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**“Das Eismeer” – Caspar David Friedrich
and the North**



The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) created the work of art “Das Eismeer” in the years 1823/24. Besides his painting “Mönch am Meer” it is his most radical painting. It depicts a dramatic and grim subject: A shipwreck in the Arctic Sea. According to different cultural, historical and social contexts there have been many different interpretations of his painting since it was produced.



C. D. Friedrich, Detail "Das Eismeer",
1823/24



Engraved by William Westall after Frederick William Beechey, "His Majesty's Ships Hecla and Griper Blocked up with the Ice in Winter Harbour", 1820.

In the 19th century the Arctic attracted wide interest in Germany. There were Arctic expeditions to discover unexplored regions, especially to find a North-West-Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In 1819-1820, the Englishman William Edward Parry made such an expedition and stayed the entire winter with the research vessels, “Griper” and “Hecla” in the Arctic Sea. Even though the ships were blocked with ice during these winter sojourn, they were not damaged and both ships returned to port - in contrast to the ship in Friedrich’s painting. Nevertheless the painting “Das Eismeer” is related to Parry’s voyage. Some contemporaries of Friedrich regarded the tiny shipwreck seen in the painting as the ship “Griper”.¹ It is disputable if Friedrich was referring to this expedition.² Although he could have received inspiration by Parry’s voyage, there were many reports, articles and in Germany illustrations about other Arctic expeditions from which Friedrich could have gathered his information. In the year 1822 Parry’s “*Journal of the Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West-Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific*“ was published in German translation.³

Friedrich is not the only artist working in Germany, who was inspired by the Arctic. For example, Johann Carl Enslin exhibited his painting “Winteraufenthalt der Nordpolexpedition” at a gallery in Dresden 1822 and it is possible that Friedrich, who lived in

¹“Und sähen wir auch heute nur sein [Friedrichs] zweites Polarbild mit dem Griper zwischen starrenden und gähnenden Eisblöcken eingeklemmt[...]“ Böttiger, Blicke auf einheimische Künstler. Die Professoren Dahl und Friedrich. – Kupferstecher Rosmäsler. Artistisches Notizenblatt 1825, pp. 21-23. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 106.

² Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 386.

³ It was published by J. Murray. Compare. Sumowski (1970), p. 212 and Hofmann (1974), p. 259. Stechow assumes Friedrich probably knew the German translation of the journal “*Parrys Reisen 1819 und 1820 mit Hecla und Griper*”. Compare Sumowski (1970), p. 212.

Dresden, may also have been inspired by this painting - or by paintings of other artists.¹

“Das Eismeer” represents Friedrich’s idea of the North, which is based on reports and illustrations of Arctic-expeditions in the 19th century and especially on his own imagination.

This quotation depicts his main idea of art:

*The artist should paint not only what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also refrain from painting that which he sees before him.*²



C.D. Friedrich, "Eisblöcke", 1820/21

Friedrich obviously never saw the real Arctic Sea. He knew the structure of piled ice-floes from the Baltic Sea. But the models for the ice floes in the painting were the small sheets of ice on the German river “Elbe”.³ There were great amounts of ice on the Elbe in the winter 1820/21 and he might have been inspired by the

¹ Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 387. Sumowski also refers to a painting „Die Nordpolexpedition“ (1823) by Antonio Sacchettis. Compare Sumowski (1970), p. 212.

² Friedrich (1999), p. 116.

³ Rautmann analyses the montage of the painting. Compare Rautmann (1991), pp. 14.-17.

amounts of it.¹ Friedrich used these oil sketches as drafts for “Das Eismeer”.² He always created his paintings in this manner: First, making various sketches of nature and then combining them together in his paintings.

“Das Eismeer” was not well received in Friedrich’s time. Töpfer, a contemporary of Friedrich criticized the montage of it.³ In his opinion, the illustration of pieces of ice was not the same as an illustration of the Arctic Sea. The ice sheets did not appear to be large, because of the tiny size of the shipwreck. Instead they reminded Töpfer of the ice from the river Elbe or Oder. He compared the ship in the painting to a toy ship, which a boy must have forgotten in a river.

Thus Friedrich’s “Das Eismeer” was not consistent with ideas of the Arctic held by many of his contemporaries. Ironically most of these critics were aware that they too derived their ideas about

¹ Compare Hofmann (1974), p. 259. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 387.

² By the way these “ice sheet sketches” were used in a lecture of the formation of glacial ice. “[...] so macht er doch zu allen seinen Bildern die sorgfältigsten Naturstudien; seine Eisstudien beweisen dies; man kann in ihnen die zu verschiedenen Zeiten entstandene Kristallisation des Wassers in den Schollen nachweisen, dergestalt, dass diese Studien dem Doktor Petzold bei einer öffentlichen Vorlesung über die Bildung des Gletschereises als augenscheinliche Belehrung dienen.“ Wegener, W.: Der Landschaftsmaler Friedrich. Eine biographische Skizze. In: Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd. NF 4, 1859, pp. 71-77. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 148.

