ART AND MODERNISM

Narcisa TIRBAN

Universitatea de Vest “Vasile Goldiș” Arad, Romania
Facultatea de Inginerie, Str. Tudor Vladimirescu, nr. 25 – 27 Cod 310010, tel/fax 0257 – 251 566
E-mail : narcisa_tirban@yahoo.com

Abstract

The first quarter of the 20th century was one of the most productive periods in human history, as developments in most areas of human endeavour were accelerated and old ways of representing reality were being challenged. Therefore, our modern life – an experience of extremes – is known as vulnerable, dangerous, and coming out of a world that has grown larger, and which has changed. And when people lost hope and values were decaying, an epoch with shades of gray, very pessimistic and uncertain, overwhelmed almost everybody.

Regarded as an attitude of the mind, implying the break with the past, with tradition, with convention, Modernism came as a response to the converging processes of modernization having the epicentre located in the decades preceding and following the Great War. It emerged simultaneously as avant-garde in all major arts at the beginning of the 20th century, being a search to explain mankind’s place in the modern world where religion, social stability and ethics are called into question. It was active in all forms of art and literature, being pan-European, extending to America, coming with startling innovation, disruptive of taste, shocking, disorienting, meaning rebellion, deconstruction, relativism, collage, dehumanization, the cult of the abstract.

Modernist art has been influenced by literature, by writers who held the key to a new intellectualized art (Appollinaire, Mallarmé) and Modernist
painters felt a great affinity with literature in general, their works containing nothing real but completely imaginary combinations, as they work out their fantasies and obsessions by creating abstract or dehumanized and intellectual symbols which were to be manipulated verbally and visually.

**Cuvinte cheie:** modernism, arta abstracta, cubism, miscarea cubista, avangarda, expresionismul abstract

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As an art historical term, *modern* refers to a period dating from roughly the 1860s through the 1970s and is used to describe the style and the ideology of art produced during that era. It is this more specific use of modern that is intended when people speak of modern art. The term *modernism* is also used to refer to the art of the modern period. More specifically, *modernism* can be thought of as referring to the philosophy of modern art.

The 20th-century has focused its artistic attention on progressive modernism, to the extent that conservative modernism has been neglected and, indeed, derided as an art form. The so-called academic painters of the 19th century believed themselves to be doing their part to improve the world in presenting images that contain or reflect good conservative moral values, examples of virtuous behaviour, of inspiring Christian sentiment, and of the sort of righteous conduct and noble sacrifice that would serve as an appropriate model toward which we should all aspire to emulate. The new world order reflected in academic modernism was seen by the progressives as merely supportive of the status quo and offered a future that was little more than a perpetuation of the present.

Art in the latter half of the 20th century has deliberately placed itself beyond the limits of control. Today, art historians and critics -- we might call them the art police -- throw up their hands in dismay in the face of contemporary art. They have reached their limit - they can no longer absorb contemporary art into the system, patterns of order can no longer be applied. The critical apparatus of control has broken down; traditional art theory and traditional art history have failed along with modernism.
Whenever we come to Early Modernist Art I agree that it responds to the tensions and contradictions brought about by larger cultural forces – such as the city, the growth in the media, the repressions of the family life.

I also consider the Modernist art the site of a struggle in matching technique to idea, which can include the relationship of the work to political and religious ideologies. It is the artist – as innovator – who responds to basic and recurrent problems of a philosophical character: biographical past, the ways in which works of art may be related to general concepts of language, logical versus irrational processes, emotions which work at a subconscious level.

For A. Alvarez, the well known critic, despair and suicide were the natural destinies of any modern artists. In the face of a world bereft of meaning, the artist was obliged to tunnel into himself and confront the worst. Art constituted a living out of this process and the supreme virtues of the artist were courage and clear-eyed sincerity.

All major artists had critical beliefs about the values dominant in their society. So, I may speak about classicizing Modernists (E. Pound, T.S. Eliot, V. Woolf, J. Joyce), preoccupied by the threat of social decline, the upholders of “good” past tradition and an iconoclastic avant-garde of the Dadaists, Surrealists who looked to the release of repression in art as encouraging a utopian social progress which would reject or suppress past traditions. There is a clear distinction between the evolution of Modernism with artists like: Matisse, Kandinsky, Pound, Eliot, who were “tradition haunted”, and the Futurists and Dadaists who attempted to destroy the past and lead to a very different kind of political liberation that was often Fascist (with Futurism) or Socialist anarchist (with Dadaism). This movement of liberalizing ideas becomes essential of the turn towards what we call it also lead to the differences between male and female experience of the world.

Early Modernism also led to an experimental search for new kinds of realism, regarding the subjective realm. The aim was not to get reliable descriptions of external reality, but to produce forms of art which could modify them so as to cause psychological responses in order to reveal the new ideas of the nature and value of subjective experience as we find in H. Bergson and in S. Freud.

Early Modernists innovators were those who met the challenge of the withdrawal from the assumptions of a previous generation in two ways: first,
they developed Symbolist notions of stylistic autonomy; then, they relied on the idea that creativity had to be subjective, intuitive and expressionist in character.

Nietzsche’s influence then becomes obvious: his thoughts about nihilism, after the Death of God, the Will to Power, the multiplicity of the self, art as the last form of metaphysics. The metaphysical tendency towards subjective self reliance and the anxiety about it, is reinforced by the work of H. Bergson, leading to a growing interest in divisions within the personality of which the psychology of S. Freud came as the most influential symptom.

