The Condition of Postmodernity

An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change

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Modernity and modernism

'Modernity,' wrote Baudelaire in his seminal essay 'The painter of modern life' (published in 1863), 'is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.'

I want to pay very close attention to this conjoining of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable. The history of modernism as an aesthetic movement has wavered from one side to the other of this dual formulation, often making it appear as if it can, as Lionel Trilling (1966) once observed, swing around in meaning until it is facing in the opposite direction. Armed with Baudelaire's sense of tension we can, I think, better understand some of the conflicting meanings attributed to modernism, and some of the extraordinarily diverse currents of artistic practice, as well as aesthetic and philosophical judgements offered up in its name.

I shall leave aside, for the moment, the question *why* modern life might be characterized by so much ephemerality and change. But that the condition of modernity is so characterized is not generally disputed. Here, for example, is Berman's (1982, 15) description:

> There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity'. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'

Berman goes on to show how a variety of writers in different places and at different times (Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Biely, among others) confronted and tried to deal with this overwhelming sense of fragmentation, ephemerality, and chaotic change. This same theme has recently been echoed by Frisby (1985) who in a study of three modern thinkers – Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin – emphasizes that 'their central concern was with a distinctive experience of time, space and causality as transitory, fleeting, and fortuitous and arbitrary.' While it may be true that both Berman and Frisby are reading into the past a very strong contemporary sensitivity to ephemerality and fragmentation, and therefore, perhaps, overemphasizing that side of Baudelaire's dual formulation, there is abundant evidence to suggest that most 'modern' writers have recognized that the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity, its penchant, even, for 'totalizing chaos.' The historian Carl Schorske (1981, xix) notes, for example, that in *fin de siècle* Vienna:

> High culture entered a whirl of infinite innovation, with each field proclaiming independence of the whole, each part in turn falling into parts. Into the ruthless centrifuge of change were drawn the very concepts by which cultural phenomena might be fixed in thought. Not only the producers of culture, but also its analysts and critics fell victim to the fragmentation.

The poet W. B. Yeats caught this same mood in the lines:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

If modern life is indeed so suffused with the sense of the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fragmentary, and the contingent, then a number of profound consequences follow. To begin with, modernity can have no respect even for its own past, let alone that of any pre-modern social order. The transitoriness of things makes it difficult to preserve any sense of historical continuity. If there is any meaning to history, then that meaning has to be discovered and defined from within the maelstrom of change, a maelstrom that affects the terms

of discussion as well as whatever it is that is being discussed. Modernity, therefore, not only entails a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions, but is characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself. An avant-garde has usually played, as Poggioli (1968) and Bürger (1984) record, a vital role in the history of modernism, interrupting any sense of continuity by radical surges, recuperations, and repressions. How to interpret this, how to discover the 'eternal and immutable' elements in the midst of such radical disruptions, becomes a serious problem. Even if modernism always remained committed to discover, as the painter Paul Klee put it, 'the essential character of the accidental,' it now had to do so in a field of continually changing meanings that often seemed to 'contradict the rational experience of yesterday.' Aesthetic practices and judgements fragmented into that kind of 'maniacal scrapbook filled with colourful entries that have no relation to each other, no determining, rational, or economic scheme,' which Raban describes as an essential aspect of urban life.

Where, in all of this, could we look for some sense of coherence, let alone say something cogent about the 'eternal and immutable' that was supposed to lurk within this maelstrom of social change in space and time? Enlightenment thinkers generated a philosophical and even a practical answer to that question. Since this answer has dominated much of the subsequent debate over the meaning of modernity, it merits some closer scrutiny.

Although the term 'modern' has a rather more ancient history, what Habermas (1983, 9) calls the *project* of modernity came into focus during the eighteenth century. That project amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers 'to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic.' The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures. Only through such a project could the universal, eternal, and the immutable qualities of all of humanity be revealed.

Enlightenment thought (and I here rely on Cassirer's, 1951, account) embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above

all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains. It took Alexander Pope's injunction, 'the proper study of mankind is man,' with great seriousness. To the degree that it also lauded human creativity, scientific discovery, and the pursuit of individual excellence in the name of human progress, Enlightenment thinkers welcomed the maelstrom of change and saw the transitoriness, the fleeting, and the fragmentary as a necessary condition through which the modernizing project could be achieved. Doctrines of equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence (once allowed the benefits of education), and universal reason abounded. 'A good law must be good for everyone,' pronounced Condorcet in the throes of the French Revolution, 'in exactly the same way that a true proposition is true for all.' Such a vision was incredibly optimistic. Writers like Condorcet, Habermas (1983, 9) notes, were possessed 'of the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.'

The twentieth century – with its death camps and death squads, its militarism and two world wars, its threat of nuclear annihilation and its experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – has certainly shattered this optimism. Worse still, the suspicion lurks that the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation. This was the daring thesis advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *The dialetic of Enlightenment* (1972). Writing in the shadow of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, they argued that the logic that hides behind Enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression. The lust to dominate nature entailed the domination of human beings, and that could only lead, in the end, to 'a nightmare condition of self-domination' (Bernstein, 1985, 9). The revolt of nature, which they posited as the only way out of the impasse, had then to be conceived of as a revolt of human nature against the oppressive power of purely instrumental reason over culture and personality.

Whether or not the Enlightenment project was doomed from the start to plunge us into a Kafkaesque world, whether or not it was bound to lead to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and whether it has any power left to inform and inspire contemporary thought and action, are crucial questions. There are those, like Habermas, who continue to support the project, albeit with a strong dose of scepticism over aims, a lot of anguishing over the relation between means and

ends, and a certain pessimism as to the possibility of realizing such a project under contemporary economic and political conditions. And then there are those – and this is, as we shall see, the core of postmodernist philosophical thought – who insist that we should, in the name of human emancipation, abandon the Enlightenment project entirely. Which position we take depends upon how we explain the 'dark side' of our recent history and the degree to which we attribute it to the defects of Enlightenment reason rather than to a lack of its proper application.

Enlightenment thought, of course, internalized a whole host of difficult problems and possessed not a few troublesome contradictions. To begin with, the question of the relation between means and ends was omni-present, while the goals themselves could never be specified precisely except in terms of some utopian plan that often looked as oppressive to some as it looked emancipatory to others. Furthermore, the question of exactly who possessed the claim to superior reason and under what conditions that reason should be exercised as power had to be squarely faced. Mankind will have to be forced to be free, said Rousseau; and the Jacobins of the French Revolution took over in their political practice where Rousseau's philosophical thought had left off. Francis Bacon, one of the precursors of Enlightenment thought, envisaged in his utopian tract *New Atlantis* a house of wise sages who would be the guardians of knowledge, the ethical judges, and the true scientists; while living outside the daily life of the community they would exercise extraordinary moral power over it. To this vision of an elite but collective male, white wisdom, others opposed the image of the unbridled individualism of great thinkers, the great benefactors of humankind, who through their singular efforts and struggles would push reason and civilization willy-nilly to the point of true emancipation. Others argued either that there was some inherent teleology at work (even, perhaps, divinely inspired), to which the human spirit was bound to respond, or that there existed some social mechanism, such as Adam Smith's celebrated hidden hand of the market, that would convert even the most dubious of moral sentiments into a result advantageous to all. Marx, who in many respects was a child of Enlightenment thought, sought to convert utopian thinking – the struggle for human beings to realize their 'species being' as he put it in his early works – into a materialist science by showing how universal human emancipation might emerge from the class-bound and evidently repressive, though contradictory, logic of capitalist development. In so doing he focused on the working class as the agent of human liberation and emancipation precisely because it was the dominated class of modern

capitalist society. Only when the direct producers were in control of their own destinies, he argued, could we hope to replace domination and repression by a realm of social freedom. But if 'the realm of freedom begins only when the realm of necessity is left behind,' then the progressive side of bourgeois history (particularly its creation of enormous productive powers) had to be fully acknowledged and the positive outcomes of Enlightenment rationality fully appropriated.

