

Alternative Modernism: Revisiting the 'Radical' movement of Dadaism and Surrealism

Zarqua Adam

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

Modernism, also known as "high" modernism, was a western movement in the first part of the 20th century that questioned many traditional aesthetic precepts. It impacted philosophy, music, architecture, literature, and the arts. With the motto of the avant-garde, it was characterised by non-traditional aesthetic innovations. The experimentation leads to different movements in disciplines like Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism, Constructivism, Imagism and many others.

A closer inspection reveals that Dada and Surrealism fit into mainstream modernism only chronologically/historically but not thematically. These two movements are more linked with Postmodernism rather than classic Modernism, against which it revolted. Moreover, Postmodernism broke only with the conventions of 'classical' Modernism, not with its 'alternative' tradition to which it connects. Therefore, by presenting a detailed examination of Dadaism and Surrealism, this paper tries to highlight the "alternative" or "counter" movements within "modernism" and come to the conclusion that neither there can be a single definition of Modernism nor it is time-bound by strict chronology.

Keywords: Modernism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Alternative Modernism, Postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

Modernism or high Modernism with the motto of Avant-Garde was characterised by non-traditional aesthetic innovations. Artists felt that the traditional forms had become inadequate to depict society's changing ethos and thus called for aesthetic experimentation. In literature from about 1910 until the beginning of the Second World War, canonical writers of Modernism such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and Marcel Proust, used stream of consciousness in reaction to realist modes of narrative and deliberate discontinuous narrative to suggest the fragmentation in systems, thoughts and beliefs. The experimentation leads to different movements in art, literature and architecture, such as Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, Imagism and many others.

In recent years, numerous attempts have been made to understand and redefine the traditional modernist canon beyond Wyndham Lewis's White, Anglo-American, 'Men of 1914'. Many national and regional forms and movements across Europe remain excluded from Modernism's general understanding. These excluded forms of Modernism are better known as 'alternative modernisms', which lie outside the modernist canon or mainstream due to various reasons such as nationality, language, gender, class, aesthetics, ideology, and chronology.

Movements like Dadaism and Surrealism took the call for experimentation even further than other avant-garde movements by rejecting tradition and launching a rebellion that embraced nonsense and absurdity. This paper will focus on these two movements as examples of alternative modernisms or what many like to refer to with titles such as 'extreme' Modernism, 'dissent of modernism', and 'radical Modernism'. This paper argues that the suppressed aesthetics of these two movements emerged later in many forms, most popularly, Postmodernism. Therefore, this paper will also look at the striking similarities between Dadaism/Surrealism and Postmodernism to redefine our understanding of both Modernism and Postmodernism.

Dadaism and Surrealism: Suppressed Aesthetics of Modernism

Dadaism was a literary and creative movement that started in Zürich, Switzerland. It developed as a response to World War I, and the nationalism that many people believed was to blame for the conflict. Dadaist concepts first surfaced in 1915, and the movement was formally established in 1918 with the publication of the Berlin Manifesto.

The movement was influenced by other pre-war avant-garde movements like Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Expressionism, ranging from performance art to poetry, sculpture, painting, photography, and collage. Though Ezra Pound, whose famous phrase "make it new", insisted on breaking with tradition, however, Pound's rejection was never as total as that of young Dadaists, and his attack was on immediate elders, not with a complete break with the past (Richard 1999: 56). When revolutionary Dadaism burst onto the European stage in 1916, it shocked and scandalized the public of its day with attitudes, ideas, and aesthetics. Dada attacked logic, social hierarchy and every absolute and unquestionable belief. These groups of artists and writers revolted against the war and were suspicious of the role that art and literature had come to play; Dadaists gradually assumed a consciously subversive role. Tristan Tzara, one of the founders and central figures of this anti-establishment movement, wrote:

"Do not trust Dada. Dada is everything. Dada doubts everything. But the real Dadas are against DADA" (Bigsby 1978: 7). It was a movement that arose as a reaction against the whole rationalist tradition of Western thought and questions the given reality. As Tzara puts it, "Dada places doubt above everything" (*ibid*). Dada and Surrealism are more 'radical' than traditional or canonical modernism and explicitly attack the modernist philosophy to emerge as the best examples of the 'alternative/counter' tradition of modernism. The rebellion inherited in this movement is manifested in the lines from the 1918 Manifesto:

"Freedom: DaDa Dada DADA, howls of thrilling colours, interlacing of opposites and all contradictions, utter absurdities, inconsistencies: LIFE" (*ibid*: 3)

Hugo Ball founded the Cabaret Voltaire club in Zurich, the capital of Switzerland, which became the meeting point for avant-garde artists where they performed artistic cabaret and exhibited works of the leading artist of the European Avant-Garde, including Picasso, Marinetti, as well as works by Dadaist themselves. Hans Arp, a painter and sculptor, was interested in the workings of chance in visual arts and poetry. Marcel Duchamp's most infamous urinal, which he called 'fountain', was generally accepted as truly Dadaist in spirit.

