

Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Unconscious¹

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Abstract: This paper explores two important, twentieth-century art movements, Dadaism and Surrealism and the use of primitivist representations and their relation to the art emerging from the unconscious. By giving some examples, it is argued that the influence of 'Primitive' art is strongly felt in the art of many artists of these movements. One must also include the growing interest of psychoanalytic studies, especially in the works of the period of Freud and Jung. The Dadaist artists created their art through the irrational approach towards nature and a 'primitive' attitude to the environment, the art of children and of the insane. On the other hand, the Surrealists approached the unconscious through automatism and dreams. These artists also explored the ancient human past and what is termed as the 'primitive' unconscious.

Keywords: Dadaism, Surrealism, the Unconscious, Primitivism, Twentieth-Century Art, Freud, Jung

This paper does not intend to make a historical critique of the various attitudes that Dada and Surrealist artists took in the important movements that dominated the arts and literature during the first half of the twentieth century. It seeks a coherent explanation why such movements are central to modern art through the use of primitivist representations and the appeal to the psychological interests of the time which were fundamental to subsequent art movements. The general line of argument is that it is impossible to discuss the 'unconscious' as the main feature of these two art movements (as well as other movements

¹ This is the text of a paper read during the Twenty-Eight International Conference on Psychology and the Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark, 22–26 June 2011.

in art history) without referring to the ‘primitive’ unconscious. It is the opinion of the present writer that artists had to look to their ‘roots’ by exploring the unconscious realms of the ancient human past, the tribal, as well as the psychologies of children, peasants, and the insane. This will put the readers in a better position to understand better the role of the modern artist and to find meaning in contemporary artwork.

Traditional values and morals, along with any basic hope for the future, were really shattered by World War I. That event was so catastrophic that man lost his faith in the progress that had developed in nineteenth-century Europe. There seemed no hope that Western society would survive and many questioned whether a reliance on traditional values would enable it to do so. A modern movement that emerged out of the horrors of World War I was the Dada movement. This western European artistic and literary movement (1916–23) sought the discovery of authentic reality through the abolition of traditional culture and aesthetic forms. Dada (French ‘hobby-horse’) primarily flourished in Zurich and other northern European countries like Berlin, Cologne, and Paris. It also left its imprint in New York. The origin of the name is still unclear and it is disputed how the word ‘Dada’ originated. Many identify Hugo Ball as the actual originator who is said to have accidentally found the name while flipping through a French-German dictionary ... ‘Let’s take the word “dada” ... The child’s first sound expresses the primitiveness, the beginning at zero, the new in our art.’²

At first, many Dadaists declared themselves as Expressionists and Futurists but this died out by 1917. The early group namely, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janko from Rumania; Jean Arp from France; and Hugo Ball, Hans Richter, and Richard Huelsenbeck from Germany took refuge in the neutral city of Zurich and organized the first meetings in cafes. Tristan Tzara, the leader of the movement, wanted to attack society through artistic absurdities. Artists who joined this movement believed that a society that is always engaged in wars does not deserve art, so Dadaism was considered as an anti-art movement – creating ugliness not beauty. Dawn Ades, in her essay on Dadaism, comments that:

The Dadaists believed that the artist was the product, and, traditionally, the prop, of bourgeois society, itself anachronistic and doomed. The war finally

2 Dawn Ades, ‘Dada and Surrealism’, in *Concepts of Modern Art*, Nikos Stangos (ed.), (enlarged edition, London, 1981), 110.

