Modern Thought and Culture in 1900: Crash Course European History #31

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=xGjpTjeGuZc
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course: European History. So the 20th century opened with feminists smashing store windows, the Irish were contesting British rule. Russians were challenging royal rule in the Revolution of 1905. The French were fighting within families and across society over the plight of Jewish colonel Alfred Dreyfus, who'd been convicted of espionage on the basis of fabricate evidence, and over the past few decades, anarchists had been assassinating heads of state and members of powerful families, including the Empress of Austria-Hungary, and we'll talk more about all those upheavals and the ways they affected 20th century Europe, but today, we want to turn to the arts and sciences and philosophical thought, all of which both shaped and were shaped by the big political and social events of the day.

We often use terms like "art history" and "history of science" to separate out scientific and artistic pursuits from political and social history but if history is the story of how our species got to now, the histories of art and science and philosophy are essential to and inseparable from human history.

(Intro)

So music, art, and dance in Europe had traditionally featured hummable and moving tunes, realistic depictions of graceful women and noble men, and the fluttering arms of (?~1:27)-like ballerinas moving ethereally across the stage, but by 1900, all that had changed with what is now called modern classical music, modern art, and modern dance. The term 'modernism' applies to the rejection or radical alteration of all that had come before in the arts and in thought. Some people see modernism as a rejection of the enlightenment's rational approach to reality, but others believed that aspects of moderism, such as abstraction, actually demand a higher level of rationality, but for contemporary audiences and critics, those fancy ideas didn't mean much because modern music sounded just like screeching and scratching.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Song gave way, in the view of critics, to noise, even in modern dance. The ballet dancers in "Rite of Spring" made jerking movements and pounded the floor in so-called primitive, rather than graceful, ways. Ballerinas removed their tutus and ballet toe slippers and danced in bare feet and tunics.

Choreographers and performers claimed to create these new movements by imitating foreign dancers seen at world fairs or in distant lands and similarly, composers copied instrumentation and musical forms from Japan or Bali or South Asia and other regions. Audiences literally howled and walked out of these performances in Europe, but the world of dance and music had changed forever.

As for visual art, by becoming "modern", artists changed their style almost yearly, or at least so it seemed to some observers. "Make it new" was their motto and the impressionists broke with realism in their paintings, first by having human figures appear to float without a stable background and without creating exact likenesses of faces, as you see in the paintings of Edward Manet and then Claude Monet and his followers produced images of train stations and other urban buildings that shimmered with flecks and dabs of color instead of clear lines and realistic shading.

They were trying to project the Japanese belief in mono non aware, or the fleetingness of life. Indistinct colors and lines gave the impression of nature's constantly changing appearance. Instead of stabilizing in realism which, as the impressionists pointed out, wasn't really real, because the real is always changing while realism portrays static images, but as with the changes in music, it appeared to outsiders that artists were just losing their grip on reality and their skill in minutely depicting the world.

Visual artists also increasingly focused on industrial and urban and working class life instead of presenting aristocratic privilege.

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Leisured patrons were replaced by workers in parks or women doing laundry and ironing or fatigued day laborers or the destitute. German artist Kathe Kollwitz angered the aristocratic upper classes by emphasizing the frailty and suffering of the poor instead of showing the nobility of the prosperous few. The German kaiser called her woodcuts "gutter art", but by this time, artists were earning their livelihoods from public commissions and a new class of art dealers, not only from rich elites commissioning portraits of themselves posing with pineapples, another reminder that what artists end up painting has a lot to do with who ends up buying their paint.

Many artists only scraped by. 19th century artists like Vincent Van Gogh helped give us our contemporary idea of the starving and tortured artist, but others prospered by working in commercially advantageous styles like art nouveau, which featured curving lines of vines and other plant life as well as romanticized womens' bodies with long flowing hair. Artists designed many everyday objects in the art nouveau style as well from cutlery to combs, and commercial artists also produced full color advertising posters for steamship lines and dance halls and cafes and theater performances and brands of soap and coffee, and even today, posters of art nouveau advertisements can be found in like, 1/3 of college dorm rooms. Stan says that in his experience, it's closer to 65%, but to be fair, neither of us has been in a dorm room in like, 20 years.

By the turn of the century, changes in art became even more radical, like painter Paul Cezanne depicted items like apples and oranges in geometric terms, bodily shapes and those in nature like mountains became plains and spheres. Immediately following, Pablo Picasso not only used geometric splotches to portray women but also depicted their faces as African masks. In 1907, Swedish artist Hilma Af Klint produced the first entirely abstract painting with no relationship whatsoever to realistic forms and most of these artists, like the earlier impressionists, were deeply influenced by ideas and beliefs coming from the colonized world and other distant lands.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Many would argue they were also appropriating those ideas and beliefs in much the same way colonizers were extracting other resources, but the impact of global ideas on European art was profound. For example, Af Klint and Norwegian Edvard Munch aimed to capture spiritual truths as preached in theosophy, a mixture of beliefs and practices taken from Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and other philosophical and religious traditions. They used colors with meanings that were laid out in theosophical teachings and presenting these schemes correctly was supposed to be able to portray inner reality.

Munch's "The Scream" famously used line and color in ways that people believe to be emblematic of turn of the century modernism, especially the internal distress that many felt amid the faster pace and tensions of modern life. I don't know how I feel about theosophy, but I do know that this painting looks like being on the internet feels.

Meanwhile, in the world of science, there were similarly revolutionary ideas upending our understanding of the world. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. In 1896, French physicist Antoine

Becquerel discovered radioactivity. He also suggested that elements were changeable or mutable through the rearrangement of their atoms, and then, from the discoveries of Marie Curie and her husband Pierre Curie, who found the more radioactive elements polonium and radium, scientists determined that atoms are not solid.

