What Was Modernism?

Lecture 3: Modernism and the Sister Arts

1) Painting and Perspective: The Move towards Non-Representational Art

2) Music and Modernism: The Transformations of Harmony

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1) Painting and Perspective: The Move towards Non-Representational Art

- the career of 'perspective' as concept and metaphor is deeply entwined with the emergence of modern society and culture (cf. Guillén 1971)

- medieval optics: the ideal of seeing things ontologically correct (framed by ideas of higher or divine truth captured in light and by the applied mathematics of Euclidian geometry as a means of 'objectification')

- Renaissance/Early Modern Period: the invention/discovery of 'linear' or 'central' perspective marks a change in the ideological fabric of how to perceive reality
  ("a singular moment when the fine arts made an actual contribution to the history of science" Wood 1998, 479)

- crucial ambiguity:
  while technically and mathematically, perspective is merely a matter of the position of the beholder in relation to the object, Renaissance theories and applications of perspective mark the appearance of the function of the beholder on the agenda of epistemological speculation in the post-Renaissance West
  → it is the relationship between the objectivistic appeal of the original concept and the intermittent emergence of a subjectivistic orientation which characterizes the career of the term 'perspective' in various disciplines from the 16th to the 20th century

- broad development:
  ontological notions of perspective
  ↓
  epistemological notions of perspective
  ↓
  subjectivist/relativist notions of perspective

- three dimensions:
  1) ontological/objective dimension
  2) epistemological/objective ⇢subjective dimension
  3) reflexive dimension:
     the notion of the painting as a transcription of an imaginary 'picture plane', which implies not only subjective mediation but also the external conditions of this mediation, both in terms of the medium employed and in terms of cultural contexts
     → most recent positions on questions of perspective tend to view it neither in objectivistic not in subjectivistic absolutes but rather as a culturally framed and thus conventional phenomenon

Summary:

Reluctantly abandoning traditional notions of transcendent metaphysical and ontological truth, the emerging culture of modernity had to reinvent 'objectivity' immanently, as it were, and to negotiate its uneasy relationship with the increasing prominence of subjectivity. The conflicting implications of the emerging epistemological paradigms of empiricism and idealism, with rationalism uneasily covering a middle ground, came to a head in the 19th century and lead to a radical re-orientation, turning towards the linguistic, textual, and cultural conditions of knowledge production in the course of the 20th century.

(cf. Reinfandt 2000)

[Franz Marc, *Die kleinen blauen Pferde* (1911) (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart)]

The move away from the illusion of reference/*re*presentation is the key note of modern(ist) painting at the beginning of the 20th century:

- emphasis on mediality ("Man bedenke, daß ein Bild – bevor es ein Schlachtroß, eine nackte Frau ode irgendeine Anekdote ist – wesentlich ein plane, von Farben in einer bestimmten Anordnung bedeckte Oberfläche ist" Maurice Denis 1890)

- liberation of colour and form from the restraints of representation (semiotic function shifts from icon to symbol, meaning emerges not from the illusion of reference but from internal relations)

- the emancipation of artistic devices in search of the 'deeper' meaning 'behind' or 'beneath' surface appearances

- abstraction, non-representational art which emancipates pictures from reality: not what they are pictures 'of', but the sensory stimulation through colour and form is the most important thing about pictures
  → the three dimensions of central perspective are replaced by the two dimensions of the picture plane
  → content is replaced by a demonstration of problems of representation

**[Impressionism:
Pierre-August Renoir, *Die Loge* (1874) (London, Courtauld Institute Galleries)]**

**[Expressionism:
Max Beckmann, *Die Loge* (1928) (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart)]**

**[Fauvism:
Henri Matisse, *Bei der Toilette* (1907) (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart)]**

[Cubism/Futurism:
Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase* **(1911/12) (Philadelphia**
Museum of Art)]

[Wassily Kandinsky, *Im Blau* **(1925) (Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-**
Westfalen)]

John Gohorry, 'After Kandinsky' (*TLS***, Nov 10, 2006, p. 5)**

A steel blade of light
lifts us across the river.
The air is vortex

- it draws us inward
to the high-energy hub
where fugue is colour.

Roofs, domes and churches
improvise an embankment,
an arch of windows,

a curve of houses
in a mauve-and-orange street
where a lone figure

in a red robe sits
and imagines the future.
What should it be like?

It sounds like music,
the notes of a string quartet
on a town pavement.

Why?

