

*Experiencing the First World War
through the eyes of an artist: the
example of “Eclipse of the Sun” (1926) by
George Grosz*

*Dr Raimond Selke
Universiti Putra Malaysia*



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Content (11 slides)

- Introduction (art history linkage to WW I from a Malayan perspective)
- George Grosz – Biographical Annotations
- “Eclipse of the Sun” and “Pillars of Society” - description and background
- Summary

Slide 1



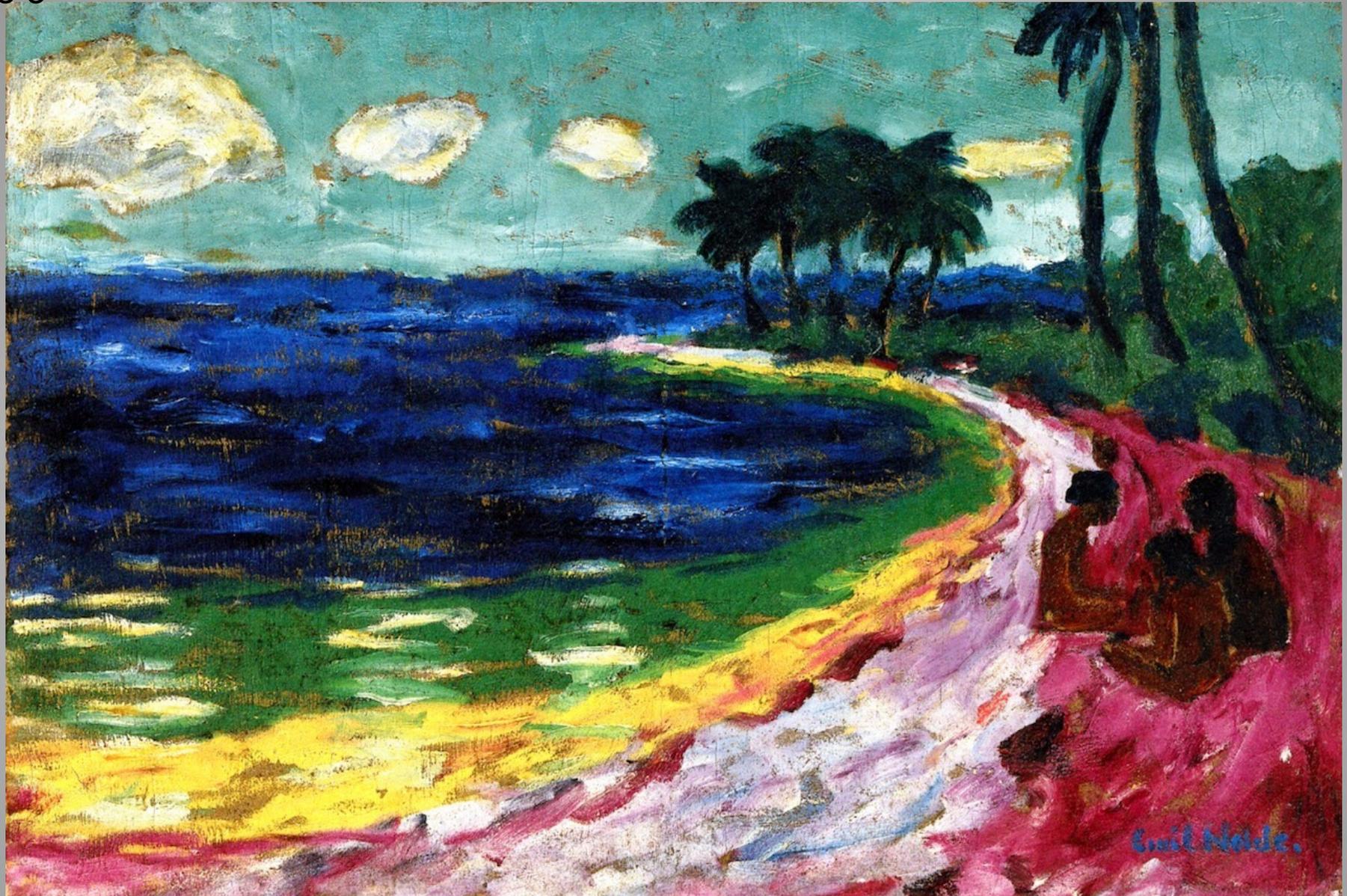
Cenotaph at the National Monument in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Slide 2



