

Exit the Ballets Russes: Fernand Léger's Depiction of Modern Society

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Abstract

With the impact of the Industrial Revolution, significant societal and individual transformations occurred in 20th-century Europe. These transformations also manifested in art. One of the important topics to be considered within this context is the aesthetics of machines, and the form of the machine plays a central role in the works of many artists. In this context, the aim of this study is to examine Fernand Léger's work named "Exit the Ballets Russes" in both formal and sociological terms, revealing how 20th-century modern society is represented through art. In line with this purpose, the study is based on the analysis and interpretation of data obtained through a comprehensive review of the literature on the conditions of the period in which the work was produced, machine aesthetics, and the artist. Based

on the obtained data, the artist's relevant work is analyzed within the framework of pre-iconographic examination, iconographic description, and iconological interpretation stages, based on Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic and Iconological Criticism Method. The analysis indicates that the symbols created through the design elements in Léger's work clearly reflected the social and economic changes that happened as society moved into the modern era, the new role of individuals adapting to these changes, and a world influenced by machine aesthetics.

Keywords: 20th Century, Fernand Léger, Erwin Panofsky.

JEL Codes: Z11, O14, O33

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1. Introduction

20th-century Europe underwent a multifaceted process of change marked by significant transformations in social structure. During this period, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, technological advancements, and mechanization became the defining elements of daily life. Radical transformations occurred in almost every field. With modernity, the individual broke away from traditional ties and had to reconstruct themselves within the social order. This process signified not only a societal but also a cultural and aesthetic rupture. Art was also affected by this transformation, where artists turned to new explorations.

One of the responses to modernization in the plastic arts, the aesthetics of the machine, emerged as a significant trend in 20th-century art. This understanding particularly emerged through avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Futurism, carrying the logic of industrial production into the language of art through formal approaches. The machine settled in the center of art not only as a motif representing production tools but also as an aesthetic model symbolizing modernity. Avant-garde artists sometimes regarded the machine as a source that glorifies individuality and at other times as a threat that destroys it. In this context, societal transformations directly influenced art, turning it into a valuable tool for reflecting modern society. At this point, the French painter Fernand Léger, as one of the leading artists of the period, developed an original pictorial language that addressed these transformations in both form and content.

Starting his education in the field of architecture, Léger soon turned to painting. As a result of his interactions with the Cubist circles in Paris, he embraced the artistic understanding of this movement. Over time, the unique approach he developed gained a structure based on machine aesthetics, where geometric shapes, vibrant colors, and industry-based forms came together (Fauchereau, 1994). The experiences he gained on the front lines during World War I deepened his artistic inclinations and led him to establish a direct connection between the destructiveness of war and the reality of a mechanized world (Fauchereau, 1994). Especially after World War I, Fernand Léger's paintings were mostly composed of machines and machine parts arranged together with human figures (Şiray, 2022). In this context, Léger's 1914 piece "Exit the Ballets Russes" is a notable illustration of how modern life is portrayed in this regard. This artwork, with its fragmented forms, figures arranged in succession, and rhythmic composition, embodies both the principles of Cubist aesthetics and the visual logic of the machine age. In this context, the research problem is concerned with how the artist represents the sociological transformations of modern society and how this representation

can be related to the changes in the social structure of the era. The aim of this study is to examine the work in question in a formal and sociological context, revealing how 20th-century modern society is represented through art.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study examines the impacts of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization in 20th-century Europe, along with the connections between these impacts and their artistic representations. The connection between art and socioeconomic changes has become particularly apparent in a novel visual language influenced by particular machine aesthetics. When considered in light of this visual language, Fernand Léger's works reflect the industrial age, modern society, and the individual's condition.

Léger's work named "Exit the Ballets Russes" makes this relationship between the formal elements of art and the sociological dynamics of the period visible. It turns into a multi-layered expression tool that questions the individual's positioning within the social order through machine aesthetics. Therefore, to understand the purpose and topics of this study, it is necessary to first examine the social structure of 20th-century Europe, the use of machine aesthetics in 20th-century painting, and Fernand Léger's artistic ideas within Cubism.

2.1. 20th-Century Europe from a Social Perspective

20th-century Europe was a period that witnessed one of the greatest social, political, and cultural upheavals in human history, marked by profound transformations. The industrial breakthroughs, technological developments, urbanization, world wars, and global economic crises radically redefined the individual-society relationship. Modernization became the key to this era, creating a new social form, economic structure, and intellectual grounds. In this process, the individual became alienated from both society and oneself, beginning to question their place and identity in a rapidly changing world. This questioning was effective not only on an individual level but also on a collective level. Both sociological theories and philosophical approaches formed the fundamental parameters of this transformation while trying to understand the 20th century.

The process of modernization can be defined as a mental change that severs ties with the past and focuses on the "now." The author Hasan Aksakal (2015) described this process not only as industrialization or urbanization but also as a historical transformation that enables the individual's liberation in thought, law, and art, as well as the development of a questioning mind.