The project of modernity has never been without its critics. Edmund Burke made no effort to hide his doubts and disgust at the excesses of the French Revolution. Malthus, rebutting Condorcet's optimism, argued the impossibility of ever escaping the chains of natural scarcity and want. De Sade likewise showed that there might be quite another dimension to human liberation apart from that envisaged in conventional Enlightenment thought. And by the early twentieth century two major, yet quite differently positioned, critics had put their stamp upon the debate. First, there was Max Weber whose overall argument is summarized by Bernstein, a key protagonist in the debate over modernity and its meanings, thus:

> Weber argued that the hope and expectation of the Enlightenment thinkers was a bitter and ironic illusion. They maintained a strong necessary linkage between the growth of science, rationality, and universal human freedom. But when unmasked and understood, the legacy of the Enlightenment was the triumph of . . . purposive–instrumental rationality. This form of rationality affects and infects the entire range of social and cultural life encompassing economic structures, law, bureaucratic administration, and even the arts. The growth of [purposive–instrumental rationality] does not lead to the concrete realization of universal freedom but to the creation of an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no escape. (Bernstein, 1985, 5)

If Weber's 'sober warning' reads like the epitaph of Enlightenment reason, then Nietzsche's earlier attack upon its very premises must surely be regarded as its nemesis. It was rather as if Nietzsche plunged totally into the other side of Baudelaire's formulation in order to show that the modern was nothing more than a vital energy, the will to live and to power, swimming in a sea of disorder, anarchy, destruction, individual alienation, and despair. 'Beneath the surface of modern life, dominated by knowledge and science, he discerned vital energies that were wild, primitive and completely merciless' (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 446). All the Enlighten-

ment imagery about civilization, reason, universal rights, and morality was for naught. The eternal and immutable essence of humanity found its proper representation in the mythical figure of Dionysus: 'to be at one and the same time "destructively creative" (i.e. to form the temporal world of individualization and becoming, a process destructive of unity) and "creatively destructive" (i.e. to devour the illusory universe of individualization, a process involving the reaction of unity)' (loc. cit.). The only path to affirmation of self was to act, to manifest will, in this maelstrom of destructive creation and creative destruction even if the outcome was bound to be tragic.

The image of 'creative destruction' is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before? You simply cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, as a whole line of modernist thinkers from Goethe to Mao have noted. The literary archetype of such a dilemma is, as Berman (1982) and Lukacs (1969) point out, Goethe's *Faust*. An epic hero prepared to destroy religious myths, traditional values, and customary ways of life in order to build a brave new world out of the ashes of the old, Faust is, in the end, a tragic figure. Synthesizing thought and action, Faust forces himself and everyone else (even Mephistopheles) to extremes of organization, pain, and exhaustion in order to master nature and create a new landscape, a sublime spiritual achievement that contains the potentiality for human liberation from want and need. Prepared to eliminate everthing and everyone who stands in the way of the realization of this sublime vision, Faust, to his own ultimate horror, deploys Mephistopheles to kill a much-loved old couple who live in a small cottage by the sea-shore for no other reason than the fact that they do not fit in with the master plan. 'It appears,' says Berman (1982), 'that the very process of development, even as it transforms the wasteland into a thriving physical and social space, recreates the wasteland inside of the developer himself. This is how the tragedy of development works.'

There are enough modern figures – Haussmann at work in Second Empire Paris and Robert Moses at work in New York after World War II – to make this figure of creative destruction more than a myth (plates 1.3, 1.4). But we here see at work that opposition between the ephemeral and the eternal in a rather different guise. If the modernist has to destroy in order to create, then the only way to represent eternal truths is through a process of destruction that is liable, in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths. Yet we are forced, if we strive for the eternal and immutable, to try and put our

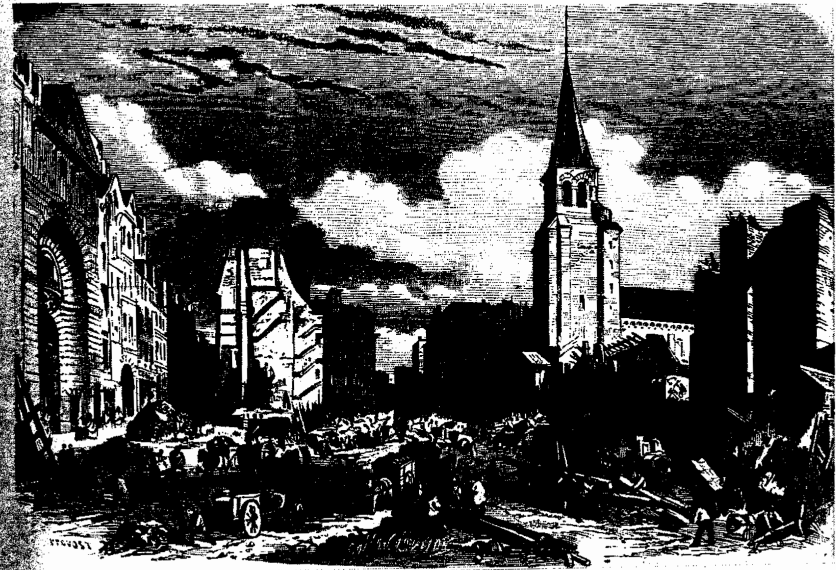

Plate 1.3 Haussmann's creative destruction of Second Empire Paris: the rebuilding of the Place Saint Germain

stamp upon the chaotic, the ephemeral, and the fragmentary. The Nietzschian image of creative destruction and destructive creation bridges the two sides of Baudelaire's formulation in a new way. Interestingly, the economist Schumpeter picked up this very same image in order to understand the processes of capitalist development. The entrepreneur, in Schumpeter's view a heroic figure, was the creative destroyer *par excellence* because the entrepreneur was prepared to push the consequences of technical and social innovation to vital extremes. And it was only through such creative heroism that human progress could be assured. Creative destruction, for Schumpeter, was the progressive leitmotif of benevolent capitalist development. For others, it was simply the necessary condition of twentieth-century progress. Here is Gertrude Stein writing on Picasso in 1938:

> As everything destroys itself in the twentieth century and nothing continues, so then the twentieth century has a splendour which is its own and Picasso is of this century, he has that strange quality of an earth that one has never seen and of things destroyed as they have never been destroyed. So then Picasso has his splendour.

