

# Modernity - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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Beman, Marshall

## Introduction

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world; this simultaneously threatens to destroy everything we have, know and are (15)

- Modernity can be said to unite mankind, but this is a paradoxical unity
  - It pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish

Drivers of modernity (16)

- Scientific discoveries
  - Changes our image of the universe and our role
- Industrialisation of production
  - Transforms scientific knowledge into technology
  - Creates new human environments and destroys old ones
  - Speeds up the tempo of life
  - Generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle
- Immense demographic upheavals
  - Severs people from their ancestral habitats
  - Hurls people across the world into new lives
- Urban growth
- Systems of mass communication
- Increasingly powerful nation states
- Mass social movements
- Ever-expanding capitalist world market

Currently, modernisation has expanded to take in the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves particular triumphs in art and thought (17)

- However, the idea of modernity is now conceived in fragmentary ways, losing its vividness, resonance, depth, and capacity to organise and give meaning to people's lives
- We are in the midst of a modern age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

First to use the word *moderniste*, source of many vital modern traditions (17)

- Nostalgic reverie
- Psychoanalytic self-scrutiny
- Participatory democracy

## 19th century modernity

In the 19th century, modernisation takes place against a landscape of steam engines automatic factories, railroads, vast cities, industrial zones etc. (18-19)

Marx: the dialectical motion of modernity turns ironically against its prime movers - the bourgeoisie (21)

Nietzsche: modern mankind finds itself in the midst of a great absence and emptiness of values yet, at the same time, a remarkable abundance of possibilities (21-23)

- Everything in this world is pregnant with its contrary

- We should embrace the perils of modernity with joy

## 20th century modernity

We do not know how to use our modernism (24)

Futurists: desire to merge their energies with modern technology and create the world anew (25)

Weber: the whole "mighty cosmos of the modern economic order" is seen as "an iron cage" (27)

- Other theorists believed that modern individuals had the capacity to both understand the ways in which modern technology and social organisation determined man's fate, and thus fight it
- Weber: modernity is a cage, people in it are shaped by its bars: we are beings without spirit, heart, sexual or personal identity

Herbert Marcuse: not only class and social struggles, but also psychological conflicts and contradictions have been abolished by the state of "total administration" (28)

Modernity is constituted by its machines, of which modern men and women are merely mechanical reproductions (29)

1960s - controversy over the ultimate meaning of modernity (29)

1. Modernism that strives to withdraw from modern life
  - Greenberg: the only legitimate concern of modernist art was art itself, the only rightful focus for an artist was the nature and limits of that genre (30)
    - Modernism was the quest for the pure, self-referential arts object
  - Barthes: the modern writer "turns his back on society and confronts the word of objects without going through any of the forms of History or social life (30)
    - Modernism is a great attempt to free modern artists from the impurities, vulgarities of modern life
2. Modernism as an unending permanent revolution against the totality of modern existence
  - Seeks the violent overthrow of all our values, caring little about the world that it destroys
  - Posits a model of modern society as one that is in itself devoid of trouble (31)
3. Post-modernists
  - People must break down the boundaries of their specialisation and work together to create more multivalent arts (32)
  - The modernism of pure form and the modernism of pure revolt were both too narrow, self-righteous and constricting to the modern spirit
    - The self must be opened up to the immense variety and richness of things, materials and ideas in the modern world

Foucault

- Totalities such as prisons, hospitals and asylums swallow up every facet of modern life (34)
- There is no point resisting the oppressions and injustices of modern life - futility (35)

# Tradition and the Individual Talent

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Eliot, T.S.

## I

If the only form of tradition consisted in following the way of the immediate generation before us in a blind/timid adherence to its success, then tradition should be discouraged (14)  
Tradition entails a historical sense, which compels one to write beyond his own generation, but with a feeling that the whole of European literature has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (14)

- This is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, it makes a writer traditional
- They are acutely conscious of their place in time, of their own contemporaneity

When a new work of art is created, something happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it (15)

- The whole existing order is altered
- Therefore, all new art is inevitably judged - not amputated - by the standards of the past

The poet must be aware that art never improves (16)

## II

The poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways (20)

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion (21)

- It is not the expression of a personality, but an escape from personality
- Only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things

## III

Divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim (22)

There is an emotion which has its life in the poem itself and not in the history of the poet (22)

- The emotion of art is impersonal