³ “[...] Stücke gehäuften Eises führen uns nicht zur Anschauung des Eismeereres. Mag immerhin jenes Schifflein zersplitterter Dreimaster, uns die Größe der Schollen andeuten, das gethürmte Eis wird nicht groß durch die Kleinheit des Schiffes, sondern das Schiff wird zu einem zersplitterten Modell, klein durch die Größe des Eises, und wir wähen, einen geringen Theil des Oder- oder Elb-Eises zu sehen, in welches ein muthwilliger Knabe ein Miniaturschiffchen zerbrochen warf.“ Töpfer, Carl: Erste Kunstausstellung in Hamburg. In: Originalien aus dem Gebiete der Wahrheit, Kunst, Laune und Phantasie 10, 1826. Pp. 417-419, 429, 437f, 443f, 454f. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 107.

the Arctic from descriptions and illustrations.¹ And like Friedrich, they had never travelled to the Arctic, yet still they judged. Even the German King Wilhelm III said, referring to this painting, the real Arctic Sea probably looks different.²

Many of the reviewers were irritated, because the conception of the painting was innovative for its time. The ice sheets are the main subject of the painting and the shipwreck seems to be a minor part of it.³ According to the Classic conception of art, most

¹ Da wir keinen Maßstab für solche Gegenstände haben, so können wir über die Wahrheit kein Urtheil fällen; nach der Analogie aber schließend von unserer Erfahrung, finden wir die Eisschollen hier und da nicht durchsichtig genug, auch konnten wir das schaumartige Weiss, was sich an und zwischen die Schollen legt, nicht ganz erkennen. Auch die Perspective, in der die entfernten Eisberge stehen, schien uns nicht richtig motiviert. [...] Wir halten dieses Gemählde für Studium, das später in irgend einer Composition verarbeitet werden soll.

Anonym [Über die Prager Ausstellung von 1824]. Archiv für Geschichte, Statistik, Literatur und Kunst XV, 1824, p. 377. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 103.

In wie weit in dieser Darstellung Treue herrscht, können wir nicht ermessen, doch können wir die Klarheit der Eisschollen allerdings bewundern, und durch den erreichten Grad der Durchscheinbarkeit derselben, Hr. Prof. Friedrichs Auffassungs- und Darstellungsgabe Gerechtigkeit wiederfahren lassen.

F. L.: Über die diesjährige Kunstaussstellung. In: Berlinische Nachrichten von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen [Spenersche Zeitung] 1826, 31.10.1826. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 110.

² “[...] das große Eis im Norden möchte wohl anders aussehen.“ Compare Schadow, Johann Gottfried (1849): Kunstwerke und Kunstansichten. Berlin. P. 122. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 139.

³ “Ein Schiff, als Haupt-Inhalt des Bildes, von Eis erdrückt, gegen die ungeheuren Schollen vergebens kämpfend, wäre allenfalls ein ausführbarer Gegenstand gewesen, aber nimmer die Eisschollen als Hauptgegenstand, und das zertrümmerte Schiff, im Halbgrund gewissermaßen als symbolischer Maßstab der physischen Länge und Breite jener

reviewers seek in a painting the blissful enjoyment of a beautiful landscape view.¹ The painting “Das Eismeer” does not fulfill this criteria because it does not allow the viewer to enjoy the painting harmoniously since it evokes existential questions. It deals with limits of mankind and, in Friedrich’s time, with limits of art.

There was a wide interest in the Arctic during this period and not only because of North-Pole expeditions. In German Romanticism, the North in the broadest sense was used to build a positive self-image in contrast to the classic south. The Romantics intended a distinction between Romantic ideas of art and classical art ideals. Towards the end of the 18th century, the image of the North is related to the Philosophical theories of the Sublime by Edmund Burke², Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller. The Romantics found in the idea of the Sublime an attractive alternative to the strict rules of the neo-classical era. The Sublime is clearly associated with nature. Wild landscapes, polar zones, terrific storms, huge mountains, the view of the endless sea, the infinity of the starry sky or gazing into an abyss can evoke sublime emotions. The marvellous, but also hostile nature of the Arctic is encapsulated in the image of the “Sublime North”.³

Eisblöcke, welche unser Auge ermüden und abweisen.“ Töpfer, Carl: Erste Kunstausstellung in Hamburg. In: Originalien aus dem Gebiete der Wahrheit, Kunst, Laune, Phantasie 10, 1826. Pp. 417-419, 429, 437f, 443f, 454f. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähniq (1973), p. 107.

¹ “*So wenig der Tod uns geeignet scheint, als Gegenstand bildender Kunst, so wenig möchten wir eine so ganz leblose, einförmige, öde Naturansicht einem Maler empfehlen.*“ Anonym [Über die Prager Ausstellung von 1824]. Archiv für Geschichte, Statistik, Literatur und Kunst XV, 1824, p. 377. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähniq (1973), P. 103. „[...] so geht doch die ganze Darstellung über die Kunst der Malerey hinaus.“ Anonym: Kunstausstellung in Berlin 1826. In: Kunstblatt 1827. P. 162. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähniq (1973), p. 111.

²Burke: A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, 1757, German translation: Strube, Werner (1989): Philosophische Untersuchung über den Ursprung unserer Ideen vom Erhabenen und Schönen. Hamburg.

³ “*Ein rauer Winter der Polargegend*“ can evoke sublime emotions. Vgl. Schiller (1962), S. 186f.

The Sublime emotion, in the sense of Burke, Kant and Schiller combines two contradictory emotions: horror and pleasure. In the year 1688 John Dennis described his emotions, while he crossed the Alpes and was faced with the beautiful and at the same time terrible and life-threatening nature.

*And sometimes its [nature's] face appear'd Smooth and Beautiful [...] In the very same place Nature was seen Severe and Wanton. In the mean time we walk'd upon the very brink, in a litteral sense, of Destruction; one stumble, and both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy'd. The sense of all this produc'd different motions in me; viz. A delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled.*¹

Kant and Schiller transferred ideas of morality and rationality to the Sublime.² In their theories, Sublimity is marked by grandeur,

¹ John Dennis: "Letter describing his crossing the Alps" (25. Oktober 1688) In: John Dennis: The Critical Work. Edited E. N. Hooker. Baltimore 1939/40. (Neudruck 1964), Band 2, pp. 380-382.

