

Excess-Zero. Dada and the Logic of Inflation

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Dieser Artikel will deutlich machen, wie die Dadabewegung eine Ästhetik des orgiastischen Wachstums entwickelte, die an die ökonomischen Prozesse der Hyperinflation anschlussfähig war. Es geht dabei nicht so sehr darum zu zeigen, dass die Dadaisten die Hyperinflation vorhergesehen hätten, sondern zu thematisieren, wie zeitgenössische Reflexionen auf die Inflation Rückgriff auf die Dadaästhetik genommen haben. Besonders zentral sind dabei eine Diskussion von Hans Ostwalds Buch Sittengeschichte der Inflation und Hans Richters Film Inflation.

It is a common topic of economic discussions, talk shows and even the feuilleton: inflation is one of the greatest fears of the German people. The hyperinflation of the twenties is supposedly rooted so deeply in the collective German mind that it echoes in the debates about the Euro crisis. The title page of the German news journal *Der Spiegel* from October 8, 2012, however, clearly shows that the collective anxiety in the early twenty-first century depends on a quite different phantasmagoria and imagery than in the early twentieth century. On the *Spiegel*, we can see a single one Euro coin, set against a dark background, slowly melting away. Here, inflation is portrayed as a devaluation of money that minimizes the value of a currency – money and its value slowly disappear.

It might be that everybody in the 21st century understands that in a time of electronic banking, actual money does not have to be printed literally and can circulate as sheer numbers in computer systems; also, one does not have to be a Marxist economist to recognize that money is a merely virtual entity. This enlightened insight, however, covers up that inflation is not only a spectacle of minimization, but also comes along with an orgiastic production of an enormous amount of money that, however, has no value. Precisely, this dialectic of devaluation and growth was central to the imaginary and imagery that went hand-in-hand with the hyperinflation of the twenties. [1]

In this text, I want to focus on this orgiastic side of inflation, meaning that inflation goes along with an explosion of money. I want to show that the vicious logic of generating more and more money, but devaluating it at the same time connects to the aesthetic of the Dada movement, and further I would like to outline that this aesthetic was used to conceptualize the phenomenon of hyperinflation in its time. At first, I will briefly outline the Dadaistic economy of nothingness and show how it was recognized as a cultural impact in the time of inflation, second I will demonstrate that Dada developed an aesthetic of inflation that resonates in the imagery typical for the time of hyperinflation, and finally I will provide a discussion of the short-film *Inflation* by Hans Richter, a film maker who was famously close to the Dada movement.

In order to bind back my discussion to the historical context, I will make several comparisons to Hans Ostwalds *Sittengeschichte der Inflation. Ein Kulturdokument aus den Jahren des Marktsturzes* from 1931. This book does not attempt a neutral cultural analysis but represents an almost contemporaneous and extensive report that recognized in the inflation everything that was wrong with society. According to Ostwald, inflation was not only an economic process, but mirrored the hedonistic and immoral zeitgeist and brought about prostitution, divorces, even magician and clairvoyants. In its polemical tone, it is an enormously enlightening document and it simultaneously describes and rejects the hyperinflation in a tone that resembles the cultural criticism voiced against Dada in the early twentieth century.

Dada and the Growth of Nothing

Certainly, Dada emerged in 1916 in Zurich, spread all over Europe after the end of the First World War and culminated and ended – at least in Germany – in 1920 with the great Dada exhibition in Berlin. A comparison between Dada and the time of inflation thus faces the problem that Dada preceded the hyperinflation and was not a product of it. I also do not want to imply that – based on the coincidence that Dada basically ended in the moment when the hyperinflation was about to start – that Dada caused the money devaluation. However, the logic and aesthetic of Dada can be seen as a parameter that was used to deal with this economic situation, and also Dada texts explicitly point to money devaluation, and more implicitly performed a logic that undercut any economic rational.

As also Ostwald documents in his *Sittengeschichte*, the Dada movement belonged to the great cultural forces in the early twentieth century that shook up the bourgeois society of Weimar Germany and attempted to provoke and invigorate their contemporaries with a culture of non-sense that was enveloped in the polysemantic linguistic shrapnel «Dada». This newly shaped word «dada» did not mean anything, but precisely because of that it could be attached to and used for everything. Already the first Dada manifestos from Zurich celebrated «Dada» as something completely meaningless that nonetheless had the power to invade every aspect of a society. [2] The flexibility that is inscribed into «dada» and its potentially ubiquitous presence was understood by the Dadaists as an orgiastic, nonsensical growth that could not be stopped. The *Dadaistisches Manifest* even attests that Dada has a global impact: «der Club Dada hat [...] Mitglieder in allen Teilen der Erde, in Honolulu so gut wie in New Orleans und Meseritz.» [3] In fact, the Dada movement became a rather international enterprise that inscribed its traces not only all over Europe, but also emerged in New York and influenced modern poetry all around the world.

