

Dada Shorts: *Ballet Mecanique, Emak-Bakia,*
and *Le Retour a la Raison*

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Dada and Surrealism

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Dada is an art movement that was born from a group of pacifist and draft-dodging artists who came together in their distaste for World War I. This group looked to create new art types in efforts of shunning the movements—Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism—that came before them. They did this by protesting the war—unlike the Futurists who hailed the option to work with new machines created for war, — by changing the structured way that art had previously been created—obvious in the rigidity and over analyzed forms of Cubism—and by removing the over emotionality that had been apparent in Expressionism.¹ One way that Dada artists looked to create these new arts was by using the new technologies that had become available to them such as photography, typography and film. Artists like Man Ray and Fernand Leger really investigated the possibilities that the cinema offered the Dada artist. “...Dada artists drew attention to the film medium’s usually concealed materiality and processes and investigated its particular formal and expressive possibilities.”² Some of their films that showcase this ingenuity and creativity are *Emak-Bakia* (1926) and *Le Retour a la Raison* (1923) by Man Ray, and *Ballet Mecanique* (1923-24) by Leger. All of these films truly embody the Dada spirit even though the artists that created them also belonged to other art movements. Man Ray began as a Dada artist but his “... experiments with photography ... brought him into the center of surrealism in Paris in the 1920s.”³ Leger was a member of Purism—a movement that came from Cubism—and his film *Ballet*

¹ See Matthew Gale. *Dada & Surrealism* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1997) 5-32.

² Leah Dickerman, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington D.C.: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2005) 410.

³ Dickerman, 479.

Mecanique was for a long time seen as a Cubist piece.⁴ The visual elements and consistent themes of these films makes them both an important part of the Dada movement.

Dada artists had a long running obsession with popular media. As a whole, the group created an enormous amount of print media, especially in the form of magazines. Many of these only had one or two volumes due to the inclusion of heavily political content that would cause them to be banned by the government.⁵ With the dawning of the film age, Dada artists saw film as a new outlet for their media-based works. “People across Europe and America were flocking to studio films in unprecedented number in the 1920s, when commercial cinema became a global cultural force ... Dada artists, however, were unsatisfied with film’s easy ability to reproduce reality and ... conventional narrative.”⁶ Just as these artists had done before with typography and propaganda, the Dadaists took film and explored every outlet of it. This resulted in films that are extremely experimental in appearance and content.

“In early 1922, probably after Tzara [a prominent figure in Zurich Dada] showed him the cameraless photograms made by Christian Schad, Man Ray began to produce his own photograms, calling them “Rayographs”...”⁷ Man Ray took these experiments and applied them to film and created *Le Retour a la Raison* which

...premiered at the dadaists’ notorious Coeur a barbe soiree in Paris on 6 July 1923, a day and a half after Tristan Tzara showed Man Ray, who had never made a film ... that Man Ray’s name figures in the gala’s program as the producer of

⁴ See film notes *Ballet Mecanique, Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction*, Unseen Cinema, 168 Minutes, 2005, DVD.

⁵ See Gale, 35-80, 117-170.

⁶ Dickerman, 410.

⁷ Dickerman, 479.

a Dada film. ... He sprinkled short sections of the film with salt and pepper, added pins and thumbtacks to other sections, and exposed the film briefly to light. After developing it, he spliced the resulting footage with sporadic, unrelated shots that he had on hand, including a field of daisies, a nude torso, and an egg crate dangling on a string.⁸

This film “highlights the incorporation of chance and the focus of materiality in Dada films.”⁹ This element of chance was a huge part of both the Dada aesthetic and ideology. It represented the removal of thought from the art-making process and was believed to free the artist and allow them to create more meaningful work. *Emak-Bakia*, *Le Retour a la Raison* and *Ballet Mecanique* show a large amount of chance, it being the one element that can tie all three films together. Dada artists such as Hans Arp and his wife Sophie Taeuber developed the idea of chance, used for art creation, in Zurich in the form of collages and sculpture.¹⁰ This element of chance seems to be the main defining characteristic of Dada cinema.

Ballet Mechanique (Mechanical Ballet) was directed by Fernand Leger (1881-1955), a French Purist artist that mostly worked with painting. He worked with American cinematographer Dudley Murphy (1897-1968) for the main filming of this movie. Ezra Pound (1885-1972), an American poet, and Man Ray are also rumored to have worked on *Ballet Mecanique*. There is controversy as to what involvement the later two had because each individual involved with the film recounted the creation of *Ballet Mecanique* completely differently.¹¹ *Ballet Mecanique* begins with the imagery of a puppet that referenced comedians such as Charlie Chaplin. This puppet was called “Paris

⁸ Dickerman, 413.

