

**OLIVER SUKROW, M.A.**

PhD-candidate, Institute for European Art History, University of Heidelberg and Fellowship-holder at the Central Institute for Art History, Munich

## **“Subversive Landscapes. Wolfgang Mattheuer and the Romantic Tradition in the Visual Arts of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)”**

*Presentation for “Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism's Reason”*

*(Interdisciplinary Conference, University of Princeton, May 9-10, 2014)*

---

### a) Introduction

Exactly 40 years ago, in 1974, the GDR celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich with an international conference in his hometown Greifswald<sup>1</sup> and with a major retrospective in Dresden<sup>2</sup>, where Friedrich lived for most of his life (**fig. 2**). The celebrations of Friedrich's life marked the climax of a controversial, dynamic debate on Romantic art in the GDR since the late 40s. In '74, however, the integration of Friedrich's oeuvre into the art canon of the Socialist East German state was officially approved with the conference and the exhibition (**fig. 3**). The director of the Stately Art Collections of Dresden wrote in an article, that Friedrich's art “embodies the best traditions of the progressive bourgeoisie” and can therefore be seen as a fruitful source of inspiration for the Socialist presence.<sup>3</sup> At the same time as Friedrich's art was re-discovered, the conference and exhibition also focused on a contemporary East German painter, whose oeuvre was also dominated by the depiction of the landscape: Wolfgang

---

<sup>1</sup> *Caspar David Friedrich. Bildende Kunst zwischen der Französischen Revolution von 1789 und der bürgerlich-demokratischen Revolution von 1848. 1. Greifswalder Romantik-Konferenz anlässlich der Caspar-David-Friedrich-Ehrung in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1974*, Conference Proceedings, (Greifswald: University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> *Caspar David Friedrich und sein Kreis*, Friedrich Exhibition Catalogue, ed. by the Ministry of Culture of the GDR and the Stately Art Collections Dresden (Dresden: Stately Art Collections, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Bachmann, “Festrede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung “Caspar David Friedrich und sein Kreis” am 24. November 1974 im Albertinum“, *Beiträge und Berichte der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden 1972-1975*, ed. by the Stately Art Collections Dresden, (Dresden: Stately Art Collections, 1976), pp. 7-12, p. 11. All translations by the author.

Mattheuer was seen, according to the exhibition catalogue of 1974<sup>4</sup> and the conference proceedings<sup>5</sup>, as an inheritor of the German Romantic tradition (**fig. 4**). One might say that Mattheuer served as a modern Socialist Neo-Romantic artist.<sup>6</sup> In '74, it seemed that the aesthetic dogma of a naturalistic Socialist Realism was overcome and replaced by a more diverse approach to the history of art.<sup>7</sup>

**(Fig. 5)** I want to take this observation – the positive reception of the Romantic Friedrich and Mattheuer's breakthrough – as starting point for my exploration of a concrete example of the conference's thesis, that Sotsromantizm was a twofold phenomenon, both a critique and a renewal of Socialist culture in the 70s. I will argue that Mattheuer's success in the art world of the GDR and Friedrich's return as a role model are two outcomes of the same process, which can be described as a historicization and actualization of Romanticism in East Germany. This process is directly linked with the genre of landscape painting and with the changing image of man, nature, and society in Socialist ideology and visual culture.<sup>8</sup>

#### b) Seeing and Interpreting Landscape in Socialism

**(Fig. 6)** Before I discuss Mattheuer's contribution to contemporary Socialist landscape painting of the 70s and 80s, it is necessary to qualify two basic assumptions.

Firstly: Landscape (and so nature) was culturally meaningful under Socialism.<sup>9</sup> The depiction of landscapes in movies, photographs, poems, graphics, murals, and paintings in the GDR always

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Feist, "Romantik und Realismus", *Friedrich Exhibition Catalogue*, 1974, pp. 11-21, p. 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Palme, "Zur Romantikrezeption in der DDR-Kunst. Beobachtungen am Werk von Wolfgang Mattheuer", *Friedrich Conference Proceedings*, 1974, pp. 138-141.