In 1900, German physicist Max Planck's quantum theory changed peoples' understanding of energy, although like Galileo centuries earlier, his theories were not accepted at the time, and amid this revolutionary scientific universe, physicist Albert Einstein announced his special theory of relativity in 1905. According to this theory, space and time are not absolute categories but instead, vary according to the vantage point of the observer, only the speed of light is constant.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

In 1915, Einstein published his general theory of relativity, which connected the force, or gravity, of an object with its mass and proposed a fourth mathematical dimension to the universe, and Einstein's theories of energy became critical to all kinds of technological innovation from the television to the nuclear bomb. As discussed in detail in our History of Science series, the findings of Planck, Einstein, and others really created a paradigm shift away from the Newtonian science of the early modern period and in many ways, we are still in the shadow of the tremendous discoveries of the turn of the 20th century. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So for a long time, scientists have made discoveries and produced theories that do not fit with our everyday interpretations of the physical world, right? Did the center of the world just open? Is there a compass in there? This is a great example of what I mean. We still say that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, right, because practically, for us, it does, even though, you know, it doesn't. Slightly off-topic, but when I close my eyes and imagine the Earth from space, I always picture North being up, right? Like, Antarctica's at the bottom, the North Pole is at the top, but no. Why?

So inevitably, the way we need to represent the world in an everyday way in order to know when to turn left and when to turn right is gonna skew our understanding of the world, and during this revolutionary time, just as thinkers were trying to understand the relationship between perceived reality and objective reality, they were also trying to understand the mind and the relationship between our interior selves and the selves we project, which brings us to Freud.

Sigmund Freud questioned the Enlightenment beliefs in a rational self wedded to reasonable decision-making and self-interest, because, you know, we are not rational selves weded to reasonable decision-making and self-interest. Instead of a unified persona, Freud claimed that the human self or psyche contained three parts, struggling against one another for dominance: the ego, the part centered on realistic activity to survive, the id, or libido, the part alive with sexual energies pushing instinctual rather than rational behavior, and the superego, the part that acts as the conscience.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Freud developed the practice of psychoanalysis to treat the person in whom these three elements were out of balance enough to cause mental disturbances or neuroses. Psychoanalysis involved a talking cure, in which the patient tried to call forth repressed fantasies and fears and desires so that they might be understood and cured. An especially controversial part of Freud's theories stated that sexual life should be evaluated scientifically without religious or moral judgments. According to him, from infancy on, children had sexual drives and in order for civilization to exist, these drives, most notably in the case of Freudian psychology, the drive toward incest, needed to be controlled. He also insisted that gender identity was not a straightforward entity but instead complicated and that women, like men, had strong sexual feelings. They weren't passionless, as advocates of domesticity maintained.

Although many of Freud's ideas have been abandoned, the influence of psychoanalysis extends to this day. In fact, I am visiting my therapist later this afternoon. It's now common to talk about our problems with counselors and therapists and to bring our problems out into the open instead of trying to repress them. We also believe in the existence of neuroses and that our selves are not composed entirely of rationality and intellectual activity. Just like artists discarding traditional beliefs, Freud advanced modernism by claiming that our old ideas about the mind were outdated.

Simultaneously, other theorists rejected the idea that science and facts could be used to uncover social laws. The social sciences of sociology and economics, to name just two, had developed around the pursuit of identifying enduring laws of society and the belief that you can discover social facts and basic social laws to guide public policy is called positivism and it was challenged by those who held that there were too many facts to compute and that humans were complex and ever-changing and at times, somewhat irrational, both when it came to economic choices and when it came to social ones.

===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====

I mean, how else do you explain the strange early 21st century rise of the Croc? Those theorists, called relativists and pragmatists, have been in constant debate with positivists, right up until now and if you think we're getting in the middle of that, you're wrong. Can we rationally and with confidence make infallible laws? Is a question I'm sure you'll be commenting upon.

Probably the most scandalous thinker of the time was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who denied the certainty of truth, insisting that all knowledge simply represents what humans, from scientists to shopkeepers, have perceived. The human mind, for example, filters what nature is and presents its own sense of nature's truth, a human representation of reality rather than reality itself. Nietzsche believed that absolute truths, including age-old tenets of religion, were in decline. God is dead, we have killed him, he famously announced as the result of modern understandings of the universe. Humans could now embark on the happy search for poetries of life, free from religious and other traditional rules.

Nietzsche eventually contracted syphilis and became mentally ill and his sister converted the philosopher's disdain for traditional values into attacks on Jews and support for nationalists and anti-semites and militarists, a reminder that the ideas of modernism were tools that could be wielded in a variety of ways, which we will see with tragic consequences throughout the 20th century, and so the turn of the century was alive with fresh ideas, upending concepts from paintings and dance to philosophy and physics and we are living today in a world wrought by those ideas, but also one that is experiencing its own period of profound disruptions in the ways we communicate and how we understand truth, and that makes me wonder how our revolutionary disruptions will seem a century from now.

===== (14:00) to (15:09) =====

Will this time be remembered as one in which people grew closer together through tools of communication or will it be remembered as one in which people grew increasingly further apart as polarization worsened? The answer to that is partly up to you and

the choices that you will make that will shape our shared future.
Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in the Jaden Smith Studios and made with the help of all of these nice people. We have so many other Crash Courses, including this one in navigating digital information. Thank you again for watching and as they say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.

(Endscreen/Credits)