

Art and Critical Theory

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### Iconography of Franz Marc's *Fate of the Animals*

Franz Marc created *Fate of the Animals* in Germany in 1913, right before World War 1.

When viewing this painting, many scholars have noted the apocalyptic tone of the work. This is corroborated by Marc himself as he mentioned many times the tensions he felt politically and artistically as the war drew nearer. *Fate of the Animals* is not only a representation of political tensions, but also Marc's own feelings towards the direction in which the art world is moving. In order to bring together Marc's own catastrophic interpretation on this era, he had to merge multiple iconographical influences. Marc was taught animal painting by Jean Bloes Niestle and he was introduced to Rayonism by Robert Delaunay. He utilizes various iconographical types from artistic and philosophical processes, along with influences from realist hunting scenes, to create an apocalyptic dynamic between structural civilisation and natural innocence.

Purely formal perception of *Fate of the Animals* would discuss only the haphazard and chaotic layout of lines and colors. (Fig. 1) The brightest colors are found on the left and the duller brown colors are found on the right, with sharp diagonal lines cutting through the entire composition. Moving quickly to the factual and expressional meaning found here, the viewer immediately recognizes animal forms in various active poses and arbitrary colors. The expressions of the animals, which are probably deer, show that they are clearly in distress and the poses describe a fervor of movement. The motif of deer in distress and dying is something that Franz Marc, and most of his viewers are readily familiar with, based on realist still lifes and

hunting scenes that were popular in the previous decade.<sup>1</sup> However, when these innocent animals are coupled with the chaotic and linear aspect of the painting, it causes one to assume (based on practical experience) that the chaos is somehow harming the deer and there is a need to search for deeper meaning.

One of Franz Marc's first teachers was Jean Bloes Niestle, a Swiss Impressionist who practiced the art of animal painting. Niestle focused on the innocence and purity of the animals he depicted and he passed that belief onto Marc. In one of Niestle's later works: *Der Kranke Fuchs*, one can easily see the carefree state of the animal existing in the harmonious foliage.<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2) Marc consistently painted animal subjects, but his love for them was not unique. Many artists practiced animal painting in the 19th century and Marc (through the teaching of Niestle and other teachers) would have been very familiar with them.

Marc not only had a love of rendering animals, but he also connected deep philosophical values to them. He believed in Pantheism, a philosophical idea put forth by Johann Gottlieb Fichte that claimed all men, creatures, and living beings were connected as one to God. This belief falls under the category of German Idealism and was modified many times to develop several different factions of Pantheism.<sup>3</sup> This philosophical idea of universal oneness with all creatures is part of the reason why Marc was so content with painting animals forever. His literary and philosophical influences allowed him and other animal painters to illustrate animal motifs in the place of humans with the same intrinsic meaning of purity and innocence.

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<sup>1</sup> Tseng, Shao-Chien. "Contested Terrain: Gustave Courbet's Hunting Scenes." *JSTOR Home*.

<sup>2</sup> *Jean-Bloé Niestlé. 5 Artworks at Auction. Mutualart.*

<sup>3</sup> "German Idealism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.,

Another influential teacher for Marc was Robert Delaunay. Delaunay not only taught Marc about the symbology of color and cubism, but he also introduced Marc to avant garde Russian Rayonism. One of the founders of Rayonism, Mikhail Larionov, wrote *The Rayonist Manifesto* in which he embarked on a scientific journey of depicting light, rather than the object itself. Larionov wrote: “The style of rayonist painting that we advance signifies spatial forms arising from the intersection of the reflected rays of various objects, forms chosen by the artist's will.”<sup>4</sup> The work of Larionov and Marc’s *Fate of the Animals* is shockingly similar. In a description of Marc’s work Wolf-Dieter Dube wrote: “The interpenetration of animal and landscape in the dissection, overlapping and interlocking of forms that have become transparent.”<sup>5</sup> Marc was clearly inspired by Larionov’s Rayonism and assimilated it into his own work. Larionov’s theories of light were more scientific than what Marc was practicing but when comparing *Fate of the Animals* with any Rayonist painting, one can see the influence. Structural organization of light quickly becomes chaotic when multiplied over an entire composition. Thus the motif of organized and machine-like chaos begins.

The most important search for a recognizable historical type in *Fate of the Animals* is that of the deer with a twisted neck. Central in the painting’s composition is a blue deer with an elongated neck that is slung backwards as if it had been struck by one of the diagonal “rays.” Finding a similar depiction of a dying deer is crucial to the iconological interpretation of *Fate of the Animals* because it gives context to the intrinsic meaning Marc was describing in the painting.

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<sup>4</sup> “Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964).” Mikhail Larionov, Russian Painter, Founder of Rayonism

<sup>5</sup> Dube, Wolf-Dieter. *The Expressionists*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1983.

