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Winterwald. Concealed political fields in the depths of the forest¹

In this essay I will examine and discuss Anselm Kiefer's *Winterwald*. In order to understand the meaning and context of this work we also need to consider Kiefer's previous political work *Occupations*. This provides an understanding of the critical political position of the artist Anselm Kiefer, who unflinchingly confronts the Holocaust. After establishing his artistic and ideological background, I will then take a closer look at his art piece *Winterwald*. Comparisons will be drawn with other forest paintings to analyze its iconography. The purpose of this essay is to uncover the mythological elements and illustrate the respective political intentions through a semiotic lens.

Anselm Kiefer is well-known for his self-portrait series *Occupations*², a critical and provocative investigation of National Socialism. In the summer and autumn of 1969, when Kiefer was a 24-year-old student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe, Germany, he embarked on a series of actions. He took photographs of himself performing the Hitler salute in different locations.³ Like the use of the swastika, the Hitler salute is considered a criminal offence in Austria and Germany since the end

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- 1 This essay is based on the given lecture „Winterwald: Concealed political fields in the depths of the forest“ in Panell II „Submergence“ at the Conference „The Hothouse Archives: Plants, Pods and Panama Red“ at the School of Visual Arts in New York City on 17th of November 2018 by Eva Klein. Credit Abb. 2-3: Gagosian Gallery, published on the website for the exhibition Next Year in Jerusalem at the Gagosian Gallery, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2010/anselm-kiefer-next-year-in-jerusalem/>, accessed 10/17/2018.
 - 2 The original German title of *Occupations* is *Besetzungen*, which carries multiple meanings including territorial expansionism, cathexis, a term for holding fast, or the act of transferring meaning to a symbol.
 - 3 There is some dispute among art historians as to how those photographs were taken. Mark Rosenthal and others say that Kiefer “took a series of photographs”, while others such as Benjamin Buchloh claim that he “had his photographs taken”. This ambiguity regarding Kiefer's method also puts the term self-portrait into question.
Cf. Rosenthal, Mark: *Anselm Kiefer*, Chicago and Philadelphia (Prestel) 1987, p.14; Buchloh, Benjamin: “1988”, in: Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (eds.): *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London (Thames & Hudson) 2004, p.614.



Abb. 1: Anselm Kiefer, *Occupations (Besetzungen)*, 1969, Collage, black and white photograph, published in the photo-essay 'Occupations', *Interfunktionen*, no.12, 1975

of the Second World War. From 1945 onwards, the Allied Forces initiated the process of denazification. The aim was to rid Austrian and German society and culture of national socialist ideologies. Swastika symbols on public buildings, for example, were not simply removed, they were blown off with explosives to intentionally stage a spectacle. Denazification was intended to be a highly visible initiative for everyone to see and experience.

In his work *Occupations*, the artist dares to perform the scandalous act of presenting himself making the Hitler salute in countries that were under Nazi occupation. These actions form a deeply polarizing photographic artwork that blurs the boundaries between parody and homage. Later, the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* becomes a continuation of this work, and also includes *Winterwald*.

The examination of different types of borders is a central aspect in Kiefer's political work, which he questions and reflects upon even more so here. His

Hitler salute photographs remind us of a not so distant past when the public masses were manipulated, infiltrated and impassioned to follow the Führer.

The use of photography as a medium also evokes parallels to the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials in 1963. SS guards stationed at the Auschwitz concentration camp were prosecuted and photographic evidence was used to convict Nazi war criminals.

During the 1960s, former national socialists started to regain attention in the German-speaking countries, sparking protests by a powerful and political student movement. This led to events referred to as the *German Autumn*, which culminated in the kidnapping and murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer by the far-left terrorist organization Red Army Faction (RAF) on October 18, 1977 after demands for the release of imprisoned members of the Baader-Meinhof Group were rejected and three of their members were found dead. The killing of Schleyer, president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, can be interpreted as a symbolic act of patricide in that he was part of a network of former Nazis and still held considerable political power.⁴

⁴ Cf. Weikop, Christian: „Occupations / Heroic Symbols“, in: Christian Weikop (ed.): *In Focus: Heroic Symbols 1969* by Anselm Kiefer, Tate Research Publication, 2016, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/occupations-heroic-symbols>, accessed 10/17/2018.