What Freud shares with Modernism is the belief that the culture around us needs to confront mythical and patriarchal orders from the past. The Modernists faced along with Freud the suggestion that personal causes may undermine universalizing pretensions. The belief that the acts of individuals such as Kurtz (Conrad), Achenbach (Th. Mann), Dedalus (Joyce), Prufrock (T. S. Eliot) may stem from infantile, sadistic, obsessional dispositions carries the implication that such labels will have different resonances for each individual.

S. Freud is of his time in helping to break down an attachment to the notion that we have a central rational self. Being reasonable becomes as stoic struggle – a kind of scepticism. And along with a rational scepticism, there went a speculative desire to know more about the nature of the unconscious and the instinctive.

It is the idea of psychological division that underpins the technique of allusion. Destroying univocity makes the very medium of literature and painting equivocal, because the “mélange” of styles, which comes out, reflects the dominance of historical relativism and doubts about a universally acceptable “message” for the work.

It is psychoanalysis that speculates on the language; the subconscious may be thought to “speak” independently of the reason and Freud has to present it as a narrative, which only becomes one the patient or artist has once spoken.

And so, the Modernists tended towards a far more dialogic conception of internal division, one in which the individual’s self expression is in tension with the language of the others. The Modernists’ work is testing our conception of the very nature of the self and that’s why we must have in mind its expressionist nature. Frustration, anxiety, disgust, discontent, violence, some frenetic intensity of feelings in response to what they see – this is what the Expressionists Depict, being concerned with general truths not with particular
situations, with mental states of individuals, with the duality of human nature and capacity for monstrous personal evil, in pessimistic vision of social collapse.

The qualities of Expressionism of being highly subjective, personal, spontaneous are typical of a wide range of modern artists and art movements, in times of social change or spiritual crisis. Expressionism remains committed to an exploration of essence, getting beyond the veil of matter.

The painters explored the aggressive effects of colour and a kind of savage simplicity of form derived from Gaugin and Van Gogh; then there was a powerful affinity with primitive art, with a strong emphasis on self expression through a vigorous use of line and an emotional association of the sensual and spiritual.

Like the Cubists, The Expressionists were interested in finding unfamiliar images of the world calculated modes of distortion, the emphasis being on the intensity of perception secured by infusing the world with violent emotions. Colour becomes a measure of spiritual intensity and it had so little to do with actual objects.

Then, there has been suggested that Otto Weininger’s “Sex and Character” could be read as an early Expressionism manifesto. Woman, is not capable of conceptual thought or self knowledge and she lives a discontinuous life, and represents negation; in her mind the subjective and objective are not separated; Weininger’s negative view of sexuality has been assimilated by Expressionists such as Oskar Kokoshka or Egon Schiele.

Modernist art in its period is metamorphic or transforming. The innovatory work can exert a retrospective influence. It can recast our understanding of the past so that we find it as anticipating innovation (when we see the geometry of late Cezanne in the light of Cubism). It is a dialectical interaction between the individual artist tradition which takes place within a philosophical matrix of ideas.

As far as we are concerned, modernist artistic achievements in England prior to 1914 were seen as less impressive than in other countries. There was a style of abstraction in painting which was soon abandoned under the pressures of the W.W.I.

But thanks to David Bomberg & W. Lewis, English painting could claim a distinctive form of abstraction. Painting was praised for making no
concessions to "general emotions" and we are confined but it "to the appearance of form tout purr".

A great deal of abstraction, from W. Kandinsky to Barnett Newman was supposed to have an air of purity & philosophical profundity.

First at all W. Kandinsky looked for a solution to the loss of faith by turning to the internal world of spiritualism in the hope that Christianity might be brought to incorporate the “ancient wisdom” of previous religious cults. His starting point is that of W.B. Yeats and the Symbolists.

Kandinsky’s thinking leads to the artistic investigation of the subconscious and automatic process in Dada and Surrealism. His abstraction shows us disintegration under the stress of emotion which presages the gesture existentialism of later action painting. He brings an apocalyptic clash of worlds giving rise to a “symphony” which is abstract and has no practical application to reality. The relationship between conscious and unconscious forces, the motif of the couple is seen on his canvas Improvisation 27. Not only did he created a turbulent landscape of the mind, impossible to “read” (in Composition VII, with themes of God and Love in a combination of triangle and couple), but visionary fantasies full of destruction, apocalyptic conflicts, chaos, and also salvation (the rainbow in Composition IV) became part of unique paintings.

W. Kandinsky was fascinated by music’s emotional power as it expresses itself through sound and time, allowing the listener a freedom of imagination, interpretation and emotional response. The affinity with Schonberg’s music its obvious: the same search for a free chromatic field (Composition VII) where richly structured polyphonic motifs create spatial and compositional ambiguities, visual beauty, emotional impact and intellectual stimulation.

The elements constructing Kandinsky’s Compositions that are at first glance abstract could be compared to Schonberg’s use of unresolved dissonance. In Kandiky’s Compositions, numerous motifs – either abstracted from natural objects or more purely abstract as in Composition VII- are organized into visual structures that can be experienced simultaneously and can exert emotional impact on the viewer on several physical, psychological, emotional levels. As in musical composition, the rhythms add vitality to the pictorial composition, inviting the eye to travel. Every phenomenon in nature not only in music (in painting too) has its own structural rhythm. Kandinsky felt
that numerous paintings represent excellent examples of “complex rhythmic” composition with a strong intimation of the symphonic principle. The symphonic composition is tied. For Kandinsky, if that objective element of a painting were taken away, the building blocks of the composition would reveal themselves to cause a feeling of repose and tranquil repetition, of well-balanced parts. A similar feeling is evoked by diverse modes of musical expression, for instance early choral music or the music of Mozart or Beethoven. However, when the objective element is in place, especially beginning with Composition IV, all of the juxtaposition, conflicts, and dissonances are arranged in a manner that parallels Schonberg’s own innovations.

