

**Scientists and artists between war and peace: the Blaue Reiter moment**

Dr. Jay Winter

Professor of History at  
Yale University

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One of the objectives of this series of forums is to try to help bring together the study of art, science, and cultural history in new and fruitful ways. Perhaps a promising path to follow is to trace a number of creative moments in the arts and sciences in the context, perceived or ignored, of the violence which both constituted and threatened to destroy the world in which such daring experiments emerged. This essay is a step on that long and torturous journey, leading to our own times. Let us start, therefore, as so many stories do, on the eve of war in 1914.

But before doing so, a caveat or two may be useful. I am standing in for those who know this subject better than I do. That is why I frame this paper in a broad way, to help us conceptualize the sweep of the forums we have in mind for the future. Why start on the eve of 1914 and move through the twentieth century to our own times? This interrogation makes my paper one about origins, about the threads that link 1914 to today, and the study of 1914 to the subjects we shall address. In this context, this paper is also about scholarly origins and trajectories. In part it is about the godfather of my ‘godfather’, if I can call him that: Fritz Stern, my first teacher. I attended a seminar at Columbia University with Fritz Stern 46 years ago, and I am in it still. I had hoped Fritz, the distinguished author of *Einstein’s German World*,<sup>1</sup> would address this gathering on science and the arts before the Great War, but alas he was unable to come. His godfather was Fritz Haber, a close friend of the family. Fritz’s father was his doctor, and his parents were part of a world of artists, theologians, scientists and men of affairs in Breslau, then Germany, now Poland. That multi-faced cosmopolitan society was Haber’s world, and the world of many of his creative contemporaries. It about that world that I wish to speak today, a mere echo of what Fritz Stern could have told us about it.

I want to gesture, nonetheless, towards the astonishing exuberance of those men and women who saw a new Renaissance unfolding before them in the years prior to 1914. To know what the Great War destroyed we need to see the world on the eve of the conflict through the eyes of contemporaries. We need to acknowledge what they saw and what they did not see, what they did and what they did not do.

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Stern, *Einstein’s German world* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

In that light, my first argument is that prior to 1914, art and science were transnational cultural practices, located both in robust nation states and in self-defined creative communities that crossed borders with alacrity and impunity. The Great War brought passports and border controls of many kinds into the world, in science and the arts as much as in personal life. The nationalization of art and science was one of the disasters of the 1914-18 conflict. How great a disaster can be seen by having a look at the trans-national world which thrived before the opening of hostilities in August 1914.

My second argument is that while innovation in both science and the arts proceeded at a dizzying speed, the world of scientific work and that of artistic creation were not segregated either from each other or from wider currents of thought and politics. That is, artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc were well aware of what was happening in science, and scientists like Einstein and Haber were active participants in cultural networks in Breslau, Berlin and beyond. Our fragmented world of increasingly isolated specialists was not yet a reality.

My third claim is that they were engaged in different ways, either directly or indirectly, in the great political problems of the day, including problems of war and peace. Engagement, to be sure, is not the same as comprehension. In this respect they were not very different from most of their contemporaries, in underestimating drastically the dangers industrialized violence posed to their world and its values. To see them living on the edges of a volcano is both an overused metaphor and a true representation of the precarious situation of which they were aware in some ways but not in others.

My fourth claim is that some of these people were what I term 'minor utopians', people who believed that radical transformations in the world are possible, and that they can occur without producing the mountain of corpses 'major utopians' like Hitler, Stalin and Mao left in their wake. Such individuals dream impossible dreams, and then come up against the contradictions in their own visions of the world which destroy or fragment their hopes. That is what utopias are: they perform the contradictions of an age. Tracing the fate of such 'minor utopians' is part of the work of later forums, but we should beware of the mistaken belief that we ourselves are somehow immune from similar illusions, similar contradictions, similar limitations. Viewing impossible dreams and failed projects in the past is almost always like glancing in the mirror.

## 1. Reflections on violence

In the decade or so before the Great War, violence was not at the margins of European society: it was one of its central preoccupations. Violence in revolutionary dreams, in imperial wars, in colonial plunder and barbarism: they were all there in abundance. What interests me today is the response to these structural instabilities in the European world among artists and scientists who produced at that time a veritable explosion of iconoclastic and path-breaking achievements in many fields. Wherever you look in the experimental sciences or the creative arts, someone was tearing down received wisdom and erecting a strikingly original edifice of knowledge and feeling. Virginia Woolf put it, with characteristic irony, in her obiter dictum in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' that 'On or about December 1910, human character changed'.<sup>2</sup> I like to read into that oracular statement that what changed was less human character than our understanding of its complexity, its interiority, and its development over time. Here is what Woolf said of her fellow revolutionary James Joyce: 'let us record the atoms as they fall on the mind in order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness'.<sup>3</sup> Here we can see the sources in pre-1914 developments of her literary achievements in the post-war years.