Kiefer's clothing in the *Occupations* photographs can be seen as a nod to the social activism of the New Left, one of the many movements of '68. He produced his photo series around the same time, in 1969. Rather than wearing a military uniform he chose casual contemporary clothes, such as sandals and Easy Rider sunglasses.⁵ On the one hand, the juxtaposition of clothes worn by liberals and the far-right pose of the Hitler salute can be understood to reflect the latent presence of Nazi ideology. That is, the persistence of national socialist ideas in post-war society despite the targeted efforts of denazification.

On the other hand, Kiefer's use of fascist images was, of course, also subject to harsh criticism. He continuously breaks the taboo surrounding these explosive images and symbols, thus confronting the fascination with the forbidden to engage with the subject matter. The sheer volume of German-language media coverage and the reaction to Kiefer's art actions is overwhelming. He is accused of naiveté, carelessness, and disrespectfulness in how he deals with German nationalist themes and images in his artistic work. Some critics even go as far as to accuse Kiefer of pro-fascism because he reproduces and reintroduces symbols and myths of a national socialist nature.

Kiefer's previous work already shows influences of a political nature and a critical investigation of social issues. Throughout his entire oeuvre, he addresses and confronts the Holocaust. Anselm Kiefer was born just before the end of the Second World War, thus inheriting a world of atrocities and devastation he seems unable to shake off. In a way, he uses his work to create a reflection of social order. However, he never completely dissolves the fundamental boundaries between art and politics as this would invalidate and render the terms themselves meaningless.

Kiefer believes:

*"There is a special border, the border between art and life that often shifts deceptively. Yet, without this border, there is no art. In the process of being produced, art borrows material from life, and the traces of life still shine through the completed work of art. But, at the same time, the distance from life is the essence, the substance of art. And, yet, life has still left its traces. The more scarred the work of art is by the battles waged on the borders between art and life, the more interesting it becomes."*⁶

5 Cf. Kiefer, Anselm: Heroic Symbols (Heroische Sinnbilder), photo 1969, Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

6 Quote by Anselm Kiefer, published on the website for the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* at the Gagosian Gallery, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2010/anselm-kiefer-next-year-in-jerusalem>, accessed 10/17/2018.



Abb. 2: Anselm Kiefer, *Occupations (Besetzungen)*, 2010, Installation view of the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* at Gagosian Gallery, New York (Credit: Gagosian Gallery)

Even though professor Huyssen at Columbia University claims in his essay⁷ from 1993 that images of national socialism and the Shoah have disappeared since the 1980s, we see a thematic resurrection 17 years later. The subject matter is the same, the artistic approach, however, is different – evolved.

Anselm Kiefer's idea of art is that it is subject to constant movement and change, a process that according to the artist never quite seems to reach completion.⁸ This is why individual works of art are always connected to each other within the artist's oeuvre, regardless of whether they have been produced a decade apart. Similarly, Kiefer creates a relationship between the two works *Occupations* and *Winterwald*.

From December 6-8, 2010 the Gagosian Gallery hosted Kiefer's exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem*, including a work of the same name, *Occupations*, thus explicitly establishing a connection to his work in the 1960s. The Gagosian Gallery describes this

7 Cf. Huyssen, Andreas: "Anselm Kiefer. Mythos, Faschismus und Geschichte", in: Manuel Köppen (ed.): *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz*, Berlin (Erich Schmidt Verlag) 1993, pp. 137–150.

8 Interview with Anselm Kiefer by Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2010, published on Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, accessed 10/19/2018.



Abb. 3: Anselm Kiefer, Winterwald, 2010, Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, ash, torn bushes, synthetic teeth and snakeskin on canvas in glass and steel frames
(Credit: Gagosian Gallery)

piece as the center piece of the *Next Year in Jerusalem* exhibition, thus also establishing it as the focus point in the exhibition including *Winterwald*. 2010's *Occupations* is a large-scale photo series of the 1969 photographs in which he shows himself performing the Hitler salute in front of sites of historical significance as discussed earlier. The photographs are mounted on lead and hung from large metal hooks. The photographs are only partially visible through open doors in the container. It is difficult to make out details, rather the viewer experiences the sensation of an onslaught of images. This mode of display is typical of Kiefer. It reminds us that we must not forget what has happened, and equally be aware of what may still happen. Confronting oneself with the artwork means confronting both the past and the present. "Their loaded repackaging here signifies his expanded ambition, and a determination that we not miss the point. Never forget. Ever."⁹