Although Dada can be recognized as an influential artistic movement, when one looks at the texts and proclamations of the Dada artists, Dada appears to be without substance, as an empty promise, or as Richard Huelsenbeck proclaims: «Wir wollen die Welt mit Nichts ändern, und wir wollen die Dichtung und die Malerei mit nichts ändern und wir wollen den Krieg mit Nichts ändern.» [4] This is a central strategy of Dada aesthetics: the currency that Dada offers to its audience is literary «nothing», and the embarrassment and irritation of the spectators in the «Cabaret Voltaire» who participated in the first Dada soirees may have corresponded to the shock of the citizens of Weimar Germany who in the years 1922-23 received their salary as a mere empty promise to be able to buy products for the daily life.

In the years of hyperinflation, money approached the value of Dada, namely nothing. The rapid devaluation of the German currency made money almost worthless and the attempt to buy goods became a bizarre and almost senseless enterprise. Ostwald recognizes in his *Sittengeschichte* [5] explicitly that the hyperinflation in Weimar Germany mirrored in economic terms what the Dadaists tried to establish in the cultural discourse, namely a devaluation of the established semantic and cultural order. «Die Sinnlosigkeit der Inflationsjahre offenbarte sich am deutlichsten in einigen Erscheinungen auf dem Gebiet der Kunst. Am grellsten machten sich die *Dadaisten* bemerkbar.» [6] And Ostwald states further: «Er [der Dadaismus] konnte aber nur darum eine Rolle spielen, weil er dem Strudel der Zeit entsprang, gewissermaßen ihr Plakat war.» [7]

Ostwald points out in his book, which constitutes an almost contemporaneous documentation and mostly moral evaluation of the time of the hyperinflation that Dada greatly coincided with the zeitgeist. Ostwald sees a close connection between the social climate of that time and the aesthetic strategies of Dada. Very critical of the Dada movement, he maintains that the economic devaluation provided a fruitful ground for the growth of such an openly nonsensical form of art.

Of course, from a sheer historical perspective Ostwald is wrong with his assessment. Dada did not grow out of the inflation — it rather preceded this historical situation. The fact that Ostwald merges Dada and inflation, however, is telling, because it shows that he recognized structural identities. The production of meaningless signification in Dada poetry coincided for him in the fact that the signifying power of a paper bill also was not stable anymore. The promise of a 100 Mark-note to buy at least a basic staple was an illusion like the Dadaist promises to save the world. Ostwald, however, was not the first to recognize in the subversive handling of language by the Dadaist an economic structure.

The Dadaists themselves spelled that out. For example, there is the manifesto *Legen Sie Ihr Geld in Dada an* [8] issued by the «Zentralamt des Dadaismus» in 1919. Also Raoul Hausmann wrote in 1922 a polemical text about the inflation, entitled *Von der Macht des Dollarkurses, dem Barometerstand, den Butterpreisen und eines Menschenherzens Elend*. [9]