Recording the atoms as they fall on the mind: what a fine image not only for abstract art but also for the age of Rutherford and the first experiments in nuclear fission. His insights went into the atom itself, and found ways of deconstructing it. In a period when Freud was doing his iconoclastic best to reconfigure our internal lives as framed by war between desire and conscience, and when Einstein, Bergson, and Proust, were challenging conventional notions of time, we can perhaps justify this reading of Virginia Woolf's aphorism. When machine-speed exponentially accelerated rhythms of transportation and communication, human interactions covering the globe became, if not instantaneous, dizzyingly rapid. More atoms fell on more minds in motion than ever before. Human beings moved in huge waves in this period; in the first phase of globalization between 1880 and 1914, perhaps 30 million people moved westward in Europe and out of it across the Atlantic to North and South America and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), vol. 3, pp. 422-3.

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, p. 161.

Woolf's ironic precision masked a profound sense shared by many of her contemporaries, that at a time of accelerating movement, they were in the act of creating new languages of creativity. It is to those linguistic turns and the explosive context in which they emerged that I want to draw your attention today.

To call the period 1900-14 explosive is not at all metaphoric. The setting for the cultural explorations of the time was one of the most dynamic periods of industrial capitalism. What we term globalization began then, more than a century ago, in the bowels of the second industrial revolution, driven by electricity, assembly-line method and new scientific processes of synthesis or extraction of raw materials, of generation of energy supplies, and the creation and exploitation through plunder or more polite 'civilizing' cultivation of all five continents.

Globalization was a monument to civilization, and as Benjamin put it, it was at one and the same time a monument to barbarism. Violence and creativity were braided together in this period, as it would be in others. It is not difficult to enumerate the well-publicized cruelties and barbarisms of this first phase of globalization. The Boxer rebellion in China took perhaps a million lives when European powers plundering the chaotic last period of the empire, responded to a nationalist uprising. The German response to African protest in colonial southwest Africa was the extermination of the Herero and Namaqua people. Concentration camps were 'invented' first in Cuba and then deployed in South Africa, during colonial wars conducted by the United States and Britain around the turn of the century.

This spasm of imperial violence contrasted sharply with the display of innovation and wealth at the great world's fair of 1900 in Paris. Here was a celebration of the surface glitter of empire, attended by 40 million people – ten times the population of the city of Paris itself – attracted by the first moving staircase, the first primitive television, the first 3-D films, all products of the electrification of everyday life. Dozens of colonial pavilions turned Passy into corners of Africa and Asia, and brought the exoticism of empire into the heart of Europe. The heart of darkness was the way the Polish-born English writer Joseph Conrad put it in his novel of that title published in the very same year, and all the electricity in the world could not erase the contradiction between imperial grandeur and colonial brutality.

Matching the optimism of the grand expo of 1900 in Paris, was that underlying another international gathering in the Hague. The year before, at the behest of Czar Nicholas II, 26 delegations had come to the Hague to explore ways of creating lasting institutions of arbitration and disarmament. The delegates were well aware of the effect of the new industrial technology on creating arsenals exponentially larger and more lethal than any seen before. They also knew that there was an international peace movement, with wide appeal in many countries.<sup>4</sup> The first Inter-Parliamentary Conference for arbitration in international affairs met in Paris in 1889, the date of the founding of the Second socialist international. At the two Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907, the laws and customs of war were formalized and updated, and though enforcement measures were beyond their reach, the signatories registered their desire to control war and its cruelties.

Among the delegates to the 1899 Hague conference was the French physician Charles Richet. We shall have occasion to meet him again. In this context, he was already a well-known advocate of international arbitration and disarmament.<sup>5</sup> He sat together with scientists, artists, men of letters, men of the cloth, and lawyers to envision a world not without violence, but with barriers to stem its tides. That was not to be, but let us not ignore the effort in light of its subsequent failure.

## 2. Crossing boundaries: international science

It is difficult in the light of the catastrophe of 1914 to recognize how widespread were such efforts to match nationalism with internationalism. Among them were numerous scientific ventures, conducted in such a way as to show that the dizzying speed of experimental science made national frontiers either of little importance or completely redundant. It is not that scientists were immune to national sentiment; it is rather they were also dedicated to developing trans-national networks which benefited everyone.<sup>6</sup> Like their counterparts today, scientists then were men of their times, subject to the same pressures of socialization and national pride as their contemporaries. They were not universalists; instead virtually all were men (and occasionally,

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Barcroft, 'The Hague Peace Conference of 1899', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, iii, 1 (1989), pp. 55-68.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Richet, *Pour la paix* (Paris: G. Ficker, 1920), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Crane, 'Transnational networks in basic science', *International Organization*, xxxiii (1971), pp. 585-601.

very occasionally, women) with plural identities, national and trans-national at one and the same time.<sup>7</sup>

Historians of science have taught us much about the mix of the national and the trans-national in many disciplines before 1914. There is a complex story to be told here, one in which national scientific ‘styles’ existed alongside international efforts to share knowledge, to communicate research results, and to standardize measurements. Internationalism in science was a practice, consciously following the *Encyclopédistes* of the eighteenth century, but with social as well as scientific benefits. The study of sociology emerged at this time too, with multiple national facets, but with an internationalist’s mission. Experimental scientists thought along similar lines, and looked to find ways of communicating their findings in the most rigorous ways.<sup>8</sup> The Bureau international des poids et mesures (BIPM), set up through an international treaty in 1875 in Sèvres, near Paris, provided scientists with the means to formalize and compare their findings. Standardized time was one of its achievements.