The installation is part of an ensemble that includes a total of 13 monumental sculptures and 23 sculptural constructions inside large glass and steel vitrines with a morbid aesthetic. The dark colors and cool materials create a depressive atmosphere. Kiefer's exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* engages with the sensitive

9 Smith, Roberta: "A Spetacle with a Message", in: The New York Times. November 18, 2010, accessed 10/17/2018.

issue of National Socialism in an encoded and, thus, subtle manner. Allegorical representations point to realities within the context of the Holocaust. The exhibited works include references to the Kabbalah, the Bible, Norse mythologies and German war destructions.¹⁰

“Kiefer’s paintings and sculptures address specifics, but also allude to what is usually hidden between the lines. He has made it his ambition to formulate what many would prefer to leave unsaid.”¹¹

The showing became a true spectacle in the New Yorker art scene, drawing large numbers of visitor. Influential American art critics were deeply impressed and deeply affected by the material presence of Kiefer’s work.¹² The art critic Roberta Smith summarizes her impression in the New York Times as follows:

*“The German artist Anselm Kiefer knows how to put on a show. The dour and dusty copse of art with which he has forested the vast Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea may elicit awe, skepticism or disdain — or perhaps a conflicted combination of all three. But its initial power is hard to deny. This is Mr. Kiefer’s first exhibition in New York in eight years and possibly the best he has ever mounted in the city, at least on his own terms.”*¹³

She describes Kiefer as a “philosopher-showman with an immense following”, and as an artist that has himself become a myth, a legend.

Seeing the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* and actively engaging with the presented work, the viewer feels like being part of a performance piece. The artwork enters into a relationship with the viewer, so to speak, thus not only giving meaning to the object and subject but to the process in between – the process of ‘relational aesthetics’. This also reflects the artist’s intention. Kiefer himself says that he is much more interested in the process of art rather than in individual artworks in their momentarily presented form.¹⁴

The process of experiencing his work has, for example, been described in the following words:

10 Cf. Kley, Elisabeth: “Broddingnagian Bijoux”, in: artnet. accessed 10/17/2018.

11 Buhmann, Stephanie: “Review: Anselm Kiefer, Next Year in Jerusalem”, in: Brooklyn Rail. December 20, 2010, accessed 10/19/2018.

12 Cf. Esplund, Lance: “Netherworld Chic, Surreal Impressions”, in: The Wall Street Journal. November 13, 2010, accessed 10/17/2018.

13 Cf. Smith, Roberta: “A Spetacle with a Message”, in: The New York Times. November 18, 2010. Accessed 10/17/2018.

14 Interview with Anselm Kiefer by Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2010, published on Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, accessed 10/19/2018.

*“To wander among these works is to participate in a performance piece of the artist’s devising. The sheer density of the installation gives it an almost interactive, relational-aesthetics quality. As we gawk, peer and crane, decipher the titles and mull over the allusions — all the while avoiding collisions with other similarly engaged people — we form a cast of extras trapped in some museum of devastation.”*¹⁵

The visitor wanders through a labyrinth of glass and steel vitrines, which are more than twenty feet high. Each vitrine contains and comprises inorganic material combined with organic material, such as plant matter from palms, bushes, or trees. They appear like reliquaries that have a story to tell. The title is inscribed directly on the glass, opening up an additional layer of meaning.

*“In these works, Kiefer inverts the historical and ritualistic connotations of his chosen materials, particularly lead. In Valentinus, named for the second-century Gnostic theologian, lead buckets and chains are juxtaposed with synthetic diamonds and wire; in Die Schechina a disembodied white dress is molded to an invisible female figure and pierced by glass shards and numbered glass disks, in reference to one of the ten Kabbalistic markers of spiritual presence. [...] In Mount Tabor, barren furrowed fields lead to the site of Christian pilgrimage where the Transfiguration is said to have occurred. Fitzcarraldo comprises four panels on which a winter forest is painted. Clusters of thornbushes are dispersed across the surface, forming a second forest in relief. A lead U-boat noses across the panels, in reference to the late nineteenth-century Peruvian rubber baron Carlos Fitzcarrald, who famously orchestrated the movement of a thirty-ton boat across an isthmus to avoid treacherous conditions. Encased in a huge vitrine, the final effect is one of a mythical refuge or forest where materials are recast as transcendent elements on an epic scale.” “In large landscape paintings hung around the perimeter of the gallery, Kiefer layers ash, lead, snakeskin and other distressed materials, merging them with iconic German landscapes of mountains, seas, and forests.”*¹⁶

I would now like to delve deeper into this forest with you – the forest of Anselm Kiefer’s *Winterwald* as presented in this exhibition. The artist uses and combines organic and inorganic materials creating collages within his artworks. These materials include oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, ash, torn bushes, synthetic teeth and snakeskin on canvas in glass and steel frames. Parts of the forest are formed of these materials.

