

## Lecture one

### Modernism: Definition and Characteristics

#### Definition: what is in a name?

When you talk about Modernism in literature, you generally talk about the literary movement that started as an expression of the similarly-named movement in art. They all developed with core ideas like individualism, mistrust of established traditions, and a disbelief in what was believed to be absolute truth. It started in the European continent sometime in the 1890s and took a whole new life as a reaction to the First World War. Modernist literature is heralded for having changed the form and content of literature and exploring new avenues in style and semantics.

Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack in their book *Key Concepts of Literary Theory* define Modernism as a:

term referring to the literary, artistic and general culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism is distinguished by its general rejection of previous literary traditions, particularly those of the late nineteenth century and of bourgeois society.

(Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack 56)

J A Cuddon defines Modernism as:

A comprehensive but vague term for a movement (or tendency) which begins to get under way in the closing years of the 19th century and which has had a wide influence during much of the 20th century. The term pertains to all creative arts, especially, poetry, fiction, drama, painting, music and architecture.

(Cuddon 551)

#### Characteristics

Arising out of the rebellious mood at the beginning of the twentieth century, modernism was a radical approach that yearned to revitalize the way modern civilization viewed life, art, politics, and science. This rebellious attitude that flourished between 1900 and 1930 had, as its basis, the rejection of European culture for having become too corrupt, complacent and lethargic, ailing because it was bound by the artificialities of a society that was too preoccupied with image and too scared of change. This dissatisfaction with the moral bankruptcy of everything European led modern thinkers and artists to explore other alternatives, especially primitive cultures. For the Establishment, the result would be cataclysmic; the new emerging culture would undermine tradition and authority in the hopes of transforming contemporary society.

The first characteristic associated with modernism is nihilism, the rejection of all religious and moral principles as the only means of obtaining social progress. In other words, the modernists repudiated the moral codes of the society in which they were living in. The reason that they did so was not necessarily because they did not believe in God, although there was a great majority of them who were atheists, or that they experienced great doubt about the meaninglessness of life. Rather, their rejection of conventional morality was based on its arbitrariness, its conformity and its exertion of control over human feelings. In other words, the rules of conduct were a restrictive and limiting force over the human spirit. The modernists believed that for an individual to feel whole and a contributor to the re-vitalization of the social process, he or she needed to be free of all the encumbering baggage of hundreds of years of hypocrisy.

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The rejection of moral and religious principles was compounded by the repudiation of all systems of beliefs, whether in the arts, politics, sciences or philosophy. Doubt was not necessarily the most significant reason why this questioning took place. One of the causes of this iconoclasm was the fact that early 20th-century culture was literally re-inventing itself on a daily basis. With so many scientific discoveries and technological innovations taking place, the world was changing so quickly that culture had to re-define itself constantly in order to keep pace with modernity and not appear anachronistic. By the time a new scientific or philosophical system or artistic style had found acceptance, each was soon after questioned and discarded for an even newer one. Another reason for this fickleness was the fact that people felt a tremendous creative energy always looming in the background as if to announce the birth of some new invention or theory.

As a consequence of the new technological dynamics, the modernists felt a sense of constant anticipation and did not want to commit to any one system that would thereby harness creativity, ultimately restricting and annihilating it. And so, in the arts, for instance, at the beginning of the 20th-century, artists questioned academic art for its lack of freedom and flirted with so many isms: secessionism, fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, dada, and surrealism. Pablo Picasso, for instance, went as far as experimenting with several of these styles, never wanting to feel too comfortable with any one style.

The wrestling with all the new assumptions about reality and culture generated a new permissiveness in the realm of the arts. The arts were now beginning to break all of the rules since they were trying to keep pace with all of the theoretical and technological advances that were changing the whole structure of life. In doing so, artists broke rank with everything that had been taught as being sacred and invented and experimented with new artistic languages that could more appropriately express the meaning of all of the new changes that were occurring. The result was a new art that appeared strange and radical to whoever experienced it because the artistic standard had always been mimesis, the literal imitation or representation of the appearance of nature, people, and society. In other words, art was supposed to be judged on the standard of how well it realistically reflected what something looked or sounded like.

