

Georgia O'Keeffe and Adolf Hitler – a comparison

by Phillip W. Weiss

In the MALS 70000 class the students were given the following assignment:

“Identify two ways in which Georgia O'Keeffe creates herself as a celebrity in her book Georgia O'Keeffe. Identify two ways in which Perry Miller Adato creates O'Keeffe as a celebrity in her documentary Georgia O'Keeffe. Be specific and provide evidence from the text to support your answer. Think about the book and the documentary in relation to each other. In what ways do they create O'Keeffe as a celebrity similarly? In what ways do they create O'Keeffe as a celebrity differently?”

This was my reply:

In her autobiography, Georgia O'Keeffe tries to present herself as modest, humble, and self-effacing. For instance, she writes: I was shocked to see my name so big and black on my pale drawings. And it didn't seem like my name - it was someone quite apart from me. I had never thought much about having last name." If one is to believe this statement, then Georgia O'Keeffe did not put much store in a her name, the implication of that being that her name is not that important. This theme of humility is further evidenced in another statement she writes: "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." Once again, O'Keeffe is downplaying her name, and other more routine details of her life, wanting to call attention instead to her work.

In the Perry Miller Adato documentary O'Keeffe is treated in a different manner, one of the reasons being that Adato is using a different medium, film. Film and print are two different mediums and so the results will differ. For instance, whereas in her book, O'Keeffe is talking about herself in the first person, in the documentary, she is presented in the third person and the role of geography in shaping her life and artwork is given much more prominence. Interspersed within the documentary are comments from O'Keeffe herself, which Adato uses to connect O'Keeffe to the land, and thereby make a statement about the role of geography in influencing art. Hence the documentary reveals two stars: O'Keeffe and geography. Much of the documentary seems to presented in the form of a travelogue showing different locales (Wisconsin, Texas, New York City, Lake George, Taos, New Mexico), each place exerting an influence on O'Keeffe's art. For instance, the documentary includes film clips of New York City, one of the places where O'Keeffe lived, interspersed with shots of O'Keeffe's New York City paintings and accompanied with her comments about the city, such as, "I think New York is wonderful. It's like a dream. It always makes European cities look like villages." (I was surprised that someone like O'Keeffe who made such a big deal about the outdoors would find the urban environment of New York wonderful.)

The documentary also shows O'Keeffe collecting animal bones in New Mexico, another place she liked. O'Keeffe attributes her fascination with animal bones to her visits to New Mexico. She says: "Because there were no flowers, I began picking up bones."

One glaring difference between the autobiography and the documentary is that in the former O'Keeffe candidly discusses her experiences as an art student while in the latter the subject is glossed over. In her autobiography O'Keeffe's reveals a deep disdain for art school which for her as a student was an unpleasant and stifling experience. Her strong negative feelings on that subject are plainly revealed in these statements (*italics added*):

"Out walked a very handsome ... man ... naked except for a small loincloth. I was surprised - I was shocked - It was suffering."

"I don't remember learning anything"

"It [referring to one of her paintings] looked so fresh and clean compared to the dingy things we usually did at the League."

"Those walks over the Virginia hills and through the woods were the best thing that happened to me in those years - because I never did like school."

"I was told to draw a great big headless armless man's torso. It didn't particularly interest me but I tried to do what I thought I was expected to do."

Interestingly, there was at least one contemporary of O'Keeffe who shared her negative feelings about art schools. That contemporary was Adolf Hitler. Hitler was born in 1889, approximately one year after O'Keeffe's birth, and although he was born in a different country and on different continent, his views on art schools were remarkably similar to that of O'Keeffe's. Regarding art schools, here is what Hitler said:

"It is a characteristic of the present-day academies that they invariably try to stifle genius. No sooner does a real genius make his appearance in the circle of these very moderate 'big-wigs' of the academies, then up they rise with their whole plumage ruffled in wrath against him" (Hitler, *Table Talk*, 409). When referring to real genius, Hitler could have been talking about O'Keeffe.

Hitler too believed that art schools had little to offer. Again Hitler: "In a general way, the academies have nothing to tell me that's worth listening to." (Hitler, *Table Talk*, 280) O'Keeffe's claim that she did not remember learning anything probably would have received a sympathetic response from Hitler.

Both shared similar thoughts on other matters as well. On the subject of open spaces, something that figured prominently in O'Keeffe's life and work, and which was a cornerstone of Hitler's program of achieving Lebensraum for the German Reich, Hitler said:

"The Germans must acquire the feeling for the great open spaces. We must arrange things so that every German can realize for himself what that means" (Hitler, *Table Talk*, 29). One can only speculate how Hitler would have reacted to O'Keeffe's paintings of Texas and New Mexico showing the grandeur of the vast open spaces, the likes of which he was seeking for the German people.

The theme of nature that runs through O'Keeffe's paintings probably would have found an avid fan in Hitler whose racial policies were predicated on the belief in "the will of nature" as the determining factor in the survival of the fittest (Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, n.p.). O'Keeffe's paintings, with their panoramic depictions glorifying nature probably would have earned her accolades in the Hitler-dominated Reich. Indeed, when in the documentary O'Keeffe says, "The bones do not symbolize death to me," one can reasonably wonder if such a statement would have also included the skull and cross-bones (*Der Totenkopf*) which were part of the uniform of the SS.

O'Keeffe's struggle to gain recognition as an artist probably would have generated a sympathetic reaction from Hitler, himself once a struggling artist, who said: "It is not easy to be successful in life, and for some people the difficulties are piled on unjustly" (Hitler, *Table Talk*, 75). Again, Hitler could have been talking about O'Keeffe and her long struggle to gain recognition and assert her unique artistic vision in a rigid patriarchal society in which she had no advantages.

Further similarities between O'Keeffe and Hitler can be found in their respective artwork. Included in Hitler's portfolio of paintings and drawings are landscapes, flowers and nudes, the same kind of artwork for which O'Keeffe is now famous. Also, both were professional painters, meaning that for the both of them, art was more than a hobby. Rather, it was a central part of their lives.

It is also noteworthy that O'Keeffe had a long and intimate relationship with a man, Alfred Stieglitz, who, although born and raised in the United States, had lived in Germany for nine years. Thus, it is possible that O'Keeffe, at least vicariously through Stieglitz, may have been exposed to German cultural influences.

Also noteworthy is that Hitler enjoyed the company of creative people, including women. During his visit to Paris in 1940, shortly after the fall of France, Hitler was accompanied by the sculptor Arno Breker and the architect Albert Speer. He was also friends with Richard Wagner's daughter-in-law, Winifred Wagner, and sponsored the work of the German movie producer, Leni Reifenstahl. One of Hitler's closest confidantes and a member of his inner circle, Joseph Goebbels, was a writer. He was also a supporter of the aviatrix Hanna Reitsch.

Although the similarity of thought between O'Keeffe and Hitler is most likely coincidental, that is, there is no evidence to suggest that they had any contact with each other or in any way influenced each other, yet the appearance of some kind of cultural compatibility between the two is convincing enough to

warrant further inquiry, the absence of such inquiry in both the book and the film leaving a glaring gap in our understanding of Georgia O'Keeffe.

sources:

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