

## TO SEE A WORLD: ART AND THE I OF THE BEHOLDER

Ken Wilber  
*Boulder, Colorado*

It is not the object expressed, but the depth of the subject expressing it, that most defines art. And this shifts art and art criticism from irony to authenticity—a rather unnerving move, at least to today's eyes. Can art and art criticism survive the loss of irony, the loss of inauthenticity, as its central source? And if today's art abandons sardonic surfaces, where will it finally reside?

### DIFFERENT WORLDS EXIST

We do not live in a pre-given world. One of the more remarkable tenets of the postmodern revolution in philosophy, psychology, and sociology is that *different worldviews* exist—different ways of categorizing, presenting, representing, and organizing our experiences. There is not a single, monolithic world with a single, privileged representation, but rather multiple worlds with pluralistic interpretations. Moreover, these worldviews often—indeed, almost always—change from epoch to epoch, and from culture to culture.

This insight need not be taken to extremes—there are plenty of common features in our various interpretations to prevent the world from falling apart. Indeed, scholars have discovered there are at least some (and often many) universals in languages, in affects, in cognitive structures, and in color perception, to name a few. But these universal ingredients are woven together and organized in a rich variety of ways, resulting in a tapestry of multiple worldviews.

Although there are, in theory, an almost infinite number of worldviews, in the course of human history on this planet, there seem to be about a dozen that have had, or are still having, a widespread and significant influence. Investigated by scholars such as Jean Gebser, Gerald Heard, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, and others, these major worldviews include: sensorimotor, archaic, magic, mythic, mental, existential, psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual. (The exact meaning of those terms will become more obvious as we proceed.)

---

Copyright © 1998 Transpersonal Institute

It is not a matter of which of these worldviews is right and which is wrong; they are all adequate for their time and place. It is more a matter of simply cataloging, as carefully as possible, the very general characteristics that define each worldview, and "bracketing" (or setting aside), for the moment, whether or not they are "true"-we simply describe all of them as if they were true.

The *magic-animistic* worldview, for example, is marked by a partial overlap of subject and object, so that "inanimate objects" like rocks and rivers are directly felt to be alive or even to possess souls or subjective spirits. The *mythic* worldview is marked by a plethora of gods and goddesses, not as abstract entities but as deeply felt powers, each having a rather direct hand in the affairs of earthly men and women. The *mental* worldview-of which the "rational worldview" is the best known subset-is marked by a belief that the subjective realm is fundamentally set apart from the objective realm of nature, and how to relate these two realms becomes one of the most pressing problems in this worldviews. The *existential* worldview possesses an understanding that multiple perspectives are built into the universe, so that not only are there no privileged perspectives, individuals must carve for themselves some sort of meaning from that frightening multitude of possibilities. The *subtle* worldview is marked by an apprehension of subtle forms and transcendental archetypes, primordial patterns of manifestation which are usually felt (and claimed) to be Divine. The *causal* worldview is marked by the direct realization of a vast unmanifest realm-variously known as emptiness, cessation, the Abyss, the Unborn, Ayin, The Ursprung-a vast Formlessness from which all manifestation springs. And the *nondual* represents a radical union of the Formless and the entire world of Form.

Those various worldviews present a truly dizzying array of the many ways that our experiences can be organized and interpreted. Those are by no means the only worldviews, nor is the list fixed or predetermined-it is constantly unfolding with new possibilities. But without some sort of worldview, we remain lost in the blooming buzzing confusion of experiences, as William James put it.

In other words, all of our individual perceptions are, to some extent, embedded in particular worldviews. Within those worldviews, we still possess abundant freedom of choice, but worldviews generally constrain what we will even consider choosing. We moderns do not, for example, often get out of bed with the thought, "Time to kill the bear." Each worldview, with its distinctive characteristics, stamps itself all over those born within it, and most individuals do not know, or even suspect, that their perceptions are occurring within the horizons of a given and rather specific worldview. Each worldview, operating for the *most* part collectively and unconsciously, simply presents the world as if it were the case. Few question the worldview in which they find themselves.

Nonetheless-and here the story takes a decidedly fascinating turn-research in both the psychology of the individual and cross-cultural anthropology demonstrates rather convincingly that, under various circumstances, individuals have available to them *the entire spectrum of worldviews*. The human mind, it appears, comes with all of these worldviews-archaic to magic to mythic to mental to subtle to causal to non-dual-as potentials in its own makeup, ready to unfold when various factors

conspire to allow them to do so, rather like a seed awaiting water, soil, and sun to unfold.