<sup>6</sup> Ullrich Kuhirt, "Ein "ungewöhnlicher" Realismus? Gedanken zum Werk Wolfgang Mattheuers", *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 23, nr. 6, 1975, pp. 281-285.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus. Die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> See generally on the history of art in the GDR: *Abschied von Ikarus. Bildwelten in der DDR – neu gesehen*, Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Wolfgang Holler and Paul Kaiser (eds.), (Cologne: König, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Schipperges, "Natur", *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, no. 4, (Stuttgart: Klett, 1978), pp. 215-244, p. 242.

meant something more than just a topographical reflection of the very landscape.<sup>10</sup> Landscape was analyzed as a carrier of meaning, whether a political, ideological or historic meaning.<sup>11</sup> The idea of landscape as symbolic representation for something has its roots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and was primarily based on the interpretation of Friedrich's paintings in Romantic art theory.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly: In the case of the GDR, we must distinguish between a positive and a negative reception of everything linked with Romanticism. The discourse on the Romantic element in German art and culture is a long-term and difficult development and has, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, been linked with a discussion about German culture in general.<sup>13</sup> This discussion continued in the GDR as well. Even though in the 50s and 60s we can observe an attitude in GDR cultural policies towards everything "classical" as examples of a Renaissance or German Classicism (Goethe and Schiller),<sup>14</sup> a respect for the Romantic preference for phantasy, liberty, freedom of form and style, and subjectivity never really disappeared.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the distinct

---

<sup>10</sup> For the discussion of landscape in GDR-literature in the 70s/80s see: Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1996), pp. 196-197; pp. 312-317; pp. 374-379.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Warnke, *Politische Landschaft. Zur Kunstgeschichte der Natur* (Munich: Hanser, 1992).

For the viewing and interpretation of landscape and nature in Germany after the "spatial turn", see Hansjörg Küster, *Schöne Aussichten. Kleine Geschichte der Landschaft* (Munich: Beck, 2009), p. 10-15; Markus Leibenath, Stefan Heiland, Heiderose Kilper and Sabine Tzschaschel, *Wie werden Landschaften gemacht? Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die Konstituierung von Kulturlandschaften* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, translated by Sarah Twohig (New York: G. Brazillen, 1974); Werner Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich-London: Prestel, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See lastly: Sébastien Allard (ed.), *De l'Allemagne, 1800-1939. De Friedrich à Beckmann* (Paris: Hazan- Musée du Louvre, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Horst Haase (ed.), *Die SED und das kulturelle Erbe: Orientierungen, Errungenschaften, Probleme* (Berlin: Dietz, 1986); Wolfram Schlenker, *Das „Kulturelle Erbe“ in der DDR. Gesellschaftliche Entwicklung und Kulturpolitik 1945-1965* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977); Dieter Hoffmann, *Arbeitsbuch. Deutschsprachige Prosa seit 1945. Von der Trümmerliteratur zur Dokumentarliteratur* (Tübingen-Basel: Francke, 2006), p. 333.

For Weimar as "classical" place of German culture in the GDR see: Helmut Holtzhauer, *The National Research and Memorial Centre of Classic German Literature in Weimar*, translated by H. Klein (Weimar: The National Research and Memorial Centre of Classic German Literature, 1966), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1973; Helmut Holtzhauer, *The Goethe Museum in Weimar: A short guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Weimar: National Research and Memorial Places of Classical Literature, 1969); Helmut Holtzhauer, *National Research and Memorial Places of Classical German Literature in Weimar*, translated by Jutta Görne (Weimar: National Research and Memorial Places of Classical Literature, 1970).

For the reception of German Classicism in the GDR see Lothar Ehrlich and Gunther Mai (eds.), *Weimarer Klassik in der Ära Ulbricht* (Cologne-Vienna-Weimar: Böhlau, 2000); Lothar Ehrlich and Gunther Mai (eds.), *Weimarer Klassik in der Ära Honecker* (Cologne-Vienna-Weimar: Böhlau, 2001).

For the reception of Classicism in the architecture of the GDR see Eva von Engelberg-Dočkal and Kerstin Vogel (eds.), *Sonderfall Weimar? DDR-Architektur in der Klassikerstadt* (Weimar: Bauhaus University Press, 2013), pp. 6-9.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Klemperer, "Für und wider die Romantik", *Neues Deutschland*, 26.08.1947, vol. 2, nr. 198, p. 3. Hannelore Gaertner, "Stellung und Bedeutung Caspar David Friedrichs in der deutschen Romantik. Festrede zu Ehren Caspar David Friedrichs anlässlich der 200. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages", *Friedrich Conference Proceedings*, 1974, pp. 4-11, p. 7.