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Modernity, unlike traditional society, has an individual-centered structure and replaced the previously determining collective identities with individual consciousness and rationality. This process of individualization became particularly pronounced within the structural and cultural conditions of the modern city, leading to profound changes in the relationships individuals establish with their surroundings. Sociologist Georg Simmel, while analyzing the effects of modernity on urban individuals, drew attention to the psychological dimension of this transformation. He noted that life in large cities creates "mental fatigue" and excessive sensory overload in individuals. According to Simmel (2003), the individual feels the mental living conditions of vast environments, mutual distance, and indifference most acutely in the crowd of the big city. This alienation can be associated more with the individual's functional existence rather than their social ties. The material basis of this transformation is industrialization. With the industrial society, mechanized production has severed the individual's connection with their labor, causing them to become merely a small link in the production chain. This situation has resulted in a diminished sense of belonging for the individual, leading to alienation from both work and production. Thus, the person has gone from being an active participant to a mere object. Sociologist Fritz Pappenheim (2002) also associated this situation experienced by the modern individual with technology freeing itself from human control and following its own internal laws.

Another aspect of this transformation emerged during the process of urbanization. Cities transformed into spaces that were far from the face-to-face relationships of traditional society, becoming anonymous, functional, and fast-paced environments. At this point, the words of the author Server Tanilli (2007), stating that the modern city has become the center of industry and commerce, are quite significant. This situation changed the ways individuals socialize. While physical proximity among people increased, emotional and social distance deepened. Individuals became isolated among crowds, and the modern lifestyle pushed them into introspection. This dilemma is not only a psychological issue but also a sociological condition.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim evaluated this transformation process in the context of the social division of labor. According to him, in modern society, individuals are in a relationship of dependence arising from differences, not similarities. The division of labor establishes this differentiation and gives rise to organic solidarity. Accordingly, organic solidarity is a form of cohesion that emerges in structures where the parts of society, composed of individuals, differentiate from one another, and each individual assumes a unique function. This solidarity is possible not through the dissolution of individuals within a social personality but rather through each having

their own unique sphere of activity. As the division of labor develops and as individuals specialize, their dependence on society increases while their personal characteristics become more pronounced. This situation creates a system that ensures social cohesion, akin to the different but harmonious functioning organs of an organism (Durkheim, 2006).

The structural principles that transform the individual-society relationship of modernity have been regarded by thinkers like Durkheim as the source of positive social cohesion. However, it is also clear that this transformation has not always resulted in stable and peaceful outcomes in the historical context. The increase in social differentiation and functional integration has, in some cases, made visible the tensions between the desire of modernity for rational order and its destructive practices. The wars and mass destructions of the 20th century represent one of the harshest contradictions of modernity. Millions of people lost their lives in World War I, and the mobilization process directly affected the civilian population. According to Tanilli (2007), the birth rate in Europe decreased by forty percent during the war, while the death rate increased by thirty-seven percent. World War II, on the other hand, brought unprecedented levels of destruction. Zygmunt Bauman defined this situation as an inherent contradiction of modernity. According to Bauman (1997), the rationalizing structure of modern reason has become capable of planning mass extermination. In this context, the Holocaust was a cold-blooded extermination process organized by the technical rationality of modernity (Bauman, 1997). Currently, the ideals of order, development, and progress that modernity promised have experienced significant ethical degradation. The Great Depression of 1929 exposed the unstable structure of the capitalist system, leaving millions unemployed and triggering social unrest. The collapse of the economic structure shook individuals' sense of security, and in particular, caused deep disappointment among the lower classes.

The identity crisis, alienation, and loneliness experienced by the individual in these processes have triggered the rise of existentialism on the philosophical level. Bedia Akarsu's (1987) assertion that the modern individual has achieved numerous successes yet simultaneously faces the threat of losing everything underscores this inherent contradiction. This situation reveals that the individual is undergoing a profound reckoning not only with external regulations but also with their own inner existence.

According to Marshall Berman (1983), modernity presents the adventure, development, and possibilities for transforming ourselves, while simultaneously posing a threat to destroy what we currently possess, and this effectively summarizes the dilemma of our age in an impressive manner. These words also reveal the structural contradiction inherent in modernity. While modernization provides indivi-

duals with opportunities for liberation and self-actualization, it also introduces destructive dynamics that undermine their existential, cultural, and social foundations. Especially in 20th-century Europe, this distinctly experienced internal tension should also be considered as a period where the individual was simultaneously liberated and disregarded and where the soul was troubled while the new order was being established.

2.2. The Aesthetics of Machines in 20th Century Painting

The 20th century is a period characterized by modernity, which significantly transformed the world of arts. At the start of the century, substantial changes in Europe's social, political, and economic structures resulted in radical shifts within the field of arts. Artists, breaking away from traditional aesthetic understandings, developed a new language of expression that reflected the pace of modern life, technological transformations, and the phenomenon of urbanization. The machine's form became a key element in painting, both symbolically and formally. The machine became a focal point for artists, both as a representation of modernization and as an aesthetic model that redefines the visual language of art.