So, even though certain epochs were especially marked by a particular worldview--foraging, by magic; agrarian, by mythic; and industrial, by mental-rational, for example--nonetheless, all of these major modes of interpreting our experience seem to be potentials of the human organism, and any of them can be brought forth in any individual under the right circumstances. To the question, "Which worldviews are available to us now", the answer appears to be, "All of them."

Still, at any given time and in any given culture, most adults tend to inhabit the landscape of one particular worldview. The reason is simple enough: each worldview is, indeed, a person's world. To lose that world is to experience a type of death-seizure. To surrender a worldview is a psychological earthquake somewhere around 7.0 on the internal Richter scale, and most people avoid this at all costs.

But sometimes, under exceptional circumstances ... or in exceptional artists ... higher or deeper worldviews break through the crust of our ordinary perceptions, and the world is somehow never quite the same again.

Artists express worldviews. Paleolithic artists, for example, painted the magical worldspace--objects overlapping each other. Little perspectivism, animistic symbols. few constraints of space and time, wholes interchangeable with their parts. Medieval artists painted the mythic worldspace--an entire pantheon of angels, archangels, a God, a Son of that God, the Mother of that God, Moses parting the Red Sea--the themes were the endless possibilities of the mythic worldspace, all depicted, not as symbols, but as realities (precisely because, as we saw, all worldviews present themselves as simply true). With the rise of the very general movement of Modernity in the West--riding as it did on the mental worldview, with its separation of subjective mind from objective nature--we see a gradual replacement of mythic themes with themes dominated by nature, by realism. by impressionism, by subjective expressionism, and by abstract expressionism. And with the general rise of Post-modernism, we see those trends carried even further into the existential worldspace, where multiple perspectives, at first a source of endless creativity, soon became a paralyzing nightmare of infinite jest, met with infinite irony.

The existential worldview is called "integral-aperspectival" by Gebser--"aperspectival" because it presents multiple perspectives, none of which are privileged, and "integral" because nonetheless some sort of unity, coherence, or meaning has to be fashioned in the midst of multiplicity. In the previous worldview--the mental-rational, which Gebser also called "perspectival"--the single, rational subject tended to take up a single, fixed interpretation of the world. and this was evidenced in everything from science (Newton) to philosophy (Descartes) to portraiture (van Eyck) to perspectivism (starting with Renaissance painting, especially Brunelleschi, Alberti, Donatello, Leonardo, Giotto). But with the shift to integral-aperspectival, the subject itself becomes part of the objective scene--the camera becomes part of the movie. the author's stream of thought becomes part of the novel, the painter's own operations show up conspicuously on the canvas. Multiple perspectives draw the

subject *into* the world of objects, *making* it one object among many others, all lost in a dizzying regress of self-reflexivity, from which there is no escape.

Every worldview has *its* pathological *expressions*. The rational worldview's most notorious is "Cartesian dualism"-subject split from object, mind divorced from nature-a dualism against which, it seems, every thinking person of the last three hundred years has vocally declared war. But the postmodern, integral-aperspectival stance is not without its own major aberration, known generally as "aperspectival madness," the insane view that no view is better than another. Starting with the noble proposition that all of the multiple perspectives are to be treated fairly and impartially ("pluralism and rich diversity"), postmodernism slides, in its extreme forms, into the insidious notion that no perspective whatsoever is better than another, a confusion that results in complete paralysis of will, thought, and action. Madness it is indeed: it claims no view is better than another, except its own view, which is superior in a world where nothing is supposed to be superior at all. And worse: if no view is better than another, then the Nazis and the KKK are on the same moral footing as, say, art critics.

"Aperspectival madness" might fairly well describe much of the last two decades of art, art criticism, lit crit, and cultural studies. Irony is one of the few places you can hide in a world of aperspectival madness-s-say one thing, mean another, therefore don't get caught in the embarrassment of taking a stand. (Since, allegedly, no stand is better than another, one simply *must not commit-sincerity* is death). So skip sincerity, opt for sardonic. Don't construct, deconstruct; don't look for depth, just hug the surfaces; avoid content, offer noise-"surfaces, surfaces, surfaces is all they ever found," as Bret Easton Ellis summarized the scene. No wonder that David Foster Wallace, in a recent essay that received much attention, lamented the pervasiveness of the art of "trendy, sardonic exhaustion" and "reflexive irony," art that is "sophisticated and extremely shallow."

But if we do abandon irony and seek to make sincere statements, where do we begin? If we do surrender surfaces and look also for the depth, what exactly does that mean? And where are these "depths" to be found?