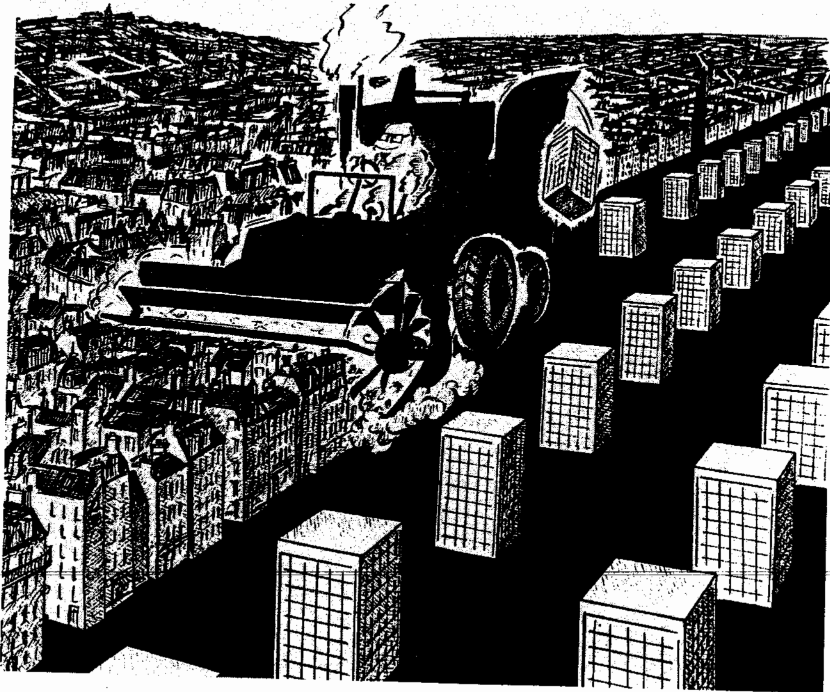

Plate 1.4 The boulevard art of Paris, attacking the modernist destruction of the ancient urban fabric: a cartoon by J. F. Batellier in 'Sans Retour, Ni Consigne'

Prophetic words and a prophetic conception this, on the part of both Schumpeter and Stein, in the years before the greatest event in capitalism's history of creative destruction – World War II.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly after Nietzsche's intervention, it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment reason a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and immutable essence of human nature. To the degree that Nietzsche had led the way in placing aesthetics above science, rationality, and politics, so the exploration of aesthetic experience – 'beyond good and evil' – became a powerful means to establish a new mythology as to what the eternal and the immutable might be about in the midst of all the ephemerality, fragmentation, and patent chaos of modern life. This gave a new role, and a new impetus, to cultural modernism.

Artists, writers, architects, composers, poets, thinkers, and philosophers had a very special position within this new conception of the modernist project. If the 'eternal and immutable' could no longer

be automatically presupposed, then the modern artist had a creative role to play in defining the essence of humanity. If 'creative destruction' was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the artist as individual had a heroic role to play (even if the consequences might be tragic). The artist, argued Frank Lloyd Wright – one of the greatest of all modernist architects – must not only comprehend the spirit of his age but also initiate the process of changing it.

We here encounter one of the more intriguing, but to many deeply troubling, aspects to modernism's history. For when Rousseau replaced Descartes's famous maxim 'I think therefore I exist,' with 'I feel therefore I exist,' he signalled a radical shift from a rational and instrumentalist to a more consciously aesthetic strategy for realizing Enlightenment aims. At about the same time, Kant, too, recognized that aesthetic judgement had to be construed as distinct from practical reason (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge), and that it formed a necessary though problematic bridge between the two. The exploration of aesthetics as a separate realm of cognition was very much an eighteenth-century affair. It arose in part out of the need to come to terms with the immense variety of cultural artefacts, produced under very different social conditions, which increasing trade and cultural contact revealed. Did Ming vases, Grecian urns, and Dresden china all express some common sentiment of beauty? But it also arose out of the sheer difficulty of translating Enlightenment principles of rational and scientific understanding into moral and political principles appropriate for action. It was into this gap that Nietzsche was later to insert his powerful message with such devastating effect, that art and aesthetic sentiments had the power to go beyond good or evil. The pursuit of aesthetic experience as an end in itself became, of course, the hallmark of the romantic movement (as exemplified by, say, Shelley and Byron). It generated that wave of 'radical subjectivism,' of 'untrammelled individualism,' and of 'search for individual self-realization' which, in Daniel Bell's (1978) view, has long put modernist cultural behaviour and artistic practices fundamentally at odds with the protestant ethic. Hedonism fits ill, according to Bell, with the saving and investment which supposedly nourish capitalism. Whatever view we take of Bell's thesis, it is surely true that the romantics paved the way for active aesthetic interventions in cultural and political life. Such interventions were anticipated by writers such as Condorcet and Saint-Simon. The latter insisted, for example, that,

> It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde. What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a

positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties in the epoch of their greatest development! (quoted in Bell, 1978, 35; cf. Poggioli, 1968, 9)

The problem with such sentiments is that they see the aesthetic link between science and morality, between knowledge and action, in such a way as 'never to be threatened by historical evolution' (Raphael, 1981, 7). Aesthetic judgement, as in the cases of Heidegger and Pound, could just as easily lead to the right as to the left of the political spectrum. As Baudelaire was very quick to see, if flux and change, ephemerality and fragmentation, formed the material basis of modern life, then the definition of a modernist aesthetic depended crucially upon the artist's positioning with respect to such processes. The individual artist could contest them, embrace them, try to dominate them, or simply swim within them, but the artist could never ignore them. The effect of any one of these positionings was, of course, to alter the way cultural producers thought about the flux and change as well as the political terms in which they represented the eternal and immutable. The twists and turns of modernism as a cultural aesthetic can largely be understood against the background of such strategic choices.

I cannot here rehearse the vast and convoluted history of cultural modernism since its inception in Paris after 1848. But some very general points need to be made if we are to understand the postmodernist reaction. If we go back to Baudelaire's formulation, for example, we find him defining the artist as someone who can concentrate his or her vision on ordinary subjects of city life, understand their fleeting qualities, and yet extract from the passing moment all the suggestions of eternity it contains. The successful modern artist was one who could find the universal and the eternal, 'distil the bitter or heady flavour of the wine of life' from 'the ephemeral, the fleeting forms of beauty in our day' (Baudelaire, 1981, 435). To the degree that modernist art managed to do that it became our art, precisely because 'it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos' (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 27).

But how to *represent* the eternal and the immutable in the midst of all the chaos? To the degree that naturalism and realism proved inadequate (see below p. 262), the artist, architect, and writer had to find some special way to represent it. Modernism from its very beginning, therefore, became preoccupied with language, with finding some special mode of representation of eternal truths. Individual achievement depended upon innovation in language and in modes of

representation, with the result that the modernist work, as Lunn (1985, 41) observes, 'often wilfully reveals its own reality as a construction or an artifice,' thereby transforming much of art into a 'self-referential construct rather than a mirror of society.' Writers like James Joyce and Proust, poets like Mallarmé and Aragon, painters like Manet, Pissarro, Jackson Pollock, all showed a tremendous preoccupation with the creation of new codes, significations, and metaphorical allusions in the languages they constructed. But if the word was indeed fleeting, ephemeral, and chaotic, then the artist had, for that very reason, to represent the eternal through an instantaneous effect, making 'shock tactics and the violation of expected continuities' vital to the hammering home of the message that the artist sought to convey.

Modernism could speak to the eternal only by freezing time and all its fleeting qualities. For the architect, charged to design and build a relatively permanent spatial structure, this was a simple enough proposition. Architecture, wrote Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s, 'is the will of the age conceived in spatial terms.' But for others the 'spatialization of time' through the image, the dramatic gesture, and instantaneous shock, or simply by montage/collage was more problematic. T. S. Eliot ruminated on the problem in *Four Quartets* this way:

> To be conscious is not to be in time
> But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
> The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
> Be remembered; involved with past and future.
> Only through time time is conquered.

