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THE DARKER SIDE

A Vision of the Human Condition

This thesis is submitted as part fulfillment
of the Fine Art (Painting) Degree Course
National College of Art and Design

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March 15, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

This essay proposes to examine the relationship between the grotesque and Dix's art. In doing this several questions must be answered. Firstly, what exactly is the grotesque? Secondly, why did its usage appeal to this particular artist? The ultimate aim of this thesis is that a coherent picture emerges of Dix's vision of humanity and how this vision informed his artistic aesthetic.

Defining the grotesque gives rise to two apparently opposite meanings. The Oxford Dictionary gives the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Grotesque (as adjective) | 1. Comically or repulsively distorted; monstrous, unnatural.
2. Incongruous, ludicrous, absurd. |
| Grotesque (as noun) | 1. A decorative form, interweaving human and animal features.
2. A comically distorted figure or design. ¹ |

The grotesque is defined, on the one hand, as something comical, ludicrous and absurd, and on the other as something repulsive, monstrous and unnatural. Immediately, a polemic is set in place. The grotesque's very definition is paradoxical at worst, unfixed at best. With such a crepuscular term much more information than is given in the dictionary is needed. To this end I intend later to explore the etymology of the term as it develops into an aesthetic category.

If aspects of the grotesque are assumed to be unnatural then how can it appear so often in the work of an artist who often spoke of his addiction to reality?

"Well, I happen to be a person who likes reality. I have to see everything."²

Dix's version of reality is one that is informed by a brutal honesty. What most people consider unnatural becomes, in Dix's perception, human, and therefore natural. With a kind of utopian longing only what is good is commonly assumed natural. Dix regards the correlation between 'good' and 'natural' as idealistic and unfounded on actuality. The grotesque, with all its paradoxes becomes the obvious tool of the artist who resolves the seeming dialectic within the all-embracing term - 'the human condition.' In seeking knowledge about the human condition Dix even embraces the 'unnatural' phenomenon of war.

"I have to plumb all life's depths myself. That is why I go to war you have to see the human being in this uncontrolled state in order to know something about humankind."³

Waxing and Waning, 1911 (Fig 1) is one of Dix's earliest paintings and it strikes the first note in the use of the grotesque in his oeuvre. It bears testimony to a perception that accepts paradoxes as natural rather than unnatural. In this piece Dix uses two motifs from the tradition of still-life painting. A twig of blossoms arranged in a vase are juxtaposed with a skull. It is the appearance of these images side by side that provokes a discordant response. Life and death are normally regarded as opposites and to present images of Eros and Thanatos simultaneously seems grotesque to the viewer. Dix does not see life and death as opposites however, because for him death is another aspect of life, and therefore should not be shunned but accepted. From the onset Dix wished, through his art, to bear witness to life in all of the forms that it takes.

The above attempts to give a brief account of why the grotesque assumes such importance for Dix. However, in order to fully confront the role it plays in his oeuvre, it becomes necessary, at this point to look at the history of the genre. The shaping of the term will reveal much about the shaping of Dix's perception of reality.



Fig 1
 Otto Dix
 Waxing and Waning, 1911
 Oil on canvas 60.5 x 47.5 cm.
 Bautzen, Municipal Museum.

Tracing the path of the Grotesque

The word grotesque is ultimately derived from the Latin 'La grottesca' which is based on grotto (cave). Late fifteenth century excavations in Italy revealed an ornamental form of painting which, until that point had been unknown in Western art. This style of painting reached Italy in the antique period (the beginning of the Christian era) and was rejected by Vitruvius in the following manner:

"But those subjects which were copied from actual realities are scorned in these days of bad taste. We now have fresco paintings of monstrosities, rather than truthful representations of definite things. For instance, reeds are put in the place of columns, fluted appendages with curly leaves and volutes, instead of pediments numerous tender stalks and volutes growing up from the roots and having human figures senselessly seated upon them; sometimes stalks having only half-length figures, some with human heads, others with the heads of animals. Such things do not exist and cannot exist and never have existed."⁴