“modernity” of Romantic art against the stereotype of classical severity was seen as a great challenge to Socialist art theory.<sup>16</sup> That means that beyond the discussion on Romanticism, the debate was always one about the relationship of Socialism to cultural phenomena of European “Modernity”, which started with the Romantic era around 1800.

Considering these two factors of “Sotsromantizm” in the GDR – landscape as a carrier of meaning and a dynamic reception of everything “Romantic” in the arts – we can now analyze more detailed Wolfgang Mattheuer’s landscape paintings. I would like to ask: What are the characteristics of his landscapes and what differentiate them from other Socialist landscape painters?

### c) Mattheuer’s Landscapes: Characteristics and Comparison

We have seen that Mattheuer was celebrated simultaneously alongside the Romantic painter Friedrich in 1974 (**fig. 7**).<sup>17</sup> But was his art just a simple imitation of Friedrich’s style? Clearly, Mattheuer was not a simple copy of Friedrich, but he adapted some motifs (**fig. 8**), compositional elements (**fig. 9**), and even the custom for written explanations which was also used by Friedrich.<sup>18</sup> Friedrich’s paintings were all of a conceptual character and not straight records of a direct observation of nature.<sup>19</sup> The same is true of Mattheuer: He did also observed nature but then reordered and reorganized elements in an “artistic”, not naturalistic way.

---

<sup>16</sup> See Eckhart Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder? Der Kalte Krieg und die deutsche Kunst 1945-1990* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009), pp. 160-163.

<sup>17</sup> Joachim Uhlitzsch, “Zur Ausstellung der Werke Wolfgang Mattheuers im Albertinum”, *Dresdner Kunstblätter. Zweimonatsschrift der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden*, vol. 6, nr. 18, 1974, pp. 174-182.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of the parallels between Friedrich and Mattheuer see Heinz Schönemann, *Wolfgang Mattheuer* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1988).

Several diaries by Mattheuer are published in the meanwhile, see: Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Äusserungen. Texte - Graphik* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990); Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Aus meiner Zeit. Tagebuchnotizen und andere Aufzeichnungen* (Stuttgart-Leipzig: Hohenheim, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Jeroen Stumpel, “The Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich”, in Vincent Boele (ed.), *Caspar David Friedrich & the German romantic landscape* (Aldershot-Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2008), pp. 40-55.

To understand Mattheuer's achievements as an innovator, it seems necessary to regard some of his iconic landscape paintings, to describe and contextualize them shortly, and to compare those works with other Socialist landscape paintings.<sup>20</sup> I have chosen five landscapes by Mattheuer painted between '67-'75 as well as one painting by Bernhard Kretzschmar of the late 50s, one by Werner Tübke of the mid-60s, and two murals by Josep Renau of the late 60s. All of them are artists' reflections on the relationship between man and nature through the depiction of landscape. They represent rather an explicit or a subtle discussion with the general phenomenon of "Romanticism", too.

Mattheuer became known to a broader audience with his painting "Landscape near Bratsk" (**fig. 10**), created around '67 after a stately organized trip to the Siberian city with other colleagues.<sup>21</sup> (And I do remember that the image of Bratsk was mentioned in our Call for Paper as example for the rhetorical force of romanticism.) It was first presented at the Sixth German Art Exhibition in Dresden in '67. One could have expected a pathetic or dramatic depiction of the region around Bratsk and their huge industrial plants as it was described in the GDR as the

