Legende: Der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. by idem., Aya Soika, Christian Ring, Munich: Prestel 2019, pp. 179–217. In the brochure *Emil Nolde 1867–1956. Der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus*, published by the Nolde Foundation in 2019, its director Ring also admitted on p. 21 that Haftmann's assertion, according to which Nolde eventually "turned away" from the Nazis was definitely false, as Nolde did not turn away until the end of the regime.

²⁷ Nolde did well financially during the Nazi era because private collectors kept acquiring his work. Some of them later supported documenta as lenders of works by Nolde. Bernhard Sprengel, founder of the Sprengel Museum Hannover, is an example. See Astrid Becker: "Emil Nolde und die documenta: Das Machtvolle Geflecht von Netzwerk, Mythos und soziokulturellen Sehnsüchten," in: *Emil Nolde: A Critical Approach* by Mischa Kuball, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Draiflessen Collection, Berlin: DCV 2020, pp. 55–56.

²⁸ Individual drawings were also shown in other spaces, mostly loans from the Hamburger Kunsthalle, directed by documenta co-founder, former NSDAP member, and *Kunst der Nation* author Hentzen at the time. See *ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁹ Haftmann: "Einführung," in: *documenta III*, exhibition catalogue, vol. 2 ("Handzeichnungen"), n.p. Reproductions of some of the pictures are shown in the first volume of the catalogue, which is dedicated to painting.

³⁰ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Trying to justify the artist's position by pointing to the dominance of Jewish art dealers in Berlin around 1910, Haftmann reproduced antisemitic arguments himself. He shared these with later documenta artists like Paul Klee, Franz Marc, and August Macke of the *Blaue Reiter* group and artists of the *Brücke*, whose antisemitism came to the fore, for instance, in their conflicts with dealers such as Paul Cassirer or Alfred Flechtheim.

existential anti-fascist.”³² Thanks to Haftmann’s support, Nolde was generally perceived as one of the prime casualties of Nazi cultural politics by the wider German public, until the 2019 exhibition *Emil Nolde - A German Legend: The Artist during the Nazi Regime* at Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof caused Chancellor Angela Merkel to take down the artist’s paintings from the walls of her office.³³ By turning a Nazi like Nolde into a victim, Haftmann managed to present himself as an art historian who tirelessly fought for the rehabilitation of modern artists, in spite of the limited roster of primarily non-Jewish German positions that were rehabilitated by documenta.³⁴ His lifelong self-staging as a champion of the modern art that was ostracized during the Nazi rule, thus expurgated not only Nolde’s biography but also his own.

Remarkably though, despite these exculpations, Haftmann’s writings about Nolde remained saturated with *Blut und Boden* semantics long after the end of the Nazi regime. In his 1958 biography, he characterizes the artist as a “great loner” and “broody” character highly influenced by the nature and soil of his native northern Germany,³⁵ arguing that the “organism of the picture” found its “manured soil” in “Germany and its spiritual traditions.”³⁶ According to Haftmann, Nolde’s desire as a “German artist” was to create “German art” that “is rooted in the *Heimatboden* (domestic soil)” of the northern German landscape, in the “world of Nordic fate.”³⁷ Due to the artist’s “heavy blooded Frisian origin,” Haftmann writes, the central tension in his work is between the “earthly and the metaphysical” that he cultivates “in harmony with the energies of the earth.”³⁸ Haftmann continues to observe that “this close relationship with the Chthonic and the Panic received its particular coloring from the forces of his soil and the dark memories of his blood.”³⁹ Whenever Nolde was away from his home in Seebüll on the German-Danish border, he was “called back to his native soil” and the “nature of his home country,” as the art historian stresses.⁴⁰

Against this background, it is no surprise that five years later, in 1963, Haftmann still calls the ‘unpainted pictures’ “paintings of fate.”⁴¹ In an argument with social Darwinist undertones, the art historian explains that the professional ban only emphasized Nolde’s characteristically Nordic introversion and seriousness, helping his “ideas to ripen without compromise,”⁴² so that he could present these images as witnesses to “the force of German art.”⁴³ Haftmann’s naturalizing framing of the artist’s Nordic character and his quasi-biological realization of his inborn fate resonates with the ‘geographies approach’ to “artistic entelechies,” which Wilhelm Pinder, who would become one of the most prominent art history professors of the Nazi era, developed in his 1926 treatise *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* (The Problem of

³² Haftmann: *Verfemte Kunst: Bildende Künstler der inneren und äußeren Emigration in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Cologne: DuMont 1986, p. 18.

³³ This is remarkable because scholars have been discussing Nolde’s Nazi sympathies since at least the 1990s. See, for example, Mario von Lüttichaus: “Emil Nolde: Die Jahre 1930–1945: Tagtägliches Paktieren mit den Zuständlichkeiten,” in: *Emil Nolde*, exhibition catalogue, Museo d’Arte Moderna, ed. by Rudy Chiappini, Milan and Lugano: Electra 1994 and Uwe Danker: “Nachdenken über Emil Nolde in der NS Zeit,” in: *Demokratische Geschichte*, no. 14 (2001), pp. 149–88.

³⁴ On the selective character of documenta’s canon of modernity, see Walter Grasskamp: “‘Degenerate Art’ and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed,” in: *Museum Culture*, ed. by Irit Rogoff and D.J. Sherman, Routledge 1994, pp. 163–96, where he calls attention to the omission of Jewish artists and leftist political traditions from documenta.

³⁵ Haftmann: *Emil Nolde*, p. 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15. Thus, Martin Schieder’s remark that Haftmann’s 1934 articles do not follow the model of Nordic expressionism, cannot be generalized to all of his writing. While it was obviously not Haftmann’s only interpretative model, it played a role in his thinking even after the Nazi era. See Schieder’s comment on “Zur Vielfältigkeit in der Kunst,” in: *Gauklerfest unterm Galgen*, p. 248.

⁴¹ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Generation in the Art History of Europe).⁴⁴ Haftmann later officially distanced himself from Pinder, but dedicated his Nolde biography to the museum directors Ernst Gosebruch and Max Sauerlandt “in memoriam”. Both were early promoters of expressionism, friends with Nolde and among the first to acquire paintings by him for public collections in Germany.⁴⁵

Doppelgänger in *Deutschstunde*

At first glance, Lenz’s 1968 novel *Deutschstunde* presents a positive, heroic image of the painter Nansen as stubbornly antagonistic to the Nazi dictatorship, in line with Haftmann’s embellishing hagiographic description of Nolde as a stealthy underground opponent of the regime rather than the Nazi as which he has meanwhile been exposed. Nevertheless, I would like to speculate if the passage on the visiting critic Maltzahn, which I cited earlier, may not be an early covert criticism of Haftmann, who had become the director of the newly founded Neue Nationalgalerie in West Berlin in 1967, just one year before the novel’s first publication. This idea – that Lenz’s description of the visiting art critic Maltzahn could be a secret portrait of Haftmann – first came to my mind when I happened to reread *Deutschstunde* at about the same time that I was studying Haftmann’s writings. I noticed that the art theoretical views of Nansen and his followers in Lenz’s novel and the ‘jargon of authenticity’ that they use to express them bear striking similarities with Haftmann’s art narratives, in terms of both style and content.

The fictional critic’s explanation that by labeling Nansen’s works as “witches’ spook” he intended to refer to the “relationship between real world and image world,”⁴⁶ for instance, closely resembles Haftmann’s rhetoric of abstraction as a metaphysical vision that perceives the inner truth of reality beyond the mere appearances of objects and his distinction between the “reproductive” and the “evocative image.”⁴⁷ Haftmann differentiates between three kinds of relationships between the “outer” or “visible world” and the artistic expression of the perceived truths with varying relations to nature or reality: “Even where experience of nature is part of the game, it is not the visible thing that is reproduced or interpreted, but rather the relationship to it [the thing], which is only produced in the viewing subject.”⁴⁸ Regarding Nolde, he consequently writes in *Ungemalte Bilder*:

“Nolde, in his hidden studio, now exclusively stayed within the realm of his dreams. The window, which opened up the view onto this ‘other reality’ was facing towards the inside. This window, however, was a small piece of paper on the drawing board, on which images of inner life appeared and congealed in visual form in a process of tentative pictorial fixation.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ See Wilhelm Pinder: *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* [1926], fourth edition, Cologne: Seemann 1949, pp. 145–51, where he develops a “natural history of art,” whose prime indicator is the individual artist’s date and place of birth. Since Pinder claims that European nations, with their individual characters and “entelechies,” share a familiarity in “blood and fate” that stands in contrast to those of other “races” (pp. 56–57), it is no surprise that he later even spoke of a “racial history of art” on the occasion of Hitler’s fiftieth birthday.

⁴⁵ In 1913, Sauerlandt bought a Nolde for the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts. Despite his nationalist position and defense of Nolde as a Germanic artist in line with the Nazi ideology, Sauerlandt was suspended from his posts in 1933, just like Gosebruch, whose political position was less explicit.

⁴⁶ Lenz: *Deutschstunde*, p. 414.

⁴⁷ Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. II, Munich: Prestel 1955, p. 22. (Revised and extended English edition: *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Ralph Mannheim, New York: Frederick A. Praeger 1960) See also idem.: “Einführung,” in: *documenta II*, exhibition catalogue, vol. I (“Malerei”), Cologne: DuMont Schauberg 1959, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 14–15.

⁴⁹ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 20



Fig.: Werner Haftmann in front of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 1968.
Photo: Reinhard Friedrich
© Staatliche Museen Berlin/Zentralarchiv



Fig.: First page of Werner Haftmann's article "Geografie und unsere bewusste Kunstsituation," in: *Kunst der Nation*, vol 2, no 20, 1934, pp. 3-4.



Fig.: First page of first edition of the weekly *Die Zeit*, vol. 1, no. 1, February 21, 1946.



Fig.: View of Berlin edition of the *Degenerate Art* Exhibition (1938) with Emil Nolde's painting "Das Leben Christi" (The Life of Christ, 1911/12).
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin/Zentralarchiv

Haftmann's escapist interpretation of this withdrawal into 'inner emigration' as an act of opposition and his highlighting of Nolde's expressive color painting as an alternative access to a transcendental reality resisting the Nazi regime is taken up in Lenz's novel, which pictures the artist as a visionary who expresses his deep metaphysical insights through painting while real windows occasionally remain blind, "keep everything to themselves," and do not allow to see behind the curtain.⁵⁰ When the figure of Maltzahn is introduced in the plot, he carries the fictional artist's treatise on "Color and Opposition,"⁵¹ which might also be a reference to Haftmann's apologetic Nolde interpretation.