Ornamental grotesques, despite criticism like the above became popular in the Renaissance to the extent that Raphael was commissioned to decorate the pillars of the Papal Loggias around 1515. Raphaels work consists of "curled and involuted shoots, from whose foliage animals emerge and cause the difference between animal and vegetable forms to be eliminated."⁵ The new style negated the laws of gravity, proportion and statics and received as much criticism as it did praise. Yet it ultimately opened up new boundaries of expression for artists because it allowed reality to be somehow inverted, or perhaps better words here would be supplemented and extended. The word grotesque generated new meaning as its limits began to be explored in the context of artistic expression. A synonym for the grotesque emerged during the sixteenth century_dreams of painters_(sogni dei pittori). Placing importance on depicting the nature of dreams prefigures later Freudian dream analysis and also gives validity of the usage of a form that mixes the natural with the unnatural. The use of this new form was further validated

around this time by seeing it as an allegorical function.

Hieronymous Bosch's (1450 - 1516) apocalyptic triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* contains the monstrous elements of the grotesque. In the right hand panel depicting Hell, Bosch is clearly referring to Christian symbols and iconography - the harp was commonly seen as a symbol or pictorial allegory of human suffering. The creatures in the lower right of the Hell panel remind us of the animals rising from the abyss described by St John in Revelation 9:7 - 10. In his depictions of chaos Bosch surrenders to his phantasmagorical imagination and his popularity ensured the genre's acceptability as a valid artistic expression. There is no doubt that Dix was influenced by both Bosch and Bruegel and "on numerous occasions cited his roots in the tradition of painting, especially that of the sixteenth century Germany."⁶ The eldest Bruegel was called the 'second Bosch' by his peers, a fact which points to the influence Bosch had on his art. Both Bruegel the elder and younger depicted chaos within the framework of Christian iconography. Bruegel the elder's engraving *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1556 (Fig 3), reveals disproportions and monstrous creatures in order to explore the subject matter of the nature of temptation and also the decay and corruption in the church (the rotting fish; the animal and mineral juxtaposed). This theme is a recurrent subject and has become a motif in itself for the monstrous side of the grotesque. Dix entitled a mixed media piece *The Temptation of St Anthony II* (1940). In this painting St Anthony is resisting the charms of a naked woman, and horrible monsters claw in the background. The piece pays homage to traditional images and to the value of Christian elements as valid means of expression. Dix describes his use of Christian themes as follows;



Fig 2
 Hieronymus Bosch
 The Garden of Earthly Delights, 1500
 Oil on Wood, 220 x 292 cm.
 Madrid, Museo Del Prado.

"There is something else that intrigued me, the great task of repeatedly making something new out of time-worn themes, of renewing art, just as Christianity rejuvenates itself. The Christian motif allows one creative freedom of expression."➤

The Temptation of St Anthony 11 is perhaps the work that most pays tribute to the traditional meaning of the grotesque - where the artist gives free reign to the phantasmagorical and monstrous.

In relation to Dix there are three important aspects of the grotesque to which special attention should be paid. Firstly the grotesque in its original usage showed that the idealisation of beauty and the depiction of an ordered reality do not express all human concerns and validated 'otherness' as a coherent art form. Secondly the grotesque by its very nature remains undefined and it is this characteristic that allows the artist and writer, in Dix's words, "to plumb all lifes depths" and also to introduce nuances such as humour, satire and caricature. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly the effect that this form produces in the viewer is nearly always similar to a kick in the teeth. We shudder at the grotesque while simultaneously we laugh at aspects of it. This is very unbalancing, the viewer is left confused and shocked.

It is difficult to know just when the grotesque assumed the humorous characteristics by which it is now partly defined. Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Fig 2) does contain elements of comedy such as the pig dressed in a nun's habit and we can only laugh at Bruegel's character who exemplifies the proverb 'he opens the door with his bottom,' indicating a person who doesn't know whether he's coming or going (from *The World's Follies*).

In literature tragicomedy such as Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* showed



Fig 3
 Pieter Bruegel the Elder
 The Temptation of St Anthony, 1556.
 Engraving.

how the tragic and comic can be mixed to great effect. The absurd lessens the tension of horror and tragedy and by means of contrast in fact heightens it. Aristotles definition of tragedy - "that its technical and overall ends are respectively the imitation of horrifying and pitiful events and the purgation of the pity and fear they arouse"³ - is complemented by a parallel theory of comedy by Guarini. In *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica* (1601) Guarini suggests that the technical aim of comedy is the imitation of the actions of people whose mistakes make us laugh and that its effect is the purgation of melancholy in order to gladden the soul. Both elements, like the disparate elements in the grotesque affect the viewer or reader in the same way. Both evoke strong feelings and shock the viewer out of complacency.