This was a period of artistic innovation in different arts. The works seem to be some kind of language – construct within which the interpreter is being invited to play at the game of interpretation. Losing confidence in the power of ordinary syntax to articulate causal processes, the writers believe less and less in the project of representing the world through the narrative of historical development. This is to be found in music and painting, too. Debussy came with no thematic development, no thread of a logical discourse, but a flow of harmony. Cezanne’s “Apples and Oranges” with the perspective of slipping forward out of the frame and so, relativism is being built into this practice.

Maybe one lesson of Modernism is that different aspects of a changing experience may have an equal claim on us, in perception and in art. The basic strategy for innovation which made Modernism more radical than its predecessors was its movement beyond an early stage of stylistic metamorphosis towards a re-imagining of the foundational properties of the arts. New language was being invented to correlate colours and non-representational shape with emotion. And H. Matisse managed to grab the artist’s reliance upon an expressive relationship between colours and the emotions projected through them. The emotional commitment was typical of Post Impressionism but now with Fauvism it is no longer Central, as the artist is able to adept any conventional subject to his expressive aims. Everyday visual experience which seems to the canvas to be made of raw sensations is being dramatized. And colours are used very expressively; some being aggressive, the way our character is sometimes, others may be paralleled in human nature with madness, or even restful and heavenly. The bright colours and the cunning distortions of its drawing have an immediate appeal; they dramatize everyday
visual experience by making it appear on the canvas to be made up of raw sensations.

Fauve pictures and Matisse have achieved a new autonomy for colours making the beginning of the advance of the painting towards the spectator, which was a characteristic of twentieth century art. There is a harmony like the one we find in a musical composition and its appeal to the idea of musical harmony runs the Modernist period providing a new freedom on the way to pure abstraction.

While Fauvism was aiming at an emotionally unifying vision of real life situation, Cubism tended to fragment the human subject into a still life without drama. It was the foundational rather than rhetorical character of early Modernism which seemed to encourage the analogy with science.

This brought Cubism in its right place. With notions of geometrization and spatial continuity in common, G. Braque and P. Picasso worked hard and met with difficulties all the time. Cubism is said to have produced a shift from the unreflective enjoyment of the perceptual in art towards the conceptual - a language of sings which makes Modernist painting so perplexing and disturbing to the viewer as it explores languages which are more and more private in character. Now the painters no longer respect the identities of the separate objects, they show objects prolonged in all directions and armed with incomprehensible fins.

In portraits there is something very interesting: the idea of the image as the record of an act of psychological penetration is so brutally discarded that we usually speak of “deconstruction” to point out the way in which Cubist painting shows up contradictions which come out when a three dimensional object is represented.

We do agree that early Cubism does not show a very coherent view of life as Impressionism or Fauvism did in terms of city life, tourist landscape, and bourgeois pleasure. But delight in confusing the viewer is one of its regular features. “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon”, marks the beginning of the new visual language. The ugliness and threat breaks with the sophisticated hedonism of the tradition in which Matisse and The Fauve worked. The conflict here stems from an internal psychological division between attraction and repulsion, classical superego and primitive libido; the outcome is an aggressive attack on the image of women.
There is no aesthetic unity as we find with Cezanne and Matisse, but a sense of the arbitrary and surprising. The canvas is being challenged as Picasso rejects conventional perspective, his surfaces sliding into one another. Three of the girls are staring at us, their angularity denying their desirability and challenge the male gaze in which the women is usually offered by the male painter to the male viewer as a desirable object.

And so they pay the price of being ugly, bringing contradictory feelings about women - the view of the primitive as sexual energy in its crudest state, as the image of the life force; then there is another conflict - the destructive attitude to artistic convention which parallels an aggressive bent towards women.

Picasso’s interest in Iberian and African art surely distinguished him from the vitalism of the Futurists. The primitive evoked those energies apparently repressed by Western forms of social order, and could also function as the correlative of experience and emotions which were felt to lie beyond representation, to resist sanctioned Western modes of expression and to precede the Futurist opposition of past to future. Thus the aim is to return the object from being recognized to seeing it.

Picasso’s fascination with “unrepresentable” energies in African Masks made his exploration of non-objective forms partly contingent upon new ways of imagining the body; there is a short of violence, in terms of deforming the human figure and so, the artist invents his own systems of signs; the forms radiate, shapes are spreading out into the atmosphere of the canvas.

It is C. G. Jung who viewed Picasso’s work in terms of a progressive detachment from exterior reality and a move into more interior, unconscious or subconscious realms. What Picasso was using is a kind of sign language (a double curve represents the side and back of a human head or the outline of a guitar) and he subjected the human body to violent deformations managing to render art more physically real than the real in itself. We see obsessive neuroticism, grief and horror, his art being endowed with the “convulsive” drama which became an obsession, and had the power to shock.

It seems that Cubism had plenty of things in common with Futurism which sprang out of it: love of the dynamic and for the simultaneous, the fascination with types of duration and the abandonment of unitary perspective. The difference was in their conceptions of dynamism – the Futurists’ ideal being
one of constant movement, the Cubist’s interest in simultaneity has made time freeze.

The art of the Futurists is one of optimism strongly tinged with bombast and they glorified and deified the position of the machine in society, being engaged in the battle of modern art with violence and bravado that were ultimately self-defeating.

