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A Contested Field. Wheatscapes and the Politics of Representations

Kirsten Twelbeck (Augsburg)

Type »wheatscape« into your search engine and what you will get are close-ups of ripe wheat ears filling your monitor, forming a blurry line at the upper side of the frame. The motif can be downloaded to decorate apartments, hotel rooms, and offices—as print, gobelin tapestry, or ordinary wallpaper. You can also install a »wheatscape« as screensaver to bring an atmospheric, relaxing, and dreamlike aura of uninterrupted vastness into your busy, cluttered, and thoroughly digitalized life.

Four weeks before now (I write this text in mid-March 2022), the dreamlike aura of a wheat field touching a clear blue sky was challenged by a war against a country that like no other is associated with wheat: the Ukrainian flag, with its yellow and blue stripes, is popularly interpreted as an illustration of the country's role as global breadbasket. Displayed on streets, national monuments, and monitors all over the world, this flag is not only a sign of solidarity but reminds us that the war in Ukraine is also causing a major food crisis, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, where the price of wheat is often subsidized, and where governments struggle to keep up with the developments on the global market.[1] Unlike other flags, the Ukrainian colors connect the wish for national self-determination and identity to the soil and air of the largest country within European borders. This agrarian symbolism is, of course, fundamentally a-historical: the evolution of the flag's heraldic colors goes back to the religious symbolism of the middle ages and the principality of Galicia-Volhynia.[2] This may serve as a reminder of how easily images and traditions of seeing can travel across historical periods and places, thereby repositioning and challenging previous cultural interpretations, concepts, and perceptions. Sometimes, such a journey transforms an ambiguous work of art into an explicit political statement. Mark Rothko's abstract

paintings are a case in point: the American artist of Latvian-Jewish descent had always insisted on the mythical, universal quality of his work,[3] and he abhorred ideological and figurative art.[4] Nevertheless, versions of his »untitled (yellow and blue)« are now posted on websites and on Facebook, as artistic references to the Ukrainian flag. Whether Rothko, who had openly criticized the Soviet invasion of Finland, would have liked that appropriation, is impossible to say—he passed away in 1970.

This short introduction about wallpapers, flags, and abstract art leads me right into my topic: taking the latest version of the gigantic wheat field, the »wheatscape,« as a starting point, this text analyzes the politicized aesthetics of agricultural expansion. Building on the assumption that industrialization inspired artists and writers to fight over the meaning and depiction of large-scale agriculture, it discusses a selection of modern paintings, photographs, films, and other cultural artefacts that have energized these cultural, and intercultural, negotiations, to the point of challenging the ideological basis of the agricultural sublime. By shedding light on the historical and cultural evolution of the discourse on large-scale farming, this text hopes to sensitize readers to the ideological implications of present-day representations of agriculture and modern food systems. By tracing the changing dynamics of this discourse in the context of transnational relations, it will also elucidate why artistic representations of wheat have largely bypassed ecological issues linked to modern agriculture.

Between »Wheatscapes« and Large-Scale Agriculture

One must distinguish between the meaning of »wheatscape« as a more recent, linguistic term, and the older, and changing spectrum of cultural connotations that has been woven into visual and literary representations of wheat monocultures. When the expression »wheatscape« entered the US vocabulary about thirty years ago, it referred to the erasure of the American family farm and symbolically buried the republican ideal of the hardworking, honest, and independent yeoman farmer, that ideal citizen of the Jeffersonian era. Resonating with political disdain and

irony, the »wheatscape« stands in contrast to the allegedly pious and harmonious country life that is the epitome of anti-political »Landlust.« Best represented in Pieter Breughel the Elder's »The Harvesters« (1565), this longing for an imagined past has been immortalized on countless shopping bags, coffee mugs, phone cases, and beach towels on both sides of the Atlantic.[5]

In American culture in particular, this yearning for a rural picturesque is part of a complex structure of feeling that has evolved around agricultural expansion: In the »land of plenty,« large-scale farming is met with ambivalence, wavering, and polarization: fans of the 1987 Matt Dillon movie *Kansas* will hardly agree with the bestselling political writer and fierce localist Bill Kauffman, who has criticized the movie for reducing the so-called »American heartland« to a faceless »wheatscape.«[6]