15 Smith, Roberta: “A Spectacle with a Message”, in: The New York Times. November 18, 2010, accessed 10/17/2018.

16 Website for the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* at the Gagosian Gallery, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2010/anselm-kiefer-next-year-in-jerusalem>, accessed 10/19/2018.

Winterwald in German means winter forest. The subject of the winter forest is nothing new in Kiefer's work, rather it is an ongoing theme the artist seems to be drawn to and continues to return to. "The winter forest is a recurring theme in Kiefer's work since the late 1960s, which often signifies time in history that suggests the barren end of a cycle and the uncertainty of a new beginning."¹⁷

In *Winterwald*, Kiefer draws on the myth of the German forest, as he already did in previous pieces. This winter forest particularly resembles the one in his 1976 work *Varius*¹⁸, which also offers a glimpse into a dark forest. In *Varius*, however, the view into the forest is stained with drops of blood representing the fatal trap the Roman general Varius walked into. Names of 19th and 20th century figures who established the battle as a national myth are written across the trees. By recreating this historic event in the winter forest, and thus claiming and reinterpreting it, Kiefer relativizes and de-theorizes it at the same time. He takes the image of the forest even further in his large woodcuts *Weltweisen*. Instead of drawing the viewer into the depths of the forest representing the depths of history, he presents a planar view of a forest that is already engulfed by the fire in the foreground. Around the tree trunks, Kiefer positions portraits of the people he calls *Weltweisen* (literally translated 'world wise men'), represented by politicians, artists, poets, philosophers and generals, who got entangled in the foreboding forest. They are portraits of people who got lost in the thicket of it, each on a wrong path, and who ultimately failed to claim the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest for their national identity.¹⁹

As demonstrated in Kiefer's work, the forest holds an important iconic status in German-speaking cultures. It is often the setting of folktales and was the setting for an important moment in Germany history. The forest is also a symbol used during the Unification of Germany in the late 19th century. Later, the Nazis adopted the symbolism of the forest to invoke national sentiments in the dissemination of their ideology.

Forest landscapes are, of course, also an important theme for and in other artists' works. For example, Caspar David Friedrich, to name but one.

The forest is a popular sujet amongst artists and often becomes layered with mythical connotations. Anselm Kiefer perceives the forest as a space between heaven and earth, a space in which our history is stored. He addresses the misuse of the forest as a myth by revealing this in his works, exposing the hidden for all to see, and thus, demystifying the symbolism instead of propagating it. He lifts the romantic and imaginary from the forest and puts it into a real historical context.

17 Glossary of the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* by Anselm Kiefer of the Gagosian Gallery in New York, November 6 – December 18, 2010.

18 Kiefer, Anselm: „Varius“, 1976, Mischtechnik, Eindhoven, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum.

19 Gebhardt, Volker: „Das Deutsch in der Deutschen Kunst“, Cologne (DuMont) 2004, p. 362.

A context in which the forest plays a specific role, for example, as a site of historic events such as the Holocaust. Further reference to the Holocaust is evident from the ash that Kiefer uses in *Winterwald*. There is no escaping the past in his work. He also incorporates snakeskins as a reference to the fateful temptation by the serpent, which left a trace by shedding its skin on the canvas. The serpent itself is not present anymore. The trees appear to have already been there during the Nazi period, silently bearing witness and withstanding the atrocities of time.

The New York Times describes the piece in the following words:

“Heavy with paint yet photographic in depth, these images are banked with more dried bushes, cast-resin ferns and occasionally strewn with large, synthetic teeth and snakeskins. They look a little like neglected shop windows, yet they achieve a stark, haunting beauty even as they rather too obviously evoke the kind of woods where refugees hide.”