Cenotaph with names of soldiers from WW I and WW II

Slide 3



Emil Nolde, A long time alone, oil/canvas, around 1931

Slide 4



George Grosz (1893-1959), photography

Fallen and mutilated soldiers, cripples



Photography, b/w



Georg Grosz, Gray Day,
oil/canvas, 1921

Slide 6



Otto Dix, The match dealer, oil/canvas, 1920



Max Beckmann, Bird's Hell, oil/canvas, 1938



G. Grosz, God with us, Lithography Portfolio, 1920

Slide 9



Eclipse of the Sun,
oil/canvas, 218 x
188 cm, Heckscher
Museum,
Huntington, N.Y.

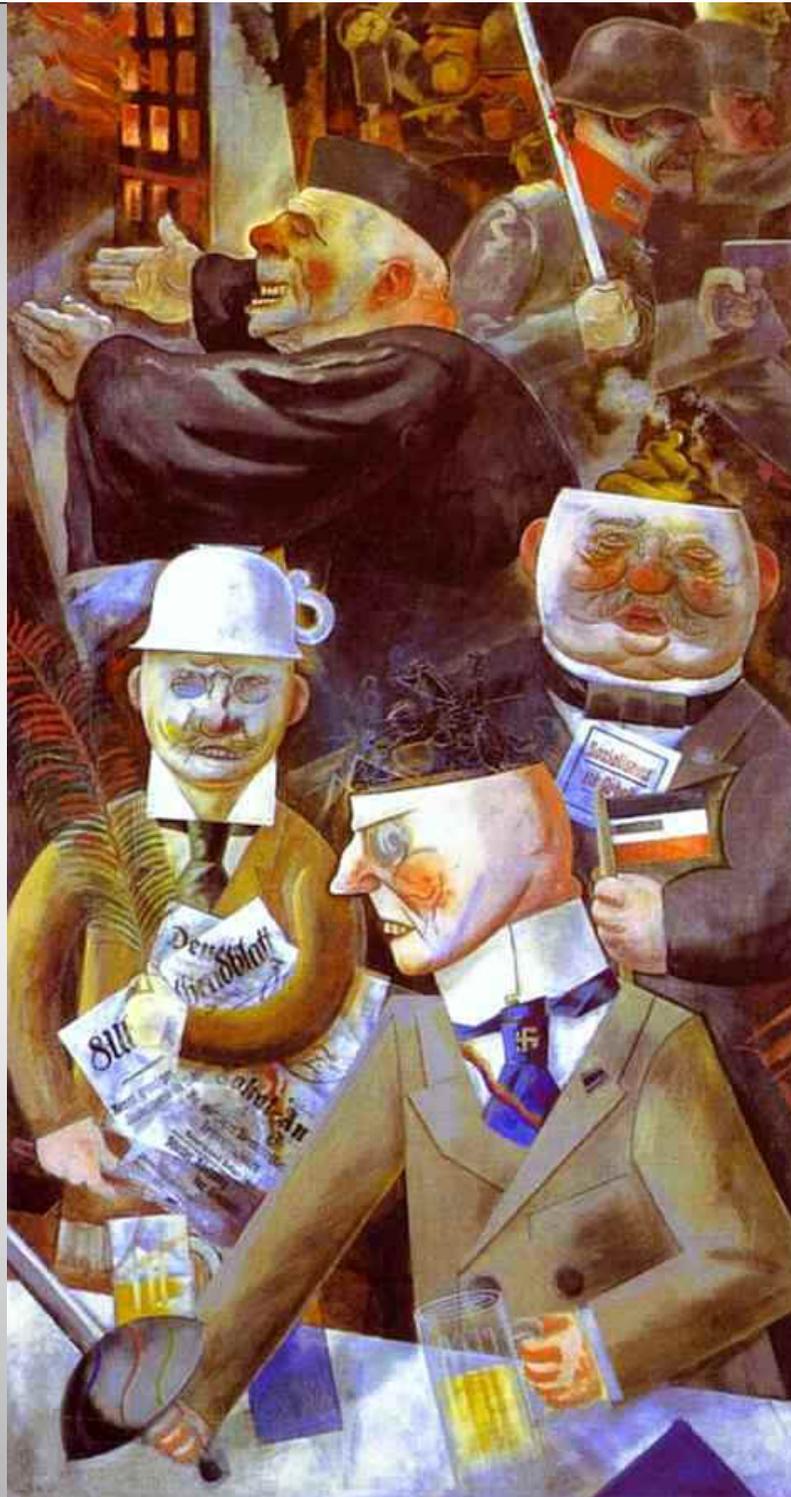
Details

- In the upper left hand corner there is a bloody dollar sign eclipsing the sun, which symbolises money and greed. The sun being the symbol of life and growth, and being completely eclipsed by a dollar symbol, is quite powerful in itself. That is the feature the title derives from.
- At the top centre is what is taken to be a leader in military uniform. The man represented here is the (second) President of the Weimar Republic, Paul von Hindenburg. Next to him is a wealthy industrialist (presumably Gustav Krupp von Bohlen), who is whispering to Hindenburg. Both of them are represented as very large and powerful images, and are the only ones having a head, (the other figures at the table being headless).
- In showing bared teeth, the two look quite evil. The wealthy industrialist holds a toy steam locomotive, keeps a rifle plus a knife under his left arm, and in the upper right corner is a military airplane.
- In front of the leader is a funerary cross painted red, white, and black, the colours of the Weimar Republic imperial flag, indicating all action is carried out with the blessing of the Church.

Details, conti.

- On the green square table – reminding on a gambling table – is a donkey with covers over its eyes. This could be symbolizing the common person blindly following their leaders. The donkey, the public, is here also fed by news/newspaper propaganda. Also on the table is a bloody sword, which is likely to indicate that the President and wealthy industrialist have influenced the politicians to do whatever they want by cutting off their heads; the decapitated heads being the most potent symbolism in this painting.
- In the bottom right corner of the painting is what appears to be a prison cell with prisoners. The common people have been trapped and can't do anything to escape a life of poverty, while the rich businessmen continue to grow richer.