² "Das Gefühl des Erhabenen ist also ein Gefühl der Unlust, aus der Unangemessenheit der Einbildungskraft in der ästhetischen Größenschätzung, zu der Schätzung durch die Vernunft, und eine dabei erweckte Lust, aus der Übereinstimmung eben dieses Urteils der Unangemessenheit des größten sinnlichen Vermögens mit Vernunftideen, sofern die Bestrebung zu denselben doch für uns Gesetz ist. Es ist nämlich für uns Gesetz (der Vernunft) und gehört zu unserer Bestimmung, alles, was die Natur als Gegenstand der Sinne für uns Großes enthält, in Vergleichung mit Ideen der Vernunft für klein zu schätzen; und was das Gefühl dieser übersinnlichen Bestimmung in uns rege macht, stimmt zu jenem Gesetze zusammen. Nun ist die größte Bestrebung der Einbildungskraft in Darstellung der Einheit für die Größenschätzung eine Beziehung auf etwas Absolut-großes, folglich auch eine Beziehung auf das Gesetz der Vernunft, dieses allein zum obersten Maße der Größen anzunehmen. Also ist die innere Wahrnehmung der Unangemessenheit alles sinnlichen Maßstabes zur Größenschätzung der Vernunft eine Übereinstimmung mit Gesetzen derselben, und eine Unlust, welche das Gefühl unserer übersinnlichen Bestimmung in uns rege

vastness, incomprehensibility, and the power to cause an intense pleasure in the observer, which has transcendent qualities. According to Schiller, the sublime emotion in regard to powers of nature is the effect of three sequential conceptions:

First: An objective physical power – like the Arctic Sea, for example

Second: Our subjective physical inferiority

And Third: Our subjective moral superior strength.¹

In German Romanticism, the ideas of morality weakened. The “Sublime North” was simply added to a counter-image of the Arcadia-South.² In the year 1820 Friedrich’s contemporary, Johann Gottlob von Quandt, a patron of the Arts, asked him to paint a picture, which shows the “Sublime North”. Quandt ordered



J. M. von Rohden, “Einsiedler bewirtet einen Pilger“, 1818

macht, nach welcher es zweckmäßig, mithin Lust ist, jeden Maßstab der Sinnlichkeit den Ideen des Verstandes unangemessen zu finden.“ Kant (1974), pp. 180f.

¹ Das Praktischerhabene ist “*die Wirkung dreier aufeinander folgender Vorstellungen:*

1) einer objektiven physischen Macht,

2) unsrer subjektiven physischen Ohnmacht

3) unsrer subjektiven moralischen Uebermacht.“ Schiller (1962), p. 186.

² Compare Rautmann (1991), pp. 45-49. Compare Grütter (1986), p. 159.

it, because he wanted a counter-image for a sepia-painting of the beautiful classic South from Johann Martin von Rohden (1778-1869).

Der Landschaftler Friedrich malt für mich ein großes Bild, welches ein Gegenstück zu Rohdens Landschaft werden soll. In Rohdens Bild ist und alles vereint, was eine südliche Natur Freundliches darbietet und in Friedrichs, was der Norden Ungeheures und Erhabenes zeigt. Schroffe Felsen oben mit Schnee bedeckt, an welchen kein armes Gräschen Nahrung findet, schließen einen Meerbusen ein, in welchem Stürme Schiffe verschlagen und durch ungeheure Eisschollen zerdrückt haben. Dieses graue Gemisch von Schiffstrümmern, Treibholz und Eismassen macht eine wunderbare und große Wirkung.¹

After Friedrich finished his painting, his client Quandt hung both paintings in one room, facing one another. Rohden's painting shows a hermit, who acts as a host for a pilgrim, surrounded by the beautiful Arcadian landscape. The counter-painting Friedrich produced, is called "Die Gescheiterte Hoffnung". Unfortunately it is missing, but descriptions that exist of the painting show that it is very similar to the painting "Das Eismeer". It shows a shipwreck, called "Hope", which is buried in ice floes. Like the painting "Das Eismeer" it can be considered as allegoric. Friedrich was the first painter who reflected emotions and thoughts in his landscape paintings.

Even if the subject of the North gained popularity in art as the 19th century progressed, it was not a typical subject. Huge "Ice sheets" were certainly not regarded as main subjects for illustrations.² The classical "Arcadia" still was a primary subject

¹ Bennemann, Rudolf: Aus dem Leben Johann Gottlob von Quandt. In: Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte und Altertumskunde 46, 1925. P. 21, Briefwechsel v. Quandt an Julius Schnorr v. Carolsfeld, 04.03.1822. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 176.

² Compare Töpfer, Carl: Erste Kunstaussstellung in Hamburg. In: Originalien aus dem Gebiete der Wahrheit, Kunst, Laune, Phantasie 10,

for art, but even so there were also reviewers, who admired the “delightful horrors of the North” in Friedrich’s painting.¹ In Friedrich’s life time there were conflicting opinions about his painting and it was not well received. It is interesting, that his contemporaries did consider the idea of the painting “The Artic Sea” as sublime, but they did not consider the painting itself as a sublime painting.² The critics referred to many different issues. A

1826. S. 417-419, 429, 437f, 443f, 454f. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p.107. *“Die Nordpol- oder Eismeer-Scene ist gewiß eben so wahr: es friert Einen, wenn man davor steht; man kann aber den Wunsch nicht unterdrücken, daß der Künstler uns öfter mit Gegenständen erfreuen möge, die uns näher liegen, wie es der Fall ist bei der schönen Landschaft Nr. 324 – Ulrich von Huttens Denkmal [BS 316] – denn bei den Massen ewigen Eises befindet sich der Kunstsinn nicht ganz wohl.“* Anonym: Über die Berliner Ausstellung von 1826. In: Der Gesellschafter oder Blätter für Geist und Herz 1826. P. 935. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 110.