As already mentioned, Anselm Kiefer also uses synthetic teeth in *Winterwald*. Personally, they remind me of the displays in concentration camps, which today are open to the public as museums, preserving the memory and lessons of history for future generations. These displays also include remains of those who were killed in the camps, such as strands of hair and prosthetics. Thus, the teeth convincingly look like relics of Holocaust victims.

The material the teeth are made of also lends itself to mythological interpretation. Here, Kiefer references the Greek myth of Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece.²⁰ Kiefer also used teeth in *Fitzcarraldo*, which is part of the *Next Year in Jerusalem* exhibition, as well as in *The Argonauts*, which he created in 1990. The latter is also in reference to Jason and the Golden Fleece. Jason is a hero figure in Greek mythology. According to the myth, Jason embarked on a quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece for his family together with 50 of the strongest fighters on the ship Argo. He managed to steal the golden fleece of the winged ram named Chrysomeles with the help of Medea.

According to Kiefer, he initially started incorporating elements like teeth in his work before he became aware of their mythological connections. Talking about his work *The Argonauts*, he explains his process as follows: “Jason has to sow the teeth ... so here we have the teeth. Or, there is also the story of Medea taking revenge on Glauce, Jason’s first wife. She gives her a beautiful dress that is poisoned. As she puts it on she disappears into thin air ... so here we have the dress.” The artist’s work can be interpreted through association, but it cannot be “explained” in the same manner.²¹

20 Glossary of the exhibition *Next Year in Jerusalem* by Anselm Kiefer of the Gagosian Gallery in New York, November 6 – December 18, 2010.

21 Cf. Website of the Städelmuseum, Highlights der Sammlung, Die Argonauten von Anselm Kiefer, <https://www.staedelmuseum.de/de/sammlung/die-argonauten-1990>, accessed 10/23/2018.

Kiefer does not develop his work on a conceptional level. On the contrary, he takes the artistic process as the starting point from where he then slowly explores possibilities in terms of content. This starting point is a momentary experience of shock, as he describes it himself. It can be, for example, triggered by an event, a moment, a text, or a landscape. This initiates a process within the artist through which his experience is transformed into a material form. This process is not within the artist's control. After this first step, the artist reflects on what has been created. This second phase can also be described as a dialogue between the artist and the first steps of work. As Anselm Kiefer explains himself, it is of great importance to him to carry out and work on his art pieces himself because he needs to feel the "spirit" of the material.²²

Kiefer, whose style is often linked to New Symbolism, references the Kabbala, the Bible, Norse mythology and the German war destruction in his work *Winterwald*. He incorporates a plethora of references and associations that gain yet more connotations in reference to the title. The insightful and carefully chosen titles generally open up another layer of meaning in Kiefer's works. However, the artist usually does not offer a detailed explanation, often leaving the viewer wondering.²³ Anselm Kiefer's work can be interpreted through association, but it can not be definitively explained.²⁴ For Anselm Kiefer, art is also spiritual, as he explains in an interview²⁵ with Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Art creates a connection between things, as the artist himself puts it.

Kiefer's work is characterized by connections, associations, memories, and transformations. Kiefer's interest in transformative processes can be traced back to his very early work, for example, his aquarelle paintings,²⁶ which skirt the line between realism and abstract art. Alchemy is another recurring theme throughout his oeuvre.²⁷

Kiefer leaves it up to the viewer to make their own associations and, thus, creates the possibility of ambiguity. Ultimately, the terms and metaphors we choose to make

22 Interview with Anselm Kiefer by Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2010, published on Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, accessed 10/19/2018.

23 Cf. Arasse, Daniel: *Anselm Kiefer*, Munich (Schirmer/Mosel) 2015, p. 19.

24 Cf. Website of the Städelmuseum, under Highlights der Sammlung, Die Argonauten von Anselm Kiefer, <https://www.staedelmuseum.de/de/sammlung/die-argonauten-1990>, accessed 10/23/2018.

25 Interview with Anselm Kiefer by Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2010, published on Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, accessed 10/19/2018.