This mimetic tradition had originated way back in ancient Greece, had been perfected during the Renaissance, and had found prominence during the nineteenth-century. But for modern artists this old standard was too limiting and did not reflect the way that life was now being experienced. Freud and Einstein had radically changed perception of reality. Freud had asked us to look inwardly into a personal world that had previously been repressed, and Einstein taught us that relativity was everything. And, thus, new artistic forms had to be found that expressed this new subjectivity. Artists countered with works that were so personal that they distorted the natural appearance of things and with reason. Each individual work begged to be judged as a self-sufficient unit which obeyed its own internal laws and its own internal logic, thereby attaining its own individual character. No more conventional cookie-cutter forms to be superimposed on human expression

What were some of the artistic beliefs that the modernists adopted? Above all they embraced freedom, and they found it in the artistic forms and emotions of the primitive cultures of Africa, the Orient, the Americas and Oceania. This act was the repudiation of all of the stylistic refinements that were the basis of 19th-century artistic endeavor. On the one hand, primitivism represented the simplification of form, which was to become one of the hallmarks of modernism. This abstraction of form suggested that some essential structure, previously hidden by realistic technique, would come to light. Art had, according to the modernists, become too concerned with irrelevant sophistications and conventions that

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detracted from the main purpose of art: the discovery of truth. On the other hand, primitivism was the expression of all that civilized man had to repress in order to enter into contract with society. According to Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in order for man to partake in civilized society, he had had to lay aside many uncivilized urges within the self, such as the natural appetite for adultery, incest, murder, homosexuality, etc., all held as taboos. It is this repression of natural desires that, Freud argues, is the source of modern neurosis. As a Jew, Freud was too well acquainted with the THOU SHALT NOTS of the Ten Commandments. Symbolically, the embrace of primitivism is a negation of the very principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition and an affirmation of authentic expression of that hidden self that only finds expression at night when we dream.

It is that exploration of what is underneath the surface that the modernists were so keen about, and what better way to do so than to scrutinize man's real aspirations, feelings, and actions. What was revealed was a new honesty in this portrayal: disintegration, madness, suicide, sexual depravity, impotence, morbidity, deception. Many would assail this portrayal as morally degenerate; the modernists, on the other hand, would defend themselves by calling it liberating.

Ironically, the modernist portrayal of human nature takes place within the context of the city rather than in nature, where it had occurred during the entire 19th-century. At the beginning of the 19th-century, the romantics had idealized nature as evidence of the transcendent existence of God; towards the end of the century, it became a symbol of chaotic, random existence. For the modernists, nature becomes irrelevant and passé, for the city supersedes nature as the life force. Why would the modernists shift their interest from nature and unto the city? The first reason is an obvious one. This is the time when so many left the countryside to make their fortunes in the city, the new capital of culture and technology, the new artificial paradise. But more importantly, the city is the place where man is dehumanized by so many degenerate forces. Thus, the city becomes the locus where modern man is microscopically focused on and dissected. In the final analysis, the city becomes a "cruel devourer", a cemetery for lost souls.

### **The Forces That Shaped Modernism**

The year 1900 ushered a new era that changed the way that reality was perceived and portrayed. Years later this revolutionary new period would come to be known as modernism and would forever be defined as a time when artists and thinkers rebelled against every conceivable doctrine that was widely accepted by the Establishment, whether in the arts, science, medicine, philosophy, etc. Although modernism would be short-lived, from 1900 to 1930, we are still reeling from its influences sixty-five years later.

How was modernism such a radical departure from what had preceded it in the past? The modernists were militant about distancing themselves from every traditional idea that had been held sacred by Western civilization, and perhaps we can even go so far as to refer to them as intellectual anarchists in their willingness to vandalize anything connected to the established order. In order to better understand this modernist iconoclasm, let's go back in time to explore how and why the human landscape was changing so rapidly.

