

What is Modernism?

introduction |,intrə'dæk sh ən|

In an article for *The Irish Review*, concerning modernism and art history in Ireland, contemporary theorist and art historian Dr. Francis Halsall asserts that strategies of history writing are strategies of amnesia. He claims that, in order to operate, historians are forced to forget not only certain facts but objects, people, theories and practices in order to construct new ways of looking at the past. Borrowing a term from W.J.T Mitchell's *Narrative, Memory and Slavery* Halsall proposes that this mode of 'strategic amnesia' could itself be employed in the name of writing art history *and* new histories of art. Looking at a body of work by Irish artist Martin Creed at Dublin's Douglas Hyde Gallery (a stack of rectangular plywood, a set of geometric paintings, and a row of household nails that incrementally protruded or withdrew into the wall), and prompted by his students "non-plussed" responses to the work, Halsall proposes a mode of viewing the artwork that involves a similar process of amnesia: a mode of 'active forgetting' that enables aesthetic experience.

If the work by Creed failed to have the desired effect on Halsall's students it was, accordingly, due entirely to the context within which it was seen. The students were not so 'non-plussed' by the works formal qualities as they were by its mediated position within the gallery's four walls. On this occasion, in the dialectical relationship between art and institution, between thesis and anti-thesis, the synthesis had failed to meet the expectations as to the 'effects' that this work of art should produce. Halsall's students suggested a much more positive encounter with, say, the 'plywood stack' if they had simply come across it on the street. This suggested that beyond the confines of 'art', a context that is directly shaped by 'dialectics' and the multitude of historical precedents that this brings to bear, damning connoisseurial judgements would instead turn into sheer delight at the presence of this structures interplay of textures, providing instead a rich perceptual and aesthetic experience. It is at this point that Halsall is prompted to a theory of *strategic amnesia*, in that, he proposes that by 'actively forgetting' that Creed's work is situated within the very specific context of art display - thus by strategically forgetting that it is 'art' - one could view the work in what he describes as 'a thoroughly modernist fashion', in a manner that recalls Clement Greenberg's words: 'the purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work are the only ones that count'. Halsall locates the obvious paradox that to strategically forget that the work is 'art' is also to strategically forget all historical precedents, which in turn raises the paradoxical possibility of an aesthetic experience. My interest and argument lies in the initial paradox, and in the fact that Halsall does not seem to locate this paradox in the historical precedent itself: in Clement Greenberg; or, as the 'grand author of art after Vasari', one wonders why Halsall does not locate the paradox here in Clement Greenberg's own words. That is to say, my riposte to the paradox that exposes the 'active forgetting' of 'art' as being also the 'active forgetting' of historical precedents, is that the 'active forgetting' of historical precedents is the 'active forgetting' of 'active forgetting' itself. This is my principle point, and is in response to Dr. Francis Halsall's question *what is modernism?* It is my contention that modernism is *strategic amnesia* ; and as stemming from the dialectical nature of the question itself.

Halsall has, in so many words, already suggested that modernism is strategic amnesia. He concedes that the edifice of art history is constructed from those cultural practices that are 'marginalised, excluded and forgotten'. He recognises this as a form of *active forgetting*, and asserts that this strategy could be useful in writing 'new' histories of art; as in the case of Ireland for example, it could be utilized as a means of her negotiating her way forward - as a means of moving beyond her troubling

past. He notes in conclusion that this does not imply that Ireland should merely 'forget' modernism, but rather it means that *in forgetting*, Ireland would in fact contribute *more* to the incomplete project of modernity given that, as he notes quoting Paul deMann and alluding to Nietzsche, "modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier", and is predicated on a 'ruthless forgetting' of history. Which is to say, in a round about way, that Ireland should express her own amnesia in order to be truly modern. I disagree, and I believe it is possible to have a degree of common measurement between heterogeneous histories in modernity without having to 'actively forget' that which does not fit into such holist accounts. I believe that 'active remembering' will contribute more to the incomplete project of modernity. I will discuss this in relation to the sentence-image, and the incommensurability that Hegel conceived in all future modernisms. I find such 'ruthless forgetting' to be deeply troubling, and immanently traumatic, and the coming subtext will subsist in suggesting that such *strategic amnesia*, or 'ruthless forgetting', is that which has resulted in art history's edifice becoming nothing less than a haunted house.

The psychological signifiers of this *unheimlich* place are already present in Halsall's article, indeed it is almost impossible to ignore the traumatic language in use. In the opening lines of his article Halsall quotes Robert Smithson in his assertion that the history of art is a 'monstrous museum' - here one cannot simply perceive 'monstrous' as meaning 'big', but rather as 'inhuman' or 'depraved' given that such an edifice's foundations are built on necessary death and discrimination - a dialectics of master and slave: the 'marginalised, excluded and forgotten'. This inevitably leads one to conflate such troubling imagery with the footnote on offer from W.J.T Mitchell's *Narrative, Memory and Slavery* at the bottom of the page, 'What if the technology of memory, the composite visual-verbal architecture of the memory palace becomes a haunted house?' And after a few paragraphs, one is thrust back into the imagined horrors of such a place in Halsall's use of Berman's Marxist model which depicts the *superego* or 'superstructure' of modernism as an expression of the 'base'. In *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* Slavok Zizek remarks that in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Norman Bates' mansion has three floors paralleling the three levels that psychoanalysis attributes to the human mind. The first floor represents the *superego* where Bates' mother lives, the ground floor represents the *ego* and this is where we find Bates' functioning as a normal human being, and finally the basement, the ignoble 'base' that represents Bates' *id*: that un-enlightened place we normally associate with 'evil'; that low-minded place where innate instinctive impulses, primary processes, and dark-desires are manifest. Even in Marx the 'base' was not simply 'bedrock' it was, *already* 'evil': the 'base' was capitalist. (*Here we have stumbled across the irony of language itself, or at least, a lot of the tartuffery that stemmed from the enlightenment, which I shall call your attention to via Peter Sloterdijk*) Zizek's interpretation of this is via the scene of Bates' dragging his mother's corpse down to the basement from the first floor, he sees this as a valorization of the deep connection that psychoanalysis posits between *superego* and *id*. .. and throughout the following pages it is expounded as the deep connection between enlightenment and myth. For Adorno and Horkheimer it is enlightened reason that echoes the determinate negativity of the Hegelian dialectic, in so many words, this suggests that the progressive demythologizing agenda of 'enlightened reason' is akin to the rebel in Camus: that which rages against everything in the name of progress - in the name of change, but ultimately doesn't want change, because if change ever really came to pass... the rebel could no longer be the rebel.

What is Modernism?

1. The Principle of Fatal (fateful) Necessity



‘Enlightenment, no matter how impotent the mere means of reason seem, is subtly irresistible, like the light, after which, in sound mystical tradition, it is named: *les lumieres*, illumination.’

(Sloterdijk, 1993, p. 77)

‘Liberation from superstition is called enlightenment...it must be very difficult to preserve or instill in someone’s way of thinking (especially the public) that merely negative element which constitutes enlightenment proper.’

(Kant in Bernstein, 2001, p. 77)

The program of the Enlightenment, which can be loosely located from Descartes's *Discourse On The Method* to the death of Voltaire in 1778, was to rid the world of illusion and superstition, of magic and animism. Its *raison d'être*, one might say, was the dissolution of mythology, and the substitution of reason and ratiocination for imagination and intuition. *A priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge was the order of the day, and whatever did not conform to this formidable rule of computation and utility was deemed more than suspicious. That which was not readily reducible to numbers and ultimately to the *one* was written off by positivism. It was only in this vein that the Enlightenment recognised itself in mythology, all myths and mythological figures were expressible as the direct product of human subjectivity: Oedipus' answer to the riddle of the Sphinx "It is man" became the trophy of Enlightenment schematization. Thus, myth itself turned into enlightenment and with Descartes *Discourse On The Method*, with his relegation of the animal to machine, nature itself turned into mere objectivity - the sign of our absolute sovereignty.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer's genius was in recognising that the whole process of the Enlightenment was already realised in mythology. Its *patria* is the principle of fatal necessity, and through the Enlightenment process mythology would have its requital. The principle of fatal necessity is plainly understood as that *chain of reasoning* that ensures the moribund revelation of the heroes birth. Revealed in the pronouncement of the Oracle the hero is logically and necessarily a being-toward-death:

‘ Through the mouth of She Who Speaks, the Sun-God told him that not only was he different and out of place amongst his brothers and friends, like a beast of the forest, a ghost, but that he would also become a monster among men, the scum of the earth, the city and the world.’