The Futurists took place an aggressive position and posed two vital questions: the first concerned a Modernist urban subject matter, the second the search for an adequate mode of presenting its psychological effects. The assumptions about psychology arose out of a deep anti-intellectualism, which owed a good deal to the visionary “derangement” of Rimbaud.

The Futurists considered that art is violence, cruelty and injustice because culture is a war of generations. They will glorify war and scorn women, promoting a heroic masculine tone of pride in Italy’s technological potential. This contempt for the feminine was closely related to the Nietzschean desire for a transcendence of the “merely” human. The creation of the nonhuman type, a mechanical being, as a dream of super masculinity was still a fantasy of the Futurists.

Emotion is depersonalized, and instead of the vertical relations asked by the symbol, the scatter-gun effect of Futurist analogies produces a horizontal cross-weave of images which brings together different, unrelated zones of experience. In this new reality, where the Nietzschean will to power is caught into the forces of the industrial world which were set free, the result is “man multiplied by the machine,” and he is able to overcome the feminine tendency to inwardness.

There field of operation remained that of the consumer as Germano Celant noticed: “art became” socialized following not the utopian path of revolution but rather those of consumption and disposability, an attitude that implies the final disappearance of the “avant-garde” as value and the advent of a social statue of culture” G. Celant, Futurism as Mass Avant garde, in A.D’Harnocourt, Futurism and the International Avant garde.

Marinetti says that the writer does not only discover the internal semantic limits of a natural language, but he plays a game with it. The aim is to make the text the multi-dimensional analogue for the dynamic and collective
processes which much Futurist painting attempted to capture. The result was an abrupt, instantaneous, telegraphic form of communication.

Believing in the “dynamism” of modern life, Futurism worked towards the lines of force—the internal tensions. An urban subject matter was promised which was given an Expressionist, dynamic quality. If the Impressionists had analyzed the basic element of light, the Futurist will analyze and represent movement.

Boccioni’s “States of Mind” bring the sensation of discouragement, chaotic excitement, loneliness, anguish, dazed confusion, infinite sadness in three images which express the successive human emotions: of “those who go”, “those who remain”, “those who say farewell” contrasting the impersonal automatism of the machine. With Futurism we stick to H. Bergson’s idea that the present is carrying the past with it; it is swollen by memory as our perceptions are full of memories; the details of past experience are mingling with the immediate and present data of our senses, as every perception fills a certain depth of duration prolonging the past into the present, and partaking of memory.

Indeed for Bergson and for Freud the personality is involved in a continuous interactive process. Each individual has then a unique intuitive rhythm of experience. This introspective view of the personality treats subjective experience as betrayed by the kind of thinking demanded by the sciences which purport to describe and measure the parts of an external world, theoretically independent of our observation. A work of art can express this kind of temporal process (Cubism). The Futurists livened up this temporal space by showing how an urban content could imply the Bergsonian processes of memory and by making spatial equivalents for the rhythm of the intuitions which occurred within the experience expressed by the image.

With a Cubist-Futurist style, dedicated to abstraction the Vorticists were inspired by the pace of modern life, celebrating the modern world with its machines and monumental architecture, until reference to the original reality had mostly disappeared.

The Vorticists interpreted through their work the vitality of the time working in a two dimensional multiple viewpoints. Whereas the Futurists showed movement in their work through a progression of sequential moments, the Vorticists looked for an over sense of movement, drawing the observer into
the work toward a distant vortex. Unlike the painterly impressionistic qualities of Futurism, the Vorticists’ works were shapely defined forms with flat, vibrant colours based on simplistic geometric shapes. They also expressed an inner emotional content unlike Cubism which was more an intellectual study of objective reality. It is true that their ideal was an art which drew the viewer into a spiralling cubist based vortex of dynamic shapes and forms, but in reality it was the dynamism of the times which was the primary motivating factor for the artists.

The logic of rationality itself was put in doubt; it was replaced by an associative juxtaposition, in relying upon intuitions – more and more difficult to interpret. Modernist work incorporates ambiguity & contradiction – in the conflict and complex implications of the unresolved discored, the impossible materialization of space, the apocalyptic tension between colour shapes with an emotional charge and the oscillation between brush stroke as object in itself and as representing something else.

These contradictions deny the transparency of the medium. The discursive significance of literature, music, painting is being threatened favouring the interest in the artist’s psychology. And this period developed psychoanalytical theories which showed that the mad may indeed make sense.

In early Modernism, the focus was upon associative processes within the individual consciousness. Aschenbach, Stephen Dedalus, Freud are justificatory figures in the transition from logical deduction to juxtaposition in art. Worlds which seemed to be less and less susceptible of explanation and description through the causal process of historical narrative were constructed. The world seen as simultaneity or as subject to the intuitive leaps of the unconscious, could be full of estranging displacements from the history that Joyce’s Stephen was later to describe as a “nightmare” and Eliot as an “immense panorama of anarchy & futility”. As Eliot moved from a Bergsonian stream of consciousness towards collage, the world become for him a place of competing voices and historical contexts.

The way was thus made open for a radically allusive juxtaposition, by consideration which Derrida and others have tried to make central to the philosophic tradition, by arguing that language is constituted by the hidden armies of metaphor and image. The multiple consciousness aimed at challenged the subordinating effects of an analytic and discursive logic. The subject is seen
as falling through dissociation into alienation or neurosis. The confrontation of such tensions demands a conception of the person as driven by a highly subjective, largely unconscious, inner necessity which may express itself – in search of a relaxing harmony of design in Matisse, the cosmic vibrations of Kandinskyan abstraction.