The work of the BIPM was an indication of the importance of collaboration between laboratories in different countries, rather than their parallel and antagonistic development. Competition never vanished to be sure, but especially in astronomy and geophysics, such trans-national networks were of real importance by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1882 a Central Committee for Astronomic research was created; five years later came the Permanent International Committee to map the heavens. Earlier still geologists had formed the International Committee of Geodesie (1864), the International Meteorological Committee (1872), and the International Geological Congress (1875). In the 1890s international congresses of physics and chemistry joined the ranks of trans-national scientific forums. The most advanced of these initiatives were in the applied sciences, benefiting from international bureaus standardizing

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Crawford, *National and internationalism in science, 1880-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 31ff.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Rasmussen, ‘L’Internationale scientifique (1890-1913)’, Thèse du doctorat d’histoire, EHESS, 1995.

procedures and methods in telegraphy (1868), electrotechnology (1906), refrigeration (1908), and electric lighting (1913).<sup>9</sup>

All of the impulses which went into commercial globalization operated in the sphere of scientific globalization. It was in everyone's interest that there be free trade in scientific discovery, and to that end hundreds of international congresses were organized in specialized disciplines. Some were linked to the great world's fairs; some were regular events.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the speed of growth of the scientific meeting was so rapid that an association of academies was formed to keep track of them.<sup>11</sup> In this way, international science became a utopian quest, promising a cornucopia of benefits for humanity as a whole.

Many scientists were partisans of the peace movement in the first years of the twentieth century. I have already noted the work of the French Nobel Prize laureate Charles Richet, and will return to his thinking later in my second contribution to this forum. He was an indefatigable pacifist, for Dreyfus and against what he saw as clerical reaction. Above all he was convinced that international science was the enemy of war.<sup>12</sup> In an address published in April 1914, he summarized his thinking in these terms. Two forces, he said, contest the world: on one side is tradition, religion, the maintenance of old customs, hatred for the foreigner, disdain for things of the spirit, the cult of force, in a word *nationalism*. It is like a plague throughout Europe, especially in Germany. Opposing these currents is internationalism, a movement which does not exclude love of nation. And in that internationalist camp, the most powerful support came from science. This was for one simple reason: 'Toutes les conquêtes de la science sont

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<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Crawford, John L. Heilbron, John G. May, Rebecca Ullrich, 'Les élites scientifiques internationales. Physique et chimie dans le premier tiers du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, No. 12 (Oct. - Dec. 1986), pp. 97-100.

<sup>10</sup> Rasmussen Anne, 'Les Congrès internationaux liés aux Expositions universelles de Paris (1867-1900)', *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, N°7 (1989). *Les congrès lieux de l'échange intellectuel 1850-1914*, pp. 23-44.

<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus, 'Division of labour and the common good : the International Association of Academies, 1899-1914', in C.G. Bernhard *et al.* (dir.), *Science, Technology and Society in the Time of Alfred Nobel*, Nobel symposium 52, (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 3-20.

<sup>12</sup> Paris, Académie nationale de médecine, Fonds Charles Richet, VI, 2, A, 2, numbers 1-15. For instance, 'War and science', *Advocate of Peace*, lxxi, 11 (Dec., 1909), pp. 256-8.



internationales'.<sup>13</sup> Richet was not alone in thinking that this internationalism could keep nationalism in check ; his error was common, but still catastrophic.

Scientific optimism was hardly surprising, given the extraordinary strides in medicine, in transportation and in communication in the latter nineteenth-century. Perhaps the best known advocates of both trans-national science and peace were Swedish and French: Alfred Nobel and the Curies. Dynamite, Alfred Nobel's contribution to humanity, belonged to everyone (for a fee), and so did the scientific knowledge which had led to its development. The establishment of the Nobel prizes both honored national scientific achievement and was intended by their founder to promote the work of young scientists wherever they lived. His personal attachment to his former secretary Baroness Bertha von Suttner helped stimulate his commitment to establishing a peace prize, funds for which were set aside in his will after his death in 1896. One of the first winners of the Peace Prize was none other than Baroness von Suttner herself. Thus an Austro-Bohemian aristocrat and a Swedish arms manufacturer gave birth to the idea that the Norwegian parliament would honor someone each year for his contribution to peace. The first two winners were Swiss and French; they were followed by more Swiss, an Englishman, an American (Teddy Roosevelt), an Italian, a Swede, a Dane, a Belgian, the good Baroness, a Frenchman, a Dutchman, a German, another American (Elihu Root), and a Belgian. Then came the outbreak of the Great War; the prizes were suspended.