These similarities, along with the fact that Haftmann's own biography resembles that of the fictional critic in so far as he wrote for the Nazi journal *Kunst der Nation* (Art of the Nation) in 1934 and then worked for the German liberal newspaper *Die Zeit* (The Time, founded in 1946) after the war, gave rise to my suspicion that Lenz's figure of Maltzahn could be based on Haftmann. This speculation becomes even more plausible considering that the novel *Deutschstunde*, which is constructed around the story of the 'invisible pictures,' was published five years after Haftmann's publication on Nolde's *Unpainted Pictures* (1963). It is hard to believe that these parallels are a coincidence, especially since the Nolde Foundation recently pointed out that Haftmann's writings about Nolde served Lenz as a blueprint for his novel.⁵² The analogies between the *Unsichtbare Bilder* (invisible pictures) and the *Ungemalte Bilder* (unpainted pictures) and the journals *Volk und Kunst* (Nation and Art) and *Kunst der Nation* (Art of the Nation) are more than obvious. Furthermore, the telling name of Lenz's fictional art publication *Das Bleibende* (The Remaining) could not only be read as pointing to continuities of things that remained the same between the 'Third Reich' and the FRG, but also as a pun on the weekly *Die Zeit*. Both two-word titles not only combine a reference to temporality with a definite article – *Das Bleibende* also recalls the jargon of authenticity used by Martin Heidegger and his followers, which was characterized by the frequent use of nominalized verbs. Heidegger, another Nazi professor and NSDAP member (1933–45), spoke about *Das Seiende* (The Existing) in his book *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time, orig. 1927) and it perhaps comes as no surprise that the existentialist philosopher's ontologizing rhetoric also left traces in Haftmann's style of writing.⁵³

⁵⁰ Lenz: *Deutschstunde*, p. 40.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 411.

⁵² See *Emil Nolde 1867-1956: Der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus*, p. 18.

⁵³ To highlight the parallel morphological structure of "Das Bleibende" and "Das Seiende" and the sense of continuous being evoked by the nominalized verbs, I adhere to my own translation "The Existing" here, even though Heidegger's term "Das Seiende" is elsewhere translated as "being" or "entity." See, for instance, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford/Cambridge Blackwell 1962. The title of the fictional journal *Das Bleibende* (The Remaining) may also refer to the monthly journal *Die Wandlung* (The Transformation), founded by Heidegger's former friend Karl Jaspers and others in Heidelberg in 1946, as transformation is the direct opposite of things remaining as they are.

Spooky Specters

Against this backdrop, it is particularly notable that – beyond the obvious similarities between *Ungemalte Bilder* (real) and *Unsichtbare*

Bilder (fictional), *Kunst der Nation* (real) and *Volk und Kunst* (fictional), *Die Zeit* (real) und *Das Bleibende* (fictional) – there are interesting, if not uncanny, connections between the use of the expression *Spuk* (spook) by the real and fictional critics. In 1968, Lenz lets the potential literary doppelgänger of Haftmann use the expression *Hexenspuk* (witches' spook) in reference to the work of Nolde's literary doppelgänger, implicitly referring to the defamation of Nolde's religious works in the *Degenerate Art* exhibitions. In the exhibition series' 1938 Berlin edition, the antisemitic artist's "Das Leben Christi" (The Life of Christ, 1911/12) was (ironically) accompanied by an antisemitic sign that read: "Painted witches' spook, hewn pamphlets were passed off by psychopathic artists and business-minded Jews as manifestations of German religiosity and turned into pure cash." Haftmann, remarkably, employed the word "spook" in reference to both the NS regime and to Nolde's work: In his 1959 documenta opening speech and his 1962 *Die Zeit* article on the *Degenerate Art* exhibitions in Munich, for example, he referred to National Socialism as a "spook."⁵⁴ But in *Ungemalte Bilder*, he also used the expression in connection with some of Nolde's 'unpainted pictures' and the "ungraspable spheres of dreams" they evoke: "Also the spook, the always somehow enigmatic drollery and the uncanny are present."⁵⁵ And in his 1958 biography, Haftmann had already written about Nolde's work: "It is still at home in regions where within ancient memories the myth comes into being, the magic spell, the double face, the spooky masks and fervent legends. This art is by all means un-Latin, absolutely Nordic."⁵⁶

In Haftmann's writing on Nolde, the Nazi regime remains nebulously "ungraspable" and is only referred to in indirect paraphrases, such as "the darkness of the time, which belongs to the most corrupt in the history of the German people," "the fatal years between 1933 and 1945," the "horrible foreground of these years," "a horde that calls for a hunt of free spirits," "apocalyptic chaos that the political man created," "invasion of the unspirited," "appalling void of German history," "darkness of amorphous time," "this state of exception," and "art terrorism."⁵⁷ He is more explicit about the recent German past only once, when he speaks of the "National Socialist art-polemic."⁵⁸ Haftmann's combination of derogatory adjectives with abstract concepts not only others, externalizes, demonizes, and disembodies Nazi crimes in a suspiciously excessive way, which calls to mind an overcompensatory exorcism, but also frequently temporalizes them like a natural phenomenon as inescapable as the night. Given what we know about his own biography today, the way Haftmann renders the Nazis 'unspeakable' here almost appears as if he was afraid that by calling their name he would summon the ghosts of his own inglorious past as a party member and accessory to the spook he is exorcising (or externalizing) in this text.

⁵⁴ Haftmann: "Von den Inhalten der modernen Kunst" [1959], in: *Skizzenbuch: Zur Kultur der Gegenwart, Reden und Aufsätze*, Munich: Prestel 1960, p.128 and idem.: "Bildersturm vor fünfundzwanzig Jahren: Die Ausstellung 'Entartete Kunst' in München," in: *Die Zeit*, no. 45, November 9, 1962.

⁵⁵ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 33.

⁵⁶ Haftmann: *Nolde*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 7, 8, 9, 10, 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Nachtgelichter" (Nocturnal Apparitions, date unknown), one of the 'unpainted pictures' featured in Haftmann's book *Unpainted Pictures* (1963) but not in *documenta III* (1964).
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Source: *Emil Nolde: Ungemalte Bilder*, Fig. 25, n.p.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Zwielichtige" (Shady Twilight Characters, date unknown), one of the 'unpainted pictures' featured in Haftmann's book *Unpainted Pictures* (1963) but not in *documenta III* (1964).
© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

Source: *Emil Nolde: Ungemalte Bilder*, Fig. 24, n.p.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Böses Paar" (Evil Couple, date unknown), one of the 'unpainted pictures' featured in *documenta III* (1964) but not in the book *Unpainted Pictures* (1963).

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Source of black-and-white reproduction:

Catalogue of *documenta III*, p. 92.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Erregte Alte Männer" (Anxious Old Men, date unknown), one of the 'unpainted pictures' featured in *documenta III* (1964), but not in the book *Unpainted Pictures* (1963).

© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

Source of black-and-white reproduction:

Catalogue of *documenta III*, p. 93.

Although Haftmann does not state this clearly, it almost seems as if he regarded Nolde's spooky nightmare paintings of "goblins" and "nightly creatures," "demons of nature" and "rude nature dudes," "magicians" and "witch whisperers," the imagery of "shady figures," "who sit in the dark and look at us from the night"⁵⁹ as the artist's reflections on his personal nightmare of the spell the Nazis put on him by "tying his hands" (as the art historian quotes Nolde's own words).⁶⁰ In Haftmann's references to the Nazi "spook," Hitler and his followers remain unnamed and are rhetorically disembodied, sometimes obscured to the degree that they become an indistinguishable formless "horde." This evocation of an anonymous mass stands in stark contrast to Haftmann's ideal of individualism.⁶¹ His description of the pandemonium that populates Nolde's paintings, on the other hand, is more figurative, fantastic and individualizing, although Haftmann is at pains to tease out their abstract, immaterial, spiritual, and timeless dimensions.⁶² "Like all appearances," Haftmann notes, Nolde's art "was not graspable in an optical-physical sense, but only perceivable in a spiritual sense."⁶³ He notes further that "the disembodiment of the figurative now also conditions the dematerialization of the spatial."⁶⁴

This juxtaposition of Nolde's miniatures and the Nazi's misdeeds as two antagonistic but complementary polarities, which seem to reciprocally mirror each other's spookiness in Haftmann's texts, is taken up in Lenz's description of the untimely apparition of the former Nazi art critic Maltzahn. The two "spooks" are superimposed in the opportunist critic's premature return from hiding. His shapeshifting and side-switching is framed in the novel as a revenant re-materialization of the Nazi spook in the guise of an immoral turncoat. When Nansen claims that he would rather stay in the "chambers of horror," into which he has been placed, because he feels that it is "precisely the horrors that are worthy of expression,"⁶⁵ the fictional critic, in an act of self-defense, claims that he had tried to tease out the "humble double meaning of spook"⁶⁶ in his earlier writing. Reinterpreting what would have probably been read as vilification of the artist's abstract style during Nazi times into a secret praise of the artist's critical rendering of the spooky Nazi powers, he continues to say that the "painted witches' spook," he had earlier noted in the artist's work, was in fact representing the "witches' spook happening in the reality around him."⁶⁷ This argument directly echoes Haftmann's reciprocal mirroring of Nolde's painted spook and the Nazi spook allegedly forcing him into 'inner emigration.'⁶⁸ In hindsight, the novel's literary juxtaposition and blurring of several fictional and real spooky agencies makes even more sense, because meanwhile we know (again?) what Lenz may have known, or at least suspected, in the late 1960s: Despite their dedication to modernist expressionist painting, both Nolde

⁵⁹ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 13 and 18.

⁶¹ See, for example Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, pp. 7 and 9, idem.: *Nolde*, pp. 9 and 39, and idem.: "Bildersturm vor 25 Jahren," n.p.

⁶² Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, pp. 38–39. He sees Nolde's paintings as examples of a "timeless-general" and "timeless-anonymous" world of art.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁵ Lenz: *Deutschstunde*, p. 413.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 414–15.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 414.

⁶⁸ Remarkably, many of Nolde's 'unpainted pictures' also feature couples or twin figures that, in a way, mirror each other, sometimes in contrast and sometimes in likeness. Yet, while Haftmann associates their spookiness with the Nazis, given Nolde's antisemitism, they could also be read in line with the stereotyping of Jews as shady powers ruling the world with capitalist speculation that was prominent in romantic anti-capitalism at the time.

and Haftmann had been at least partially sympathetic to Nazi ideologies, and thus must have been haunted by their own pasts, even if they did not always follow the regime's official course and disagreed with its official cultural politics.

Care and Confinement

Like so many other things, these pasts remained largely unspoken of in West Germany after 1945, although Haftmann's and Nolde's contemporaries must have known about them.⁶⁹ Nansen, the last name of Lenz's painter protagonist, could hence be interpreted as a hint to these repressed continuities and silenced affinities. To my knowledge, the name has so far only been interpreted as a compound of Nolde's self-chosen last name (derived from the village Nolde where he was born) and his birth-name Hansen,⁷⁰ but in addition to sharing its first letter with Nolde's name, the first letters of its two syllables appear significant as well: NanSen, i.e., NS.⁷¹ Likewise, the art critic's name Maltzahn could have a deeper meaning. It might be an intertextual reference to the mean and ugly dragon Frau Mahlzahn (Mrs. Grindtooth) from Michael Ende's children's book *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer* (Jim Button and Luke the Engine-Driver, orig. 1960). In this popular novel, the dragon (an authoritarian educator who is teaching racist evolutionary theory and rolling her r's like Hitler) buys abducted children and detains them under cruel conditions. After she is herself defeated and imprisoned by the protagonists Jim Button and Luke the Engine-Driver, Mahlzahn shifts her shape and turns into a golden dragon of wisdom, changing over from the side of evil to the side of good.

