The Condition of Postmodernity
An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change

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Modernity and modernism

"Modernity," wrote Baudelaire in his seminal essay 'The painter of modern life' (published in 1863), 'is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.'

I want to pay very close attention to this conjointing of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable. The history of modernism as an aesthetic movement has wavered from one side to the other of this dual formulation, often making it appear as if it can, as Lionel Trilling (1966) once observed, swing around in meaning until it is facing in the opposite direction. Armed with Baudelaire's sense of tension we can, I think, better understand some of the conflicting meanings attributed to modernism, and some of the extraordinarily diverse currents of artistic practice, as well as aesthetic and philosophical judgements offered up in its name.

I shall leave aside, for the moment, the question why modern life might be characterized by so much ephemeralism and change. But that the condition of modernity is so characterized is not generally disputed. Here, for example, is Berman's (1982, 15) description:

There is a mode of vital experience - experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils - that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity'. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'

Berman goes on to show how a variety of writers in different places and at different times (Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Biely, among others) confronted and tried to deal with this overwhelming sense of fragmentation, ephemeralism, and chaotic change. This same theme has recently been echoed by Frisby (1985) who in a study of three modern thinkers - Simmel, Krausser, and Benjamin - emphasizes that their 'central concern was with a distinctive experience of time, space and causality as transitory, fleeting, and fortuitous and arbitrary.' While it may be true that both Berman and Frisby are reading into the past a very strong contemporary sensitivity to ephemeralism and fragmentation, and therefore, perhaps, overemphasizing that side of Baudelaire's dual formulation, there is abundant evidence to suggest that most 'modern' writers have recognized that the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity, its penchant, even, for 'totalizing chaos.' The historian Carl Schorske (1981, xix) notes, for example, that in fin de siècle Vienna:

High culture entered a whirl of infinite innovation, with each field proclaiming independence of the whole, each part in turn falling into parts. Into the ruthless centrifuge of change were drawn the very concepts by which cultural phenomena might be fixed in thought. Not only the producers of culture, but also its analysts and critics fell victim to the fragmentation.

The poet W. B. Yeats caught this same mood in the lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold:
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

If modern life is indeed so suffused with the sense of the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fragmentary, and the contingent, then a number of profound consequences follow. To begin with, modernity can have no respect even for its own past, let alone that of any pre-modern social order. The transitoriness of things makes it difficult to preserve any sense of historical continuity. If there is any meaning to history, then that meaning has to be discovered and defined from within the maelstrom of change, a maelstrom that affects the terms...
of discussion as well as what it is that being discussed. Moder-
ity, therefore, not only entails a ruthless break with any or all
preceding historical conditions, but is characterized by a never-
ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself.
An avant-garde has usually played, as Poggioli (1968) and Bürger (1984)
recorded, a key role in the history of modernity, interrupting
any sense of continuity by radical surges, recuperations, and repeti-
tions. How to interpret this, how to discover the ‘eternal and
immeasurable’ elements in the midst of such radical disruptions, becomes
a vexed problem. If modernism always remained committed to
the idea of modernity as poetic abstraction, as the painter Paul Klee put it, ‘the essential character of the accidental’, it now had to do so in a field of continually changing meanings, that effaced the ‘contradictions of the rational experience of
yesterday’. Aesthetic practices and judgements fragmented into this
kind of ‘transcendental scrapbook filled with colourful entries that have no
relative to each other, so determining, rational, or economic scheme,
which Raban deemed ‘an essential aspect of urban life’.

Where, in all of this, could we look for some sense of coherence,
let alone say something cogent about the ‘eternal and immeasurable’
that was supposed to lurk within this maelstrom of social change in
space and time? Enlightened thinkers generated a philosophical and
even a practical answer to that question. Since this answer has
dominated much of the subsequent debate over the meaning of
modernity, it merits some closer scrutiny.

Although the term ‘modern’ has a rather more ancient history,
what Habermas (1983, 1) calls the project of modernity came into
focus during the eighteenth century. This project amounted to an
extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightened thinkers
‘to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and auto-
nomous art according to their inner logic’. The idea was to use
the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working
freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the
enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised
greater freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural
laws. The development of rational forms of social organization and
rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities
of myth, religion, superstition, from the arbitrary use of
power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures.
Only through such a project could the universal, eternal, and the
immeasurable qualities of all of humanity be realized.

Enlightenment thought (and, I here rely on Cassirer’s, 1951, ac-
count) embraced the idea of progress, and actually sought that break
with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above
all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacra-
lization of ‘knowledge and social organization in order to liberate
human beings from their chains. It took Alexander Pope’s Ejection
‘the proper study of mankind is man, with great seriousness. To
the degree that it also lauded human creativity, scientific discovery,
and the pursuit of individual excellence in the name of human pro-
gress, Enlightened thinkers welcomed the maelstrom of change
and saw the transitory, the fleeting, and the fragmentary as a
necessary condition through which the modernizing project could be
accomplished. Doctrines of regulatory liberalism, faith in human intelligence
(since allowed the benefits of education), and universal reason
abounded. ‘A good law must be good for everyone’, pronounced
Condorcet in the throes of the French Revolution, ‘in exactly the
same way that a true proposition is true for all.’ Such a vision was
incredibly optimistic. Writers like Condorcet, Habermas (1983, 3)
were, possessed of the extravagant expectation that the arts
and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces
but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress,
the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.

