

## Dada's Hannah Höch - woman, artist, *Cyborg*?

Hannah Höch - woman, artist, *Cyborg*? Defined in 1960 by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, the *Cyborg* is a self-regulating human (or animal)/ machine hybrid that is altered to live in the environment for which it was not adapted; a somewhat accurate description of Höch during the years of the Weimar Republic.<sup>1</sup> Post-World War I Germany transformed Höch and although not made of steel parts herself, her seminal works such as *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* and *The Beautiful Girl* prominently display such apparatuses (fig. 1 & fig. 2). Depictions of human hybrids, such as Höch's portrayal of ousted German Kaiser, Wilhelm II of Prussia, in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, composed of a rubber tire, a ship's motor and other machine parts, foreshadow the identification of the *Cyborg* by more than forty years. This concept is the driving force of Matthew Biro's book *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*. Biro provides a multifaceted exploration of cyborgs in the work of Berlin Dada artists, including detailed examinations of works by Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann.<sup>2</sup> Biro analyzes some of the major influences on cyborg imagery, most significantly, the traumatic effects of World War I on Germany, as well as the implications of mass culture, the mechanization and modernization of society, and Freudian psychology on quotidian life in the Weimar Republic. I intend to discuss one manifestation of such influences, the use of cyborgs to symbolize feelings of alienation- the *Cyborg* as "outsider." Building on feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Introduction, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Biro, Introduction, 1-2.

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philosopher of science Donna Haraway's theorization of this idea, Biro describes the *Cyborg*, in this context, as "a woman, as a person of color, as a homosexual, as an outsider, or as a monster."<sup>3</sup> He devotes practically two of the five chapters of his book to Hannah Höch, describing her work as "the most radical representations of cyborgs to be found in Berlin Dada art. Much more than any of the other Dadaists, Höch explored how the cyborg challenged traditional notions of gender and race."<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I will concentrate primarily on Höch's work in relation to different groups of "outsiders," comparing Biro's interpretations and insights to those of other distinguished authors.

"The Weimar Republic...was that moment of German history in which a truly modern mass culture was initially developed," writes Biro. Consequently, photomontage grew from this culture, with Dadaists utilizing the plethora of images found in magazines and advertising. A major subtext of this new medium was the provocation of Germans to question the influx of such media.<sup>5</sup> Biro relates the emergence of new forms of mass media in the Weimar Republic to the concurrent rise of the Nazi Party. He references Siegfried Kracauer, who argued that the new modern class, composed of urban white-collar workers, felt tired and dejected, leading them to embrace the entertaining distractions mass media provided, which, eventually, became Nazi ideology.<sup>6</sup> Biro acknowledges that it is "tremendously difficult" to assess the years of the Weimar

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<sup>3</sup> Biro, Introduction, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Biro, Introduction, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Biro, 85.

<sup>6</sup> Biro, 42-4 from Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (1929), trans. Quintin Hoare (1930; repr. London: Verso, 1998)

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Republic, a period when women achieved the right to vote and Dada existed, yet because of the great financial instability of Germany after World War I, the Weimar Republic suffered from hyperinflation and widespread unemployment, which led to a resurgence in racism, discrimination, and fear.<sup>9</sup> Within this ominous environment, Hannah Höch created provocative images that challenged the increasingly intolerant society in which she subsisted.

In Peter Chametzky's *Objects as History in Twentieth-Century German Art: Beckmann to Beuys*, he discusses Höch's relationship with the Jewish community, the compulsory "outsiders" of the Nazi Party, which he believes had a significant impact on her life and art. Chametzky notes that Höch frequented gatherings organized by Ludwig Meidner, an Orthodox Jew, whose talks often focused on Zionism and related Jewish issues.<sup>10</sup> Höch's seminal work *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* prominently features well-known German Jews, including Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, Max Reinhardt and several others.<sup>11</sup> Biro cites Hanne Bergius, who argued that Einstein's theory of relativity was "a primary point of reference" for the photomontage.<sup>12</sup> Chametzky further observes that the work "refers to and is informed by the ideas of Messianic Jewish philosopher Salomo Friedlaender, the only person beside Höch who is named in one of the montage text

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<sup>9</sup> Biro, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Chametzky, *Objects as History in Twentieth-Century German Art: Beckmann to Beuys* (California: University of California Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Chametzky, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Biro, 77 from Hanne Bergius, "*Dada Triumphs!*" *Dada Berlin, 1917-1923*, *Artistry of Polarities*, trans. Brigitte Pichon (Farmington Hills, Mich.: G.K. Hall, 2003), 142-5.