In a similar vein, Haftmann, who was taken prisoner by the Allied Forces in May 1945 and released one year later in May 1946, may have changed his political leanings after having undergone the American re-education program during his internment. Jim and Luke could, by the way, be understood as the representatives of the main parties of the anti-Hitler coalition: Luke the train driver could well be identified as a communist worker from the Soviet Union and the Black child Jim as an American GI (many Black children in postwar Germany were children of African-American GIs). In her book *Darwins Jim Knopf* (2009), Julia Voss reads the novel as a counter-narrative to racist evolutionary theory after finding out that Jim was modelled on the historical figure of Jemmy Button, a young man of African descent featured in Charles Darwin's writings.⁷² Against this backdrop, "Sorrowland," the novel's dark realm of the dragons, where – according to a sign – "racially impure dragons" were not allowed to enter, may be understood as an allusion to the "Third Reich."

⁶⁹ Among the few who did speak up about Nolde were Adolf Behne, who criticized Nolde's use of his defamation as a political alibi as early as 1947, and Carl Hofer, who called him a Nazi the same year. In 1967, Walter Jens also mentioned Nolde's racism and antisemitism but suggested to keep his work separate from the person.

⁷⁰ His first name Max Ludwig was interpreted as a reference to the painters Max Beckmann and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

⁷¹ Like the two middle letters of the brand Lonsdale, which is popular among neo-Nazis, the two middle letters of Nansen spell out 'ns.'

⁷² Julia Voss: *Darwins Jim Knopf*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2009.



Fig.: Franz Josef Tripp: Illustration from Michal Ende's *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer* (orig. 1960).

The sign above the entry to 'Sorrowland' states: "Attention! Racially impure dragons are not allowed to enter and will receive capital punishment."

Source: Michael Ende: *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer*, Stuttgart and Vienna, 1989, p.161.



Fig: Still from the 2019 movie adaptation of Siegfried Lenz' novel *Deutschstunde*, directed by Christian Schwochow. In this scene, a policeman confiscates blank sheets of paper, which the artist declares to be "invisible pictures." The novel's narrator Siggy appears in the foreground, watching the incident.

Since both Ende's and Lenz's novels allegorically deal with educational settings as situations of literal confinement and indoctrination of young people and the harmful legacy of authoritarian Nazi pedagogy in postwar West Germany, I believe it is not unlikely that Lenz referred to exactly this Nazi dragon's conversion after defeat. According to Voss, Ende, whose father was among the artists denigrated as 'degenerate,' had witnessed the opening of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich when he was seven years old. This adds another layer to the parallel between the confiscated paintings in Lenz's novel *The German Lesson* and the kidnapped children in *Jim Knopf*. If Lenz indeed alluded to the dragon who is abducting and indoctrinating children in Ende's book to draw an analogy to the stealing and ideologizing of art, this could be more than just a reference to the Nazi exhibitions as 'chambers of horror' or to the ideological deployment of art in general. It might even be associated with Haftmann's activities as a member of the German *Kunstschutz*, a military unit which repeatedly took its mission to protect and take care of artworks during the war as an excuse for their theft and monetization.⁷³

Children and art are comparable in *The German Lesson* in the sense that they are conceptualized as passive innocent *tabulae rasae* that can be ideologically inscribed with whatever message appears useful to those in power.⁷⁴ On pp. 172–73, for example, Lenz takes the idea of the 'invisible pictures' literally: In the passage where Nansen presents a portfolio of white pieces of paper to the police officer in charge of monitoring the artist's compliance with the professional ban and claims that these are his "invisible pictures," a bystander observes that they are "innocent like snow."⁷⁵ The 'invisible pictures' are here likened to the boy narrator's 'innocence' as a child, which is, however, rendered dubious by the fact that he steals Nansen's paintings to protect them from being seized by the Nazis and installs them in secret exhibitions, which he curates just for himself. Siggy, who is later convicted for taking artworks into 'protective custody,' could also be read as personifying the *Kunstschutz*. Its members often presented themselves as caring art lovers and humanist caretakers risking their lives to protect humankind's cultural heritage and art treasures from destruction.⁷⁶ All in all, the ambiguous figures in *Deutschstunde* serve as reminders that 'innocence' has to remain a myth, particularly in the wake of a fascist system that left hardly anyone uncorrupted and created many ethically ambivalent "grey zones,"⁷⁷ while a *Persilschein* (an official document issued by the Allied Forces and informally named after a popular brand of laundry detergent) offered a kind of certificate of innocence in the context of the superficial 'denazification' in West Germany.

⁷³ On Haftmann's participation in the evacuation of the archival materials and art treasures from the monastery Montecassino south of Rome in 1943–44, during which fifteen boxes of material went missing and were most likely stolen by the Germans, see Christian Fuhrmeister: *Die Abteilung Kunstschutz in Italien: Kunstgeschichte, Politik und Propaganda 1936–63*, Cologne: Böhlau 2019, pp. 164, 178–83.

⁷⁴ According to Haftmann, Nolde felt that his paintings were like children, which the artist "wished to protect like bodily progeny." See *Ungemalte Bilder*, pp. 13, 37. Art historian Paul Schultze-Naumburg, member of the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* and the NSDAP, also saw artworks as spiritual children of the artists, which inherit character traits of their parents, thus biologizing them, as Daniela Bohde points out in her study *Kunstgeschichte als physiognomische Wissenschaft: Kritik einer Denkfigur der 1920er bis 1940er Jahre*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2012, p. 89.

⁷⁵ Lenz: *Deutschstunde*, p. 172.

⁷⁶ After the war, there were unrealized plans by former members of the *Kunstschutz* to publish a "white book" of their activities. This unit's image of innocence was still perpetuated in the German movie *Die Grünen Teufel von Monte Cassino* (1958) and later turned upside-down in its American counterpart *Monuments Men* (2014).

⁷⁷ For Primo Levi's concept of "grey zones" and its shattering of the idea of innocence, see Michael Rothberg's intersectional theory of implication: *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019, p. 39.



Fig.: Werner Haftmann (fourth from the left) and other members of the German *Kunstschutz* at Montecassino on February 18, 1944.
Source: <http://werner-haftmann.de/biografie/lebensbeschreibung/>



Fig.: Poster for the German post-war movie *Die grünen Teufel von Monte Cassino* (The Green Devils of Monte Cassino), directed by Harald Reinl, 1958.

Unreliable Narrators

It is important to mention here that Siegfried Lenz himself (whose first name is identical to that of his narrator, Siggy, short for Siegfried) became a member of the NSDAP when he was seventeen or eighteen years old, but claimed that he did not know about this when his membership rose to public attention in 2007.⁷⁸ Because applications for party membership had to be signed personally, his plea of innocence – like those disclaimers of many other former party members – remains doubtful; and – like Nolde and Haftmann who lied about their NS pasts – Lenz himself has to be regarded as an unreliable narrator. If he was aware of his own party membership despite his denials, this could explain to a certain degree why he was never more explicit about Maltzahn's real-world model. He may have feared that the undead past they all tried to bury could come to light, despite the fact that he was much younger than Nolde (b. 1867) and Haftmann (b. 1912) and – unlike them – could have claimed to be part of the *Flakhelfer* generation and thus only partially responsible because of his young age (b. 1926).⁷⁹ Another reason for Lenz's silence could have been Haftmann's reputation and power in the West German cultural field. In the decade after the war, Haftmann spent quite a lot of time in Hamburg, the largest city in Northern Germany, where – after returning from war captivity in 1946 – he worked for the newspaper *Die Zeit* and as a reader in art history at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (formerly Landeskunstschule Hamburg) from 1951–55. It is not entirely unlikely that he and Lenz, who was fourteen years his junior, could have met in the city's intellectual circles.

If these speculations about the specters of the past should turn out to be true, they would be typical examples of the “communicative silence” on the continuities of personal and professional networks between Nazi Germany and the West German Federal Republic.⁸⁰ Like Haftmann's art historical work and the writings by the other members of Lenz's literary peer group *Gruppe 47*, some of whom, as it turned out later, had likewise been NS affiliates or (cultural) collaborators,⁸¹ Lenz's writing was widely perceived as a form of literature that fought against forgetting the past. Lenz and his peers of *Gruppe 47* were also members of the Hamburg office of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was exposed as a propaganda institution secretly funded by the CIA in 1967. This US agency may have also covertly co-funded documenta during the so-called Cold War, and thus perhaps even Haftmann's work as a defender of the freedom of abstraction.⁸² Lenz's literary fictionalization of Nolde's story contributed to the popularization of Haftmann's fairytale about the expressionist artist as a natural “anti-Fascist.” In many ways, the novel reproduced Haftmann's re-signification of supposedly essentially

⁷⁸ According to materials in the Federal Archives in Berlin, Lenz applied for NSDAP membership on July 12, 1943 and became a member on April 20, 1944, Hitler's birthday. See: “Dieter Hildebrandt soll in NSDAP gewesen sein,” *Die Welt*, June 30, 2007, <https://www.welt.de/politik/article987203/Dieter-Hildebrandt-soll-in-NSDAP-gewesen-sein.html>. Shortly before the end of the war, Lenz deserted in Denmark and became a British prisoner of war in Schleswig Holstein. See: “Stets wehte freundliche Milde durch sein Werk: Ein Nachruf auf den verstorbenen Siegfried Lenz,” (interview with Hellmuth Karasek), *Radio Bremen*, October 8, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150924110724/http://www.radiobremen.de/kultur/themen/siegfried-lenz104.html>

⁷⁹ For examples of how members of this generation narrated their biographies, see also Heinz Bude: *Deutsche Karrieren: Lebenskonstruktionen sozialer Aufsteiger aus der Flakhelfer-Generation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987.

⁸⁰ See Hermann Lübke: *Vom Parteigenossen zum Bundesbürger: Über beschwiegene und historisierte Vergangenheiten*, Munich: Fink 2007. On the apologetic dimensions of Lübke's arguments see Axel Schildt: “Zur Durchsetzung einer Apologie,” in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 1, (2013), pp. 148–52.

⁸¹ For the NS affiliations of other members of the group besides Lenz's and Martin Walser's NSDAP memberships, see Heinz Ludwig Arnold: “Aufstieg und Ende der Gruppe 47,” in: *Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, no. 25 (2007), pp. 4–11. Günter Eich had written a Nazi radio play, Alfred Andersch had notified the Reich's literature commission of the separation from his Jewish wife and, most famously, Günter Grass admitted in 2006 that he had been a member of the SS.

⁸² Haftmann's article “Woran krankt die östliche Kultur,” published in *Die Zeit* on December 6, 1956 and calling for a boycott of the Russian invitation to collaborate in the cultural field by responding with “deadly silence,” for instance, sounds like sponsored anti-Soviet propaganda. For a further discussion of potential CIA support for Haftmann and documenta in the context of an “Americanization of Abstraction,” see my forthcoming *documenta as a Haunted Exhibition*.

‘Nordic stubbornness’ and ‘artistic solipsism’ as anti-totalitarian character traits and thus contributed to clearing the ‘Germanic spirit’ of any responsibility for the Nazi crimes by depicting the German artist’s heroic individualism as incompatible with collective totalitarianism.

