

What Was Modernism?

Lecture 2: The Cultural Contexts of Modernism

1) The Self and the Senses

2) Science and Technology

3) Politics of Reform

4) Mass Culture and the Market

1) The Self and the Senses

- notions of dynamic temporality become central to the experience and understanding of modernity: 'too much', trauma/memory, rupture, fragmentation
- Henri Bergson (French philosopher, 1859-1941):
 - Memory and Matter* (1896, trans. 1911)
 - Creative Evolution* (1907, trans. 1911)
 - Time and Free Will* (trans. 1919)
 - Nobel Prize for Literature 1927
 - > sought to bridge the gap between metaphysics and science
 - > rejected notions of eternity (= absolute time of philosophy) and moment (= scientific abstraction) in favour of an understanding of time as a rolling accumulation of traces previous time, taken up into the body and bound up with intentions directed at the future
 - > psychologization, interiorization, subject[ificat]ion
- literature as a prominent medium for reflecting upon new experiences of temporality (cf. Kohl 1998)
- WW I produces a disrupted temporality in which the dynamic relation between past, present and future intrinsic to modernity is forced to co-exist with elements of 'frozen' time: a lost past, a traumatic present, a blighted future (cf. Broich 1998):
 - > modern art has to be reconfigured to accommodate mourning, hysteria, paralysis, delirium but it can also be argued that
 - > WWI brings long-term developments to a head (cf. Faas 1988, Sass 1994)

Reconceiving the Senses and the Self:

- 19th century developments in psychology, psychophysics, and technology (telegraph, telephone, phonography, photography, cinema) lead to a heightened sensitivity for sensation
 - > particularization replaces the traditional focus on universality/representation with abstraction/perspectivism
 - > perception is active, individual and contingent
- distraction threatens attention and awareness

→ How can the self be reconfigured against this background?

→ experimental techniques (automatic writing, stream of consciousness)

vs.

compensatory conventions aimed at fixing the flux (e.g., the representation of subjectivity in flux is counterbalanced by an insistence on the objectivity of media representation and/or the 'objectness' of works of art)

→ an acknowledgement of opacity replaces older assumptions of transparency

Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" (1919)

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the [realistic] story is not only labour thrown away but labour misplaced [...] The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability [...] But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions [...] From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old. [...] We are not merely pleading for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

[...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

2) Science and Technology

Science:

- realism/naturalism ↔ scientific objectivism
(including the human sciences sociology, psychology, criminology)
- increase in specialisation at the end of the 19th century:
natural sciences vs. social sciences/humanities
- the emergence of modern physics challenged materialist thinking in which the universe is seen in terms of the mechanical action of solid bodies
 - > the universe emerges as a flux of force-fields and particles in motion instead
 - > declining need for a material substratum
 - > multiple frames of reference become possible:
mechanical, relativistic, perspectival and paradoxical models coexist
 - > epistemological uncertainty

Literature in the new scientific culture:

a) texts which register shock,

e.g. Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1900):

"In these seven years man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world in which he could measure nothing except the chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale. [The physicists] seemed prepared for anything, even for an indeterminable number of universes interfused – physics stark mad in metaphysics."

b) texts which incorporate the new science into their depiction of the world,

e.g. D.H. Lawrence's novels as described by him in a letter to E. Garnett (1914):

"I don't care about physiology of matter – but somehow – that which is physic – non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element – which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent [...]"

You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character. There is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotrophic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond – but I say, 'Diamond, what! This is carbon.')

c) texts which deploy science at the level of poetics,

e.g., most famously, James Joyce, who is described by the experimental writer B.S. Johnson as follows:

“Joyce is the Einstein of the novel. His subject-matter in *Ulysses* was available to anyone, the events of one day in one place; but by means of form, style and technique in language, he made it into something very much more, a novel, not a story about anything. What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen for the reader. And for style alone *Ulysses* would have been a revolution. Or, rather, styles. For Joyce saw that such a huge range of subject-matter could not be conveyed in one style, and accordingly used many. Just in this one innovation (and there are many others) lie [sic] a great advance and freedom offered to subsequent generations of writers.”

(Introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* 1973)

Technology:

The equation between technology and modernity is, by the end of the nineteenth century, established as a truism which operates in a number of distinct areas: in the linking of technology, progress and evolutionary thinking; in the discourse of efficiency; in forms of prosthetic thinking which imagines the extension of human capacities; and in the reconfiguration of time and space by technology. At the same time, technology is also posited as a set of problems relating to its demands and structural implications. At the bodily level technology is seen as overload or as dwarfing the human [...] At the level of production technology it is seen as standardizing the commodity and displacing or regulating the human maker. And at the level of social metaphor technology functions as an image of alienation, instrumentalization, and estrangement from the natural order.