One must not look far before Marc to find paintings of dead and dying deer in various poses. Realist still lifes featuring dead game were common in the 17th century. The term “still life” in French is *nature morte*, which literally means “dead nature.”<sup>6</sup> A classic motif in these still lifes were dead deer with their heads thrown back. A famous painter of game still lifes was Frans Snyder in the early 17th century. In his painting, *Still Life with Dead Game Birds and Deer*, the body of a deer is thrown over a table with its head and neck hanging off the table.<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 3) This is of course the opposite orientation of the deer depicted in *Fate of the Animals*, but the emphasis on the long neck of the deer and its gruesome death are certainly similar. Marc was obviously familiar with these exaggerated positions of dead game, but in his painting the animal is in the middle of being killed, rather than being dead already.

Finally, after thorough searching for exact works of art Marc came into contact with, represented a deer in the midst of being killed with its head thrown back, and had the same intrinsic meaning of innocence and purity of animals: we come upon Gustave Courbet. In Courbet’s painting, *The Death of the Deer* there is a hunting scene in which two men are killing one stag surrounded by hunting dogs.<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 4) Immediately upon seeing this image, one comprehends using practical experience that the deer is being killed and is in death throes. The specific pose of this deer is the exact pose of the blue deer in the center of *Fate of the Animals*: it has its head thrown back as if it had just been struck. Not only is the motif of the deer the same, but the composition is the same as well. The assailant of the deer is coming from the right and

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<sup>6</sup> “Arts & Sociétés.” # 78. *Animals and the Paintings of Things*. Armelle Fémelat,

<sup>7</sup> “Frans Snyders.” *The Morgan Library & Museum*, 25 Apr. 2021,

<sup>8</sup> “Gustave Courbet the Death of the Deer Painting.”

the deer is being flung back to the left. Courbet may have missed out on the Rayonistic influence, but the idea of action and movement is still very much alive in *The Death of the Deer*.

The intrinsic meaning of Courbet's painting is also significant to Marc. Both men were calling for compassion for the animals due to their innocence and tragic deaths. In the article *Contested Terrain: Gustave Courbet's Hunting Scenes* by Shao-Chien Sang, they write that "Courbet's hunting scenes call attention to human-animal relations mediated by cultural values and embody his endeavors to resolve the contested identities of both modern artist and hunter."<sup>9</sup> The men and hunting dogs represent man, military and civilization, while the deer is the innocent victim.

Both Franz Marc and Gustave Courbet are grappling with the idea of animals' connection to humanity and their role in an ever changing world. In both *The Fate of the Animals* and *The Death of the Deer* the viewer is called to sympathize with the deer, while feeling the cold nature of the attacker. Each artist is picking the specific moment in which the deer is being killed to pull viewers' heartstrings. Marc's ideas about the purity of animals were not born from nothing. He learned from Jean Bloé Niestle and saw images from Courbet which gave him the tools to depict his Pantheistic belief that humanity and nature are united as one. Sang mentions in their essay that, "social struggles embedded in Courbet's hunting scenes and writings... elucidate how they contributed to mid-nineteenth century French natural history and animal rights discourses."<sup>10</sup> This illustrates how work made in the past can influence the intrinsic meaning of work made hundreds of years later.

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<sup>9</sup> Tseng, Shao-Chien. "Contested Terrain: Gustave Courbet's Hunting Scenes."

<sup>10</sup> Tseng, Shao-Chien. "Contested Terrain: Gustave Courbet's Hunting Scenes."

Iconographical references to animal painters, Rayonism, and Courbet's hunting scenes: allow scholars to contextualize *Fate of the Animals* based on what Franz Marc was influenced by. The rising political tensions in Germany were not the only catalyst for this intense scene of death and violence represented in the painting: Marc was putting into visual form his opinions about the changing world through symbols he had learned over time from other artists. The chaotic linear elements were clear renditions of Rayonism which was introduced to him by Robert Delaunay, the animal subject matter was inspired by Marc's teacher Jean Bloe Niestle, and the motif of the deer getting killed came from Courbet and common hunting scenes. Marc was an avid student of the arts, so he used Rayonism to represent structure, civilization, and military, and he used the distressed animals to represent humanity and innocence. He was familiar with many famous artists and clearly used their influences in *Fate of the Animals* to contextualize the tensions in Germany politically and artistically.

Appendix



Figure 1. Franz Marc, *Fate of the Animals*, 1913.