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fragments.”<sup>13</sup> The Dadaists, in general, were openly associated with Jewish culture; Chametzky notes that the Hebrew word for *Kosher* appeared in the first issue of the Berlin journal *Dada* in June 1919. Several Dadaists were Jewish, such as Tristan Tzara of the Zurich Dada group and Berlin members Walter Mehring and John Heartfield.<sup>14</sup> Further to this point, the Dadaists were associated with I.B. Neumann Gallery in Berlin in c.1918. Neumann did not change his name in order to hide his Jewish heritage; Chametzky writes in respect of Neumann, “his Jewish ethnicity was written large on gallery signs and letterheads associated with Dada’s first and subsequent appearances in Berlin.”<sup>15</sup>

Höch clearly felt a kinship with the “outsiders” of German society, because she too was one. She was the only female Berlin Dadaist and within this men’s club George Grosz and John Heartfield apparently opposed her inclusion in the Dada-Messe. As the lover of fellow Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, she was often dismissed as just that, rather than being acknowledged as an innovative artist and contributor to Dadaism. In 1968 Höch asserted, “My personal relationships with Berlin Dadaists were determined by the authority of Hausmann’s boundaries.”<sup>16</sup> In *Dada’s Women*, Ruth Hemus elucidates the complexity of Höch’s artistic career. She, like Biro, discusses in detail *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* as well as the only other of Höch’s photomontages exhibited in the Dada-

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<sup>13</sup> Chametzky, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Chametzky, 50-2. John Heartfield was half-Jewish.

<sup>15</sup> Chametzky, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 91-2.

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Messe, *Dada Panorama* (fig. 3). Both works allude to women's rights; in the first, Höch includes a map of Europe in the bottom right corner which highlights the countries where women had gained the right to vote, and in *Dada Panorama*, reference is made to women being appointed to office for the first time in 1919, with the words *Deutsche Frauen in der Nationalversammlung* (*German Women in the National Parliament*) included in the upper left hand corner.<sup>17</sup> Höch's photomontages offer multiple readings; such is the case in *The Beautiful Girl*, which Hemus describes as "an exemplary subversion of the female portrait."<sup>18</sup> In this work, Höch critiques the New Woman, a concept that gained popularity during the years of Weimar. Biro assigns the last chapter of his book to the examination of the New Woman, writing the following:

On the most basic level, the New Woman suggested a transformed mode of "modern" female identity, distinguished from the "traditional" types characteristic of Wilhelmine society and connected to the modernization, rationalization, and sometimes the "Americanization" of everyday life during the Weimar Republic. In addition, however, the New Woman quickly became a primary sign representing the radical transformation of Germany after the war. As a result, she was lauded as a representative of new possibilities open to women at the time, yet demonized as a primary force threatening the nation's social, moral, physical, and economic stability.<sup>19</sup>

In the aforesaid work, Höch juxtaposes a bathing beauty, a bouffant hairdo, and BMW logos to create the consummate New Woman cyborg; a woman mesmerized by, and target of, consumerism. Within this work exists another female cyborg, one that watches despondently from the upper right hand corner. Höch has cut out her eye and replaced it

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<sup>17</sup> Hemus, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Hemus, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Biro, 204.