---

<sup>20</sup> Mattheuer's connection to German romantic art and especially to those of Friedrich has been observed since a long time. Firstly, Dieter Gleisberg mentioned in 1970 that Mattheuer's landscapes were "extended romantic spaces full of emotions" (Dieter Gleisberg, "Wolfgang Mattheuer", *Weggefährten. 25 Künstler aus der DDR* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1970), pp. 224-239, p. 227). In Peter Romanus' unpublished dissertation of 1978, the author writes that Mattheuer's "romantic" landscapes are mirroring aesthetical attitudes of the modern man in the late 1970s, symbolizing a distanced relationship between human beings and nature (Peter Romanus, *Zur gesellschaftlichen Funktion zeitgenössischer Werke der Landschaftsmalerei der DDR*, Berlin 1978, pp.104-110). It was Heinz Schönemann in 1988 who gave a detailed overview of Mattheuer's formal and compositional orientation to Friedrich. After the German reunification of 1989/90, Mattheuer stayed in the focus of the art historical research. Christoph Zuschlag thematized Mattheuer's landscape paintings as historical source for interpretation (Christoph Zuschlag, "Hinter den sieben Bergen. Wolfgang Mattheuer – Malerei als Selbstbefragung", *Das Kunstwerk als Geschichtsdokument. Festschrift für Hans-Ernst Müttig*, ed. by Annette Tietenberg (Munich: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1999), pp. 219-236). Two large exhibitions in the last decade put Mattheuer's contribution to German landscape painting after WW II at the center of attention: In 2002, Mattheuer confessed in an interview with Peter Iden, that he was "especially attracted by the landscape" (Peter Iden, "Es geht um das Bild der Welt – Wolfgang Mattheuer über seine Kunst in der alten und der neuen Zeit", *Wolfgang Mattheuer – Retrospektive. Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Figuren*, ed. by Ingrid Mössinger and Kerstin Drechsel (Leipzig: Seemann, 2002), pp. 74-79, p. 78). And lately, in 2007, an exhibition exclusively on Mattheuer as landscape painter was shown in Leipzig. In this book, Howoldt investigated the romantic roots of his art (Jens Howoldt, "Wolfgang Mattheuer and the romantic landscape", *Evening, Hills, Forests, Love. The Other Mattheuer*, ed. by the Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt und Wolfgang Mattheuer-Stiftung Leipzig (Leipzig-Bielefeld: Kerber, 2007), pp. 50-60) and Beaucamp focused on Mattheuer's attempt for a renewal of the romantic tradition of landscape as carrier of meaning (Eduard Beaucamp, "Mattheuer and the lessons of the landscape", *The Other Mattheuer*, pp. 14-26).

<sup>21</sup> Gertraude Sumpf, "Landschaft und Industrie. Zu einigen Werken der VI. Deutschen Kunstausstellung", *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 16, nr. 5, 1968, pp. 239-243.

“electrical heart of Siberia”.<sup>22</sup> But Mattheuer focused not so much on the industry – which is, in fact, pushed toward the background – but more on the people and their behavior in a transformed, destroyed, and torn landscape.<sup>23</sup> I think, that this could not have been the intention of this “Socialist Grand Tour” organized by the party (**fig. 11**).<sup>24</sup> From our perspective it seems obvious that Mattheuer did not celebrate the human triumph over nature or the victory of Soviet Socialism. He shows us a waste brown desert, structured by broken pipelines, streets, and power lines. Exactly beyond the power plant in the background, the sky enigmatically turns from bluish to greyish, and the pipeline leading from this plant to the foreground divides the landscape. In the same way that industry or human artefacts in this landscape lack heroism or pathos, the same is true of the human figures. An old lady on the left is sitting alone in contemplation; a boy on the right is playing with tanks next to a fallen tree. On the pipeline, two women are balancing while moving forward. At the first sight, this picture seems to have nothing in common with Friedrich’s sublime landscapes which celebrated man in nature (**fig. 12**). It is true that Mattheuer does not really show us a Romantic image of landscape, but what links his picture with Friedrich is that Mattheuer presents not only a landscape but a space of meaningful interaction between humans and nature.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the landscape tells us something about the human beings. Here, in Bratsk in the late 60s, the people are seen as isolated, disorientated, and struggling individuals trying to live in a dramatically and fundamentally changed landscape. The separation of industry from the people in Mattheuer’s painting could be read as alienation of man from both, their work and their surrounding nature.

---

<sup>22</sup> For the history of the hydroelectric power station at Bratsk see: Klaus Gestwa, *Die Stalinschen Großbauten des Kommunismus. Sowjetische Technik- und Umweltgeschichte 1948-1967* (Munich: Oldenburg, 2010), pp. 32-35.