The illustration of the ice sheets can be also regarded as an abstract illustration. Compare Dickel (1990), pp.231f. *“Die Frage nach der Darstellbarkeit der Natur, die er [Friedrich] als Abstraktum im Gegensatz zur überschaubaren Landschaft behandelte, hat ihn damals besonders beschäftigt, wahrscheinlich weil die Kollegen Koch und Richter als Vertreter einer anderen Kunstauffassung allenthalben reüssierten, er selbst jedoch am mangelnden Verständnis der Zeitgenossen scheiterte [...] Während das Sentiment der Zeitgenossen nach einer menschlich moderierten Natur verlangte, lehnte Friedrich den Versuch, die Natur im Bild zur gefälligen Landschaft zu verharmlosen, prinzipiell ab. Stattdessen versuchte er die Natur in ihrer abstrakten Größe zu zeigen und sie in einen kosmischen Zusammenhang mit dem Leben der Menschen zu rücken.“* Dickel (1990), pp. 235f.

¹ *“Uebersieh auch das andere Werk des genialen Friedrichs nicht, das Eismeer, ganz so wie wir es aus des wackern Parry’s Schilderung kennen; es ist schön in seiner starren feindlichen Größe“* Anonym: Ueber die diesjährige Kunstausstellung in Dresden. Literarisches Conversations-Blatt 1824, p. 979f. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), pp. 103f.

² *“Dergleichen Naturgegenstände, dergleichen Naturspiele ziehen in der Natur selbst wohl den Beschauer an, ja sie ergreifen ihn, wegen ihres Schauerlichen; allein in einem Gemälde lassen sie ihn kalt, ja der Beschauer weiß selbst nicht recht, was er daraus machen soll.“* “K.-th

contemporary of Friedrich stated, for example that the artist failed because it is impossible for mankind to copy “God’s great work”, the North Pole, even in paintings.¹

Many of the reviewers were irritated because the composition of “Das Eismeer” was not traditional. For the viewer, there is no way to “enter the painting”. He or she is faced with huge ice floes. These are the main subjects of the painting, the shipwreck seems to be minor. This is different to other illustrations of these times



C. D. Friedrich (?), “Wrack im Eismeer“, 1798

[Über die Berliner Ausstellung von 1826). In: Königl. Privilegierte Berlinische Zeitung von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen [Vossische Zeitung] 1826. 9.11.1826. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 110.

¹ “[...] den Theil unseres Planeten vor den Blick zu bringen, wo ein ewiger Winter mit gewaltiger Faust die ungestüme Meereswoge gefesselt hält, wo Riesenschiffe an der Kraft der ungeheuren Eisgebirge zerschellen, hat etwas Erhabenes aber auch etwas erschreckend Kühnes. Das Schiff der Phantasie des Künstlers, mit welchem günstigem Winde es auch getrieben wurde, es mußte scheitern an dieser gigantischen Natur.“ Töpfer, Carl: Erste Kunstausstellung in Hamburg. In: Originalien aus dem Gebiete der Wahrheit, Kunst, Laune, Phantasie 10, 1826. Pp. 417-419, 429, 437f, 443f, 454f. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 107.

which mostly show narrative scenes, for example the painting “Wrack im Eismeer”. It is credited to Friedrich, but it is debatable if Friedrich was the artist.¹

Regardless, the composition of this painting was created in the traditional way. It shows a narrative scene. The painting tells a story and the contemplator is able to enter the scene. The painting “Wrack im Eismeer” can be regarded as a “touristic sight”. The painting “Das Eismeer” is completely different. Due to the combination of the huge ice floes and the tiny shipwreck this painting irritated Friedrich’s contemporaries. However, because of the unusual composition, the effect on the viewer is powerful and impressive.

Since 1970 “Das Eismeer” has become integrated into the discourse of the philosophical theory of the Sublime, although the painting is still controversial. On one hand Friedrich and this painting are referred to as following the philosophical theories of Kant and Schiller.² On the other hand Friedrich is seen as a detractor of Schiller’s theory: With the painting “Das Eismeer” he wanted to criticize the philosophical theory.³ Both of these opinions, that Friedrich is following the theories and he is criticizing the theories, have to be judged very critically.

It is important to note, that Friedrich’s use of the term “Sublime” did not imply the transcendent moral ideas Schiller and Kant were referring to. It is debatable if Friedrich even knew these philosophical theories of the Sublime. In his aesthetics he shows an anti-theoretical attitude.”⁴ By creating a painting he emphasizes

¹ In the year 1798 when the painting was produced, Friedrich did not paint in oil. He only started to produce oil-paintings in 1806. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 485.

² Compare for example Rantsch-Trill (1977).

³ “*Friedrich schlägt die Theoretiker des Erhabenen, [nämlich Schiller] mit ihren eigenen Waffen*“. Grave (2001), p. 128.

⁴ “*Willst du wissen, was Schönheit sey? befrage die Herren Aesthiker; beim Theetisch kann es dir nützen. Vor der Staffelei aber mußst du es fühlen was schön ist.*“ Friedrich (1999), p. 37.

the artist's emotion and his fantasy.¹ It is possible that he neither wanted to show the theories of the Sublime, nor wanted to criticize them.