(Lefebvre, 1995, p. 50)

In the Enlightenment process, which recognises as being and event only that which can be apprehended in unity (in the *ratio* or reckoning of the *one*) 'Unity' replaces the Oracle, and this stringent formal logic passes down an identical set of presuppositions: anger against insufficient righteousness. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 5-9) Just as the myths conceived of the Enlightenment, 'enlightenment' in turn would become pregnant with mythology; revealing a *dialectical* link between 'awakening' and domination, between power and alienation.

For Adorno and Horkheimer it is Kant's judgement that becomes an Oracle - echoing the *determinate negativity* that the pair posit in the Hegelian dialectic, in that the relation of one force to another is always already conceived as a negative element in the essence. (1997, p. 23 -27) According to Kant philosophic judgement aspires to the new, and yet, according to Adorno and Horkheimer Kant's judgement cannot recognise the new because it always only ever recalls what *reason* has deposited in the object. (1997, p. 26) It is in this light that Adorno and Horkheimer make what J.M Bernstein calls the 'notorious' claim that enlightened reason is instrumental reason - typified in the prototype of Odyssean cunning - the constituting action of which is abstraction and consequent of which is the identification and subsumption of different particulars under a common universal concept. (1997, p. 43 - 80) (Bernstein, 2001, p. 83 - 84) Accordingly, enlightened reason like Odysseus, acts as sacrifice and priest at one and the same time, by calculating his own sacrifice '...(the latter) effectively negates the power to whom the sacrifice is made. In this way he redeems the life he had forfeited.'(Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 50) The skeptical negativity of instrumental reason subsists in its abstraction and subsumption, which is not to say that instrumental rationality is inherently skeptical, but rather that enlightened reason and rationality are only on the whole instrumental, and thus the skepticism of instrumental rationality occurs when the latter claims to be

total and self-sufficient. It is in its claims to be self-sufficient that critical reason devaluates itself and appears irrational and repressive:

‘Rationalization is necessarily the rationalization of reason; rationalized reason is skeptical, and because skeptical it is thereby irrational. If the self-sufficiency of instrumental reason renders it skeptical, and the claim to self-sufficiency is intrinsic to its movement, form of claiming, and formation, then this would claim how our highest value, critical reason, devaluates itself.’

(Bernstein, 2001, p. 84)

Bernstein notes that as tempting as it is to read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as promulgating a counter-history to the progressive demythologizing of history provided by Kant, to do so is to miss the fundamental point. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not propose a regressive philosophy of history nor does it represent a turn to the philosophy of history in order to usurp a single-minded abstract rationalism, rather, *Dialectic* demands that reason examine itself; and it testifies that the historical endpoints - culminating in *nihilism* - inscribed within it, are dictated by the enlightenment’s own conception of reason: reason opposes myth. Whatever appears as a developmental history to Kant inevitably depends on this dualism, this dialectic: enlightenment versus myth. Conversely, as illustrated above, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rejects the conceptual dualism of enlightenment and myth upon which the project of progressive demythologization depends; and in expounding mythology as that which already contains a central moment of enlightenment, it argues that myth cannot therefore be its opposite; and further, that enlightenment, in reifying itself against myth - in the very Odyssean schematization of Oedipus’ answer to the riddle of the Sphinx “it is man” - regresses to the basic mythic principle *the principle of immanence*, what Adorno would later call ‘identity thinking’ - the explanation of every event as repetition - or that which can be analogized in terms of cognition as repetition in Alphonse Bertillon’s famous words: ‘one can only see what one observes and one observes only things which are already in the mind.’ (1997, p. 12)

In essence *Dialectic of Enlightenment* puts forward a theory of ‘total integration’; a theory that stems from the Hegelian conception of the dialectic itself. Like Kant’s judgement, the Hegelian ‘dialectic’ has a negative function, typified in the tenet *aufhebung* - it is a process of ‘active forgetting’: the negation of a negation *ad infinitum*. In the Hegelian dialectic the essential relation of one force to another is preconceived as a negative element in the essence; this is what is meant in the Nietzschean sense that underneath the Hegelian image of the master we always find the slave. Nietzsche’s ‘yes’ is opposed to the Hegelian ‘no’; affirmation is opposed to dialectical negation; and *difference* to dialectical contradiction. For Nietzsche, such a dialectical force ‘denies all that it is not and makes this negation its own essence and the principle of its existence’ (Deleuze, 2005, p.9) Anti-Hegelianism runs through Nietzsche’s work as its cutting edge; he was one of the few after Hegel to recognise the dialectic of Enlightenment itself. In stating their account of instrumental reason and its claim to self-sufficiency through the course of its critical endeavors, Adorno and Horkheimer ceaselessly return to Nietzsche to underline the dependance of this mode of critique on the objects it seeks to destroy, and in order to expound the fundamental fact that if the objects of critique are in some significant sense a condition of critique to which reason cannot avow then enlightened reason is not as self-sufficient as it thinks: enlightenment depends upon myth; it depends upon the *human, all too human* nature of objects for the possibility of enacting its cynicism.¹ As Bernstein notes:

¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 44, pp. 81-119 (see also Adorno (2005) *Minima Moralia* pp. 244 - 247) and Nietzsche (2007) *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 10-120 (see also Deleuze (2005) *Nietzsche And Philosophy* pp. 8-10, 68-74, 139-183)

‘Enlightenment depends upon myth, it depends upon the entire range of anthropomorphisms for the possibility of enacting its skeptical reflections. Without material to negate, there can be no enlightenment; without the material meditations of reason in sensory states and its objects, language and its social conditioning, reason could not rationalize itself; if these are neutral as historical theses, they become performatively self-defeating as a characterisation of reason as a whole. *If rationalised reason is constituted essentially by the principle of immanence, then it cannot avow its conditionality.*’

(2001, p. 95)

And so it is for Adorno and Horkheimer in the years preceding 1947, within sight of the abrogated march of Nazi terror, and the wake of the Cold War: the dialectic of Enlightenment is nothing but *determinate negativity* and accordingly the *all or nothing* explanations of the world it offers are themselves nothing more than mythologies. And whilst Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism is more complex and faceted than the cruciform of nihilism caricatured by fascists themselves², one can perceive the *principle of immanence* as that which brings about the Enlightenment’s equivalence in so-called German nihilism as the synthesis in a dialectical relationship between destruction and creation at the centre of all palingenetic mythology. Further to this, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis, one can perceive the terrible logic of the principle ‘destroy to build’ - the myth of palingenesis or ‘rebirth’ - at the very hearth of modernism, and as the dialectical motion of modernity.³

From Fichte’s resounding addresses at the University of Berlin to Hegel’s inheritance of his ‘chair’ in philosophy; from the former’s conception of a ‘moral elite’ that would lead Germany in the project of the world’s regeneration, to the latter’s conception of ‘heroes’ as the ethically exempt agents of providence that would carry out the will of the world spirit - even if this meant trampling down innocent flowers or crushing to pieces the objects that stood in its path - war is a process of purification: ‘the ethical health of people’s corrupted by a long peace’. (Shirer, 1960, p.130) From Descartes’s *Discourse on The Method* to Leger’s exaltation of the machine; from Heartfield’s sentence-images to Mussolini’s admonition: ‘Believe, Fight, Obey’. (see fig.15) From primitivism to futurism; from the cultivated hatred of intelligence typified by the ‘Noble Savage’ mythology of the *Nibelungenlied* to the myth of *Neugeburt* or national rebirth. From Hobbes’ *Leviathan* to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* and from *Olympia* to Rodchenko’s *Pyramids*: the myth of ‘The New Man’. (see figs. 16,17,18,19 respectively) From the radically palingenetic ideals of Le Corbusier to the utopianism of Walter Gropius and The Bauhaus: the myth of ‘The New World’. (see figs. 20, 21, 22) The regime of the myth, or consensual idiocy, is already implied in the very premise

² Adorno notes ‘Nietzsche’s relation to the Enlightenment... was discordant. Though he discerned both the universal movement of sovereign spirit (whose executor he felt himself to be) and a ‘nihilistic’ anti-life force in the enlightenment, his pre-Fascist followers retained only the second aspect and perverted it into an ideology...’ (see 1997,p.44-45) Also Roger Griffin’s review in *The Oxford Art Journal* (- 18:2:1995) of *The Romantic Spirit of German Art* The South Bank Centre, National Galleries of Scotland and Oktagon Verlag, p.103-105, in which he notes: ‘ There is a dialectical relationship between destruction and creation at the centre of all palingenetic myth. Once projected onto Germany it took the form of what fascists themselves have called ‘German nihilism’. It is the terrifying logic of the principle ‘destroy to build’ which links the Nazi’s destruction of liberalism, socialism, pluralism, and humanism to the creation of a ‘strong’ state based on a single party and a single ideology... the aim was to give modern life a strong *spiritual* basis and historical purpose, not to destroy it.’ (my emphasis)

