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### Absurdity or Rationality?

The interwar period, which lasted roughly from 1920 to 1939, is a vitally important time in the history of modern art. Traumatized and yet to recover from the first world war, this generation of artists witnessed the epitome of nationalism, which eventually led to the second deconstructing world war. While artists in the interwar period were trained in traditional art institutions, in the tumultuous society, they had to forfeit their status as pure artists and enter into the real world filled with class struggle and violence facilitated by industrialization. Responding to the absurd social turmoil, artists sarcastically yield the language of absurdity to its extreme in art expression. On the one hand, Dada artists in Berlin, like John Heartfield and George Grosz, assume the responsibility of evoking the masses with their seemingly realistic but inherently absurd paintings. On the other hand, Surrealists like Max Ernest escape from the conflicts on the grand societal scale and study the hidden drive of human beings to heal the trauma caused by the unceasing warfares and industrialization. Although Dada and Surrealism artists embrace different ideologies responding to the rapid modernization, they both fearlessly and groundbreakingly rebel warfares, materialism, and authority with absurd acts. Even today, those avant-garadists' spirit of challenging social norms is still immensely valuable.

George Grosz's *The Pillars of Society*, produced in 1926, is a classic example of Berlin Dada. The portrait realistically depicts a chaotic and violent warfare scene suggested by the darkness lurking everywhere on the canvas. The three main figures on the front are depicted in a cartoonish way combined with realistic and exaggerated details to reveal their status immediately. The one holding a beer cup and a silver sword in a Nazi military uniform is a

fascist autocrat with intimidating scars on his cheek. Grosz hallows out his desire to declare wars from his head to emphasize his cruelty. The cunning glasses-wearing figure close to the autocrat is a journalist suggested by the pencil and newspaper held in his hands. A chamber pot seals his head to represent the stupidity of his words in the service of the autocrat. Finally, the corpulent moron with closed eyes behind the autocrat is the politician holding a national flag. He is so brainless that even a pile of human waste dumped on him cannot wake him up. Then, in the background, there are indifferent Nazi soldiers conducting violence with machine guns. Between the soldiers and three main figures, the man in a black cloak is a professor trying to escape the crime scene. The world outside, however, has already been destroyed by flames.

While Grosz's painting returns to figuration, it lacks any painterly skill in previous portraits. Compared with Jacques-Louis David's *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, Grosz's dictator in the front is paired down to naive features that can suggest his ruthless nature. Grosz adamantly refuses to deliver sensational joys to upper-class art collectors, relying on cartoonish brush strokes. In his mind, "all the 'ism' of art became yesterday's inconsequential studio affairs" under the shadow of the war (Grosz: 467). To understand the reason behind Grosz's rejection of pure art, one needs to understand interwar society. Coming back to the home country after many years of fleeing life, artists like Grosz may find that western civilization is perpetually covered with violence and class distinction due to the war. When veterans with amputations were walking examples of the victim of the war, fascist propaganda still brazenly favored the advent of another war. Therefore, Grosz understands that peace is transient, and the dream of indulging oneself with pure sensational and romantic art is broken. To make art meaningful and suitable to the European society in the shadow of world wars, Dada artists like Grosz favor the tendency of *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, which requires artists to take the

responsibility of “inspiring masses,” who have long been suffering from upper-class oppression (Dickerman: 9). Therefore, the figures are paired down to the most intuitive way for the public to understand. On the contrary, all the extraordinary details on the face of Jacques-Louis David’s Napoleon would thus be meaningless and redundant. Besides, the upper-class figures, namely the pillars of the society, are no longer depicted for the audience to admire but to despise. Grosz reveals their hideous face “to help workers ... understand their oppression and suffering, force them to admit openly to themselves that they are wretched and enslaved, awaken their self-confidence and stir them to the class war” (Grosz: 411-412). Therefore, from the absurd portrait of the western bureaucracy, Grosz gives art the new purpose of imposing challenges to the rationality of western civilization, which the bourgeois class has always dominated.

