

Wilhelm Worringer publishes *Abstraction and Empathy*, which contrasts abstract art with representational art as a withdrawal from the world versus an engagement with it: German Expressionism and English Vorticism elaborate this psychological polarity in distinctive ways.

“Caught a strange thought,” the German Expressionist Franz Marc (1880–1916) wrote from the front during World War I (where he would soon be killed), “it had settled on my open hand like a butterfly—the thought that people once before, a long time ago, like alter egos, loved abstractions as we do now. Many an object hidden away in our museums of anthropology looks at us with strangely disturbing eyes. What made them possible, these products of a sheer will to abstraction?” However strange, this thought was not entirely new: Marc echoes French poet Charles Baudelaire on poetic “correspondences,” and the notions of an affinity between abstract arts, of the tribal artist as alter ego of the modern artist, and of a primordial will to abstraction are all in keeping with a dissertation written in 1908 by the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965). The connection is not accidental, as another letter from Marc makes clear. In early 1912 he wrote his Russian colleague Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), with whom he had founded the association of artists *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) in Munich in 1911: “I am just reading Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* [Abstraction and Empathy], a good mind, whom we need very much. Marvelously disciplined thinking, concise and cool, extremely cool.”

Worringer was not an unambiguous advocate of the German Expressionists. When they were attacked by a jingoistic antimodernist in 1911, he defended them as harbingers of a new age marked by an embrace of elemental forms, an interest in tribal art, and, above all, a rejection of the “rationalized sight” that he deemed too dominant from the Renaissance through neo-Impressionist painting. Otherwise Worringer left the terms of his affiliation vague; for example, in a 1910 foreword to *Abstraction and Empathy*, he noted only a “parallelism” with “the new goals of expression.” However, this parallelism did point to an “inner necessity” in the age, and this metaphysical bent was shared by the *Blaue Reiter* artists, who often wrote of their art in terms of a “spiritual awakening.” This was most evident in the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* that Marc and Kandinsky published in 1912 with a cover image of a blue rider by Kandinsky inspired by folk images of Saint George (1). Apart from Expressionist work, this influential collection of essays and illustrations featured tribal art from the Pacific Northwest, Oceania, and Africa, the art of children, Egyptian puppets, Japanese masks and prints, medieval



1 • Wassily Kandinsky, final study for the cover of the *Blaue Reiter Almanach*, 1911
Watercolor, india ink and pencil, 27.6 × 21.9 (10 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{5}{8}$)

German sculpture and woodcuts, Russian folk art, and Bavarian devotional glass paintings. Kandinsky was especially drawn to the latter two forms, while his partner, Gabrielle Münter (1877–1962), was strongly attracted to the art of children, the emotive immediacy of which she sought to convey in her own painting.

A metaphysical approach to art was also practiced by *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), the other primary group of German Expressionists. ▲ Headed by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, it was founded in Dresden in 1905, included Fritz Beyl (1880–1966), Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976), all of whom were once architectural students, and was disbanded in Berlin eight years later. The metaphysical bent is clear from the names of the two groups:

the Blaue Reiter was titled after a traditional figure of Christian revelation (“one stands before the new works as in a dream,” Marc wrote in a prospectus for the *Almanach*, “and hears the horsemen of the Apocalypse”), while Die Brücke derived its name from Friedrich Nietzsche, who stated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–92) that “man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman—a rope over an abyss . . . he is a bridge and not an end.” German Expressionism echoed the metaphysical concerns of *Abstraction and Empathy* in other ways too. Like Worringer, Marc expressed the natural world as a place of primal flux, while Kirchner expressed the urban world as a place of primitive vitality. However, this very insistence on *expression* did not fully correspond with the Worringerian conception of abstraction.

Opposed styles

Abstraction and Empathy develops two notions—*Einfühlung* or “empathy,” derived from the German psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), and *Kunstwollen* or “artistic will,” derived from the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl—in order to relate different artistic styles to different “psychic states.” Across history and culture, Worringer argues, two opposed styles—naturalistic representation and geometric abstraction—have expressed two opposed attitudes—an empathic engagement with the world and a shocked withdrawal from it. “Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world,”

Worringer writes, “the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world . . . We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.” This condition of dread before nature (Worringer was influenced here by Georg Simmel [1858–1918], the great German sociologist of alienation) is very different from the state of intimacy with nature that Gauguin, for example, projected onto the primitive. According to Worringer, primitive man sees nature as a hostile chaos: “dominated by an immense need for tranquility,” the tribal artist turns to abstraction as “a refuge from appearances.” This notion led Worringer to construct a problematic hierarchy of culture (as outlined in *Form in Gothic* [1910], his sequel to *Abstraction and Empathy*), with the primitive at the bottom. The modern, however, was not placed at the top: on the contrary, “slipped down from the pride of knowledge, [modern] man is now just as lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world-picture as primitive man.” As a consequence, according to Worringer, the modern artist also struggles to arrest and separate the flux of phenomena, to abstract and preserve the stability of forms: driven once more by “inner unrest” and “spatial dread,” he too turns to abstraction. This account is very different from later celebrations of abstract art, the triumphal humanism of which Worringer challenges before the fact.