³ See also Griffin (as above), he promulgates a ‘progressive’ and not regressive account of Nazism in modernity, stating through this myth of palingenesis that Nazism presented itself as an *alter modernity* if you like - as an alternative to liberal and socialist forms of modernity. He states that to see Nazism as regressive or restorationist; as nostalgic for recreating past idylls etc, is to miss the fundamental point of its mythic core - the myth of palingenesis or *neugeburt* - national rebirth - is in fact very progressive and acts as the ‘lynch-pin’ of all Nazism’s ideology, policy, and propaganda; he states ‘the myth of palingenesis: the nation’s rebirth is a radically *new* order.’ (p. 104) And in citing Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he argues that what has prevented so many commentators grasping this point is the deep impression that Nazism incarnated a systematized form of barbarism reminiscent to a throw-back to an earlier darker age, but in fact, barbarism, as Bauman points out has nothing to do with the colossal destructiveness of the Third Reich, it is rather the capacity of the ‘modern state’ untrammelled by liberal institutions to set about creating an ideal world , at whatever social and human cost, through social engineering. (p. 105)

‘Enlightenment’, which, as Peter Sloterdijk notes is subtly irresistible, like the light, after which, in sound mystical tradition, it is named: *les lumieres*, illumination.’ (1993, p. 77) Adorno notes:

‘With the notion of determinate negativity, Hegel revealed an element that distinguishes the Enlightenment from the positivist degeneracy to which he attributes it. By ultimately making the conscious result of the whole process of negation - totality in system and in history - into an absolute, he of course contravened the prohibition and himself lapsed into mythology... This did not happen merely to his philosophy as the apotheosis of progressive thought, but to the Enlightenment itself, as the sobriety which it thought distinguished it from Hegel and from metaphysics. For enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system. Its untruth does not consist in what its romantic enemies have always reproached it for: analytic method, return to elements, dissolution through reflective thought; but instead in the fact that for enlightenment the process is always decided from the start.’

(1997, p. 240)

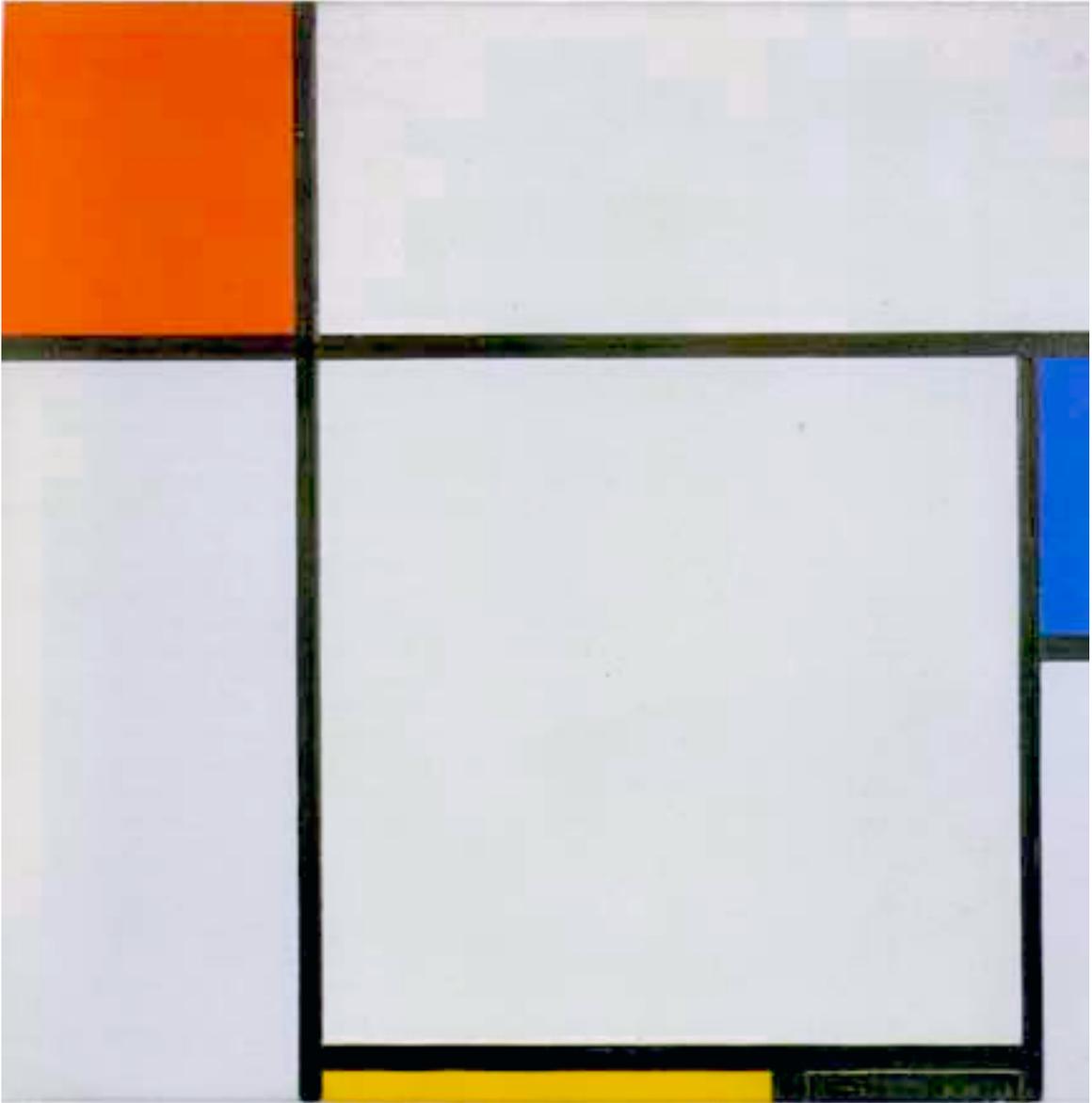
So, just as Hegel’s ‘dialectic’, whilst pertaining to a discussion or debate between two opposing forces and the subsequent synthesis of thesis and anti-thesis in the name of a ‘higher truth’, actually implies that from the outset one of these forces is cancelled or overcome - thus disclosing its contradictory and appropriative function⁴ - Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of ‘total integration’ discloses through the dialectic of Enlightenment the related conversion of enlightenment into positivism; of myth into things as they actually are; and the identification of the intellect as that which is most inimical to the spirit or - as one author put it, in terms of a Hegelianesque *night of the world* - ‘the reinterpretation of the spirit as intelligence’. (Heidegger, 1959, p.45-47) Over the course of the last century the crux of the *Dialectic’s* theory has been overwhelmingly confirmed. The purpose of the following chapters is not to expound these issues in the specific context of the text, but rather to address and identify these issues as they arose in art; and more specifically in the question - what is modernism?



⁴ In *Minima Moralia* (1951) Adorno, in discussing the history of the dialectic, notes that the harm is done in the dialectical procedure by the very fact that the thinker uses the dialectic instead of giving himself up to it. He notes in relation to this *thema probandum* : ‘ The threatening relapse of reflection into unreflectedness gives itself away by the facility with which the dialectical procedure shuttles its arguments, as if it were itself that immediate knowledge of the whole which the very dialectic precludes. The standpoint of totality is adopted in order, with a schoolmasterly That-is-not-what-I-meant, to deprive one’s opponent of any definitive negative judgement, and at the same time violently to break off the movement of concepts, to arrest the dialectic by pointing to the insuperable inertia of facts.’ (p.247)

What is Modernism ?

2. anachronism læ' nɑkrə , nɪzəmlORIGIN mid 17th cent.: from Greek anakhronism, from ana- '**backward**' + khronos ' **time**



ii.

‘ As a good Theosophist Mondrian would have known that Mme Blavatsky elaborated a theory of the orthogonal, based on the ‘celestial perpendicular’ and the ‘terrestrial horizontal base line’, and his juxtaposition formed the basis of post-War development of that wholly abstract style which became one of the iconic expressions of Modernism.’

(Weston, 1996, p. 77)

In the opening paragraphs of *Mona Lisa's Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art* (1947) - a publication strongly contested by Clement Greenberg - the author, one Robsjohn Gibling, a furniture designer and contemporaneous contributor to *Harper's Bizarre* had the following to say:

‘ Presuming that there will be attics in the houses of the future, we might visualize the householders of tomorrow peering around at the derelict remains of what we once treasured in the 1940’s. Under the sloping eaves is a broken television set, and propped up behind it a bent propeller...suppose then, we accept the probability that in some future date the attics will have gathered into their dusty darkness most of the sculpture and paintings we call so naively “modern art.” What will the curious observer think as he looks at them - with the detachment given to him by the intervening perspective of time? ...will they appear at least as typical of our time as Gainsborough was typical of England in the eighteenth century, or Boucher typical of the France of his time? The chances are that they will not. Given enough research by future historians into the motives and techniques of modern artists, and the sources from which they took their ideas, modern art will probably fall into the classification of a revival rather than a typical manifestation of our period.’