Resort to the techniques of montage/collage provided one means of addressing this problem, since different effects out of different times (old newspapers) and spaces (the use of common objects) could be superimposed to create a simultaneous effect. By exploring simultaneity in this way, 'modernists were accepting the ephemeral and transitory as the locus of their art' at the same time as they were forced collectively to reaffirm the potency of the very conditions against which they were reacting. Le Corbusier recognized the problem in his 1924 tract *The city of tomorrow*. 'People tax me very readily with being a revolutionary,' he complained, but the 'equilibrium they try so hard to maintain is for vital reasons purely ephemeral: it is a balance which has to be perpetually re-established.' Furthermore, the sheer inventiveness of all those 'eager minds likely to disturb' that equilibrium produced the ephemeral and fleeting qualitities of aesthetic judgement itself, accelerated changes in

aesthetic fashions rather than slowed them down: impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism, fauvism, Dada, surrealism, expressionism, etc. 'The avant-garde,' comments Poggioli in his most lucid study of its history, 'is condemned to conquer, through the influence of fashion, that very popularity it once disdained – and this is the beginning of its end.'

Furthermore, the commodification and commercialization of a market for cultural products during the nineteenth century (and the concomitant decline of aristocratic, state, or institutional patronage) forced cultural producers into a market form of competition that was bound to reinforce processes of 'creative destruction' within the aesthetic field itself. This mirrored and in some instances surged ahead of anything going on in the political–economic sphere. Each and every artist sought to change the bases of aesthetic judgement, if only to sell his or her product. It also depended on the formation of a distinctive class of 'cultural consumers.' Artists, for all their predilection for anti-establishment and anti-bourgeois rhetoric, spent much more energy struggling with each other and against their own traditions in order to sell their products than they did engaging in real political action.

The struggle to produce a *work of art,* a once and for all creation that could find a unique place in the market, had to be an individual effort forged under competitive circumstances. Modernist art has always been, therefore, what Benjamin calls 'auratic art,' in the sense that the artist had to assume an aura of creativity, of dedication to art for art's sake, in order to produce a cultural object that would be original, unique, and hence eminently marketable at a monopoly price. The result was often a highly individualistic, aristocratic, disdainful (particularly of popular culture), and even arrogant perspective on the part of cultural producers, but it also indicated how our reality might be constructed and re-constructed through aesthetically informed activity. It could be, at best, profoundly moving, challenging, upsetting, or exhortatory to many who were exposed to it. Recognizing this feature, certain avant-gardes – Dadaists, early surrealists – tried to mobilize their aesthetic capacities to revolutionary ends by fusing their art into popular culture. Others, like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, sought to impose it from above for similar revolutionary purposes. And it was not only Gropius who thought it important to 'bring art back to the people through the production of beautiful things.' Modernism internalized its own maelstrom of ambiguities, contradictions, and pulsating aesthetic changes at the same time as it sought to affect the aesthetics of daily life.

The facts of that daily life had, however, more than a passing influence upon the aesthetic sensibility created, no matter how much the artists themselves proclaimed an aura of 'art for art's sake.' To begin with, as Benjamin (1969) points out in his celebrated essay on 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' the changing technical capacity to reproduce, disseminate, and sell books and images to mass audiences, coupled with the invention of first photography and then film (to which we would now add radio and television), radically changed the material conditions of the artists' existence and, hence, their social and political role. And apart from the general consciousness of flux and change which flowed through all modernist works, a fascination with technique, with speed and motion, with the machine and the factory system, as well as with the stream of new commodities entering into daily life, provoked a wide range of aesthetic responses varying from denial, through imitation to speculation on utopian possibilities. Thus, as Reyner Banham (1984) shows, early modernist architects like Mies van der Rohe drew a lot of their inspiration from the purely functional grain elevators then springing up all over the American Midwest. Le Corbusier in his plans and writings took what he saw as the possibilities inherent in the machine, factory, and automobile age and projected them into some utopian future (Fishman, 1982). Tichi (1987, 19) documents how popular American journals like *Good Housekeeping* were depicting the house as 'nothing more than a factory for the production of happiness' as early as 1910, years before Le Corbusier ventured his celebrated (and now much reviled) dictum that the house is a 'machine for modern living.'

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that the modernism that emerged before the First World War was more of a reaction to the new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications), and consumption (the rise of mass markets, advertising, mass fashion) than it was a pioneer in the production of such changes. Yet the form the reaction took was to be of considerable subsequent importance. Not only did it provide ways to absorb, reflect upon, and codify these rapid changes, but it also suggested lines of action that might modify or support them. William Morris, for example, reacting against the de-skilling of craft workers through machine and factory production under the command of capitalists, sought to promote a new artisan culture which combined the power of craft tradition with a powerful plea 'for simplicity of design, a cleaning out of all sham, waste and self-indulgence' (Relph, 1987, 99–107). As Relph goes on to point out, the Bauhaus, the highly influential

William Morris contradictory response to de-skilling

German design unit founded in 1919, initially took much of its inspiration from the Arts and Crafts Movement that Morris had founded, and only subsequently (1923) turned to the idea that 'the machine is our modern medium of design.' The Bauhaus was able to exercise the influence it did over production and design precisely through its redefinition of 'craft' as the skill to mass-produce goods of an aesthetically pleasing nature with machine efficiency.

These were the sorts of diverse reactions that made of modernism such a complex and often contradictory affair. It was, write Bradbury and McFarlane (1976, 46),

> an extraordinary compound of the futurist and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was the celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expression of these things.

Such diverse elements and oppositions were composed into quite different brews of modernist sentiment and sensibility in different places and times:

> One can draw maps showing artistic centres and provinces, the international balance of cultural power – never quite the same as, though doubtlessly intricately related to, the balance of political and economic power. The maps change as the aesthetics change: Paris is surely, for Modernism, the outright dominant centre, as the fount of bohemia, tolerance and the *émigré* life-style, but we can sense the decline of Rome and Florence, the rise and then fall of London, the phase of dominance of Berlin and Munich, the energetic bursts from Norway and Finland, the radiation out of Vienna, as being essential stages in the shifting geography of Modernism, charted by the movement of writers and artists, the flow of thought waves, the explosions of significant artistic production.' (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 102)

This complex historical geography of modernism (a tale yet to be fully written and explained) makes it doubly difficult to interpret exactly what modernism was about. The tensions between internationalism and nationalism, between globalism and parochialist

ethnocentrism, between universalism and class privileges, were never far from the surface. Modernism at its best tried to confront the tensions, but at its worst either swept them under the rug or exploited them (as did the United States in its appropriation of modernist art after 1945) for cynical, political advantage (Guilbaut, 1983). Modernism look quite different depending on where one locates oneself and when. For while the movement as a whole had a definite internationalist and universalist stance, often deliberately sought for and conceived, it also clung fiercely to the idea of 'an elite international avant-garde art held in a fructifying relationship with a strong-felt sense of place' (ibid., p. 157). The particularities of place – and I here think not only of the village-like communities in which artists typically moved but also of the quite different social, economic, political, and environmental conditions that prevailed in, say, Chicago, New York, Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, or Berlin – therefore put a distinctive stamp on the diversity of the modernist effort (see Part III, below).