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his work.⁶ He created images from various materials, such as cloth, paper, and wood instead of paint and employed different techniques such as tearing, gluing, and cutting up. In these experiments, he discovered what is called the 'Laws of Chance'. Artists 'rejected everything that was to copy or description, and allowed the Elementary and Spontaneous to react in full freedom'.⁷ Arp used 'chance' also in his poetry in a more radical way, by choosing words and phrases at random from newspapers.⁸

The concept of nature was also of fundamental importance for the Dadaists. They had a different opinion of 'Nature' than the Expressionists. While Expressionists strove to become part of nature, Dadaists believed that 'matter and spirit were one' and that 'humankind was an integral part of an organic universe'.⁹ This philosophy is reflected greatly in the works of Jean Arp, like his found objects and collages as well as his organic abstractions. Colin Rhodes describes well the unifying factor of art and nature as seen by the Zurich Dadaists:

Arp and his Zurich contemporaries believed that a true work of art does not exist above nature, but that it takes its place within the natural order, as a concrete manifestation of the primal organic process of becoming.¹⁰

So we see that Dadaism 'signifies the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment'¹¹ and nature. Artists were experiencing and expressing the closest possible homogeneity with nature.

Another early work which describes the influence of primitive and tribal art is Marcel Janco's 1916 painting *Invitation to a Dada Evening*. This work is the sole example that shows the involvement of the Zurich Dadaists with Primitivism.¹² It also captures the excitement and action of the performances held at the *Cabaret Voltaire*. Later this young Rumanian artist worked on a number of masks made out of crude materials to publicize and be used in Dadaist happenings. 'For Janico, Primitive art was one of the several inspirational influences from non-traditional sources that were direct and free in the forms and manner they utilized

6 Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Britt (ed.), 216.

7 Ibid., 214, 215.

8 Ibid. 215.

9 Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London, 1994), 150.

10 Ibid.

11 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York, 1981), 71.

12 Evan Maurer, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Rubin (ed.), 536.

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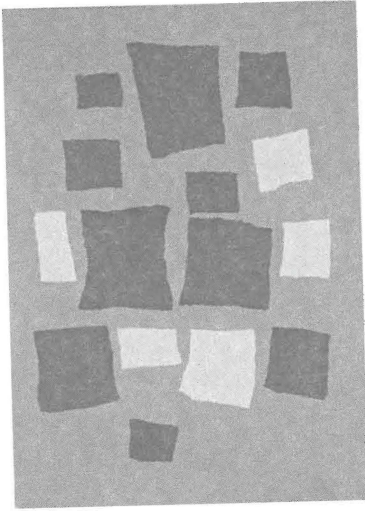
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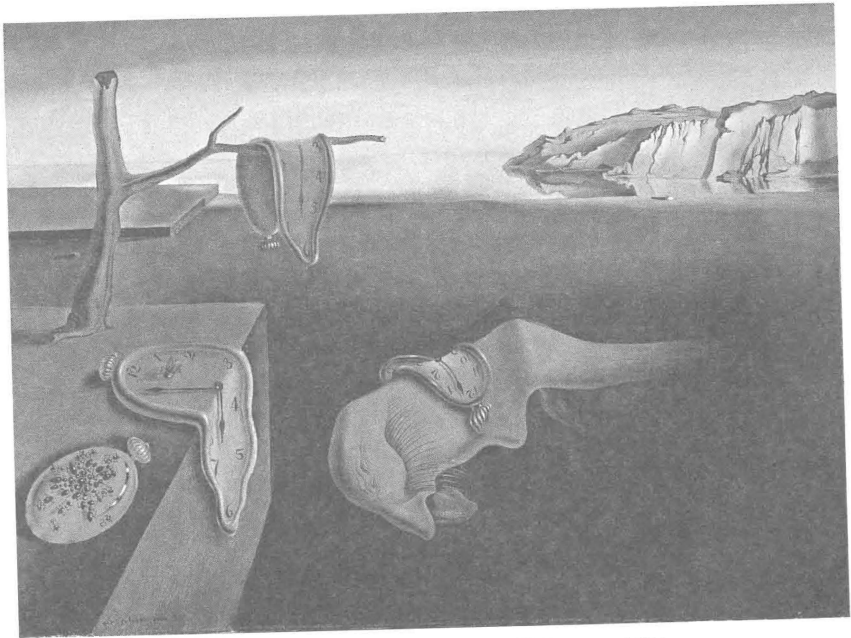
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Arp, collage with squares arranged according to laws of chance, 1916



Marcel Janco, /Invitation to a Dada Evening/, 1916.