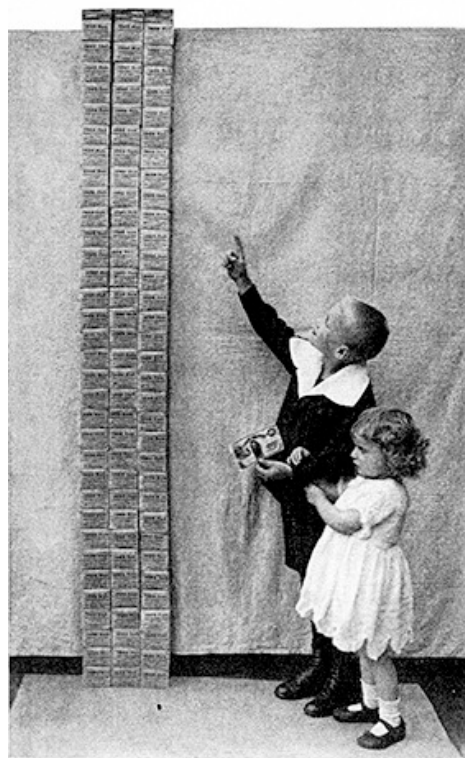
Dada Economics

The text *Legen Sie Ihr Geld in Dada an* was published in the year 1919 in *Der Dada* and it represents a typical Dada manifesto of the time. Dada is here advertised as a solid and very stable investment that produces astonishing revenue. The text does not only mock the financial discourse but also religious promises. «Der Chinese hat sein tao und der Inder sein brama. dada ist mehr als tao und brama. dada verdoppelt Ihre Einnahmen.» [10] This is a strategy that makes fun of all kinds of «Heilsversprechungen» or ideologies in general, something that one can already see in the very first manifestos from the Zurich time. [11] From its beginning, Dada appears suspicious of great belief systems and mocks their agendas of improving the political, social, or the individual life. Dada ridicules these ideological systems through an attitude that again and again promises to do great things through merely nothing.

The text *Legen Sie Ihr Geld in Dada an* projects this attitude more explicitly onto the economical realm and addresses in fact the question of inflation, once implicitly by referring to the reparations to the Entente powers («dada ist die einzige Rettung vor der Sklaverei der Entente») [12] – which were a major factor for the explosion of the inflation – and once more explicitly by claiming that «dada ist der geheime Schleichhandel und schützt gegen Geldentwertung [...]» [13] This manifesto is already in 1919 aware of the dangers of the coming currency devaluation, but Dada appears as a remedy and not as symptom of that inflation. Of course, this is a remedy with an ironic and even absurd twist: the kind of financial «security» that Dada offers is much more an effect that will lead to a hyperinflation, because it wants to inject empty meaningless signifiers into the discourse and no actual value.

Like the orgiastic spread of Dada, as it was implied in the earlier manifestos, the multiplication of the capital that is invested in Dada also appears as a rapid, organic growth. As the manifesto promises: «Jeder Hundertmarkschein vermehrt sich nach dem Gesetz der Zellteilung 1327fach in der Minute.» [14] Although the promised stable growth of 1327 times a minute does not correspond to the logarithmic rate of cellular procreation, the picture is clear in its allusion to a natural unregulated growth.

This transformation of money does not accumulate economic value but turns money into a dangerous parasite that suffocates the German society. Furthermore, such a growth that appears without an actor, who would back up the value of the currency, can only lead to the devaluation of that money. Also here the Dadaists' promise of providing a unique chance of investment is, of course, a mocking, but the bitter truth behind this joke is that it represents the mentality and problem of mere money printing that stood at the center of the hyperinflation. The mere multiplication of money does not increase, but diminishes its value. The rapid and uncontrolled growth of money is the poison and not the cure.



Phot. Presse-Photo, Berlin
Soviel Tausendmarkscheine für einen einzigen Dollar?

Abb: 1 >

The absurdity of growth is also a recurring motif in Ostwald's *Sittengeschichte*, and in this book, which is full of illustrations, one can find a photograph that in a very subtle way reflects on the absurd growth of worthless money that can hardly be measured anymore. The picture shows two children, who hold a one-dollar-note and point towards a seemingly endless stack of bundles of 1000-Mark-notes, which apparently represents the value of one dollar. I would like to argue that these bundles of 1000-Mark-notes resemble the measuring scales that record the fast growth of children in the kindergarten or elementary school, of course, the situation on this picture is inverted.

Here, it is not the stack of 1000-Mark-notes that functions as a growth chart for the children, but the children become a marker for understanding the dimension of the money devaluation (Fig. 1). This inversion highlights the absurdity of the situation by displaying that the objects that need constant measuring, namely children, become the yard stick for a normally relatively stable entity, namely money. Such a semantic mix-up that exchanges means of measuring with the measured objects themselves can also be found in Raoul Hausmann's text *Von der Macht des Dollarkurses, dem Barometerstand, den Butterpreisen und eines Menschenherzens Elend*.