It also seems that modernism, after 1848, was very much an urban phenomenon, that it existed in a restless but intricate relationship with the experience of explosive urban growth (several cities surging above the million mark by the end of the century), strong rural-to-urban migration, industrialization, mechanization, massive re-orderings of built environments, and politically based urban movements, of which the revolutionary uprisings in Paris in 1848 and 1871 were a clear but ominous symbol. The pressing need to confront the psychological, sociological, technical, organizational, and political problems of massive urbanization was one of the seed-beds in which modernist movements flourished. Modernism was 'an art of cities' and evidently found 'its natural habitat in cities,' and Bradbury and McFarlane pull together a variety of studies of individual cities to support the point. Other studies, such as T. J. Clark's magnificent work on the art of Manet and his followers in Second Empire Paris, or Schorske's equally brilliant synthesis of cultural movements in *fin de siècle* Vienna, confirm how important the urban experience was in shaping the cultural dynamics of diverse modernist movements. And it was, after all, in response to the profound crisis of urban organization, impoverishment, and congestion that a whole wing of modernist practice and thinking was directly shaped (see Timms and Kelley, 1985). There is a strong connecting thread from Haussmann's re-shaping of Paris in the 1860s through the 'garden city' proposals of Ebenezer Howard (1898), Daniel Burnham (the 'White City' constructed for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the Chicago Regional Plan of 1907), Garnier (the linear industrial city of 1903), Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner (with quite different plans to trans-

Simmel on fashion as response to modernity

form *fin de siècle* Vienna), Le Corbusier (*The city of tomorrow* and the *Plan Voisin* proposal for Paris of 1924), Frank Lloyd Wright (the Broadacre project of 1935) to the large-scale urban renewal efforts undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s in the spirit of high modernism. The city, remarks de Certeau (1984, 95) 'is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity.'

Georg Simmel put a rather special gloss on the connection in his extraordinary essay 'The metropolis and mental life,' published in 1911. Simmel there contemplated how we might respond to and internalize, psychologically and intellectually, the incredible diversity of experiences and stimuli to which modern urban life exposed us. We were, on the one hand, liberated from the chains of subjective dependence and thereby allowed a much greater degree of individual liberty. But this was achieved at the expense of treating others in objective and instrumental terms. We had no choice except to relate to faceless 'others' via the cold and heartless calculus of the necessary money exchanges which could co-ordinate a proliferating social division of labour. We also submit to a rigorous disciplining in our sense of space and time, and surrender ourselves to the hegemony of calculating economic rationality. Rapid urbanization, furthermore, produced what he called a 'blasé attitude,' for it was only by screening out the complex stimuli that stemmed from the rush of modern life that we could tolerate its extremes. Our only outlet, he seems to say, is to cultivate a sham individualism through pursuit of signs of status, fashion, or marks of individual eccentricity. Fashion, for example, combines 'the attraction of differentiation and change with that of similarity and conformity'; the 'more nervous an epoch is, the more rapidly will its fashions change, because the need for the attraction of differentiation, one of the essential agents of fashion, goes hand in hand with the languishing of nervous energies' (quoted in Frisby, 1985, 98).

My purpose here is not to judge Simmel's vision (though the parallels and contrasts with Raban's more recent postmodernist essay are most instructive) but to see it as one representation of a connection between the urban experience and modernist thought and practice. The qualities of modernism seem to have varied, albeit in an interactive way, across the spectrum of the large polyglot cities that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, certain kinds of modernism achieved a particular trajectory through the capitals of the world, each flourishing as a cultural arena of a particular sort. The geographical trajectory from Paris to Berlin, Vienna, London, Moscow, Chicago, and New York could be reversed as well as short-cut depending upon which sort of modernist practice one has in mind.

If, for example, we were to look solely at the diffusion of those material practices from which intellectual and aesthetic modernism drew so much of its stimulus – the machines, the new transport and communication systems, skyscrapers, bridges, and engineering wonders of all kinds, as well as the incredible instability and insecurity that accompanied rapid innovation and social change – then the United States (and Chicago in particular) should probably be regarded as the catalyst of modernism after 1870 or so. Yet, in this case, the very lack of 'traditionalist' (feudal and aristocratic) resistance, and the parallel popular acceptance of broadly modernist sentiments (of the sort that Tichi documents), made the works of artists and intellectuals rather less important as the avant-garde cutting edge of social change. Edward Bellamy's populist novel of a modernist utopia, *Looking backwards*, gained rapid acceptance and even spawned a political movement in the 1890s. Edgar Allan Poe's work, on the other hand, achieved very little initial honour in its own land even if he was regarded as one of the great modernist writers by Baudelaire (whose Poe translations, to this day very popular, were illustrated by Manet as early as the 1860s). Louis Sullivan's architectural genius likewise remained largely buried in the extraordinary ferment of Chicago's modernization. Daniel Burnham's highly modernist conception of rational urban planning tended to get lost in his penchant for ornamentation of buildings and classicism of individual building design. The fierce class and traditional resistances to capitalist modernization in Europe, on the other hand, made the intellectual and aesthetic movements of modernism much more important as a cutting edge of social change, giving to the avantgarde a political and social role broadly denied them in the United States until after 1945. Hardly suprisingly, the history of intellectual and aesthetic modernism is much more Euro-centered, with some of the less progressive or class-divided urban centres (such as Paris and Vienna) generating some of the greatest ferments.

It is invidious, but nevertheless useful, to impose upon this complex history some relatively simple periodizations, if only to help understand what kind of modernism the postmodernists are reacting against. The Enlightenment project, for example, took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavours were all about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends. This was a way of thinking that writers as diverse as Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot, Condorcet, Hume, Adam Smith,

Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Matthew Arnold, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill all had in common.

But after 1848 the idea that there was only one possible mode of representation began to break down. The categorical fixity of Enlightenment thought was increasingly challenged, and ultimately replaced by an emphasis upon divergent systems of representation. In Paris, writers like Baudelaire and Flaubert and painters like Manet began to explore the possibility of different representational modes in ways that resembled the discovery of the non-Euclidean geometries which shattered the supposed unity of mathematical language in the nineteenth century. Tentative at first, the idea exploded from 1890 onwards into an incredible diversity of thought and experimentation in centres as different as Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Munich, London, New York, Chicago, Copenhagen, and Moscow, to reach its apogee shortly before the First World War. Most commentators agree that this furore of experimentation resulted in a qualitative transformation in what modernism was about somewhere between 1910 and 1915. (Virginia Woolf preferred the earlier date and D. H. Lawrence the later.) In retrospect, as Bradbury and McFarlane document convincingly, it is not hard to see that some kind of radical transformation did indeed occur in these years. Proust's *Swann's way* (1913), Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Lawrence's *Sons and lovers* (1913), Mann's *Death in Venice* (1914), Pound's 'Vorticist manifesto' of 1914 (in which he likened pure language to efficient machine technology) are some of the marker texts published at a time that also witnessed an extraordinary efflorescence in art (Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Duchamp, Braque, Klee, de Chirico, Kandinsky, many of whose works turned up in the famous Armory Show in New York in 1913, to be seen by more than 10,000 visitors a day), music (Stravinsky's *The rite of spring* opened to a riot in 1913 and was paralleled by the arrival of the atonal music of Schoenberg, Berg, Bartok, and others), to say nothing of the dramatic shift in linguistics (Saussure's structuralist theory of language, in which the meaning of words is given by their relation to other words rather than by their reference to objects, was conceived in 1911) and in physics, consequent upon Einstein's generalization of the theory of relativity with its appeal to, and material justification of, non-Euclidean geometries. Equally significant, as we shall later see, was the publication of F. W. Taylor's *The principles of scientific management* in 1911, two years before Henry Ford set in motion the first example of assembly-line production in Dearborn, Michigan.