One can see in his paintings, for example in "Das Eismeer" an idea of the Sublime. Friedrich does not show the blissful enjoyment of a beautiful view, as a classical painting, instead he shows human confrontation with nature, infinity and death. These ideas are related to the Sublime. But Friedrich's idea of the Sublime does not include the moral significance, which Kant and Schiller stress.

In Romantic transcendental philosophy Nature is God's temple. In this Romantic context the individual experience of nature gained importance. Friedrich's primary interest in his art was to point out the religious contemplation of nature. Polar phenomena, like the northern lights, the magnetic attraction of the North Pole and the Polar star were figuratively integrated in Romantic natural philosophy. For example, the German Romanticist Joseph Görres figuratively saw the divine in the Arctic Nature.²

Not only in the Romantic period, there were religious interpretations of "Das Eismeer". At the North Pole there is no usual day- and night rhythm, so the painting was seen as an allegory of eternity and of the divine.³ The huge ice floes, in which the shipwreck was buried, are reminiscent of a grave. The

¹ "Schließe dein leibliches Auge damit du mit dem geistigen Auge zuerst siehst dein Bild. Dann fördere zu Tage was du im dunklen gesehen, daß es zurück wirke auf andern von außen nach Innen." Friedrich (1999), p. 35.

² "Und wie die Religiosität den Süden charakterisiert, so wird die Erkenntnis und philosophisches Schauen des Göttlichen dem Norden eigen sein. Eine lichte, klare Vernunft ist der Anteil nördlicher Naturen, ein durchsichtiger ewig heit'rer Äther füllt des Geistes Tiefen, in dem die Ideen in Sternenglanze blinken." Müller, Günther (Hg.) (1926): Josef Görres, Gesammelte Schriften. Hg. I. A. der Görres Gesellschaft von Wilhelm Schellberg. Bd. 3. Köln. P. 56. Compare Bohrer (1961), p. 17.

³ Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 387.

painting was interpreted as an allegory of the evanescence of man and the impossibility to explore the divine.¹

Furthermore, the painting “Das Eismeer” can also be associated with Friedrich’s own inner life. At that time, 1823/24, his paintings were received negatively which caused him to be bitter and dissatisfied. His growing pessimism is reflected in his paintings. Because of changing cultural and historical perspectives in Germany in the mid-19th century, Friedrich’s contemplative landscape art was seen as the religious mysticism of a bygone era. But Friedrich did not adapt his paintings to the ideas of art which were gaining popularity, he maintained his style. “Das Eismeer” could be seen as an expression of his radicalism and his will not to satisfy the “new” demands of art. Consequently Friedrich suffered financially because he could not sell many paintings. He found comfort in his religious beliefs, because there was still hope in God. According to the ideas of Romanticism and of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich reflects his strongly felt religious ideas in his landscape paintings. “Das Eismeer” can also be interpreted in this context. It refers both to issues of “hope” and “salvation” as well as to issues of “desperation” and “destruction”.

The shipwreck allegorises obviously “Death”, a subject Friedrich often dealt with in his art, for example in the painting “Friedhof im Schnee”.(1826/27).

As a young man he painted his own funeral. The painting is called “Mein Begräbnis”.² It portrays a churchyard with a ruin of a Gothic church. In the centre there is an open grave and a gravestone with the inscription “Hier ruht in Gott C. D. Friedrich”. Around the grave mourners are standing and the preacher points toward a butterfly which is flying above the grave. Above the grave in a ray of light are five more butterflies an allegorical

¹ Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähniq (1973), p. 387.

² Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähniq (1973), p. 278f.

reference to Friedrich's dead family members. The single butterfly can be associated with Friedrich himself.¹



C. D. Friedrich, "Friedhof im Schnee", 1826/27

Friedrich was only a boy when he first experienced Death, with the death of his mother in 1781. Another terrible experience of death occurred when he was thirteen years old, while ice-skating with his brother, the ice broke and his brother drowned. Friedrich could not help him. Some accounts suggest that Friedrich first broke the ice, but was saved by his brother and later on had to witness his brother's death. But this early familiarity with death suggests that the melancholy in his art is based on these events.²

¹ Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 278f.

² Compare for example Wegner's statement: "*Einer seiner bedeutendsten Jugendeindrücke war der Tod eines Bruders, der ihn retten wollte, als er beim Schlittschuhlaufen im Eise einbrach, und dabei selbst ums Leben*

However, one should be cautious using solely this argument. In Friedrich's personal testimonials there are few melancholic signs, instead he seemed to be a humorous and self-ironic man.¹ Regardless, to have witnessed the death of his brother and being unable to help him, would have made an intense impression on Friedrich. It is probable because of that experience his relationship with ice was an uncomfortable one. Thus "Das Eismeer" as a dramatic expression of death is fraught with possible implications.

Friedrich's painting can also be associated with the historical and political situation in Germany: When he painted "Das Eismeer" 1823/24, it was the time of the German "Restauration". German national identity developed at the end of the 18th century and into the 19th century. In the Napoleonic Wars, the Germans emerged for the first time with a common political identity. Friedrich was involved in this process. He had a national anti-French attitude and in his art he expressed his hope for one German nation and the liberation from French occupation. His motives were related to the German culture and mythology and to the North. Friedrich's landscape paintings convey political meanings. He also held national meetings in his workshop.

After the decisions of the Congress of Vienna 1815 and the "Karlsbader Beschlüsse" Friedrich had to be careful in expressing his national view and he abandoned his hope of a constitution of one German nation. This was the time he painted "Das Eismeer". One can refer to the historical and political situation in the 19th century and consider the painting as an expression of desperation and resignation.² It is possible, that Friedrich wanted to allegorise

kam. Man kann behaupten, dass der wehmütige Ton in seiner ganzen Richtung durch dies schmerzliche Erlebnis mit bedingt war." Wegener, W.: Der Landschaftsmaler Friedrich. Eine biographische Skizze. Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd. NF 4, 1859, pp. 71,-77. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig: (1973), p. 147.