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with an asymmetrical cat's eye, perhaps an allusion to a monocle, Höch's symbol for Dadaists, possibly referencing herself, as Maud Lavin suggests in her book *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* from 1993.<sup>20</sup> Biro interprets this elusive figure as the consciousness of the New Woman who has since been left behind.<sup>21</sup>

Höch alludes not only to the female “outsiders” of society in *The Beautiful Girl*, but also to issues of racial inequality. Biro reveals that the image of American boxer Jack Johnson, found on the bottom left, had multiple associations, including a reference to “cross-racial desire.” This interpretation is further substantiated given that Johnson was romantically linked to white women throughout his career, which caused great controversy.<sup>22</sup> Höch confronted issues of identity and race unhesitatingly, as can be seen in *Half Breed* from 1924 (fig. 4). In the 1996 catalogue for the Walker Art Center's exhibition, *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, Maria Makela explains that this work makes reference to the presence of Africans and West Indians stationed in the Rhineland, by France, during the post- World War I occupation of Germany by the Allies. She explains, as does Biro, how resentment of the troops grew amongst Germans, igniting racist propaganda, much of which was focused on the soldiers' relations with German women. In *Half Breed*, Höch addresses this issue by combining the attributes of a white

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<sup>20</sup> Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Biro, 217.

<sup>22</sup> Biro, 215.

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woman, the red lips, to the face of a black woman.<sup>23</sup> However, Lavin notes “Höch never substantively or explicitly challenged contemporary racist or colonialist ideas, although her irony often functions as implicit criticism.”<sup>24</sup> It is arguable if Höch’s strong identification with subjects, such as women, overshadowed her interpretation of more personally inaccessible topics, such as race issues.

Further to this discussion, in Höch’s later Weimar works she seems to focus on, as Lavin describes as the, “ambiguous and androgynous representation of the New Woman.”<sup>25</sup> It was during this time that Höch further transformed, having begun a lesbian relationship with Til Brugman, a Dutch poet and language teacher, in 1926.<sup>26</sup> Both Biro and Lavin explain that the concept of the New Woman had implications of a sexually ambiguous being, which Biro articulates as ‘garconne,’ often representing Lesbianism.<sup>27</sup> Makela echoes this notion, writing, “Because the phenomenon of the New Woman blurred what formerly had been clear-cut definitions of sexual identity and gender roles, androgyny was a highly charged issue throughout Germany in the 1920’s.”<sup>28</sup> Lavin cites Sigmund Freud’s article “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman” from 1920, in which he states his objection to the notion that homosexuality could be

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<sup>23</sup> Maria Makela, “By Design: The Early Work of Hannah Höch in Context.” In *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, organized by Maria Makela and Peter Boswell (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1996) 84.

<sup>24</sup> Lavin, 160.

<sup>25</sup> Lavin, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Lavin, 188.

<sup>27</sup> Biro, 205-6.

<sup>28</sup> Makela, 66.

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cured.<sup>29</sup> Biro comments that Freud's theories led to new ways of understanding sexuality in the Weimar Republic.<sup>30</sup> *The Melancholic* from 1925 speaks to these issues; Höch places seemingly female features on a male face, and to further the androgyny, she titles the work *Der Melancholiker*, referring to the masculine form of the noun (fig. 5).<sup>31</sup> It is inferred that Höch's shift in subject matter during this period is twofold, influenced by her burgeoning relationship with Brugman and contemporary society's fascination with bisexuality, one likely affecting the other as well. Conversely, Lavin notes, male homosexuality remained illegal throughout the Weimar years even with the acceptance of a theory of universal bisexuality.<sup>32</sup> As Biro points out, this belief relates to male homosexuality being defined as a danger to the Aryan state, leading to their inclusion in the Nazi's sordid eugenics policies.<sup>33</sup>

It is evident that Höch, even with her cyborgian tendencies, is wholly human, employing androids, automatons and alien beings to represent the complexities of humankind. Biro surmises, "From today's perspective, which has seen so much violence result from the idea of fixed human essences, Höch's photomontages reveal the importance and power of these conflicting formulations of what it meant to be human."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lavin, 187.

<sup>30</sup> Biro, 250.

<sup>31</sup> Biro, 231.

<sup>32</sup> Lavin, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Biro, 230.

<sup>34</sup> Biro, 254.

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She explored the unknown, as much as she did the real world, observing the struggles of the “outsiders” of society while acknowledging her own. Like Sonia Delauney, Emmy Hennings, and Sophie Taeuber, Höch's personal relationship with a man initiated her into a revolutionary art movement, Dada, but her artistic legacy is entirely her own.