This cultural ambiguity can be traced back to the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, about two decades after new technologies, scientific insights, and international trade had started to turn US agriculture into a global business. Somewhat ironically, however, this was also an era associated with national doom: in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner famously declared the end of the so-called Western »frontier« and proclaimed that the dynamic spirit of the American people was coming to an end.[7] Placed in this context, the patriotic hymn »America the Beautiful« sounds a surprisingly defiant tone: praising the »spacious skies« and »amber waves of grain,« it conjures up the American promise of endless progress and independence.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this peculiar mix between joy and fear traveled to Europe, a continent that was caught up in anti-aristocratic sentiment and political turmoil. After the American naturalist writer Frank Norris had published *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), European publishing houses and writers quickly realized the adaptability of this »Epic of the Wheat« to Old World class struggles.[8] Norris's novels describe the decline of US wheat-growing culture through the brutal forces of corporate capitalism, infrastructural modernization, American neo-imperialism, and speculation. Somewhat awkwardly, however, they share an uncritical fascination with size, speed, and technological

progress. To soften the horror of a modern »practice of land,«[9] Norris uses the spellbinding power of pathos, thereby turning land into landscape[10]: hypnotic descriptions of a »limitless sea of wheat«[11] transform the crop into a natural spectacle that is both hostile and exhilarating.[12]

The shift in cultural reactions from early twentieth-century awe to late twentieth-century disdain should not keep us from recognizing that there have been many more, and often very nuanced artistic reactions to agrarian expansion, the merging of plots, and global farming. Markus Lüpertz, Peter Krieg, Agnes Denes, and George Steinmetz have responded in complex ways to the tensions surrounding wheat as a global commodity, growing in isolation from the rural communities that used to make their living from the crop. Born either during or shortly after the Second World War, these artists take up the pathos of the agricultural sublime as a critical topic and theme but go beyond lamenting the monotony of the wheatscape: they discuss the politics behind it. This is no coincidence: coming from Germany, Hungary, and the United States, they have a heightened awareness of the role of grain in the making of ideologies and nations. To better understand the connection between wheat and politics in their work, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the role of agriculture in the Soviet Union, Germany, and the United States from, roughly, 1930–1945. The transformation of traditional farming was central to socialism, the American left during and after the Great Depression, and racial nationalism, and they all relied on the works of artists, writers, and film makers, to stabilize their concept of a national identity.

Agriculture in an Age of Ideological Competition

In the early twentieth century, wheat fields touching the horizon were largely associated with the North American continent, where modern cultivators, binders, reapers and combustion engines to power threshing machines, enabled farmers to till the flat and open fields on the Great Plains.[13] Russian emigrants, especially Mennonites of German descent, contributed to this success: they had been experienced wheat growers in the Russian steppes and introduced wheat types that were particularly

suitable for the climate and soil in the so-called »heartland.«[14] These immigrants arrived in the late nineteenth century, when Russia itself was known as a »country of boundless territorial expanse« dominated by feudal structures and mismanaged by the Czarist regime.[15] Yet following Lenin's doctrine of expropriation and collectivization, Soviet agriculture did not thrive the way it was supposed to either, and the peasantry continued to suffer from a shortage of land. Many decided to leave the country.

