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Anti-war Motives of the Surrealists

World War I has ended and the Dadaists, anarchistic yet semi-whimsical, are rampant with collages marrying ideas from all corners of knowledge in order to instill feelings of anti-war, anti-politics, and anti-conformity. Artists such as Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, and even master Max Ernst participated in the ideas, the movement, and thus the art. Although Dada as a movement spanned less than a decade, these pacifist yet anarchistic motives lingered into the movement that was to follow: Surrealism. Many Dadaists transitioned into and helped develop Surrealist techniques, and thus brought with them Dadaist ideals; as for those Surrealists with other roots, sporting anti-war opinions in a world where rising political tension was pretty much omnipresent was nothing if not with ease. Works of WWI veteran Max Ernst, anti-Spanish Civil War Salvador Dalí, and WWII exile Yves Tanguy have underlying themes supporting pacifist, or rather, anti-war ideologies. Surrealist artists, although technically confined to a construct purely of dreams and imagination, possessed a tendency to express various anti-war ideals within their artwork.

In *History of the Surrealist Movement*, Gérard Durozoi explores Dada, the precursor to Surrealism. This is followed by a roughly four-hundred page study of Surrealism, including the birth, evolution, major events, and dissolution of the movement. At the helm of the movement (at least for the first few decades) stood André Breton, the pivotal author of *le Manifeste du Surréalisme*. This 1924 declaration describes Surrealism here as “Surrealism, n. Pure psychic automatism with which one proposes to express the real process of thought, either orally or in writing, or in any other manner. Thought’s dictation, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, outside any esthetic or moral concerns” (Durozoi 68). He then lists several artists, among which exist Aragon, Éluard, Péret, and the like. Then, hitting bookstores in 1930 after six years of the ever-changing movement, Breton returns with the

Second Manifesto. Breton declares, “the surrealist operation has no chance of succeeding unless it takes place in conditions of moral asepsis, and there are very few people who are willing to even hear about this” (Durozoi 192). The message Breton intends to communicate is in regards to the individual through accessing one’s unconscious in consciously vulnerable situations (i.e. “love, dreams, madness, art, and religion”). Making record of these abstract or surreal images and ideas, and dictating them through some real medium, and discovering the truths of reality: this precisely is the foundation Surrealism has adapted to (Durozoi 190). Among the fourteen signatures are, again those of Aragon, Éluard, and Péret. Although this time, new signatures appear: Ernst, Dalí, and Tanguy.

After serving all four years on both German fronts during the terrible First World War, one can already assume artist Max Ernst has developed intense anti-war ideals. Completed in 1937, almost 20 years after the end of World War I, Ernst conceives one of his most iconic Surrealist masterpieces, “Barbarians Marching to the West.” The painting describes the meeting of three quite hideous creatures, birdlike in nature yet also possessing human qualities such as opposable thumbs, erect stature, and similar limb structure. Ernst then gives them feeling, the two on the left cowering in fear while the third, although only doing so with a hand gesture, threatens the others with a gun. In addition, it is important to make note of the fact that the two on the right don’t have eyes, while the third simply has his closed.

Now, in regards to the manifestoes, it’s almost too easy to draw conclusions: the eyes represent the Surrealists’ blind journey into his own unconscious, and witnesses a meeting of Surrealists: blind to the reality of their violent unconscious abstractions yet consciously arguing (in some cases actually resulting in physical violence [Durozoi 65]) for reasons futile. Exit: the previous idea, enter: roughly 65 million soldiers drafted and deployed during World War I, and of those, according to Doctor of US History, Dr. Allen Ruff, “some 6.8 million died from combat-related deaths while maybe another 3 million died from disease. Another 7.7 million went missing, presumed dead while approximately 8 million were left permanently disabled” (2014). This provides context to the sheer magnitude of death Ernst witnessed while he, without question of moral or will, was sent to fight for German

Imperialism (most Surrealists at this point [including Ernst although but with the exception of Dalí] were in fact active communists or at least incredibly left-leaning). With that in mind, one can draw conclusions wherein the purpose of the eyes (or lack thereof) shut, represents the mass theft of young men sent blindly into battle who, like Ernst, aren't given a choice.