This text is written around the assassination of Walther Rathenau on June 26, 1922. In a manner that is typical for Hausmann, the Dadaist produces a text-collage that represents in a synoptic way the on-goings of these days. This is a complex strategy that short-circuits processes of modern mass media with an intimate observation of an individual psyche. Although I cannot provide a full interpretation of the textual composition, I would like to emphasize that this text ends with formulating an instructive picture for the social confusion that was caused by hyperinflation: «Auf meinem Todesgange verwechselte ich schon den Barometerstand mit dem Dollarkurs – ich weiß gar nicht mehr, ist das Wetter 170 Mark oder der Dollar 773 Millimeter und die Butter 880 Mark oder umgekehrt – nein, nein ich muss schnell machen sonst werde ich noch vorher irrsinnig!» [15]

Hausmann portrays inflation as a source of confusion. Any relationship between measurements and its units becomes undermined. Consistent points of reference disappear and disorientation spreads out – not only the value of money becomes questionable, but everything else is drawn into this vertigo. For Hausmann, the problem of inflation is not only an economic, but also a semiotic one. The constant change of the money rate causes the currency to lose its specificity – not only its value erodes, but also its identity disappears. For the contemporaries, it was hard to grasp this process and Richter's film *Inflation* attempts to create a visual representation of the confusion that was caused by the inflation.

Richter: *Inflation*

Hans Richter started out as a painter close to the Dada movement. However, his most important works were not paintings, but he developed abstract or absolute films in the early twenties. Films such as *Rhythm 21* do not represent a photographic image of the actual world, but project a dynamic assemblage on the screen. The goal of Richter's movies was to create a visual music that had its self-referential existence only on the screen.

Richter's films from the late twenties abandon this completely non-representational agenda, but they still open up an illusionary realm not unlike the films of the trickster Georges Méliès. However, Richter does not intend to produce magic tricks but to unveil complex social practices through visual illusions. He displays the phantasmagoric structures that underlie economic processes, i.e. points to the fact that complex processes cannot simply be assigned to single actors, but emerge out of complex constellations.

Accordingly, *Inflation* represents the inflation as an actor-less growth. We hardly see any economical aspects of the society (such as places of production etc.) that are not directly connected to the speculation with or the organization of money. We see a man reading the news from the stock market, we see hands counting money, and we see speculations at the stock market itself, but we do not ever see, for example, printing presses generating the money or the process of production that backs up the currency on an actual level. Inflation appears in this film as process without cause. What the film displays is simply that money becomes more and more and the question «why?» is never answered — Richter only displays the phenomenon of inflation, and not the economical structure that lies behind it.

This actor-less multiplication reflects on how Richter uses the cinematic medium. Richter employs in his work the medium of film strategically in order to represent events that do not have a conceivable cause. In his abstract work, we do not have a discussion of cause and effect and his famous movie *Vormittagsspuk* uses the medium film most explicitly in order to exhibit events that have no perceivable agent. This film displays a phantasmagoric rebellion of objects against man. Objects are no longer controlled by human beings or other agents but gain an independent will. Revolvers cut loose, hats fly around, etc.

Similar to a restless bow tie in *Vormittagsspuk* that can no longer be controlled by its owner, in *Inflation* we can see the multiplication of money, but we do not see a concrete cause for it. Money simply becomes more and more and Richter does not provide a substantial explanation for why and from where. It appears as an incomprehensible event. The immense growth out of nothing that was the promise in the Dada manifesto is here displayed through the cinematic medium that shows a growing stack of money, a growth that seemingly has no cause.

Nonetheless, this short film provides a rather elegant analysis of the economical situation of inflation. There is, for example, a parallel montage, in which, at first, a rather small stack of money is followed by the rather expensive commodity of a car. Obviously, the stack of money represented the value of the car. (Fig. 2 & 3)

Thema: Geld bewegt Bild.