Salvador Dalí, The Persistence of Memory, 1931

For the Surrealist, dreams played an important role. They believed that the primitive state could only be reached through the thoughts and images that arise from the unconscious through dreams. Also, in the early days of this movement, artists made use of drugs and hypnotism to enter into the dream-like state and a state of the unconscious and be able to extract images and ideas. Surrealists 'dreams were valuable simply for poetic content, as documents from a marvellous world'.²⁰ It was not necessary to record dreams and then translate them into paintings. They are rather explorations into an interior landscape. Although Freudian psychology played an important role in the development of Surrealist thinking, the Surrealists borrowed only what was appropriate for them. Their aim was to change the view of mankind, not to offer an objective scientific contribution to psychology. So it was natural for the Surrealists to create dream-like scenes and images that are impossible to find in the natural world. Surrealist painting shows a great variety of content and technique. Salvador Dalí for example, painted with a photographic-like accuracy and made his images look bright, intense, and alive. His paintings expressed a kind of 'theatrical illusion' to the spectators. He was perhaps one of the Surrealists who provoked 'the most difficult questions about the possible realization of dreams on canvas, and hence about the symbolic function of the imagery'.²¹ In fact, Freudian psychology was the most appealing to Dalí. Freud himself explains this when he met Dalí in 1938 in London. Freud argues:

It is not the unconscious I seek in your pictures, but the conscious. While in the pictures of the masters – Leonardo or Ingres – that which interests me, that which seems mysterious and troubling to me, is precisely the search for unconscious ideas, of an enigmatic order, hidden in the picture. Your mystery is manifested outright. The picture is but a mechanism to reveal itself.²²

Dalí's work shows undoubtedly the great influence that Freud had on him especially when he read about the theory of the unconscious in Freud's seminal book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* written in 1900. Freud's general theme in this major work is that dreams are disguised wish-fulfilment, manifestations of repressed sexual desires and energy.

20 Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Britt (ed.), 242.

21 Ibid., 241.

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Within the visual arts Surrealism was one of the most voracious of all modern movements, drawing into range the art of mediums, children, lunatics, the naïve painters, together with primitive art, which reflected their belief in their own ‘integral primitivism’.²⁷

The Surrealists believed in the innocent eye and therefore they found that the art produced by children was more real than that produced by adults. The art of adults was seen to be repressed and contaminated. Joan Miró was one of the first Surrealists to be inspired by the art of children. His strange images, remnants of various parts of the imagined human body, derived from children’s games, became the basis for his early works. Miró took advantage of any form and used all sorts of materials to bring out the desired shapes. He used sponges, rags or burlap. His process in painting had two stages. He stated: ‘I begin painting, and as I paint the picture begins to assert itself, or suggest itself, under my brush. The form becomes a sign for a woman or a bird as I work ... The first stage is free, unconscious.’ But, he added ‘the second stage is carefully calculated’.²⁸ Actually Miró was not a product of Surrealism but was important for the Surrealists. He turned away from a representational style and made use of *automatism*. Breton commented that ‘by his “pure psychic automatism” Miró might “pass as the most surrealist of us all”’.²⁹

During the early years of Surrealism, Max Ernst, who later became well known for his automatic techniques known as frottage and grattage, ‘was the artist most involved with primitivism and the imagery of Primitive art’.³⁰ He was one of the most prolific contributors of Surrealism using a vast choice of materials in his work. In the late twenties, his interest in sculpture was becoming more evident and he derived his inspiration from the art of Primitive American Indians. Ernst produced a series of sculpture with a totemic nature. Even his masks had a symbolic, magical quality and a personal sacredness. ‘Like the Primitive shaman, Ernst sought to utilize hallucinations and visions to become seer, one capable of penetrating beyond the appearances to give form to surreal visions of his creative imagination.’³¹ Ernst’s interest was to create images that

27 Ades, *Dada and Surrealism*, in Stangos (ed.), 127.

28 Ibid., 130.

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30 Evan Maurer, ‘Dada and Surrealism’, in Rubin (ed.), 575.

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