From this point on, it can first be stated that Cubism represents a radical break that shakes the structural and conceptual foundations of visual representation in Western art. Instead of traditional perspective, this approach, based on the analysis of objects from multiple viewpoints in time and space, aimed to deconstruct and reconstruct form (Antmen, 2009). This fragmentation process is directly related to the scientific developments of the period (Robbin, 2006; Henderson, 2007). Cubist artists included unseen structures in their pictorial narrative by simultaneously depicting objects from different angles on the surface. Thus, they produced a reality based not only on the eye but also on mental comprehension. As the author İsmail Tunalı (2013) pointed out, this approach turned into a formal analysis process with the aim of "breaking the old values brought by tradition." Art had now moved away from the effort of creating beautiful images and turned toward a realm where the formal structure itself carried value. This intellectual and formal understanding offered an aesthetic approach parallel to the fragmented, mechanized, and rationalized world of the industrial age. The geometric forms used in Cubism contributed to the creation of a visual language that overlapped with machine aesthetics by emphasizing the functional and structural aspects of objects.

After Cubism, Futurism, which developed as an aesthetic stance glorifying mechanization, speed, and technology as a reflection of the industry-based

transformations affecting 20th-century Europe, and the Futurist Manifesto published by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, can be referred to as a call for a radical transformation in art. The manifesto opposes the traditional understanding of art and focuses on dynamic elements of modern life such as speed, energy, and aggression. Industry, automobiles, factories, airplanes, and trains, as modern technological tools, have been presented as new aesthetic elements that should transform not only life but also art. In the Futurist approach, art is no longer an expression of traditional values but it is an expression of technology, mechanization, and the energetic rhythm of the modern human. Marinetti's manifesto, while painting an aestheticized portrait of this new world, argues that art must also keep pace with this dynamism (Apollonio, 1973).

Similarly, the Constructivist movement that developed in Russia aimed to transcend art as an aesthetic representation and integrate it with technology, engineering, and industry. In this direction, artists shifted from the understanding of plastic form to the laws of mechanical necessity. Geometric precision and industry-based structures became the fundamental determinants of artistic production. The concept of "construction" was considered not only as a visual form but also as a material assembly and functional mechanism, and art was redefined within a structural and production process (Rowell & Rudenstine, 1981).

During this period, design schools in Europe, particularly the Bauhaus School, placed the technical possibilities brought by mechanization at the center of artistic production, making machine aesthetics a guiding principle not only in architecture but also in all visual fields, from furniture to everyday object design. This understanding, which advocated for a holistic relationship between design and life, aimed to transform the new tools offered by industrialization into an aesthetic language and brought art and technology together for the first time with such a holistic approach (Gropius, 1965).

To clarify what is meant by the expression of the machine transforming into an aesthetic language in art, one of the important examples of this understanding that can be mentioned is Fernand Léger's work named "Soldiers Playing Cards" (Figure 1). This work has a structure dominated by cylindrical forms and light-shadow modeling. Fernand Léger constructs the entire surface in a regular and functional manner, drawing inspiration from the parts of military machines. Color vibrations and ambiguous transitions are not allowed. Instead, clarity, sharpness, and structural rigidity take precedence. The composition is constructed with architectural precision, and the forms are assembled as if they were components of a war machine working in harmony (Kuh, 1953).



Figure 1. Fernand Léger, *Soldiers Playing Cards*, Oil on Canvas, 1917, 129.5x194.5 cm (*Soldiers Playing Cards*, n.d.)

In addition to Léger's paintings created with machine forms, many artists of the same period also developed various approaches based on machine aesthetics. This situation shows that the machine form was not merely an expression tool unique to Léger but rather a part of a broader aesthetic movement reflecting the spirit of the era. As a first example, Francis Picabia's work named "Love Parade" offers an ironic approach to the superficiality of modern

life by reducing human relationships to mechanical processes, where love is represented as a functional system through interconnected machine parts (Figure 2). In Charles Demuth's work named "Machinery," an ordinary industrial object is reinterpreted within an abstract rhythm organized by geometric shapes. Thus, industrial aesthetics are transformed into a visual language both in terms of formal balance and conceptual level (Figure 3). In Paul Klee's 1922 work

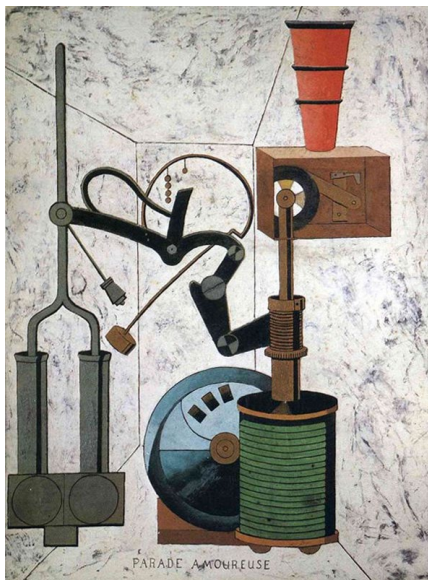


Figure 2. Francis Picabia, *Love Parade*, Oil on Cardboard, 1917, 96.5x73.7 cm (Holzwarth, 2016, p. 283)



Figure 3. Charles Demuth, *Machinery*, Opaque Watercolor and Graphite on Board, 61x50.5 cm (*Machinery*, n.d.)