The twentieth century — with its death camps and death squads,
its militarism and two world wars, its threat of nuclear annihilation
and its experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — has certainly shat-
tered this optimism. We’re still, the suspicion lingers that the En-
lghtenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform
the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppres-
sion in the name of human liberation. This was the daring thesis
advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno in their The Dialectic of
Enlightenment (1972). Writing in the shadow of Hitler’s Germany
and Stalin’s Russia, they argued that the logic that hides behind
Enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression.
The lust to dominate nature entailed the domination of human beings,
and that could only lead, in the end, to ‘a nightmare condition of
self-domination’ (Bernstein, 1985, 5). The revolt of nature, which
they pointed as the only way out of the impasse, had then to be
received as of a revolt of human nature against the oppressive
power of purely instrumental reason over culture and personality.

Whether or not the Enlightenment project was doomed from the
start to plunge us into a Kafkaesque world, whether or not it was
bound to lead to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and whether or is any
power left to inform and inspire contemporary thought and action,
are crucial questions. These are those, like Habermas, who continue
to support the project, albeit with a strong dose of skepticism over
aims, a lot of anguishing over the relation between means and

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ends, and a certain pessimism as to the possibility of realizing such a project under contemporary economic and political conditions. And then there are those — and this is, as we shall see, the core of post-
modernist philosophical thought — who insist that we should in the
name of human emancipation, abandon the Enlightenment project
entirely. Which position we take depends upon how we explain the
‘dark side’ of our recent history and the degree to which we attribute
it to the defects of Enlightenment reason rather than to a lack of its
proper application.

Enlightenment thought, of course, internalized a whole host of
difficult problems and possessed not a few troublesome contradictions.
To begin with, the question of the relation between means and ends
was opaque, while the goals themselves could never be specified
precisely except in terms of some utopian plan that often looked so
appealing as to cause some to look emancipatory to others.
Furthermore, the question of exactly who possessed the claim to superior
reason and under what conditions that reason should be exercised as
power had to be squarely faced. Mankind will have to be forced to
be free, said Rousseau; and the Jacobins of the French Revolution
took over in their political practice where Rousseau’s philosophical
thought had left off. Francis Bacon, one of the precursors of En-
litement thought, envisaged in his utopian tract New Atlantis a
house of wise sages who would be the guardians of knowledge, the
ethical judges, and the true scientists; while living outside the daily
life of the community they would exercise extraordinary moral power
over it. To this vision of an elite but collective male, white, wisdom,
others opposed the image of the unbridled individualism of great
thinkers, the great benefactors of humankind, who through their
singular efforts and struggles would push reason and civilization
willy-nilly to the point of true emancipation. Others argued either
that there was some inherent incoherence at work (even, perhaps,
divinely inspired), to which the human spirit was bound to respond,
or that there existed some social mechanism, such as Adam Smith’s
celebrated hidden hand of the market, that would convert even the
dmost dubious of moral sentiments into a result advantageous to all.
Marx, who in many respects was a child of Enlightenment thought,
sought to convert utopian thinking — the struggle for human beings
to realize their ‘species being’ — as he put it in his early works — into
a materialist science by showing how universal human emancipation
might emerge from the class-bound and evidently repressive, though
contradictory, logic of capital development. In so doing he focused
on the working class as the agent of human liberation and eman-
cipation precisely because it was the dominated class of modern

Weber argued that the hope and expectation of the Enlighten-
ment thinkers was a bitter and ironic illusion. They maintained
a strong necessary linkage between the growth of science, ra-
tionality, and universal human freedom. But when unmasked
and understood, the legacy of the Enlightenment was the triumph
of . . . purpose—instrumental rationality. This form of ration-
ality affects and infects the entire range of social and cultural
life encompassing economic structures, law, bureaucratic
administration, and even the arts. The growth of [purpos-
e—instrumental rationality] does not lead to the concrete
realization of universal freedom but to the creation of an
‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no
escape. (Bernstein, 1985, 5)

If Weber’s ‘sober warning’ reads like the epitaph of Enlightenment
reason, then Nietzsche’s earlier attack upon its very premises must
surely be regarded as its nemesis. It was rather as if Nietzsche
plunged totally into the other side of Baudelaire’s formulation in
order to show that the modern was nothing more than a vital energy,
the will to live and to power, swimming in a sea of disorder,
anarchy, destruction, individual alienation, and despair. ‘Beneath the
surface of modern life, dominated by knowledge and science, he
discerned vital energies that were wild, primitive and completely
cruel’ (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 446). All the Enlighten-

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ment imagery about civilization, reason, universal rights, and morality was for naught. The eternal and immemorial essence of humanity found its proper representation in the mythical figure of Dionysus: 'to be as one and the same time “destructively creative” (i.e. to form the temporal world of individualization and becoming, a process destructive of unity) and “creatively destructive” (i.e. to devour the illusory universe of individualization, a process involving the reaction of unity)’ (loc. cit.). The only path to affirmation of self was to act, to manifest will, in this madmew of destructive creation and creative destruction even if the outcome was bound to be tragic.