In tandem with the Breton manifestoes, there was an insatiable deal of studying and/or collaborating with then active psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Jung believed that in every individual's unconscious lies a "collective unconscious," wherein living human beings share the memories as well as some distinct personal characteristics, or archetypes, of their ancestors. Just as with Surrealists, these psychologists employed the dictation of dreams in order to create a better understanding of the unconscious, and Ernst has taken quite a dose. One can assert that the use of "Barbarians" in the title refer to the three visible creatures, and although they don't necessarily resemble any modern-day humans, their hideous demeanor correlates precisely to their primitive, barbaric nature. Ernst, technologically and philosophically savvy as he was (Janis & Blesh 97), ponders the memories of primitive humans, their inherent militant attitudes due to inaccessibility to enlightened thought, or any philosophy for that matter, and how they must have yearned for improved weaponry. Ernst decides: modern advancements in military technology (i.e. machine guns, chemical warfare, the sky as a theater of war) grants mankind the kind of tools he has longed for since his dawn, and in turn results in his return to more barbaric actions, which is clearly visible as the right-most creature, obviously lacking in modern military technology, expresses primitive and barbaric aggression.

Ernst is nothing if not a veteran: a veteran of war, of art, of horror. There isn't quite anything comparable to the terrors that had been placed before Ernst: it's as if in order to paint a clear picture of the devastation of World War I, one would need to reach into theirs as well as their ancestors' unconscious minds, only to find the truth of behind the fact that war is born only of the most evil. This truth serves as the foundation for Ernst's hatred of war.

Not only did 1937 mark the conception of "Barbarians Marching to the West," but also ushered in Francisco Franco's assertion of power in Spain, home to perhaps the most

iconic of Surrealists, Salvador Dalí. After 3 years of civil war, violent Republican revolutionaries failed to overthrow Franco and the Loyalist Party (fascist, like Dalí). In a state of reconstruction, Spain does not take part in the war that, in 1940, only continues to escalate: World War II. Something within Dalí is set aflame. Picture this: a barren, infinite surface; hovering just above is a massive, disembodied face, surrounded by several malicious serpents. Upon this face lies a look of horror and disgust. Within his gaping eyes and mouth exist additional faces, and even more within their eyes and mouths, and so on and so forth, all sharing similar expressions of terror and misery, implying their infiniteness. This is the image of “the Face of War,” Dalí’s outcry against the atrocious consequences of war. The faces in this painting, the faces of absolute horror, represent Dalí’s unconscious imagery of the terror of battle and the overwhelming imminence of death and destruction. The disembodiment, the infinite landscape, the near-deformation of the faces; these represent the lethal, inescapable, destructive nature of war, as well as the depth of Earth’s population whom war-time affects. Throughout the entire Spanish Civil War, the world heard of political divisions and uprisings and mass bombings and massacres in Spanish cities, while Franco, with Axis Powers support, eventually suppressed the revolutionaries. On record as leaning towards fascism, it’s easy to understand how Dalí, a supporter of Franco and the Loyalists, would fear the chance that the violent revolutionary groups, who, by striking fear into the heart of Spain by inciting countless riots, encouraging multiple strikes, and committing several assassinations, might successfully overthrow Franco’s regime. Regarding Dalí’s reactions to the consequences of civil war, Rev. Leo O’Donovan, S.J., former president of Georgetown University in Washington D.C., tells of how he often paradoxically “claimed to have no interest in politics,” yet expressed his disgust in paintings such as “The Burning Giraffe,” (1936-1937) and “Soft Construction with Boiled Beans,” (1936) in which one finds deformed and wounded women as well as “on another hallucinatory landscape and against an ironically romantic blue sky full of turbulent clouds (one thinks of El Greco), a shrieking head appears above dismembered but wildly recombined human limbs,” (O’Donovan 2007) respectively.