While the above may appear to be a digression from the main topic under discussion it is valid in so far as it better informs us that the grotesque is not such a contradictory term after all and that literature played an important role in broadening this aesthetic category.

Artists of the nineteenth century such as Blake and Redon used the grotesque despite the then current trends of romanticism. Romanticism highlighted the potential of the sublime in the world and the Enlightenment that followed, placed great emphasis on reason and truth. So why did the grotesque regain popularity in the twentieth century and what influenced Dix to depict this particular form in his oeuvre? World War 1, the extravagances of the Weimar Republic and the philosophy of de Sade and Nietzsche were to play the most important roles in the shaping of Dix's perception of reality.

THE GROTESQUE AND DIX

Dix was often regarded as *the* artist of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. This movement is defined by Helmut Lethen as "the emotional and intellectual tendency to act, not for personal gain, but in the service of a higher cause."⁹ However, Dix, despite his working class background, was never motivated in a political way. His depictions of human suffering were not done in "the service of a higher cause." The following anecdote reveals much about Dix's political feelings. His friend Conrad Felixmuler (who was a member of the German Communist party) called to Dix in 1919 in order to persuade him to join the party. Dix's reply was "stop bothering me with your pathetic politics - I'd rather go to the whorehouse."¹⁰ We could perhaps better describe Dix's project as a Nietzschean or Sadian one as he himself declared that he was not a humanist. Like Bann, Mann and Junger, to name but a few, Dix began to study Nietzsche's thought." Nietzsche considered the world as a monster of energy, which goes beyond the categories of good and evil. The world is regarded as cycles of life and death, each giving rise to the other. It is a philosophy of eternal rejuvenation, allowing one to embrace all facets of life including death. Nietzsches nihilism is important because it informs us of the concept of nihilism in the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. With nihilism all values are devalued, there are no easy answers to the why of things, rather the world is accepted for what it actually is - both one of grandeur and grotesque. Previous philosophies always centered on the spiritual part of the subject rather than on his/her corporal existence. Nietzsche puts it this way: "Everything which becomes conscious as unity is already terribly complicated; we invariably have only the semblance of unity. The phenomenon of the body is the richer, dearer, more palpable phenomenon."¹²

Dix's emphasis on the body, his depictions of it in almost every state, underlines his acceptance of Nietzsche's concepts. Most artists and thinkers reacted to the horrors of humanity with a blinkered vision, preferring illusions and idealism to replace actuality. The body becomes the starting point of nearly all Dix's work. Individuality is no longer regarded as a sacrosanct project - nihilism signals the end of the Romantic subject. Even Dix's adoption of multiple stylistic approaches fits into this loss of the ego or the explicitly identifiable subject. Dix did not seek to adopt a style specifically Dixian, rather he incorporated styles ranging from those of the old masters to the Expressionists. We are arriving at a point where we no longer see the grotesque in Dix's oeuvre as an artist simply pandering to a particular form. It becomes quite clear that for Dix and followers of Nietzsche, the grotesque is not unnatural - rather it depicts reality for what it actually is. Reality is harsh, cruel and sadistic - Darwin's theory of the 'survival of the fittest' leaves us in no doubt of this.

Part of Dix's understanding of reality came from his involvement in the First World War. In *The Position* 1917 (Fig 4), he uses sharp edges, heavy lines and zig zags to render a war torn landscape. The artistic technique itself seems to be torn apart, exploding simultaneously with the desolate scene. We might call the picture grotesque as it is, both in style and content, "repulsively distorted,"¹³ but there is nothing unreal about the actual destruction of war. Coming a bit closer to the older definition of grotesque we see the mixture of the animal and mineral in some of Dix's post war images. *The Skat Players* (Fig 5), *The Match Vendor 1* (Fig 6) and *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7), (all completed in 1920) provide an ironic echo to the initial conception of 'la grottesca' where human faces appeared in flowers and bodies out of oddly shaped leaves and volutes.