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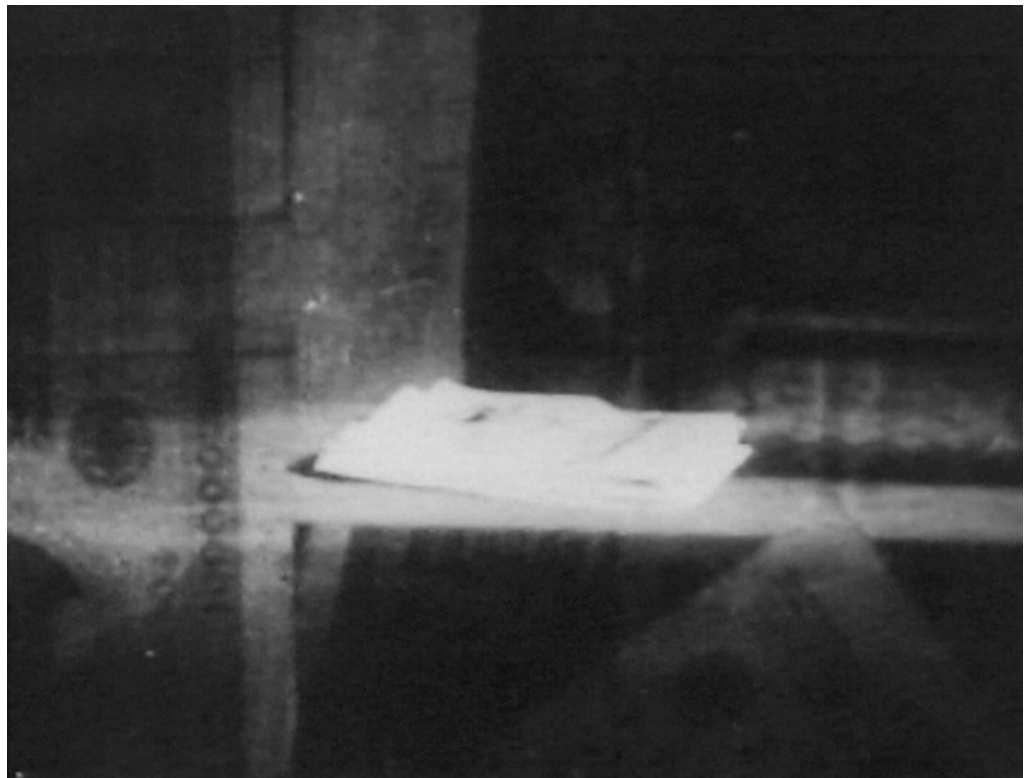


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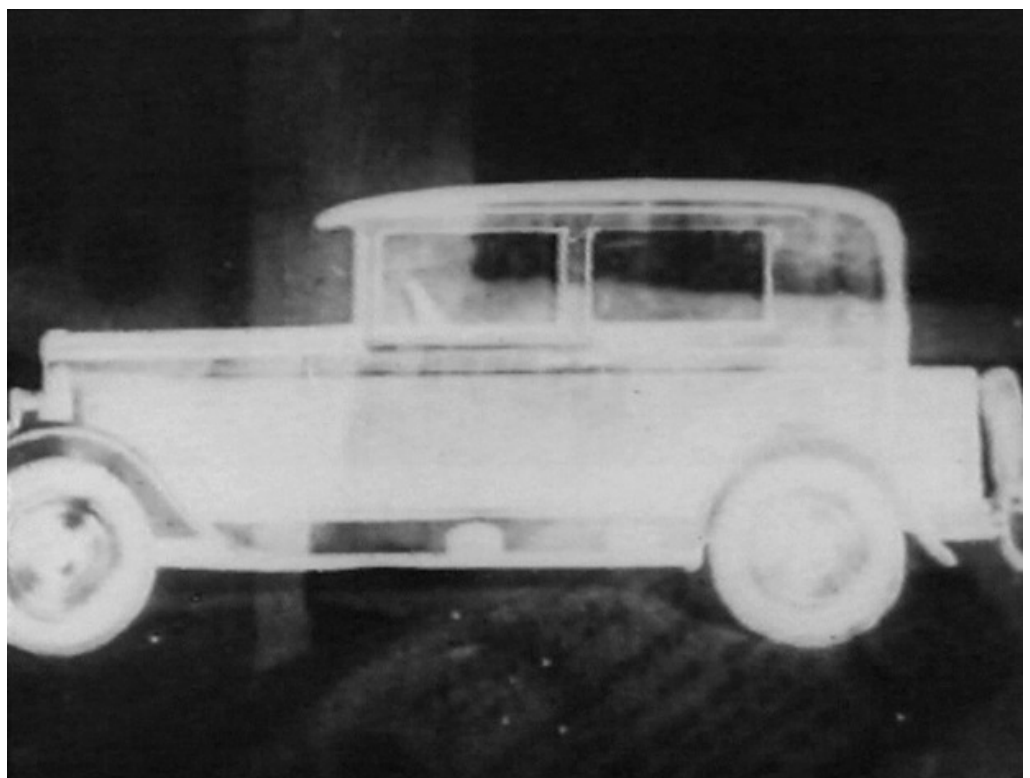