It is hard not to conclude that the whole world of representation and of knowledge underwent a fundamental transformation during

this short space of time. How and why it did so is the quintessential question. In Part III we shall explore the thesis that the simultaneity derived from a radical change in the experience of space and time in Western capitalism. But there are some other elements in the situation which deserve note.

The changes were certainly affected by the loss of faith in the ineluctability of progress, and by the growing unease with the categorical fixity of Enlightenment thought. The unease in part derived from the turbulent path of class struggle, particularly after the revolutions of 1848 and the publication of *The communist manifesto*. Before then, thinkers in the Enlightenment tradition, such as Adam Smith or Saint-Simon, could reasonably argue that once the shackles of feudal class relations had been thrown off, a benevolent capitalism (organized either through the hidden hand of the market or through the power of association made much of by Saint-Simon) could bring the benefits of capitalist modernity to all. This was a thesis vigorously rejected by Marx and Engels, and it became less tenable as the century wore on and the class disparities produced within capitalism became more and more evident. The socialist movement increasingly challenged the unity of Enlightenment reason and inserted a class dimension into modernism. Was it the bourgeoisie or the workers' movement which was to inform and direct the modernist project? And whose side were the cultural producers on?

There could be no simple answer to that question. To begin with, propagandistic and directly political art that integrated with a revolutionary political movement was hard to make consistent with the modernist canon for individualistic and intensely 'auratic' art. To be sure, the idea of an artistic avant-garde could, under certain circumstances, be integrated with that of a political avant-garde party. From time to time communist parties have striven to mobilize 'the forces of culture' as part of their revolutionary programme, while some of the avant-garde artistic movements and artists (Léger, Picasso, Aragon, etc.) actively supported the communist cause. Even in the absence of any explicit political agenda, however, cultural production had to have political effects. Artists, after all, relate to events and issues around them, and construct ways of seeing and representing which have social meanings. In the halcyon days of modernist innovation before World War I, for example, the kind of art produced celebrated universals even in the midst of multiple perspectives. It was expressive of alienation, antagonistic to all sense of hierarchy (even of the subject, as cubism showed), and frequently critical of 'bourgeois' consumerism and life-styles. Modernism was during that phase very much on the side of a democratizing spirit and progressive

universalism, even when at its most 'auratic' in conception. Between the wars, on the other hand, artists were more and more forced by events to wear their political commitments on their sleeves.

The shift in modernism's tone also stemmed from the need to confront head-on the sense of anarchy, disorder, and despair that Nietzsche had sown at a time of astonishing agitation, restlessness, and instability in political–economic life – an instability which the anarchist movement of the late nineteenth century grappled with and contributed to in important ways. The articulation of erotic, psychological, and irrational needs (of the sort that Freud identified and Klimt represented in his free-flowing art) added another dimension to the confusion. This particular surge of modernism, therefore, had to recognize the impossibility of representing the world in a single language. Understanding had to be constructed through the exploration of multiple perspectives. Modernism, in short, took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality.

Whatever may have constituted this singular underlying reality and its 'eternal presence' remained obscure. From this standpoint Lenin, for one, inveighed against the errors of relativism and multiple perspectivism in his criticisms of Mach's 'idealist' physics, and tried to emphasize the political as well as the intellectual dangers to which formless relativism surely pointed. There is a sense in which the outbreak of the First World War, that vast inter-imperialist struggle, vindicated Lenin's argument. Certainly, a strong case can be made that 'modernist subjectivity ... was simply unable to cope with the crisis into which Europe in 1914 was plunged' (Taylor, 1987, 127).

The trauma of world war and its political and intellectual responses (some of which we shall take up more directly in Part III) opened the way to a consideration of what might constitute the essential and eternal qualities of modernity that lay on the nether side of Baudelaire's formulation. In the absence of Enlightenment certitudes as to the perfectibility of man, the search for a myth appropriate to modernity became paramount. The surrealist writer Louis Aragon, for example, suggested that his central aim in *Paris peasant* (written in the 1920s) was to elaborate a novel 'that would present itself as mythology,' adding, 'naturally, a mythology of the modern.' But it also seemed possible to build metaphorical bridges between ancient and modern myths. Joyce chose Ulysses, while Le Corbusier, according to Frampton (1980), always sought 'to resolve the dichotomy between the Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture, to inform utility with the hierarchy of myth' (a practice he increasingly emphasized in his

creations at Chandigarh and Ronchamp in the 1960s). But who or what was it that was being mythologized? This was the central question that characterized the so-called 'heroic' period of modernism.

Modernism in the inter-war years may have been 'heroic' but it was also fraught with disaster. Action was plainly needed to rebuild the war-torn economies of Europe as well as to solve all the problems of the political discontents associated with capitalist forms of burgeoning urban–industrial growth. The fading of unified Enlightenment beliefs and the emergence of perspectivism left open the possibility of informing social action with some aesthetic vision, so that the struggles between the different currents of modernism became of more than just passing interest. What is more, the cultural producers knew it. Aesthetic modernism was important, and the stakes were high. The appeal to 'eternal' myth became even more imperative. But that search turned out to be as confused as it was dangerous. 'Reason coming to terms with its mythical origins, becomes bewilderingly tangled with myth ... myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment relapses into mythology' (Huyssens, 1984).

The myth either had to redeem us from 'the formless universe of contingency' or, more programmatically, to provide the impetus for a new project for human endeavour. One wing of modernism appealed to the image of rationality incorporated in the machine, the factory, the power of contemporary technology, or the city as a 'living machine.' Ezra Pound had already advanced the thesis that language should conform to machine efficiency and, as Tichi (1987) has observed, modernist writers as diverse as Dos Passos, Hemingway, and William Carlos Williams modelled their writing on exactly that proposition. Williams specifically held, for example, that a poem is nothing more or less than ' a machine made of words.' And this was the theme that Diego Rivera celebrated so vigorously in his extraordinary Detroit murals and which became the leitmotif of many progressive mural painters in the United States during the depression (plate 1.5).