Wallace suggests that, instead of "reflexive irony," art should provide "insights and guides to value." A fine sentiment, but let us note immediately that *specific values exist only in specific worldviews*. The mythic worldview, for example, valued duty to a rigid social hierarchy, which few moderns find appealing. The mythic worldview also valued male dominance and female subordination, which most enlightened moderns regard as ignorant. All values exist in particular worldviews, and if trendy sardonic exhaustion is actually the exhaustion of the existential worldview, then the only possible conclusion is that we will have to look to other worldviews altogether if we are to escape aperspectival madness and its relentless insincerity.

The reason that art in the postmodern, existential world has reached something of a cul-de-sac is not that art itself is exhausted, but that the existential worldview is. Just as rational modernity previously exhausted its forms and gave way to aperspectival postmodernity, so now the postmodern itself is on a morbid death watch, with nothing but infinitely mirrored irony to hold its hand, casting flowers where they will not be

missed. The skull of postmodernity grins on the near horizon, and in the meantime, we are between two worldviews, one slowly dying, one not yet born.

Whatever we may think about it-and volumes have been delivered-perhaps the best that can be said of the avant-garde is that it always implicitly understood itself to be riding the crest of the breaking wave of evolving worldviews. The avant-garde was the leading edge, the growing tip, of an evolving humanity. It would herald the new, announce the forthcoming. It would first spot, then depict, new ways of seeing, new modes of being, new forms of cognition, new heights or depths of feeling, and in all cases, new modes of perception. It would spot, and depict, the coming worldview, while breaking decisively with the old.

The story is familiar. Jacques-Louis David's art was part of the early rise of modernity (reason and revolution) that violently broke with the remnants of the mythic, aristocratic, hierarchical, rococo past. From neoclassicism to abstract expressionism, each succeeding growing tip became in turn the conventional, accepted norm, only to see its own form challenged by the next avant-garde. Even postmodernism, with its aperspectival madness, which first attempted to deconstruct the avant-garde altogether, intimately depended upon it for something to deconstruct; thus, as Donald Kuspit points out in *the Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, a type of "neo-avant-garde" art inevitably dogged postmodernism from the start.

Like huge successive waves crashing ashore, worldviews succeed one another, and the avant-garde, at its best, were the great surfers of these waves. And now that the postmodern wave is washing on the shore of its own demise, what new waves are forthcoming? What new worldviews surge from the ocean of the soul to announce a new perception? Where are we to look for the *contents* of the sincere artistic statements that will supplant irony and aperspectival madness? Standing on tiptoe, looking through the mist, can the vague outline of the face of tomorrow's art-and therefore, tomorrow's world--even be seen?

#### TOMORROW'S LANDSCAPE

What worldviews, from those available, might carry the contours of tomorrow's art? Of course, some aspects of the coming landscape will be entirely new and original. "Creative advance into novelty," according to Whitehead, is the basic feature of the universe. But we also know, from extensive psychological and sociological research, that certain basic features of the dozen or so major worldviews, briefly summarized above, are potentials *already* available to the human organism, and instead of starting entirely from scratch, nature usually reworks what is at hand, before adding the finishing touches of novelty.

We know the worldviews that have been tried, toiled, worked, and exhausted: archaic, magic, mythic, mental-rational (modern), and existential-aperspectival (postmodern). The postmodern, of course, will continue its major influence for decades to come, on the way to its resting place. It is simply that artistic productions, as canaries in the cultural mine shaft, are dropping dead in alarming numbers as the rotting gas of postmodernity first starts wafting down that tunnel. So the art world, more quickly

than the sturdier herd mentality, seeks out new horizons. and thus, as we earlier noted, the dead-end of today's art is really the future endgame of the postmodern worldview in general. So what other horizons are available *right now*?

Three, at least. We already named them subtle, causal, and nondual. The phenomenologists of worldviews (those who research and described the contours of available worldviews) describe these three worldviews as being *trans rational* or *transpersonal*, and they contrast them with the earlier worldviews, some of which are *prerational* or *prepersonal* (archaic, magic, and mythic), and some of which are *rational* or *personal* (mental and existential). This gives men and women, as potentials in their own organisms, a spectrum of available worldviews, ranging from prerational to rational to transrational, from prepersonal to personal to transpersonal, from subconscious to self-conscious to superconscious. Supposing that we have exhausted the dizzying rhetorical regress of self-reflexivity, there are only two ways to go: back into subconsciousness or forward into superconsciousness-e-back to the infrarational or beyond to the suprarational.

