

The Aesthetic of Nihilism: Nietzsche and Dada Film

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The year is 1916. An explosion of shrapnel obscures the sky as a general shouts commands. Men who just years before had worked in mills or factories now stand shoulder to shoulder in water-logged trenches, their feet rotting, their eyes burning and their ears ringing with the sounds of shells whirring overhead. Yards away in the field, a dead man lies entangled in a barbed wire fence. Breathing is impossible, as the air over the front has been infused with chlorine gas. Far from the battleground, a town's buildings and food stores rise up in flames as they burn to the ground. Both civilians and soldiers suffered and some ultimately perished in the carnage. European artists and filmmakers were among those who suffered during the war. These individuals were angry about and disgusted by a modern European society that had allowed worldwide death and destruction to occur. As a result of their feelings, many aligned themselves with the nascent Dada movement. Dada became an artistic and literary movement associated with proclaiming the death of all established traditions. Some of the Dada artists were filmmakers who used film for the expression of their radical ideas, namely the idea that all traditional social and cultural institutions and ideologies are meaningless. However, Dada soon moved beyond a simple rebellion against tradition. This paper aims to move the discourse concerning Dada – its film in particular – beyond the viewpoint that Dada was simply reckless and reactionary. Moreover, this paper aims to explore, in particular, the film of the Dada movement, which has been relatively ignored in the existing literature.

HYPOTHESIS

This paper seeks to argue that the themes of Dada film in the 1920s were informed not only by a disdain for social, political and artistic convention, but also by nihilist philosophy. Many scholars have previously claimed that Dada art possessed a nihilistic tinge, a spirit of rebellion. In

building upon this basic idea, this paper argues that Dada film was profoundly informed by Nietzsche's philosophical nihilism – not only in spirit but in thematic substance. This paper further asserts that nihilism and Dada have both influenced the art and culture of postmodern America.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to fully explore the relationship between Dada film and nihilism, both are first explored individually in their own contexts. Following a thorough analysis of both the philosophy and the art movement in themselves, specific scenes and an image are selected from two Dada films that visually represent a number of Nietzsche's ideas; the themes evoked by the selected scenes and images are analyzed, compared and ultimately joined to substantial nihilist ideas in Nietzsche's works. Following this initial comparative analysis, both nihilism and Dada art are considered for their influence upon postmodern American culture. This final comparative analysis is accomplished by comparing sociological data and existing related literature with the basic premises of nihilist thought.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE REVIEW

Nihilist philosophy espouses the belief that human life, morals, ideas, and values are without objective meaning and credence. Nihilists scorn the traditions and institutions of any culture. Some of the earliest nihilist thinkers were the Skeptics of ancient Greece who rejected the Greek ideal of rationalism and science. Among these skeptics was Sextus Empiricus. He believed that individuals must always be skeptical of all knowledge, including subjective experience, the objective world, and the relationship between the two (Empiricus 25). For Empiricus, humankind

could never know about any object or phenomenon in itself. Only in relation to its context could anything be understood – and even then understanding was only partial. Similar doubts about the meaning and value of knowledge and human experience continued to intrigue both Western and Eastern philosophers long after the Greek Skeptics. In fact, the term “nihilism” was originally coined by Russian novelist Ivan Turnegev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* in 1862. Though Turnegev himself did not adopt the term as a philosophical position, the term was apt, as his novel describes a generational conflict between the “Fathers” (the older generation) and the “Sons” (the younger generation) who believed that the traditions and values of the old order were destructive (Turnegev *xii*). However, while Turnegev’s novel and Empiricus’ essay touched upon basic tenets of nihilism – a skepticism of knowledge and an urge to destroy old values – it wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that nihilism became a prominent school of thought in Europe.

Much like the conflict described in Turnegev’s novel, the surge of philosophical nihilism in the late 1800’s is attributable to many philosophers distaste for the Christian morals they believed were incompatible with the world in which they lived. During this time, Friedrich Nietzsche asserted that due to the cultural devaluation of Christianity, whether recognized or not, nihilism was the term that properly characterized the modern age (Michels 5). For Nietzsche, the values and sacred institutions of Christianity were bankrupt; Western culture was drifting away from its Christian foundation that had once been perceived as meaningful. Thus, Nietzsche believed the age of nihilism had come. Upon nihilism’s arrival Nietzsche writes, “I praise, I do not reproach [nihilism’s] arrival” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 141). For Nietzsche, nihilism was a cultural condition to be embraced.