The nature of such feelings meant investigating in the light of new ideas. Such emotions could arise from Bergsonian intuition or from the release of primitive instincts. They all encourage the artistic expression of the irrational, as the symptom of contradictions and tensions with society.

And such ideas inspired the Dada movement. Its ideas spread throughout Europe after the war and it provided a model for those avant-gardes the exploited irrational states of mind to aim at social transformation. It sustained the Futurist belief that “advanced” art needed to be protected by confrontational activity and had to aim at constant metamorphosis. Dada mixed irrational liberation and anarchist incongruity; it took the techniques of Modernism seriously enough to see what happened to them when taken to extremes.

It leaves absolute irony as the only valid mode of self-consciousness we can felt it in Fr. Picabia and M. Duchamp’s work where the human is lingering in a kind of metaphorical trace in a world otherwise refined or debased ) to pure mechanism. There is a mechanization of the erotic in these works and irony lies precisely in its failure to satisfy desire. Contrasting the technological fantasies of the Italian Futurists, Duchamp’s machines don not work; they separate object from meaning and the viewer is asked to consider them from two completely different points of view at the same time – the essence being the contradiction.

Duchamp maybe more than any other artist had the bent of mind And the intellect to come to grips with the discoveries of science; he realized that the symbolism of alchemy could help him to achieve the more abstract, more hermetic and more intellectual art towards which he was striving.

Alchemy which dealt with concepts of a cosmic and esoteric nature and had been forced to render these in terms of diagrammatic visual images held out exciting possibilities. The mixture science and the irrational involved in alchemical thought appealed to Duchamp. Like science fiction it must have seemed a way out of Symbolism. There was no either – or for this age, but there was an intermediate realm between mind and matter, a realm of subtle bodies
which were able to come in a mental as well as material form. This was exactly the condition to which Duchamp’s art was aspiring. There was a kind of cosmic chess, a system of speculative thought, half science, half philosophy, in which ideas were constantly being formulated. I came very close to Duchamp because he is not only special but he elicits from us to have our mind in the right place. Like so many Modernists he was curious to explore the borderlines of male and female sexuality. The figures are highly abstracted and have about them a depersonalized, sexless air, the bodies being rendered by means of metallic forms. The sex cylinder is attached to the head (which points to the displacement of the sexual organs) and suggests that sexual fantasies are the product of the mind and can be a form of intellectual as well as physical activity. The idea in Duchamp’s paintings is that the body is an empty vessel capable of receiving other substances in it.

The Large Glass is unique and the most daring Modernist painting. It is something like a department store window in size, and relates to the changing use of glass and mental in the architecture of the time. It is used as a non-referential surface upon which some of the isolated components (the chocolate grinder and the glider) are being shown. On is reminded of the disembodied reality reflected in store windows. The realm of the painting is extremely complicated: a love machine or better a suffering one?

Like Mallarme, Duchamp has been obsessed with the idea of the work of art as a symbol or substitute for the object of love or desire which cannot be touched, or to do so you would break the spell.

No coherent world is mirrored by Dada as it was founded in a spirit of absolute contradiction. The real is bound up with the unconsciousness of the body, the Dadaist’s culture being above all of the body and instinct which are prized above intellect. Intense emotional states or fluid identities remain as psychology is being substituted.

In avoiding conventional forms of expression to convey its alienation from established order, Dada exalts the individual’s irrational responses above any contextual position in language or in culture.

For Tristan Tzara, Dada expressed the knowledge of a supreme egoism in which laws wither away and attempt to get through to the unconscious human nature which has the merit of being primitive and spontaneous. He was less certain that a new man could come out of this anti-ideological process,
freed from the restrictions of a bourgeois identity. Tzara aligns instinct with the principle of unresolved contradiction to create a force which should liberate the psyche, by destroying its stable identity. The instincts probably perform a work of disarticulation comparable to the death drive found with S. Freud. And it is this drive towards dissolution which produces a paradoxical pleasure.

It seems that the future is made doubtful unknowable: we do not know what will survive and we can’t even guess why it should. We are to live in our period and to accept its terms: that means accepting a bewildering plurality. Any view of the art and culture of a civilization is partial especially one of an age which is still evolving so it becomes more and more difficult to speak about Modernism and its implications.

Both Modernism in the visual arts and in literature viewed the age a kind of intellectual “climacteric”. The literary response to this was a type of extreme classicism which in T. S. Eliot became radical conservatism, a belief in the need to struggle to offset the fragmenting effects of the XX-th century.

Some themes are clear indeed: the long struggle with the artistic legacy of the first half of the XX-th century, with the idea that we live in the shadow of the period comparable to the Renaissance, the attempt to cope with the imaginative power of science, the ambiguity and uncertainty of the national identity, and history itself, as well as the search for a coherent basis for art in socially fragmented and unreligious world.

Modernism was distanced from British sensibility by more than just the war. It was not a unitary force to be contained and subdued. In literature it was politically right wing. Mandarin in tone and cared little for social issues; its purpose was the imaginative grasp of the entire culture. And across, the spectrum of the visual arts the whole tone was softer.

So, in painting the British Modernism of the 1930’ was the positively pastoral. In architecture it was politically left and convinced it was the one art that could achieve social transformation, its purpose being the reconstruction of the world, in a ravaged Europe and with the blank feeling of indirection. New people thinking, new thoughts could do things better than in the past.

Viewed from abroad, the strength of British art is seen to rest not with any school, movement, or style but with the achievement of a handful of individuals: Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Howard Hodgin, all of them bringing an intensity that could startle, delight,
discomfort or appease but which carries their discoveries and experience into
the minds and hearts of others, creating the dialogue without which the act of
communication might remain incomplete.