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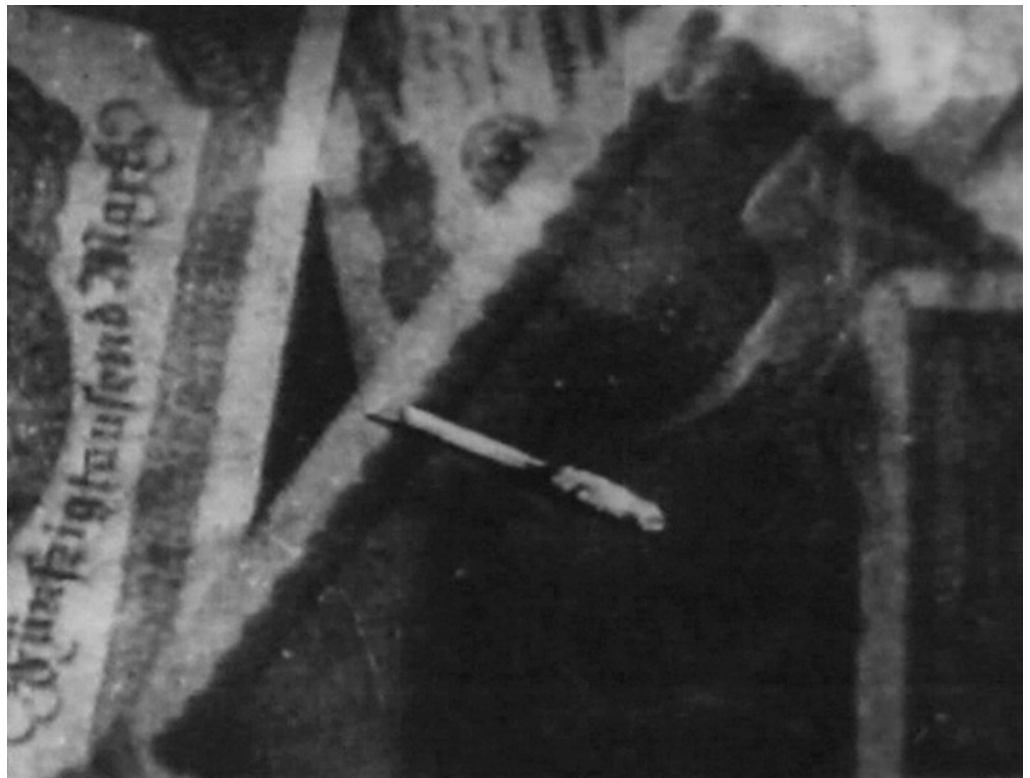


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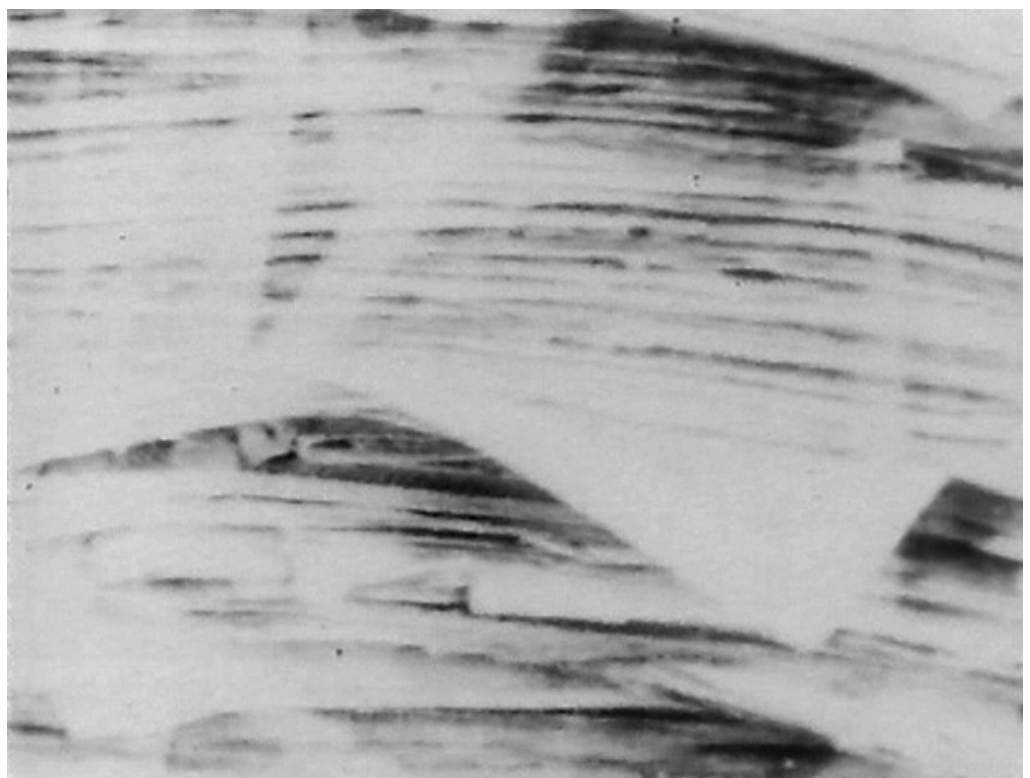