(Armstrong 2005, 129)

New Media (cf. Bode/Behrens 1998):

a) Radio

1922	Founding of the <i>British Broadcasting Company</i> 36 000 receivers
1927	> <i>British Broadcasting Corporation</i> 2 000 000 receivers
1939	8 000 000 receivers (reach: 34 of 40 million!)

- ▶ mass medium for entertainment *and* education, which is from its beginnings identified as an agent of alienation:

“He was queer. He preferred the radio [...] he would sit alone for hours listening to the loudspeakers bellowing forth [...] But there he would sit, with a blank expression on his face, like a person losing his mind, and listen, or seem to listen, to the unspeakable thing.”

D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928)

b) Film

pre-1910	fun-fair attraction
1914	300 cinemas
1939	5000 cinemas

- ▶ mass medium of entertainment with openings for propaganda in times of war and artistic aspirations, a medium which is, however, not quite in tune with the epistemological complexities of its day:

“Little obviousnesses fill [...] quite half of the great majority of contemporary novels, stories, and films. The great public derives an extraordinary pleasure from the mere recognition of familiar objects and circumstances [...] Recognizableness is an artistic quality which most people find profoundly thrilling.”

Aldous Huxley, “Art and the Obvious” (1931)

‘Modernist’ film classics

(marked by montage, changes of perspective, subtle uses of light and shadows, defamiliarisation etc.)

Lang, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1919), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), *Der müde Tod* (1921), *Metropolis* (1927)

Murnau, *Nosferatu* (1922)

Eisenstein, *Panzerkreuzer Potemkin* (1925)

Bunuel/Dali, *Un chien andalou* (1929)

3) Politics of Reform

- modernism as a critique of the world of instrumental reason
vs.
parallels between modernism and other reform movements
(cf. von Rosenberg 1998, Kilian 1998)
- modernism ↔ mesmerism, sexology, psychoanalysis,
Darwinism/eugenics,
anarchism, fascism etc.
- old order vs. new order: the perceived dangers of democracy
- the city between nightmare and emancipation

4) Mass Culture and the Market

- 'mobocracy': modernism between rejection and appropriation of mass culture
→ the emerging prominence of the short story as a form which is publishable
in magazines
→ cinematic references in *Ulysses*
→ references to jazz and the music hall in *The Waste Land*
- modernism's complex sense of market relations:
→ attempting to create a new niche market for 'advanced' literature, structured
by scarcity rather than abundance, and by patronage rather than direct
commercial relations (cf. Rainey 1998): the 'autonomy' of the modernist
text as the product of surplus value (cf. Cooper 2004, Karl 2009)
→ fascination with the techniques of advertising, even in its attempt at creating
a 'counter-public sphere' (cf. Morrison 2001)
- the professionalization of literature and literary activity (cf. Outka 2009)

Reading:

- reading as a 'pure activity' within a market culture?
- the necessity of academic training?
- prefaces as vehicles for aesthetic theory
vs.
texts as allegories of unreadability (opening a space for hoaxes)

Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry'

The poem in the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage,
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat
Exactly what it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must
Be the finding of satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

Ern Malley, 'Petit testament'

There is a moment when the pelvis
Explodes like a grenade. I
Who have lived in the shadow that each act
Casts on the next act now emerge
As loyal as the thistle that in session
Puffs its full seed upon the indicative air.
I have split the infinitive. Beyond is anything.

Reed, Henry. "Chard Whitlow (Mr. Eliot's Sunday Evening Postscript)." *New Statesman and Nation* 21, no. 533 (10 May 1941): 494.

CHARD WHITLOW

(Mr. Eliot's Sunday Evening Postscript)

As we get older we do not get any younger.
Seasons return, and today I am fifty-five,
And this time last year I was fifty-four,
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.
And I cannot say I should like (to speak for myself)
To see my time over again— if you can call it time:
Fidgeting uneasily under a draughty stair,
Or counting sleepless nights in the crowded Tube.

There are certain precautions— though none of them very reliable—
Against the blast from bombs and the flying splinter,
But not against the blast from heaven, *vento dei venti*,
The wind within a wind unable to speak for wind;
And the frigid burnings of purgatory will not be touched
By any emollient.

I think you will find this put,
Better than I could ever hope to express it,
In the words of Kharma: "It is, we believe,
Idle to hope that the simple stirrup-pump
Will extinguish hell."

Oh, listeners,
And you especially who have turned off the wireless,
And sit in Stoke or Basingstoke listening appreciatively to the silence,
(Which is also the silence of hell) pray not for your selves but your souls.
And pray for me also under the draughty stair.
As we get older we do not get any younger.

And pray for Kharma under the holy mountain.

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