¹ Compare for example Zschoche (2006), p. 11.

² Compare Rautmann (1991), pp. 25-36, 66-75. "*Eis und Schiffskatastrophe als Symbol fürs Scheitern und vereister gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse [...]*." P. 36. "*Der Bereich des Todes im Vordergrund, auf den Betrachter als eine Erfahrung des Schreckens und Erschreckens*

the desperate political situation in Germany in “Das Eismeer”. Sadly, Friedrich did not live long enough to see the establishment of the German Nation in 1871, as he died in 1840.

In Romanticism, Ernst Moritz Arndt, Theodor Körner and many others were referring to northern issues, when they fought for one German nation.¹ In the year 1813, Körner wrote a patriotic poem which is entitled “Aufruf”, in which he intended to mobilize the Germans in the war against the French. Regarding the Swedish invasion in the Napoleonic War, he states: “*Hell aus dem Norden bricht der Freiheit Licht.*”² The Germans hoped the Swedish would defeat the French. In Romanticism the Swedish King Gustav Adolf II was popularised, especially during the Napoleonic wars. In the Thirty Years’ War he invaded Germany and liberated the Protestant Germans.

Friedrich, a Protestant, is also fascinated by the Swedish King and named his son Gustav Adolf. Friedrich’s connection to Sweden was a close one. His hometown Greifswald belonged to Sweden until 1815. Atterbom noted that Friedrich considered himself as half Swedish. In many of his paintings one can find the Swedish flag, for example in his popular painting “Die Lebensstufen”. The persons in the painting can be interpreted as Friedrich and his family.³ The old man who turns his back to the viewer is supposed to be Friedrich himself, and the boy who holds the flag can be interpreted as his son Gustav Adolf.

wirkend – Zone der „Reinigung unsrer Leidenschaften“ -, macht nicht nur frei zum „Mitleid“, sondern auch zur Hoffnung auf einen ganz neuen Zustand des Lebens im Sinne der Vorstellung vom Norden als einem Land der Freiheit.“ P. 67.

¹ Arndt quotes in the year 1806: “*Welch ein hoher und kolossalischer Geist weht in der ältesten Geschichte des westlichen Nordens! welch ein kühner Freiheitssinn! welcher Trotz! welche Lebensverachtung! Höchste Kraft, unbezwinglicher Mut, barbarisch und wild, der Grund des Ganzen.*“ Compare Hubatsch (1951), p. 74.

² Körner, Theodor: Aufruf. In: Körner, Theodor (1814): *Leier und Schwert*. Pp. 37-39.

³ Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 438.



C. D. Friedrich, Detail, "Die Lebensstufen", 1835

There are many biographical links between Friedrich and the North. For example, Friedrich studied at the Academy of Copenhagen and later in Dresden where he met and became close friends with the Norwegian Romantic painter Johann Christian Clausen Dahl (1788-1857).

Beginning in Romanticism and up to the time of National Socialism the term "North" has also been used to represent national ideas in Germany. According to the Napoleonic Wars the North also figuratively portrays liberty.¹

By the use of the term "North" to represent national ideas in Romanticism, there was no racial thinking, in contrast to National Socialism. In the middle and the end of 19th century Arthur de Gobineau, Paul de Lagarde and Houston Stewart Chamberlain

¹ Rautmann refers to Märker (1974), pp. 175-177, 182 and Bohrer (1961). Compare Rautmann (1991), p. 44.

formulated racial thoughts, the National Socialists were referring to.¹ The racist ideology of National Socialism was based on Northern discourses: Hitler stated, that the Aryan people descended from the North and because of the harsh Northern conditions the development of a superior race was possible.²

Relating to Darwinism, the National Socialists created a pseudo-scientific base to legitimise their cruel racial actions,

¹ For example, the racial thought are formulated in Gobineau's "Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines" (1853/1855) and Chamberlain's "Die Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts" (1899).

² *"Wir können diese Not auf dieser Erde in graue Vorzeit verfolgen in erster Linie auf dem nördlichen Teil dieser Welt, in jenen unerhörten Eiswüsten, in jenen Stätten, die nur das kärglichste Dasein boten. Da war der Mensch zum ersten Mal gezwungen, um seine Existenz praktisch zu kämpfen, was ihm der lachende Süden in überreichem Maße arbeitslos bot, musste er im Norden mühsam erringen, und so entstand hier vielleicht die erste bahnbrechende Erfindung: in diesen kalten Strecken war der Mensch gezwungen, Ersatz zu suchen, für das einzige Himmels-geschenk, das das Leben ermöglicht, die Sonne, und der Mensch, der zum erstenmal den Funken künstlich erzeugte, ist der Menschheit erschienen als Gott: Prometheus, der Feuerbringer.*

Dieser Norden zwang die Menschen zu weiterer Tätigkeit, zur Bekleidung, zum Bau eigener Behausungen, Höhlen, später Wohnungen, kurz er hat ein Prinzip praktisch geboren, das Prinzip der Arbeit. [...] Und es ist zugleich eine zweite Entwicklung dort erfolgt: die unerhörte Not und die furchtbaren Entbehrungen wirkten als Mittel zur Rassen-reinzucht. Was schwächlich und kränklich war, konnte diese fürchterliche Periode nicht überstehen, sondern sank frühzeitig ins Grab und über blieb ein Geschlecht von Riesen an Kraft und Gesundheit; und eine weitere Eigenschaft wurde diesen Rassen angeboren. Wo Menschen äußerlich geknebelt sind, wo äußerlich ihr Wirkungskreis begrenzt ist, da beginnt sich ihr Inneres zu entwickeln, äußerlich begrenzt, innerlich unbegrenzt, je mehr der Mensch durch äußere Gewalt auf sich selber angewiesen ist, um so tiefer wird sein inneres Leben, um so mehr wendet er sich den inneren Dingen zu." Hitlers Rede auf einer NSDAP-Versammlung: "Warum sind wir Antisemiten?", München, 13. August 1920 Compare Hg. Jäckel, Kuhn (1980), p. 185.