It was in this context that the Soviet director Dziga Vertov contributed newsreels to promote the new era of collectivized agriculture. The famous modernist used amazingly avant-garde techniques to convey an idea of peasant life that was modern, beautiful, non-conformist, and thus quite similar to city life.[16] Sergej Eisenstein's »The General Line« (1929)[17] follows a similar strategy. Contrary to historical facts, it represents collectivization as set in motion by small farmers themselves. The camera fetishizes modern farm machinery and stages it as a liberating force in a wide and open landscape promising a rich harvest. Eisenstein's »The Bezhin Meadow« (1937) was, arguably, one of the last Soviet films that celebrated the promise of cultivated grass in an experimental way, with close-ups meditating on movement and patterns, documenting the play of light and wind on whipped up grain fields. It is often not the field but a group of stalks that fill the screen in Eisenstein's films, creating a sense of endlessness that pays tribute to biological science and the technical possibilities of camera art. By the late 1920s, however, Stalin called for an end to »elitist« cinema. From now on, epic films like »Victory of Collectivization« (1935)[18] featured sweeping views of endless wheat fields and unparalleled harvests. Movie productions such as this one lacked the political and aesthetic curiosity of the earlier ones; their propagandistic optimism was used to replace cultural memories of recent famine in Soviet Ukraine (1932–33) and the lesser known »grand famine« in Kazakhstan (1930–33), where millions of people had died as a result of the communist leader's agricultural politics.[19]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the effects of the Great Depression and the drought were very much felt by American farmers. The painter Joe Jones, a regionalist and leftist, tried to capture America's expansive agricultural landscapes as threatened by storm and destruction

in this study for a mural that can still be seen in a post office in Seneca, Kansas (fig. 1).[20]

Fig. 1: Joe Jones (1939), »Men and Wheat.« Mural study, Seneca, Kansas Post Office
© Smithsonian American Art Museum

And yet, Jones's »Men and Wheat« (1939) is a refreshing change from the pathos of Soviet propaganda and the anti-modern sentimentality that marks the representation of peasants in Nazi art. »Men and Wheat« expresses the hope and optimism that had come with Roosevelt's presidency and the New Deal: we see two farm workers, deeply engaged in their work and yet relaxed, ignoring the weather. They instead concentrate on steering a modern combine harvester, their white hats turned toward the observer. Below and in front of them, the equally white heads of the wheat seem to mock the golden furrows of Werner Peiner's »Deutsche Erde« (1930s).

Peiner was Hermann Göring's favorite painter. In the early 1930s he helped prepare Hitler's infamous »Blut und Boden« ideology and the colonial dream of a Germanic »Lebensraum« in Eastern Europe. Peiner's representations of German agriculture avoid what the artist called a »hollow« and »un-German« pathos.[21] His best-known painting, »Deutsche Erde«[22] displays fresh furrows in a huge golden acre, suggesting a rich wheat harvest. We see a small but agile man steering a plow pulled by horses—the prototype of a German peasant who shapes the national future as part of a »Volk« of soil lovers. This corresponded well with the Nazis' idea of »Lebensraum,« an imperialist concept claiming to be

a superior and more humane alternative to Stalin's terror against the peasantry. As Anton Zischka, arguably the most successful author of non-fiction books in the »Third Reich,« explained to his large and international readership in 1938, the failure of Soviet agricultural politics was the result of a biological flaw caused by racial mingling with the Mongolians,[23] and it was only a question of time before German farmers would replace the Soviet peasantry. After centuries of self-perfection, the German »Aryans« supposedly knew how to farm more efficiently, but also more ecologically sustainably, than the machine-worshipping Soviet communists and the disconnected »Jewish capitalists,« who—according to the Nazis' anti-Semitic master narrative—controlled the agricultural sector in the United States. In line with Peiner's representation of traditional plowing, Zischka equipped the German farmer with a »healthy« skepticism vis-à-vis agricultural over-technologization and large-scale agriculture. For Zischka, the fact that US farms were six times larger than their German counterparts is a sign of moral and ecological deterioration, and he interprets the American »dust-bowl« experience as the logical result of a fundamental, capitalist disconnect with anti-Semitic overtones.[24] That one Russian peasant owned twice as much land as a German did not worry Zischka; it in fact increased the scope of failure that he traced back to »Slavic« ineffectiveness.[25] Suffice it to say that the prominent role that the Nazis assigned to German farmers was largely theoretical: national self-sufficiency remained wishful thinking when agricultural machinery had to be imported, and if major food shortages could be prevented until the end of the war, this was only possible due to the exploitation of forced labor and territorial expansion.[26]