In addition to the mass of casualties discussed regarding World War I, Dr. Ruff

asserts that “total war,” paid for mostly by loans and credit eventually forced upon popular classes, also helped lead to African Imperialism, which not only caused nations such as France and England to employ “*corvée* labor” (unpaid) and force indigenous peoples to fight on the frontlines, but the implementation of mass blockades of resources to Germany. Along with resource blockades followed a massive decrease in agricultural output thus a massive increase in malnourishment. In Germany alone “the mortality rate for women and small children went to 50%; deaths attributed to tuberculosis increase by over 70%. The birth rate declined by 50% and the German Health Office attributed some 730,000 deaths to the ‘Hunger Blockade’” (2014). Dalí makes use of the infiniteness of sorrow and pain in “the Face of War,” not only to communicate the emotional toil of civil war, but to emphasize the depth behind the resulting destruction of the “total war economy” of World War I.

Within every man lies the inherent fear of death, which is ever so often, as in this painting, represented by the serpent. The vile specimens in this painting represent the paranoia soldiers experienced across all theaters of war: a result of the same inherent fear of their impending death. Such as in the King James Bible, Satan, disguised as a snake, tempted Eve with “knowing good and evil,” only to be punished with exile and the realities behind the cycle of life and death (King James Version, Gen. 3.1-19), political leaders protect their views of good and evil, corrupt or not, by sending the young and vestal into war to experience these same realities God had punished upon Adam and Eve. Dalí views war as not only the absolute destruction of man, but also as a “disaster of nature,” (O’Donovan 17) and as is any other living thing, humans are a part of nature as well. Thus asserting an interpretation wherein the foremost face represents Spain and the faces within represent her population, while Dalí uses the serpents to represent the revolutionaries and their thirst for a venomous end to Franco’s Loyalists.

Dalí, like Ernst, understands how war results in nothing but the destruction of life. He’s fallen victim to the pain surfacing when one’s home is threatened. Although these hold true, Dalí also asserts one strange philosophy. Nowadays, it’s almost globally accepted that Fascism throughout history, whether Dalí openly recognized it or not, has served as a political vehicle to commit heinous crimes (i.e. Hitler, Mussolini and the like). Thus, through

his use of historical symbolism (historical is a very loose term), Dalí asserts that political revolution, or more specifically, the casualties of the resulting war, is trivial. He accepts that, although times may not be the best, the death of soldiers and civilians in order to usher political revolution, especially in the Spanish Civil War, only opens further the wounds of society. In summary, Dalí asserts that the battlefield is no place for politics, let alone anything at all. This, surrealistically speaking, is a truth of reality.

Time has eclipsed both World Wars, yet anti-war ideals still call the hearts of the Surrealists home. After witnessing the terrors of the First World War with Ernst and receiving Dalian aid in understanding the greater truths, one can now explore the infinite mind of French surrealist Yves Tanguy. During World War II, the artist exiled to the United States from his home in Brittany, France. Then, in 1945, he creates the third, final, and arguably most abstract of the discussed artworks, “the Rapidity of Sleep.” It features a massive amount of oddly shaped objects, a finite row of which separating even more odd shapes, with a large population to the left contrasting just a few, small shapes to the right. To the left, shapes display a combination of red and white and even a bit of blue. The row that separates them alternates coats of red and white, while they stretch into a frontier of cloudy skies with just the slightest spot of blue, contrasted to an almost wavy floor of dark grey, creating a vague horizon nearly touched by one, towering, white shape.