The science prizes were similarly ecumenical, though German winners outnumbered all other nationals. In 1911, Marie Curie received her second Nobel Prize for the discovery of both radium and polonium, named for her native land. The Curies embodied trans-national science and showed how entirely compatible it was to serve the nation which had provided her (grudgingly as a woman) the conditions to do the work that made her name world-famous. War-work on X-ray techniques for the front after 1914 probably cost her her life.<sup>14</sup>

Before 1914, national scientific societies welcomed distinguished foreigners as honorary fellows and participants in meetings and celebrations. Everyone knew the power of German science, headed by the world-renown scholars organized in Kaiser Wilhelm II Institutes, now

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<sup>13</sup> Fonds Richet, VI, 2, A, 2, no. 3, 'L'éloge de la raison', *Floréal, Annales officielles de la Fédération des jeunesses laïques de France*, no 7. Avril 1914, pp. 215-18.

<sup>14</sup> Karin Blanc, *Marie Curie et le Nobel* (Uppsala : Uppsala Studies in the history of science, 1999).

renamed for one of their most distinguished leaders, Max Planck. Reciprocal recognition was accorded to German scientists by the Royal Society in London and the French Académie des sciences, housed in L'Institut de France, that is until wholesale expulsions followed the outbreak of war in 1914. To their credit, German scientists, following Planck's lead, were less precipitous in removing the names of colleagues from hostile nations from their books.<sup>15</sup>

In this forum, we are concerned with the period prior to 1914, that is, before the international brotherhood of science was blown to pieces. What was lost can be symbolized by one moment in university ceremony. In June 1914, Oxford University conveyed honorary degrees on five eminent scholars in the humanities and the sciences. Every single one was German. In addition a doctorate in civil law was awarded to Prince Lichnowsky, German ambassador to the Court of St James.<sup>16</sup> After the commencement of hostilities two months later, that world of learning, braided together with those in Oxford, Cambridge, and a host of other universities, was never the same again. The bridges, once destroyed, could never be rebuilt. Nationalism, and the bitterness on which it thrived, occluded internationalism for decades to come.

### 3. Crossing boundaries: art and the spirit

What might have been: there is no way to avoid this wistful formulation in considering the launching of the first *Blaue Reiter* almanac. The moment was brief and brilliant. Of the triumvirate at its core, both Franz Marc and August Macke were dead two years later. Kandinsky left for Russia, and the first number of the almanac became the last.

There are two documents which constitute the legacy of this revolution in the making. The first is an essay of Kandinsky on what he termed 'the spiritual'. The second is the almanac itself. Let us consider them together. Kandinsky came to Munich in 1896 at the age of 30, following his education in Russia in economics and law. He passed up a chair in Roman law at the University of Dorpat, and left Russia to study art, privately and then at the Academy of Fine Arts

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Fordham, 'Universities', in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital cities at war: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919, Vol. II. A Cultural history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Winter, 'Oxford and the First World War', in B. Harrison (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 290-323.

in the Bavarian capital. From 1902, he made his life and shared his art with Gabriella Münter in the nearby village of Murnau.

It was in this period that he made his move into abstraction and penned the two manifestoes associated with his work and the group he led. The first was entitled *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. It distilled his thinking in the first decade of the twentieth century. Composed mostly in 1910, it was published the following year, just in time for the *Blaue Reiter* exhibition and the publication of the almanac, to which we turn in a moment.

### 1. *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*

The title requires exposition. ‘On the spiritual in art’ is only a rough translation. The primary problem is that in German the term ‘*Geistige*’ is a house of many mansions. It can accommodate the sacred and the secular, the intellectual and the creative, the spirit of an age and the rejection of materialism.<sup>17</sup> It is likely that Kandinsky wanted to express all these shades of meaning, since the pamphlet was primarily polemical in character. We can judge what he rejected more clearly than what he championed. He was against the art of the surface, produced by those blinded by materialism. Instead, Kandinsky insisted that ‘relationships in art are not necessarily ones of outward form, but are founded on inner sympathy of meaning’. That ‘sympathy’ is more akin to music and dance than to the banal paintings of the ‘realists’, who have no idea of the ‘inner meanings’ in the world around us. These meanings are beyond the reach of the natural sciences, which, in their older forms, cannot help us arrive in what Kandinsky termed ‘the realm of the immaterial. That which has no material existence cannot be subjected to a material classification. That which belongs to the spirit of the future can only be realized in feeling, and to this feeling the talent of the artist is the only road’.<sup>18</sup>

In my second paper to this forum, I will explore the overlap between the program of the *Blaue Reiter* group and that of other freethinkers. Among the revolutionaries who were advancing beyond conventional science were those investigating extra-sensory perception, or

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<sup>17</sup> Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich. The formative Jugendstil years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 140-1.