Modern art in Britain is often said to date from 1910 the year in which
Roger Fry’s “Monet and the Post Impressionists” exhibition opened at the
Grafton Galleries. Fry discerned in the work of the Post Impressionists a
rediscovery of that constructive design which he admired in Italian Renaissance
art. The exhibition was a call to order, a return to formal principles rooted in
tradition: Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Cezanne

The Post Impressionists no longer content to record the shifting pattern
of appearance sought more durable and subjective effects, either by making
more emphatic the underlying structure (Cezanne) or by emphasizing their own
expressive response and selecting and rearranging the visual facts. These artists
do not seek to intimate form, but to create form; they do not imitate life but find
an equivalent for it.

Post Impressionists taught that painting was not a trick dependent on
skill and craftsmanship but a language. Line, colour, shape, space, rhythms,
design were now to be assessed and valued in their own right. The tendency
was more and more towards abstraction.
An immediate effect of Post Impressionism was to encourage a more expansive
and fresh interest in subject matter (Vanessa Bell, Spencer Gore, Duncan Grant,
Walter Sickert).

Then the war changed everything: There was the shock of being faced
with a future without the system of meanings, values and directions. Edwardian
optimism may have been replaced by despair but that was replaced by a new
determination to get things done. The years immediately after the war marked
by the appearance of some more or less popular works which were meant to
restore a sense of wholeness to the world, to reduce its immense and
threatening spaces.
During this period the marriage of reason and nightmare which had
dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world.
Across the communication landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies
and dreams that money can buy.
Themes like: the lateness and decadence of the cultural hour, the lure of
science and the image of the artist deprived of his context became very popular.
Ballard writes as though writing itself had awoken from a dream, only to find itself in a nightmare. The dream was that of the ordered characters and narratives of 19th century novel, their time certain, the nightmare is that of the real modern world. Time and space were being recognized by technology and the urban vision had taken over completely from the rural. A new wholeness may be born by the reunion of science and the imagination.

Then the “darkness” anticipated by J. Conrad has descended little by little and the human condition, alienation, became dominant moods.

By the time war engulfs Europe, thinkers and artists were finding in the historical chaos. There is a loss of belief which had existed since the Enlightenment in the rationality of man and society and a growing feeling that the individual person is irrelevant and helpless amid uncontrollable forces. Neither art nor philosophy, not language itself seems adequate to maintain a sense of understanding and civilized values amid the wasteland.

Prophets of change between the wars there had been, no doubt; W.B. Yeats who accepted the inadequacy of humanity in the face of historical change. S. Freud who tried to explain the “darkness” in probing the discontentment of civilization. He also explained the 20-th. Century mind, he made “darkness’ and its fauna of the night the object of his study.

T.S. Eliot whose understanding of his time merges with Yeats. V. Woolf who too acknowledges the ambiguity of the moment. All the characters await their fate in time, seeking identity and resolution, conscious of the ambivalence of the historical moment. Like Yeats, Eliot, V. Woolf too looks forward desperately to the answers for civilization which will come out of the violence. They all accepted the violence of the present reality as a way to get on with history.

Post war life seemed to be as meaningless and austere as Orwell had feared. The psychiatrist R.D. Laing said that madness was commonplace, explaining “The Divided Self” 1960 that the substantiality of the age is one of ontological insecurity Civilization has become “neurotic “ as Freud said and it was an age of austerity, of anxiety. E.M. Forster had described the condition in his essay “ What I Believe” 1939 long before D. Laing diagnosed it. From the same basis in Freud, E. M. Forster thinks that psychology has split and shattered the idea of a “person” and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us which may destroy our normal balance. But
fortunately Forster put his faith in personal relationships. It was now that literature started to express the cultural neurosis of its time by combining the theme of betrayal with the other manifestation of post war disillusionment with society.

It was anti-intellectualism as something that emerged from the indifference of the post war working classes to traditional, literate English culture and from their hostility to what they perceived to a domain of the upper classes. Lacking education but enjoying the leisure provided by the full employment and welfare policies of the government, the new philistines represented a very different outcome of the after war than G. Orwell foresaw.

While in Orwell’s novels a Gordon Comstock struggles against the personal and creative limits imposed by a Depression or a Winston Smith, rebels against political repression, the protagonists imagined by the angry Young Men in the 1950 have abandoned the conflict with society so as to cope with the psychological consequences of the New England. Their predicament is that the old literate culture is disappearing and nothing new has emerged to take its place and give significance to their lives. They cling to remnants of the old way of life. Their condition seems to be one of inescapable imprisonment within class, a creative paralysis. It was in 1950 that the very good causes which had sustained the society through the war became more and more suspect.

The ideology of Modernism that had dominated literary culture between the wars had collapsed indeed. Those who had witnessed the devastation of war had collapsed indeed. Those who had witnessed the devastation of war reacted against the Moderns’ uncritical absorption of reactionary attitudes. Lacking a new humanistic foundation to replace a discredited Modernism, the literary scene faced by the rise of philistinism was dominated by the pessimism, frustration, anger of Post Modern Works.