But does this account of abstraction really suit the Blaue Reiter, as Marc and Kandinsky [2] hoped it might? It might be more relevant to Die Brücke, for it could be argued that Kirchner and colleagues used abstract elements—unreal colors, uneasy perspec-



2 • Wassily Kandinsky,
With Three Riders, 1911
ink and watercolor on paper,
25 × 32 (9% × 12%)

▲ 1903

tives—in order to register “inner unrest” and “spiritual dread.” Like Worringer, Kirchner often pictured modernity as primitive, not only in the figure of the primitive prostitute that he inherited from Manet and Gauguin by way of Matisse and Picasso, but also in the streets of the modern city where, for observers such as Simmel, the prostitute was only emblematic of a general regression. Just as, according to Worringer, the natural world appeared chaotic to primitives, so, too, according to Kirchner, did the urban world appear chaotic to moderns (German industrialization was fast and furious during the first two decades of the century). In *The Street, Dresden* [3], Kirchner evokes Dresden as a vital but nervous confrontation: huddled masses border the picture and block its expanse, while several figures, mostly women with faces that resemble masks, bear down on us (the little girl here is especially bizarre). With its distorted space and lurid orange-red, the picture is tinged with the anxiety often associated with the painting of Edvard Munch, the Norwegian forerunner of the Expressionists. At the same time the figures also suggest the “blasé attitude” that Simmel ascribed to “the mental life” of the modern city. “The metropolitan type,” Simmel argued in a famous essay of 1903, “develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment.” *The Street* might evoke such a current in the electric line that courses around the figures and through the avenue in orange, green, and blue. Part nervous stimulation, part protective shield, this line isolates these urban dwellers even as it also connects them: it suggests a paradoxical kind of alienation that unites. This effect becomes more extreme in “The Street” paintings that Kirchner produced in Berlin after his move there, with other Die Brücke members, in 1911: the colors of these pictures are more acrid, the perspectives are more

perverse (he adapted Cubism and Futurism for this effect), and the figures (often prostitutes and clients) are more anxious-blasé. If there is a new kind of modern beauty here, as art historian Charles Haxthausen has argued, it is also, at least in part, a terrible beauty. Again, for Worringer, abstraction served to ease the stimulation provoked by the chaos of the world. Kirchner, on the other hand, approached abstraction in order to register this stimulation, indeed to heighten it. The abstraction of the Blaue Reiter is different again: Marc moved toward abstraction in pursuit of a connection with the natural world, while Kandinsky did so in search of a communion with the spiritual realm. For both artists, the isolation of human beings was a problem to overcome, not a condition to deepen. “We search,” Kandinsky wrote in 1909, “for artistic forms that reveal the penetration of these collected forces.” Rather than abstraction *versus* empathy, then, the Blaue Reiter proposed an aesthetic of abstraction *as* empathy—empathy with nature and/or spirit. (In this respect they were in line with the “abstract empathy” already suggested in the *Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau style in Munich that influenced Kandinsky.) The Blaue Reiter artists sought an equation of feeling and form, a reconciliation between “inner necessity” and outer world; Kandinsky insisted that the very “contents” of his art are “what the spectator *lives* or *feels* while



3 • Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *The Street, Dresden*, 1908
Oil on canvas, 150.5 × 200 (59¼ × 78⅞)

under the effect of the *form and color combinations* of the picture.” And this is one reason why they took music, which featured prominently in the *Almanach*, as an aesthetic paragon. Again, this was not to reverse the Worringerian poles of abstraction and empathy but to force them together: as Kandinsky states in the *Almanach*, “Realism = Abstraction; Abstraction = Realism.”

Pantheistic penetration

If Kandinsky aspired to a transcendental world of spirit, Marc delved into the immanent world of nature. Guided at first by Gauguin, Marc defined his project in 1910 as “a pantheistic penetration into the pulsating flow of blood in nature, in trees, in animals, in the atmosphere.” To trace this flow he elaborated two kinds of drawing: first, a fluent, organic, and airy line influenced by Matisse and Kandinsky; then, a more constricted, geometric, and anxious line influenced by Picasso and Robert Delaunay (like Kirchner, Marc adapted Cubism to his own ends). Marc also devised a color symbolism to modulate the moods of this flow: blue was “severe” and “spiritual”; yellow, “gentle” and “sensual”; red, “brutal” and “heavy.” Although this intuitive system was gendered reductively (blue as masculine, yellow as feminine), it led Marc, in the few years left to him, to produce a number of animal paintings that are among the finest in the Western tradition. Finally, however, these pictures do not convey an “animalization of art” (Marc) so much as a humanization of nature: less than empathic communion with nature, they suggest an expressive projection on the part of the artist. In 1853 the English aesthete John Ruskin critiqued this projection as “the pathetic fallacy”; some time after 1913 Marc also came to question it:

Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than to imagine how nature is reflected in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, how does an eagle, a doe, or a dog?... Who says the doe feels the world to be Cubistic? It's the doe that feels,

therefore the landscape must be “doelike.” The artistic logic of Picasso, Kandinsky, Delaunay, Burliuk [a Russian associate of the *Blaue Reiter*], etc., is perfect. They don’t “see” the doe and they don’t care. They project their inner world—which is the noun of the sentence. Naturalism contributes the object. The predicate ... is rendered but rarely.

