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| **Dadaism in Film** |
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| Members of the Dada cultural and artistic movement began to experiment with film as a means to disseminate their stylistic partialities and cultural values through a new medium free of cultural respectability and aesthetic pretension. Founded in Zurich, Switzerland, by Tristan Tzara in 1916, this avant-garde movement would soon spread to France, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere. Much like the Surrealists that would follow, the Dadaists sought to liberate their audience from the cultural allegiances, prejudices, and norms of thinking that, in their view, had been largely responsible for the catastrophes of World War I. |
| Link: Dadafilm1.jpg  Members of the Dada cultural and artistic movement began to experiment with film as a means to disseminate their stylistic partialities and cultural values through a new medium free of cultural respectability and aesthetic pretension. Founded in Zurich, Switzerland, by Tristan Tzara in 1916, this avant-garde movement would soon spread to France, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere. Much like the Surrealists that would follow, the Dadaists sought to liberate their audience from the cultural allegiances, prejudices, and norms of thinking that, in their view, had been largely responsible for the catastrophes of World War I.  Unlike Surrealist film, Dadaist film did not seek to lure its viewers into the cinematic illusion. Instead, Dadaists employed unconventional methods in order to alienate the audience members and to provide them the distance with which to reflect upon the meta-artistic (and anti-artistic) quality of their productions. Film enabled the Dadaists to distort reality, motion, and perspective; it revealed familiar things in radically unfamiliar but persuasive new shapes.  It was an American artist, Man Ray, who would produce perhaps the first Dadaist film, *The Return to Reason* (1923). The title is blatantly ironic, as Ray was member of a group founded on the rejection of logic and reason and the prizing of nonsense, irrationality, and intuition. For him, the purpose of Dadaism was to test the audience’s patience, which he assuredly accomplished with *Reason.* To make the film, Ray spread out 30 meters of film, nailed it to a table, and sprinkled it with salt, pepper, nails, and tacks. The result was a puzzling succession of white flashes and shapes dancing over a black background with intermittent shots of Ray’s muse, Kiki of Montparnasse.  Hans Richter, another early pioneer of Dadaism, also produced one of his most influential films during 1923. In *Rhythmus 21*, Richter experimented with the constituent parts of the filmic medium by concentrating on the playful interaction between basic shapes, such as lines, squares, and rectangles. Throughout the 1920s, Richter would consistently highlight the importance of this minimalist rhythm in film while his post-WWI nihilism translated into a focused critique of German society. Some of the most notable titles in this critical vein include *Filmstudie* (1926), *Inflation* (1928), and *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928), all of which helped lay the groundwork for surrealism and other avant-garde movements.  Marcel Duchamp’s *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) is another significant example of screen Dadaism. Utilizing what he termed ‘precision optics,’ Duchamp attempted to create optical illusions by pairing rotating circles with puns written on the outer edge with rotoreliefs, or images that appear as three-dimensional when placed on a rotating surface. Set in motion, these abstract images appeared to move back and forth in a pulsating rhythm that, coupled with the suggestive wordplay, elicited an erotically charged process of free association that exploited traditional grammatical and filmic practices.  *Entr’acte* (René Clair, 1924) exhibited a more comprehensible (if absurd) storyline while demonstrating the Dadaists penchant for visual tricks. The film concludes with a lengthy chase scene that rivals the antics of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, both of whom the Dadaists admired for their tendency to poke fun at the bourgeois. In the final scene, a group of people magically disappear one by one. The scene exemplifies the Dadaists’ innovative use of the camera as an illusion-producing apparatus.  With *Emak-Bakia* (1926), Man Ray set out to make a surrealist film, but most critics agree that its techniques and reception better place it within the Dada movement. While most of the film employs Ray’s disorienting images (aided by his own invention, the rayograph), the final scene might be read as an allegory. A woman directly faces the camera with eyes painted on her eyelids, giving the audience the illusion of a fixed stare. She then opens her eyes, revealing the deception and suggesting the new way of seeing the world advanced by the Dadaists.  Unlike the more programmatically pursued literature, painting, and sculpture of the movement, film Dadaism was a scattered, decentralized activity. By the end of the 1920s, Dada’s influence diminished while many of its gestures fed into other projects, such as surrealism and other forms of modernism. Important Films *The Return to Reason.* Dir. Man Ray. 1923.  *Rhythmus 21.* Dir. Hans Richter. 1923.  *Ballet Mécanique*. Dir. Fernand Leger. 1924.  *Entr’acte.* Dir. René Clair. 1924.  *Anemic Cinema*. Dir. Marcel Duchamp. 1926.  *Emak-Bakia.* Dir. Man Ray. 1926.  *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. Dir. Germaine Dulac. 1926.  *L'Étoile de Mer*. Dir. Man Ray. 1928. |
| Further reading:  (Foster & Kuenzli, 1979)  (Hopkins, 2004)  (Kuenzli, 1996) |