'Truth is the significance of fact,' said Mies van der Rohe, and a host of cultural producers, particularly those working in and around the influential Bauhaus movement of the 1920s, set out to impose rational order ('rational' defined by technological efficiency and machine production) for socially useful goals (human emancipation, emancipation of the proletariat, and the like). 'By order bring about freedom,' was one of Le Corbusier's slogans, and he emphasized that freedom and liberty in the contemporary metropolis depended crucially upon the imposition of rational order. Modernism in the inter-

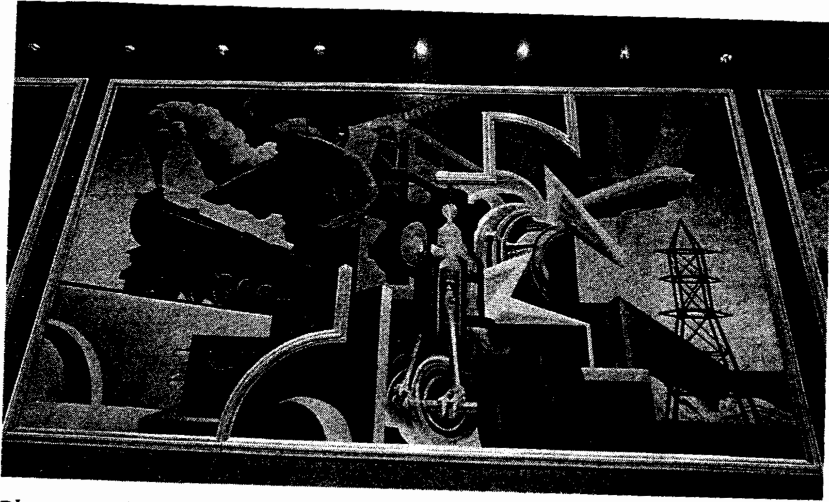

Plate 1.5 The myth of the machine dominated modernist as well as realist art in the inter-war years: Thomas Hart Benton's 1929 mural 'Instruments of Power' is a typical exemplar.

war period took a strongly positivist turn and, through the intensive efforts of the Vienna Circle, established a new style of philosophy which was to become central to social thought after World War II. Logical positivism was as compatible with the practices of modernist architecture as it was with the advance of all forms of science as avatars of technical control. This was the period when houses and cities could be openly conceived of as 'machines for living in'. It was during these years also that the powerful Congress of International Modern Architects (CIAM) came together to adopt its celebrated Athens Charter of 1933, a charter that for the next thirty years or so was to define broadly what modernist architectural practice was to be about.

Such a limited vision of the essential qualities of modernism was open to easy enough perversion and abuse. There are strong objections even within modernism (think of Chaplin's *Modern Times*) to the idea that the machine, the factory, and the rationalized city provide a sufficiently rich conception to define the eternal qualities of modern life. The problem for 'heroic' modernism was, quite simply, that once the machine myth was abandoned, any myth could be lodged into that central position of the 'eternal truth' presupposed in the modernist project. Baudelaire himself, for example, had dedicated his essay 'The *Salon* of 1846' to the bourgeois who sought to 'realize the

Mussolini as modernist hero

idea of the future in all its diverse forms, political, industrial, and artistic.' An economist like Schumpeter would surely have applauded that.

The Italian futurists were so fascinated by speed and power that they embraced creative destruction and violent militarism to the point where Mussolini could become their hero. De Chirico lost interest in modernist experimentation after World War I and sought a commercialized art with roots in classical beauty mingled with powerful horses and narcissistic pictures of himself dressed up in historic costumes (all of which were to earn him the approval of Mussolini). Pound too, with his thirst for machine efficiency of language and his admiration of the avant-gardist warrior poet capable of dominating a 'witless multitude,' became deeply attached to a political regime (Mussolini's) that could ensure that the trains ran on time. Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, may have actively attacked modernism's aesthetic principles in his resurrection of classicist themes, but he was to take over many modernist techniques and put them to nationalist ends with the same ruthlessness that Hitler's engineers showed in taking over the practices of Bauhaus design in their construction of the death camps (see, for example, Lane's, 1985, illuminating study, *Architecture and politics in Germany, 1918–1945*). It proved possible to combine up-to-date scientific engineering practices, as incorporated in the most extreme forms of technical–bureaucratic and machine rationality, with a myth of Aryan superiority and the blood and soil of the Fatherland. It was exactly in this way that a virulent form of 'reactionary modernism' came to have the purchase it did in Nazi Germany, suggesting that this whole episode, while modernist in certain senses, owed more to the weakness of Enlightenment thought than it did to any dialectal reversal or progression to a 'natural' conclusion (Herf, 1984, 233).

This was a period when the always latent tensions between internationalism and nationalism, between universalism and class politics, were heightened into absolute and unstable contradiction. It was hard to remain indifferent to the Russian revolution, the rising power of socialist and communist movements, the collapse of economies and governments, and the rise of fascism. Politically committed art took over one wing of the modernist movement. Surrealism, constructivism, and socialist realism all sought to mythologize the proletariat in their respective ways, and the Russians set about inscribing that in space, as did a whole succession of socialist governments in Europe, through the creation of buildings like the celebrated Karl Marx-Hof in Vienna (designed not only to house workers but also to be a bastion of military defence against any rural conservative assault

mounted against a socialist city). But the configurations were unstable. No sooner had doctrines of socialist realism been enunciated as a rejoinder to 'decadent' bourgeois modernism and fascist nationalism, than popular front politics on the part of many communist parties led to a swing back to nationalist art and culture as a means to unite proletarian with wavering middle-class forces in the united front against fascism.

Many artists of the avant-garde tried to resist such direct social referencing and cast their net far and wide for more universal mythological statements. T. S. Eliot created a virtual melting pot of imagery and languages drawn from every corner of the earth in *The Waste Land,* and Picasso (amongst others) plundered the world of primitive (particularly African) art during some of his more creative phases. During the inter-war years there was something desperate about the search for a mythology that could somehow straighten society out in such troubled times. Raphael (1981, xii) captures the dilemmas in his trenchant but sympathetic critique of Picasso's *Guernica:*

> The reasons for which Picasso was compelled to resort to signs and allegories should now be clear enough: his utter political helplessness in the face of a historical situation which he set out to record; his titanic effort to confront a particular historical event with an allegedly eternal truth; his desire to give hope and comfort and to provide a happy ending, to compensate for the terror, the destruction, and inhumanity of the event. Picasso did not see what Goya had already seen, namely, that the course of history can be changed only by historical means and only if men shape their own history instead of acting as the automaton of an earthly power or an allegedly eternal idea.

Unfortunately, as Georges Sorel (1974) suggested in his brilliant *Reflections on violence,* first published in 1908, it was possible to invent myths that might have a consuming power over class politics. Syndicalism of the sort that Sorel promoted originated as a participatory movement of the left, deeply antagonistic to all forms of state power, but evolved into a corporatist movement (attractive to someone like Le Corbusier in the 1930s) that became a powerful organizing tool of the fascist right. In so doing it was able to appeal to certain myths of a hierarchically ordered but nevertheless participatory and exclusive community, with clear identity and close social bonding, replete with its own myths of origin and omnipotence. It is instructive to note how heavily fascism drew upon classical

references (architecturally, politically, historically) and built mythological conceptions accordingly. Raphael (1981, 95) suggests an interesting reason: the Greeks 'were always conscious of the national character of their mythology, whereas the Christians always ascribed to theirs a value independent of space and time.' The German philosopher Heidegger likewise in part based his allegiance to the principles (if not the practices) of Nazism on his rejection of a universalizing machine rationality as an appropriate mythology for modern life. He proposed, instead, a counter-myth of rootedness in place and environmentally-bound traditions as the only secure foundation for political and social action in a manifestly troubled world (see Part III). The aestheticization of politics through the production of such all-consuming myths (of which Nazism was but one) was the tragic side of the modernist project that became more and more salient as the 'heroic' era came crashing to an end in World War II.

If the modernism of the inter-war years was 'heroic' but fraught with disaster, the 'universal' or 'high' modernism that became hegemonic after 1945 exhibited a much more comfortable relation to the dominant power centres in society. The contested search for an appropriate myth appeared to abate in part, I suspect, because the international power system – organized, as we shall see in Part II, along Fordist–Keynesian lines under the watchful eye of US hegemony – itself became relatively stable. High modernist art, architecture, literature, etc. became establishment arts and practices in a society where a corporate capitalist version of the Enlightenment project of development for progress and human emancipation held sway as a political–economic dominant.