However, closer scrutiny of Lenz’s minor characters, like the opportunist renegade art critic Maltzahn, may reveal some previously hidden layers of history that call for additional ‘detention classes’ to catch up on the yet unlearned German lessons and their uncanny resonances today.⁸³

⁸³ Since Haftmann and Nolde seem to have never met in person, the Maltzahn character may also be a composite of several historical figures. One other potential model is the Nazi painter Fritz Kaiser, who authored the exhibition guide of the *Degenerate Art* shows. Further candidates may have been Hanns Theodor Flemming, a journalist who wrote an article about Nolde titled “Besuch bei Nolde” in 1946, Hermann Kellenbenz, a historian of economy, who wrote a review on “Das Spätwerk des Malers E. Nolde” in 1947, or the art historian Martin Gosebruch, whose book *Emil Nolde: Aquarelle und Zeichnungen*, appeared in 1957. Fulda cites these writings as first steps in the construction of the myth of the ‘unpainted pictures,’ but – unlike for Haftmann – I know of no account that Lenz actually referred to their texts as inspiration. In the most recent movie adaptation of *Deutschstunde* by Christian Schwochow, which premiered in 2019, Maltzahn does not make an appearance and the film generally reproduces the novel’s heroizing narrative, not taking into account Nolde’s Nazi affiliations.



Fig.: Cover of the Nazi journal *Kunst dem Volk* (Art for the Nation), no. 11, 1940.

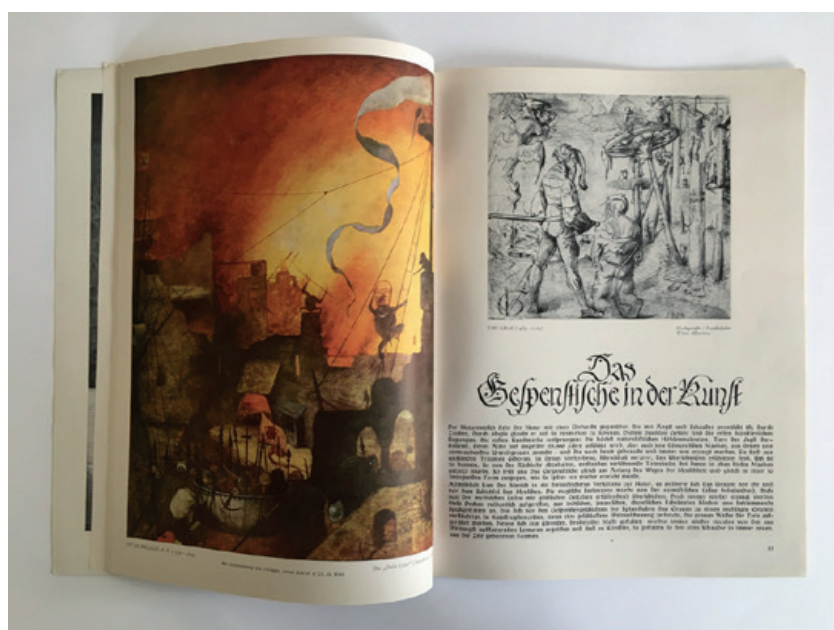


Fig.: First pages of the article "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst," in: *Kunst dem Volk*, no. 11, 1940, p. 15.

II Ghost Writing: The Spooky as a Prefiguration of Abstraction

After finishing a rough draft of the first part of this essay, I stumbled across a footnote that referenced an unsigned article titled “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst” (The Spooky in Art), published in the Nazi propaganda art journal *Kunst dem Volk* (Art for the Nation) in 1940.⁸⁴ This raised my curiosity because the journal’s name immediately reminded me of Lenz’s fictional *Volk und Kunst* (Nation and Art). Moreover, the footnote cited the anonymous author’s observation that “the fogginess in Northern countries has made its inhabitants dreamy and broody, so that these people have developed an imagination that we may call spectral [*gespenstisch*],”⁸⁵ thus recalling Haftmann’s essentializing characterization of Nolde as a broody and dreamy Nordic artist, highly influenced by the nature and soil of his native Frisian landscape. Upon reading the article, however, I realized that it was not about Nolde, at least not explicitly. Instead, the anonymous author argues that the spooky always erupts in art in “times of catastrophe,” whenever “world views break up” and exceptionally sensitive “individuals are shook by lemurs thrashing around in terror of the world,” and, if they are artists, they “construe the old scare” in “new forms born out of their times.”⁸⁶ The article’s title “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst” is, by the way, not only reminiscent of Vasily Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, orig. 1912), but also of Sigmund Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Culture and Its Discontents, orig. 1930) and could furthermore be associated with Freud’s essay on “Das Unheimliche” (The Uncanny, orig. 1919).⁸⁷

The anonymous author primarily speaks about the Middle Ages and the Inquisition as triggers for “deep, spiritual confusion” that caused particularly “the more serious souls” to be “overshadowed by melancholia [*melancholische Überschattung*]”.⁸⁸ His first example is Pieter Bruegel the Elder, whose landscapes, like the painting “Dulle Griet” (Dull Gret, ca. 1562),⁸⁹ are infused with “spooky [*gespenstisch*] dark light,” with “wild demonic” “devil’s spook” erupting as a consequence of the “mushrooming belief in witches.”⁹⁰ This still “world affirming” position, according to the anonymous author, is flanked by Hieronymus von Aachen, who is overwhelmed by the “creatures of the twilight,” “goblins,” and “hybrid quiddity of all kinds.”⁹¹ Remarkably, the author’s vocabulary and tropes are quite similar to Haftmann’s, who, for example, describes Nolde’s paintings as “overshadowed by melancholia [*Melancholie überschattet*]” and showing “far away mythic worlds.”⁹² Admittedly, this may just be a coincidence, like the fact that both Hieronymus Bosch and Emil Nolde chose their places of residence or birth, respectively, as their professional

⁸⁴ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” in: *Kunst dem Volk*, no. 11 (1940), pp. 14–21. The journal was published by Heinrich Hoffmann, curator of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (Great German Art Exhibitions), whose photographs of Hitler were a central part of NS propaganda. His publishing house *Heinrich Hoffmann Verlag national-sozialistischer Bilder* was one of the most important publishers of the “Third Reich.”

⁸⁵ Christina Schedlmayr: *Die Zeitschrift ‘Kunst dem Volk’: Populärwissenschaftliche Kunstliteratur im Nationalsozialismus und ihre Parallelen in der akademischen Kunstgeschichtsschreibung*, PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2010, p. 82.

⁸⁶ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 15.

⁸⁷ There is a close connection between the psychologization of art history around 1900 and the simultaneous embrace of essentializing categories like *Rasse* and *Volk*. See Daniela Bohde: *Kunstgeschichte als physiognomische Wissenschaft*, p. 8. On p. 23, she calls attention to the belief that there are symptomatic correspondences between the “inner character” and outer form of a visual *Gestalt*, which originated in physiognomics and survived in occultism and esoterics. I believe Kandinsky is a good example of this, see for instance his *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Benteli: Bern 1952/2004, p. 45.

⁸⁸ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 18.

⁸⁹ A color reproduction of a section of the painting precedes the article while all other featured works are reproduced in black and white.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 33.

names, as the anonymous author and Haftmann each point out in their texts. But besides the emphatic individualism, which is shared by the two authors, who both understand the creation of spooky works as the melancholic reaction of extraordinarily sensitive, anxious [*ängstlich*] and serious artists to dark times, there are more parallels, which I will trace in the following comparison of the anonymous article with some of Haftmann's texts.

While Haftmann describes Nolde's art in 1958 as "un-Latin, absolutely Nordic,"⁹³ the anonymous author claims eighteen years earlier that "The idea of the ghost [*des Gespenstes*], or the diluted, fading, shadowy being does not come easy to the Southerners,"⁹⁴ which is why "in the entirety of Italian art you will hardly find anything spooky [*gespenstisch*]. The clarity of the Southern light, the sharp outlines, the ever distinct modulation have trained these people to regard the 'plastic values' ('Valori Plastici' is the name of an artist group) as a given."⁹⁵ Like Haftmann, the anonymous author juxtaposes Southern clarity with the fogginess of the "Nordic countries" and "Germanic nations," where the spook has nevertheless arrived late: "The disembodied, shadowy creatures of Gothic times, are still meant to be corporal, even death is depicted as a skeleton. Their corporality is only absorbed by the concomitant sensation of the netherworld [*jenseitige Welt*]."⁹⁶ Haftmann – in what reads like an inversion of this formulation – later writes about Nolde's "un-Latin," Nordic art: "The disembodiment of the figurative now also conditions the dematerialization of the spatial, against which the sculptural secularity [*Diesseitigkeit*] of the things receives its contours."⁹⁷ Haftmann, by the way, also frequently mentions the Italian *Valori Plastici* movement as a contrast to Nordic expressionism.⁹⁸ Upon close reading, it almost seems as if the anonymous article thus not only foreshadows Haftmann's arguments but also summons disembodied ghostly presences from the history of art as spectral prefigurations of abstraction.

Furthermore, Haftmann's life-long struggle against mannerist representations of outer reality that do not take into account the inner truths of things and his preference for the "evocative image" over the "reproductive image,"⁹⁹ seem to be foreshadowed by the anonymous author's contempt for belated artists, like Pieter Bruegel the younger [*Höllenbruegel*, the hellish Bruegel] and Frans Francken, who paint "hell and witch creatures" only because "these themes offer painterly motifs, capturing their outer appearance more superficially. Because of this monotonous repetition, any terror dissolves by itself."¹⁰⁰ As a positive counterpart to these 'reproductive' renderings, the anonymous author praises more 'evocative' artists such as Francisco de Goya, who paints the "anxieties of his time [*Ängste seiner Zeit*]" two centuries later,

⁹³ Haftmann: *Emil Nolde*, p. 39.

⁹⁴ "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst," p. 17.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁹⁷ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 29.

⁹⁸ See, for instance, Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, p. 300. *Valori Plastici* was an Italian magazine (1918–22) that promoted the nationalist neo-classicist *Return to Order* movement, which led to the fascist *Novecento* and *Stapaese* movements. One of the artists involved in these movements was Giorgio Morandi, who is also known for having retreated into 'inner emigration' and was featured in the first three documenta exhibitions (1955, 1959, 1964).

⁹⁹ Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. II, p. 22. See also idem.: "Einführung," in: *documenta II*, exhibition catalogue, vol. I: *Malerei*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst," p. 21.



Fig.: Frans Francken: "Eine Hexenstube"
(A Witches' Kitchen, date unknown), illustration
from "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,"
in: *Kunst dem Volk*, no. 11, 1940, p. 18.



Fig.: Francisco de Goya: "Where is Mother Going?
(Leaving of the Witch, 1797-98)," illustration
from "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,"
in: *Kunst dem Volk*, no. 11, 1940, p. 19.

“when the world is torn apart again at the end of the eighteenth century,” after “the abyss had been closed for a while with the ghosts subdued and banished.”¹⁰¹ Haftmann, in turn, sees “memories of Goya lightly resonating” in Nolde’s paintings, but also notes a “benevolent humor” of natural spirits that “counterbalance the terrors of the spook.”¹⁰² The anonymous author, likewise, speaks about the possibility of “conquering the chaotic contradictions through humor,” which he sees exemplified by Shakespeare, among others.¹⁰³ Haftmann, once more paralleling the anonymous’ arguments, also finds in Shakespeare’s work a “drollery that repudiates the dark mythic character of nature to reflect it in the human passions”.¹⁰⁴ In sum, both authors not only share a common set of references and the understanding of the obscure vagueness of the spooky as something Nordic,¹⁰⁵ but also mention a number of mixed, hybrid creatures, metamorphoses, transformations, shape-shifters, nightly figures, witch creatures, and witch charmers inhabiting the paintings that were produced in dark and scary historical times and thus testify to the transfiguration of anxiety into abstraction.