Like the Skeptics long before him, Nietzsche's nihilist philosophy is undergirded by a deep skepticism toward all forms of human knowledge, both empirical and conceptual. In *Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* Nietzsche argues, "[Truth] is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations that have been enhanced and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people" (Nietzsche, *Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* 6). For Nietzsche, truth is nothing more than the result of human relationships that humans then craft, adorn and ultimately believe to have an objective reality. Truths only appear authoritative due to their prolonged use in society. Nietzsche expands upon this skepticism toward absolute or ontological truth in his later work *The Gay Science*. In discussing the nature of the world he writes, "The total character of the world is in all eternity chaos – in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 109). Here Nietzsche dismisses claims of a aesthetic, ordered universe as anthropocentric narratives imposed upon an essentially not human world; the world is not beautiful or orderly but rather entropic.

A concept central to Nietzsche's nihilist philosophy is the Will To Power. In his posthumously compiled manuscript *The Will To Power*, Nietzsche describes this concept. He writes that in our world which can only be perceived by the senses "causal unities are invented...if we eliminate [these invented causal unities], no things remain but only dynamic quanta: their essence lies in a relation of tension to all other dynamic quanta...the Will To Power is...a pathos, the most elemental fact from which a becoming and effecting first emerge" (Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* 135). For Nietzsche, causal relationships in the perceivable world are characterized by the flux and tension of energies. Nietzsche believes that this basic energy,

which he terms the “Will To Power”, is “elemental” – it is the generative force undergirding all events in the world. Nietzsche goes on to further explain the nature of the Will To Power. He writes, “every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force – its will to power – and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to a union with those of them that are sufficiently related to it...and so the process goes on” (236). Here, Nietzsche characterizes the Will to Power as a metaphysical force intrinsic to all entities that seeks not only to influence, but to *control* any surrounding space. Yet he also argues that Wills desiring a similar type of influence or control coincide, the Will of one entity uniting with that of another. Thus, for Nietzsche, causality is not a linear series of effects. Rather, it is a swirling energy that constitutes the process of the universe. An important philosophical implication of the Will to Power is a negation of the anthropocentric world view. If causality is reduced to the interactions between elemental impulses, humans have no more agency than anything else in nature. In light of the Will To Power, not only is the universe chaotic, but human beings are powerless within it.

Much like Nietzsche’s nihilist philosophy grew out of an anger with Christian institutions and biblical morality, the Dada art movement grew out of an anger with European society during First World War. Simmering for many years, the underlying tensions in the Balkan peninsula erupted into war almost immediately after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip in 1914 (Henig 29). The war that emerged from this mixture of nationalism and militarism was one of the most brutal in history, claiming millions of lives, destroying architecture and plunging much of Europe into severe economic depression. Soon after the war had begun, Dada responded. The foundational members of the nascent Dada movement included Marcel Janco, Hans Richter, Tristan Tzara, and Hugo Ball. These men were

artists whose disillusionment with bourgeois European society prompted them to seek voluntary exile from their native countries in neutral Switzerland during the war. According to Dada artist Hans Richter in his book *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, “Dada rebelled against the cultural and intellectual conformity – in art and more broadly in society – that corresponded to the war” (Richter 83). Richter’s point is that the Dadaists believed European culture and art had become not only stagnant but also toxic. Indeed he suggests that the cultural and intellectual conformity of European art and society bore a relation to the war. Thus, the Dadaists sought to rebel against both artistic tradition and societal norms through their art. Richter goes on to describe the ethos of Dada’s artistic rebellion. He writes, “Dada was not art: it was ‘anti-art.’ Dada represented the opposite of everything which art stood for. Where art was concerned with traditional aesthetics, Dada ignored aesthetics. If art was to appeal to sensibilities, Dada was intended to offend” (112). For Richter, Dada was an art form of protest. Characterized by a refusal to adhere to traditional norms of artistic presentation and process, the Dada project was an attempt to disrupt the artistic and cultural status quo.