The image of ‘creative destruction’ is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before? You simply cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, as a whole line of modernist thinkers from Goethe to Mao have noted. The literary archetype of such a dilemma is, as Berman (1982) and Lukacs (1969) point out, Goethe’s Faust. An epic hero prepared to destroy religious myths, traditional order and customary ways of life in order to build a brave new world out of the ashes of the old, Faust is, in the end, a tragic figure. Synthesizing thought and action, Faust forces himself and everyone else (even Mephistopheles) to extremes of organization, pain, and exhaustion in order to master nature and create a new landscape, a sublime spiritual achievement that contains the potentiality for human liberation from want and need. Prepared to eliminate everything and everyone who stands in the way of the realization of this sublime vision, Faust, to his own ultimate horror, deploys Mephistopheles to kill a much-loved old couple who live in a small cottage by the sea-shore for no other reason than that they do not fit in with the master plan. ‘It appears,’ says Berman (1982), ‘that the very process of development, even as it transforms the wasteland into a thriving physical and social space, creates the wasteland inside of the develop-er himself. This is how the tragedy of development works.’

There are enough modern figures — Haussmann at work in Second Empire Paris and Robert Moses at work in New York after World War II — to make this figure of creative destruction more than a myth (plates 1.3, 1.4). But we here see at work that opposition between the ephemeral and the eternal in a rather different guise. If the modernist has to destroy in order to create, then the only way to represent eternal truths is through a process of destruction that is liable, in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths. Yet we are forced, if we strive for the eternal and immutable, to try and put our
Prophetic words and a prophetic conception this, on the part of both Schumpeter and Stein, in the years before the greatest event in capitalism’s history of creative destruction — World War II.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly after Nietzsche’s intervention, it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment reasons a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and immutable essence of human nature. The degree that Nietzsche had led the way in placing aesthetics above science, rationality, and politics, so the exploration of aesthetic experience — beyond good and evil — became a powerful means to establish a new mythology as to what the eternal and the immutable might be about in the midst of all the ephemeral, fragmentation, and patent chaos of modern life. This gave a new role, and a new impetus, to cultural modernism.

Artists, writers, architects, composers, poets, thinkers, and philosophers had a very special position within this new conception of the modernist project. If the ‘eternal and immutable’ could no longer be automatically presupposed, then the modern artist had a creative role to play in defining the essence of humanity. If ‘creative destruction’ was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the artist as individual had a heroic role to play (even if the consequences might be tragic). The artist, argued Frank Lloyd Wright — one of the greatest of all modernist architects — must not only comprehend the spirit of his age but also initiate the process of changing it.

We here encounter one of the more intriguing, but to many deeply troubling, aspects to modernism’s history. For when Rousseau refuted Descartes’s famous maxim ‘I think therefore I exist,’ with ‘I feel therefore I exist,’ he signalled a radical shift from a rational and instrumentalist to a more consciously aesthetic strategy for realizing Enlightenment aims. At about the same time, Kant, too, recognized that aesthetic judgement had to be construed as distinct from practical reason (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge), and that it formed a necessary though problematic bridge between the two. The exploration of aesthetics as a separate realm of cognition was very much an eighteenth-century affair. It arose in part out of the need to come to terms with the immense variety of cultural artefacts, produced under very different social conditions, which increasing trade and cultural contact revealed. Did Ming vases, Grecian urns, and Dresden china all express some common sentiment of beauty? But it also arose out of the sheer difficulty of translating Enlightenment principles of rational and scientific understanding into moral and political principles appropriate for action. It was into this gap that Nietzsche was later to insert his powerful message with such devastating effect, that art and aesthetic sentiments had the power to go beyond good or evil. The pursuit of aesthetic experience as an end in itself became, of course, the hallmark of the romantic movement (as exemplified by, say, Shelley and Byron). It generated that wave of ‘radical subjectivism’, of ‘unamnnelled individualism’, and of ‘search for individual self-realisation’ which, in Daniel Bell’s (1978) view, has long put modernist cultural behaviour and artistic practices fundamentally at odds with the protestant ethic. Hedonism fits ill, according to Bell, with the saving and investment which supposedly nourish capitalism. Whatever view we take of Bell’s thesies, it is surely true that the romantics paved the way for active aesthetic interventions in cultural and political life. Such interventions were anticipated by writers such as Condorcet and Saint-Simon. The latter insisted, for example, that,

It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde. What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a
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posture power, a true priestly function, and of marching force
fully in the van of all the intellectual faculties in the epoch of their
greatest development (quoted in Bell, 1978, 35, cf. Poggioli,
1968, 9).

The problem with such slogans is that they see the aesthetic
link between science and morality, between knowledge and action, as
such a way as not to be threatened by historical evolution (Raphael,
1981, 7). Aesthetic judgments, as in the cases of Thedegger and
Pound, can never be taken as is. What will lead to the right as to the left of
the political spectrum: As Baudelaire was very quick to see, if flux and
change, ephemeralism, and fragmentation, formed the material basis of
modern life, then the definition of a modernist aesthetic depended
crucially upon the artist’s positioning with respect to such processes.
The individual artist could contest them, embrace them, try to
dominate them, or simply swim within them, but the artist could
never ignore them. The effect of any one of these positions was, of
course, to alter the way cultural producers thought about the flux
and change as well as the political terms in which they represented
the eternal and immutability. The twists and turns of modernism as a
cultural aesthetic can largely be understood against the background
of such strategic choices.