The distinction is important, because the transrational, transpersonal worldviews are what might be called "spiritual," yet they bear little relation to the traditional religious worldviews of the magic and mythic spheres. The transrational realms have nothing to do with external gods and goddesses, and everything to do with an interior awareness that plumbs the depths of the psyche. Nothing to do with petitionary prayer and ritual, and everything to do with expanding and clarifying awareness. Nothing to do with dogma and belief, everything to do with cleansing perception. Not everlasting life for the ego, but transcending the ego altogether.

When one exhausts the personal, there is left the transpersonal. There *is*, right now, simply nowhere else to go.

#### TRANSPERSONAL WORLDSPACES

Not just different values, but different objects, exist in different worldviews. And artists can paint, depict, or express their particular perceptions of the objects in any of these realms, *depending on whether or not they are themselves alive to these realms*.

The *sensorimotor* world is familiar enough—those objects that can be seen with the senses: rocks, birds, bowls of fruit, nudes, landscapes. Artists can, and doggedly have, painted those objects, in everything from a glaringly realistic fashion to the softer tones of impressionism. The *magical* worldview is one of plastic displacement and condensation, the world of the dream, full of its own very real objects (when dreaming—when actually *in* that worldview—it appears absolutely real, as all worldviews do). Artists can paint those objects, as the Surrealists, among others, have demonstrated. The *mythic* worldview is full of gods and goddesses, angels and elves, disembodied souls, figures kind and cruel, helpful and malevolent. Artists can paint those objects, and, indeed, most artists around the world, from 10,000 BC to BC 1500 CE, painted *nothing but* those objects. The *mental* worldview is crowded with concepts and ideas, rational perspectivism and abstract forms. Artists not only can represent those contents (conceptual art, abstract art), they can express them as well (abstract

expressionism). The *existential* (aperspectival) worldview involves, among other things, the terror of the isolated subject confronting an alien world bereft of mythic consolations and rational pretensions. Artists in every medium have depicted this state of affairs, often overpoweringly (e.g., Edvard Munch, "The Shriek"). But the aperspectival worldview is also, at its limits, a subject looking at itself as it tries to look at the world. Artists have attempted to depict this self-reflexive regress in a variety of ways, from deconstruction to ironic reflexivity to doubling (including the artist as part of the art)-all a dicey game, all headed eventually for self-strangulation.

Which leaves the transpersonal worldspaces with their contents, themes, and perceptions. All of these realms are, indeed, transpersonal, which simply means those realities that include, but go beyond, the personal and the individual-wider currents that sweep across the skin-encapsulated ego and touch other beings, touch the cosmos, touch spirit, touch patterns and places kept secret to those who hug the surfaces and surround themselves with themselves.

That these transpersonal worldspaces are available to us as great, potential houses does not mean they come with all the furniture. We supply that ourselves. We build, create, add, model, fashion, mold, bring forth, and compose, and here artists in every medium have traditionally led the way, *avant garde* in the best and truest sense. So, on the one hand, we might look to the past for those rare occasions where a subculture plugged into the transpersonal realm and brought it forth in art and architecture, poetry and painting, crafts and compositions-the influence of Zen on Japanese aesthetics, for example. But we can look to the past only for hints, because the house of our tomorrow can only be graced by artists standing now on the threshold of that unfolding.

What will these furnishings look like? We are standing now in the open clearing, between two worlds, awaiting exactly that birth. But one thing is certain: it will come from the consciousness of men and women who stand open to the transpersonal in their own case, who bring forth, from the depths of the heart and spirit, those radiant realities that speak to us in unmistakable terms. For one thing we have seen: all of the major worldviews are available as potentials in the human bodymind. The deeper the awareness of individuals, the more worldspaces they can plumb. And that is why ultimately, profoundly, inescapably, it is the depth of the subject that provides the objects of art.

We have seen sensory objects, magic objects, mythic objects, mental objects, and aperspectival objects ... and we have seen them all exhaust the play of their own significance. Who will show us now the objects of the transpersonal landscape? Who will open themselves to such depths that they can scale these new heights, and return to tell those of us silently waiting what they have seen? Who can stand so far aside from self and same, ego and shame, hope and fear, that the transpersonal comes pouring through them with such a force it rattles the world? Who will paint what reality looks like when the ego is anesthetized, when settling into the corpse pose, it dies to its own wonderment and beholds the world anew? Who will paint that rising landscape? Who will show us that?

---

Requests for reprints to: Ken Wilber. 6183 Red Hill Road, Boulder, CO 80302.