Underlying Dada’s ostensible message of protest and anger was a complex aesthetic of negation and subjectivity. One of the first artists to codify the project of Dada in writing was Tristan Tzara, a Romanian and French avant-garde poet and essayist. In his *Dada Manifesto* he declares, “Dada means nothing” (Tzara 1). For Tzara, the name of the movement was itself an objectively meaningless, nonsensical word. In conjunction with their nonsensical name, the Dadaists proposed that all art is without universal meaning or beauty. Indeed Tzara goes on to write in the *Manifesto*, “[beauty] exists only subjectively, for each man separately, without the slightest character of universality” (1). Tzara’s point is that aesthetic evaluation is only

dependent upon the observer. The foundational Dada text thus contains the seed of aesthetic relativism. In the Dada films, this seed flourishes into nothing less than philosophical nihilism.

RESULTS

Just as Nietzsche's nihilism departs from previous philosophies of Kant and Plato that assigned an order or meaning to the universe, the film that emerges out of the Dada movement breaks from previous artistic traditions of realism, impressionism and romanticism in which human beings were central. One significant reason Dada film was able to constitute such a dramatic departure from previous artistic convention was the novelty of the medium of film itself. While film-making had been possible since the 1890's, the early 1900's was the first time full feature films were available rather than short one-reel pieces. Furthermore, numerous cinematic and film editing techniques soon developed such as the "panning shot" and "double exposure" that allowed filmmakers to be more creative than they had ever been (Wakeman 104). Panning shots are shots taken by a camera that is able to rotate during the shooting process, allowing the director to incorporate a wider field of view. The editing technique of "double exposure" allows figures or objects in the film to take on a ghost-like appearance. The effect of this double exposure technique is visible in the attached image. The image is a still shot of a scene from Hans Richter's 1927 Dada film, *Ghosts Before Breakfast*. In the image four men stand shoulder to shoulder and face forward, their hands combing their beards. The image is a negative, meaning that the shades of the true scene are reversed; the men's faces are dark grey while their beards and clothes are white. As a result of this distortion of color, the men take on an ominous and alien appearance. By distorting scenes to the point at which human beings appear strange and unhuman, the Dadaists break from traditional works of romantic and realist literature and art in which human beings comprise the familiar, identifiable nucleus of the work. Dada's message

is decidedly darker. For the Dadaists, humans are just as strange and mysterious as any other worldly phenomena.

Hans Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast* is one of the seminal films of the Dada movement. The opening of the film displays a giant clock which spans the entire screen. The hour hand moves very quickly, going from 3 to 4 to 5 in a matter of seconds. When functioning properly, clocks symbolize the passage of time. The sped up clock therefore suggests that the narrative of *Ghosts* is perhaps unnatural or hyperkinetic. The next scene depicts hats lifting off from a sidewalk and flying around in the air, a tray of china flying out of a door only to fall and shatter in slow motion, and a man attempting to put on a bow-tie that refuses to stay properly tied around his neck. Later in the film, a group of young men wander around as if in search of their flying hats. These scenes are illogical. It is unclear what or who causes these events to happen. Moreover, it quickly becomes clear that the human characters in *Ghosts* have less agency and power than inanimate objects, as the man is simply unable to hold on to his bow-tie. Hats, though objects crafted by humankind for a specific function, fly around freely and playfully in the air seemingly of their own volition while their owners search for them. The men's absurd quest to find their hats symbolizes that, in fact, inanimate objects have their own agency – an agency that is perhaps beyond what humankind is able to understand. The idea that all objects and bodies might possess agency is implicit in Nietzsche's belief that "[once our invented causal unities are eliminated], no things remain but only dynamic quanta: their essence lies in a relation of tension to all other dynamic quanta" (Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* 135). Just as Nietzsche describes a world in which all things, human and non-human, are essentially comprised of nothing more than constantly changing energies, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* presents a world of seemingly absurd, random relationships in which hats may evade men. The film goes on to further distort narrative

and time. In portraying the mens' quest, Richter employs the cinematic technique of reverse motion. As a result, the search appears to be shifting quickly back and forth in time: a hose on the street unravels and rolls back up and a woman emerges from a house only to walk backwards back into it. Time is both reversed and sped forward. Thus, the hyperkinetic world of *Ghosts Before Breakfast* is a visual representation of Nietzsche's claim that "the total character of the world is in all eternity chaos" (Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* 109). For Nietzsche as for Richter, humankind lives an existence in a universe ruled by the irrational and illogical.