I cannot rehearse the vast and convoluted history of cultural
modernism since its inception in Paris after 1848. But some very
general points need to be made if we are to understand the post-
modernist reaction. If we go back to Baudelaire’s formulation, for
example, we find him defining the artist as someone who can
concentrate his or her vision on ordinary subjects of city life, understand
their fleeting qualities, and yet extract from the passing moment all
the suggestion of eternity it contains. The successful modernist artist
was one who could find the universal and the eternal, ‘distil the
bitter or heady flavour of the wine of life’ from ‘the ephemeral, the
fleeting foros of beauty in our day’ (Baudelaire, 1881, 439). To the
degree that modernism managed to do that it became one of the
prescriptions because ‘it is the one art that responds to the scenario of
our chaos’ (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 27).

But how to represent the eternal and the immutable in the midst of
all the chaos? To the degree that naturalism and realism proved
inadequate (see below p. 262), the artist, architect, and writer had to
find some special way to represent it. Modernism from its very
beginning, therefore, became preoccupied with language, with finding
some special mode of representation of eternal truths. Individual
achievement depended upon innovation in language and in modes of
representation, with the result that the modernist work, as Lunn
(1985, 43) observes, ‘often willfully reveals its own reality as a con-
struction or an artifact,’ thereby transforming much of art into a
self-referential construct rather than a mirror of society. Writers
like James Joyce and Proust, poets like Mallarmé and Aragon, painters
like Matisse, Picasso, Jackson Pollock, all showed a tremendous
preoccupation with the creation of new codes, significations, and
metaphorical allusions in the languages they constructed. But if the
word was indeed fleeting, ephemeral, and chaotic, then the artist
had, for that very reason, to represent the eternal through an instan-
taneous effect, making ‘shock tactics and the violation of expected
continuities’ vital to the hammering home of the message that the
artist sought to convey.

Modernism could speak to the eternal only by freezing time and
all its fleeting qualities. For the architect, charged to design and build
a relatively permanent spatial structure, this was a simple enough
proposition. Architecture, wrote Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s, ‘is
the will of the age conceived in spatial terms.’ But for others the
‘spatialization of time’ through the image, the dramatic gesture, and
the instantaneous shock, or simply by montage/collage was more pro-
blematical. T. S. Eliot ruminated on the problem in Four Quartets this
way:

To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time limit is conquered.

Resort to the techniques of montage/collage provided one means of
addressing this problem, since different effects out of different times
(old newspapers and spaces (the use of common objects) could be
superimposed to create a simultaneous effect. By exploring sim-
ultananeity in this way, modernists were accepting the ephemeral
and transitory as the locus of their art at the same time as they were
forced collectively to reaffirm the potency of the very conditions
against which they were reacting. Le Corbusier recognized the
problem in his 1924 tract The city of tomorrow. ‘People tax me very
readily with being a revolutionary,’ he complained, but the ‘equi-
librium they try so hard to maintain is for vital reasons purely
ephemeral: it is a balance which has to be perpetually re-established.’
Furthermore, the sheer inventiveness of all those ‘easier minds likely
to disturb’ that equilibrium produced the ephemeral and fleeting
qualities of aesthetic judgement itself, accelerated changes in
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aesthetic fashions rather than slowed them down: impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism, fauvism, Dada, surrealism, expressionism, etc. The avant-garde,' comments Poglioli in his most lucid study of its history, 'is condemned to conquer, through the influence of fashion, that very popularity it once disdained — and this is the beginning of its end.'

Furthermore, the commodification and commercialization of a market for cultural products during the nineteenth century had the consequent decline of aristocratic, state, or institutional patronage, forced cultural producers into a market form of competition that was bound to reinforce processes of 'creative destruction' within the aesthetic field itself. This mirrored and in some instances surged ahead of anything going on in the political-economic sphere. Each and every artist sought to change the base of aesthetic judgement, if only to sell his or her product. It also depended on the formation of a distinctive class of 'cultural consumers.' Artists, for all their predilection for anti-establishment and anti-bourgeois rhetoric, spent much more energy struggling with each other and against their own traditions in order to sell their products that they did engaging in real political action.

The struggle to produce a work of art, a once and for all creation that could find a unique place in the market, had to be an individual effort forged under competitive circumstances. Modernist art has always been, therefore, what Benjamin calls 'autistic art,' in the sense that the artist had to assume an aura of creativity, of dedication to art for art's sake, in order to produce a cultural object that would be original, unique, and hence permanently marketable at a monopoly price. The result was often a highly individualistic, aristocratic, disdainful (particularly of popular culture), and even arrogant perspective on the part of cultural producers, but it also indicated how profoundly our reality might be constructed and re-constructed through aesthetically informed activity. It could be, at best, profoundly moving, challenging, upsetting, or exhilarating to many who were exposed to it. Recognizing this feature, certain avant-gardes — Dadaists, early surrealists — tried to mobilize their aesthetic capacities to revolutionary ends by fusing their art into popular culture. Others, like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, sought to impose it from above for similar revolutionary purposes. And it was not only Gropius who thought it imperative to 'bring art back to the people through the production of beautiful things.' Modernism internalized its own maelstrom of ambiguities, contradictions, and pulsating aesthetic changes at the same time as it sought to affect the aesthetics of daily life.