Dadaism's conceptual movement emphasised challenging ideas more than creating aesthetically pleasing objects. It questioned the value of art and the artist's role by prioritising chance over the craft to challenge the traditional artistic norms. Moreover, they were enraged by the deep-rooted and almost blind belief in the natural order, authority and progress. Alan Young writes, "the sustained, angry intensity generated by the Zurich group was directed against the institutions and values of the western world: nationalism, patriotism, militarism, capitalism and culture in the form of art". Alan Young also pointed out that 'radical nihilism inherited in these two movements was by no means new, but the target on role of art and artist was' (Young 1983: 15). And this very refusal to accept any discipline or principle, whether rational or irrational, was responsible for not only the side-lining of the movement but was also the reason behind fierce attacks from canonical modernist writers.

After the Dada groups disbanded, many artists joined other art movements, particularly Surrealism. The Manifesto of Surrealism, written by André Breton, served as the movement's official launch in 1924. Many Dada movement artists started working in a surrealist style after the war. Dada and Surrealism both shared this fundamental dissatisfaction with and condemnation of the West's reliance on logic and reason.

As defined by Breton, Surrealism was dedicated to revising our definition of reality. He believed that the mind could free itself of the restrictions of logic, rationality and conscious control through its efforts. C.W.E Bigsby wrote, "the Surrealist did not see themselves as an Avant-Garde movement in literature or painting but as revolutionaries intent on changing the nature of consciousness and alternating our conception of the nature of reality" (1978:79). Though "surrealism's anarchism, though not explicitly nihilistic as Dadaism had been, could be, in effect at least as uncompromisingly radical in terms of social and artistic consequences" (Young 1983:123).

In his book *Extreme Modernism and English Literature*, Alan Young gives a detailed picture of English reaction to these radical movements of Dadaism and Surrealism. The critics of modernism have usually failed to consider and include the works produced by artists of these movements in the modernist canon. "The lateness and timidity of the general English response to 'modernism', particularly in literature and especially in its more extreme manifestations, have convinced some critics that in confronting twentieth century, English as writing has demonstrated a failure of nerve" (Young 1983: 36).

From its inception, the American Magazine 'Mercury' was abusive about most 'avant-garde' writings, foreign or home-produced, and saw them as unoriginal and lacking in anything productive (Mansanti 2006: 116). Even in most Avant-Garde circles of England, these movements were condemned. T.S Eliot initially wrote in one of his writings that Dadaism was

essentially a symptom of French sickness and was mainly irrelevant to English readership (Sean: 2002). Others, like F.S Flint, believe that literature was a humanising activity which the Dadaist and surrealists have 'betrayed', and Wyndham Lewis argued that Dadaism and Surrealism betrayed modernism because they widened the gap between modernist art and the potential public. Their foundation on anarcho-modernist hampered the creative development of modernism. (Young 1983: 222). Therefore, many acknowledged leaders of modernism in England rejected the alternative modernism as being 'extremist', 'unproductive' and 'anarchic'.

Therefore, movements like Dadaism, Surrealism and Futurism, which originated in different parts of Europe, were not included in the Anglo-American exclusivist notion of literary modernism.

Dadaism and Surrealism: A Modern or Postmodern Attitude?

Modernism is always depicted in contrast to postmodernism, which is believed to have risen in opposition to Modernism's regressive, hierarchical and hegemonic structures. For example, McHale argues in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) that changing from focusing on epistemological issues to exploring ontological questions marks the move from modern to postmodern. Even while giving such a specific definition of both, he emphasised that the passage from Modernism to postmodernism is not just a simple replacement but a shift in literary dominance. (Malpas:2005:24).

Another interesting example would be James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is, by general agreement, quite different from other mainstream modernist works. Not surprisingly, due to the distinctiveness of *Ulysses*, it is often now being pushed to postmodernism. So lately, those text of Modernism which does not fit mainstream Modernism is now conveniently placed under the concept of postmodernism. Postmodern literature adopts a view of Modernism that excludes radical movements; therefore, Dadaism and other avant-garde movement are subtracted from mainstream Modernism, as pointed out by Sanford Schwartz in his essay, *The Postmodernity of Modernism* (1997: 10).

Hence, we have only developed a partial understanding of Modernism by taking into account canonical works of Modernism, which not only distorts our understanding of Modernism but also of postmodernism, which broke only with the conventions of the 'classical' Modernism, not with its 'alternative' tradition to which it connects.

There are numerous other striking fundamental similarities between Dada/Surrealism and Postmodernism. For instance, Dada emerged as a reactionary movement against the entire rationalist legacy of Western philosophy, much as Postmodernism did. Both questioned the unrestrained adoption of "enlightenment" and its ideas of "rationalism" and "progress" by contemporary society.