26 One example here is the 1972 aquarelle painting *Earth – Heaven* by Anselm Kiefer.

27 Cf. Seegers, Ulli: "Stoffwechselprozesse. Von großen Werken und unsichtbaren Werten in der zeitgenössischen Kunst", in: Sven Dupré, Dedo von Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, Beat Wismer (eds.): *Kunst und Alchemie. Das Geheimnis der Verwandlung*, *Ausstellungskatalog Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast*, Munich (Hirmer) 2014, pp. 178–245, here p. 234–235.

sense of what is presented to us in this unclear and undefined form also always reveal something about ourselves and our relationship to the subject.²⁸

Anselm Kiefer himself says: *I work with symbols that link our consciousness with the past. These symbols create a simultaneous continuity, and we remember our origins.*²⁹

Kiefer's political artworks derive their energy from their multilayeredness and ambiguity. And this energy becomes highly charged in the force field between German history, mythology, the chosen materials, and the created aesthetic. The work triggers processes of remembering and association that become entwined with mythological imagination, lending a real utopian dimension to Kiefer's creations.³⁰

Kiefer's complexity and ambiguity as well as his seemingly vague comments about his art, in which much is often left to interpretation, allow for an almost chaotic plethora of possible meanings in a postmodern sense. This postmodern pluralism is often taken as the starting point for interpreting his work. A good example for this approach can be found in John Gilmour's *Fire on the Earth. Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World* published in 1990. This postmodern discourse draws from some of the great philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and others. A similar philosophical approach to Kiefer's work can also be found in Gerhard Richter's *Ästhetik der Ereignisse* published in 2005. Here, Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history also already forms part of the basis for discussion.

Although all of these theories are, of course, valid and important, I believe that there is another essential aspect to Kiefer's work that should not be overlooked: the constant – even if sometimes subtle – presence of something specifically 'German'. This is something that Mark Rosenthal observed in a side note in his exhibition catalogue for Kiefer's exhibition in Philadelphia in 1987, in which he mainly criticizes the narrative in the artist's work.

My intention is to make this intangibility and ambiguity somewhat clearer with the help of Jost Hermands words in *Politische Denkbilder* published in 2011. He observes that there are recurring themes in Kiefer's work that go beyond postmodern arbitrariness. A causal relation between cause and effect within a historic context makes the theoretical discussion of Kiefer's work more complete. Thus, the viewer

28 The same applies to the sensibilities around the term Holocaust, which itself is the source of debate regarding its origin and connotation. The vocabulary and metaphors chosen to describe historic events, such as the Holocaust, also always reveal something about the relationship between the recipient and the historic event being discussed.

Cf. Heyl, Matthias: *Erziehung nach Auschwitz. Eine Bestandsaufnahme. Deutschland, Niederlande, Israel, USA, Hamburg (Krämer Verlag) 1997, p. 10.*

29 Hermand, Jost: *Politische Denkbilder. Von Caspar David Friedrich bis Neo Rauch*, Cologne-Weimar-Vienna (Böhlau) 2011, p. 233.

30 Cf. Huyssen, Andreas: "Anselm Kiefer. Mythos, Faschismus und Geschichte", in: Manuel Köppen (ed.): *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz*, Berlin (Erich Schmidt Verlag) 1993, pp. 137–150.

is encouraged to reflect on their own cultural and political background, which can trigger a process of remembering and, ultimately, create more awareness for political and social issues.

I am talking here about Kiefer's political works, and I believe *Winterwald* firmly belongs within this category. The historic references in this work are by no means random, even the choice of title alone alludes to the Holocaust. Additionally, this political historical dimension is also reflected in the mythological elements. As such, *Winterwald* can be described as a political image of thought that reveals the almost inseparable connectedness between intention and effect.³¹ This is not necessarily an inherent characteristic of the work, rather it can be perceived as such by the viewer. This perception, however, requires active engagement with the work to uncover the "hidden symbolism". Viewers that merely spend seconds with the work before dismissing it will not be able to see beyond the surface, of course. From a semiotic standpoint, an informed audience as an autonomous subject possessing the semiotic code is able to enter into a dialogue with the artwork, an equally autonomous object. This then leads to an interaction in the sense of relational aesthetics. Thus, in the case of Kiefer's paintings, something that is not present in this time and space is visualized through something else – the artwork. Kiefer achieves this through the use of strongly mythological imagery.

In Kiefer's own words:

*"After the Second World War, as a matter of principle, having an interest in mythology was looked upon with suspicion. It became clear just how dangerous it could be for politicians to make use of myths and to abuse and interpret them as justifications and templates for behavior. But is it not even more dangerous to bury the myths in the collective subconscious, so to speak, rather than to continue working on them in a way that everyone can see?"*³²

He talks about continuing to address and engage with myths that had been misused for political agendas.