The facts of that daily life had, however, more than a passing influence upon the aesthetic sensibility created, no matter how much the critics themselves proclaimed an aura of 'art for art's sake.' To begin with, as Benjamin (1969) points out in his celebrated essay on 'The Work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' the changing technical capacity to reproduce, disseminate, and sell books and images to mass audiences, coupled with the invention of first photography and then film (to which we would now add radio and television), radically changed the material conditions of the artists' existence and, hence, their social and political role. And apart from the general consciousness of flux and change which flowed through all modernist works, a fascination with technique, with speed and variation, with the machine and the factory system, as well as with the stream of new commodities entering into daily life, provoked a wide range of aesthetic responses varying from denial, through imitation to speculation on utopian possibilities. Thus, as Reyner Banham (1984) shows, early modernist architects like Mies van der Rohe drew a lot of their inspiration from the purely functional grain elevators then springing up all over the American Midwest. Le Corbusier in his plans and writings took what he saw as the possibilities inherent in the machine, factory, and automobile age and projected them into some utopian future (Frisch, 1982). Tichi (1987, 19) documents how popular American journals like Good Housekeeping were depicting the house as 'nothing more than a factory for the production of happiness' as early as 1910, years before Le Corbusier ventured his celebrated (and now much reviled) dictum that the house is a 'machine for modern living.'

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that the modernism that emerged before the First World War was more of a reaction to the new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications), and consumption (the rise of mass markets, advertising, mass fashion) than it was a pioneer in the production of such changes. Yet the form the reaction took was to be of considerable subsequent importance. Not only did it provide ways to absorb, reflect upon, and codify these rapid changes, but it also suggested lines of action that might modify or support them. William Morris, for example, reacting against the de-skilling of craft workers through machine and factory production under the command of capitalists, sought to promote a new artisan culture which combined the power of craft tradition with a powerful plea for 'simplicity of design, a cleaning out of all sham, waste and self-indulgence' (Relph, 1987, 99–107). As Relph goes on to point out, the Bauhaus, the highly influential...
German design unit founded in 1919, initially took much of its inspiration from the Arts and Crafts Movement that Morris had founded, and only subsequently (1923) turned to the idea that the machine was our modern medium of design. 1 The Bauhaus was able to exercise the influence it did over production and design precisely through its redefinition of ‘craft’ as the skill to mass-produce goods of an aesthetically pleasing nature with machine efficiency.

These were the sorts of diverse reactions that made of modernism such a complex and often contradictory affair. It was, write Bradbury and McFarlane (1976, 46), an extraordinary compound of the futurist and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was the celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expressions of these things.

Such diverse elements and oppositions were composed into quite different brews of modernist sentiment and sensibility in different places and times:

One can draw maps showing artistic centres and provinces, the international balance of cultural power — never quite the same as, though doubtlessly intricately related to, the balance of political and economic power. The maps change as the aesthetics change: Paris is surely, for Modernism, the outright dominant centre, as the fount of bohemia, tolerance and the émigré life-style, but we can sense the decline of Rome and Florence, the rise and then fall of London, the phase of dominence of Berlin and New York, the energetic bursts from Norway and Finland, the radiation out of Vienna, as being essential stages in the shifting geography of Modernism, charted by the movement of writers and artists, the flow of thought waves, the explosions of significant artistic production.2 (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 107)

This complex historical geography of modernism (a tale yet to be fully written and explained) makes it doubly difficult to interpret exactly what modernism was about. The tensions between internationalism and nationalism, between globalization and parochialism...
form fin de siècle Vienna), Le Corbusier (The city of tomorrow and the Plan Vison proposal for Paris of 1925), Frank Lloyd Wright (the Broadacre project of 1935) to the large-scale urban renewal efforts undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s in the spirit of high modernism. The city, remarks de Certeau (1984, 95) 'is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity. Georg Simmel put a rather special gloss on the connection in his extraordinary essay 'The metropolis and mental life,' published in 1911. Simmel there contemplated how we might respond to and internalize, psychologically and intellectually, the incredible diversity of experiences and stimuli toward which modern urban life exposed us. We were, on the one hand, liberated from the chains of subjective dependence and thereby allowed a much greater degree of individual liberty. But this was achieved at the expense of creating others in objective and instrumental terms. We had no choice except to relate to faceless 'orders' via the cold and heartless calculus of the necessary money exchanges which could co-ordinate a proliferating social division of labour. We also submit to a rigorous disciplining in our sense of space and time, and surrender ourselves to the hegemony of calculating economic rationality. Rapid urbanization, furthermore, produced what he called a 'blasted attitude,' for it was only by screening out the complex stimuli that stemmed from the rush of modern life that we could tolerate its extremes. Our only outlet, he seems to say, is to cultivate a sham individualism through pursuit of signs of status, fashion, or marks of individual eccentricity. Fashion, for example, combines 'the attraction of differentiation and change with that of similarity and conformity'; the 'more nervous an epoch is, the more rapidly will its fashions change, because the need for the attraction of differentiation, one of the essential agents of fashion, goes hand in hand with the flourishing of nervous energies' (quoted in Frith, 1985, 98).

