

## ***Modernism: A Way In***

*Abridged from a paper given by Piers Tattersall on 16 March 2013 at the Thomas More Institute*

Unlike a religion or a philosophy Modernism is/was not animated by a single idea or cultural narrative and found different modes of expression in different countries. It can be seen as a term incorporating, movements such as Symbolism, Impressionism, Orientalism, Futurism, Dadaism and Primitivism. Some of these, like Futurism and a fascination with the Orient found outlets across the arts ranging from painting to literature and into music while others were confined to only one medium.

Increasingly artists in the nineteenth century felt the need for a radical change in the technical language they employed in expressing themselves and their ideas. Some thinkers asserted that such a change was needed in order to reflect the massive social changes that had taken and were taking place in politics and society. Art had to express the upheaval of the French Revolution as well as the massive social changes brought about by the industrial revolution. One of the major themes expressed as a result of social upheaval was that of alienation and the idea that man could no longer relate to his (predominantly urban) surroundings as he once had. Religion was held to be nothing more than a relic of an old order and even the notion of a common humanity were abandoned by some. Theodore Adorno, writing in 1958 exclaimed 'the... idea of humanity, or of a better world no longer has any sway over mankind'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet for all its fragmentation Modernism remains a valuable point of reference for describing the art and aesthetics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a first step into Modernism I want to spend a little time talking about three figures that, in many ways act as signposts in this milieu of passionate, if also Baroque, contradictions. Briefly, these are Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud and Theodore Adorno.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adorno. T.W, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, (London, 1973) p19.

## .1. Einstein: the Modernist Man

‘Einstein *is* a modernist in his background (*fin de siècle* Vienna), in his models (trains moving across time zones), and the way he was represented (the genius iconoclast). (Armstrong 2005: 115; emphasis in original).

The notion of *fin de siècle* refers to the end of the nineteenth century and consisted of a mixture of an artistic and cultural movement or cultural ‘spirit’ that broadly embraced decadence and a sense of ennui. Its devotees believed that European civilisation was at an end. We might call the movement apocalyptic were it not for the fact that so many of the artistic statements associated with it seem to embrace frivolity or boredom. Artists and writers associated with this movement include Oscar Wilde, Edvard Munch ([\*The Scream\*](#)) and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec ([\*The Moulin Rouge\*](#)) whose work in many ways dovetailed with Modernism as much as the *fin de siècle*. Citing one of their number, the poet Baudelaire, Pierre Boulez, one of the leading lights of musical Modernism in the twentieth century noted that ‘Modernism is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, one half of art, of which the other half is eternal and immutable’.

Secondly there is the question of Einstein’s descriptive models: the idea of a train moving across time-zones as some sort of metaphor of modernity. Scientific innovation, industrial power and travelling at great speed have been widely regarded as among the hallmarks of the modern age.

To a lesser degree artists across the stylistic spectrum felt some kind of pull towards modern scientific advances. Gustav Eiffel’s tower now dominated the skyline of Paris just as advances in photography, sound recording, and even the moving image were beginning to make an impact on cultural life. Modernism, to some extent was bound up with new technology and the potential for using it artistically. Filippo Marinetti, the Italian Futurist, even envisaged a new kind of ‘music’ with his noise machines and, in turn he had a strong impact on the French émigré working in America, [Edgar Varese](#).

Lastly, to finish with Einstein, there is his status as a ‘genius iconoclast’. Repeatedly we are told that this artist or that thinker is a ‘revolutionary’ or ‘inimitable’. Much the same could be said of Beethoven or Wagner, Edgar Allen Poe or Rousseau, Turner or even the Pre-Raphaelites. But with Modernism this kind of ‘prophetic’ view of the genius took on a more destructive characteristic. As Einstein’s research called into question some of the most important tenets of an established understanding of the physical world this ‘revolution’ was being echoed in the arts. In the eyes of many artists what Einstein and other scientists achieved was a complete re-imagining of the world that both justified and completed their rejection of tradition. The artists of modernism took it upon themselves to create a kind of art that called into question the basic assumptions that had underpinned their own practices. For them this was all a part of creating what Harold Rosen has called ‘the tradition of the new’. Every new ideology that achieves any significance whatsoever must be overthrown by whatever is new.

## **2. Freud: A Subconscious that ‘shows us as we really are’**

Towards the end of the nineteenth century artists began to take a deeper interest in the human mind. Along with the likes of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson many writers felt that it was necessary to explore the hidden recesses of characters, rather than to simply describe their outward actions.

We can see in the short stories of Virginia Woolf a preoccupation with introspective thought. Her famous short story [\*A Mark on the Wall\*](#) spends about half a dozen pages speculating about just that, delving into the writer’s own thoughts about what the mark could signify, or to what it is similar; what kind of history it might suggest before going off at a tangent on a narrative only loosely connected with the original impetus of thought.

In much the same way we can see in a work like Schoenberg's *Erwartung* a preoccupation with the 'inner recesses' of the mind. In this instance of a one-act monodrama (opera) we see the heroine, the only character in this one-act solo opera in which 'the aim is to represent in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour'. The excitement in question is that of the heroine who imagines her lover has been killed. Half dreaming she wanders out into a wood until she finds his body. This is an opera about state of mind. There is no action on stage but even then our interest in this event is actually directed to her reaction to the discovery of her lover's body, rather than any drama that making such a find may entail of itself. Most clearly in *Erwartung* we can hear or see the way in which this preoccupation with mental states naturally leads to a kind of heightened anxiety which characterises so much early modernist art.

At its heart this conception of 'mind' is irrational and irrepressible. But such creative free-wheeling was unsustainable and left a vacuum where reason had once been, and in many ways paved the way for a different kind of modernism to flourish.

### **3. Theodore Adorno: More Rival Visions of Modernity**

Adorno's view was that modern Man was, through the industrial revolution, alienated from his environment. For Adorno unity in production and consumption was a kind of cultural Eden to which society could never return. As a result man was cut off from a true understanding of what his life was for. One purpose of art was then, to represent the unhappy reality of such a state of affairs. Art, for Adorno, had to reach into the essential truths of civilisation as it currently is.

When we take the long view of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they are a period of cultural political – and, yes, artistic – upheaval. European societies went from being predominantly rural and agrarian to being urban and industrial. Electricity, steam travel and

flight were discovered or invented. At the same time two world wars saw some of the most brutal destruction being meted out by Europe's political power-houses. The horrors of the Holocaust etched themselves into the memories of musicians and writers in a way that is still evident today. The left-wing composer Helmut Lachenman has spoken about his experiences as a boy hearing Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony before a broadcast of Hitler or Goebbels. For him the music of German Romanticism cannot be separated from Nazism.

Modernism was at once powerful but also terrible to such an extent that the clarity and vision of its ideas are considered to be unruly in contemporary society. But the strident nature of Modernist pronouncements – Boulez: 'blow up all the opera houses' – have either lost their initial potency or are seen as little more than jokes. Indeed, it was the very weakness of Modernism in this respect that laid some of the foundations for Post-modernism and a kind of 'anything goes' attitude to culture.