

Franz Marc (1880-1916) created *Fate of the Animals* in 1913, a powerful example of German Expressionism. Examining the physical characteristics of the painting and influences on Marc's work reveals that it is actually a vision of an apocalyptic future in pre-First World War Europe.

The *Fate of the Animals* (ill. 1) is a massive oil painting measuring 196 x 266 cm and originally titled *The Trees Show Their Rings, The Animals Their Veins* (Levine 269). It was finished in 1913, about a year before Marc began service in the German army (Levine 269) and depicts a catastrophe befalling a forest and its imperiled animal inhabitants. The painting itself was partially damaged by fire in November, 1916 while being transported to a memorial exhibit for Marc at the Sturm Gallery in Berlin (Levine 269). Restoration fell to friend and contemporary Paul Klee, who "intentionally restored only the diagonals" and "did not even attempt to duplicate the inimitable transparent colors of Marc" (Levine 270). Despite the chaotic vision of the painting, Marc rendered it in a structured and controlled way by using intersecting diagonals. Frederick S. Levine asserts that the diagonals serve three purposes - they "impose a strict compositional order"; "provide an atmosphere of unremitting tension"; and "play an essential role in the narrative of the composition itself" (270).

The diagonals break up the painting into four quadrants as it is viewed from left to right - notice that there are few, if any, purely vertical or horizontal lines. A destructive flame, seemingly "cosmic or supernatural" (Levine 270) occupies the top left hand corner while terrified green horses sit below it. Meanwhile, the same energy engulfs a pair of wild

boars in the lower left hand corner. Unlike the horses, the boars are more accepting of their fate, as they appear frozen and unable to escape. (Levine 271). A blue deer appears in the very middle of the painting, almost at the point where two falling trees intersect, where it assumes a fateful position as well. On the right, a herd of four deer, presumably safe, watch from the side. Some scholars actually believe the group are foxes or wolves, but Frederick S. Levine makes a strong argument that they are other deer (272). In fact, leading up to First World War, Marc and his wife owned four tame deer (Holst *et al.* 27). This scholarly disagreement is outside the focus of this paper, however.

Colour ties into the meaning of the painting as much as the symbolic nature of the animals. By 1913 Marc had invested much time and effort developing his own colour theory and colour symbolism which he called *farbentheorie* (Moffitt 110-111). His friends and fellow artists August Macke and Wassily Kandinsky also developed their own theories on colour, but it was Kandinsky's use of colour as "spiritual symbols" (Moffitt 114) that impressed Marc the most. For Marc, colour had to have an emotional effect as well as an illustrative one. He defined red as "brutal and heavy", yellow represented the "female principle" and blue was the "male principle, severe and spiritual" (qtd. in Moffitt 115-116). As seen in *Fate of the Animals*, the mysterious destructive forces are rendered in vibrant red, the deer is blue (and appears to be genderless, despite the masculinity assigned to blue) and yellow is absent, although it may have existed before the fire damage. Levine feels that along with the strong diagonals, Marc's use of green

with red and red with blue was "designed to produce the maximum intensity of tonal contrasts" (270).

Lastly, in this examination of physical characteristics it should be noted that while Marc is classified as a German Expressionist (Levine 276), the style of the painting can be defined as Futurism or Orphism. Around 1912 Marc became interested in Italian futurism (Holst *et al.* 209) and he corresponded with French Orphism painter Robert Delaunay. While they disagreed on philosophical matters, Marc was inspired by Delaunay's prismatic style (Holst *et al.* 210) which is evident in *Fate of the Animals* (Levine 273).

The painting at once reflects both the concerns of Marc and is truly a manifestation of his time and place in pre-First World War Europe. To understand Marc's work is to also understand the time in which he was raised and worked. Several influences can be identified - his fellow artists, German myth and philosophy, and feelings of patriotism leading up to the First World War. All these influences appear to overlap over time, until they come together in *Fate of the Animals*.

First of all, Marc's relationships with other artists reveal an eager student fascinated with abstraction. His art career was short, but prolific. He studied painting at the Munich Academy until 1903 and, following that, visited Paris many times, seeking out the newest styles in modern art (Zweite 61). By 1909, he had made the acquaintance of other artists who would become close friends and collaborators. It was Marc's defense

and praise for a heavily criticized showing of Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM or New Munich's Artist Union) works that ingratiated him with likeminded artists and he developed strong friendships with Wassily Kandinsky and August Macke (Holst *et al.* 18-20). As previously noted, their colour theories inspired Marc and allowed him to grow as an artist. Marc was actually quite fortunate to live in Munich when he did as it was the right place and the right time for modern artists. It was an artistic centre and attracted artists with its international flavor, galleries and museums. Some artists even preferred Munich to Paris as a place to get an art education (Zweite 11-12).