The Emergence of the Modern Wheatscape

By the end of the Second World War family farms continued to dominate North American and European agrarian landscapes.[27] When synthetic nitrogen-based fertilizer became more largely available in the 1950s, crop yields increased, and prices plunged. Small farmers had to sell their land to larger corporations who then combined smaller fields into large ones (in

Germany this process is called »Flurbereinigung,« a strategic »cleansing« of cluttered, small-scale agriculture) that relied on modern technology and machines to be managed successfully. Between 1950 and 1980, topographies were leveled, and borders neatly drawn in many parts of the world, to facilitate the use of gigantic plows and harvesters. The measurements of land that were necessary to prepare this change of scale were facilitated in the 1970s with the introduction of self-recording tachymeters and computer technology, once more speeding up the transformation.[28] On the level of infrastructure, grain monocultures came to disrupt rural connections: streets, pathways, and meadows that had been used for agricultural purposes (but also to visit neighboring villages, lakeside beaches, and meeting places) disappeared, changing traditional structures and relationships in rural communities. Local nature conservation groups had protested against these transformation processes from the beginning, when natural wetlands were dried up and trees cut to create a more geometrical, technology-friendly environment. In the 1970s, fears of ecological destruction were widespread and became a political concern, leading to major changes, particularly on the legal level, in the 1980s.[29]

Resistance against large-scale agriculture was never majorly driven by a naïve, anti-modernization thinking, even if some of the symbols, songs, and speeches that have emerged from that movement express countryside nostalgia.[30] And yet many of us share a romantic yearning for a more immediate relationship to the land: we would like to experience agriculture »like a picture,«[31] and happily participate in the musealization of an ideal rurality that is sold to us in the form of »home-grown« products that help us maintain the picturesque ideal.

Allen Carlson's celebration of modern agrarian landscapes must be seen in precisely this context: in 1985, the environmental philosopher reproached the new pastoralism for contributing to the naïve rejection of large-scale transformations in the agricultural sector: »we are inclined to judge the aesthetic interest and merit of the new landscape in relation to that which it has replaced.«[32] While he acknowledges that the scale of modern farming might have an »ecological and social price,« he warns against exaggerations and demands that we recognize the expressive

qualities of the new face of the rural unjustly subsumed as a »flatscape,« a »blandscape,«[33] or, as one may add, a »wheatscape.« Carlson draws on cubism to state his point: the abstract, geometric forms that many people found »offensive and baffling« upon their first encounters with modern art in the early twentieth century are now a widely cherished form of expression. This adaptation experience, he argues, should help his contemporaries cultivate an »appropriate aesthetic appreciation« for the »intensity of color,« the »boldness of line,« the »breathtaking formal beauty« of »great checkerboard squares of green and gold« that come with »scale and scope«.[34] There is reason to believe that Carlson has since revised his thoughts; in a 2008 revision of an earlier essay on nature appreciation, he turns against what he calls »artistic approaches« to perceiving non-cultivated land, and demands that we appreciate nature's »true nature« by questioning anthropocentric perspectives and drawing on a multiplicity of knowledge systems, including the natural sciences.[35] While he clearly distinguishes between nature and cultivated land, his critical considerations regarding the aloofness and distance of the observer, the a-historical de-contextualization of the observed, and the preference for particular positions that enable us to turn land into landscape can easily be transferred to an aestheticization of modern agriculture. Our present state of knowledge about climate change, the loss of biodiversity, decreased soil quality, falling groundwater levels, the connection between pandemics and agricultural expansion, and the transnational dependencies that go along with large-scale agriculture make the admiration of agricultural abstraction seem just as outdated as the wheat-patterned wallpapers in the middle of a war between two of the world's major grain-producing nations. Today, wheat fields can no longer serve us as islands of meditative calm. The question is: was this ever adequate?