Anxiety and Abstraction

The notion of *Angst* played an important role in German existential philosophy and these ideas seem to have informed both the anonymous author and Haftmann, who pays credit to Heidegger, Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* (Painting in the 20th Century, two volumes, orig. 1954/55). In *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Heidegger differentiates between *Angst* (anxiety) and *Furcht* (fear) by explaining that, as opposed to *Furcht*, which is focused on concrete things, *Angst* is an undefined form of dread, which is not caused by any concrete object but rather characterized by the perception of an abstract “indefinite” threat, which cannot be located “within the world [*innerweltlich*].”¹⁰⁶ Instead, *Angst* is about the possibilities of “being-in-the-world” and thus an expression of the “uncanny,” the “not-being-at-home,” the “collapse of mundane familiarity.”¹⁰⁷ According to Heidegger, “Anxiety individualizes and thus unravels the being-there [*Dasein*] as ‘solus ipse.’ This existential ‘solipsism,’” however, “does not displace the isolated subject-thing in the harmless emptiness of worldless occurring,” but rather confronts “being-there” with “its world as world” and thus with “itself as being in the world.”¹⁰⁸

It is interesting to note here that the art historian Wilhelm Worringer already problematized this alienating ‘spiritual homelessness’ and its singularizing force some twenty years before Heidegger. In his books *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and Empathy, orig. 1907) and

¹⁰¹ Ibid. The author also praises Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt, Arnold Böcklin, and Max Klinger.

¹⁰² Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 36.

¹⁰³ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁵ This opposition between clear Italian and dynamic German form can also be found in Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Italien und das Deutsche Formgefühl* (Italy and the German Sense of Form, orig. 1931). Wölfflin was a supporter of the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur*.

¹⁰⁶ See Martin Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer 2001, pp. 186 and 187. On p. 190, Heidegger credits Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* (the Danish original was published in 1844) but does not mention Freud.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 188 and 189.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

Formproblem der Gotik (Form Problems of the Gothic, orig. 1912), Worringer not only identifies a ‘drive towards abstraction’ in Gothic art and architecture, which he explains by the northern people’s alienation from the unwelcoming nature that surrounds them, but also frames tendencies towards abstraction in northern Europe as expressions of Nordic religiosity and its metaphysical disposition to regard the visible reality with anxious suspicion.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, he explicitly elaborates on the spooky and the uncanny dimensions of abstraction.¹¹⁰ With this in mind, the antisemitic defamations of Nolde’s art in the so-called *Degenerate Art* exhibitions as “painted witches’ spook” and “hewn pamphlets,” which “were passed off by psychopathic artists and business-minded Jews as manifestations of German religiosity,” sound like the (negative) inversion of a (positive) Worringerian interpretation of Nolde’s work. Such a positive reading of the spooky in art as a specifically Germanic way of coping with anxiety through creativity would be taken up after the war by Haftmann in his writings about Nolde.¹¹¹ Remarkably, Haftmann also pays tribute to Worringer in the first volume of *Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1954) where he cites his assertion that the “feeling of anxiety can be taken as the root of artistic creation,”¹¹² as a “salutary shock.”¹¹³

Only two or three years after Nolde’s paintings were disparaged by Fritz Kaiser as “devil’s grimaces” in the 1937–38 *Degenerate Art* exhibitions,¹¹⁴ and one year after the Nazis burned thousands of art works in 1939,¹¹⁵ the anonymous author of the 1940 article on “The Spooky in Art” defends a number of historical artists – some of whom had “burned on the stake” – as “fully worthy chroniclers of their times,”¹¹⁶ whose “devil’s spook”¹¹⁷ and “hybrid creatures between human, animal, and plant” are born out of the “chaos of the time,”¹¹⁸ thus framing these proto-modernists as martyrs. Because there are so many remarkable parallels to Haftmann’s concerns, rhetorical tropes, and argumentative structures, I would not be surprised if the anonymous text was in fact written by Haftmann as an implicit critique of the official anti-modernist course of NS cultural politics and a defense of Nordic expressionism. Haftmann’s lifelong dedication to Nolde, his apology of the artist as a Nordic painter in his 1934 *Kunst der Nation* articles, and his postwar work as a curator and author make it quite likely that he may have also felt the need to anonymously defend the accomplishments of expressionism when the Nazi state officially prescribed a rigidly realist course and even ostracized and burned art by painters who, like Nolde, sympathized with the regime, by arguing that the spooky – as an expression of anxiety – is inherently Germanic.¹¹⁹ If this was true, the article itself could be read as a quite remarkable charade, masking not only its anonymous author’s identity but also its criticism behind a riddle-like ghost history of abstraction, in which the unspeakable specters of Nazism appear as (dis)embodied nocturnal creatures from the past.

¹⁰⁹ Wilhelm Worringer: *Abstraktion und Einfühlung. Beiträge zur Stilpsychologie*, PhD diss. University of Bern, Neuwied: Heuserische Verlagsdruckerei 1907, p. 98 and idem.: *Formprobleme der Gotik*, Munich: Piper & Co 1912, pp. 53–56. (English editions: *Form Problems of the Gothic*, New York: Stechert & Co, 1920; *Empathy and Abstraction: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. by Michael Bullock, Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks 1997)

¹¹⁰ Worringer: *Formprobleme der Gotik*, pp. 53–57.

¹¹¹ To my knowledge, Worringer did not write explicitly about Nolde himself. He developed his theories of abstraction with regard to historical art and only spoke about modern abstraction in a number of articles after the expressionists of the *Blaue Reiter* group had shown interest in his writings. See Worringer: “Entwicklungs-geschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst,” in: *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den Protest Deutscher Künstler*, Munich: Piper & Co 1911, pp. 92–99, idem.: “Künstlerische Zeitfragen” (1921), and idem.: “Spätgotisches und Expressionistisches Formsystém” (1925), both reprinted in: *Gauklerfest unterm Galgen: Expressionismus zwischen ‘Nordischer’ Moderne und ‘Entarteter’ Kunst*, pp. 117–22 and pp. 346–53.

¹¹² Worringer: *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, p. 15.

¹¹³ Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, p. 105.

¹¹⁴ The aforementioned exhibition signage echoes a passage from the exhibition guide by Kaiser where he speaks about “devil’s grimaces” on p. 8: “The Jewish press once called these horror pieces ‘epiphanies of German religiosity.’ Those with normal perception, however, associate these ‘epiphanies’ with witches’ spook [...]. It is particularly remarkable that one cannot find painted and hewn sneer of Jewish legends from the old testament. The creatures of Christian legends, in contrast, smirk at us with ever new devil’s grimaces.”

¹¹⁵ Because, unlike the 1933 book burnings, the burning of artworks was not staged in public and there is no photographic documentation, there remain some doubts if it actually happened. Nevertheless, Meike Hoffmann from the research group on “Degenerate Art” at Free University Berlin regards this as very likely. See Daniela Späth: “Vor 75 Jahren: NS-Bilderverbrennung,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/de/vor-75-jahren-ns-bilderverbrennung/a-17503698>.

¹¹⁶ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Note that the Nazis also politicized historical witch trials. Himmler and other SS researchers lamented the Christian persecution of Germanic women, whose practices they saw as grounded in nature and folk traditions. For Nazi occultism see also Eric Kurlander: “Hitler’s Monsters: The Occult Roots of Nazism and the Emergence of the ‘Supernatural Imaginary,’” in: *German History*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2012), pp. 528–49.



Fig.: Fragment from Pieter Bruegel the Elder:
"Dulle Griet" (Dull Gret, ca. 1562),
as reproduced in "Das Gespessische in der Kunst,"
in: *Kunst dem Volk*, no. 11, 1940, p. 14.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Das heilige Feuer"
(Holy Fire, 1940).
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A Critic's Charade

The author of “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst” describes the Middle Ages as a sinister time in which “everything is turned upside down” and “the impossible seems to have become possible.”¹²⁰ This could be read as an allusion to the atrocities of the Nazi regime, which Haftmann later characterized as “the darkness of amorphous time.”¹²¹ Haftmann’s 1963 declaration that “the brutal cruelty of the persecution and the severity of the contradictions have fostered the uncompromising seriousness of [Nolde’s] artistic practice”¹²² frames NS cultural politics as unspeakable tyranny, not unlike the Inquisition.¹²³ The anonymous author’s emphatic descriptions of the schisms of doubt and devastation in the Middle Ages, and the fact that they are written in present rather than past tense, evoke an uncanny sense of immediacy.¹²⁴ They sound as if the author was not using the historical present to speak about the past, but as if he was speaking about the horrors of his time.¹²⁵ With regard to Bosch’s painting, the anonymous author writes “the unspeakable hides rebus-like in mad masquerade: a hut that one knew standing tight on the ground is now growing feet and running away.”¹²⁶ Besides having an analogy with Haftmann’s long quote from a letter by Nolde, in which the artist describes his “bodily experiences of the forces of the soil and the spirits of nature” by stressing “how his hands and fingers strike roots deep into the sand from which trees will grow,”¹²⁷ (in a way reversing the grotesque image of the running uprooted house with human extremities striking roots), the anonymous passage, perhaps, could also be understood as a key to a potential secret message of “The Spooky in Art” in the context of World War II and NS cultural politics.

If the article does indeed include a coded subtext that conceals the “unspeakable” of the present in a “rebus-like” way behind the mask of an art history of the grotesque, the image of the uprooted house leaving its place could also be read as a patriot’s disappointment with the national government’s focus on foreign policies of war and imperialism at the cost of domestic concerns, or an alienation from the direction its misguided (cultural) politics were taking, which perhaps resulted in a feeling of spiritual homelessness. In *Ungemalte Bilder* (1963), Haftmann eventually frames the Nazi regime as a nightmare and (falsely) explains that “Only after the Nazis dropped one mask after the other [...] and Nolde had to realize that his persecution was just a tiny part of a gigantic terror machine [...], he turned away.”¹²⁸ While this statement is not true because Nolde never turned away from his nationalist convictions, the image of dropping the masks could also hint at Haftmann’s own perception of Nationalist Socialism as an initially attractive idea to the young patriot he was, if only the Nazi State had taken a different stance

¹²⁰ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 18.

¹²¹ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 9.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ In his contribution to the catalogue of the MoMA exhibition *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, New York: Simon & Schuster 1957, on p. 129, Haftmann refers to the Reich’s chamber of art as “official artist’s guild.”

¹²⁴ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 18.

¹²⁵ Even though we cannot be entirely sure, it is most likely that the anonymous author was male. In “Magischer Geist des Mittelalters” (Magic Spirit of the Middle Ages, orig. 1946), Haftmann writes “We recognize the Middle Ages as a historical mirror for our own world of imagination.” According to him, their objects “speak about the very contemporary distress of occidental man.” See idem.: in: *Skizzenbuch: Zur Kultur der Gegenwart*, pp. 163 and 165.