<sup>23</sup> Gleisberg 1970, p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, many of the big industrialization campaigns in the Socialist world were depicted in the visual arts and spread through media, see for instance: Ulrich Best, “Arbeit, Internationalismus und Energie. Zukunftsvisionen in den Gaspipelineprojekten des RGW”, *Zukunftsvorstellungen und Staatliche Planung im Sozialismus. Die Tschechoslowakei im ostmitteleuropäischen Kontext 1945-1989*, ed. by Martin Schulze Wessel and Christiane Brenner (Munich: Oldenburg, 2010), pp. 137-158.

<sup>25</sup> Kuno Mittelstädt, “Die deutsche Landschaftsmalerei. Zu einer Ausstellung der Lucas-Cranach-Kommission in Berlin”, *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 6, nr. 1, 1958, pp. 30-34, p. 30.

A very different point of view is manifested in Josep Renau's murals "Triumph of Man over Nature" and "The Forces of Nature" (**fig. 13**), designed in the late 60s and only partly executed.<sup>26</sup> In comparison with Mattheuer, Renau celebrated the Socialist hero as conqueror and ruler over nature.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in Renau's murals we cannot see anymore "nature" or "landscape": It is replaced by technique, industry, and the human society. His murals are representing the development of a modern, "rational" relationship to nature, which Klaus Gestwa has described as an "energetic imperative to legitimate a progressive subjugation of nature".<sup>28</sup> Not without reason, the late 50s and the 60s saw the rise of the so-called "scientific-technical revolution" which was interpreted as a tool to fulfill the dream of Communism.<sup>29</sup> In the murals, the triumph over nature was even transferred to the space as last frontier to overcome. In this utopian dream, which Renau illustrated, nature and landscape have no place anymore. They virtually disappeared while in Mattheuer's paintings, the surrounding nature is crucial for the interpretation of the whole scenery.

For our next example of how Mattheuer renewed the landscape painting in the sense of Sotsromantizm, we need to confront an industrial panorama of the late 50s with two images of Mattheuer of '72-'74. Bernhard Kretzschmar's "View of Eisenhüttenstadt" (**fig. 14**), which was a commission of the Ministry of Culture of the GDR in '55,<sup>30</sup> has been celebrated as the first Socialist landscape painting and as a major step toward the "Socialization" of the romantic tradition in East Germany.<sup>31</sup> Kretzschmar's masterpiece belongs in a very long tradition of panoramic views executed by Dresden-based artists since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It unifies older

---

<sup>26</sup> See for Renau's murals in the GDR: Oliver Sukrow, "Ein Rivera der DDR? Die Bedeutung Josep Renaus als Importeur des mexikanischen "Muralismo" in die DDR", *Abschied von Ikarus*, 2012, pp. 217-227.

<sup>27</sup> See generally for questions of pathetic heroism in Socialist societies: Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Sozialistische Helden. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR* (Berlin: Links, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Gestwa 2010, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> For the connection of Renau's murals with the „scientific-technical revolution“ of the 1960s see: Oliver Sukrow, "Josep Renau's 'Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo'. An Emblematic Work of the Era of the Scientific-Technical Revolution in the German Democratic Republic", *Arara. Art and architecture of the Americas*, no. 11, 2013 ([http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/research/pdfs/arara\\_issue\\_11/sukrow.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/research/pdfs/arara_issue_11/sukrow.pdf)).

<sup>30</sup> Gabriele Männel, "Dresden – Gostritz – Friebeistraße. Landschaft und Reisen", *Bernhard Kretzschmar 1889-1989* (Dresden: Stately Art Collections, 1989), pp. 37-62, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Ullrich Kuhirt, "Mensch und Arbeit im neuen Verhältnis", *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 6, nr. 4, 1958, pp. 227-232, p. 227.

elements of an aristocratic view over the territory, the early modern element of staffage figures in the foreground as well as an impressionist style (**fig. 15**).<sup>32</sup> Stylistically and compositionally, Kretzschmar painted a very anachronistic image for a modern Socialist role model of the late 50s. However, its content and message was seen as contemporary and even utopian.<sup>33</sup> By implementing the panoramic view of the newly founded industrial plant of Eisenhüttenstadt – described in 1963 by a journalist of the London *Times* as “town of young blood and iron”<sup>34</sup> – and its settlement into a sunny, summery atmosphere under a clear blue sky, the artist created a utopian image of the Marxist vision of Communism to repeal of all differences between man, industry, and nature. It may remind us on the Marxist vision of Communism to repeal of all differences not only between classes and people but also between town and country, human society and the natural environment.<sup>35</sup> Kretzschmar celebrated in his landscape the construction of Eisenhüttenstadt as symbol for the construction of Socialism in the GDR of the 50s as a milestone towards the realization of the Marxist utopia.<sup>36</sup>