Secondly, other media give some insight into the German mysticism and philosophies that guided Marc's life. Frederick S. Levine discusses a number of works that influenced Marc, and one of them, by Gustave Flaubert, will be further expanded below. Marc grew up in a time heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's¹ 1872 *Birth of a Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. Nietzsche's vision was that of a rebirth that would "mark a return to the truth of Germanic culture that lay buried in the old legends and myth" (274). In turn, it would be Richard Wagner who "would resurrect the sleeping Siegfried" (274) with *The Ring of the Nibelungen* which was completed after thirty years in 1874. Marc did see at least one showing of the opera, which conveyed the "romantic conviction that night and death redeem man from the turmoil and burden of daylight and life" (274). The opera ends with an "apocalyptic holocaust" (274); the world can then begin anew and pure.

While Levine cannot confirm that Marc may have been familiar with Norse legends called the *Eddas*, Marc was keenly interested in studying Germanic literature and

¹ A letter to his wife from the Western Front tells us that Marc was familiar with Nietzsche's works (Holst 179).

enrolled in the faculty of German philology at the University of Munich as a young man; Levine believes Marc could not have avoided studying it as such (274). Levine identifies an *Edda* named *Volupsa* where a “period of degeneracy...acts as a signal for the dissolution for the world to begin” (275). Similarly, Levine theorizes that the tree in *Fate of the Animals* may be a reference to a legendary tree named Yggdrasil and that the unharmed deer to the right are the survivors who will populate the new world, just as a pair of humans hide inside the Yggdrasil at world's end (276).

It would appear then that Marc was not unique, nor alone, in his catastrophic vision. Levine states that *Fate of the Animals* fits in with other works that existed in the pre-First World War era. Artists of all kinds were reacting to rejection from a "society they saw as soulless, materialistic, hopelessly bourgeois, a society whose morals, mores, and institutions they despised as wholly corrupt" (Levine 276). Marc's pre-occupation with doom also appeared in on the reverse of the canvas for *Fate of the Animals*, where he wrote “And All Being is Flaming Suffering” (Levine 269).

This notion of suffering would appear a relatively new concept in Marc's work. In his last year of painting he began to treat his animal subjects differently. *Small Blue Horses* (ill. 2) from 1911 was typical of the "abstraction and empathy" found in Marc's art. The curvy forms of the horses blend well with a similarly curving landscape, representing the Pantheism Marc felt in nature (Morgan 325). In contrast, by 1912-1913 he was "creating images that violently dismantled the animal and its happy existence in the landscape" (Morgan 325). By this time he had also "manifested the first tendencies towards the

geometric abstractions of Parisian art" (Morgan 326). This shift represents Marc's increasing usage of more abstract forms (Zweite 82).

While on the Western Front, he explains his shift in thinking in a letter to his wife, Maria:

Very early on I saw human beings as 'ugly'; animals seemed to me more purer, more beautiful, but even in them I found so much that was ugly and contrary to feeling that, following an inner compulsion, my pictures instinctively grew more schematic and abstract, until I suddenly became aware of the ugliness, the impurity of nature. Perhaps our European eyes have poisoned and distorted the world; that is why I dream of a new Europe". (qtd. in Zweite 82)

Another work, which just happens to be the precursor to *Fate of the Animals*, also depicts pre-war tensions. *St. Julian the Hospitaller* (ill. 3) is "filled with terror and destruction" (Levine 273) and further abstraction. A deer and a boar cower before St. Julien against a fiery red background - but the destruction in both cases suggest "a necessary, preliminary cleansing, a clear away of sin and corruption, a preparation for the emergence of purification and redemption" (Levine 273). *St. Julian* is directly inspired by *La legende de St. Julien l'Hospitali* by Gustave Flaubert. The Frenchman was a favourite author of Marc's and the dramatic themes of destruction and salvation held his imagination (Levine 273).

Another clue appeared in an invitation for *The Blue Rider* subscriptions.² He specifically states that one can "hear the onrush of the approaching Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (qtd. in Holst *et al.* 177). His yearning for renewal is also found in an

² *The Blue Rider* was an unsuccessful almanac started by Marc and Kandinsky (Holst 23, 25).

unpublished forward for the magazine. "What can one do to attain salvation other than give up everything and flee? Other than draw a line between yesterday and today?" he wrote, as well as, "If we dare to go on, we shall have to cut the umbilical cord that binds us to the past" (qtd. in Holst *et al.* 177). Despite his wife's disapproval, Marc entertained few doubts about the new vision of Europe that came to preoccupy him and his fellow artists, almost to the point of glossing over the realities of war (Holst *et al.* 207). This could be called a battle of the "inner" and "outer" worlds.