"Twittering Machine," birds, which represent nature and organic life, are depicted as being connected to a machine, symbolizing the replacement of what is natural by what is artificial (Figure 4). In this context, chirping is no longer a natural sound coming from nature, but it is an artificial tone emanating from a mechanical device. Klee's representation offers a glimpse into how the modern age transforms the natural. A similar approach can also be seen in Otto Umbehr's photomontage named "the Racing

Reporter" (Figure 5). Here, the human figure merges with technological symbols like an airplane, a clock, and a car, essentially transforming into a biomechanical entity. Umbehr's composition presents the individual as a figure empowered by technological tools. Both works demonstrate that machine forms are used not merely as a formal choice but to conceptually question the effects of modernization on individuals and society.

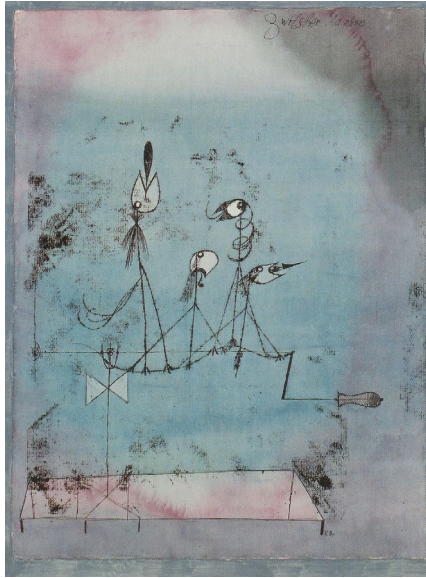


Figure 4. Paul Klee, *Twittering Machine*, Oil Transfer Drawing, Watercolor, and Ink on Paper with Gouache and Ink Borders on Board, 1922, 64.1x48.3 cm (*Twittering Machine*, n.d.)

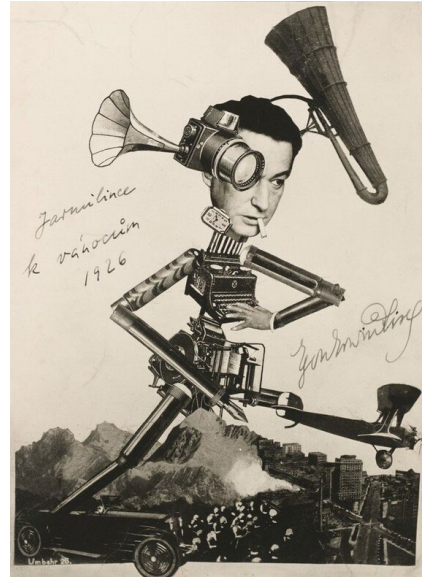


Figure 5. Otto Umbeh, *The Racing Reporter*, Gelatin Silver Print of Photomontage, 1926, 28.6x20.5 cm (*The Racing Reporter*, n.d.)

The reasons for the intensive use of the machine form in 20th-century European painting are multi-layered. First and foremost, the machine is one of the fundamental symbols of modernity. Machines that accelerate daily life, increase production, and transform social structures have shaped not only the environment of modern humans but also their sensitivities. Artists could not ignore this transformation and incorporated the machine into their works from a perspective that either glorified or questioned it. Secondly, the formal structure of the machine became a new aesthetic source for artists. Finally, the machine also emerged as a metaphor symbolizing the tensions between the individual and society, the natural and the artificial, and humanity and technology. The machine's aesthetics were now a theme and a form of expression.

2.3. The Aesthetic Language of the Machine: Fernand Léger in a Cubist Context

Developed in the early 20th century under the leadership of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, Cubism is an expression of a radical break that shook the centuries-old representational system of Western art. Cubism, by deviating from traditional perspective, developed a new visual language based on the principle of multiple viewpoints, understanding objects based on changing angles in time and space instead of depicting them from a fixed viewpoint. Cubists depicted nature conceptually, as opposed to descriptively, on the two-dimensional pictorial surface. By displaying an object from several perspectives at once, they added a sort of four-dimensional comprehension to the picture. This revolutionary break accelerated the transition from representational reality to pictorial reality, grounding art not only

in what the eye sees but also in the forms constructed by the mind (Antmen, 2009).

The concept of the fourth dimension that Antmen pointed to is not only an artistic orientation but also closely related to the scientific developments of the time. As noted in the book "Shadows of Reality," European artists in the early 20th century incorporated concepts such as multidimensional geometry, non-Euclidean space, and n-dimensional structures into their aesthetic language, and this directly influenced the development of Cubism (Robbin, 2006). Art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson, drawing attention to the scientific roots of this trend, stated that Cubist and Futurist painters were inspired by the effect of X-rays in making solid matter transparent. According to Henderson (2007), this method, which makes invisible forms visible, has reinforced the idea of breaking down volumes in paintings to also represent internal structures.