However, 20 years after Kretzschmar, we can registry the disappearance of the utopian character of the landscape.<sup>37</sup> While Kretzschmar depicted a vital and bright scenery, Mattheuer shows in his “Friendly Visit to the Lignite Mining” of ‘74 a tortured and deformed landscape (**fig. 16**). It is the same blue sky and a comparable industrial plantation in the background in both paintings, but Mattheuer brings the central motive – some workers and square-headed party officials – much closer to the viewer. Not only are the human beings alienated from one another, they seem to

---

<sup>32</sup> For Kretzschmar’s biography and artistic education in see: Birgit Dalbajewa and Andreas Dehmer, “Überhöhte Wirklichkeit um 1900. Voraussetzungen der Neuen Sachlichkeit in Dresden“, *Neue Sachlichkeit in Dresden. Malerei der zwanziger Jahre von Dix bis Querner*, ed. by Birgit Dalbajewa (Dresden: Sandstein, 2011), pp. 58-67.

<sup>33</sup> Diether Schmidt, *Bernhard Kretzschmar* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> “Town of Young Blood and Iron”, *The Times London*, 04.07.1963, no. 55744, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> For the consequences of Socialist environmental politics in the region of Eisenhüttenstadt see Michael F. Scholz, *Die DDR 1949-1990* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2009), p. 310.

<sup>36</sup> For the issue of nature and Marxist utopia see: Eva-Maria Seng and Richard Saage, “Utopie und Architektur”, *L’Architecture Engagée. Manifeste zur Veränderung der Gesellschaft*, ed. by Winfried Nerdinger (Munich: Detail, 2012), pp. 10-37, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> See Eckhart Gillen in a conversation with Christine Käppeler, Oct. 2012: “Kretzschmar shows the ideal of an industrialized landscape, Mattheuer the devastated landscape. The party officials hover above the ground, they are totally lifted, the workers are passing them. You see yourself, you miss yourself. That is the thesis: utopia and reality.”, “Das Gesetz der Flügel”, *Der Freitag*, 17.10.2012 (<http://www.freitag.de/autoren/christine-kaepplerer/das-gesetz-der-fluegel>).



have lost contact with nature, too. But what nature can we trace in the image at all? Only a small piece of vegetation survives in the foreground in the middle of the brown desert. While Kretzschmar has most likely chosen the panorama format for his utopian, optimistic vision, Mattheuer presents a “closed” landscape without any perspective into a future development. The viewer is not invited to recognize a bright future but is confronted with the very problems of life under Socialism and the ongoing destruction of natural resources in the 70s.<sup>38</sup> It is possible to read this painting by Mattheuer as critique on Socialist environmental politics of the 70s that aimed to change nature and landscape as programmatic act of “the overcoming of the past and its limitations and as overcoming of nature”, as Ulrich Best puts it.<sup>39</sup>

**(Fig. 17)** Let me briefly return to Kretzschmar’s painting which also presents different forms of how man could approach nature and landscape. In the middle foreground the viewer can find a young couple resting in the shadows. They are the only ones not contemplating the landscape and the developments around them. Their view is blocked by vegetation, too. They are only focusing on themselves and represent a poetic, romantic relationship to nature as a form of hiding place. Just as the whole picture presents a great vision of harmony, so too does this detail. The harmony of man and woman – symbolized by the couple – is supported and reinforced by the landscape.<sup>40</sup> **(Fig. 18)** The motif of a couple in nature is indeed a Romantic topic, so it is no wonder, that Mattheuer’s “Vogtländische Lover” of ’72 translates this into a contemporary motif **(fig. 19)**. Against the backdrop of rolling green hills and a small town with some industrial plants, a couple stands above the scenery. They do not contemplate the beauty of the landscape but are dealing with themselves. Even though their view into the valley is not blocked, they were looking only at one other. The special atmosphere of this evening, the quietness and tranquility of the

---

<sup>38</sup> See Scholz 2009, pp. 475-477.