- The message of social inequality, suppression of the opposition, militarism, ignorance and short sightedness of people, plus a militaristic, racist and corruptive leadership style, remain prevalent in the contemporary world.

Slide 10



Pillars of Society,
oil/canvas, 200 x
108 cm, Staatliche
Museen,
Preußischer
Kulturbesitz,
Nationalgalerie
Berlin

Details

- The aggressive open mouthed man with duelling scars plus a sword and beer mug in his hands, and Nazi stick pin, (the official Nazi “swastika” symbol since 1920) represent him as a warmonger.
- However, he seems to be blind to his own brutality, seeing himself as a gallant hussar, symbolized by the delusional thoughts coming out of his head. Based on the outcome of the First World War the ‘stab-in-the-back myth’ (“Dolchstoßlegende”) was widespread and many Germans believed in the need for a revision of the victors’ political established rules in Europe after 1918.
- Furthermore, a fat German nationalist, (who looks remarkably like Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the Social Democratic Party and the first President of the Weimar Republic from 1919-1925), with his head full of manure.
- He is holding a leaflet that reads, “Sozialismus ist Arbeit” ("Socialism is Labour") and a flag of the Weimar Republic. Grosz leaves no doubt that he believes such policies to be worthless and that they ride roughshod over the working class.
- Leftists can be seen behind prison bars at sunset on the right.

Details, cont

- At the rear, a red nosed clergyman blesses everything and everyone indiscriminately with his closed eyes blind to the burning cities outside the window of his safe room and blind to the civil war erupting behind his back.
- There is also a ruthless military man playing with his pistol and bloody sword, plus the reactionary journalist Alfred Hugenberg, with a blood stained palm leaf and a pencil in his hands plus a chamber pot engraved with an Iron Cross on his head.
- Historically, the palm is a symbol of peace, but coloured with the bloody consequences of his newspapers' propaganda, it becomes a symbol of hypocrisy.
- For Grosz, these people were also those responsible for the First World War.
- To understand the meaning of both paintings we cannot look at them in isolation but must consider them together as a set.



Eclipse of the Sun



Pillars of Society

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Thank you very much!!

Dr Raimond Selke, Universiti Putra Malaysia

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National University of Malaysia - UKM,
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Note: A paper is currently in preparation.