Modernity, however, was not only shaped by this new technology. Several philosophical theoreticians were to change the way that modern man perceives the external world, particularly in their refutation of the Newtonian principle that reality was an absolute, unquestionable entity divorced from those observing it. The first to do so was F. H. Bradley, who considered that the

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human mind is a more fundamental feature of the universe than matter and that its purpose is to search for truth. His most ambitious work, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (1893), introduced the concept that an object in reality can have no absolute contours but varies from the angle from which it is seen. Thus Bradley defines the identity of a thing as the view the onlooker takes of it. The effect of this work was to encourage rather than dispel doubt. In one of the most seminal works of this century, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," Albert Einstein's theory of relativity held that, if, for all frames of reference, the speed of light is constant and if all natural laws are the same, then both time and motion are found to be relative to the observer. In other words, there is no such thing as universal time and thus experience runs very differently from man to man. Alfred Whitehead was another who revised the ideas of time, space and motion as the basis of man's perception of the external world. He viewed reality as living geometry and believed in the essential relevance of every object to all other objects: "all entities or factors in the universe are essentially relevant to each other's existence since every entity involves an infinite array of perspectives." For all of these thinkers, subjectivity was now the main focus.

Politics and the economy would also transform the way that modern man looked at himself and the world in which he lived. Science and technology were radically changing the means of production. Whereas in the past, a worker became involved in production from beginning to end, by 1900 he had become a mere cog in the production line, making an insignificant contribution. Thus, division of labor made him feel fragmented, alienated not only from the rest of society but from himself. One of the effects of this fragmentation was the consolidation of workers into political parties that threatened the upper classes. And, thus, the new political idealism that was to culminate in the Russian Revolution that swept through Europe.

By 1900 the world was a bustling place transformed by all of the new discoveries, inventions and technological achievements that were being thrust on civilization: electricity, the combustion engine, the incandescent light bulb, the automobile, the airplane, radio, X-rays, fertilizers and so forth. These innovations revolutionized the world in two distinct ways. For one, they created an optimistic aura of a worldly paradise, of a new technology that was to reshape man into moral perfection. In other words, technology became a new religious cult that held the key to a new utopian dream that would transform the very nature of man. Secondly, the new technology quickened the pace through which people experienced life on a day to day basis. For instance, the innovations in the field of transportation and communication accelerated the daily life of the individual. Whereas in the past, a person's life was circumscribed by the lack of mechanical resources available, a person could now expand the scope of daily activities through the new liberating power of the machine. Man now became literally energized by all of these scientific and technological innovations and, more important, felt a rush emanating from the feeling that he was invincible, that there was no stopping him.

Several psychological theoreticians were to also fundamentally alter the way that modern man viewed his own internal reality, an unexplored heart of darkness. Sigmund Freud was the first to gaze inwardly and to discover a world within where dynamic, often warring forces shape the individual's psyche and personality. To explain this internal world within each of us, he developed a complex theory of the unconscious that illustrated the importance of unconscious motivation in behavior and the proposition that psychological events can go on outside of conscious awareness. And so, according to Freud, fantasies, dreams, and slips of the tongue are outward manifestations of unconscious motives. Furthermore, in explaining the development of personality, Freud expanded man's definition of sexuality to include oral, anal, and other bodily sensations. Thus his legacy to the modern world was to expose a darker side of man that had

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been hidden from view by the hypocrisy of 19th- century society.

Freud was not the only psychological theoretician who asked us to gaze inwardly to better understand the human psyche. His disciple, Carl Jung, was also to develop another theory delving into the unconscious which explored the nature of the irrational self and which explained the common grounds shared by so many cultures. Jung's Theory of the Collective Unconscious, about an area of the mind that he believed was shared by everyone, states that there are patterns of behavior or actions and reactions of the psyche which he calls archetypes that are determined by race. These instinctive, universal patterns manifest themselves in dreams, visions, and fantasies and are expressed in myths, religious concepts, fairy tales, and works of art.

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To sum up:

The following are characteristics of Modernism:

- Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
- Belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is.
- There is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.
- No connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
- Championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
- Life is unordered.
- Concerned with the sub-conscious.

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