My purpose here is not to judge Simmel's vision (though the parallels and contrasts with Raban's more recent postmodernism essay are most instructive) but to set it at one representation of a connection between the urban experience and modernist thought and practice. The qualities of modernism seem to have varied, albeit in an interactive way, across the spectrum of the large polycentric cities that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, certain kinds of modernism achieved a particular trajectory through the capitals of the world, each flourishing as a cultural arena of a particular sort. The geographical trajectory from Paris to Berlin, Vienna, London, Moscow, Chicago, and New York could be reversed as well as short-cut depending upon which sort of modernist practice one has in mind.
The search for a mythology appropriate to modernity

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universalism, even when at its most 'aesthetic' in conception. Between
the wars, on the other hand, artists were more and more forced by
events to wear their political commitments on their sleeves.

The shift in modernism's tone also stemmed from the need to con-
front head-on the sense of anxiety, disorder, and despair that
Nietzsche had sown by his astonishing agitation, restlessness, and
instability in political-economic life — an instability which the
anarchist movement of the late nineetieth century grappled with
and contributed to in important ways. The articulation of erotic, psycho-
logical, and irrational notions (of the sort that Freud identified and
Klatt represented in his free-flowing art) added another dimension
to the confusion. This particular surge of modernism, therefore, had
to recognize the impossibility of representing the world in a single
language. Understanding had to be constructed through the explora-
tion of multiple perspectives. Modernism, in short, took on multiple
perspectives and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it
still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, under-
lying reality.

Whatever may have constituted this singular underlying reality
and its 'eternal presence' remained obscure. From this standpoint
Lunis, for one, inveighed against the errors of relativism and multiple
perspectivism in his criticism of Mach's 'idealism' physics, and tried
to emphasize the political as well as the intellectual dangers to which
formless relativism surely pointed. There is a sense in which the
outbreak of the First World War, that vast inter-imperialist struggle,
vindicated Lunis's argument. Certainly, a strong case can be made
that 'modernist subjectivity... was simply unable to cope with the
crisis into which Europes in 1914 was plunged' (Taylor, 1987, 127).

The trauma of world war and its political and intellectual responses
(some of which are more directly in Part III) opened the
way to a consideration of what might constitute the essential and
eternal qualities of modernity that lay on the newer side of Basadur's
formulation. In the absence of Enlightenment certitude as to the
perfectibility of man, the search for a myth appropriate to modernity
became paramount. The surrealistic writer Louis Aragon, for example,
launched his central aim in Poems prison (written in the 1920s)
by creating a world that would present itself as mythology,
adding, 'naturally, a mythology of the modern.' But it also seemed
possible to build metaphorical bridges between ancient and modern
myth, Jorge Luis Borges, while Le Corbusier, according to
Frampton (1990), always sought 'to resolve the dichotomy between
the Engineer's Aesthetic and Architectural, to inform utility with the
hierarchy of myth' (a practice he increasingly emphasized in his
creations at Chandigarh and Ronchamp in the 1960s). But who or
what was it that was being mythologized? This was the central
question that characterized the so-called 'heroic' period of modernism.

Modernism in the inter-war years may have been 'heroic' but it
was also brought with disaster. Action was plainly needed to rebuild
the war-torn economies of Europe as well as to solve all the problems
of the political, social, and cultural forces associated with capitalist
forces of burgeoning urban-industrial growth. The fading of unified
Enlightenment beliefs and the emergence of perspectivism left open the
possibility of informing social action with some aesthetic vision, so
that the struggles between the different currents of modernism be-
came more of than just passing interest. What's more, the cultural
productions knew it. Aesthetic modernism was important, and the
stakes were high. The appeal to 'eternal' myth became more more
imperative. But that search turned out to be as confused as it was
dangerous; 'Reason coming to terms with its mythical origins, be-
comes bewilderingly tangled with myth... myth is already en-
lightenment and enlightenment relates into mythology' (Huyssen,
1984).

The myth either had to redeem us from the 'formless universe of
contingency' or, more programatically, to provide the impetus for
a new project for human endeavour. One wing of modernism ap-
pelled to the stage of rationality incorporated in the machine, the
factory, the power of contemporary technology, or the city as a
'living machine.' Ezra Pound had already advanced the thesis that
language should conform to machine efficiency and, as Tshikh (1987)
has observed, modernist writers as diverse as Dos Passos, Hemingway,
and William Carlos Williams modelled their writing on exactly that
proposition. Williams specifically held, for example, that a poem is
nothing more or less than 'a machine made of words.' And this was
the theme that Diego Rivera celebrated so vigorously in his extra-
ordinary Detroit murals and which became the leitmotif of many
progressive mural painters in the United States during the depression
(plate 1.5).