⁹ Dickerman, 413.

¹⁰ See Gale, 35-80.

¹¹ See Freeman, 28-45.

of Charlot” and is used to portray “the idea of a disintegrating/reconstituted Charlot at the beginning and end...”¹² of the movie. The imagery then moves to Katherine Murphy, Dudley Murphy’s wife, on a swing performing repetitive movements. These movements are meant to mimic the movements of the machines that informed Leger’s painting. From here a series of images consisting of geometric shapes, a hat, a typewriter, lettering and many other images flash one after the other—next a repetition of a woman smiling that is supplemented with the image of the hat that had previously appeared. Another sequence of fast-moving, segmented images happens again and leads into another view of Katherine Murphy swinging. This leads to a segment of the camera zooming in and out on a reflective surface and actually allowing you to see Murphy and Leger filming. This is followed by a compilation of images that have been distorted using mirrors and prisms. The fast paced nature and the imagery continue throughout the 16-minute running time of the movie. Some other significant imagery that occurs later in the film was that of a washerwoman climbing a set of stairs. Dudley Murphy was the one who filmed this section and said about it:

I saw an old washerwoman climbing a flight of stone stairs. When she reached the top, she was tired and made a futile gesture. The scene itself was banal, but by printing it 20 times and connecting the end of the scene with the beginning of her climb, it expressed the futility of life because she never got there. This scene in the editing followed a very intricate piece of machinery, somehow correlated in the movement and rhythm to that of hers.¹³

¹² Judi Freeman, “Bridging Purism and Surrealism: The Origins and Production of Fernand Leger’s *Ballet Mecanique*,” in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli. (London: The MIT Press, 1996) 36.

¹³ Freeman, 31.

“One of the first films to be acclaimed as avant-garde, *Ballet Mecanique* presents an exuberant, determinedly low-tech fantasia on the machine age...”¹⁴ This relation to machine and human appeared yet again as Murphy describes another scene where it “...showed a tremendous piston, brilliant and shiny, plunging up and down in a very phallic movement. This was followed by the bulging stomach of Katherine...who was now pregnant.”¹⁵ This theme of the mechanic was to be reinforced by a soundtrack created by American composer George Antheil. The score was written by never performed with the film until Paul D. Lehrman realized it in 1999. In regards to the composition, Lehrman commented:

The music is scored for eight percussionists, two pianists, bells, siren, airplane propellers, and sixteen player pianos. It eschews conventional forms, instead creating a unique “soundscape.” Due to technical limitations related to synchronization, this complex composition was never played in its original instrumentation, alone or with film.¹⁶

The pairing of the two (now available through Unseen Cinema, *See Bibliography*) truly adds to the sense of speed and mechanization that Leger and Dudley aimed to achieve in *Ballet Mecanique*. Leger comments on these two properties in his film:

- Two coefficients of interest upon which the film is constructed:
The variation of the speeds of projection:
The rhythm of these speeds.¹⁷

All in all Leger sums up his film the best by declaring that the film has “No scenario—Reactions of rhythmic images, that is all.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Susan Delson film note, *Light Rhythms: Music and Abstraction*, Unseen Cinema, 168 Minutes, 2005, DVD.

¹⁵ Freeman, 31.

¹⁶ Paul D. Lehrman film note, *Ballet Macanique*, Unseen Cinema, 16 Minutes, 2005, DVD.

¹⁷ Freeman, 39.

“This fleeting vision of random objects laid directly onto the filmstrip (nails, thumbtacks, etc.) and combined with snatches of photographed images (a fairground, a nude torso) is considered the quintessential Dada movie.”¹⁹ This statement about *Le Retour a la Raison* (The Return to Reason), a two-minute short by Man Ray, points to the major use of the element of chance. As previously stated, Man Ray created this film in less than two days producing a film almost entirely based on chance. George Antheil was also supposed to compose music for *Le Retour a la Raison* but because of his involvement with his *Sonata Sauvage*, he did not perform the music with the film.²⁰ This extremely short film visually consists almost entirely of Rayographs—the cameraless photographs that Man Ray was so famous for creating—that scroll by at a very fast pace. At the very end of the film, there is footage of a nude torso. This torso belongs to Man Ray’s lover and studio model for most of the 1920s, Alice Prin (1901-1953), better known as Kiki of Montparnasse. She was a famous model of the time was frequently photographed by Man Ray.²¹ She also appears in Fernand Leger’s *Ballet Mecanique*, which hints to Man Ray’s involvement in the film, and appears again in one of Man Ray’s other short films *Emak-Bakia*. This use of the imagery of Alice Prin is consistent with the Dada love of the “modern woman” of which many of the Dadaists celebrated through their work. Man Ray is no exception, especially in the way that he so blatantly shows Kiki’s nude body at the end of the film. It is through this celebration of the