(1947, p. 3 - 7)

Published in the same year as Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Mona Lisa's Mustache* marks a paradigmatic shift in understanding the aesthetic expression of the underlying principle of modernity as anachronistic contrary to the *a priori* assumption that modernism meant progress, and expressed a desire to break with the past, with history and tradition⁵. *Mona Lisa's Mustache* appears to have been one of the first, if not *the first*, art historical account of an irrational modernism. That is to say, that unlike Panofsky’s *Idea* (1924) - a study of the Neo-Platonic tradition - which had already alluded to the vogue of ‘mysticism’ and cosmology in modern art, *Mona Lisa's Mustache* was one of the first accounts to outline the *dyadic motion* of modernity, and to reveal the basic fact, that modern art like modern life, as Marx experienced it, was radically contradictory at its ‘base’.

Gibling charges modernism with being a revival. It is his contention, in 1947, that so-called ‘modern’ art is actually fraught with magic, mythology and mysticism, and that it is completely disconnected from the mainstream of twentieth century creative thought. Gibling suggests that the contemporaneous revival is assimilable to the Gothic and Greek revivals of the eighteenth- and nineteenth century, which subsisted in ‘grafting’ forms and moods of earlier periods onto later centuries, and as such no one, even at the time of their revival, could have thought of them as being typical of their times. It is in this regard that Gibling charges contemporary ‘modern art authorities’ and certain ‘nineteenth century German metaphysicians’ with *obscurantism*, for accordingly, it is they who are responsible for the contemporary lack of clarity surrounding such ‘grafting’ for it is they who have maneuvered the public into a position of ‘not understanding art’. Although Gibling does not divulge names, it is apparent from the outset that the aforementioned parties charged are in fact Immanuel Kant and Clement Greenberg. Gibling is clearly charging Kant’s formalism, and perhaps even more specifically his third critique - *The Critique of Judgement* - with having inspired the movement ‘aestheticism’ and thus with having, in Gibling’s own words, ‘maneuvered the artist out of his role of craftsman into the modern role of quasi-religious mystic’. (1947, p. 12) It is clear that Gibling is not fulminating against aestheticism *per se* or proposing a regressive philosophy of history

⁵ Contrary to Gibling, Adorno does not describe modernity in chronological terms but as a qualitative order. In *Minima Moralia* he notes that ‘the modern has really become unmodern’, he sees modernity as a *quid pro quo* of progression and regression, of progress and reaction; he perceives the regression as a regression of subjectivity - the psychological regression of individuals without a self - which manifests not from the chronological order of things as suggested by Gibling in the term *anachronism*, but as a regression of the objective spirit. (2005,p. 218 - 219)

in order to usurp 'autonomous' art, he is fulminating against the very lack of clarity surrounding the 'grafting' of autonomous self-legislation to art; what Bernstein locates as *the Myth of the Given* which surrounds idealist modernity and takes its central gesture from Kant:

'With the coming of Modernity - with the emergence of a disenchanted natural world as projected by science, a political language of rights and equality, a secular morality, a burgeoning sense of subjective consciousness, and autonomous art - the task of philosophy became that of providing a wholly critical and radically self-reflexive conception of reason and rationality that would demonstrate the immanent ground for our allegiance to these new ways of being in the world. Or better, what these distinctly modern forms of practice evince is an ideal of human freedom and autonomy in which the worth of our pursuits is dependent upon their being self-legislated and self-authorized...and only what can be so authorized is rationally deserving of our allegiance...idealist modernism can appear a daunting claimant since its fundamental critical gesture, derived from Kant, treats all of its opponents as falling into some version or other of the Myth of the Given, some version of providing a ground or authority for what we do in a source beyond our doing that is given to us, and hence either lapsing into dogmatism or pretending to an authority that it can have only because we have already, reflexively tokened that authority.'

(2001, p. 242)

And it is undoubtedly in this regard - in this reckoning - in Greenberg's championing of Kantian tenets in what he saw as the long march toward 'medium specificity' that constituted aesthetic autonomy, exemplified in *Toward A New Laocoon* (1940), that Gibling is charging the latter with the role of a priest, or that of a magician. For accordingly:

'Once this transformation had taken place, the public was in the same position with regard to art as is a devoutly religious man who is told to believe without question in the tenets of his faith. Under these circumstances an abstract painting, for instance, becomes a miraculous 'vision' that the layman must accept without question and not try to understand. And since it is capable of as many explanations as theologians give to the supernatural mysteries of the church, modern art can acquire as many theologians, or art authorities to "explain" it to the public.'

(1947, p. 12)

Gibling is not suggesting that Greenberg the 'theologian' necessarily believed in God; or that Greenberg the 'magician' - the high priest of modernism - actually believed in magic. On the contrary Gibling is suggesting that 'magic' and 'God' were *strategically forgotten* by Greenberg in his studied pursuit of materialistic objectivity. Gibling notes that probably no one believed in magic less than did the ancient magicians, what they did believe in - and with good reason - were the systems whereby the belief in magic could be induced in their audience; and the system that Greenberg employed was 'aesthetic distance'. Like the contemporaneous theories of Adorno, of whom Greenberg with his knowledge of German would have been aware, the latter advocated 'aesthetic distance' from the socio-political reality that pervaded at the time; 'aesthetic distance' as a guarantee of quality; the ability of art to repudiate society's most *a priori* assumptions by remaining insistently aloof from them. However, it must be noted that in Adorno the autonomy of artistic forms implies a dramatically different meaning from that of the autonomy championed by Greenberg. For Adorno, in removing the pure forms of art from the aestheticized reality of everyday we thus make it possible for the solitary nature of these forms to express the original separation that founds them in idealist modernity - the *rational* separation between spheres of existence stemming from enlightened reason itself - thus, contrary to Greenberg's rationalist, optimistic version which takes its central gesture from Kant, Adorno saw the autonomy of art as necessary in disclosing an image of this repression and of reminding us of our need for a non-separated existence. Thierry de Duve acknowledges that it was Greenberg, and not Adorno, who wronged modernist art, when he cut the works off from the words of the artists themselves, and simply because he liked them better "without a soundtrack"; 'as if only their anxieties about the fate of art - or plight of culture - mattered.' (1996, p. 457) Gibling's

account lends itself to Adorno, and fulminates against Greenberg in this very sense: in the sense that it suggests that orthodox modernism seems to be suffering from a bad case of the ‘emperors new clothes’. Accordingly, in modernity, art is dressed up with aesthetic autonomy in the name of ‘progress’, in the name of ‘a-historicity’ and ‘vehemence against tradition’, but what is actually beneath this abstract facade and, in a way, in plain view all the time, is life itself in its *human, all too human* form.