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In the following frames, we see a series of similar juxtapositions, in which the value of the commodity declines but the stack of money increases — up to an almost worthless burning cigarette that corresponds to an enormous pile of money, which fills, and even transcends the frame of the film. Richter constructs here an impressive counter punctual sequence that displays the inverted growth of the sheer amount of money and its declining value. (Fig. 4 & 5).

Another motif that is strategically employed in a parallel montage is the juxtaposition of circulating zeros and human faces. An increasing amount of faces corresponds to an increasing amount of zeros. In fact, Richter merges human faces and zeros further together by arranging them in the shape of a zero. This visual transposition implies that also the individuals become less and less valuable, [16] however, the sheer amount of zeros becomes more and more.

It is interesting to see that, although *Inflation* gives a concise visual analysis of the economic development, it does not explain the reason that causes it. The money devaluation appears as an almost actor-less event that leads to a break down (represented by the collapsing building) and primarily knows victims (represented by the poor and lonely man walking away in the final sequence). However, the lack of a cause for the inflation in Richter's film should not be understood as naïveté, but rather points to the fact that this movie did not represent the actual economical process of inflation, but displayed the psychological profile of the time of inflation.

The impressive scene with the man reading the newspaper makes this point clear. (Fig. 6) At first the man is evidently dressed as a well-off member of the bourgeoisie and represents the upper class. Then after having a short look at the newspaper, he understands that he lost all his wealth, takes off his hat and begins to beg for money. Although, the man accesses the situation with an uncanny speed, his face and reaction signify resignation and desperation. He quickly understood the economic catastrophe, but he also did not have a good plan of what to do now. Although there was an understanding of the economical process, the people did not know how to react in such a situation. Any attempt to secure prosperity was threatened by the absurd value decline of money. I suggest that it is precisely this feeling of not to know how to react and of existential meaninglessness as it was experienced in the early twenties that Richter tried to capture in his cinematic representation of the inflation by representing the inflation as an effect without a cause.



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Dada and the Logic of Inflation

Dada and the inflation were connected through a logic of absurd orgiastic growth, whose socio-psychological consequences caused a collective confusion – not because the economic situation or the situation at the Dada soirees was so difficult to grasp, but because both events provided the social experience of meaninglessness. Ostwald's correlation of Dada with the inflation points precisely to that. And although he was highly critical of Dada, Ostwald might have understood very well – through studying the inflation – that the goal of the Dada movement was the erosion of established cultural practices and norms.

What is fascinating about all of this, is that Dada was not a product of the hyperinflation, it did not emerge at the time, when money lost its economic stabilizing function. The calculus of meaninglessness that permeated Dada poetry and manifestos existed before the fiscal breakdown. Furthermore, Dada peaked and ended quite at the time, when the hyperinflation was about to happen. I do not want to argue that the Dadaists caused the devaluation of money, but that they provided a cultural frame of reference for economical shifts that were about to happen.

Elias Canetti's analysis of the inflation in *Masse und Macht* corresponds quite precisely to the global devaluation of meaning performed through Dada texts. Canetti asserts: «Was geschieht nun bei einer Inflation? Die Geldeinheit verliert ganz plötzlich ihre Persönlichkeit. Sie verwandelt sich in eine wachsende Masse von Einheiten; diese sind immer wertloser, je größer die Masse wird.» [17] This loss of meaning, identity, and signification is not only an economic problem, but also erodes the identity of every individual in a mass society: «Der *einzelne* fühlt sich entwertet, weil die Einheit, auf die er sich verließ, die er sich selber gleich achtet, ins Abgleiten geraten ist. Die Masse fühlt sich entwertet, weil die Million entwertet ist.» [18]