<sup>39</sup> Best 2010, p. 139: “It has been especially the idea of planning in a great – a “geological” – scale, which inspired the visions of future [in Socialism, O.S.]. The alteration of the physical space, for example of rivers, meant the rule of man over nature. Infrastructural major projects are related closely with ideas of modernity – both as the overcoming of the past and its limitations and as overcoming of nature.”

<sup>40</sup> Fritz Löffler, “Bernhard Kretzschmar”, *Bernhard Kretzschmar. Malerei – Graphik*, ed. by Horst-Jörg Ludwig (Berlin: Academy of Arts of the GDR, 1974), pp. 5-23, p. 21.

landscape can be traced in the couple and vice versa. Couple and landscape are mirroring each other, representing another striking Romantic feature in Mattheuer's art.

My last comparison between Mattheuer and a contemporary landscape painter in Socialism is based on Mattheuer's "Oh Caspar David..." of '75 (**fig. 20**), a direct reference to the Romantic Friedrich is given in the title, and Werner Tübke's "Memories of Dr. jur. Schulze III" of '65. (**Fig. 21**) It is a surrealistic, mannerist work between the genres of history painting and landscape. Tübke deciphered his critique on German Fascism in the representation of a doll dressed like a judge, surrounded by allegorical and concrete figures.<sup>41</sup> The landscape, in this case, is not a reflection of an actual existing one. It is born from Tübke's phantasy as backdrop and reinforcement of the allegorical message of the painting. Here, landscape is only meaningful because of the context in which it is shown. (**Fig. 22**) In contradiction, Mattheuer again referred to Friedrich's art. As in previous examples, it is the again the combination of reality and phantasy, of symbolic representation and accurate observation of reality which distinguishes Mattheuer's landscape paintings from those of others. In this case, Mattheuer foregoes human figures and visible artefacts of human society, only the smoking power plants in the very background are a direct reminder of industrialization. However, what is most important here is, I think, the division into three zones: The brown foreground with a fallen oak, the large central area consisting of regular but artificial hills of dark earth and the dark, greyish sky above. The reference to Friedrich is given not only by the title but also by the tree in the foreground, because for Friedrich, the oak was a symbol of the German nation and history.<sup>42</sup> In his "Abbey in an Oak Forest" (1818), the tree and the gothic architecture form a commitment to the German culture, symbolized just by oak trees and gothic ruins. Since the intensive resource extraction in the GDR,

---

<sup>41</sup> Eduard Beaucamp, "Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. jur. Schulze III (1965)", *Kunst gegen Krieg und Faschismus*, ed. by Gabriele Saure und Gisela Schirmer (Weimar: VDG, 1999), pp. 219-224.

<sup>42</sup> Jost Hermand, "Caspar David Friedrichs "Eiche im Schnee" im Umkreis der Befreiungskriegsthematik", *Die Zukunft der Alten Meister*, ed. by Ekkehard Mai (Cologne-Vienna-Weimar: Böhlau, 2001), pp. 217-242; Christina Grummt, "Der Wald bei Caspar David Friedrich. Kunst als religiöse Umdeutung der Natur?", *Der Wald als romantischer Topos*, ed. by Ute Jung-Kaiser (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 107-128.

the oak in Mattheuer's painting has fallen and the landscape has been transformed. Now, it is not a vital symbol like a tree dominating the scenery but a depressive and monotonous outlook on actually existing Socialism.

**(Fig. 23)** Mattheuer and Tübke were quoting art historical styles, techniques, and motifs – they were nostalgic. Despite their partisan engagement and involvement in Socialist cultural politics in the GDR, both painters formed an artistic opposition against the dogma of socialist realism as mirroring the reality in its revolutionary development. Especially Tübke fled into pre-realistic art historical worlds. He fled into the early modern period of Durer, Titian or Correggio. Mattheuer, however, orientated himself toward the Romantic Friedrich. However, for both, the category of history was much more than just a formal aspect, but an attitude towards the presence of actually existing late Socialism. While Tübke costumed contemporary events in – difficult to understand<sup>43</sup> – historical settings and presented landscapes as baroque, symbolic topographies, Mattheuer dealt with manipulated and transformed elements of elderly styles to express his view of contemporary issues. Artworks by Tübke and Mattheuer became “time images” on several levels: They quote the past (style, motifs, technique) by interpreting the presence (topic, message) and envision the future very skeptically. We will not find any more neither Kretzschmar's open and bright horizon in the landscapes of Tübke and Mattheuer nor Renau's powerful vision of a technocratic utopia. Panoramic views, stable positions, and clear messages were replaced by highly subjective and enigmatic visions which emphasized the role of the subject viewing the painting. The artistic vision of a connection of industrialization and overcoming of nature as a symbol of a Socialist modernity,<sup>44</sup> which was embodied in Kretzschmar's and Renau's works, has lost its force of