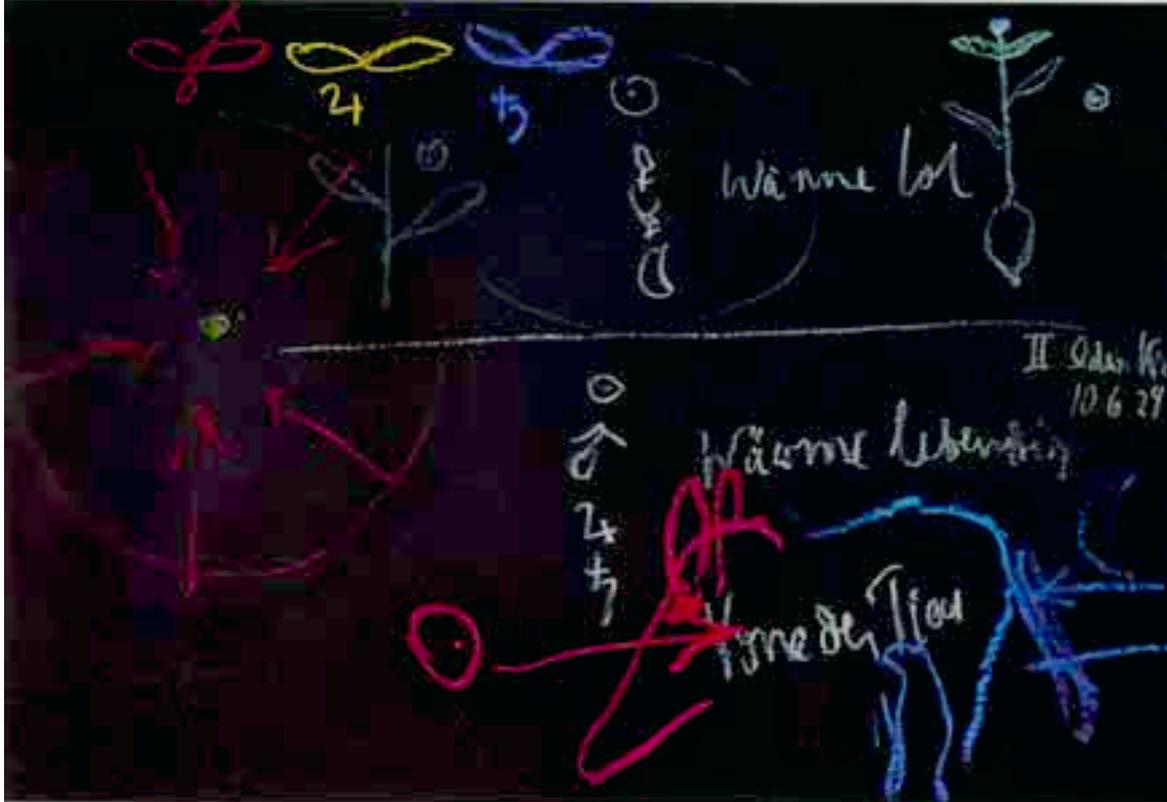
Gibling’s account which begins with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with Ruskin’s contempt for modern life, with his distaste for the ‘tramwayed, shamwayed and eternally damnwayed’ English mob and their “commercial preoccupations”, postulates an *anachronistic* account of modernism which begins with a ‘secret meeting’ held in August 1848 - when seven men made a pact to wage a ‘holy warfare’ against the age. At this ‘secret meeting’ the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood consciously returned to an idea of God, and to a medieval mindset when the artist, like the priest, was a purveyor of enchantment - a miracle-maker - who conjured up the natural world with the same strength that science now dismissed it. For their requital Rossetti mimicked a process utilized by the Church, a process that is indicative of the many *weltanschauungen* or ‘worldviews’ that constituted modernism. *Weltanschauung* sought to purport, through common denominators, basic beliefs that could not by definition be logically proven, but that could be seen as axioms that could be argued from rather than for. The latter, once described as “science’s bankruptcy”, were principally derived from language, from the comparative study of old scriptures, epics and myths, and expressed a renewed faith in narrative which stemmed from the Enlightenment’s own failed attempt to attain all truth by reason alone. On this occasion, and in relation to Rossetti, Gibling notes:

‘Out of the vast shadowy occult world of superstition and half-forgotten legend, a new version of reality - half dream, half reality - could be created that would defy the learning of Victorian scientists to explain or refute. And on the basis of this supernatural concept a new sense of superstitious awe could be indoctrinated into the living generation against which science and logic and middle-class “common sense” would battle in vain.’

(1947, p. 27)



Further to his own admonition: ‘modern art is not modern at all’, Gibling proceeds to promulgate his thesis through a range of equally incommensurable sentence-images, and to locate Rossetti’s *impetus* as a common denominator in a discussion of artists and erudites from Dali to Gauguin, from Picasso to Apollinaire⁶, and on through Klee, Chirico, Kandinsky⁷; from archaism to futurism to ‘futurism as archaism’, from Mussolini’s valorization of Marinetti as ‘the John the Baptist of fascism’ to the conflation of *weltanschauungen* which found its aesthetic expression in the ‘witchcraft -



⁶ In Greenberg’s canonical account of cubism it is seen as embodying ‘the boldness and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism’, and is accordingly formed by the insights of a progressive age; conversely in Gibling’s account he purports that Rossetti, was the prototype of Picasso, who was equally as preoccupied with the myths and magic of primitive Africa and Oceania as the former was with restoring occultism and medieval superstition; in expounding his case that Picasso dabbles in Negro-cubist “magic” he quotes English critic Herbert Read as saying Picasso’s paintings “succeed in creating symbols whose nearest parallels are to be found in the *magical* accessories of primitive religion”...and in describing Apollinaire he too is subjected to the precedence of Rossetti, ‘Like Rossetti, Apollinaire was fascinated with magic, and in one of his early plays, *L’Enchanteur pourrisant*, Merlin, the Celtic magician, appears as an omnipresent spirit who converses with the entire occult populace of druids, sphinxes, magi and monsters.’ Today, none of this seems revelatory, even E.H Gombrich concedes in ‘Plato In Modern Dress: Two Eye-Witness Accounts to the Origins of Cubism’ that if rationalism rather than relativism had influenced Picasso *et al* doubtless we would have missed the period altogether. See Gombrich, E.H (1991) *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth Century Issues In Learning and In Art*, London: Phaidon. See also, in O’Brien, John (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays And Criticism; Arrogant Purpose 1945-1946*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. And for Apollinaire and Picasso’s own accounts which lend themselves more to Gibling than to Greenberg see Chipp, Herschel B. (ed.) (1996) *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁷ The Austrian born Rudolf Steiner was the head of the Theosophical Society in Germany from 1902 - 1912. In 1901 he had published a book on colour theory, and this book along with another entitled *Thought Forms* which was published jointly by the heads of the English Theosophical Society Annie Besant and C.W Leadbetter and concerning ‘psychic chemistry’ was to be hugely influential on the work of Wassily Kandinsky. *Thought Forms* which illustrates specific emotions through amorphous blobs of colour, was taken quite literally by Kandinsky and theosophy is said to have impacted through him to Paul Klee. See Weston, Richard (1996) *Modernism*, London and New York: Phaidon. See also E.H Gombrich’s study of the Neo-Platonic Tradition in (1991) *Topics Of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues In Learning And In Art* London: Phaidon.

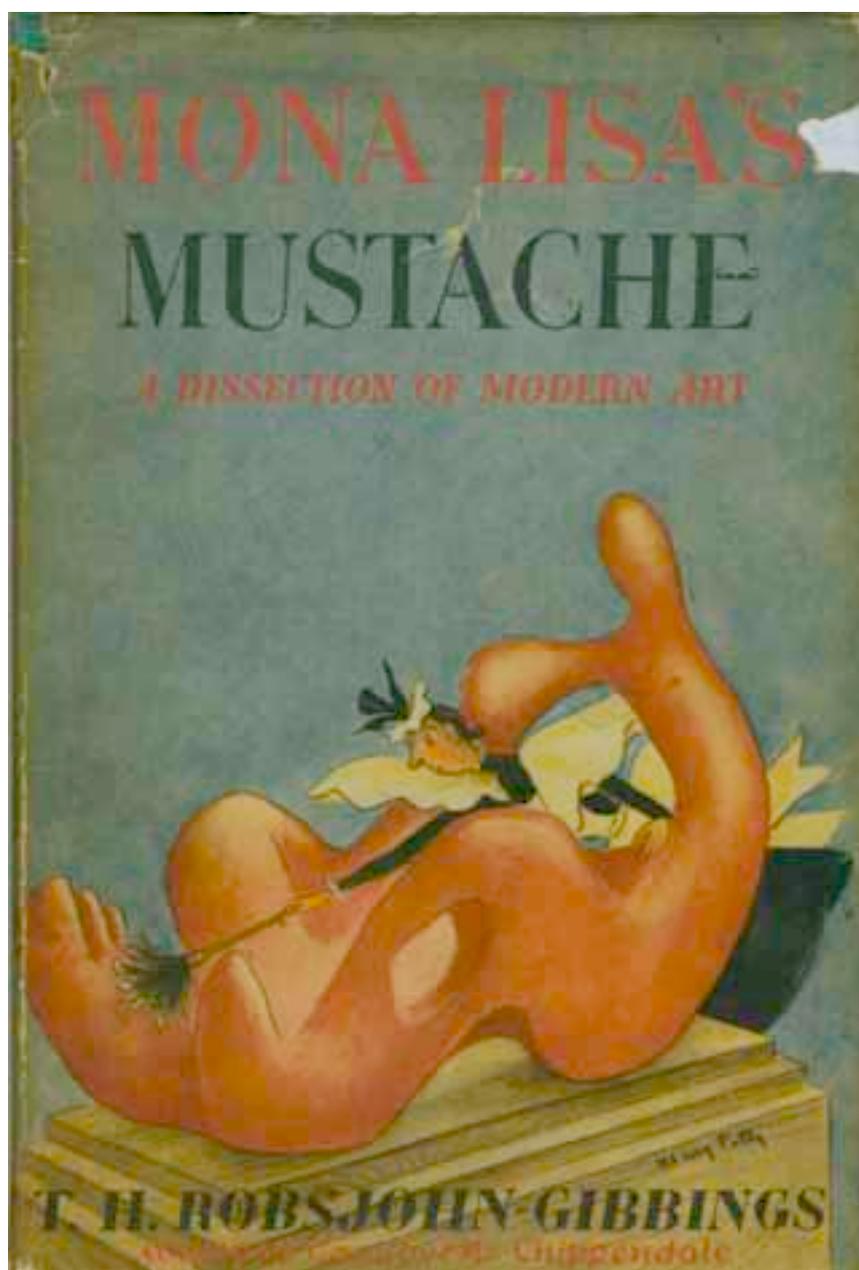
streamlined' movement⁸; from cubism and expressionism to the bauhaus and Madame Blavatsky, from Picasso's call '...for a dictatorship of painting' to Mondrian's compositions - executed by the rigor mortis hand of a dead God who geometricised⁹; from surrealism's valorization of the impossible encounter of sewing machine and umbrella to 'taxi cabs with rain inside' and a painting by Marcel Duchamp in which 'Mona Lisa has a mustache'. The account on the whole is arguably preposterous and but a piecemeal offering: as an art-historical document it is largely unusable because the sources are 'hearsay' at best, and alarmingly anecdotal. But that is not to say that it does not contain a central moment of truth or further, that the topsy-turvy take on triumphalist modernity that Gibling expounds is not in fact the topsy-turvy reality of modernism itself. Greenberg concedes that: '...as sometimes happens with very, very stupid people, its author does have hold of the truth by a hair on its tail, a hair that many infinitely more intelligent writers on modern have not even brushed' but accordingly where Robsjohn-Gibling should explain 'he can only go on repetitiously about magic, dictatorship, and Madame Blavatsky, compromising his