The belief 'in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders' under standardized conditions of knowledge and production was particularly strong. The modernism that resulted was, as a result, 'positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic' at the same time as it was imposed as the work of an elite avant-garde of planners, artists, architects, critics, and other guardians of high taste. The 'modernization' of European economies proceeded apace, while the whole thrust of international politics and trade was justified as bringing a benevolent and progressive 'modernization process' to a backward Third World.

In architecture, for example, the ideas of the CIAM, of Le Corbusier, and of Mies van der Rohe, held sway in the struggle to revitalize war-torn or ageing cities (reconstruction and urban renewal), to reorganize transport systems, build factories, hospitals, schools, state works of all kinds, and last, but not least, to build adequate housing for a potentially restless working class. It is easy in

retrospect to argue that the architecture that resulted merely produced impeccable images of power and prestige for publicity-conscious corporations and governments, while producing modernist housing projects for the working class that became 'symbols of alienation and dehumanization' on the other (Huyssens, 1984, 14; Frampton, 1980). But it is also arguable that some kind of large-scale planning and industrialization of the construction industry, coupled with the exploration of techniques for high-speed transportation and high-density development, were necessary if capitalistic solutions were to be found to the dilemmas of postwar development and political–economic stabilization. In many of these respects high modernism succeeded only too well.

Its real nether side lay, I would suggest, in its subterranean celebration of corporate bureaucratic power and rationality, under the guise of a return to surface worship of the efficient machine as a sufficient myth to embody all human aspirations. In architecture and planning, this meant the eschewing of ornament and personalized design (to the point where public housing tenants were not allowed to modify their environments to meet personal needs, and the students living in Le Corbusier's Pavillon Suisse had to fry every summer because the architect refused, for aesthetic reasons, to let blinds be installed). It also meant a prevailing passion for massive spaces and perspectives, for uniformity and the power of the straight line (always superior to the curve, pronounced Le Corbusier). Giedion's *Space, time and architecture,* first published in 1941, became the aesthetic bible of this movement. The great modernist literature of Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Faulkner – once judged as subversive, incomprehensible, or shocking – was taken over and canonized by the establishment (in universities and the major literary reviews).

Guilbaut's (1983) account of *How New York stole the idea of modern art* is instructive here, not least because of the multiple ironies that the story reveals. The traumas of World War II and the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were, like the traumas of World War I, hard to absorb and represent in any realist way, and the turn to abstract expressionism on the part of painters like Rothko, Gottlieb, and Jackson Pollock consciously reflected that need. But their works became central for quite other reasons. To begin with, the fight against fascism was depicted as a fight to defend Western culture and civilization from barbarism. Explicitly rejected by fascism, international modernism became, in the United States, 'confounded with culture more broadly and abstractly defined.' The trouble was that international modernism had exhibited strong socialist, even propagandist, tendencies in the 1930s (through surrealism, constructivism, and socialist realism). The de-politicization of modernism that occurred with the rise of abstract expressionism ironically presaged its embrace by the political and cultural establishment as an ideological weapon in the cold war struggle. The art was full enough of alienation and anxiety, and expressive enough of violent fragmentation and creative destruction (all of which were surely appropriate to the nuclear age) to be used as a marvellous exemplar of US commitment to liberty of expression, rugged individualism and creative freedom. No matter that McCarthyite repression was dominant, the challenging canvases of Jackson Pollock proved that the United States was a bastion of liberal ideals in a world threatened by communist totalitarianism. Within this twist there existed another even more devious turn. 'Now that America is recognized as the center where art and artists of all the world must meet,' wrote Gottlieb and Rothko in 1943, 'it is time for us to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.' In so doing they sought a myth that was 'tragic and timeless.' What that appeal to myth in practice allowed was a quick passage from 'nationalism to internationalism and then from internationalism to universalism' (cited in Guilbout, 1983 p. 174). But in order to be distinguishable from the modernism extant elsewhere (chiefly Paris), a 'viable new aesthetic' had to be forged out of distinctively American raw materials. What was distinctively American had to be celebrated as the essence of Western culture. And so it was with abstract expressionism, along with liberalism, Coca-Cola and Chevrolets, and suburban houses full of consumer durables. Avant-garde artists, concludes Guilbaut (p. 200), 'now politically "neutral" individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology.'

I think it very important, as Jameson (1984a) and Huyssens (1984) insist, to recognize the significance of this absorption of a particular kind of modernist aesthetic into official and establishment ideology, and its use in relation to corporate power and cultural imperialism. It meant that, for the first time in the history of modernism, artistic and cultural, as well as 'progressive' political revolt had to be directed at a powerful version of modernism itself. Modernism lost its appeal as a revolutionary antidote to some reactionary and 'traditionalist' ideology. Establishment art and high culture became such an exclusive preserve of a dominant elite that experimentation within its frame (with, for example, new forms of perspectivism) became increasingly difficult, except in relatively new aesthetic fields such as film (where modernist works like Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* became classics). Worse still, it seemed that establishment art and high culture could

1950's – modernism coopted by

do nothing more than monumentalize corporate and state power or the 'American dream' as self-referential myths, projecting a certain emptiness of sensibility on that side of Baudelaire's formulation that dwelt upon human aspirations and eternal truths.

It was in this context that the various counter-cultural and anti-modernist movements of the 1960s sprang to life. Antagonistic to the oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical–bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalized power (including that of bureaucratized political parties and trade unions), the counter-cultures explored the realms of individualized self-realization through a distinctive 'new left' politics, through the embrace of anti-authoritarian gestures, iconoclastic habits (in music, dress, language, and life-style), and the critique of everyday life. Centred in the universities, art institutes, and on the cultural fringes of big-city life, the movement spilled over into the streets to culminate in a vast wave of rebelliousness that crested in Chicago, Paris, Prague, Mexico City, Madrid, Tokyo, and Berlin in the global turbulence of 1968. It was almost as if the universal pretensions of modernity had, when combined with liberal capitalism and imperialism, succeeded so well as to provide a material and political foundation for a cosmopolitan, trans-national, and hence global movement of resistance to the hegemony of high modernist culture. Though a failure, at least judged in its own terms, the movement of 1968 has to be viewed, however, as the cultural and political harbinger of the subsequent turn to post-modernism. Somewhere between 1968 and 1972, therefore, we see postmodernism emerge as a full-blown though still incoherent movement out of the chrysalis of the anti-modern movement of the 1960s.

3

Postmodernism

Over the last two decades 'postmodernism' has become a concept to be wrestled with, and such a battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces that it can no longer be ignored. 'The culture of the advanced capitalist societist,' announce the editors of *PRECIS* 6 (1987), 'has undergone a profound shift in the *structure of feeling*.' Most, I think, would now agree with Huyssens's (1984) more cautious statement:

> What appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'post-modern' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is. I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social, and economic orders; any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period.

With respect to architecture, for example, Charles Jencks dates the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern as 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, when the Pruitt–Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's 'machine for modern living') was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed. Thereafter, the ideas of the CIAM, Le Corbusier, and the other apostles of 'high modernism' increasingly gave way before an onslaught of diverse possibilities, of