---

<sup>43</sup> See for the critique of Lea Grundig, 1964-70 president of the Association of Visual Artists in the GDR, on Tübke's paintings: Oliver Sukrow, *Lea Grundig: Sozialistische Künstlerin und Präsidentin des Verbandes der Bildenden Künstler Deutschlands (1964-1970)* (Oxford et al.: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 227-228. In April 1966, Grundig criticized Tübke's *Lebenserinnerungen* for having “too many artistically innovations” and for its “painterly abundance.” The original message of the painting – an accusation of German fascist legacy during WW II and after the war – is getting therefore lost. Grundig said, that “the most important thing of the painting, the victims in the foreground, I have to say, leave me completely untouched.”

<sup>44</sup> Best 2010, p. 138.

persuasion. Neither an ideological nor a clear Socialist slogan can be traced in Mattheuer's landscapes – the subject is turned back upon itself.

d) Summary and Outlook: Reception of Romanticism as Historization and Actualization

**(Fig. 24)** The comparative method of viewing landscape paintings by Mattheuer in combination with Romantic images of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on the one hand and contemporary pictures from the GDR on the other was chosen in order to both draw connections and envisage differences more clearly (**fig. 19**). Here, the framework of “Sotsromantizm” was implemented as a historical and formal category of analysis. In future research on the topic of the reception of Romanticism, one should investigate much deeper the importance of the Romantic tradition for German art after WW II in East and West.<sup>45</sup>

In our specific case, I suppose the double nature of “Sotsromantizm” is shown in the fact that the confrontation with Romantic elements in art theory, art history, and visual arts can be understood as a dynamic process. It had widespread consequences for the interpretation of the pre-history of art in the GDR.<sup>46</sup> Plus, it resulted in the circumstance that especially in the genre of landscape painting, “Romanticism” became a fruitful source of inspiration for contemporary artists in Socialism again. This is really extraordinary since “Romanticism” had been criticized for being backward-looking and ideologically reactionary.<sup>47</sup> The reception of the German Romantic era of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can therefore be interpreted as part of the broader phenomena of “Sotsromantizm”. This reception was at the same time a historicization and an actualization. The emphasis on the viewer as autonomous subject and the ambiguity of Mattheuer's landscapes –

---

<sup>45</sup> Monika Schmitz-Emans, “Theories of Romanticism. The first Two Hundred Years”, *Nonfictional Romantic Prose: Expanding borders*, ed. by Steven P. Sondrup and Virgil Nemoianu (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004), pp. 13-36, esp. pp. 28-31.

<sup>46</sup> See Feist, 1974.

<sup>47</sup> Kurt Magritz, “Die Wahrheit der Kunst ist die Wahrheit des Lebens”, *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 1, nr. 3, 1953, pp. 20-27; Lea Grundig, “Unser Ringen um die sozialistische Kunst”, *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 1, nr. 3, 1953, pp. 28-31; Hermann Müller, “Ludwig Richter zum 150. Geburtstag. Ein Abriss seines Lebens und Werkes”, *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 1, nr. 5, pp. 10-20; Hermann Müller, “Schwind und die deutsche Romantik. Gedanken anlässlich seines 150. Geburtstages”, *Neues Deutschland*, 23.01.1954, nr. 19, p. 4.

they can be read as critique, depictions of romantic sentiments, transfigurations, allegories or all at once<sup>48</sup> – challenged and questioned Socialism’s reason in art and its faith in an artistic “truth”.

In this case, it is as a specific example of a Socialist postmodernity that Mattheuer’s work can be investigated in future research.

---

<sup>48</sup> See Mössinger and Drechsel, 2002; *The Other Mattheuer*, 2007.