Hitler's policy of expansion and in the end the Second World War.¹ The whole domestic policy was focused on the aims of war. In this context, culture was exploited as a propaganda tool. The National Socialists distinguished between "degenerate art" and "Aryan art". They exalted traditional art depicting National-Socialistic subjects which show the "blood and soil" values of "racial purity".

In National Socialism, Friedrich's work and life was used for their propaganda. Friedrich is portrayed as an ideal Aryan and his art is constituted as an example for National Socialistic art. Above all, they misinterpreted the issues concerning his relation to the North and his national attitude. It is important to note that Friedrich was in no way racist.

Friedrich was adopted by the National Socialists, almost a century later, for their propaganda. His appearance was suitable to their ideology. Friedrich had blond hair and blue eyes. But more importantly, he fought for the establishment of one German nation. Furthermore Friedrich had a very strong relation to his native country. His paintings depict images of landscapes of Northern Germany and thus according to the "blood and soil" ideology of the National Socialists, made the subjects painted by Friedrich eminently usable for propaganda. The importance of his painting "Das Eismeer" is seen in the subject of the "North".² Friedrich was a painter who consequently held on to northern motives and popularized them. Issues in Friedrich's life which were not in agreement with National Socialistic ideology were ignored or interpreted in a different and suitable way. For example Friedrich's melancholy was considered to be "Deutsche Innerlichkeit".

¹ Hitler stated: "[...] diese große Periode im Norden (hat) die Rassen rein gezüchtet. Das ist so zu verstehen, dass alles Minderwertige, Schwächliche allmählich aus diesen Rassen abgestorben ist und dass nur die gesündesten Körper übrig blieben." Compare Jäckel, Kuhn (Hg.) (1980), p. 188.

² Compare for example Eberlein (1940), p. 32. Furthermore it is also interpreted as an allegorical depiction of the powerful forces of nature. Compare Kloos (1940), p. 158.

The National Socialists also used polar phenomena, for example Friedrich's uncompleted painting "Northern Lights" in their propaganda. In the year 1834 in which Friedrich painted it, there was a political magazine, called "Northern light". The authors fought for the establishment of one German Nation and possibly Friedrich knew the author and the magazine.¹ In Friedrich's hometown there were phenomena of northern lights in the end of the 1820's and in the 1830's. Friedrich recognized them and he might have been inspired by them.²



C. D. Friedrich, "Nordlicht", about 1834/35

¹ Compare. Märker (1974), pp.180ff. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 437.

² Compare for example Börsch-Supan, Jähnig (1973), p. 437.

So one can not exactly state whether Friedrich wanted to refer to the magazine and a national subject in his painting “Northern Light”.¹

One century later, the National Socialists interpret Friedrich’s painting “Northern light” rhetorically as a sign of hope for one Greater German Empire. They referred to the German “Befreiungskriege” in 1813/14, which Friedrich morally supported and they saw allegorically in the painting the “Liberation of all Aryans”.² In this context they quote a poem of Ernst Bertram:

*Nordleuchte brennt, Noch einmal ist
Nornische Stunde. Speerlicht zuckt
Über des Himmels hohen Pol.
Scheue die Zeichen. Furchtbar flammt
Über der Welt eisigen Rand
Euch der grollende Geist als Nord.*³

A new focus in the National Socialistic Art was the subject of “war”. Soldiers were often depicted and exalted. Art was used as propaganda to mobilize the German population towards the war and to strengthen their will to succeed. An example is Lünstrohts painting “Soldat am Meer”. One can compare Friedrich’s painting “Mönch am Meer” with “Soldat am Meer”. Both depict a person from behind, which offers the opportunity to identify with the person. Friedrich was the first to establish this subject in his art and popularised it⁴

¹ There is another painting „Nordlicht“. Compare Börsch-Supan, Jähmig (1973), p. 437.

² “Friedrichs Gemälde “Das Nordlicht” ist als Hinweis und Verheißung nicht nur den preußischen Befreiungskampfes von 1813, sondern tiefer noch der damals angebahnten Befreiung germanisch-nordischen Wesens überhaupt zu deuten [...]” Compare Kästner, Rohling, Degner (1940), p. 60.

³ Compare Kästner, Rohling, Degner (1940), p. 60.

⁴ Compare Hofmann (2005), pp. 256f.



C. D. Friedrich, "Mönch am Meer", 1810

"Individuality" first gained significance in art, philosophy and literature of the 18th century. In Romanticism, the individual experience of nature became important.

The tiny person in the painting "Mönch am Meer", who is confronted with the threatening dark sky and black sea, can evoke existential thoughts, like the evanescence of mankind. According to the respective cultural and historical background the allegoric painting "Mönch am Meer" received many different interpretations. In contrast, the individual soldier suggests to be an identification figure and this painting is clearly associated to the war propaganda.