T.S. Eliot feared that that rise of the ‘new civilization’ was at the expense of the old English culture. He emphasizes the unifying importance of shared religious values; he also fears greater political democracy in the post war era, he cannot tolerate the idea of a classless society; he argues that for national leaderships there must be a class of elite to insure that the transmission of culture continues.
It was C. P. Snow who stated that science should become the basis of education, of society. Maybe it is Alex in A. Burgess’s “A Clockwork Orange” and his gang who embody the nightmare of humanity de-humanized’ produced by the world culture that T.S. Eliot feared. The world as described by Alex is one in which traditional culture is ravaged for the purpose of violent pleasure both in the action and in the telling. Violence is Alex’s and his generation’s protest against the unnatural imposition of social engineering on human free will and individuality. Alex’s treatment reveals the fallacy of forgetting the imperfect nature of humanity by showing what will occur when out of scientific over confidence and optimism about solving social problems, the perfectibility of mankind as “clockwork orange” is sought.

Then J.Fowles in his novel ‘the Collector” adds another view of the threat of philistinism and science to traditional culture. The novel becomes an allegory of the conflict between scientific and humanistic thinking. We may speak of a scientific “rape” of humanistic tradition, their struggle imitating the plot of Richardson’s Clarissa. Her consciousness which Clegg cannot violate is the filled with artistic and literary references by which she asserts her artistic identity and defines her intellectual superiority. “The Collector” becomes an assertion of the value of the intellect in an age of the masses, where Clegg as representative of the Many is committed to evil which is wholly. The struggle between the two remains unsolved and ends tragically and the character remains the result of the conditioning of his society.

Both Burgess’ and Fowles’ novels suggest that the value of the scientific mind can become distorted and this was depicted in literature and art too.

In British painting to post war period is one of great diversity as we have in view the revival of the landscape tradition and the ascendancy of formalist theory. A subject came to be considered primarily for the formal interest it contained. The autonomy of form had been a key issue in Roger Fry’s promotion of Post Impressionism. Because this art relied for bits effect on formal strength rather than associated ideas it achieved “classic” concentration of feeling”. During this period certain artists felt slighted by the critical attention given to formal qualities and by Fry’s praise of French art. The revolutionary period of modernism was now over.
If the splintered language of Cubism dwindled away in the fine arts it lingered on in the field of design, in fabric, rug and carpet design. For some artists there was a flight from the machine and a return to landscape: Mathew Smith, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson.

During the 1930s, British art, formerly seen as inferior to French moves into a position at the forefront of the “modern movement”, a term signifying a dominant trend within European Modernism, one dedicated to the unification of the visual arts through the growing commitment to a classical notion of universal order. After 1926 when The Tate Gallery displayed contemporary European art, there was a noticeable increase in the assimilation of foreign ideas.

The issue of abstract art grew more divisive as the decade progressed. P. Nash, Ben Nicholson, Burra brought images symbolic subconscious threat of fear.

At the beginning of the twenties the two overlapping waves: Dada and Surrealism were very close to abstract art. The latter welcomed Freud’s ideas but if psychoanalysis was concerned with the function of memory as malady and therapy, f or the Surrealists the voice of the unconscious was prophetic and it pointed not to psychic dislocation but to a promise of the self’s unity.

From the nihilistic fantasy of Dada, through the Cubist sense of structure Surrealism was moving to a stage where fantasy and structure are linked and were structure is shaped not by the conscious mind but by desire and the unconscious. The limits of a merely “useful” reality are destroyed and in its place there is not separate world of art but a world made up of elements of reality that have been exposed to the force of desire. Desire seems to move from one object to another, refuses itself nothing and there is not the nostalgia for a primordial lost object but a continuous search for connections.

The vision of totality is something that the Surrealist are looking for and it will occupy a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the unreal, past and future are no longer perceived as contradictions. The hope was that our interaction with the world may bring us back to a full sense of ourselves by unravelling the ways in witch reality is shaped and responds to our desires. And the human nature is rediscovered in the deepest impulses which merge desire and sensation.
A journey inwards and downwards with ambiguity of imagery, with the supremacy of the dream word, Surrealism brought the assault upon the human body in terms of extreme distortion, the artists experiencing the stronger than themselves.

Surrealism in England developed with abstract and constructivist art. If the Constructivists sought to inspire social improvement by uncovering clarity and order, the Surrealist stripped away conventional logic and received ideas and challenged the belief in man’s capacity to be in control of himself and the others. It laughed at and belittled bourgeois vanities. By shocking the mind and eye with their surreal images, by jarring their audience out of habitual ways of seeing and thinking, the artists hoped to create a shared, “primitive” state of mind, free of society’s conventional inhibitions.

The Surrealists’ chief weapon was the imagination released or stimulated by unexpected conjunctions or by the combination of methodical detail with disordered logic. Its purpose was to reunite conscious and unconscious realms of experience so that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in absolute reality. Emphasizing content and free from Surrealism provided an alternative to the contemporary, highly formalistic Cubist movement.

Surrealism’s sense of itself as the ultimate avant-garde may have come with certain ambiguity, as it was indeed the end of Modernism and it was also conceived as an end without finality or closure summing up all the tensions of Modernism.

The year 1950 was the emergence of British artists who were wholly postwar. There had been tiredness in the late 1940s that seemed to overwhelm any new creativity. On the one hand there was an uncertain, hedged modernist optimism, on the other there was outright despair that both Edwardian rationalism and Victorian idealism were no longer at hand to write the program for the future. Then there was analytical philosophy with its nagging insistence on eradicating every last trace of metaphysics and we should not forget existentialism – bleak, foreign, apparently terminal.

The artists of the 1950s brought the resurrection of realism as a means of rejecting the doubts form and content of the modernists. This new realism was an attempt to set art within a more manageable context. The “real”, the actual perspective of experience with its limited horizons and its complete
absence of the grand, heroic style came to predominate. In 1960 the academic success of structuralism became a reality.

