



The Origins of 20th Century Western Painting



James F Welles*

Free lancer, USA

Submission: December 01, 2017; **Published:** February 22, 2017

***Corresponding author:** James F Welles, PO Box 17, East Marion, New York, USA, Tel: 954 531 5382; Email: JWelles103@aol.com

Introduction

As impressive as our technological triumphs are, they do nothing to relieve our interpersonal difficulties. Nor do they clarify our relationship to nature because they do not elucidate who we are and how we can better relate to each other. Unfortunately, neither the social sciences nor arts offer much toward resolving or clarifying the underlying philosophical issues. The social sciences give muddled if not contradictory answers which create as many problems as they solve while art devolved hopelessly in demoralizing phases from the primitive to the infantile to the inane if not insane in our paranoid, self-constructed, post-modern, fragmented, relativistic, subjective, deconstructive world [1] in which nonsense seems relevant [2] when packaged as targeted nonsense [3].

Symptomatically, poet Henry Longfellow was dismissed by 20th century critics as a 19th century windbag for lacking ambiguity, paradox, difficulty, anxiety and obscurity [4] as if these were criteria for qualifying as a great modern poem or poet: Saying something simply and clearly in rhythmically and rhyming imagery is considered poetically jejune if not idiotic. Culturally and politically, "Nothing" had found its voice [5] it meant everything, and versa vice. Indeed, culture is a nonsense machine [6], and the power of meaninglessness is infinite [7].

In Europe, this came to shape in the 1906 slam at Victorianism in the form the "The Bridge"—a movement away from motion, reason, the past, sanity, you-name-it to Modernism. Beginning in an age when a bull was referred to as "A gentleman cow" and diners order turkey "bosom" for dinner [8], imagination and creativity, anticipating WWI, led to fragmentation, disunity and chaos at the expense of beauty, harmony [9] and grace. It was not necessary to mean anything in order to contribute to the emerging revolutionary unconsciousness, in which there was no "I", nor team and the subject was missing [10]. A decade later, Cubism, Dadaism, Constructivism, Futurism and Surrealism everything but Ism-ism—gave shape and texture to the irrationality of the subconscious mind being revealed by Freud and Jung, the insensibility of the stream of incontinence produced by James Joyce, the bewilderment of Franz Kafka

and the atonality of the enemy of harmony and embodiment of musical dissonance, Arnold Schoenberg [11].

Via shock and chance, symbolism and suggestion, surrealism expressed the sometimes violent, uncontrolled absence of reason aesthetic or moral standards extending beyond consciousness [12] or conscience. In a rare instance of intellectuals leading the artists, naysayers Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's reduction of meaninglessness to emptiness presaged Giorgio de Chirico's Piazza d'Italia 1913 rendition of the void of the loneliness of the 20th century's defining nothingness [13].

This nothingness is but an empty echo of the public reaction to the "First German Autumn Salon" exhibition in September, 1913. Most artists who were anyone were represented: the Futurists, Cubists, Expressionists, Etc. Its and reactions ranged from fury to outrage. A kind critic suggested there was something developmental on display but then referred to pretensions being presumptuous. Others referred to rough fiddle faddle, a great mass of absurdities and ludicrous scribbles which might have been produced in an insane asylum [14], although that was insulting to the residents of our insane asylums as well as our more talented finger-painters.

Crazier still was Ludwig Meidner's "Apocalyptic Landscape" or "Visions of the Trenches" first shown in his Berlin studio a month later. His motto was, "Paint your grief, your entire insanity and sanctity out of the whole of your being". Overcome by visions of horror, he wrote, "A painful impulse inspired me to spread ruin, destruction and ashes across all landscapes. My brain bled amid these awful visions. All I could see was a thousand-strong roundelay of skeletons prancing around in front of me." The landscape is torn apart by bombs and war. His friends who viewed the painting worried that he was losing his mind [15] not that he was a psychic anticipating the carnage unleashed less than a year later by intensely sane Western un-civilization. That would be charitably characterized as an exercise in cubism in which human bodies and the country side were rearranged in grotesquely curious, dysfunctional new ways [16]. Reality imitating art was soon to follow.

Not to be outdone, at the Futurist Congress in Finland in 1913, Kazimir Malevich introduced the world to "Suprematism", which meant the beginning of a new if not better civilization. He discarded the burden of representational art and progressed to a state where nothing is needed not color, form, shape nor reality. His rejection of all demands made of art or the artist and the complete lack of judgmental standards made it the greatest assertion of artistic autonomy ever. Specifically, his "Black Square" It was also an end point for art and a Big Bang starting point for something new if cataclysmic [17] i.e. WWI as a work of art. At this point, not only were people abstracted out of art; objects, purpose and art were abstracted out as well [18]. Most emphatically abstracted out of art and everything else was enlightened rationalism. That had led to soldiers in trenches confronting one another across no-man's land with everyone ensconced behind machine guns and barbed wire. Einstein's theory of relativity (1905) had pulled the physical basis for security out from under civilization, but every patriotic maniac would warp himself in his state's flag and defend to the death whatever it was he had left.