Paintings referring especially to the heroic death or heroic fight of soldiers were popularised and exalted. The painting "Das Eismeer" can also be seen as an allegory of the heroic death. The explorers in the ship of the Polar expedition dared and lost their lives while exploring the unknown. In their time, Polar explorers were regarded as "heroic".



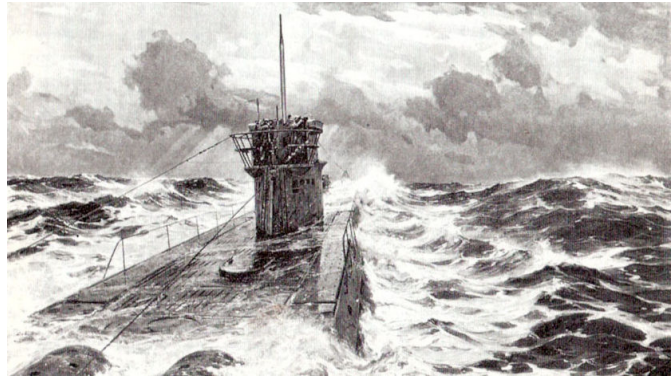
F. M. Lünstroht, "Posten am Meer", 1942

In National Socialism "NS"-submariners were exalted by the propagandists and were regarded as brave men. Claus Bergen's painting "Im Kampfgebiet des Atlantik" shows a heroic illustration of the German Navy and their will to succeed in the war. In National Socialistic art warships were often depicted in paintings. In a way Bergen's painting can be seen as a counter painting to Friedrich's "Das Eismeer": The ship in Friedrich's painting failed, because it was inferior to the powers of nature. The submarine in Bergen's painting represents the power of the German machinery of war and in contrast to "Das Eismeer" it demonstrates the will of the Germans to succeed - and not to fail. The viewer seems to be above or even on the ship and follows the course of the submarine. A dynamic situation is created. In contrast, the viewer of "Das Eismeer" is confronted with a "frozen moment" the painting suggests.¹

Under National Socialism, Friedrich's painting is not interpreted as a depiction of the heroic death. Instead it is alle-

¹ Some viewer felt uncomfortable since they were irritated by the conception of the painting and could not figure out the imaginary position, where he or she is standing. Compare for example Grave (2001), p. 68.

gorically seen as “Stranded Hope”, referring to the title of Friedrich’s second Polar painting:¹ Individual hope is stranded in



C. Bergen, “Im Kampfgebiet des Atlantik“, 1941

the ice-floes of life.² The National Socialists did not associate this interpretation with their own political and historical situation. “Das Eismeer” can also be seen as a failure of mankind, a disaster. It shows a fearsome monumentalism, which can be associated with the National Socialistic situation.

Today there are many different interpretations of “Das Eismeer”. The painting has contributed to the discourse of the Sublime and it is related to the philosophical theories of Burke, Kant, Schiller and Lyotard. Additionally, there are political, historical, psychological and ecological³ interpretations. Of course

¹ Compare Kloos (1940), p. 158. By the way, the National Socialists sometimes used the wrong title “Die verunglückte “Hoffnung” instead of “Das Eismeer”. Compare Eberlein (1940), Abb.52.

² Compare Eberlein (1940).

³ Referring to Friedrich’s painting the art-historian Dickel asked the question “*Will the Arctic-ice last forever?*” He referred to an oil-spill in the year 1989 on the coast of Alaska. These days with the problems of global warming and the melting Arctic-ice, such a question is of prime importance. Dickel states: Friedrich habe “*in den Anfängen der empiristischen Naturwissenschaft und der profitorientierten Ausbeutung der*

“Das Eismeer” has been compared with other paintings, including for example the 20th century Joseph Beuys and his installation art “Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch”. In form and content there are similarities. Beuys’ work was also innovative in his era and this artpiece has a relation to the Arctic.¹



J. Beuys, “Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch“, 1958/85

It also offers a controversial interpretation of the subject. A flash of lightning illuminates a group of half-formed creatures. A stag is represented by an ironing board resting on wooden “legs”; there

Natur“ auf Grenzen des menschlichen Wirkens aufmerksam machen wollen. Compare Dickel (1990), p. 233.

¹ Compare Rautmann (1991), pp. 30f. Compare Dickel (1990), p. 244 “Beide Künstler gelangten dabei an die Grenzen der Darstellbarkeit, an denen sie das Vorstellungsvermögen der Betrachter aktivieren müssen, um Gedanken an das nicht Darstellbare hervorzurufen. Statt den scheinbar vertrauten Umgang mit der Natur durch eine abbildende Landschaftsmalerei zu bestätigen, entrücken beide die Natur in den Bereich der Vorstellungskraft. Das Verhältnis des Menschen zum Kosmos wird dargestellt, als das Verhältnis des Sichtbaren zum Unsichtbaren.“ Dickel (1990), pp.242f.

are many wormlike “primordial animals” made by plunging tools into piles of clay; and a goat is represented by a hapless three-wheeled cart. These are illuminated by a powerful lightning bolt, represented by a weighty triangular form that hangs precariously from a beam. Beuys has also used a box and a small compass, mounted on a tripod. This he called “Boothia Felix” named after the island location of the magnetic North Pole in the Canadian Arctic. There is obviously a direct reference to the natural energies of the earth. Friedrich’s and Beuys’ artworks reached the limits of what could merely be “represented” and the viewer’s imagination is evoked.

According to the historical, cultural, political and individual background of the viewer, the painting “Das Eismeer” was and still is received in many ways. This shows the modernity and intensity of this painting. It evokes many different emotions and interpretations and deals with existential questions and with limits of mankind. This painting was, and still is, thought-provoking.

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