All these developments explain the tendency of Cubist artists to analyze objects and detach form from appearance. According to Tunalı (2013), to dismantle the old values inherited from tradition, forms need to be deconstructed. Thus, by leaving the effort of creating a "beautiful image," painting has focused solely on form, allowing for a representation of reality stripped off emotional embellishments. Cubism, in this respect, can be considered not only a formal transformation but also a significant visual revolution that transforms the perception, knowledge, and aesthetic structure of modern people.

Artists who emerged from or interacted with Cubism clearly reflected the effects of this formal transformation. Although Cubist principles influenced Fernand Léger, his unique approach led him to evolve in a different direction. His approach was referred to as Tubism. This term was derived from his use of

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forms reminiscent of cylinders, pipes, and mechanical parts in his paintings. With this approach, Léger focused more on the machine, construction, and technical representation than on geometric abstraction. He also openly expressed this preference by saying, "Just as others brought the naked body and still life into their paintings, I brought the machine into my painting" (Turani, 1995). In this context, Léger's theoretical approach to machine aesthetics laid the groundwork for developing a unique visual language in his artworks, where geometric forms and mechanical elements are central. In his 1913 article, Léger argued that rather than the representational function of art, the focus should be on plastic values, and he suggested that the arrangement of line, form, and color is the source of true aesthetic value. In this context, the machine is positioned not merely as a technological object but as a contemporary metaphor for a new mode of perception and the transformation of the subject of art (Léger, 1973).

The artist, who adopted the structural analysis approach of Cubism by deconstructing and reconstructing objects, adapted this method to the new aesthetic forms of industrial society, beginning to shape the human figure and its surroundings according to the logic of technical objects. This tendency is apparent in Léger's selection of the machine as the focal point of his artwork, as well as in his development of a "machine-like" visual language utilizing plastic elements. The combination of forms, the recurrence of elements, and the robustness of structure establish a visual framework in his paintings that mirrors the functionality of a machine. Thus, while preserving the Cubist legacy, Léger transforms it with the visual codes of the industrial age, becoming one of

the pioneers of machine aesthetics both formally and conceptually. One of the significant examples of this intellectual and visual transformation is the artwork named "Contrast of Forms" (Figure 6). In this work, the artist creates a composition that resembles interlocking parts of a mechanical system by rhythmically repeating cylindrical, conical, and prismatic forms on the surface. This structure, where the volumes overlap and intertwine with each other, is completely devoid of figurative elements. Visual narration is based solely on form, color, and rhythm. This approach shows that the artist focuses more on the structural functioning of the object and its movement within space than on the object itself. "Contrast of Forms" signifies a pivotal moment where Léger, driven by his aim to emphasize plastic values, departs from traditional representational art and restructures form in accordance with the visual logic of industrial society. In the work named "Soldier with a Pipe," however, Léger reduces the human body to a mechanical order through tubular forms. Here, the figure, anonymized by war, aligns with the formal aesthetics of the machine (Figure 7). It is known that the artist's experiences as a soldier were an important reference in creating his works. As Katharine Kuh noted, Léger did not pick up a brush for a while after going to the front in 1914, but he continued to draw. The war experience fundamentally changed his perspective on art. Encountering the direct and stark reality of machines and modern warfare deeply influenced his understanding of the figure. This process laid the groundwork for Léger to interpret the human body not as a whole, but as a mechanical system composed of fragmented and functional components (Kuh, 1953).



Figure 6. Fernand Léger, *Contrast of Forms*, Oil on Canvas, 1913, 100.3x81.1 cm (Contrast of Forms, n.d.)



Figure 7. Fernand Léger, *Soldier with a Pipe*, Oil on Canvas, 1916, 130x97cm (Neret, 1993)

In Léger's understanding of the figure, the transformation experienced after the war was not limited to military representations. The human figure in civilian life was similarly reconstructed with mechanical forms. This transformation was not only a result of the war's destructive impact but also of the effects of modern life and the mechanized urban environment on the individual. The artist perceives the human body not as a vessel of expression and identity but as an organism composed of structural units functioning within a systematic framework. This understanding shows that Léger's plastic language, shaped by war, persisted in representations of urban life and daily practices in the following years. The figure is no longer a narrative object, but it is now equated with the mechanical objects around it and included in the

same aesthetic logic. This framework becomes even more pronounced in the artist's work named "Three Women" (Figure 8). In this work, Léger constructs the figures as parts of a mechanical arrangement, transforming the human body into an aesthetic object. The female figures, created with cylindrical volumes, are treated with a similar formal understanding as the surrounding interior objects, consciously eliminating the visual distinction between human and object. This approach also shows that the artist imbues the figure with not only an expressive content but also a plastic value. The work visualizes the monotony of modern life and the mechanized reality, replacing individuality with formal order and balance (Kuh, 1953).



Figure 8. Fernand Léger, *Three Women*, Oil on Canvas, 1921-22, 183.5x251.5 cm (*Three Women*, n.d.)

