

Abstract

## Images of History in Anselm Kiefer's Art - *Melancholy, Allegory and Constellation*

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Anselm Kiefer is one of the prominent Neo-Expressionists, who insistently dealt with the concern of history. This paper investigates Anselm Kiefer's art in relation to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, especially in terms of his three main philosophic concepts: 'melancholy', 'allegory' and 'constellation'.

Benjamin regarded history not as a lineal progress but as a process towards catastrophe, which required sacrifice of numerous unknown human lives and the destruction of nature. Reflecting Benjamin's view of history, the aesthetic of ruins is predominant in Kiefer's work. Benjamin's melancholic gaze on history involves, however, the aspiration for redemption of it as well. For him, 'redemption' means to provide a new meaning on the historical aspects that was excluded and ignored in the established written history, and to rehabilitate them as significant components of history. This dialectic aspect of Melancholy is implicit in Kiefer's works such as <the guardian angel of painter> and <angel of history>. The former one alludes to the famous <Melancholia I> of Dürer, which visualized, according to Benjamin, the melancholic perspective of history. The title of the latter one refers to Benjamin's famous historico-philosophical text <Über den Begriff der Geschichte>, which was inspired by Klee's <Angelus Novus>. In this installation, Kiefer criticized the post-war era of German society that tried to conceal the traumatic history of Fascism and strove only for the economic development. In numerous other works Kiefer insistently dealt with the traumatic history of Fascism and Shoah.

The way how Kiefer visualized his melancholic view of history relates to Benjamin's concept of allegory. The term 'allegory', which is a mode of artistic expression as well as an attitude, was denigrated for a long time as inferior to symbol, until Benjamin focused on it and reestimated its potentiality. In allegory, the relation between signifier and signified is not fixed but is rather arbitrary, having a great potential of meaning.

The signifying mechanism of allegory is similar to the mapping of constellation. Benjamin explained

constellation as the process of getting to the 'idea,' by arranging and forming various empirical phenomenon into an overall structure of particular aspects. Each of them can be a part of different constellations at the same time, so that the meaning could change depending on the constellation in which it engages. An identical signifier, thus, can signify even contrary concepts.

Kiefer's works are sedimentations of various fragments, which constitute an allegorical image of history that is conceived as ruin, and take their part in all different semiotic constellations. The overlapping fields of forces cannot be integrated into one coherent interpretation but remain in permanent fluctuation, creating endless chains of semiosis. In this way, the unifying signification of these chains of semiosis is constantly deferred. According to the semiotic chain in which each component of his painting participates, an identical component can connote different meanings, sometimes even the opposite, which is exemplified in his painting <Sternenlager IV>, <Gewitter der Rosen> and <Daphne>. Such allegorical mode is the only way to represent the inevitably defective history and the dialectic melancholic gaze in it.

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