In essence, the Dadaists believed that meaning is arbitrary, relative, and subjective; they believed that language signified nothing and, as a result, could be manipulated in any way desired. Dadaist's experiments with the poetry of picking random words actually posed questions about the very nature of both language and poetry. Similarly, at the heart of Postmodernism lies the assumption that most of the things that we take for granted are, in fact, simply illusions. Reality is not reflected within the text; only text is reflected within the text. There is no truth beyond the experience of the text, and meaning is created every time the text is experienced. In other words, the meaning is arbitrary, relative, and subjective.

The Dadaists believed that the 1920s were a time of irrationality, indeterminacy, and situational or arbitrary truth, during which only amusement was worthy of pursuit (Biggsby 1978:12). The same traits, such as irrationality, play, indeterminacy, and arbitrary truth, were later used to define "Postmodernity." The goal of both movements was to establish a place of difference, otherness, and flux.

Additionally, Dadaists held a strong resistance to absolute artistic and moral laws, just like postmodernists who challenged the conventional notions of 'high art' and 'low art'. Moreover, both take the rejection of and disregard for mainstream philosophy, aesthetics, ethics and established order as their basic starting point. If Dada was anti-aesthetic, anti-philosophy, anti-rational, and an anarchic movement, then so was Postmodernism.

Thus, one is inevitably reminded of the startling similarities between the two movements, given their disdain for literature and the arts, as well as their mistrust of language and conviction that life is a mess. As a result, there is a striking likeness in the artwork produced by both movements. For instance, the artist frequently plays with the idea of meaning instead of the modernist search for order and meaning in a chaotic world. This aversion to totalizing systems goes to the author's perception of himself. Because of this, these artists frequently favoured chance over craft.

CONCLUSION

Generally, the list of polarities is commonly used to distinguish modernism and postmodernism, such as presence/absence and hierarchy/anarchy, which only reflects a partial understanding and the forgotten side of modernism. The artistic anarchy that postmodernism desired is very much present in Dadaism and Surrealism. Frank Kermode rightly observed that the alternative form of modernism, Dada, after an interval of silence, explodes into history again: under 'Neo-Dada', or more popularly later under the name of postmodernism. "It is the modernism we neglected and not the one we cultivated, that has, after lying dormant for half a century, erupted as the revolution of the counterculture" (Pegrum 2000: 58).

Therefore, to look at postmodernism as the complete opposite of modernism reflects our limited understanding of both movements. Many postmodern artistic and intellectual tendencies have descended via an underground tradition from the experiments of the Dadaists earlier in this century. Few critics, such as Zygmunt Bauman, even suggested that postmodernism is a critical engagement with modernism rather than claiming the end of modernism. He regards postmodernity as 'modernity conscious of its true nature'. These critics argue that postmodernism is not a chronological period but more of a way of thinking and doing. In other words, it is a social and intelligent self-reflexive mood within modernity (Best 2003: 236).

So many postmodern artistic and intellectual tendencies have descended from the experiments of the Dadaists and Surrealism. They are, in fact, the bridge between the movements of Modernism and Postmodernism, whose debts are rarely acknowledged. The striking similarity not only points out the suppressed aesthetics of Dada and Surrealism but also questions the claim of postmodernism as a complete new school of thought, a 'radical' new way of looking at things. Moreover, what is required is to revisit and rethink the literary tradition of Modernism to understand that rather than one modernism, there were many modernisms which include not only Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Expressionism but multiple forms of cultural expression from across the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Best, Shaun. *A Beginners' Guide to Social Theory*. India: SAGE Publication. 2003. Print
- [2] Bigsby, C.W.E. *Dada and surrealism*. New York: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1978. Print.
- [3] Céline, Mansanti. 'Mainstreaming the Avant-Garde: Modernism in *Life Magazine* (New York, 1883–1936)', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 1.2 (Winter 2016), 113–28.
- [4] Cotter, Sean. "THE SACRAMENTAL DADA OF T. S. ELIOT." *The Comparatist*, vol. 26, 2002, pp. 69–82. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44367152>. Accessed 2 Jan. 2023.
- [5] Eliot, T.S. "The Lesson of Baudelaire", *Tyro*, vol. I, Spring 1921, p. 4
<http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/tseliot/works/essays/lesson-of-baudelaire.html>
- [6] Hutcheon, Linda. *Poetics of postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge. 1988. Print.
- [7] Ihab Hassan. *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. US: OSU Press. 1987. Print
- [8] Murphy, Richard. *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*. UK: Cambridge University Press. 1999. Web.
- [9] Pegrum, Mark. *Challenging Modernity: Between Modern and Postmodern*. US: Berghahn Books, 2000. Web.
- [10] Malpas, Simon. *The Postmodern*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- [11] Schwartz, Sanford. *The postmodernity of Modernism*. Hugh Witemeyer. Ed. *The Future of Modernism*. US: University of Michigan. 1997. 9-32. Web.
- [12] Woods, Tim. *Beginning Postmodernism*. India: Viva Books, 2010. Print.
- [13] Young, Alan. *Dada and After: Extremist modernism and English Literature*. US: Manchester University Press, 1981. Print.
- [14] Zalman, Sandra. *Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: Dissident Modernism*. USA: Routledge. 2015. Print.