'Truth is the significance of fact,' said Mies van der Rohe, and
a host of cultural producers, particularly those working in and around
the influential Bauhaus movement of the 1920s, set out to impose
the rational order (rationalized by technological efficiency and
machine production) for socially useful goals (human emancipation,
emancipation of the proletariat, and the like). By order bring about
freedom,' was one of Le Corbusier's slogans, and he emphasized that
freedom and liberty in the contemporary metropolis depended cru-
ially upon the imposition of rational order. Modernism in the inter-
"William's" a machine made

WILLIAM'S A MACHINE MADE
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Plate 1.5 The myth of the machine-dominated modernist as well as realist art is the inter-war years: Thomas Hart Benton's 1929 mural 'Instrument of Power' is a typical example.

War period took a strong positivist turn and, through the intensive efforts of the Vienna Circle, established a new style of philosophy which was to become central to social thought after World War II. Logical positivism was as compatible with the practices of modernist architecture as it was with the advance of all forms of science as avatars of technical control. This was the period when houses and cities could be openly conceived of as 'machines for living in'. It was during these years also that the powerful Congress of International Modern Architects (CIAM) came together to adopt its celebrated Athens Charter of 1933, a charter that for the next thirty years or so was to define broadly what modernist architectural practice was to be about.

Such a limited vision of the essential qualities of modernism was open to easy enough perversion and abuse. There are strong objections even within modernism (think of Chaplin's Modern Times) to the idea that the machine, the factory, and even the rationalized city provide a sufficiently rich conception to define the eternal qualities of modern life. The problem for 'heroic' modernism was, quite simply, that once the machine myth was abandoned, any myth could be lodged into that central position of the 'eternal truth' presupposed in the modernist project. Baudelaire himself, for example, had dedicated his essay 'The Salon of 1846' to the bourgeoisie who sought to 'realize the
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mounted against a socialist city). But the configurations were unstable.
No sooner had doctrines of socialist realism been enunciated as a
rejoinder to 'decadent' bourgeois modernism and fascist nationalism,
than popular front politics on the part of many communist parties
led to a swing back to nationalist art and culture as a means to unite
proletarian with waverling middle-class forces in the unified front
against fascism.

Many artists of the avant-garde tried to resist such direct social
referencing and cast their net far and wide for more universal mytho-
logical statements. T. S. Eliot created a virtual melting pot of
imagery and languages drawn from every corner of the earth in The
Waste Land, and Picasso (amongst others) plundered the world of
primitive (particularly African) art during some of his more creative
phases. During the inter-war years there was something desperate
about the search for a mythology that could somehow straighten
society out in such troubled times. Raphael (1981, xii) captures the
dilemmas in his trenchant but sympathetic critique of Picasso's
Guernica.

The reasons for which Picasso was compelled to resort to signs
and allegories should now be clear enough: his utter political
helplessness in the face of a historical situation which he set out
to record; his instinctive effort to confront a particular historical
event with an allegedly eternal truth; his desire to give hope and
comfort and to provide a happy ending, to compensate for the
terror, the destruction, and inhumanity of the event. Picasso
did not see what Goya had already seen, namely, that the course
of history can be changed only by historical means and only if
men shape their own history instead of acting as the automata
of an earthly power or an allegedly eternal idea.

Unfortunately, as Georges Sorel (1974) suggested in his brilliant
Reflections on Violence, first published in 1908, it was possible to
invent myths that might have a consuming power over class politics.
Syndicalism of the sort that Sorel promotorized originated as a parti-
cipatory movement of the left, deeply antagonistic to all forms of
state power, but evolved into a corporatist movement (attractive
to someone like Le Corbusier in the 1930s) that became a powerful
organizing tool of the fascist right. In so doing it was able to appeal
to certain myths of a hierarchically ordered but nevertheless parti-
cipatory and exclusive community, with clear identity and close
social bonding, replete with its own myths of origin and omnipotence.
It is instructive to note how heavily fascim dreamt upon classical
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retrospect to argue that the architecture that resulted merely produced impecable images of power and prestige for publicity-conscious corporations and governments, while producing modernist housing projects that became ‘symbols of alienation and dehumanization’ on the other (Huysmans, 1984, 14; Frampton, 1982). But it is also arguable that some kind of large-scale planning and industrialization of the construction industry, coupled with the exploration of techniques for high-speed transportation and high-density development, were necessary if capitalistic solutions were to be found to the dilemmas of postwar development and political-economic stabilization. Many of these respects high modernism succeeded only too well.

Its real nether side lay, I would suggest, in its subterranean celebration of corporate bureaucratic power and rationality, under the guise of a return to the discipline of the efficient machine as a sufficient myth to embody all human aspirations. In architecture and planning, this meant the eschewing of ornament and personalized design (to the point where public housing tenants were not allowed to modify their environments to meet personal needs, and the students living in Le Corbusier’s Pavillon Suisse had to fry every summer because the architect refused, for aesthetic reasons, to let blinds be installed). It also meant a prevailing passion for massive spaces and perspectives, for uniformity and the power of the straight line (always superior to the curve, pronounced Le Corbusier). Giedion’s Space, time and architecture, first published in 1941, became the aesthetic bible of this movement. The great modernist literature of Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Faulkner — once judged as subversive, irreverent, unorthodox, shocking — was taken over and canonized by the establishment (in universities and the major literary reviews).