Fig 4
 Otto Dix,
 The Position (Battlefield with Tree) 1917
 Gouache, 41 x 38.7 cm.
 Freiburg, Augustiner Museum.

In *The Skat Players* (Fig 5), pieces of wood provide legs for the crippled veterans and bits of metal make up mouths, ears and necks. The cripples are a mass of spare parts, the left-overs of a war that was horrifyingly real. Our gut reaction to such a piece is one of horror and disgust. Dix's three pieces of humanity however seem totally unaware of their effect on the spectator. They are playing a casual game of cards, their handicap hardly seems to bother them. It certainly bothers the viewer but Dix does not allow us to pity them as they do not seem to pity themselves - we are left with a hollow feeling in the pit of our stomachs. These products of war are ruthlessly, and in Dix's hand, calmly real.

The cripples in *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7) are also composed of spare parts slapped together hastily, yet I feel Dix's attitude to them differs from the *Skat Players* (Fig 5). The response of the viewer helps us see this difference. We do feel pity for the beggar who is almost ignored by passers by - his eyes gaze soulfully at us from within his mutilated body. We are made aware of the injustice of his condition by the prosthetic devices on sale in the shop window behind him. These devices would make this man's life easier but his position in society does not enable him to purchase them. There is an ironic interplay between the images of dismembered dummies in the shop front and the dismembered body of the beggar. The cripple in the foreground is also treated sympathetically by Dix, he wears an expression of disillusionment and helplessness. Of the three paintings under discussion, *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7) alone fits into the traditional aims of depicting tragedy. We can purge ourselves of the feeling of horror and repulsion by pitying characters who are victims of a society gone wrong. *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7) has an ultimately cathartic effect on the viewer, a catharsis we are rarely granted when looking at Dix's works. Because of this cathartic effect *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7) cannot be termed truly grotesque. The grotesque does not relieve the

viewers feelings of disgust or repulsion through catharsis of pity, rather a state of suspension is induced.

In *The Match Vendor* (Fig 6) Dix adds an important note to his perception. A limbless and seemingly blind match vendor (his darkened glasses) is being urinated on by a dog. It is hard not to grin at the dog's act - it is grotesque - but comically so. The cripple does not evoke our pity as his facial expression is not one of self pity or despair, he seems to simply accept his condition as a fact of reality - there is no feeling of pathos in the piece. We can see quite clearly here Dix's ruthless vision of humanity. The three other pedestrians depicted in *The Match Vendor* (Fig 6) have perfect limbs - the woman's almost see-through dress exposes the lushness of her legs, creating a stark contrast with the veterans stumps. None of the three are looking at the cripple - he is no longer fully human. Even the dog is looking away - the only function this half-human has is to provide a urinating post for animals. Dix, like Nietzsche, always asserted that the body is the starting point when exploring the nature of what is human, of what being an individual subject entails. In this painting Dix seems to be asking us to accept the fact that the external form of the cripple points to how he should be regarded. Quite simply the painting says that he cannot participate bodily in what it means to be human. In all three paintings proportion and distance is distorted. Through this perceptual distortion Dix emphasizes the grotesque nature of his subject matter.

These post-war paintings have led critics to label Dix as a pacifist and a socially committed artist. In *Prager Strasse* (Fig 7) Dix inserts a cutting with "Juden Raus!" written on it. This popular chant "Jews Out!" reveals the anti-semitic sentiments inherent in the National Socialist regime - a regime which would later attempt to annihilate an entire race. But the



Fig 5
 Otto Dix,
 The Skat Players, 1920.
 Oil and Collage on canvas, 110 x 87 cm
 Stuttgart, Stuttgart Municipal Gallery.

insertion does not reveal Dix's sympathies as either pro-semitic or anti-semitic, more accurately it simply reveals Dix's awareness of the current political trends. There is another cut-out in the *Match Vendor* (Fig 6) which is an appeal written by Kokoschka. This tract refers to the "Kapp Putsch", a battle between striking workers and federal troops. During the fracas a stray bullet damaged a Ruben's painting in the Zwinger Museum in Dresden. The appeal basically asks for the fighting to be taken elsewhere in order to protect art. These cut-outs and the very subject matter of the paintings (focused on the atrocities of war) established the myth of Dix the proletarian.

