

# The Realism of the Unreal

Uninhibited by knowledge of the limits of the knowable, ancient peoples described the creation of the cosmos, its destruction and recreation, in fantastic visions. Just as the abundance of mysterious figures in mythological tales provoke astonishment and fascination, modern art can tap into this source of ideas and become enriched by it.

Realism means the recognition of reality, and in art it means transforming this realisation into a work of art. A represented object is thus realistic if it comes close to an idea of reality. If this is an idea from a distant, ancient past that has been superseded, we thrust it aside, for it is no longer in harmony with our sense of reason, and we do not wish to waste our time on historical detours. But drawn from the deep well of the past, these ideal images entice our imagination and our desire to form. Modern art, which has evolved into postmodern art, is open to this stimulus because it strives for meaning and perception. This implies a tendency towards a semiotic art that renders the content of consciousness. It conceives of itself as a new direction which is new because it encompasses the world as a whole. And as Thomas Mann expressed it in *Joseph and his Brothers*, it transpires that in the depths of the well of the past, the deeper one digs, the further down one penetrates

and probes, the first principles of humanity, its history and its ethos prove to be entirely unfathomable. In this search, Paul Gauguin, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc discovered there the origins of creativity, and to us, a source is revealed that has been a prerequisite of art since Classical Modernism. It was at that time that artists strove for a profound renewal of visual language to express new ideas. They were termed Symbolists. The basic religious undertone of ancient worlds was filled with symbolic images of productive religious inventions. In *What is Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger describes them as a questioning that goes beyond what we know and see, to receive it back as comprehension of the whole. The metaphysical images are unreal. For Adorno, metaphysical experience is possible first and foremost in art. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, he speaks specifically of the "metaphysical content of art".

The reality of this unreality is belief, and the truth of art of this kind is a representation of the diversity of beliefs in the course of history. Belief proves to be a necessity of life for emotional security and as a social necessity to tame human nature. And these beliefs are subservient to socialisation, to an education towards societal norms. This was always the goal, but it is the pathways that lead

there that divide humanity.

Ancient religions posit a great spirit as the ruler of the world, at whose side stand servants or messengers of the gods, imagined as real. These are miraculous creatures and fantasy creatures, most frequently birds, as they inhabit the heavens, in fantastical colours and shapes. These companions and messengers of divine will are symbols of noble human characteristics: wisdom, justice, compassion. Even in the great world religions that we are familiar with today, the legends are no less inventive.

Mediaeval Christian art was also symbolic, as is the art of indigenous peoples today, and it has a powerful suggestive force. It is said of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin that they were captivated by the exotic works on show at the Paris world exhibition of 1888. Vlaminck, Derain and Matisse were deeply affected by the expressive power of sub-Saharan Africa and by the way the African artists expressed their notions of an afterlife and of the supernatural. It seemed senseless to them to strive for a resemblance to nature. They consider it illogical to paint a portrait of a woman since it is not possible to smell or feel the likeness. Symbolism dominates their art. It exerted a great attraction on the artists of Classical Modernism.

**Quetzalcoatl**, the white god in the shape of a winged serpent. He flies above smoking volcanoes at an infinite height, and they lend him his enormous power with their hot breath. According to a legend of the Aztecs, Toltecs and Mayas, he committed to memory everything that has ever been told in the whole world about what has been, what is and what is to come.