¹²⁶ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 18.

¹²⁷ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

on modern art (as he and the other authors of *Kunst der Nation* initially believed to be possible and as was the case in Mussolini's Italy with fascist modernism).¹²⁹

In any case, the motif of masquerade is reminiscent of "The Spooky of Art," where the anonymous author explains in the very first paragraph that "demonic masks" of figures from "nightmares" were used in the ancient dance rituals of cave men "to keep the deceased from returning," resulting in a "most compelling" realization of the spooky "that has never been achieved again."¹³⁰ Fifteen years later, in the second (illustrated) volume of his *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, Haftmann similarly references masks in caves and the archaic in his description of Nolde's "Pfingstbild" (Pentecost Picture, 1909): "Like in a cave, blazed by tongues of flames, masks flash up ecstatically. Now color comes in and adds a burning light to the faces. [...] The wildly radiant colors are what elevates the scene into the realm of the visionary."¹³¹ He concludes that the "blaze of ecstasy represses the individual. Behind the human face, the otherworldly of the universal shines through, the archaic mask of human primary instincts."¹³² Thus, Haftmann describes the painted descent of the 'holy spirit' in a language that links the religious experience and the messianic belief in Christ's resurrection to more archaic and 'primitive' motives,¹³³ perhaps even to a quasi-religious *Führerkult*.

It is remarkable that, despite making frequent connections between anxiety and fire, Haftmann does not comment on Nolde's paintings "Das heilige Feuer" (Holy Fire) and "Heiliges Opfer" (Holy Sacrifice, both 1940), which show a burning temple and a castle in flames respectively. These works contradict the tale of Nolde avoiding 'real' (i.e., oil) painting during these years in favor of the 'unpainted pictures' executed in watercolors. The imagery of the two paintings might have also evoked associations with Hitler's pyromania, with torch marches and the burning of books and artworks, and thus posed the risk of suggesting a connection to the Nazi aesthetics, which Walter Benjamin famously described as a fascist "aestheticization of politics."¹³⁴ While the art historian remained silent, Nolde interpreted "The Holy Fire" as a portrait of himself running from a building on fire, stating that he "lived strongly in these pictures,"¹³⁵ and thus implying that putting his paintings on fire, as the Nazis did at least symbolically, left him spiritually homeless. But Nolde's existential anxiety, which – according to Haftmann – enhanced the artist's creativity and allowed him to contemplate his 'Dasein' vis-à-vis the world and himself as 'being-in-the-world' (to borrow Heidegger's words), was nothing compared to the sufferings of those victims of the Nazis who had to leave the country or were actually imprisoned, tortured, killed, and burned in crematories.

¹²⁹ Haftmann later credits Mussolini's former lover and muse, the critic and curator Margherita Sarfatti, for her wit and the "circle of fascist intellectuals around her" for keeping Italian art from regressing into cliché realism. See *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, pp. 302, 423. No longer supported by Mussolini, Sarfatti also campaigned for inclusion of the *Brücke* artists into the 1930 Venice Biennale. See Christian Saehrendt: *'Die Brücke' zwischen Staatskunst und Verfemung*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 2005, p. 31.

¹³⁰ "Das Gespenstische in der Kunst," p. 15.

¹³¹ Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. II, pp. 75–76.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

¹³³ Both authors frame these scenarios about preventing or waiting for resurrection in exoticizing language and express colonialist ideas about the Other that are typical of Primitivism. Nolde, whose oeuvre includes a number of Orientalizing representations, took part in a colonial expedition to New Guinea in 1913–14 and owned a collection of 'ethnographic objects.'

¹³⁴ Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main 1962, p. 42. (English edition: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: Benjamin: *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn, New York: Schocken Books 1969 [1968], pp. 217–51)

¹³⁵ He also uses medieval imagery: "I painted the holy fire, a landscape, I am the riding knight, then I painted a burning castle, a mighty, moldy residence, it burns and only the ruin remains. I lived strongly in these paintings." This quote was displayed above the painting at the Nolde Museum in Seebüll, which I visited shortly after its reopening in March 2020. The new exhibition *Der Zauber des kleinen Formats* (The Magic of the Small Format) celebrates the small-format works without referring to the history of their ideologization.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Heiliges Opfer"
(Holy Sacrifice, 1940).
© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll



Fig.: Still from the 2019 movie *Deutschstunde*.
The narrator has a hallucination of flames
shooting from canvases.

Metaphysical Masks

While the final paragraph of the “Spooky in Art” is about other artists, it almost reads like an expression of Haftmann’s empathy for the heroically self-isolating Nolde during the Nazi era, since both, Haftmann and the anonymous author, evoke scenarios in which artistic individuals respond to ungraspable plural powers, represented by flames and fire, with anxiety. About Alfred Kubin – whose work was also disparaged as ‘degenerate’ by the Nazis and later included in the drawing section of *documenta III* not far from where Nolde’s ‘unpainted pictures’ were shown – anonymous writes “Man, a hybrid of ‘chaos and self,’ is ‘an adventurer in the infinity of unknown powers that besiege him’ – and one is scared by the fine prints, finding the well-known world distorted as if by flames from hell shooting from within.”¹³⁶ Linking this observation to James Ensor’s “protest against the mass society [*Massenmenschen*],” and Franz Sedlazeck’s surreal renderings of the “underworld of the soul,” the anonymous article concludes “These artists are fully worthy chroniclers of time. Considering the ways in which they give us deep insights, it will one day be impossible to understand our epoch [*unsere Epoche*] without them.”¹³⁷

This praise for artists as historical witnesses finds its equivalent in Haftmann’s characterization of Nolde’s ‘unpainted pictures’: “In the midst of the trials and tribulations of his horrible time, from the center of his solitude threatened by inner and outer sorrows, the painter presents us with an unexpected and precious gift. In it, the epoch [*die Epoche*] should recognize itself, in that which was safe and sound within it.”¹³⁸ Ensor’s painting of “Christ’s Entry into Brussels” (1889), by the way, may well have inspired Nolde’s “Das Leben Christi” (The Life of Christ, 1911/12), which was labeled “witches’ spook” in the *Degenerate Art* shows.¹³⁹ The Belgian artist’s work was also featured in the 1963 exhibition *Zeugnisse der Angst* (Testimonies of Anxiety), co-curated by Haftmann in the context of the *Darmstädter Gespräche*.¹⁴⁰ This confirms Haftmann’s lasting investment in the role of anxiety in artistic production and the importance he attributes to artists as historical witnesses and detectives uncovering the metaphysical truths hidden behind masks of outer appearances – an investment he shares with the anonymous author of the 1940 article.¹⁴¹

It perhaps comes as no surprise then that Ensor features prominently in Haftmann’s opus magnum, *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*. While Haftmann does not juxtapose their work directly, the illustrated second volume even includes mask paintings by both Nolde and Ensor – with the latter placed in a platonic scenario that highlights the dubious reality of the visible:

¹³⁶ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 21.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Haftmann: *Ungemalte Bilder*, p. 39.

¹³⁹ There were plans to include “Das Leben Christi” (The Life of Christ) in *documenta II* (1959), but eventually “Die Grablegung” (The Burial, 1915) was included instead. See Astrid Becker: “Emil Nolde und die documenta,” p. 56.

¹⁴⁰ Here the trope of “anxiety” (*Angst*), which played such a central role in the 1940 article, is part of the show’s title. Haftmann had already given a talk titled “Die Angst verlieren” (Losing one’s Fear) in New York on the occasion of the 1957 MoMA exhibition *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, thus once again linking Germany and *Angst*.

¹⁴¹ This idea of looking beyond the surface of reality to see some sort of metaphysical truth might be a spiritualizing adaptation of Pinder’s racist idea that “the real nature, from which shapes are generated, is not the nature around us, but the one in us, the blood – not the world of appearances.” See Pinder: *Deutsche Plastik des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Kurt Wolff 1924, pp. 1–2.



Fig.: James Ensor: "Self-Portrait with Masks" (1899).
Source of black-and-white reproduction:
Werner Haftmann: Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts
(1955), p. 45.



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Pfingstbild" (Pentecost, 1909).
© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll
Source of black-and-white reproduction:
Werner Haftmann: Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts
(1955), p. 82.



Fig.: James Ensor: "Christ's Entry into Brussels" (1889).

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Fig.: Emil Nolde: "Das Leben Christi" (The Life of Christ, 1911/12).

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In utter exaltation of the tragic conflict between external world and human being, he hauls out of himself pictures, in which dream and reality, hallucination and visibility are inextricably entangled. Things become suspicious, seek to hide something, everywhere, behind the face of reality something else is lurking, something enigmatic which peeks around the screens of the visible or giggles behind the surface.¹⁴²

Haftmann, moreover, describes Ensor as a forerunner of twentieth-century expressionism, which he characterizes as Germanic in a Worringerian argument: “Thus, it was the Germanic element that reacted to the loss of trust in the environment with utmost rigor, bordering on the pathological. In the expressive intensification of its means, it already prepared the ground on which expressionism was founded.”¹⁴³

While this allusion to the pathological almost sounds like a concession to the ostracizing National Socialist views of modern art, it seems that Haftmann, like the author of the unsigned article, considers the spooky not just as a specifically Germanic or Nordic expression of anxiety and German *Angst* but, like him, also suggests that it can be seen as a prefiguration of abstraction. According to Haftmann, “the Germanic spirit attempted to leave behind the reality character of the visible, to transcend the visible and to hallucinate and relate the autistic vision to the visible world.”¹⁴⁴ Against this backdrop, Haftmann’s assertion of “abstraction as a world language” only four years later, in the context of *documenta II* (1959), could be understood as a declaration of the universal victory of the German spirit fourteen years after the end of the ‘Third Reich.’ If one takes Haftmann’s above-cited elaborations from *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* seriously, his 1959 explanation that “art has become abstract”¹⁴⁵ could be rephrased as ‘art has become Germanic.’ He would, in fact, continue to insist on the significant role German art played in the teleology towards abstraction.

Terrors of Turin

The article “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst” appeared in November 1940, just a few months after Haftmann – as he claims – declined a position as a university assistant [*Universitätsassistent*] for the NS art historian Hans Sedlmayr in Vienna to work as a freelance critic “in spiritual freedom.”¹⁴⁶ After leaving his four year position at the Kunsthistorisches Institut (KHI) in Florence in the spring of 1940, Haftmann moved to Turin, where, beginning in July, he worked as a translator and secretary to the German delegation assisting with the Italian negotiations for a ceasefire with France.¹⁴⁷ The fact that Haftmann relocated to Turin in 1940 is remarkable insofar as the Allied Forces had begun bombing Turin repeatedly and intensely in the summer of that year, because local

¹⁴² Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. II, p. 30.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Haftmann: “Einführung,” in: *documenta II*, exhibition catalogue, vol. I: *Malerei*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁶ Haftmann’s letter to Sedlmayr is cited by Hans Aurenhammer in: “Hans Sedlmayr und die Kunstgeschichte an der Universität Wien 1938–1945,” in: *Kunstgeschichte an den Universitäten im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. by Jutta Held and Martin Papenbrock, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 2004, pp. 161–94, p. 167. Haftmann had been recommended to Sedlmayr by his former boss, Friedrich Kriegbaum, the director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, as a “true National Socialist, a man of the SA, and seeking membership in the NSDAP,” although he had already joined the party in 1937 as Redmann reconstructed in “Das Flüstern der Fußnoten,” pp. 4–7.