Léger reduces figures to a formal element through his understanding of the mechanized body. This reduction in figurative representation affects the artist's approach to objects and forms. Now, not only humans but every element in the surroundings is conceived as part of the same aesthetic system. In the mid-1920s, with the figurative structure gradually transforming into abstract forms, the artist integrates mechanics into his paintings not just as representational content but as a pure plastic fictional element. This transformation is clearly observed in

Léger's work named "Mechanical Element," where he emphasizes principles such as form, balance, and clarity (Figure 9). In this work, he establishes a clear connection with machinery by using the wheel-like structure of geometric parts and the metallic surface sheen. However, the materiality of these metallic elements is systematically pushed into the background by reducing their volumes to flat surfaces. The rigid linear structure is balanced with intense and undiluted colors. It is clear that this imaginary setup creates only an abstract visual effect (Lanchner, 1998).



Figure 9. Fernand Léger, Mechanical Element, Oil on Canvas, 1924, 92.8x65.5 cm (Elément Mécanique Sur Fond Rouge, n.d.)

Looking at Léger's artistic approach from a holistic perspective, one can speak of a narrative form that initially relied on the formal foundations of Cubism and gradually merged with machine aesthetics to transform into an original and contemporary visual language. Using industry-based forms such as tubes, cylinders, and gears in his art, Léger composed figures as if they were parts of a machine, thereby visually blurring the boundaries between humans and technology. His works question not only form but also the modern individual's relationship with society, urban life, and the mechanized world. With his rhythmic compositions and geometric structures, he reflects the order, speed, and artificiality of modern life. Léger, in this respect, is not only an artist who diverges from Cubism but also stands out as an important representative who clearly conveys the aesthetic understanding of the machine age into the language of painting. In his art, the machine has become not just a tool but also a center representing the intellectual and cultural transformation of the era.

3. Method

This study was conducted based on qualitative research methods, and a descriptive and interpretive analysis approach was adopted. A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted within the framework of the sociology of art. In this context, sources written about Fernand Léger's life, artistic practice, formal style, and the historical period he was in were systematically examined. The data obtained from texts written by art historians, sociologists, and theorists were evaluated in light of the social transformations at the beginning of the 20th century. Be-

fore proceeding to the analysis of the work under the theoretical framework, the conditions of the period in which the work was produced, the aesthetics of the machine, and the artist's artistic understanding in the context of cubism were focused on.

Based on the information obtained during the research process, Léger's work "Exit the Ballets Russes" was examined using Erwin Panofsky's method of iconographic and iconological criticism, which is an approach that stands out for its analysis of artworks in terms of subject, form, and content (Kum, 2022). In this method, not only the formal characteristics of the work but also the symbolic, cultural, and social meanings it carries are analyzed. This three-stage method consists of pre-iconographic examination, iconographic description, and iconological interpretation, and according to Panofsky, the perception and esthetic evaluation of a work of art is based on a three-stage assessment step in terms of form, subject, and content (Türkcan, 2021; Şirin & Coşkun, 2023). In the first stage, the primary or natural meaning is defined as the world of artistic motifs where the forms and movements in the artwork represent natural objects, and this representation is combined with expressive qualities. In the second stage, the secondary or conventional meaning, is a layer of meaning where specific themes and concepts are expressed through images, stories, and allegories formed by the combination of artistic motifs, and correctly identifying the motifs is fundamental in iconographic analysis (Panofsky, 2012). In the final stage, the basic beliefs and values of a nation, time period, social class, or way of thinking are analyzed by examining the key ideas shown through the way the artwork is put together and its symbolic meaning. In the first stage in this study, the elements visible

on the canvas were examined, and the work's formal structure was analyzed. In the second stage, the symbolic elements in the artwork were identified, and their relationship to industrial society was analyzed. In this process, themes such as mechanization, urbanization, and the stripping of individual identity were highlighted. In the final stage, the aim was to interpret the work in depth within its cultural, historical, and social context. At this stage, using a sociological perspective, the accelerated mechanization of the Industrial Revolution and its transformation of society and the individual were examined.

Using Panofsky's analysis method, the visual elements of the artwork were closely examined to reveal how they are connected to the social and cultural changes of the period and how the industrial society affected individuals and the community.

4. Findings

This study was conducted to examine the dynamics of social transformation in 20th-century Europe, machine aesthetics, and Fernand Léger's understanding of art.

4.1. Analysis of the Work Named "Exit the Ballets Russes" Using the Iconographic and Iconological Criticism Method

4.1.1. Pre-iconographic examination

Fernand Léger's work named *Exit the Ballets Russes*, completed in 1914 just before World War I, is a striking example of the artist's unique style, which he developed under the influence of the Cubism movement and later became known as "Tubism" (Figure 10). At this point, what is particularly noteworthy is Léger's artistic approach, which he integrates with modernism, consciously reflecting the aesthetic and structural principles of the machine age in his works (Kahnweiler, 1950). Indeed, in an evaluation he made in 1913 on the foundations of modern painting, Léger stated that the value of reality in an artwork does not stem from the exact imitation of the object but from the arrangement of plastic elements such as form, line, and color (Antmen, 2008). The painterly language developed by the artist in line with this thought transforms into a coherent aesthetic order, as seen in *Exit the Ballets Russes*, where line, form, and color are structured with a machine-like logic.