Dix himself opposed this version of himself. Eva Karcher explains his interest in images that are extreme in nature: "He registered them without prejudice or bias, with the most finely tuned senses."¹⁴

Dix was never an idealist, thinking of him as such runs counter to any interpretation of Nietzschean perspective. It is only the idealist who seeks to change history through his art or even hope to hold an influential political viewpoint. Dix explains his preoccupation with war images:

"I did not paint pictures of war in order to prevent war; that would have been presumptuous. I painted them in order to banish the war. All art is banishment."

War was a "phenomenon that I absolutely had to experience,"¹⁵ asserts the artist. He was, above all, curious and his experiences at the front let him see the dark instinctual forces that exist in every human but are only fully revealed in the setting of war. The war validated Nietzsche's concept of nihilism and since Dix embraced this philosophy he was better able to record in detail the grotesque in human suffering. Dix was not unfeeling, he had nightmares years after the war ended, and his preoccupation with the theme shows that he was deeply horrified by it. It was this horror that prompted him to depict in minute detail every facet of the phenomenon while his Nietzschean perspective enable him to remain ruthlessly honest, without resorting to emotive pathos.



Fig 6
 Otto Dix
 The Match Vendor 1, 1920
 Oil and Collage on Canvas, 144 x 166 cm
 Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

In *Human Concern and Personal Torment* Robert Doty discusses the importance of the grotesque in art. His understanding of the term fits very much into what has been discussed above but he extends its nuances while setting it in a more modern context. He characterises the grotesque as the rejection of reason and its institutes. For him the grotesque signals an immersion in the subconscious and its energies which include fear, passion, violence and sex. It also allows for apparent opposites to clash discordantly, giving room for humour to sit side by side with horror and it generally enables the artist to take a wider perspective on reality.

So far, the depiction of fear and violence have been the focus, it is now time to turn to Dix's images of sex. Dix's exposing sense of humour came into its own when tackling themes which were, from a bourgeois viewpoint, disreputable and taboo.

The sex murder is the ultimate paradox. The sexual instinct normally ensures the continuation of the species and when it is coupled with murder the distinction between Eros and Thanatos is levelled. Dix, lover of the extreme forms of human instinct was fascinated by the theme.

In *Sex Murder* 1922 (Fig 8), the body of a prostitute is obscenely spread-eagled across a bed, her upper torso drapes towards the floor, one of her breasts exposed. The pose could almost be one of sexual abandon - it is a pose associated with sexual desire, but in this case, desire is fuelled by a destructive impulse. The woman's throat has been cut, rivulets of blood run in oddly even lines down her face ending in a 'neat' puddle on the floor. The worst havoc of destruction had obviously been aimed at the woman's genitals which have been ripped apart, laid open by a knife. The depiction is grotesque and Dix's attention to detail renders it even more so. The woman's attire is

exactly as we would expect it to be, there even are holes in the toes of her stockings. There is a contrast created between the chaos in the foreground of the picture and the order in the background. The detail in this piece suggests that Dix, like de Sade did not shirk from depicting ultimate savagery. It is questionable whether Dix himself got sexual pleasure out of these images, but he certainly testifies with this piece that others find sexual pleasure in murder.

The etching *Sex Murder* 1922 (Fig 9) also depicts the frenzy of destruction. Our eyes are immediately drawn to the similarly mutilated body of the corpse, the pool of blood in which she is lying. A detail we might fail to notice at first are the two dogs copulating, a comically grotesque insertion by the artist. The detail also serves to remind us of the subconscious drive of sexual instinct that prompted the murder.