Great wealth diminishes in the inflation and identity becomes dissolved in the same way as the promises of signification and meaning collapse in Dada poetry. The orgiastic, unstoppable growth of the zero becomes the apparent foundational discourse of the twenties, and it is astonishing that Richter, as a former Dadaist, is able to visualize in *Inflation* this process and produces a restabilized image of economic processes in the early thirties in his movie *Die Börse*. As Dirk Verdicchio and Urs Stäheli have pointed out, this movie tried to display a functioning economic system and thus to create trust in the stock exchange. [19]

However, a concrete agent is also here not indicated. Nonetheless, the phantasmagoria of economic processes is compensated by a continual use of anonymous hands that function as the visible mediators in the economic exchange. [20] Although Adam Smith's invisible hand resonates in this display, the hands become concrete indices pointing towards agency in the system. Hands become agents, something that becomes apparent in the German, where «die Hand/the hand» resonates in the word for to act, namely «handeln». [21] Of course, these hands are structural abbreviations and metaphorical gestures, but this visual strategy departs from the Dada aesthetics in which every agent was excluded, and thus Richter is able to show in *Die Börse* an economic situation that remains stable and does not run out of control like a Dada manifestation.

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Fussnoten

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For a comprehensive cultural history of the era of hyperinflation see:
Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, Berkley 2001.

Seite 11 / [2]

Central manifestos that emphasize this semantic emptiness are
Huelsenbeck's Erklärung in which he proclaims «Dada wurde in einem
Lexikon gefunden, es bedeutet nichts» (Richard Huelsenbeck, Erklärung,
in: *Dada Total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*, Karl Riha et al. (Hg.),
Stuttgart 1994, S. 33.) and Tzara's Manifest Dada 1918 (Tristan Tzara,
Manifest Dada 1918, in: ebd., S. 35–45) which boldly states «Dada
bedeutet nichts.» (ebd., S. 36)

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Ebd., S. 94.

Seite 12 / [4]

Ebd., S. 33.

Seite 12 / [5]

Hans Ostwald, *Sittengeschichte der Inflation. Ein Kulturdokument aus
den Jahren des Marktsturzes*, Berlin 1931.

Seite 12 / [6]

Ebd., S. 205.

Seite 12 / [7]

Ebd., S. 207.

Seite 13 / [8]

Legen Sie Ihr Geld in Dada an, in: Riha, *Dada Total* (Anm. 2), S. 106–107.

Seite 13 / [9]

Raoul Hausmann, Von der Macht des Dollarkurses, dem Barometerstand,
den Butterpreisen und eines Menschenherzens Elend, in: Raoul
Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele. Raoul Hausmann in
Berlin 1900–1933. Unveröffentlichte Briefe, Texte, Dokumente*, Eva
Züchner (Hg.), Berlin 1998, S. 161–167.

Riha, Dada Total (Anm. 2), S. 106.

Ball's Eröffnungs-Manifest in which he explains «Wie erlangt man Seligkeit? Indem man Dada sagt» represents a good example for the Dada critique of great ideologies, (Ebd., S. 34) and also the phrase «Nur dada ist der Erlöser von Not und Trübsal» from Legen Sie Geld in Dada an makes that clear. (Ebd., S. 107)

Ebd., S. 106.

Ebd.

Ebd.

Hausmann, Scharfrichter (Anm. 9), S. 164–165.

Bernd Widdig points out that this connection between the devaluation of money and a declining appreciation of the human life is something that is central to Elias Canetti's analysis of the hyperinflation. Widdig, Inflation (Anm. 1), S. 53–75.

Elias Canetti, Masse und Macht, Hamburg 1960, S. 217.

Ebd., S. 218.

Urs Stäheli, Dirk Verdicchio, Das Unsichtbare sichtbar machen. Hans Richter Die Börse als Barometer der Wirtschaftslage, in: montage/av, 15/1, 2006, S. 108–122.

Ebd, S. 112f.

Ebd., S. 112.

Abbildungen

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Soviel Tausendmarkscheine für einen einzigen Dollar?, from: Hans Ostwald, Sittengeschichte der Inflation. Ein Kulturdokument aus den Jahren des Marktsturzes, Berlin 1931.

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Einzelbild aus: Hans Richter, Inflation, 1928.

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Einzelbild aus: Hans Richter, Inflation, 1928.

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Hans Richter, Inflation, 1928.

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Einzelbild aus: Hans Richter, Inflation, 1928.

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Einzelbild aus: Hans Richter, Inflation, 1928.