¹⁴⁷ See <http://werner-haftmann.de/biografie/lebensbeschreibung/> (accessed November 12, 2020). The website is managed by his widow Evelyn Haftmann, another unreliable narrator, as Redmann and Fuhrmeister each point out in “Das Flüstern der Fußnoten,” p. 8 and in *Die Abteilung Kunstschutz in Italien*, p. 179. According to Fuhrmeister (p. 276), Haftmann was promoted to the rank of a liaison officer in the spring of 1941 and participated in activities of the German *Kunstschutz*, becoming an official member in 1944. In the document he cites, Haftmann is referred to as “rifleman” and “special commander.” Living on and off in Turin during this time, he was taken prisoner there on May 2, 1945 (the very last day of the battles in Italy).



Fig: Palazzo Morozzo della Rocca in Turin after it was bombed on December 8, 1942 by the Allied Air Forces. Until the bombing, the Palazzo housed the Galleria d'Arte Moderna.

Source: Torino, Archivio Fotografico della Fondazione Torino Musei

<https://www.arte.it/calendario-arte/torino/mostra-dalle-bombe-al-museo-1942-1959-33795>



Fig: Kassel's Museum Fridericianum, home of documenta since its foundation in 1955, after it was bombed on September 9, 1941 by the Allied Air Forces. Photo: unknown photographer.

Source: <http://regiowiki.hna.de/Datei:Ebv008481.jpg>

industrial companies like Fiat were crucial for war production. To those who lived there, the city must have felt like purgatory “with flames from hell shooting from within,”¹⁴⁸ to borrow the words of the anonymous author of “The Spooky in Art.”¹⁴⁹ Turin is also known as a place of occult beliefs, where the triangles of black and white magic are supposed to meet, where antiquarian bookshops sell old treatises on witchcraft, and where the entrance to the underworld is believed to be.¹⁵⁰

In the months preceding the publication of “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” which is accompanied by several reproductions of works featuring witches,¹⁵¹ Haftmann, in other words, lived in one of the world capitals of witchcraft and the occult, which – just like Kassel – was the target of Allied air raids that made the city go up in flames, resembling the affective scenarios the anonymous author so emphatically invoked in his text published shortly after. Turin, moreover, houses the world’s oldest museum of Egyptian art, which is noteworthy, as the anonymous article starts its sketch of the development of the spooky in art by observing that “The greatest death cult was developed by the Egyptians. [...] But their bodies are still fully plastic [...] they continue their lives in stone, following magical thinking much more literally than we can imagine today.”¹⁵² Together with a reference to the “sharp contours” of the Italian *Valori Plastici* group, this literalistic understanding of the other world served the author as a foil for elaborating ideas about the more diffuse Germanic spookiness, foreshadowing Haftmann’s discussion of the opposition between the Latin and the Nordic, which also mentions the *Valori Plastici*.¹⁵³

Although the pieces of the puzzle presented here give some plausibility to the assumption that Haftmann may have been the ‘ghostwriter’ of “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” this hypothesis will have to be further verified, ideally, by finding a manuscript of the anonymous text or notes for it among Haftmann’s papers. This would be key for ascertaining his authorship, as the relationship between anxiety, abstraction, and the spooky was a common trope not just in the art historical discourses of the time, but also in other areas of cultural production. In art history this nexus figures prominently, for example, in Wilhelm Fraeugner’s “James Ensor: Die Kathedrale” (The Cathedral, 1926), Wilhelm Pinder’s “Zur Physiognomik des Manierismus” (On the Physiognomy of Mannerism, 1932), and Hans Sedlmayr’s “Die ‘Macchia’ Bruegels” (Bruegel’s “Macchia,” 1934).¹⁵⁴ Since these articles, moreover, share artistic examples as well as the motifs of the mask and the masses, they certainly may have been inspirational for both the anonymous text and Haftmann’s writing. While Sedlmayr denounced modern art, Fraeugner and Pinder tended to defend modern expressionism and thus cannot be

¹⁴⁸ “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ I am grateful to Kathryn Floyd for pointing me to the racist implications the word spook has acquired in the US and for calling my attention to the fact that Black US army pilots were referred to as ‘spookwaffe’ during World War II as a play on the German *Luftwaffe*. These African-American Tuskegee pilots flew missions in Italy starting in 1943.

¹⁵⁰ See Niki Saval: “The Ghosts of Turin,” in: *The New York Times*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/t-magazine/travel/turin-italy-art-carol-rama-carlo-mollino-castello-di-rivoli.html>

¹⁵¹ Hans Baldung Grien’s “Hexenausfahrt” (Witches’ Outing), Frans Francken’s “Eine Hexenstube” (A Witch’s Kitchen), Albert Welti’s “Hexennacht” (Walpurgis Night).

¹⁵² “Das Gespenstische in der Kunst,” p. 16.

¹⁵³ See, for instance, Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, p. 300.

¹⁵⁴ According to Bohde: *Kunstgeschichte als physiognomische Wissenschaft*, p. 115, these were inspired by Hans Prinzhorn’s and Karl Jasper’s studies on schizophrenia, whose focus on the creative potentials of psychological exceptionalism was later pathologized. See Fraeugner: “James Ensor – Die Kathedrale,” in: *Die graphischen Künste* 49 (1926), pp. 81–98, Pinder: “Zur Physiognomik des Manierismus,” in: *Die Wissenschaft am Scheideweg von Leben und Geist*, Festschrift Ludwig Klages zum 60. Geburtstag, 10. Dezember 1932, Leipzig 1932, pp. 148–56, Sedlmayr: “Die ‘Macchia’ Bruegels,” in: *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, NF 8 (1934), pp. 137–59.



Fig: Pieter Bruegel the Elder: "The Beekeepers" (ca. 1568).
Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig: James Ensor: "The Cathedral" (1886).
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

excluded as potential authors of the text, although it is stylistically closer to Haftmann's writing, which also most explicitly frames abstraction as something Nordic or Germanic.¹⁵⁵ In terms of my overall objective of understanding both specific discursive formations and the recurrence of figures of thought across political systems or camps, however, the possibility that Haftmann may have written the text is more relevant than confirming his authorship, as it reveals the uncanny intellectual consonances of Haftmann's postwar writings and texts published during the Nazi regime by its propaganda organs and by its most eminent art history professors.¹⁵⁶

d is for ...

Despite these remaining uncertainties, I would like to conclude by asking what it would mean if my intuitions turn out to be true.¹⁵⁷ What if my hypotheses that "The Spooky in Art" was authored by Haftmann and that the figure of Maltzahn in Lenz's novel was modeled on him should turn out to be correct? In that case, Haftmann, the self-declared tireless defender of modern art, may indeed have "risked a lot," as the fictional artist Nansen sarcastically notes about the turncoat critic Maltzahn in *Deutschstunde*.¹⁵⁸ It may, without doubt, have entailed certain risks to smuggle hidden criticism of the Nazi regime's official cultural policies and an apology of expressionism into a journal, which was edited by Hitler's house photographer Heinrich Hoffmann in Vienna and served the curator of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* and persecutor of 'degenerate art' as a propaganda magazine dedicated to *völkisch* realism.¹⁵⁹

Like the fictional critic, the anonymous author therefore could claim to be an "unknown defender" of expressionism, whose references to the "political spook happening outside" were indeed "hidden in modest ambiguity."¹⁶⁰ They could as well be read as a neo-romantic critique of modernity, which looks like a subversive criticism of the NS only through the eyes of readers trained by the post-war narratives fabricated by Haftmann and Lenz. Thus, these risks may appear larger in retrospect, seen through the magnifying glass of a historiographic framing that – inspired by Haftmann's stories, amongst others – has turned history into a fairytale with a clear distribution of roles between villains and victims, a historical fiction within which existing ambiguities could be reinterpreted as heroic strategies of resistance against Nationalist Socialist cultural politics, which were, however, not as consistent as the dichotomizing story would conventionally have it.¹⁶¹ Remember, for instance, that Goebbels – who wrote in a preamble for *Kunst dem Volk* that the journal's intention was to "refine the taste of the people" – privately sympathized

¹⁵⁵ For a more detailed discussion of these discourses, see my forthcoming *documenta as a Haunted Exhibition*.

¹⁵⁶ In his reflections on the "uncanny neighborhoods" between thinkers from different political spectrums, Helmut Lethen calls attention to the risk that studies of intellectual exchanges between friends and foes diminish the significance of the political as a procedure to draw borders between them, while, on the other hand, he acknowledges the insights of such an uncovering of shared figures of thought. See Lethen: *Unheimliche Nachbarschaften: Essays zum Kälte-Kult und der Schlaflosigkeit der Philosophischen Anthropologie im 20. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg, Berlin, and Vienna: Rombach 2009, pp. 46–49.

¹⁵⁷ Since I wrote this essay during the COVID-related lockdown, sources that could have helped with confirming my intuitions were not always accessible. I would thus be grateful for any hints that might help to further substantiate my hypotheses – and of course I also welcome any evidence that contradicts them.

¹⁵⁸ Lenz: *Deutschstunde*, p. 415.

¹⁵⁹ A number of museum directors, such as Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, Hildebrand Gurlitt, Max Sauerlandt, or Ludwig Justi, who had bought and shown modern art, were removed from their posts, sometimes even before 1933, despite their nationalistic attempts to defend modern art as inherently Nordic or Germanic, which often included praise for the NSDAP and antisemitism. Gurlitt nevertheless had a successful career during the Nazi era, dealing with 'degenerate art' and collecting looted art for Hitler's *Führer* museum.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁶¹ For the complexities of cultural politics see also Hans-Ernst Mittag: "Art and Oppression in Fascist Germany," in: *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism*, ed. by Irit Rogoff, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1991, pp. 191–215. In the introduction, Rogoff writes on p. 3: "This entire paradigm works through simplified concepts of reviled radicalism, conservative collaboration and muted resistance while ignoring the areas and possibilities for links and negotiations which actually existed between them."

with expressionist tendencies, although he could no longer afford to promote them officially in his role as propaganda minister.

Looking back on the discursive entanglements of progressive and reactionary art historical positions before and after 1945, my aim was to shed light on the complexities of both Nazi cultural politics and the discourses on abstraction (neither of which are monolithic), in order to complicate all-too-easy narratives of good and bad, black and white, or even left and right – as a reminder that Dr. Jekyll is also Mr. Hyde. My prime interest was neither to evaluate individual guilt nor to relativize it by pointing out the continuity of conventions and ideas that originated long before the Nazi era and remained in currency long after. Rather, I intended to problematize the clear-cut borders that were retrospectively erected to delineate the ‘fascist’ from the ‘non-fascist’ art forms because the very idea of a clear cut between them allowed the vanquished to pass themselves off as victims and externalize all responsibility by projecting it onto an unspeakable spooky other, thereby reiterating former (racist or antisemitic) patterns of discrimination between good and evil under reverse signs.