These two pictures remind us of de Sade whose name would coin the term sadist to represent one who takes pleasure from another's pain. De Sade regarded the sex murder as a natural phenomenon curbed only by the forces of moral repression. For de Sade murder fulfilled the brutal will of nature; he regarded it as a kind of hygienic measure which would stop overpopulation. His views on nature would find their way into Darwin's theories on the 'survival of the fittest' and Nietzsche's nihilism. We might be disgusted when reading *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (1795)¹⁶ but de Sade points out several truths that we are often unwilling to look at. Sex is usually idealistically regarded as an act that brings people closer emotionally. Christianity has clothed the sexual act with mystification and morality. De Sade brushes aside conventions and reveals sexuality as a power relationship. Western sexual politics almost always portray the male as an aggressor in sexual relations. The lover has the mettle of a soldier, "his organ is tense



Fig 8
Otto Dix
Sex Murder, 1922
Oil on Canvas, 165 x 135 cm
Whereabouts unknown.



Fig 9
Otto Dix
Sex Murder, 1922
Etching, 27.5 x 34.6 cm
Albstadt, Walther Grosz Foundation
in the Albstadt Municipal Gallery.

like an arrow" he finds his target...., it is a fact that the sexual act is treated as if one were going to war. De Sade clearly relishes the violence that he regards as inherent in sex and Dix's *The Sex Murder* (self-portrait), 1920 (Fig 10) prompts us to question Dix's personal feelings on the matter. Is Dix gratuitously depicting a frenzied sexual act,

"It was a pleasure for me to find that life is that way, that not everything is sugar-coated and wonderfully beautiful."⁷

Or is this painting simply to Dix's strict philosophy of realism, the dispassionate chronicler, portraying human nature even at its most extreme?

The dismembered body is grotesquely scattered around the room evoking feelings of horror and disgust, nevertheless we may not be able to answer the question asked above but we cannot simply call the artist dispassionate in relation to these images.

Dix has said 'I'll either be famous or infamous' and his *Girl at the Mirror*, 1921 (Fig 11) and etching *At the Mirror* (1922) provoked such outrage that charges were brought against him. The motif in these works is the juxtaposition between youth and old age, freshness and decay. In both a whore is dressing herself up in seeming preparation for work. The underwear hints at the erotic, being crotchless and therefore inviting. The body appears full and rounded from the back but the mirror, exposing the front of the figure negates any erotic expectations. The women are bending forward which reveals sagging breasts and wasted muscles. The dichotomy between the two images, beauty and ugliness has a double-take effect. Our preconceptions are shattered as we see two opposites contained in the one figure. The grotesque of the absurd is invoked and we are also forced to deal with the harsh reality that age radically alters beauty. Dix's sense of the grotesque informs almost all of the themes he touches on.

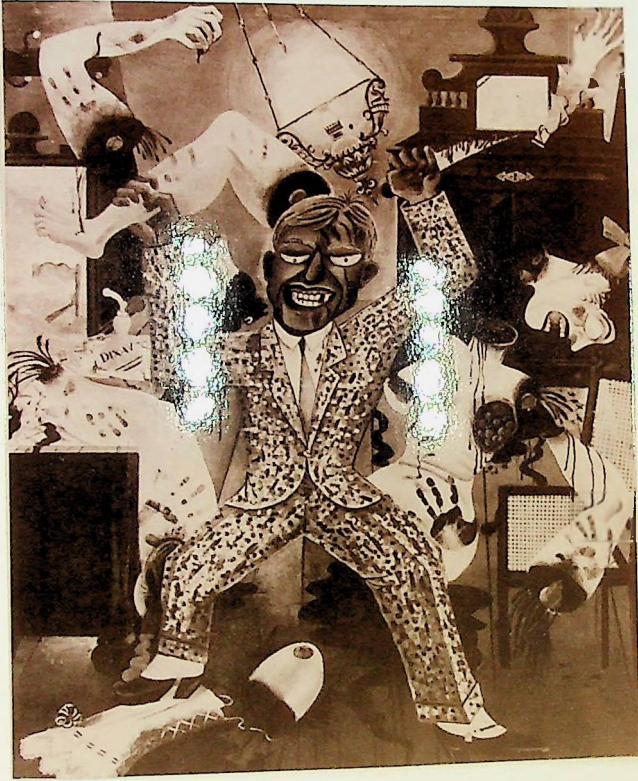


Fig 10
 Otto Dix
 The Sex Murderer (Self-Portrait) 1920,
 Oil on Canvas, 170 x 120 cm
 Whereabouts Unknown.

