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The Man-Machine - The Utopia of a New Man ? Perspectives on Masculinity in the Works of French and German Artists of the Avant-Garde

Abstract

Armoured soldier; prosthetic man; hybrid woman; automaton; sex machine; athlete with mechanised features: the machinic body is a multifaceted, challenge-laden motif in avant-garde art. More specifically, between 1914 and 1926, artists such as Otto Dix, Rudolf Schlichter, George Grosz, Hannah Höch, Willi Baumeister, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Delaunay used this theme as an illustration of tension and crisis which questions the place of men and women in society. Moreover, the concept of masculinity, which was considered weakened at the beginning of the 20th century, plays a significant role in the development of the man-machine represented in the works of these artists. Indeed, the mechanical male body is combined with the imagining of a potential ideal ego, a New Man, to provide answers to the questions of 'who' and 'what we are' in modern society. Commonly associated with totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, notably the Third Reich and Vichy France, this utopia of the New Man resonates with the man-machine represented in the French and German avant-garde.

The objectives of our work are therefore to understand the links between the discourses of modernity and those of the 1930s and 1940s through the figure of the man-machine, the concept of masculinity and the New Man. The study of the works of the above-mentioned artists will provide a binational, even global, societal depiction of the representation of the body and its evolution during the Weimar Republic and the inter-war period in France. The aim is not to compare propaganda art with the works of the avant-garde but to highlight the parallels between the discourses conveyed in these images and the perception of the body under the rule of Hitler and Petain. This work therefore proposes a new reading of the man-machine in the avant-garde through its transcultural approach and its connection to studies of masculinity, a research field in full bloom in art history. Our attention will focus on the socio-cultural upheavals and exchanges and collaborations of French and German artists that will allow us to understand the correspondences between the mechanical body represented between 1914 and 1926 and the New Man of the 1930s and 1940s.