<sup>18</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *On the spiritual in modern art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (London: Constable, 1914). All citations are from this edition.

what was termed at the time ‘spiritualism’. Here is one more shading of the *Geistige* which Kandinsky held up for admiration: the work of Crookes, Richet, Flammarion, scientists with the courage to go beyond the shibboleths of the science of their day. Theosophy to Kandinsky was ‘a tremendous spiritual movement’ (there is that word again), humbling the haughty Westerners so used to condescending to those they held in imperial chains.

Kandinsky called another cultural critic his brother in arms. Under the savage critique of Nietzsche, morality and conventional science lose their hold over freethinkers, who lead the way. ‘Literature, music and art’, Kandinsky affirms, ‘are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt’. Both Wagner and Debussy pushed music into the world of ‘spiritual impressions’, and pointed the way to Schonberg, whose music was ‘severed from conventional beauty’ in his ‘search for spiritual harmony’. Similarly Cézanne broke the mold of representational art. He ‘was endowed with the gift of divining the inner life in everything’. Matisse and Picasso, Kandinsky added, were by his side, breaking up conventional notions of color and form, respectively.

Just as in the natural sciences, that domain he rejected, the plea here was for an alliance of the arts, and of artists committed to moving into the spiritual domain. ‘And so the arts are encroaching one upon another’, Kandinsky wrote, ‘and from a proper use of this encroachment will rise the art that is truly monumental. Every man who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will someday reach to heaven’.

‘Someday’, from Kandinsky’s perspective, could be quite soon. There are apocalyptic rhythms in his 1911 essay *Über das Geistige*, moments when he both acknowledged political and social conflict, and saw the way beyond them.<sup>19</sup> He spoke of our inhabiting a ‘spiritual atmosphere’ which was made up of warring elements, the higher, nobler sentiments arrayed against ‘Suicide, murder, violence, low and unworthy thoughts, hate, hostility, egotism, envy, narrow "patriotism," partisanship...’ Despite this collision between ‘violent warlike feelings’ and higher aspirations, he was optimistic. ‘Hope’ is a verb prominent in his vocabulary. Since

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<sup>19</sup> Reinhold Heller, ‘Kandinsky and Traditions Apocalyptic’, *Art Journal*, xliii, 1, Are We Ready to Memorialize Kandinsky? (Spring, 1983), pp. 19-26.

‘spiritual experience is quickening, that positive science, the firmest basis of human thought, is tottering, that dissolution of matter is imminent’, then ‘we have reason to hope that the hour of pure composition is not far away’. ‘It is possible that towards the close of our already dying epoch a new decorative art will develop, but it is not likely to be founded on geometrical form’ but rather on abstraction. Artists, the carriers of hope, point the way to the future. He closed his essay on ‘the spiritual’ with these words: ‘We have before us the age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders’.

How do we assess this extraordinary document? Kandinsky’s was a clarion call, an awakening, a rallying of artistic ingenuity in the pursuit of more than the material world. This crusade was by definition multi-national and multi-dimensional, just as much as was experimental science. What distinguished the two might be termed professional immodesty. Kandinsky was a prophet. What is critical here is not the accuracy of his assessments, but his taking on the mantle of the oracle. Here is the man to lead the avant-garde, away from the vulgar materialism of Marxism or social movements into the realm of the spiritual.

And there’s the rub. Kandinsky’s sense of the *Geist* is so removed from the material world that the apocalypse he envisioned was overwhelmed by the very material apocalypse of war he (and most others) could not see. Still the call to arms had to be issued, and it informed both the display of modern art which Kandinsky and Marc organized in Munich in 1911-12 and the almanac which came out of it.

## 2. The *Blaue Reiter Almanac*

Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky literally framed the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. That is, their joint and several manifestoes proclaimed the dawn of a new era precisely at the opening and the end of the book. Their words were parentheses, in between which were placed 150 works of art, music, and theatre embodying the creative pulse of the day, the search for the ‘inner life’ and its

expression in art. This art embodied what they saw as the ‘spiritual “awakening” preparing the way forward to the new ‘epoch of great spirituality’.<sup>20</sup>

As most iconoclasts do, Marc and Kandinsky believed in clearing away the rubble of the old materiality of the world before exploring triumphantly the spirituality of the world. ‘We stand before the new pictures as in a dream’, Kandinsky wrote, ‘and we hear the apocalyptic horsemen in the air’.<sup>21</sup> The artist par excellence who painted sound, Kandinsky gave us a glimpse of what the heavenly symphony felt like. Have a look at this work by Kandinsky which decorates the almanac:

Fig. 1: Wassily Kandinsky, *Sound of Trumpets*, 1911, Munich: Städtische Galerie



In this period, the apocalyptic mode still retained its hope of regeneration. A few years later, apocalypticists recreated the sounds of the last days without the hope of Kandinsky and his allies. Instead of a new dawn, a dark sun dominated the horizon in the work of Beckman and Dix.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (eds), *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 250. This is the English translation of the edition prepared by Klaus Lankheit as *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1965). (Hereafter cited as BRA).