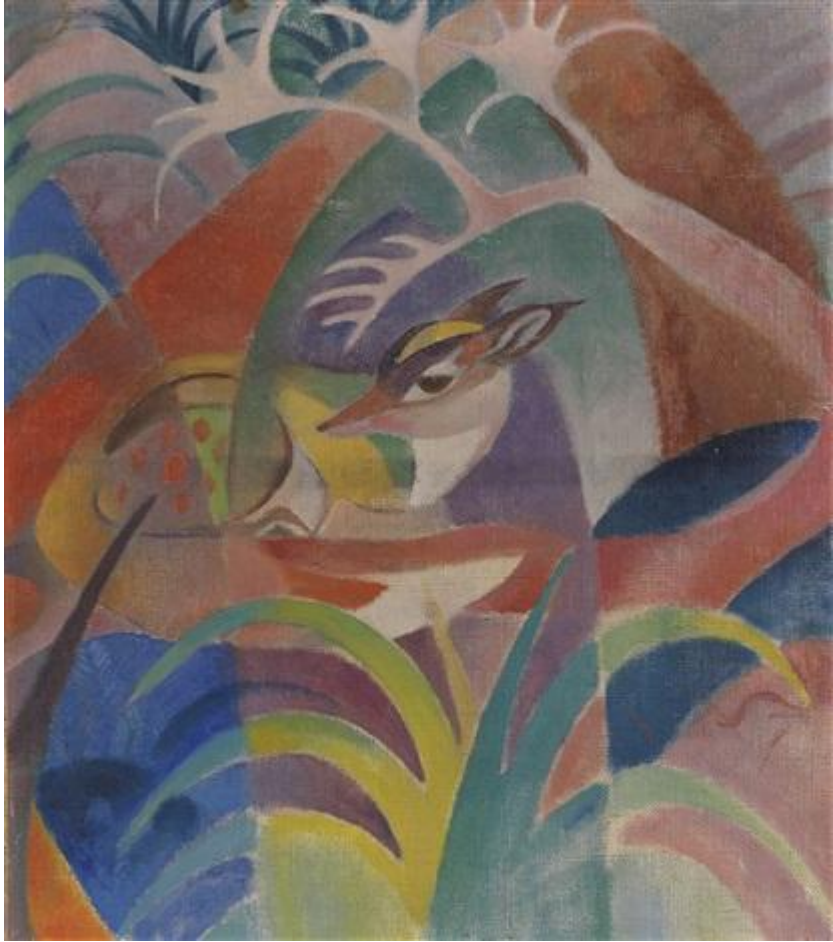


Figure 2. Jean Bloch-Niestle, *Der Kranke Fuchs*, 1920.





Figure 3. Frans Snyder, *Still Life with Dead Game Birds and Deer*, 1641.



Figure 4. Gustave Courbet, *The Death of the Deer*, 1866.

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*Fate of the Animals* Essay: Meta Critique

In 2021 Piper Grant wrote a paper called *Fate of the Animals: A Reflection on the Turning of an Era*. Even the title is dripping in Hegelian zeitgeist. This paper was an attempt at an in depth art historical analysis and the effort was clearly made to reconcile the visual forms on a picture plane with the historical context in which it was created. Grant uses the art historical method of style to categorize the work of Franz Marc. However there are many areas where the essay is found lacking. Grant neglects to investigate the iconological significance of Marc's symbology whatsoever. In her essay there is no comparison to any other work made at the same time as *Fate of the Animals* with the same intrinsic meaning as Marc's. Grant also allows in too much mysticism and faith in Hegelian ideas of spiritual movements controlling the hands of the artists through the methodology of style. Overall, there is very little contextualization in her essay which aims to define Marc's intentions. This lack of historical contextualization leaves the reader feeling as if the author is grasping at straws while hoping she still gets an "A" on the paper.

One main reason why Grant's essay falls flat is because she is neglecting to ask the right questions that will lead to more emphasis on iconological interpretation. How are animals being depicted in Germany before World War 1? How are Marc's animals different or similar to this? Are any other artists rendering apocalyptic paintings before WWI? If so, what are the intrinsic meanings of their paintings and how is *Fate of the Animals* different or similar? What are Franz Marc's literary influences at this time? None of these questions are answered or even addressed in Grant's essay.

Zero comparison to any other specific work of art makes it seem as if *Fate of the Animals* lives in its own bubble of apocalyptic expressionism. Grant goes to great lengths to contextualize Marc in Der Blaue Reiter and his influences from German romanticism, but she never gives concrete iconographical or symbolic examples from other artists. Which is ironic considering the obvious blue horses that show up in the work of many members of Der Blaue Reiter. Had there been a definitive comparison or relationship given between Marc's work and any other artwork that existed in the same time/space; Grant's essay would have had a much more powerful thesis.

One of the most annoying things about Grant's essay is how much mystery is surrounding Marc's motivation for making *Fate of the Animals*. She mentions several times how Marc somehow "predicted" the spiritual change of an era and how this is seen as prophetic because how could Marc have known this before WWI? The idea that Marc was responding to a higher power and the style (or spirit) of the German Expressionist movement was changing is all very Hegelian. However, Piper did not even know who Hegel was at the time she wrote this paper, so truthfully this was just lack of research, rather than intense philosophical thought. Had she put in the time to look for Marc's influences instead of accepting them as mysteriously prophetic and why he might be drawn to apocalyptic themes; I am sure there would have been less talk of spiritual style and more concrete evidence.

Lack of art historical context is the death nail in Piper Grant's *Fate of the Animals: A Reflection on the Turning of an Era* paper. She makes an effort to include artists that Marc was influenced by, but she does this briefly and sparingly. Robert Delauney is given one sentence of context and Kandinsky is mentioned several times but never in regard to the visual aspects of his individual work. She uses Hegelian ideas of spirits directing artists in the changing of artistic styles as a way to supplement little research on Marc's historical influences. Overall, Grant's

essay acts as a thin veil covering the story of Marc's life in regard to his visual compositions:  
fluttering in the wind and aspiring to block the light of the sun.