Figure 10. Fernand Léger, *Exit the Ballets Russes*, Oil on Canvas, 1914, 136.5x100.3 cm (Lanchner, 1998, p. 167).

In the artwork, the ballerina figures descending a staircase are depicted in an abstracted and mechanized form, stripped off their graceful and fluid movements. The reduction of the figures to cylindrical and conical volumes almost transforms them into machine parts. The abstract and mechanical shapes in the artwork make it look mostly abstract at first. The staircase and human figures are like hidden clues among the messy lines and colors, but one can only see them if they look closely. The sharp contours that define the boundaries of the forms separate the pieces that make up the composition while also holding them together in a common rhythm.

The diagonal direction of the staircase and the diagonal arrangement of the steps give the painting a sense of depth and movement, while the depiction of the railings with perspective shortening stresses the dynamic structure of the scene extending towards the viewer. Nonetheless, this sense of depth arises not from traditional perspective rules but from the gradual foregrounding of superimposed planes and forms. Léger, inheriting from Cubism, deconstructs and reconstructs space and figures, bringing together images captured from various viewpoints into a single plane. Still, in terms of color usage, Cubism's neutral color palette gives way to the use of

bright and saturated primary colors.

This visual structure is also in strong interaction with the artistic and intellectual environment of the period. Léger, while reconstructing figurative elements on an abstract plane, establishes a parallel language with the common sensibility developed by the art movements of the period regarding speed, movement, and mechanization. *Exit the Ballets Russes*, in this context, not only presents an original compositional understanding within itself but also engages in dialogue with modernist approaches such as Cubism and Futurism.

4.1.2. Iconographic description

Produced in 1914, on the brink of World War I and during a period when industrialization profoundly transformed society, *Exit the Ballets Russes* exhibits a formal approach, particularly in its reduction of figures to geometric and mechanical forms, which plays an important role in reflecting the historical context in which the artist lived. Here, it should be noted that Léger's confrontation with the direct and sharp reality of machines led to a profound transformation in his understanding of art, and this transformation is clearly evident in the artist's works (Fauc hereau, 1994).

Therefore, Léger's formal choices in his work should be interpreted as an indication of an attitude toward the socio-economic structure of the period. The artist's conscious stripping of the figures off their human qualities is a visual reflection of the transformation that the individual experiences within modern production relationships. In particular, this emphasis on machine aesthetics deepens the world of meaning contained in the work while establishing a strong connection with the social reality of the era. In the work, the rhythmic and monotonous repetition of sequentially arranged figures can be interpreted as a reference to the repetitive processes of production. The bodies of each figure are devoid of individual qualities, homogenized, and mechanized. The human body here is neither a subject nor an emotional being. Instead, it has become an anonymous component of the production process. The work, in other words, presents a structure that directly visualizes the concept of "alienation" as defined by Karl Marx in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." According to Marx (2013), the worker becomes a slave to the object produced by their labor. They can only remain a physical being as long as they are a worker that can only work as long as they are a physical subject (Marx, 2013). Léger's figures are precisely the formal counterpart of this existential cycle: they are arranged like soulless machines, stripped off their true selves, with their will suppressed, reduced to mere "working" bodies. This arrangement strongly implies not only the impact of modern production techniques on the individual but

also how human labor has become a captive of the very system it created. The artist's conscious deformations and the rendering of figures as devoid of expression create a visual record of an era in which the individual becomes alienated not only from their labor but also from themselves, their body, and their humanity. This situation is closely related to the fact that, as Pappenheim (2002) also emphasized, technology has become an independent system operating according to its own internal laws, no longer under human control.

In the modern era, individuals have begun to detach from small and homogeneous communities and position themselves within the complex structure of large cities. This transformation has not only led to the dissolution of social relationships but also had profound effects on an individual level. In this context, the multiple roles and changing identities that individuals, especially in urban life, assume threaten the continuity of the self, bringing about a fragmented mode of existence. Tönnies, drawing attention to this dissolution, stated that in modern cities, the relationships of individuals are largely superficial, temporary, and based on self-interest. According to Tönnies, modern cities consist of individuals who lack a shared understanding of life and exist together only for functional reasons. The relationships between individuals are now defined within a social structure based more on contractual and rational relationships than on a sense of community (Aydoğan, 2000). Léger's work can be considered an expression of this mental and social transformation on the visual plane.

Looking at the elements that make up the composition, it can be seen that the work reflects the fragmentation, discontinuity, and plural identity experience of the modern individual. The way shapes are put together from different viewpoints on one surface represents the fast pace, many influences, and constant movement of city life. Despite all this visual chaos, a certain degree of rhythmic integrity stands out within the structure. In this respect, Léger traces an aesthetic order that exists even in the chaotic nature of big cities. Simmel's assessment of modern life is explanatory in terms of understanding this aesthetic order. Simmel (2009) asserted that one of the fundamental issues faced by the modern individual is the struggle to maintain subjective integrity and individuality in the face of social pressures, historical heritage, and the weight of a technified lifestyle. "*Exit the Ballets Russes*" presents this effort not only as an experience of failure for the individual but also as a dual interpretation of a search for a new aesthetic and order that could emerge from this failure.