Guilbaut’s (1983) account of How New York stole the idea of modern art is instructive here, not least because of the multiple ironies the story reveals. The trauma of World War II and the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were, like the traumas of World War I, hard to absorb and represent in any realist way, and the turn to abstract expressionism on the part of painters like Rothko, Gottlieb, and Jackson Pollock consciously reflected that need. But their works became central for quite other reasons. To begin with, the fight against fascism was depicted as a fight to defend Western culture and civilization from barbarism. Explicitly rejected by fascists, international modernism became, in the United States, ‘confounded with culture more broadly and abstractly defined.’ The trouble was that international modernism had exhibited strong socialist, even communist, tendencies in the 1930s (through surrealism, constructivism, and socialist realism). The de-politicization of modernism that occurred with the rise of abstract expressionism ironically pre- saged its embrace by the political and cultural establishment as an ideological weapon in the cold war struggle. The art was full enough of alienation and anxiety, and expressive enough of violent fragmenta tion and creative destruction (all of which were surely appropriate to the nuclear age) to be used as a marvellous exemplar of US com- plexion to liberty of expression, rugged individualism and creative freedom. No matter that McCarthyite repression was dominant, the challenging canvases of Jackson Pollock proved that the United States was a bastion of liberal ideals in a world threatened by com- munist totalitarianism. Within this thre there existed another even more devious turn. ‘Now that America is recognized as the center where art and artists of all the world must meet,’ wrote Gottlieb and Rothko in 1943, ‘it is time for us to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.’ In so doing they sought a myth that was ‘tragic and timeless.’ What that appeal to myth in practice allowed was a quick passage from ‘nationalism to internationalism and then from inter- nationalism to universalism’ (cited in Guilbaut, 1983 p. 174). But in order to be distinguishable from the modernism extant elsewhere (chiefly Paris), a ‘vable new aesthetic’ had to be forged out of distinctively American raw materials. What was distinctively American had to be celebrated as the essence of Western culture. And so it was with abstract expressionism, along with liberalism, Coca-Cola and Chevrolets, and suburban houses full of consumer durables. Avant- garde artists, concludes Guilbaut (p. 200), ‘now politically “neutral” individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology.’

I think it very important, as Jameson (1984a) and Huysmans (1984) insist, to recognize the significance of this absorption of a particular kind of modernist aesthetic into official and establishment ideology, and its use in relation to corporate power and cultural imperialism. It meant that, for the first time in the history of modernism, artistic and cultural, as well as ‘progressive’ political revolt had to be directed at a powerful version of modernism itself. Modernism lost its appeal as a revolutionary antecedents to some reactionary and ‘traditionalist’ ideology. Establishment art and high culture became such an exclusive preserve of a dominant elite that experimentation within its frame (with, for example, new forms of perspectivism) became increasingly difficult, except in relatively new aesthetic fields such as film (where modernist works like Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane became classics). Worse still, it seemed that establishment art and high culture could
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do nothing more than monumentalize corporate and state power or the 'American dream' as self-referential myths, projecting a certain emptiness of sensibility on that side of Baudrillard's formulation that dwelt upon human aspirations and eternal truths.

It was in this context that the various counter-cultural and anti-modernist movements of the 1960s sprang to life. Antagonistic to the oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical—bureaucratic rationality as perverted through monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalized power (including that of bureaucracticized political parties and trade unions), the counter-cultures explored the realms of individualized self-realization through a distinctive 'new left' politics, through the embrace of anti-authoritarian gestures, iconoclastic habits (in music, dress, language, and lifestyle), and the critique of everyday life. Centred in the universities, art institutes, and in the cultural fringes of big-city life, the movement spilled over into the streets to culminate in a vast wave of rebelliousness that crested in Chicago, Paris, Prague, Mexico City, Madrid, Tokyo, and Berlin in the global turbulence of 1968. It was almost as if the universal pretensions of modernity had, when combined with liberal capitalism and imperialism, succeeded so well as to provide a material and political foundation for a cosmopolitan, transnational, and hence global movement of resistance to the hegemony of high modernist culture. Though a failure, at least judged in its own terms, the movement of 1968 has to be viewed, however, as the cultural and political harbinger of the subsequent turn to postmodernity. Somewhere between 1968 and 1972, therefore, we see postmodernity emerge as a full-blown though still incoherent movement out of the chrysalis of the anti-modern movement of the 1960s.

Postmodernity

Over the last two decades 'postmodernism' has become a concept to be wrestled with, and such a battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces that it can no longer be ignored. 'The culture of the advanced capitalist societies,' announce the editors of PRECIS 6 (1987), 'has undergone a profound shift in the structure of feeling.' Most, I think, would now agree with Huysmans's (1964) more cautious statement:

What appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'post-modern' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is. I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social, and economic orders; any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period.

With respect to architecture, for example, Charles Jencks dates the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern at 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's 'machine for modern living') was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed. Thereafter, the ideas of the CIAM, Le Corbusier, and the other apostles of 'high modernism' increasingly gave way before an onslaught of diverse possibilities, of