⁸In appraising them as passionate partisans of modernity many authors quote Marinetti's rather caricatured call to 'flood the museums and burn the library shelves'; and when citing the following sentiment from Marinetti 'Comrades, we tell you now that the triumphant progress of science makes changes in humanity inevitable, changes that are hacking an abyss between the docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future' Marshall Berman, for example, makes the bold assertion that 'there are no ambiguities here' 'there are no loose ends'; 'tradition' he writes, clearly means 'all the world's traditions thrown together - simply equals docile slavery, and modernity equals freedom' (1983, p.24 - 25) However if tradition implies the transmission of customs and beliefs, or the fact of being passed on in this way; if tradition thus implies *mythology* and *mysticism* it would seem that the 'artwork' itself has been *strategically forgotten* and in the name of 'modernism'. From the outset The Futurists exemplify the sort of Homeric 'horde' mythology that Adorno and Horkheimer describe in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through the organisation of the Hitler Youth movement as '... the triumph of repressive equality, the disclosure through peers of the parity of the right to injustice.' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p.13) But even the Futurists were not unaffected by 'mysticism' despite the fact that they themselves were immersed in a very different form of mythology based around a rhetoric of palingenesis fueled by Marinetti's politics.

Further to Gibling, in relation to Giacomo Balla's *Iridescent compenetrations* Robert Weston notes how the very Bergsonian sounding 'compenetration' is actually derived from the Theosophical idea of 'mercurial integration'. (Weston, 1996, p. 81) And further research suggests that 'mercurial integration' may well intend a conflation of Theozological politics and Theosophy: a synthesis of science, mythology and Homeric ideology. It is a term steeped in political idolatry, and relates to the so-called 'Third race' the earliest intellectual race who accordingly invented magic and of which Mercury the son of Apollo amongst others was a representative patron of this secret wisdom. (see Blavatsky, 1999, p.211-215, p. 558, p.601, p.707) The fascistic undertones of this Third race, suggest *Iridescent Compenetrations* highly subversive derivation through its conflation of Theozology and Theosophy, a conflation that stemmed from Jorg Lanz Von Liebensfahl's own doctrine. Goodrich Clarke notes that the extensive effect that Theozology had on the Third Reich, for example, is prominent in the similarity of Lanz's proposals and the later practices of Himmler's *SS Lebensborn* maternity organisation; and in the nazi plans for the disposal of the Jews; and in the treatment of the enslaved Slav population. In Germany Darwin's principle proponent Ernst Haeckel (1834 - 1919) the man who would in 1933 coin the term 'ecology' had put forward the theory that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny', and in England Darwin's own cousin Francis Galton (1822 - 1911) had coined the term 'eugenics'. But in both these cases the emphasis was that science very much replaced religion, or more specifically theology. However with the advent of Von Liebensfahl's Theozological doctrine there was a shift in emphasis within Nazism from 'racial science' to 'racial mysticism'. Such 'racial mysticism' can be said to have found its aesthetic precedent in Futurism... hence the great economy, the distance and collision, that Gibling ascertains in the sentence-image of Marinetti as the 'John the Baptist' of futurism. See Goodrich-Clarke, Nicholas (1992) *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, New York: I.B Tauris & CO. LTD. See also Blavatsky, H.P (1999) *The Secret Doctrine: Vol.2 - Anthropogenesis*, London and New York: The Theosophical Society Publishing Company LTD.

⁹ Between 1878 and 1888 Madame Blavatsky published a series of books from *Isis Unveiled* to a set of volumes called *The Secret Doctrine*, the latter of which was set to quench the thirsty imaginations of this *fin de siecle* generation. *Cosmogogenesis*, the first volume in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, was hugely influential on artists at the time, and on Mondrian in particular - in her repeated conjecture that God's hand geometricised. In both Ella Bahaire's *Hidden Hands* documentary, and in Richard Weston's panoplied account of *Modernism* the canonical perception of Mondrian's seemingly 'rational' and austere work is challenged. And on both occasions it is acknowledged that Mondrian's immersion in Theosophical thought - his belief that matter was inimical to spiritual enlightenment, was a major factor in the so-called 'disinterested' march toward total abstraction. Weston, Richard (1996) *Modernism*, London and New York: Phaidon. See also Blavatsky, H.P (1977) *The Secret Doctrine: Vol. 1 - Cosmogogenesis*, London and New York: The Theosophical Publishing Company LTD.

thesis with such a wealth of irrelevancies, clumsy distortions, and falsifications that the mind refuses to grant even the very small half-truth the book contains for fear of being infected by its total vulgarity.”(in O’Brian ed.,1988, p.199)



What is modernism?

3. irony¹ |'ɪrənē; 'iərənē|absurd |əb'sərd; -'zərd|: from Latin *absurdus* 'out of tune,' hence 'irrational'



fig. 10

For Marx, as for Nietzsche, the underlying principles of modernity were ironic and dialectical. With the disenchantment of the world - with the extirpation of animism and the rationalisation of *the principle of immanence* in the fight against naive anthropomorphism, no belief could withstand enlightened criticism, and enlightened reason was forced to regard itself as self-sufficient. The principle of reason - the principle of man's sovereignty - declared God dead, and the subject's autonomy was pithily appraised as *nihilism*: a will without anything worth willing; negative, reactive and finally passive, 'from God to God's murderer, from God's murderer to the last man.' (Deleuze, 1986, p.143)

The profundity of this irony - the irony of world history itself, is further explored by Lefebvre in his dodecaphonic *Introduction To Modernity* (1959-1961). In an opening prelude, Lefebvre suggests that *irony* is a truer way of thinking about modernity than modernism's own triumphalist consciousness. He begins by positing irony and the maieutic principle as inseparable, and indeed insuperable, in Socrates himself: it is Socrates who lays claim to the riddle "what is man?" thus superseding both Oedipus and the Sphinx. For Lefebvre, the irony of world history is first located in the black humour of Hegelian fulfillment: fulfillment is also loss - *verwirklichung*, a cornucopia of alienation within and because of plenitude. (1995, p.19-22) It was Marx, and his comrade Engels, who first discovered and developed this Hegelian conception of world history, a conception of world history that brings men something other (*alter*) than that which they wanted or expected. Lefebvre contends

that it is Marx who, in giving the negative element of the Hegelian dialectic back its revolutionary force, achieves true dialectic in 'the irony of becoming'. The irony of becoming is not expounded, but implied by Adorno and Horkheimer as that which is already present in *the principle of immanence*. The latter, which Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination is the explanation of every event as repetition or, that which can be understood cognitively as 'identity thinking'. It is expounded by Adorno and Horkheimer as that which has its requital in the enlightenment process, in that nothing may be at the same time identical with itself - typified by the Homeric horde mythology of the Hitler Youth movement - 'that phony fascist mythology which shows itself to be the genuine myth of antiquity.' Accordingly, Hegelian black humor and the historical determination of the *dialectic* quickly become ironic when one realises as Marx did that modernity is a Godless place where everything becomes pregnant with its contrary, which implies, in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis, that modernity itself is defined by the principle of immanence, not novelty, but historical equivalence. In Lefebvre's prelude to modernity he promulgates the latter as that which is identified first by Engels' writing about the events of 1848-52, and then developed by Marx; concluding that history never repeats itself, but proceeds by analogies and homologies - the first time as grand tragedy, the second time as farce:

'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce ... Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise...'