On the other hand, the complex solidarity relationships of modern society explain how all the figures in the painting are interconnected and move harmoniously within a single compositional structure. The downward movement of the figures in a common

rhythm reveals the mutual dependence and the necessity of cooperation among the parts of industrial society. This situation overlaps with Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity. According to Durkheim, organic solidarity is a form of cohesion that emerges as functional differences between individuals increase and everyone specializes in a certain field; in this form of solidarity, individuals no longer resemble each other but still need each other (Durkheim, 2006 ; Burelli & Camboni, 2023). In Léger's staircase scene, each piece seems to play an indispensable role in the harmony of the entire composition. The painting gains meaning through the togetherness of all the pieces. As seen here, such multi-layered content not only intuitively reveals the effects of urbanization and industrialization on individuals and society at the beginning of the 20th century but also contains clues about how decisive the social division of labor is for both individual freedom and social cohesion.

Lastly, *Exit the Ballets Russes* is a representation that deeply questions the transformative effects of modernity on the individual, not only in terms of form but also on the level of meaning. The depiction of the figures in the work with mechanical forms reflects a new model of humanity where the individual is stripped off subjective qualities and rendered anonymous. This representation is directly related to the homogenizing impulse that modernism developed against differences to create security and stability in the face of uncertainty. Bauman's observations are important for understanding the ideological orientation behind the de-identified figures in the work, as they highlight the homogeneous societal structure that modern nation-states construct through assimilation (Boynukalin & Doğan, 2020).

It is observed that Léger's effort to incorporate the aesthetics of the machine as fundamental plastic elements into painting stems from a desire to redefine the visual language of the era. In "*Exit the Ballets Russes*," the ballerina figures have been stripped off their graceful and fluid movements. They have been transformed into rigid, fragmented, and mechanized forms. This approach can be interpreted as a reference to the rigid regulation of individual movements and behaviors in modern society. This situation is a visual expression of a social structure where humans have distanced themselves from their existence, becoming a functional and passive component of the production process. "*Exit the Ballets Russes*," by centering this transformation, presents the mood of the modern era and the conditions that erode social and physical human existence in a multi-layered manner to the audience.

4.1.3. Iconological interpretation

20th-century Europe is a period in which industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancements profoundly transformed the individual-so-

ciety relationship. In this process, the individual, on one hand, sought liberation, while on the other hand, faced the danger of standardization. One of the reflections of this dual structure in art is the aesthetics of the machine.

Fernand Léger's *Exit the Ballets Russes* addresses the social effects of this change while depicting the individual's dilemma in modern society. In this context, the work reveals the effects of modernization on individuals and society through the relationship between form and content. The work, evaluated at Panofsky's iconological interpretation stage, presents Léger's work as a powerful symbolic narrative that reveals the standardization and alienating structure of the modern world to the viewer.

5. Conclusion

The 20th century in Europe is a period when social, political, and technological transformations radically changed the individual-society relationship. This transformation was not limited to sociological and economic fields. It also reshaped the individual's perception of the world, daily living practices, and aesthetic sensibilities. In this process, where industrialization and urbanization gained momentum, the individual, on one hand, acquired opportunities for liberation and individualization, while on the other hand, they experienced significant ruptures in their emotional, social, and cultural ties. This contradictory structure has been intensively addressed not only by sociologists but also by artists, leading to the production of visual representations related to the spirit of the era. In this context, the aesthetics of the machine became one of the important themes of modern art. It found its place in artworks in relation to the dynamics of the era. Fernand Léger, one of the pioneering figures who developed this aesthetic understanding, also used the machine's form as a symbolic tool to reflect the sociological reality of the era.

The artist's multiple perspectives taken from Cubism and the emphasis on dynamism from Futurism have transformed into a visual language reflecting the structural characteristics of modern society, such as speed, fragmentation, anonymization, and rhythm. In the composition of figures, objects, and spatial areas in the artwork, the unity formed by the parts refers to a societal structure where individuals work in harmony like the parts of a machine but lose their uniqueness. The artist's artistic language, based on machine forms, represents not only a destruction but also the emergence of a new order and visual perception. Unlike many of his contemporaries, the artist viewed technological advancement not merely as a threat but as an aesthetic phenomenon embodying the tempo and structure of the era. Therefore, he centered technological form in his works. In conclusion, "*Exit the Ballets Russes*" is not only a product

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of Fernand Léger's individual artistic practice, but it is also a visual record of the modernization of the 20th century, the transformation of the individual-society relationship, and the mechanizing world. The work addresses the aesthetics of the machine on a symbolic level that reflects the ideological, economic, and sociological dynamics of the era. Thanks to this multilayered structure, the work in question simultaneously reflects both the exalted idealism of modernism and the alienating effect it creates. In this context, considering the third stage of Panofsky's Iconographic and Iconological Criticism Method, it can be argued that the metaphors created through the formal elements in Léger's *Exit the Ballets Russes* transform the socio-economic changes experienced during the transition to the modern era in 20th-century Europe and the individual's position in relation to this transformation into a visual narrative.

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