<sup>21</sup> BRA, p. 252.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of Mourning. The Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), chapter 6.

Utopias, I hold, perform the contradictions of an age. This one is no exception. In the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, Franz Marc insisted that ‘a chasm *must* exist between the genuine creation of art and the public. It cannot be otherwise because the artist can no longer create out of the now-lost artistic instinct of the people’.<sup>23</sup> The layman must be made to hear,<sup>24</sup> but he is a follower not an initiator. ‘We know that the great mass cannot follow us today; the path is too steep and too far from the beaten track for them’.<sup>25</sup> Only the artist can lead the way.

I like to call this approach to artistic transformation the canary theory of cultural change. To descend from the airy heights of Kandinsky and Marc’s manifesto, the coal miners of the day used to carry canaries with them, to sniff out leaking gas in the pits, and thereby to avoid explosions and the calamities they cause. Canaries can smell what miners (along with the rest of us) miss. To these artists, the avant-garde had that heightened sensibility, that ability to scent the creative explosion about to occur. Their job was to announce the convulsion to come and the prepare those less well endowed with such senses for the dramatic and still hopeful days to come.

Here is the Achilles’ heel of the avant-garde. However we define ‘*Geistige*’, as intellectual work, or cultural work, or spiritual work, or artistic creativity, it is the property and province of the chosen few, and not the stuff of the masses, who follow but do not lead. By adopting this elitist view, the pioneers of the Blaue Reiter movement set themselves apart from the people, not so much through condescension as through prophetic self-election.

In a sense by doing so, they were not as far removed from many materialist revolutionaries as they thought they were. In a moment I will try to make a distinction between major and minor utopias. The major ones produced mountains of corpses; the minor ones, dreams of a different, less sanguine, kind. The Bolsheviks, major utopians to a fault, announced a new order to come, and knew that they could not bring the masses with them. Hence they substituted the party for the masses, and ultimately, the central committee for the party, and finally the great leader for the lot. However disparate their aims and interests, Lenin and Kandinsky were, in their avant-

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<sup>23</sup> BRA, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> BRA, p. 252.

<sup>25</sup> BRA, p. 259.

garde elitism, brothers of a surprising kind. The upheavals of which they dreamed were light years apart, but the role of elites in guiding us to the future were surprisingly similar.

The consequences of this approach to apocalyptic events as designed and effected by an elite have been, as we know, profound. The bill the *Blaue Reiter* group had to pay for their swagger came due in a rush. The masses may not have been able to follow them, but in very short order, Macke and Marc, and in a different way, Kandinsky, had to follow them.

At this point, a caveat or two may be in order. Franz Marc in particular and the *Blaue Reiter* group in general, had a somber, pessimistic, side to them. The Guggenheim Museum in New York has a fine Marc painting of 1913, the colors of which suggest a different mood than do his wonderful equine reveries. The painting's title, 'The unfortunate land of Tyrol', gestures to the Balkan wars which ravaged the lands south and east of this landscape.

Fig. 2. Franz Marc, The unfortunate land of Tyrol, Guggenheim Museum, New York



The Berlin artist Ludwig Meidner painted urban landscapes devastated by artillery, referring more to domestic social conflict in that workers' city than to international conflict.<sup>26</sup> These men and women were not so naïve as to believe that the future would be untroubled; and yet their sense of a new dawn, an approaching breakthrough to a new creative era is palpable and intoxicating. On balance, in their pre-war firmament, hope wins the day, and understandably so.

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<sup>26</sup> Winter, *Sites of memory*, ch. 6.



There was a second edition of the first *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, and a planned second volume. But time had run out. The foreword to the second volume appeared in February 1914. Six months later Marc was called up. Kandinsky went back to Russia. August Macke was killed on 26 September, in the second month of a war which lasted 50 months. Marc died, on one of his beloved horses, during the Battle of Verdun, in March 1916. Kandinsky never renewed the project, a tribute to his friendship with Marc, and to the dialogue between them which made the *Blaue Reiter* possible. The almanac was yet another casualty of the Great War.

### 3. The national temptation: Fritz Haber and Albert Einstein

The *Blaue Reiter* moment is shorthand for that burst of creativity in the arts which Kandinsky and Marc announced. But its demise has meaning in ways which are still of significance today. The first is to force us to face the danger of separating artistic creativity from the political tensions within the societies in which artists live and do their work. It is not necessary to adopt a position crudely deriving art from social relations, in the Stalinist manner, to say that artists in 1910-14 lived in a violent world, and sat on the edges of a volcano, the rumblings of which they – like lesser mortals – did not hear. We know now what they could not know then, that the industrialization of warfare had turned Europe into a powder keg, one which could be set off with a relatively small charge of violence in Sarajevo.