The Wheatscape as a Scene of War

Carlson's call for a modern way of seeing can be interpreted as a coping strategy emerging under the impression of necessity: in the eyes of many, large-scale agriculture was (and is) the only answer to feed the world's

population. Whether or to what extent this is true is not the topic of this article: my focus is on the emotional responses to industrial agriculture. As we have seen, these responses cannot be separated from ideology. This is particularly true with regard to wheat, a grain that is not only rich in genes, but that also carries religious, cultural, and historical weight like no other grain.[36] For the culturally literate, what I choose to call the »meditation approach« to the »great checkerboard squares« is not without ethical pitfalls. Thirty years after Hitler's dream of »Lebensraum« had killed 24 million Soviet citizens, the German painter and sculptor Markus Lüpertz refuses to perceive of wheat as an innocent abstraction; for him it is a »German motif« just like steel helmets and military caps. Born in 1941, Lüpertz is a child of the war. His family had fled their native Bohemia when the boy was seven years old. He belongs to the so-called »forgotten generation« that has experienced horrendous violence at a very young age, too young in fact to communicate what they had seen, heard, and smelled.[37] Unlike most of his age group, Lüpertz has been able to connect to those memories through his art. This has not only made him one of (West) Germany's most renowned and influential artists but also a political commentator: many of his paintings and sculptures decorate government buildings and public spaces. In the mid-1970s, he created his famous cycle of wheat spikes (»Ährenbilder«), a series of drawings and paintings featuring enlarged wheat ears against the blurry, shadowy colors of a larger field (fig. 2)—a field that according to art historian Oliver Seifert represents »tendencies of obfuscation, dissolution and extermination.«[38] By forcing the wheat as »German motif« upon his countrymen and women, Lüpertz urges them to confront collective guilt and war-related trauma. While »Ähre« translates to »ear« or »spike« of grain, it is also a pun on the German term for »honor« (»Ehre«). »Ährenbilder« are, essentially, an elegy on the spiritual emptiness that followed the war. The series combines different perspectives and motifs, but all of them link the despair, horror, and senselessness of the Second World War with the wheat as symbol of life and regeneration—a symbol that the Nazis associated with Germanness. Lüpertz breaks with the impressionist tradition of the wheat field as a »shimmering whole«[39] and replaces visual synthesis

through large and muddy-colored planes, crossed through by dark lines, and cluttered with ambiguous shapes; his paintings could not be further removed from the regularity and calm of the wallpaper wheatscape.

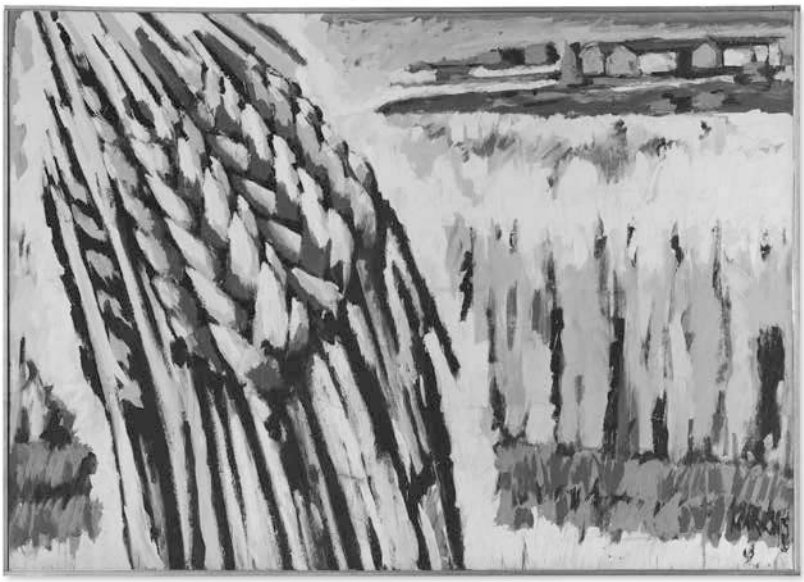

Fig. 2: Markus Lüpertz (1972), »Unser täglich Brot-dithyrambisch II.«© VG Bild-Kunst