¹⁸ Freeman, 38.

¹⁹ Deke Dusinberre film note, *Ballet Mecanique*, Unseen Cinema, 16 Minutes, 2005, DVD.

²⁰ See Lehrman film note, *Le Retour a la Raison*, Unseen Cinema, 2 Minutes, 2005, DVD.

²¹ See Whitney Chadwick, “Fetishizing Fashion/Fetishizing Culture: Man Ray’s *Noire et Blanche*,” in *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity*, ed. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse. (London: The MIT Press, 2001), 294-311.

modern woman and the use of elements of chance that make *Le Retour a la Raison* a true Dada film.

Following only a couple years after *Le Retour a la Raison* was another film by Man Ray called *Emak-Bakia*. This film used *Le Retour a la Raison* as a springboard, and actually featured some of the original footage from *Le Retour a la Raison*. Running 16 minutes it was able to be produced because of Man Ray gaining patronage from Arthur and Rose Wheeler, and American couple.²² It is “a fully realized cinematic endeavor that Man Ray described as a ‘cinepoem.’”²³ Looking back to the controversies surrounding who produced the film *Ballet Mecanique*, Leger spoke of his short film as “A series of fragments, a cine-poem with a certain optical sequence make up a whole that still remains a fragment.”²⁴ This proves that these artists shared similar ideas and most likely worked together. With Dada art in general, Man Ray felt that the purpose of Dada as art “...was to ‘try the spectators’ patience.”²⁵ Visually, the film focuses on vaguely definable imagery that adds a dreamlike quality to the work. Man Ray is said to have considered this film a surrealist work, but stated:

My surrealist friends whom I had invited to the showing were not very enthusiastic, although I thought I had complied with all the principles of surrealism: irrationality, automatism, psychological and dreamlike sequences without apparent logic, and complete disregard of conventional storytelling.²⁶

²² Dickerman, 414.

²³ Dickerman, 414.

²⁴ Freeman, 32.

²⁵ Freeman, 32.

²⁶ Elliot Stien film note, *Emak-Bakia*, Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 30s, 16 minutes, 2005, DVD.

Once revealed, this information makes it is easy to see how *Emak-Bakia* can be considered both a Dada and Surrealist film. The heavy repetition and nonsensical plot lean heavily towards the Dada spectrum.

The film seemingly randomly alternates luminous abstract optical effects...and narrative passages... Yet *Emak Bakia*'s systematic visual disconnects, its continual frustration of coherent narrative, its use of eyes as a recurring motif, and its focus on the process of filmmaking...all draw attention to the conditions of vision and representation in film.²⁷

A true bridge between Surrealism and Dada, *Emak-Bakia* is in contrast with *Le Retour a la Raison* a great example of how the Dada movement really did morph into surrealism. Beginning as a prominent figure in New York Dada and then in the Dada movement in Paris and eventually, Man Ray became a forerunner and founder in the Surrealist movement is Paris. Dating 1926, *Emak-Bakia* really does fall in Surrealism, which the beginning of the movement is dated from 1924-29²⁸ but does seem to evoke more of a Dada feeling over all.

Providing a look in to the media obsessed world of the Dada artists, Dada film is a very important part of the movement. The investigation of Dada artists into the new art of filmmaking allowed for a previously unavailable output into the media, and a new outlet for Dada creativity. "Dada strategies of incorporating chance, disrupting narrative, and investigating universal language locate these efforts in the Dada universe."²⁹ Artists like Man Ray and Leger really left an imprint on the film world with their creation of *Le*

²⁷ Dickerman, 414.

²⁸ See Gale, 213-264.

²⁹ Dickerman, 410.

Retour a la Raison, Emak-Bakia, and Ballet Mecanique that will surely continue to influence artists for generations to come.

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