Until now, we have been dealing with the shockingly evocative grotesque, at the darker side of Dix's oeuvre. Dix's portraits however contain elements of the grotesque which are not so upsetting while still incorporating Dix's philosophy of the body as primary subject.

Most of Dix's portraits border on caricature. His emphasis on the body revealing the inner person meant that outsized features became even more distorted under Dix's hand. Dix felt that each person had a particular hue or colour of their own hence Anita Berber is bathed in reds, with her skin taking on a blue waxen pallor. *Portrait of Dr Heinrich Stadelmann*, 1922 (Fig 12) makes the sitter look like a little gnome, with flapping ears and heavily lined face. They shine out with a reddish tint and the skin is green. He reminds us more of a character from a horror movie than a doctor. Dix had been supposed to portray Hans Luther, Chancellor of the Reich but his unorthodox approach to portraits probably prompted him not to sit for the artist. Kessler remarks in his diary:

"If it were only a question of Dr Luther, he would not hesitate for a minute to have himself painted by Dix. But he had doubts about whether it would come out looking like the Chancellor of the German Reich."¹⁸

The *Portrait of the journalist Sylvia Von Harden*, 1926 (Fig 13) emphasizes her long facial features and her large bony hands. She is depicted as masculine and if she were not wearing a dress it would be difficult to determine her sex. Most of Dix's portraits are to some degree comically grotesque as they tend towards caricature.

"Every good portrait is based on show. The essence of every human being is expressed in a person's external appearance; the outside is the expression of the inside; therefore external and internal are identical..... The first impression is the right one and has to be preserved in all its freshness."¹⁹



Fig 11
Otto Dix
Girl at the Mirror, 1921
Oil on Canvas, Dimensions Unknown.
Destroyed during the War.

Caricature in Dix's work is only touched on briefly here as it does not relate particularly to the darker side of his vision. His portraits do not shock the viewer as, for example his sex murder paintings do. His caricatures are without doubt powerfully crafted pieces which glow with vitality and life but they do not require the bravery that is needed in order to depict what most avoid. The artistic confrontation with violence and horror can only be undertaken by an artist with the courage of his own convictions. When depicting the 'darker side' Dix broke many taboos and had to encounter much negative criticism. Dix's courage of vision is what sets him most apart and again brings us back to Nietzsche:

"Even the bravest of us rarely has the courage for what he really *knows*...."²⁰



Fig 12
Otto Dix.
Portrait of Dr Heinrich Stadelmann, 1922
Oil on Canvas, 90.8 x 55.5 cm
Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario,
W. Landmann Collection.

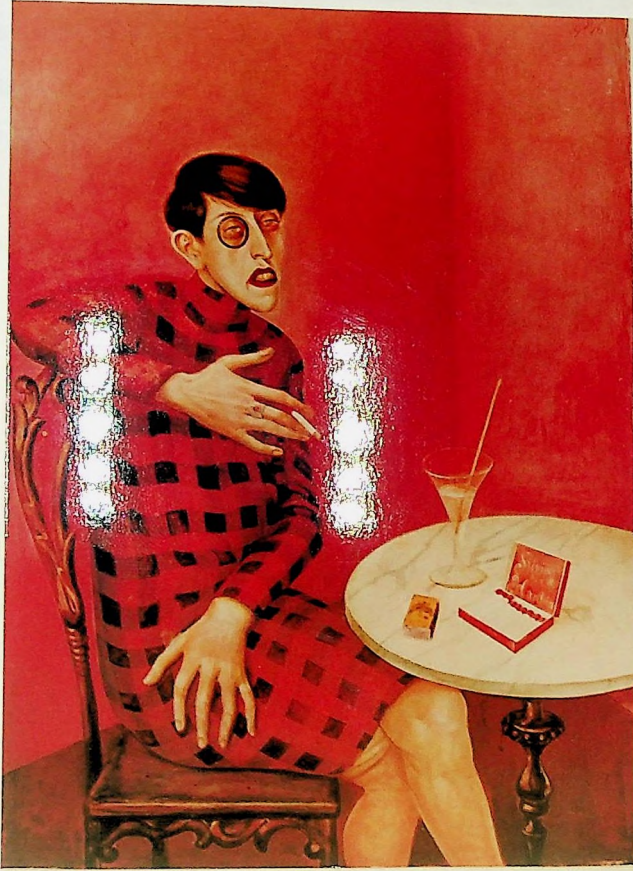


Fig 13
Otto Dix
Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia Von Harden,
1926, Mixed Media on Wood, 120 x 88 cm.
Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou.