On some of these paintings, over-dimensioned wheat ears disrupt the yellowish field like a quiver of arrows. Pale and unclean, these acres shine an unwelcome light on an essentially lost and spiritually deprived German culture.[40] The »Ährenbilder« are a territorial nightmare; they question, attack, and ridicule the ideology of »Blut und Boden« along with its terrible consequences: Lüpertz plants a steel helmet over a shabby black uniform right into the brownish-yellow suggestion of a large wheat field. Jacked up on two Roman chariot wheels, this wretched figure exposes the militarism of the previous generation—a militarism that in the 1970s was very much alive and thriving on the regulars' table in the local bar. What the »Ährenbilder« brought to those tables was an uncanny reminder of the senseless death of millions of soldiers, of a faded uniform in the attic, and of

the mass grave called Europe, caused by the Germans. By setting up a Nazi uniform like a scarecrow on a field, Lüpertz spoils the glittering universality of the global seventies: his wheat fields are culturally and historically concrete, an archive of large-scale horror. This funeral pyre of garish and washed-out colors emerges while the aforementioned »cleansing« of agricultural environments is in full swing, disposing the ugly past. In other paintings and drawings from the series we see a factory building behind a field, foregrounded by a group of wheat spikes. Their uniform inclination alludes to the enforced conformation (»Gleichschaltung«) of the Nazi period, but also of nature itself: viewed in the context of industrial agriculture, these paintings are also a more general attack against the »ideological deformation that reduces all life to usefulness.«[41]

The militarization of wheat is not an exclusively German theme, on the contrary: although industrial agriculture is commonly justified as a measure against world hunger, there is much awareness of the flip side to the global trade in grain: from the Old Romans to two World Wars, from the American wheat embargo against the Soviet Union in 1980 to the current, Russian-imposed obstacles to Ukrainian wheat exports: the crop has always been used as a weapon in geopolitical conflicts, often with devastating effects for the poorest countries. The global scope of wheat speculation has inspired the film maker Peter Krieg to produce the experimental documentary film »Septemberweizen« (1980)[42] and the artist Agnes Denes, who planted a wheat field right in front of Wall Street to question the capitalization of the crop as a global commodity (»Wheatfield. A Confrontation« 1982). The artist who took up the militarization of wheat in the most straight-forward manner is the American photographer George Steinmetz. In a 2014 project for National Geographic, he pictures various »landscapes of industrial food«[43] among them a huge Kansas wheat field. The sun rises in the upper left corner as if to announce a new era; five gigantic harvesters add to the spectacle by producing large clouds of steam (fig. 3).

The field itself seems endless—a wheatscape that is only interrupted by the short line of a hedge and a small, winding road in the distance. Steinmetz used a motorized paraglider to shoot the picture; its altitude

is just below that of a helicopter, suggesting a military context of creation.[44] The artist thus fashions himself as a photographer in combat, a human drone, and he uses his camera (a Canon EOS 5DS R) like a gun pointing towards an agricultural tank parade. Steinmetz alludes to this method of unveiling the hidden dimension of industrial agriculture as »street photography from the sky.«[45] This approach to contemporary food landscapes is entirely anti-nostalgic as it explicitly embraces the possibilities of modern technology to fight the destructive effects of present-day agricultural machines. Contrary to established uses of aerial photography, Steinmetz puts abstraction in the service of analysis. Shot from a slightly unusual angle, the unfamiliar sight of five harvesters (most representations of modern agriculture only represent one) turns the soothing effect of what Carlson called the »checkerboard squares of green and gold« into an impression of agricultural warfare. Supported by the sarcasm that resonates in the title, »Feeding 9 Billion« turns the familiar sight of monoculture into an uncanny[46] visual encounter that pushes us to rethink the strange alliance between hungry humans and an increasingly sophisticated agricultural technology.[47]

Fig. 3: George Steinmetz (2014), »Harvesting Wheat, Kansas« © George Steinmetz

Conclusion

The term »wheatscape« connotes a way of perceiving the consequences of merging plots, property concentration, technicization, artificial fertilization etc. that gained speed after the Second World War. Mostly used to highlight the negative effects of monocultures on biodiversity and landscapes, the expression has also been used, lately, to advertise wallpapers or a Christian family's life on a modern farm.[48] Both applications are reactions to a fairly recent development in modern agriculture, but a glimpse into earlier responses to large-scale wheat growing shows that grain monocultures have always evoked mixed feelings. In the early twentieth century, Frank Norris was influential in creating lasting images of gigantic wheat fields that were excessively beautiful, but also aggressive and uncontrollable incarnations of global capitalism.