Rather than an imposed expression, Marc sought an empathic abstraction that might resolve self and other pictorially. No doubt this is an impossible ideal, but a painting such as *The Fate of Animals* [4] does evoke one kind of “pantheistic penetration.” Here, however, the common point between human and animal seems to be pain or agony—even the trees appear to be butchered. Indeed, on the back of the canvas Marc scrawled “and all being is flaming suffering,” as if, like urban tension in Kirchner, natural suffering in Marc was the one thing that united all creatures. And yet, the very desperation of this work points to the ultimate *separation* between beings: after all, suffering is singular and solitary in its effects. In his pursuit of empathy, Marc touches

its limit: the animal other is revealed as precisely other, inhuman, beyond empathy. This is still not abstraction versus empathy, but it is no longer abstraction as empathy. Empathy has failed, and here abstraction becomes the sign of this limit.

Dehumanization as diagnostic

In the end, the model of abstraction versus empathy might pertain less to German Expressionism than to English Vorticism, a movement—named by the poet-critic Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and directed by the prolific painter-novelist-critic Wyndham Lewis ▲ (1882–1957)—that included the sculptors Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) and the painter David Bomberg (1890–1957), among others. The connection here to Worringer is not as attenuated as it might seem. In January 1914, the poet-critic T. E. Hulme (1883–1917), an associate of the Vorticists, delivered a lecture in London on “Modern Art and its Philosophy” that adapted *Abstraction and Empathy* toward an advocacy of Vorticism. Here Hulme—who, like Gaudier-Brzeska



4 • Franz Marc, *The Fate of the Animals*, 1913

Oil on canvas, 194.3 × 261.6 (76½ × 103)

▲ 1934b

and Marc, would soon die in the war that effectively ended both Vorticism and Expressionism—divided modern art into two opposed styles—the organic (his version of the empathic) and the geometric (his version of the abstract). Like Worringer, he then argued that these styles correspond to two opposed “attitudes”—an “insipid optimism,” dominant since the Renaissance, that placed man at the center of nature, and a steely antihumanism, emergent in Vorticist art, that valued “a feeling of separation in the face of outside nature.”

“What he said,” Lewis remarked of Hulme, “I *did*”—though, again, it was Worringer who set the aesthetic terms for both men. In “The New Egos,” a text published in *Blast* (1914), his vitriolic journal of Vorticism, Lewis presented his own Worringerian parable. It concerns two complementary figures, “a civilized savage” and a “modern town-dweller”; neither is “secure” as both live in a “vagueness of space.” Yet the civilized savage is able to ease his insecurity with an art of the figure abstracted to a “simple black human bullet,” whereas the modern town-dweller only senses that “the old form of egotism is no longer fit for such conditions as now prevail.” Lewis concludes his parable with a Worringerian credo: “All clean, clear-cut emotions depend on the element of strangeness, and surprise, and primitive detachment. Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the World.” The Expressionists agreed with this diagnosis, but Lewis saw dehumanization as a solution as much as a problem: if the modern age is to survive its own dehumanization, it must dehumanize further; it must take “strangeness, and surprise, and primitive detachment” to the limit.

Lewis rarely forgoes the human figure altogether. His early “designs” often manifest a tension between figure and surround, as if the body, never secure, were caught between definition, about to break free as an autonomous form, and dispersal, about to be invaded by space. Slowly, however, Lewis abstracts the figure, as if to harden it into a “simple black human bullet.” Sometimes this hardening appears to come from without—outside in—as in *The Vorticist* (1912), in which the body seems to be shocked into abstraction by a hostile world. Sometimes it appears to come from within—inside out—as in *Vorticist Design* (c. 1914), in which the body seems to be driven to abstraction by some innate will. In one especially concentrated figure, *The Enemy of the Stars* [5], the two kinds of armorings appear to converge. On the one hand, with a head like a receiver, the figure looks reified from without, its skin turned into a shield; on the other hand, stripped of organs and arms, it also looks reified from within, its bone structure turned into a “few abstract mechanical relations” (as Hulme once remarked of these figures). In either case, this “enemy of the stars” is the opposite of the Blue Rider whom Kandinsky evokes on an ascent toward the heavens: here Lewis suggests an abstraction of the figure that is indeed antiempathic. HF

FURTHER READING

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T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987 [first published 1924])



1914 was Feb 1917

5 • Wyndham Lewis, *The Enemy of the Stars*, 1913

Pen and ink, ink wash, 44 × 20 (17¼ × 7⅞)

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