As I tried to make clear in this article and its prequel, “The Exhibition as a Washing Machine?,” the successful self-staging as a defender of modern art allowed Haftmann to whitewash not just the reputation of artists like Nolde after the war, but also his own tainted biography and art historical writing. In my earlier essay, I began to analyze the rhetorical choices Haftmann made in his introductions to the catalogues of the first documentas, effectively depicting himself and others as politically ‘innocent’ by naturalizing, feminizing, dehistoricizing, depoliticizing, and domesticating modern art. My goal in this essay was to show that the same narrative framings contributed to covering up the nationalist and racist genealogies of his historiographic practice, whose proto-fascist formations, Nazi formulations, and continuous discursive re-formation, I examine further in the context of my larger *Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction*. By presenting only some fragments from this project on *documenta as a Haunted Exhibition* here, I am hoping to add to a better understanding of the mechanisms by which abstraction was successfully revamped from an expression of *Deutschtum* (Germanic character) to a sign of democratic virtue, an act of political resignification that Haftmann and his fellow travelers artfully accomplished by deploying documenta as a washing machine for their art historical narratives.¹⁶²

This laundering of (art) history turned out to be a ‘vicious’ cycle, allowing former promoters of Germanic and Nordic expressionism to present themselves in clean white shirts, so to speak, as defenders of democratic

¹⁶² Hence I suggest that the d in documenta could be read as standing for *deutsch* and *demokratisch*. This goes one step further than Kathryn Floyd, who read the d in documenta as a trademark that contributed to a “reauthoring” of formerly ‘degenerate art’ as an international style by means of design. See idem.: “d is for documenta: Institutional Design for a Period Exhibition,” in: *documenta: Curating the History of the Present*, special issue, *OnCurating*, no. 13 (June 2017), ed. by Nanne Buurman and Dorothee Richter, pp. 9–18.

abstraction, and – following this *circulus vitiosus* – as defenders of democracy in general, even if they had been Nazis, Nazi supporters or followers before. Against this backdrop, I understand my ‘Haftmann Hauntology’ as an intervention into the still widespread but false assumption that the artists, disciples and defenders of modern art were “natural anti-fascists,” as Haftmann repeatedly claimed.¹⁶³ As he observed in the final paragraph of *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, “the dead lives on in the fabric of the living.”¹⁶⁴ Haftmann was right here: The spooky specters of the National Socialist (and colonialist) pasts are not dead. They continue to haunt us in all kinds of guises, including the fabric from which art (history) is made: Wrapped in the whitewashed canvases of modernity, seemingly unsullied by any blood that was shed, one can still detect them between the lines of modern art’s narratives or hovering within the institutional structures, hidden behind the white walls of museums and exhibitions today.

¹⁶³ Ernst Bloch alludes to such an idea, when he writes: “But how dangerously blurring it would be perhaps for intellectuals who [...] have now been perturbed by Hitler the artist, if the Nazi heart had the cheek or the hypocrisy even to beat for Franz Marc [...] with the aim of a particular disguise. The confusion would be great; the fact that it is unfortunately not wholly impossible is demonstrated in some respects by the example of Mussolini, beneath whose rotten scepter progressive architecture, painting and music worth discussing remain unmolested.” See idem.: “Jugglers’ Fair Beneath the Gallows [1937],” in: *Heritage of Our Times* [1962], transl. by Neville and Stephen Plaice, Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press 1991, pp. 79–80.

¹⁶⁴ Haftmann: *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, p. 375.



Fig.: Toni Stadler: "Stehende" (Standing Figures, 1938-41) with Göppinger Plastics curtains at the first *documenta* (1955).
Photo: Nachlass Arnold Bode
© documenta archiv



Fig.: Layers of white walls in the exhibition *about documenta*, opened in fall 2019 at Neue Galerie Kassel.
Photo: Nanne Buurman

Postscript

The currently much-discussed question if Haftmann's party membership necessarily means that Haftmann *was* a 'real Nazi' or if his decision should rather be understood as 'merely' careerist opportunism or self-protecting conformism, was not my main concern here. Nevertheless, related questions came up during my research. Comparing Haftmann's date of admission into the NSDAP, reconstructed by Mirl Redmann on the basis of her archival research, with the dates of admission Christian Fuhrmeister gives for Haftmann's fellow assistants at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence,¹⁶⁵ it occurred to me that, according to this information given in the literature, they must have been admitted to the party on the same date. Fuhrmeister, at the time of his writing, still believed that Haftmann had not been an NSDAP member and took this as speaking against the assumption that KHI director Friedrich Kriegbaum pressured his assistants into joining the party. Yet, the dates when Haftmann and his KHI colleagues Robert Oertel and Herbert Siebenhüner applied and were admitted to the party,¹⁶⁶ point to the possibility of a joint decision. This corresponds to what Siebenhüner claimed in a 1948 testimony, cited by Fuhrmeister.¹⁶⁷

Because of the unreliability of Siebenhüner's (self-)defense, and the fact that it does not mention Haftmann, further research is necessary to be able to draw conclusions from the dates on which Kriegbaum's assistants joined the party. Was the temporal proximity pure coincidence, due to a voluntary collective decision, or a forced step, taken under pressure by authorities?¹⁶⁸ Even knowing the answer to this question would not reveal much about the individual political and personal motives of those involved. Were they motivated by strategic conformism as a mask, which – the art historians may have hoped – would allow them to continue their research as independently as possible? Was it a way for academics to hibernate under the Italian sun, or even a form of parasitic adaptation with the goal of repurposing propaganda resources for their own (scholarly) objectives? Fuhrmeister invokes all of these options as possible motives for Haftmann's boss in the years 1936–40.¹⁶⁹ Haftmann's own contributions to a journal that celebrated Hitler's visits to Florence in 1938 and the fraternization of Hitler and Mussolini in the context of the Italian-German axis,¹⁷⁰ the renewal of his party membership as late as 1942, and the ideological stance he took in his writing during and after the Nazi era, call for further research and historical contextualization to clarify his own motives, convictions, and relationship with the regime.

For the field of documenta and exhibition studies, it seems more urgent, however, to further investigate the legacy of his practice after 1945 and

¹⁶⁵ See Christian Fuhrmeister: *Die Abteilung Kunstschutz in Italien*, pp. 66–68.

¹⁶⁶ Haftmann applied for party membership on June 28, 1937. Robert Oertel and Herbert Siebenhüner submitted their applications on June 1 and July 23, 1937 respectively. Haftmann and Oertel became members on October 1, 1937. Diverging from the information Fuhrmeister gives on p. 66, Siebenhüner was admitted one month later, on November 1, 1937. I was able to ascertain these dates by referring to the membership cards in the NSDAP *Gaukartei*, which are now held at the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv) in Berlin. See Barch R9361-IX Kartei/13020147 (Haftmann), Barch R 9361-IX Kartei /31101224 (Oertel) and Barch R9361-IX, Kartei/41420485 (Siebenhüner).

¹⁶⁷ Fuhrmeister calls attention to inconsistencies in the report on p. 66.

¹⁶⁸ The Institut's website states that party membership was not required until 1939. See <https://www.khi.fi.it/de/institut/geschichte.php> (accessed November 12, 2020).

¹⁶⁹ See Fuhrmeister pp. 60–66, 70–75. According to KHI's website, Kriegbaum tried to protect the institute against cooptation by the Nazis by concurring with some of their requirements. This favorable interpretation should be viewed with caution, however, as it is part of how the institution historicizes itself.

¹⁷⁰ A special issue of the journal *Illustrazione Toscana e dell'Etruria* is titled "Firenze e la Germania" and appeared in May 1938. It includes Haftmann's article "Della scoperta dell'antica pittura fiorentina nel tardo romanticismo tedesco: Johann David Passavant." The anonymous editorial celebrates Hitler and the Duce, the powers of blood and spirit, and connects Machiavelli with Fichte. In 1947, Haftmann uses Machiavelli and Fichte as a foil to discuss Hitler and Mussolini as artists. See "Machiavelli und die Artistik des Politischen," in: *Frankfurter Hefte*, no. 5, (Mai 1950), reprinted in Haftmann: *Skizzenbuch: Zur Kultur der Gegenwart*, pp.14–19.

the ways in which those pieces of the past that were swept under the rug and hidden in the closet nevertheless played an important role in defining the conditions of possibility for refurbishing the cultural field after the war. As heirs of those times,¹⁷¹ inhabiting the social, political, economic and cultural infrastructures inherited from the generations of our parents and grandparents, it is our responsibility to open those closets and face the undead spirits from the past to acknowledge the ways in which we are still hospitable to them, not least by still profiting from the cultural, symbolic and financial capital accumulated by the exploitation, expropriation or extermination of others.¹⁷²

On a meta level, my inquiry is therefore directed towards a better understanding of the socially reproductive role documenta played in keeping and updating Haftmann's hidden heritage and his stories, 'g/hosting' our practices, so to speak.¹⁷³ I hope that eventually – instead of merely pointing fingers at dead white male historical figures and their disembodiment of art (history) as an immaculate ghostly *Männerphantasie* (male phantasy) fraught with anxieties¹⁷⁴ – my *Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction* will be helpful for acknowledging the ways in which we all still host those ghosts, not just in art's institutional and epistemological structures, but also in our bodies and souls. Since the 'Specters of Haftmann' reside in the narratives and imaginaries that implicitly govern our actions and beliefs until today, my essay should also be understood as an invitation to join the difficult struggle against the Nazis hiding within ourselves, conversing with the old and new spirits of capitalism, colonialism and nationalism, which keep marching hand in hand.

We are ghosts too, and together we can haunt the future.

¹⁷¹ Ernst Bloch: *Heritage of Our Times* [1962], transl. by Neville and Stephen Plaice, Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press 1991.

¹⁷² Obviously, my work is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural reproduction. See also Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject*, where he refers to Hannah Arendt's theorization of "collective responsibility" and writes on p. 49: "In Arendt's terms, they may not be guilty of inaugurating those histories and structures, but by inhabiting them they are politically responsible. Analysis of implication refuses a moralization of politics by remaining skeptical of assertions of purity."

¹⁷³ On 'ghosting' and the curatorial reciprocity of host and guest, see Nanne Buurman: "Hosting Significant Others," in: *Hospitality. Hosting Relations in Exhibition*, ed. by Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Berlin: Sternberg 2016, pp. 123–49.

¹⁷⁴ I borrow the term "male phantasies" from Klaus Theweleit, who points out connections between ideas of soldierly masculinity, the humanist education in German *Gymnasium* schools, and the academic tendency to exchange "possible experiences" for "objectifying concepts" to "seek shelter from frightening experiences in a fascist language" that associates "revolutionary masses with gulping femininity". See Theweleit: *Männerphantasien*, vol. 2 ("Männerkörper: Zur Psychoanalyse des weißen Terrors"), Basel: Stromfeld/Roter Stern 1977, p. 12.

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documenta studies #11
December 2020

NANNE BUURMAN:
Northern Gothic:
Werner Haftmann's German Lessons,
or A Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction

PUBLISHERS:
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Nanne Buurman
Ina Wudtke
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EDITING:
Nora Sternfeld

COPY EDITING:
Magnus Schaefer

TRANSLATION EDITORIAL:
Nanne Buurman
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GRAPHIC DESIGN:
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