Moving from awe to disgust and vice versa, reactions to wheat monocultures remain deeply ambivalent. While the actual, physical experience of endless wheat fields tends to evoke feelings of sadness and frustration, the wallpaper version possesses what Fredric Jameson calls the »euphoric intensity« of an aesthetics of the surface.[49] Importantly, however, agricultural landscapes and representations thereof cannot be fully separated. They in fact intersect to create what may be called the aesthetic value of the wheat field as a defining aspect of how we experience western rurality today. While in times of peace and economic stability, wheatscapes are wavering between monotony and meditation, their strange ambivalence is easily replaced when abstraction makes way for the historically and geographically concrete: in light of the war in Ukraine, the historical baggage of the wheat as symbol of a nation's wealth and spiritual grounding can make your heart sink while looking at the yellow-and-blue photograph in a bakery's breakfast area.

There has never been a time when wheat, politics, and power were not immediately linked. As Heinrich Eduard Jacob has shown, the histories of nations can be told as histories of wheat.[50] What he did not examine, however, is how the look of wheat changes depending on the political and economic regime, or system, that relies on the crop for its very existence.

Representations of wheat cultivation in the age of the so-called »American new imperialism«, early Soviet film, Nazi art, and post-»Dust Bowl« US painting enable us to recognize the key role of agricultural scenes for an analysis of the ideological and emotional setup of an era.

Historically, the rebuilding of destroyed cities in Germany, the early phase of »Flurbereinigung,« and the denial of Nazi atrocities went hand in hand: with each decade, Germany looked more like other modernizing countries (including the Soviet Union that became the model for collectivization in the GDR). In the mid-1970s, the German painter Markus Lüpertz captured this problematic dimension of industrial agriculture by bringing history back to the wheat field on canvas, soiling the golden yellow with the Nazis' favorite color. He was not the only one of his generation to go against the universal promise of the modern wheatscape: the German documentary film maker Peter Krieg and the land artist Agnes Denes belong to the same generation of critical wheat artists. Using very different aesthetic means, they all aimed at revising the relationship between farmers and wheat in a non-ideological, or even counter-ideological manner.

By positioning the crop historically, culturally, and in relation to the developments that have created the profit-driven, globalized agribusiness that remains a problem to this day, artists of the 1970s and 80s enabled audiences to look beyond the smooth and golden surface of the wheatscape. The American photographer George Steinmetz signals the latest development in this revision: instead of historicizing wheat, he shows us modern agriculture from a new angle, thereby encouraging viewers to rethink the promises of techno-farming. Steinmetz's wheatscape is like a battle field on a computer screen, foreshadowing more recent developments in modern farming that rely on remote control drones, computerized work processes, and robots. Steinmetz is not an anti-technologist, but like many of those who think about the future of farming, he does not believe that a predominantly tech-centric approach can solve the problems brought about by contemporary agriculture. Like other artists of his generation, Steinmetz wants us to remember that contemporary wheat fields have a long and multiform history and interact in complex ways with humans and machines. As one of the steps towards

a modern agriculture that is both sustainable and able to feed the world, learning to disrupt the seemingly endless, and timeless, yellow surface of the delocalized wheatscape through new ways of seeing is something we can all do.

Notes

1 World Food Programme (2022): Food Security Implications of the Ukraine Conflict, and Graham and Pe'er (2022): Putin's Invasion of Ukraine.

2 This region was located in what is now part of Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. Regarding the appropriation of traditional flags and coats of arms see Weber (2019): Grautöne.

3 For a quick introduction see Collins (no date): Mark Rothkos Gemälde.

4 Greenberger (2020): Mark Rothko's Politics.

5 See https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-harvesters-by-pieter-bruegel-the-elder-1565-designer77.html?product.