We also know that the *Blaue Reiter* group formed an international of creative men and women, and (like so many others) underestimated the mobilizing power of the nation state. Imperial Germany was a federation, and Munich (let alone Murnau) was not Berlin. And yet when the time came, national ties prevailed. National sentiment is what you feel in your stomach; patriotism is why you imagine in your head. National sentiment embodied in a host of ways the hopes of the masses, perhaps mistakenly, but with affective force sufficient to overwhelm any internationalist or pacifist obstacles to war in 1914. Most artists and scientists joined the ranks of the nations, and rejoiced in (finally) being at the heart of the people, not at odds with them. Separating from the masses in a creative convulsion, as Marc and Kandinsky did was to separate art from history, which over the last 150 years has been the history of empires and nation states. Part of the purpose of this meeting, and those to follow, is to urge others not to repeat this mistake.

But let us (for a moment) take this premise on board: artists live and create not outside of history, not outside of contact with the masses, but inside history and with a thick latticework of ties which bind them to the people with whom they live. Even if we accept this argument, this question remains: which history is the one artists had to face: the national or the transnational?

A glimpse at the contrasting lives of Fritz Haber and Albert Einstein in war and peace can throw some light on this question. Haber the chemist won the Nobel prize in chemistry in 1919 for discovering new ways of synthesizing ammonia. Einstein the physicist won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1921 for discovering the law of the photoelectric effect. Both were celebrities, powerful men, impossible and sometimes cruel to those near them. But they embodied the tension within international science in the period of the Great War. As we shall see in later forums, Haber chose the nation over international science; Einstein, the pacifist, chose otherwise. The science of both men exponentially augmented the killing power of war, Haber in 1914-18, and Einstein in 1939-45. Both were disowned by the country of their birth.

Einstein's early education was in Munich, a decade before Kandinsky got there. Haber grew up in Breslau, where he married a fellow chemist. She took her life in 1915, a month after Haber oversaw the release of chlorine gas on the battlefield of Ypres in Belgium. Einstein's marriages were unhappy, and he too knew tragedy, though not as brutal as that Haber faced in the middle of the Great War. Haber remained culturally a German and proud of it, even after the Nazis stripped him of his citizenship. Einstein had no time for the German apotheosis of the state, and severed his ties, institutional, cultural and political, before he could be dispossessed of them.

I raise this parallel, not only because it is a theme on which my teacher Fritz Stern has written with his characteristic humanity,<sup>27</sup> but because it presents us with a more tragic reading of the Blaue Reiter moment than may appear from the analysis above. I have pointed to the danger of separating artistic creativity from the material world in which it emerges. The optimism of Kandinsky and Marc deserves our admiration but not our critical approval. Artists could not revolutionize the world; they are as much victims of the flow of history as are the rest of us. But those who, in the words of Max Weber, can stand the harsh seriousness of the times, and take the plunge into everyday, vernacular history, do not have an easier time for having done

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<sup>27</sup> See *Einstein's German world*, esp. chapters 4, 5, and 6.

so. Moving into German history as Haber did led to catastrophe; moving out of German history as Einstein did and into a kind of pacifism did nothing to prevent catastrophe. And in his warnings as to the dangers of nationalism in the Zionist movement he adopted as his own, Einstein wound up facing the same dilemma as that which had brought down Haber 20 years before. Scientists, like artists, move on a trans-national plane, but they cannot escape from the magnetic power of the nation state to overwhelm the trans-national. The apocalypse did indeed arrive, but it was not the moment of hope Kandinsky and Marc had announced. It was the beginning of a darker era, one from which we have yet to emerge. The history of the encounter of scientists and artists in this new age of war is yet to be written. That is the task that awaits us.

#### 4. Minor utopias in the century of total war: trans-national science and trans-national art

It may be helpful in conclusion, to set this pre-1914 story in a broader analytical context in order to point the way to future discussions in later forums. Let me try to set out my thinking about minor utopias, and to suggest ways in which this interpretive approach has utility both for our present and our future work.

I would like to suggest that trans-national science and trans-national artistic movements in the period before 1914 were what I term ‘minor utopias’. Let me try to indicate how I am using the term. Utopia, I hold, is a discourse in two contradictory parts. First, it is a narrative about discontinuity. It is a story through which men and women imagine a radical act of disjunction, enabling people, acting freely and in concert with others, to realize the creative potential imprisoned by the way they live at one point in time. But secondly, since the narrative of disjunction is always written by men and women rooted in contemporary conditions and language, it inevitably shows where they are, even as it describes where they want to be. Utopias force us to face the fact that we do not live there; we live here, and we cannot but use the language of the here and now in all our imaginings. That is why the work of the imagination, scientific or artistic, is such a powerful entry point into the historical contradictions of this (or any other) period.