1) The Impact of External Factors?
   (the invention of photography, the development of modern physics etc.)
   Problems:
   reductive assumptions of monocausality, contradictory developments of culture at large

2) Internal Histories of Art?
   (the modern principles of originality/innovation/defamiliarisation
   ➢ **the evolution of artistic/aesthetic 'material' in its specific medial and cultural contexts)**

2) Music and Modernism: The Transformations of Harmony

- *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (Neubauer 1986) as a starting point: rejection of mimesis, dissolution of pre-18th-century unity of *logos*, harmony and rhythm

- music becomes a 'true universal language' with expressive powers beyond the possibilities of verbal signification

- music has an 'absolute' quality (Dahlhaus), it "unlocks an unknown realm to man; another world which has nothing to do with the world of exterior perception surrounding him, and in which he leaves all emotions that can be verbally classified behind in order to devote himself to the unspeakable" (E.T.A. Hoffmann's famous review of Beethoven's 5th symphony, 1810)
   → while art and literature have to get rid of the restraints of representation at the end of the 19th century, music is already available as a non-representational medium of artistic practice

- the development of music in at the turn from the 19th into the 20th century suggests that the 'interior histories of art'- hypothesis has greater plausibility:

> Running through all the movements [of the post-Romantic period] is the steady trend toward the dissolution of Classical tonality, a trend already perceptible in Schubert and Chopin, continued in Liszt and Wagner, accentuated with the harmonic experiments of Mussorgsky, Mahler, Strauss, Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel, and climaxed to some extent in the prewar works of Scriabin, Ives, Schoenberg, Bartók, and Stravinsky. Chromaticism, complex and unorthodox chords, national folk-song, exotism, modality, the use of the pentatonic, whole-tone, or other non-Classical scales, chord-streams, polytonality all had a part. To a large extent the task of composers in the first half of the twentieth century was to work out new concepts of, or find an adequate substitute for, tonality and to reconcile with new harmonic idioms the other musical elements of instrumentation, counterpoint, rhythm, and form.

> Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music* (1960)

Example 1: Classical harmonic tonality

W.A. Mozart, Piano Concerto No 23, K. 488, A minor, 2nd movement, Adagio (1786)

- *melodic line* is clearly recognizable and repeated with variations; when it ends, there is a sense of closure facilitated by a return to a privileged tone, the tonic.
- *harmonic progression* is grouped around the tonic, i.e. the 'key' of the piece; harmonic fields in major and minor chords move away from the tonic (towards parallel, sub-dominant and dominant chords) and back towards a final 'resolution': accordingly, there is a sense of 'syntax' in which the chord progressions move.
- there is overall *consonance*, i.e. chords only include their regular constituent notes.

Example 2: Romantic explorations

Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-61), 3rd Act: "Einsam wachend"

- *melodic line* is not clearly recognizable any more: beginning and ending are not clearly marked ('Endlosmelodie'), there is a sense of aimless movement without repetition/variation; resolution is deferred, less obvious
- *harmonic progression* is only tenuously connected to tonic centre; instead, it moves chromatically between various tonic centres ('wandering tonality'): although there is a constant sense of tonic centre, the centre constantly shifts and some chords are left unresolved, i.e. cadence/closure is deferred/less obvious, the 'gravitational pull' and sense of order is destabilized
- *tonality* is extended to include 'wrong notes', i.e. notes from different scales; there is an effect of openness, though not quite dissonance

Example 3: Modernism I (Tonal Impressionism)

Rakhmaninow, *10 Preludes* (1903)

- *melodic line* is replaced by impressionistic waves and pulses
- *harmonic progression* becomes ever more unstable, but sense of tonal 'gravitational pull' remains
- *tonality* is extended to include 'jazzy' notes which render chords slightly dissonant

Example 4: Modernism II (Atonality, programmatic impressionism)

Arnold Schönberg, *5 Orchestral Pieces* (1909):
3. Summer Morning by a Lake

- *melodic line* has almost completely disappeared; sense of melody is achieved by changes of timbre, generating a 'sound-colour melody' ('Klangfarbenmelodie')
- *harmonic fields* lack tonal centre, it is not possible to identify a governing 'key'
- *tonality* of chords is only slightly dissonant: the sense of openness results from lack of tonal centre rather than the clustering of 'wrong' notes. The music is still intelligible to 'tonal ears'

Example 5: Modernism III (Atonality)

Arnold Schönberg, *Three Piano Pieces* **(1909)**

- *melodic line* is replaced by waves and pulses
- *harmonic fields* lack tonal centre, chords are dissonant and eschew resolution
- *tonality* jars for 'tonal ears'

➢ the 'meaningful system' resides 'behind' the music in the principles of composition (serial use of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale)
➢ music is no longer based on the organisation of acoustic phenomena but rather on writing

'chromatic engeneering'   vs.   music for pleasure?
(cf. Walker 2000)

Bach's 'Wohltemperiertes Klavier'		pentatonic/ hexachordal
↓		modes based
chromaticism		on universal laws
↓		of acoustics
atonality		combining natural
(the serial technique, the		phenomena with
dodecaphonic system of		the natural inclinations
composition)		of the ear
↓		↓
evolution based on	vs.	evolution based on
writing		sound

► defamiliarisation leads to alienation?
► modernism as an an art form alienated from anthropological *and* specifically Western modes of cultural practice???
► the specialisation/autonomisation of the arts

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