POST SCRIPT

There is hardly space or time in the context of this essay to do justice to the full impact the grotesque holds for Dix's work. Dix appropriated an aesthetic category and revitalised and validated it as an art form. His personal vision (influenced by de Sade and Nietzsche) resolved the paradox raised by the grotesque. The sex murder paintings may be horrific but in Dix's out-look became 'natural' because they reveal *humanity*. He shows us that the 'darker side' is as natural as is beauty and grandeur. The grotesque is our reality, just as the nuclear bomb is our reality - both are, though regrettably so - human products.

One could argue that the existence of the nuclear bomb aids the survival of our chaotic species; until recently the existence of atomic weapons has acted as a deterrent against full-scale war. By focusing on the grotesque the artist reveals the depths to which humanity can sink, while affirming that we can still survive.

Dix's art reveals a faithful representation of the times in which he lived. The chaos of war and the excesses of the Weimar Republic are grotesque subject matters and Dix paints them as they actually are rather than what most would like them to be. He ultimately forces us to accept and take responsibility for our darker sides. Ignoring the grotesque will not make it disappear.

Dix's project is very much a twentieth century phenomenon. The popularity it holds today is unmatched by any other epoch. Dix was one of the precursors who liberated the darker instinctual forces from the unrepresented sphere into high art. Without such liberators art would become banal and insipid.

Today's cultural canon is explosive, having a unique force and impact and giving rise to indelible images. Dix may never have wanted to change political history but he certainly broadened the limits of artistic expression. The genre is unique and differs from many others (such as tragedy) since as already mentioned, it leaves the viewer in a state of suspension. There is no easy purgation of the feelings of disgust or repulsion - no catharsis is granted. Rather the grotesque induces a detached and perhaps cynical appraisal.

In Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche lists courage and bravery among the most important attributes. Many artists and thinkers shy away from the grotesque because it evokes fear and disgust. Dix's ruthless vision of reality was above all one that required courage. Dix had a personal bravery and individuality that enabled him to not only "plumb life's depths" but to represent them artistically regardless of their unconventionality. It is hardly an easy task to de-mystify utopian nostalgia and give the grotesque free rein.

"What I most like to do is see the fundamental themes of human-kind with my own eyes in a new light...Art defies any and all definition. It is his task (the artist) to form a world and show people they cannot live on bread alone. I am primitive and plebian, I need the courage to depict ugliness, undiluted life...."²¹

FOOTNOTES

1. R.E. Allen (ed) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford, 1990.
2. Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix - 1819 - 1969 - His Life and Works*. Trans by Jones & Gaines, Taschen, Germany, 1988. p. 43.
3. *ibid*, p. 43.
4. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*. Trans by Morris Hickey Morgan, Dores, New York. 1960, p. 211.
5. Wolfgang Kayser. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Trans by V. Weisstein, Columbia Press, 1981, p. 20.
6. Karcher and Taschen, p. 10.
7. *ibid*, p. 239.
8. D.L. Hurst, *Tragicomedy*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 5.
9. Karcher and Taschen, p. 7.
10. *ibid*, p. 21.
11. Robert Doty. *Human Concern and Personal Torment*. In the chapter Sex/Sadism, Doty points to Dix's philosophical connections with Nietzsche and de Sade. Whitney Museum of American Art, Praeger, 1969.
12. Karcher and Taschen, p. 34.
13. Oxford Dictionary.
14. Karcher and Taschen, p. 11.
15. *ibid*, p. 30.
16. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans by H.M. Parshley, Vintage, 1974.
17. Karcher and Taschen, p. 50.
18. *ibid*, p. 133.
19. *ibid*, p. 102.
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Trans by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, London, 1988 p. 23.
21. Karcher and Taschen, p. 228.

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13. Roters, Eberhard. *Berlin 1910 - 33*. New York, Rizzoli, 1982.
14. Schwartz, Barry. *The New Humanism - Art in a Time of Change*. Prager, 1974.
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