Utopia, in sum, is a fantasy about the limits of the possible, a staging of what we take for granted, what is left unsaid about our current social conventions and political cultures. Those who expose these silences often playfully, begin to disturb the contradictions in the way we

live.<sup>28</sup> As Paul Ricoeur has argued, “from this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted.”<sup>29</sup> What is made strange is made contingent, and what is contingent need not last forever.

As I have noted, the term “utopia” is now thoroughly discredited by contamination through association with the crimes of the great killers of the twentieth century. Major utopias of that kind have indeed been constructed by politicians turned gardeners, in Zygmund Bauman’s phrase, “weeders” of the undesirable elements in our world. Major utopians uproot, cleanse, transform, exterminate.<sup>30</sup> Their totalitarian visions, and their commitment to the ruthless removal from the world of those malevolent elements blocking the path to a beneficent future, are at the heart of what I term “major utopias.”

In an earlier publication from which I draw today,<sup>31</sup> I tried to explore a different cultural and political space, one sketched out in 1982 by Gabriel García Márquez in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. In Stockholm, standing in the place of his master William Faulkner, who had received the prize three decades before, García Márquez reflected on Faulkner’s refusal to accept annihilation as man’s inevitable fate:

Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics, spatial play*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Humanities Press, 1984), xpp. xii–xxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on ideology and utopia*, trans. George H. Taylor. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Zygmund Bauman, *The holocaust and modernity*. (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Jay Winter, *Dreams of peace and freedom: Utopian moments in the twentieth century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), introduction.

<sup>32</sup> For the full text of the Nobel prize acceptance speech, see <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html>.

In light of García Márquez's plea, does it not make sense to turn to the history of what may be termed "minor utopias," imaginings of liberation usually on a smaller scale, without the grandiose pretensions or the almost unimaginable hubris and cruelties of the "major" utopian projects? Such imaginings are powerful and sketch out a world very different from the one we live in, but from which not all social conflict or all oppression has been eliminated. St Thomas More's static 'Utopia', where all social conflict has come to an end, is not what I have in mind.

This notion of minor utopias is illustrated in Tom Stoppard's theatrical trilogy presenting the ideas of the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Alexander Herzen. The central character, Herzen urges his son (and the rest of us) to sail toward the 'coast of utopia', but never to imagine that there is some holy grail to be found inland.<sup>33</sup> Herzen, in this sense, was indeed a minor utopian; a visionary without a blueprint of a future society in which social conflict no longer existed. He urged those who explored these limited utopias to set sail each time they think they have landed somewhere solid. There is no end to this minor utopian voyage.

What distinguishes nineteenth-century from twentieth-century visions is the social context in which each unfolded. Many utopian projects of the nineteenth century were constructed against the backdrop of the upheavals associated with the French and the industrial revolutions, and the social movements spawned by each. In the twentieth century, some visionaries followed in this tradition, but others took as their point of departure a different set of upheavals arising from collective violence. It is the emergence of total war which has set the twentieth century apart and which has given to many twentieth-century visions their particular coloration and urgency.

The complex and subtle dialectic between minor utopian visions and massive collective violence is at the core of the approach I am advancing both here, in our first Yale Rubinoff forum, in the hope that it may prove useful in later years. The global violence of the turn of the twentieth century was the setting for a range of imaginings of a different future. I have explored only two of them, framed by scientists and artists before 1914. There were others. I simply want to sketch out a set of possibilities, a map of the kind Oscar Wilde had in mind when he said (impishly), 'A map of the world that does not include [minor] utopias is

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<sup>33</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Salvage. The coast of utopia, iii*. (London, Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 34.

not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail'.<sup>34</sup>

One way to put the point is to offer a variation of Marx's dictum that men make history but not in the way they think they do, not under the conditions of their choosing. Visionaries – scientists, artists, poets, theologians -- imagine alternative forms of social life, but not in the way they think they do. They frequently carry within their thinking the very contradictions they seek to supersede.

In our discussions this weekend, we might reflect on what is common to the dreams of artists and scientists about the transformation of the world. Are they not all, in their several ways, engaged in the act of imagining minor utopias? The synthetic chemistry of Haber and the new physics of Einstein opened unlimited horizons to the scientists of the day; they could feed and power the world in limitless ways. The abstract art of Kandinsky, alongside the work of his contemporaries, was equally path-breaking, similarly inspirational to those who saw its potential. Not the sky, but the heavens were the limit, the heavens above and the heavens within: that is one way to put it, when gazing at Kandinsky's compositions and improvisations.

Framing our collective investigation in this way may help us begin to realize our primary objective: to bring together the best of scholarly work in cultural history with creative initiatives in science and the arts. That task awaits us still.

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<sup>34</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The essays of Oscar Wilde*. (New York, Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1916), p. 28.