6 Kauffman (2010): Bye Bye, Miss American Empire, p. 84.

7 Turner (1920): The Frontier in American History.

8 The German writer Bertholt Brecht relied on The Pit when developing his own, socialist agenda in Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe (1930).

9 Urry (2007): The Place of Emotions, p. 77.

10 Cf. Urry (2007): The Place of Emotions, p. 77.

11 Norris (1901): The Octopus, p. 84.

12 For an elaboration on this argument, and the role of anti-Semitism in Norris's anti-capitalist analysis, see Twelbeck (2021): Wheat: A Powerful Crop, pp. 238–240.

13 https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/agriculture-in-kansas/14188.

14 Moon (2020): The American Steppes.

15 Maklatov (1950): The Agrarian Problem in Russia, p. 3, and Merl (2011): Sowjetisierung, p. 99.

16 See Kino Pravda No. 17, 1923 at https://vertov.filmmuseum.at/objekte/objekt_detail?DV_objekte_id=1228903211453&c-p=-10&p-anz=22.

17 https://archive.org/details/Eisenstein-TheGeneralLine.

18 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smVtXE5PV6c.

19 Russia's refusal to recognize that Stalin strategically used starvation to extinguish the resistant peasantry (»Holodomor«) has contributed to the deterioration of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship.

20 See Eldredge (2022): US Painters.

21 Doll (2010): Mäzenatentum, p. 76.

22 For a view of Peiner's »Deutsche Erde« see https://www.kuladig.de/Objektansicht/KLD-338904. Regarding the artist's role under the Nazis' rule see Doll (2010): Mäzenatentum.

23 Zischka (1938): Brot, p. 51.

24 Anti-Semitism in wheat narratives was not limited to Zischka: in Norris's The Octopus, the figure of the speculator Berman is clearly marked as Jewish.

25 Zischka relied on data from the Statistisches Reichsamt (1937): Statistisches Jahrbuch, p. 20.

26 Blenkle and Bodem (2008): Kanonen statt Butter.

27 Dimitri et al. (2005): The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture.

28 Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Landwirtschaft und Forsten (Hrsg.) (1986): 100 Jahre Flurbereinigung, p. 46.

29 See e. g. Hasenöhrl (2011): Zivilgesellschaft und Protest.

30 Linse (1999): Ökologiebewegung, pp. 591–592.

31 Cf. Urry (2007): The Place of Emotions, p. 82.

32 Carlson (1985): On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes, p. 306.

33 Carlson (1985): On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes, p. 305.

34 Carlson (1985): On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes, p. 308.

35 Carlson (2008): Aesthetic Appreciation of the Natural Environment, p. 129.

36 Jacob (1954): 6000 Jahre Brot.

37 With the publication of Susanne Bode's bestselling non-fiction book The Forgotten Generation (Engl. 2009), this age group now gets a lot of attention in Germany.

38 Seifert (2008): Markus Lüpertz, p. 84.

39 Seifert (2008): Markus Lüpertz, p. 85.

40 Regarding the politics of Lüpertz's art, see Dietrich (1989): Allegories of Power.

41 Seifert (2008): Markus Lüpertz, p. 85.

42 For an (incomplete) version of the film, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nO8AEykOXQ.

43 Foley / Steinmetz (2014): A Five-Step Plan to Feed the World.

44 For an introduction to Steinmetz's work, see »How George Steinmetz Tells Stories from the Sky« at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39W4 RrFVuvg.

45 Keefe (2014): George Steinmetz's Eye from the Sky.

46 Regarding the linguistic relationship between the »uncanny« and the notion of »home« in the German language, see Freud (1919): Das Unheimliche, pp. 298–324.

47 In a 2020 article for McKinsey consulting, Goede et al. praise the opportunities of smart-crop technology, drone farming, smart livestock monitoring, autonomous farming machinery, smart-building-and-equipment-management, as »Agriculture's Connected Future«.

48 https://adelightfulglow.com/wheatscapes/.

49 Jameson (1984): Postmodernism, p. 10 and p. 16.

50 Wheat is particularly crucial in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the former colonies, where it was introduced as a spiritual food, the substance to be used for baking communion wafers.

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