Slightly more realistically, in a 1924 artistic manifesto, André Breton defined surrealism as "Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations it leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms" [19]. In his second manifesto (1929), he laid waste to the family, country and religion. If the enemy of art is the absence of limitations [20], there were a whole lot of enemies reigning in the guise of advertising, electioneering and stupidity.

If an absurd example can be used to make the non-existent point, consider the phalanx of characters nominated by the Democratic Party's for its vice presidential slot in 1972. As a case of liberal equality gone amok, someone from every sub group of the political spectrum had to be and was considered up to and including Mao Tse Tung and Archie Bunker [21]. This may have made everyone one included feel good, but the whole process was rendered irrelevant with the selection of Senator Thomas Eagleton, who then had to step aside due to his personal history of mental health problems that being, for some reason, considered a disqualifier for high government office despite the transient if imposing success of leaders like Hitler, Stalin [22] and LBJ.

In concrete terms for schizoid Western civilization in general, a formula of "Technology x beauty=K" covers the history of the development of scientific progress [23] and the inverse degeneration of art for at least the past two centuries. That is, while scientists were conscientiously overcoming biases inherent in subjectivity, artists were reveling in them. To wit: Two hundred years ago we had the steam engine and the Hudson River school of painting; one hundred years ago, we had the dynamo and the Ashcan school. Now we have computers and the Fucked Up school, which does petty accurately characterize our

com-mitment to as well as our undefined attitude toward each other, nature and our mutual, self-degenerating future.

References

1. Derrida J (2003) Undated reference to Deconstruction on page 469 of Hecht, J. Doubt: A History. HarperOne; New York. 2003. For a presentation of how this attitude plays out in music see: Golea. In that vein, contemporary music was anticipated some 300 years ago in Congregational churches, of all times and places. Commonly, when the parishioners burst into song, they all did so anarchically in their own keys, tempos and styles in striking contrast to the rational order of overorchestrated cultural life in the age of reason. Emphasizing words over music, each sang to suit himself producing a horrid, confused, cacaphonic, disordered, discordant, atonal/pantonal dirge proudly termed "Rote (vs. note) singing". Tin-eared New Englanders, in their defiant, independent way, inexplicably found it moving, and all efforts to improve it were strenuously resisted. (Haraszi. pp. 61-71.) Such wailing and post-mod-ern, beyond-alleged "Music" constitute an example of cultural conver-gence-how totally different psychosocial circumstances can lead to the same result. Hallelujah, man.
2. Scruton. op cit p. 174.
3. Ibid. p. 189.
4. Lepore J (2011) The Story of America. Princet Times. Mar. 20, 2011. Sunday Opinion in "The Week in Re-view." p. 12. on University Press; Princeton, NJ p. 221.
5. Scruton. op cit p. 16.
6. Ibid. pp. 174-175.
7. Lucan J (1966) Thirty-four volumes of seminars conducted in 1953. (Cited on p. 177 of Scruton.)
8. Dwyer. op cit p. 238.
9. Kershaw (2016) op cit p. 167.
10. Scruton. op cit p. 180.
11. Kershaw (2016) op cit pp. 168-172.
12. Roberts. op cit p. 946.
13. (2010) Illies. op cit pp. 147-148.
14. Another example of "Artist-lag" was the Anti-Vietnam War movement in the mid-to late 1960's. Schweikart p. 130.
15. Illies. op cit pp. 196-197.
16. Ibid. p. 208.
17. Léger F Autumn (1916) Quoted on page 48 of Jeffery. A literary work, John Buchan's Greenmantle (1916) prefigured the reality of spies fomenting a Muslim uprising in central Asia against the Allied powers. Jeffery pp. 192-193.
18. Illies. op cit p. 245.
19. Watson (2001) op cit p. 65.
20. Gaunt W (1972) The Surrealists. G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York. 1972. While lost artists led the way breaking down the doors of perception and releasing subconscious images usually accessed only in dreams, In literature, it usually meant writing a lot of nonsense. (Hodgkinson and Bergh. p. 351.) Starting in the late 1930's, this movement had its relativist counterpart in the judicial realm's "Legal realism", which hyped the indeterminacy of the law. (Urofsky. p. 221.)
21. Welles O, H Jaglom (1988) The Inde pendent Film Maker. The Movie Business Book. Squire. J (2nd edn). Simon & Schuster New York (1992).
22. Hayward. op cit p. 355.

23. Hershman D, Lieb J (1994) A Brotherhood of Tyrants. Prometheus

Books; Amherst New York, USA.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: [10.19080/GJIDD.2018.04.555639](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJIDD.2018.04.555639)

**Your next submission with Juniper Publishers
will reach you the below assets**

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission
<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>