The spiritual nature of Marc's work can't be overlooked, whether it is pantheistic themes or symbolic use of colour. It is fortunate that Marc was a prolific writer, for one doesn't need to make assumptions about how he felt. "Today we see to look beneath the veil of appearances, at those things in nature which are hidden," he wrote in a 1912 essay. "And it is not out of caprice or the mere desire for novelty that we seek out this inner, spiritual site of nature and endeavour to paint it" (qtd. in Holst *et al.* 118).

Karin Von Maur, in her section of *Franz Marc: Horses*, feels that the visible world was not one that artists could trust in any longer. As such, Marc stripped what he saw into a purer form and framed it as existing in a timeless manner while integrating the subject with its landscape through abstraction (Holst *et al.* 203-204). Similarly, Levine identifies that German Expressionists of the time believed that the inner world, the soulful and spiritual one, should overcome the outer one (276). Abstraction was a way to see this inner world and Marc even had a term for it – *durchschauend* - which meant "Looking Through" (Morgan 329). With this in mind, by 1914 there were many new discoveries

such as x-rays and atomic structure that literally allowed transparency (Holst *et al.* 203). Remember too that the subtitle of *Fate of the Animals* hints at transparency.

Marc often philosophized about spiritual matters, such as the transcendence of the spirit (Holst *et al.* 208) and in a letter from the front felt that the war was “a preparation for a breakthrough to a higher spiritual existence” (qtd. in Levine 276). In *Fate of the Animals*, the blue deer has long been held as a symbol of Marc’s notions of sacrifice and spiritual belief (Levine 271-272).

The last area of influence is Marc’s intense patriotism. Marc and many of his artistic German friends joined the army in 1914 when war was declared in August (Holst *et al.* 27). August Macke was killed about two months later (Holst *et al.* 27) while Paul Klee survived. Wassily Kandinsky, as a Russian citizen, was forced to leave Germany (Zweite 7). Despite his trips to France and friendships with non-German artists, Marc made it clear where his patriotism lay in a passionate letter to August Macke in 1914 – Marc felt that Germany should be the one who gives birth to a new Europe (Morgan 335). The culmination of all these feelings and years of mysticism, patriotism and a lust for a new world finally became a tangible call to action that could not be ignored. Before waging war on the battlefield, it existed for Marc in painting (Morgan 340). Frederick S. Levine sums up this internal conflict nicely:

The road that led toward salvation had to begin with destruction. Thus, when the Great War finally began, most of the Expressionist artists, poets, and authors greeted it warmly in the belief that the hour of judgment had

at last arrived. (277)

Franz Marc did not live to see his new Europe. On March 4th, 1916, he was fatally struck in the head by shrapnel during the German attack on Verdun. As it happened, Marc was one of the talented Germans that the government sought to remove from fighting, but it came too late (Holst *et al.* 28). Despite early optimism for the war in an obituary for August Macke— “It will not set humanity back; it will bring about the necessary purgation of Europe” (qtd. in Holst *et al.* 27-28) - eventually it became clear to Marc that should he survive, he would not be the same man (Holst *et al.* 179).

Oddly enough, he found a postcard featuring *Fate of the Animals* in 1915.³ If he had not recognized it before, he certainly saw it now as “a chilling apocalyptic premonition of the war” (Holst *et al.* 212). It would seem that trench warfare was just as destructive at the cosmic flame. Perhaps his romantic nature sensed shortsightedness at his pre-war enthusiasm (Holst *et al.* 178-179).

It seems a great shame that Franz Marc did not have a post-war period. One can only imagine how war would have changed him or if he would have further developed *farbentheorie* or painted more prismatic abstractions. Would he be disappointed that Germany lost the war or be embittered by the Europe that emerged? Unfortunately all we can do is admire his works and understand how his intense intellectual and passionate yearning for a new world affected his work and state of mind, as particularly reflected in *Fate of the Animals*.

³ The painting had been on display in 1913 at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon show in Berlin.

III. 1

Franz Marc. *Fate of the Animals*, 1913. Oil painting, 196 x 266 cm. 6 May 2009.
<<http://www.artstor.org>>

III. 2

Franz Marc. *Small Blue Horses*, 1911. Oil painting, 61.5 x 101 cm. 17 May 2009.
< http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marc-little_blue_horses.jpg>

III. 3

Franz Marc. *St. Julian the Hospitaller*. Tempera painting, 63 x 55 cm. as reproduced in Levine, Frank S. "The Iconography of Franz Marc's Fate of the Animals." *The Art Bulletin* 58/2 (1976) fig 2.

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