The title itself suggests quite a bit. As was previously mentioned, the Surrealists were obsessed with the unconscious, specifically dream-states, making it extremely easy to see this painting as simply a projection from Tanguy’s dream-state unconscious, or, as suggested by the editor for the Art Institute of Chicago (home of “the Rapidity of Sleep”) publications, Margherita Andreotti, quite literally the “onset of sleep” (1994). Instead, one interprets the title as a reference to a soldier’s short-lived military life (ending in death, of course). This long row of gradually shrinking shapes represents the gradual decay of each soldier’s frantic life. “Given the date of the work, at the end of World War II, one also wonders whether there is embedded in this work something of the emotional tenor of the times...” (Andreotti, 1994). In 1945, having lived through both World Wars, especially through his teen years, it’s easy to recognize how Tanguy would not only trouble over, but try to

communicate the futility of a soldier's life. The soldier enters robust and healthy, then soon after the discomfort of military training, the paranoia of deployment, and the tribulations of battle, the "shape" has finally waned, withered, and collapsed after what would seem like only a few days, meeting his end; Tanguy asks, "and for what?"

Additionally, there is the fact that militaries around the world function individually as brotherhoods of young men and women in order enforce the same ideas, beliefs, and physical statures. This painting, along with countless other Surrealist paintings, is an outcry against political and militaristic outfits whose ever-compelling conformist ideologies serve as the fundamental enemy of Surrealism. In the spirit of the Second Surrealist Manifesto, Tanguy embraces methods to ignore the realities recognized by society, in order to create what has never been created before (Durozoi 189-90), therefore, and with essentially every single piece of surrealist art ever created as evidence, the idea that Surrealism promotes nonconformity and individualism emerges. Perhaps the sole, pinnacle characteristic of Surrealists comes from the artist's identification with personal attitudes and philosophies and locating similar themes within their dreams, which, technically speaking, and although abstract, are one's most personal possessions. By way of the row of shapes, Tanguy woes over not only the individual's involuntary campaign along a doomed path, but the fact that the grand variety of unique and intricate shapes (soldiers) are being robbed of their individuality by militaries or otherwise warring parties. Furthermore, one again recalls the Second Surrealist Manifesto wherein, "the surrealist operation has no chance of succeeding unless it takes place in conditions of moral asepsis, and there are very few people who are willing to even hear about this." (Durozoi 192). This encourages a return to the primitive, virgin morality wherein instead of killing for what one believes may be just, one must simply assert the need to prolong their life as well as those of their species. This, Tanguy believed would satisfy "a yearning for a peace that would transcend recent history" (Andreotti 1994). Tanguy asserts that militaries are the enemy of the individual, thus, an enemy of Surrealism. Simply knowing he had been forced to flee from Europe during World War II, it's not hard at all to understand that Tanguy held feelings of resentment and hatred for war. Of course, like most other Surrealists, these were mostly a product of exposure to war throughout their

entire lives. Not only is that present in this painting, but also many of Tanguy's other works consist of similar elements: the dark, battlefield like landscapes and the unique, intricate shapes. By stripping away the bustle of society, Tanguy uses these elements to isolate individualism in an environment where it functions as more than just an idea, emphasizing its ultimate importance as a way of life: an importance that remains a truth of reality.

Although born of somewhat silly roots, Surrealism as an art movement harbors a certain profundity that is rarely ever seen in any medium; it is the marriage of the genius behind centuries of research in art technique with modern philosophies and technologies as seen through the deepest, most inaccessible scope of unconscious. By juxtaposing realities of both the conscious and unconscious experience, Surrealism reveals truth. Truths of right and wrong, of life and of death, to hunt or be hunted, or to simply not hunt thy fellow man at all! Be it through Ernst's adoption of the Collective Unconscious, Dalí's enigmatic yet pacifist philosophies, or Tanguy's caution to the theft of the individual, Surrealists expose the means for the end of mankind: war. In the spirit of Surrealism, Edwin Starr (1970) sings, "War, what is good for? Absolutely nothing!"

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