31 Cf. Hermand, Jost: *Politische Denkbilder. Von Caspar David Friedrich bis Neo Rauch*, Cologne-Weimar-Vienna (Böhlau) 2011, pp. 233–244.

32 Kiefer, Anselm: "Acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Paulskirche, Frankfurt am Main, October 19, 2008", in: Gagosian Gallery (ed.): *Anselm Kiefer. Next Year in Jerusalem*. Exhibition Catalogue, New York (Prestel Publishing) 2011, p. 197.

The German version is as follows: "Nach dem Krieg stand die Beschäftigung mit der Mythologie prinzipiell unter Verdacht: Evident war, wie gefährlich es ist, wenn Politik die Mythen verwendet, missbraucht, als Handlungsanleitungen und Rechtfertigungen interpretiert. Aber ist es nicht noch gefährlicher, die Mythen gleichsam ins kollektiv Unterbewusste zu versenken, statt an ihnen – für alles sichtbar – weiterzuarbeiten?"

According to Andreas Mahler's recto-verso principle, which he based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theories, *Winterwald* can be separated into two parts. On the one side, we have the material as the "verso", and on the other side we have the meaning as the "recto". Mahler takes this one step further. Semiotically speaking, "verso" (the material, the composition of the work) becomes the syntax, and "recto" (the meaning, the hidden symbolism) becomes the semantics.³³ Although European and American structuralism generally appears to have reached its limits, its concept is still of significance and value in a historical context and is applied within the humanities, for example in current art history.³⁴ Anselm Kiefer's *Winterwald* is similar to a flip-flop picture flipping between two images, in that it attempts to keep both "recto" and "verso" in focus. However, this can only be realized through a process and is cognitively impossible to achieve simultaneously. Thus, the aesthetic reception of art is to be understood as a process that tries to bridge the distance between recto and verso. When looking at *Winterwald*, the viewer undergoes a process that Mahler describes as an imminent revelation through taking in the artwork. This corresponds to the principles of the New Aestheticism by focusing first and foremost on the relationship between the audience and the art piece.

Mahler distinguishes between the term "document" (the material artefact) and "monument" (the process of reception of the work). I propose a similar clear shift from document to monument in Kiefer's *Winterwald*, which is determined by its multi-layered messages, as already touched upon, rather than the end result of the work.³⁵

Kiefer's mythological investigation predominately addresses German history and its dramatic and gruesome fascist period. He uncovers essential elements of Germany's past in Germanic sagas and archaic myths. He uses them to draw parallels and establish a starting point from which to approach the Holocaust as a political event and attempt to form an explanation.

This mythological layer is not intended to retell the original mythology, rather it borrows these myths and infuses them with political events. Specifically, in the case of *Winterwald*, this means that when referencing the Greek myth of Jason and the quest for the Golden Fleece, or the biblical scene of Adam and Eve's encounter with

33 Cf. Mahler, Andreas: *Towards a Pragmasemiotics of Poetry*, in: *Poetica*, volume 38, issue 3-4, Munich 2006, p.232.

34 Cf. Albrecht, Jörn: "Der Strukturalismus in der Sprachwissenschaft: Erbe und Auftrag", in: Kenno-suke Ezawa (ed.): *Linguistik jenseits des Strukturalismus. Akten des II. Ost-West-Kolloquiums*, Tübingen (Gunter Narr Verlag) 2002. Cf. de Saussure, Ferdinand: *Grundfragen der Allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, 1916, translation by Herman Lommel, Berlin (De Gruyter) 1967.

35 Cf. Mahler, Andreas: "Performing Arts. New Aestheticism and the Media", in: *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, volume 35, issue 1, Tübingen (Gunter Narr Verlag) 2010, p. 111.

the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Kiefer's intention is not to simply recount these stories for their original content.

Therefore, we can conclude that his intention is to instead draw connections between the mythological and the political, that is, a connection between the individual elements, as Kiefer himself describes it. This connection, which is neither obvious nor defined, creates space for associations in terms of Mahler's "monument". Thus, the mythological layer can serve to subtly broach the subject of political events. Engaging with Kiefer's work in this space of association, the viewer is free to follow their own experience and can establish links to current political events and situations. Considering the current global shift to the right, the processes of remembering and reflecting on political and social developments seem all the more important.