(in Lefebvre, 1995, p. 20 - 21)

Further to Marx, Lefebvre suggests that modernity is not entirely valid - that it is *initself* to a large extent homologous: that as a form of consciousness it contains as much mystification as those contemporary forms of consciousness that make no claims to the 'modern' but see themselves as 'traditional' 'run-of-the-mill'. And contrary to Marshall Berman for instance, who also brings Marxism and modernity together in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Lefebvre does not perceive unity, even in the disunity, that is the maelstrom of modernity: he argues that modernity is not to be confused or conflated with the 'worldwide', for to do so is to carry on the dogmatic rationalism of the 'universal' in Kant. In true dialectical nature the outcome of Lefebvre's analysis is already alluded to from the start: we find it in the first prelude - in Socrates - in the irony of his 'absence'; we find it in the black humour of Hegelian fulfillment: an infinite thirst that drives the fools of history ever onward trying to fill a bucket with a hole in it: 'modernity is an endeavour: the discovery and appropriation of desire'. (1995, p. 191)

In modernity the ontological illusion confounds 'being' and 'representation', it desperately and opportunistically obtains representations in an effort to fulfill itself: to embody itself: to satisfy itself; it is consumption on a colossal scale, but accordingly you can't fill a bucket with a hole in it, although aestheticism tries. Aestheticism is modernity's *alibi*: it pretends to heal the fissure between insatiable subjectivities and increasingly unattainable accumulation. It is in this regard, contrary to Berman, that Lefebvre claims modernity cannot be conceived as a structure, or as the 'base' of a structure, for accordingly it reveals nothing but crises, contradictions and confusions at every turn; and it lacks the radically revolutionary negativity of the Marxian dialectic - which would have transformed life. Instead modernity as he perceives it is a fruitless attempt to achieve structure and coherence; and he

notes that an extended critique of aestheticism in modernity would entail a radical critique of *pseudo-worlds* and the irony of their penchants for totality:

‘... the ‘world’ of painting, the ‘world’ of poetry, the ‘world’ of music - the ‘world’ of Joyce, of Proust,..the ‘world’ of images, of discourse and so on...it would unmask the alienation of ‘worlds which save’ (salvation through children, or love, or women, or self-sacrifice, or fatherhood, or expiation, or faith, or nature...)...Aestheticism has its pretensions to totality, to unity, to coherence, to the ‘total’ world, to the conception and creation of the world. But it accepts fragmentation and division; it increases them, splitting the chaos of the palpable world from the aesthetic concepts and values which organize it.’

(Lefebvre, 1995, p. 217)

Rancierre agrees, and *In the Future Of The Image* he suggests that it was Hegel, who as early as 1820 attracted the well-founded cursing of all future modernisms in advance by showing that the separation between spheres of rationality that occurred in the 1760’s with the incommensurability of Virgil’s poem and Lessing’s Laocoon entailed not the glorious autonomy of art and the arts, but the loss of their power of thinking in common; ‘of thinking producing or expressing something common’. (2007, p. 43) This absence of common measurement originating in Lessing’s Laocoon with the disjunction between registers of expression culminated in the disenfranchisement of the representative regime in terms of the autonomy of art, and formed the common core of orthodox modernist theorization which vouchsafed each art its autonomy and valorized paintings unique surface. But Rancierre suggests conversely that it was to Hegel’s contention of incommensurability to which all future modernisms replied, by seeking their art not in some term of measurement unique to each of them, but on the contrary, where any such ‘uniqueness’ collapses. Rancierre argues that when this thread of history was undone by the very fact that the suffering of Virgil’s Laocoon could not be translated accurately into the sculptor’s stone this did not mean that words and form parted company, but rather, and further to Hegel (and Marx) it meant that it was not only forms that became analogous and homologous in modernity but materialities themselves immediately mixed. He notes;

‘...the loss of any common term of measurement between the means of art does not signify that henceforth each remains in its own sphere, supplying its own measurement. Instead, it means that any common measurement is now a singular production and that this production is only possible on condition of confronting, in its radicalism, the measurelessness of the melange.’

(2009, p. 42)

Against the triumphalist teleology of purity in art Rancierre traces the valorization of incommensurability through the mixing of materiality that began conceptually in Balzac circa 1830 in his population of novels with Dutch paintings and on through to its obvious empirical manifestations in dadaism, cubism, conceptualism *et al* (see fig) to the pseudo-metamorphoses of *Histoire(s) du cinema* and the invention of the reverse-angle shot vis-a-vis Goya in Godard; through Benjamins theorization of the dialectical clash between image and time; through Adorno’s aesthetic of contradiction peculiar to modernism; and on into Lyotard’s sublime gap between Idea and empirical representation. What Rancierre calls ‘the great parataxis’ is the indifferent melange of significations and materialities unique to modernity - he calls this the law of the ‘profound today’: a law that states there is no longer any measurement of anything in common and it is the common factor of dis-measure or chaos that defines art in modernity and gives it its power. Accordingly, aestheticism in modernity is constructed as a dualism which is in-itself contradictory: nourished on the one hand by the chaotic power of this great parataxis, but able, by virtue of this very fact, to stop this chaos or ‘schizophrenia’ from collapsing into the lethargy of consensus. (1995, p. 34 - 55)

In Lefebvre's eleventh prelude to modernity he anticipates this, he suggests that when considered dialectically the opposing forces of a dualism can no longer be considered as thesis and anti-thesis in the Hegelian sense because in Marx these become 'abstract reflected anti-theses' unique to the modern world. (1995, p. 168 - 238) The Marxian concept he is referring to is not reflection but distortion. This means that when considered dialectically modernism does not simply reflect modernity but instead distorts it: it reflects modernity and throws back not only a representation but also its own reality refracted through the reality of modernity itself; what Marx aptly described as a 'topsy-turvy' view in a letter to Ruge. Lefebvre concedes that modernism is represented by unfocused projections and distorted images which fail to produce a clear concept of it. He argues that on one hand, these offerings act as a barrier to the concept of modernism - prohibiting reflection about it, or even awareness that reflection is necessary - and on the other hand, he admits that such piecemeal offerings are essential to formulating the concept itself. But in reminding us of the gap between immediate consciousness and knowledge he indicates the huge gap between the representation of modernism and the concept itself. Ranciere goes further in his analysis, he contends not only that this incommensurability is the distinguishing feature of art in modernity but that the *jouissance* of incommensurability and thus modernism *per se* is the gap between material presence and meaning in art. In 'Sentence, Image, History' he takes the power of the topsy-turvy view of reality peculiar to the changing nature of the dialectic in Marx and renders it in terms of a measurement unique to aestheticism in modernity which is accordingly, the sentence-image. The sentence-image valorizes the incommensurability peculiar to modernity and embodies the passivity of things without any rationale: 'We have invented happiness,' say the Last men, and blink'. (in Pearson and Large eds., 2006, p. 259)



In the pre-modern schema the sentence had a role of representation, a role that indicated a conceptual linking of actions, and the image in turn was subordinate to this schema in that its role was to supplement the presence of this representation - to which it imparted 'flesh' or embodiment. The sentence-image is a topsy-turvy version of this figure, it is de-figuration itself. In modernity both sentence and image are defined aesthetically - typified by the way they undo the representative relationship between image and text. The function of the image has become active and antagonistic reflecting the new aesthetic regime. The function of the sentence in turn is still that of linking but the sentence now links in as much as it wants to give flesh, and ironically, this flesh gives embodiment to the very passivity or inertia of things that have no reason, logical basis or particular beliefs from which to proceed. From the *dis-figuration* of the sentence-image peculiar to the interstices or topsy-turvy terrain of aestheticism in modernity is revealed an *absurd* truth, a bitter-truth that runs behind the anodyne of triumphalist modernism itself. We find it first and most formidably in the enlightened 'God is dead'; we find it in Goddard's oxymoronic oedipal formula, as with Nietzsche's above: 'O sweet miracle of our blind eyes'; and we find it most appropriately in the absurd reasoning of Oedipus in Camus' own proto-Promethean critique of modernity *The Myth of Sisyphus*¹⁰: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age, and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." (2000, p.109)

In modernity the conception of Oedipus as a being-toward-death prevails beyond the irony of the enlightenment's dialectic and takes on a novel comic quality. If we look again at the principle of fatal necessity: the *patria* of the principle of immanence (the explanation of every event as repetition), revealed in the pronouncement of the Oracle as the moribund revelation of the heroes birth, and expound it in the context of modernity, things will become a little clearer as to why:

'Through the mouth of She Who Speaks, the Sun-God told him that not only was he different and out of place amongst his brothers and friends, like a beast of the forest, a ghost, but that he would also become a monster among men, the scum of the earth, the city and the world.'