In 1924 French Dada filmmaker Rene Clair released his film *Entr'acte* or "Intermission" which was intended to be played during the intermission of an opera. Much like Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, Clair's *Entr'acte* is dominated by a succession of absurd images. However, unlike Richter's film, Clair's film contains no coherent plot. The first scene depicts two men jumping beside a canon. The canon appears to fire straight at the camera lens. The scene then shifts quickly to the billowing underside of a dancing ballerina's skirt, before transitioning to a crowd of children running in slow motion. The film is devoid of any obvious significance. Indeed, Dada painter and the film's co-director Francis Picabia once said of the film, "*Entr'acte* respects nothing except the desire to roar with laughter" (Picabia 5). Yet while the film is certainly funny, the nonsensical bent of the narrative is also a form of liberation. Due to the fact that the scenes in the film bear no ostensible relation to each other, the number of possible interpretations of *Entr'acte* are limitless. Thus, Clair's film is quite literally "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche, *Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* 6). Just as Nietzsche claims that all truth is subjective and constructed, so no one interpretation of *Entr'acte* is more valid than another.

CONCLUSIONS

Some argue that Dada film was not informed by nihilist philosophy. In his essay on *Entr'acte* with the title of the same name, film critic George Baker writes, "Rather than embracing nihilism or anti-art, most Dada work has a structure...One that can be identified, described, its logic isolated. But it is one that calls for a new set of theoretical tools" (Baker 160). Baker believes that Dada art has a definite, logical structure. He contends that analyzing this structure simply requires a new theoretical approach. Baker is correct that Dada works are not completely illogical and that they are able to be analyzed, but he misunderstands the Dada project. In fact, one of Tristan Tzara's statements in the *Dada Manifesto* refutes Baker's claim. Tzara writes, "Dada was born of a need for independence. A distrust toward unity. Those who are with us preserve their freedom" (Tzara 3). For Tzara, unity was to be detested as an infringement upon artistic individuality. He points out that the Dadaists wanted nothing to do with any kind of structure. Thus, Baker fails to recognize that the underlying project of Dada is not the creation of a new structure but freedom from all structures. At its core, Dada is certainly nihilistic.

It is thus concluded that Dada film and nihilism are indeed intertwined. Furthermore, it is also the case that both Dada Film and Nietzsche's nihilist philosophy have influenced the art and culture of postmodern America. In many ways, nihilism has been co-opted as the ethos of postmodern society. In "The Challenge of Nihilism" Thomas Altizer, professor of religious studies at SUNY, claims, "Nothing is more deeply characteristic of our world than the comprehensive power of nihilism" (Altizer 1013). At least in America, It would seem that Altizer is correct, as sociological studies suggest that Americans' faith in traditional institutions has drastically decreased. Gallup poles suggest that Americans' faith in the Supreme Court declined by thirteen percent from June 2002 to June 2011. During that same time period, the public's faith in Congress declined seventeen percent. Faith in law enforcement and the public

school system declined by three and four percent respectively. Clearly, Americans' trust in traditional institutions is dwindling. Similarly, in the vein of the arts, American interest in fine art and avant-garde film has all but vanished. According to Ted Mikulski in his book *Art is Dead*, "The appreciation of fine art and other cultural traditions is being replaced with the mainstream consumer culture where having more and better things are what is valued most" (Mikulski 81). For Mikulski, fine art's decline can be attributed to a rise in consumerism; He implies that mainstream America has begun to embrace material possessions pushed by corporations rather than individually created artwork. However Mikulski's point only reaches the surface of the phenomenon that is the devaluation of high art in mainstream society, as he fails to connect the death of art, as he sees it, to the overall declining faith in American institutions as seen in the Gallup poles. Indeed the cultural devaluation of institutions and the cultural devaluation of fine art are intimately related. Just as Americans don't believe that public schools and police forces will serve them adequately and professionally, so those same Americans don't believe that high art and film truly have the ability to enrich their lives in any meaningful way. Thus, when postmodern America is evaluated as a whole, the underlying sentiment beneath both phenomena – the death of art and the decline of faith in institutions – is not simply consumerism or political dissatisfaction. Rather, America finds itself more culturally impoverished, more cynical, more nihilistic than ever before.

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ATTACHED IMAGE



Caption: A still shot from Hans Richter's Dada film, *Ghosts Before Breakfast*. An example of the "double exposure" editing technique.