Moreover, Surrealism is another response to the interwar chaos. The groundbreaking collage novel *One Week of Kindness or the Seven Capital Elements (Une Semaine de bonté)* is a prime example of how Surrealists combine unrelated real figurations absurdly to create a surreal mental state. This collage novel has 182 collages in eight chapters hand-made by Max Ernst using fragments of nineteenth-century scientific journals and novels. Although the sources of his collages are real representations of animals, figures, and objects, as Evan Maurer comments in his review of the work, “the images of Ernst’s collage novels follow his own symbolic themes and not the logical reality of ordinary experience” (Maurer: 73). Bizard animal-like humans and human-like animals are used commonly. More absurdly, the main heroine of the novel has 100 heads and is without a head at the same time (the mystic appearance of the heroine is constantly changing throughout the novel). Not only is the figuration strange, but the content of the novel is also incomprehensible, with themes associated with sex, violence, crimes, and dreams. Through illogical titles, like *L’ immaculée conception (The Immaculate Conception)* and *La même, pour*

*la deuxième.. (The same, for the second...)*, Ernst let the audience enter into the private world of his own psychological and philosophical creation and their own minds' unfamiliar and irrational structure.

Indeed, inspired by Dada artists, Max Ernest further challenges the western irrationality posted by George Grosz. Specifically, while Grosz attacks the art institution with his hideous portraits, Ernest removes the subjectivity of artists and hands the process of art-making to the randomness of human desires. Like other surrealists, Ernest found that uncontrolled human emotions perfectly coincide with industrialization's irrational deconstruction of the world. Therefore, Ernest throws away his authorship and employs the automatic art-making process so that Surrealism can "play its part in accelerating the general crisis in the consciousness and conscience of our time" (Ernest: 492). In his collage novel, readers can never understand the novel's content based on the literature analysis skills used in reading William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The only way to truly appreciate the meaning of the work is by giving up rationality and embracing the original feelings triggered by the unsettling collage images. By creating an art piece that is incomprehensible with the traditional art education, Ernest steps over the norms and rules set by the institutions.

While retaining the absurdity in the spirit of questioning western rationality, Surrealists focus on uncovering and recovering an individual's psychological state. Max Ernest himself is a victim of the first world war as a soldier who served both on the Western and the Eastern front. After witnessing the bloody images of war and touching the cold gun barrels himself, Ernst develops a severe psychological trauma and only wants to escape from any societal conflict on a grand scale. Not like George Grosz, Ernst completely loses any interest and hope in social propaganda, since Surrealist believes that "in any prerevolutionary period the writer or artist,

who of necessity is a product of the bourgeoisie, is by definition incapable of translating these aspirations (of the working class)” (Breton: 465). However, as an artist who is determined to give art a new meaning, Ernst resorts to studying the hidden drive of human beings to heal the trauma caused by the unceasing warfares and industrialization. Since people living in western society have continuously been educated to maintain their decency, their inner emotional drives are long depressed and hidden. Then, after the war, the illness may come out and jeopardize people’s mental health. As a Surrealist, Ernst is determined to let his audience directly face their unfamiliar internal desires through his automatic drawings. For example, when the desire for sex, violence, and crimes are exposed from his animal-like humans in the collage novel, the audience can finally look directly at those desires without the disguise of their human body. Once people can self-observe their hidden mental state, they can examine and heal their minds accordingly. In this process, Surrealists are “not artists but doctors,” and artworks are therapeutic (Breton. 465).

*The Pillars of Society*, and *Une Semaine de bonté*, although two differ in that one directly calls the working class to rebel against the war activists but the other one aims at providing therapeutic examinations, they both pioneeringly refuse wars and seek the tolerance and collectiveness of human beings. Behind the raging nationalism created by politicians and other officials with power are the live people with acute feelings that comprise each nation. Why would we humans rely on the advancement of western civilization to equip ourselves with deadly weapons so that one race can command the lives of another’s? What is the end of the endless chase of power and dominance? Will we eventually use human civilization to eradicate human civilization? In the none-ending chaos as the byproduct of human civilization, avant-garde artists like Grosz and Ernst bravely question the long-established norms since the beginning of civilization. They reinterpret art as the fundamental outlet of human emotions and spirits

independent of the ongoing prejudice and hatred. Thus, the presence of art constantly reminds us of the meaning of living and warns us of the danger of our self-destruction. This attitude had a tremendous influence on the artists after Dada and Surrealism artists. On American soil, it is again the art that harshly questioned the ridiculous discrimination on gender and sexuality minorities. The *Silence=Death* poster in 1987 succeeded the spirit of challenging social norms fifty years ago. Now, in the crisis of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – a possible precursor to another world-scale war – we might again resort to the avant-garde spirit to prevent us from bloodshed and guide us to the restoration of rationality.

#### Works Cited

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