Taking their cue from Roland Barths’ study of Balzac, the structuralisms focused primarily on fiction. They imposed an immense self-consciousness on fiction by insistently drawing attention to the devices with which it established itself as fiction. It is inspired by the insight that the world consists not of discrete objects but of relations. It claimed to have revealed the arbitrary nature of all signs and the overriding importance only of their relationship, but it still depended on the fixed position of the observer, the critic.

This fixed point will be removed by Post Structuralism, leaving the world a shifting, impersonal mass of systems. Structuralism’s tough rejection of humanist vagaries parallels the hippie rejection of order and the glorification of a condition of perpetual becoming, the Marxist rejection of bourgeois values. The ambitious of the critical theorists suggested that analysis was taking over the task of art. Critical theory had something of the same impact as analytical philosophy: it was seen as cold, inhuman, anti-imaginative, it threatened to trap the artist in a net of ideas and analysis which would make action all but impossible and induced a paralyzing self consciousness. One was constantly catching oneself in the act, de-constructing the moment of creation. It was a sense of the exhaustion of ideas which could be seen to affirm the mannerist mode of the age.

Artistic forms and styles had become stripped of significance. Ideas, reason itself seemed to be turning away from the warm sanity of humanism. Man, having made himself the measure of all things during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, now found he was the measure of nothing, a by-product of his own systems.

For S. Becket, the work of art’s role in the world was exhausted; its repertoire of devices and stratagems had been revealed as a history of delusion. All that was left was the artist’s incomprehensible obligation to paint, write, or whatever and the mystery of the artistic occasion. The horror of the W.W.II was more spacious, less static and brought about pessimistic works. So, Francis Bacon, the artist, created a world which has lost God, and humanism has failed to fill the void. His figures represented isolation abandonment comparable to that of the existentialist heroes. “The History of
Europe in My Lifetime” is the great theme of paintings which since the W.W. II has brought fame and controversy to F. Bacon. His paintings offer a Freudian understanding of the psychic forces which have shaped that “history”. Bacon captures the horror of an age of instincts unleashed. He usually cites as influences on his work the Moderns who scrutinized the wasteland of civilization. He paints the history of a world in which faith has been lost, expressing suffering and terror at the loss. In the absence of faint and in the face of violence, human passion and beauty remain, but in Bacon’s paintings love and ecstasy are reduced to lust and bestiality. Sex, rather than affirming the life of the body exposes mortality, it usually occurs in a setting of restraint that suggests impotence. “Triptych Inspired by T.S. Eliot’s Poem Sweeney Agonists” is famous. Instead of revealing the life force of passionate lovers as D.H. Lawrence would, the composition shows its contrary – the compulsion of mortality and death. For Bacon neither vitality nor regeneration comes from sexuality; it is merely an instinct, a need of the beast fulfilled amid an awful void of social indifference where the only links are those of perverse voyeurism.

Man in Bacon’s view is isolated, alienated, ugly, and insignificant. Paintings of single figures usually surround the human form with a background of flat planes of colour and dark lines of imprisoning hues. Even when posed at rest, apart from either violence or sexuality, the human being shows a loss of dignity and nobility. Forms are distorted, shrivelled up. The body is ugly, ridiculous, distorted. If Bacon’s artistic subject is not sexual, it is often a commonplace act; shaving, talking, sitting and smoking, sometimes alone in stifling empty rooms. All images convey Bacon’s understanding of the human condition: “I think that man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being he has to play out the game without reason”.

Bacon’s “Heart of Darkness”, like Conrad’s is ultimately the beast with vacuous mouth within us all. The portraits have no true faces. It is the sense of distortion, usually to the point of macabre – the inferno of the modern psych. We have the shadows or shades of people who are encaged by the history of the XX-th century. Bacon believes in hell and that is here and now. The naked essence of things is terrifying. Each painting is a journey inward towards the primitive and the mortal. His vision is one of history and he shows on canvas a real hell from which we may never escape.
During the 1960s-1970s America had great influence in Britain, helping the make familiar Abstract Expressionism. Much abstract art now was formalist concerned with “immanence”, an intensive examination of its intrinsic qualities. Inspired by the anti-authoritarian example of Dada, Conceptual art was concerned with ideas and information, offering the mind a teasing game not the shock of revelation. Much of it investigated itself deconstructing the process that had gone into its making. By questioning the nature of the creative process, it shifted attention away from the finality of the art object towards a more open minded aggregate of information and ideas. It came with a cerebral appeal. It was a need for a more social art.

Now, no single style dominates; much that Modernism had suppressed asserted itself; interests in narrative, myth, symbols, expressionism, primitivism, even the classical landscape tradition were more than ambition. In an age of frantic intellectual fashions Modernism has acquired a causative, explanatory function signifying a cultural event or force which at a particular moment in Europe or America determined the way artists created.

I like to think of Modernism as having a sense of cultural completeness and unifying wholeness because it dominated the twentieth, being something very special in itself, a moment when one particular form of aesthetic practice, a practice committed to particular kinds of formal and linguistic experimentation was being privileged above others. I also like to think that in art anything is possible. Is all art fiction, a convention of lies?

It was in the Post Modern landscape of 1973 that the feeling was spreading about art and its fictions which should be resurrected, being allowed to speak again without stifling self consciousness. Now art is swinging back towards content, and it is not simply an exercise in style. Mystery, fascination, will be always contained in artistic representations which so often are ambiguous and sometimes even misunderstood. But we need them to come closer and closer to what Modernism means. And without an understanding of Modernism it is impossible to grasp 20\textsuperscript{th} century culture. The works of all the artists strive to surpass the human and achieve the infinite and the eternal.
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