(Lefebvre, 1995, p. 50)

In addressing the nature of the heteronomous narrative through the tradition of myth in *Just Gaming*, Lyotard's analysis of language and Modernity points to Apollo's Oracle above and is increasingly convinced by this literal lock-down: this principle of fatal necessity, that Oedipus is not so much a tragic, or ironic, but rather a *comic* figure - a source of endless amusement for the Greeks; especially insofar as he cannot escape his afflicted fate: '... he remains "stuck" to Apollo's text and ... does not know how to tell a story that would put forward a variant of the story in which he himself is narrated, that is, of which he is the hero....' (Lyotard, 1985, p. 42) This, accordingly, is Oedipus' flaw. Albert Camus goes further in his analysis, finding in this literal lock-down a variant on the given theme; the hamming-up of such being the means by which Oedipus might proceed - within nihilism beyond nihilism.

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* is both an essay on comedy and an elegy for belief; an essay in which comedy transgresses its own inner-limit and becomes *the absurd*; precisely through an awareness of comedy itself. For Camus, Sisyphus is the absurd hero: a proto-Promethean figure without end. He is condemned by the Gods to ceaselessly roll a rock up a hill, whence-upon reaching the summit, the rock falls back of its own weight, time, and again. Sisyphus is thus condemned to an eternity of futile and hopeless labour - a very human punishment - given with good reason by the gods in accordance with his proto-Promethean crimes. *The Myth of Sisyphus* proposes the substitution of the tragedy of repetition for the ordinary, omitting comedy of repetition. Each time Sisyphus rolls that

huge boulder up the hill, he must re-realise his own torture in watching it roll down again. As it reaches the bottom, Sisyphus must start his heavy descent - heavy because he is conscious of his burden; of the farcical futility of his actions. But it is only in his 'lucidity' - in the hour of his heavy descent - that he can truly feel joy, it is an unaccumulated joy: a joy that springs forth fresh every time. His fate belongs to him. Thus Sisyphus, like the myth itself, is locked in what Lyotard calls an 'unacumulative tradition': a narrative that is bound by its own repetition and enabled by its own forgetting. In Sisyphus' lucidity 'the chain of daily gestures' is broken. It is the lucidity that sees the *means without end*, it is the lucidity that raises up the rock, and it is the rock itself that enables 'forgetting'. It is the forgetting - the unacumulative repetition that variably interests both Lyotard and Camus. And it is through *the absurd reasoning* that Camus locates in Sisyphus, that he would also be able to locate in Oedipus the absurd victory too - the victory that makes of fate a human matter: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age, and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." (in Camus, 2000, p.109) Just as Oedipus' absurd reasoning reins in the power of his own mortality and thus stands in the way of this very mortality vanishing into madness or consensus to death, modernity's sentence-image reins in the power of the great para-taxis and thus stands in the way of its vanishing into schizophrenia or common-view. Ranciere explains how the topsy-turvy truth or *absurd* victory of the sentence-image is achieved:

'By fragmenting continuums and distancing terms that call for each other other, or, conversely, by assimilating heterogeneous elements and combining incompatible things, it creates clashes. And it makes the clashes thus developed small measuring tools, conducive to revealing a disruptive power of community, which itself establishes another term of measurement... It involves organising a clash, presenting strangeness of the familiar, in order to reveal a different order of measurement that is only uncovered by the violence of a conflict. The power of the sentence-image that couples heterogeneous elements is then that of the distance and the collision which reveals the secret of a world - that is, the other world whose writ runs behind its anodyne or glorious appearances.'

(1995, p. 56 - 57)

We can sense the power of this machinery at work in the slapstick ambles of Hulot in Tati's *Playtime* as he attempts to navigate his way through a modern metropolis where the 'skin and bones' architecture of one modernist building is homologous to every other in that city and to every other city in the world. (see fig. 10) This surreal and comic portrayal of mankind's battle against the depersonalisation of life discloses the power of the sentence-image as that which separates ' the everything hangs together of art' from the 'everything merges' of explosive madness or consensual idiocy.

We can locate it in a diverse range of works from Dada and Surrealism to activist photomontage and aktionist art; from Duchamp's *Fountain* to Mona Lisa's mustache, from Bunuels eye-slashing edit in *Le Chien Andalou* to Martha Rosler's '*bringing war home*'. (see fig. 25) From John Heartfield's *Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* to VALIE EXPORT'S *Body Configurations* - from the expose of capitalist gold in Hitlers gullet to the limp body of a woman draped over a monumental staircase or lying on the pavement with her body bent round a curb: from 'human ornament' in a patriarchal symbolic economy where "ornament is crime" to 'machine-living' and the absurdity of the modernist utopian vision. (see fig. 23 and 24) In all of these cases the truth of the modern world is revealed; be it the 'umbilical chord of gold' behind the sublimity of art or the gold of exploitation and economic domination behind the rhetoric of national socialism, be it the absolute reality of desires and dreams, or the absolute reality of home comforts - the truth of conflict, and our complicity.

Duchamp's *Fountain* and *L.H.O.O.Q.* can be read in a combined way. (fig.12, and fig. 13 respectively) With *Mona Lisa*'s mustache as with the topsy-turvy rotation of the urinals axis, Duchamp simultaneously undermined the art-historical world, and called aestheticism into question. On the one hand these ready-mades precede Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in the most economical way: questioning the difference between artistic objects and objects of everyday-life; and on the other hand they indicate that their subject matter is every bit as topsy-turvy as taking an object from an assembly-line and designating it an original artwork by virtue of the context in which it is seen - i.e. the gallery or the museum. It is Duchamp, like Socrates, who turns the terrain of the Oracle - that of Kantian judgement - on its head: by laying claim to the riddle "what is art?" he takes the place of both Oedipus and the sphinx. *Fountain* thus becomes the distance and collision that discloses the secret of an other world - that is, an absurd world whose writ runs behind its anodyne or glorious appearances. Further, and perhaps most profoundly, it is against the historical determinism of the dialectic in Hegel, and further to the 'farical homology' in Marx, that we may posit the 'absurd victory' of Duchamp's sentence-image as a variable of the 'unacumulative tradition' located in both Lyotard and Camus: in the 'lucidity' of the sentence-image *L.H.O.O.Q.* the 'chain of daily gestures' is broken, a narrative that is bound by its own repetition is enabled by its own forgetting, 'It teaches that all is not, has not, been exhausted. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.' (Camus, 2000, p.110)



fig. 12

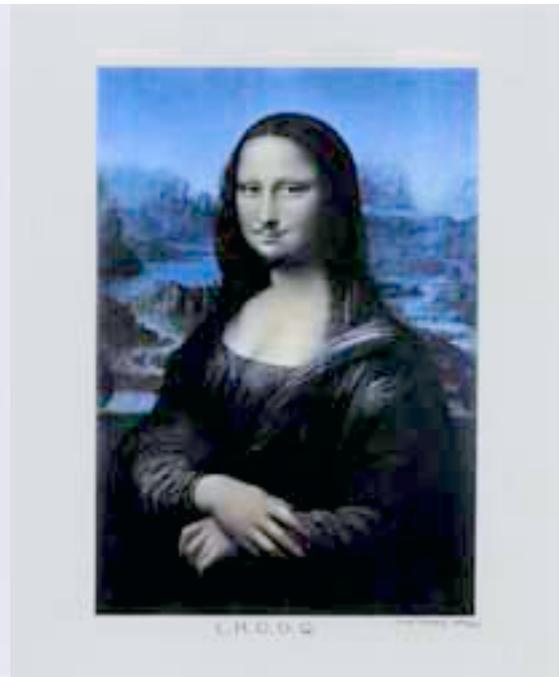


fig. 13

What is Modernism?

4. Sentence-image: **history**, from Latin *sententia* ‘opinion,’ from *sentire* ‘feel, be of the opinion.’ | image |‘imij| from Latin ; *related to imitate*



fig.14

Hegel is often cited, in particular by E.H Gombrich, as the ‘father’ of art history: he conceived a dignity and a virtue in art, in its ability to transcribe the meaning of a ‘time’. It was in this light that he conceived of the work of art as a historical document - a document that has no choice but to reveal its culture and its people. The historical determinism that Hegel conceived in the work of art is very similar to what art historian Erwin Panofsky would later identify as the ‘intrinsic meaning or content’ of a work of art. Accordingly, the acute art historian can find an essential part of a historical period in a single work of art, what art historian Vernon Hyde Minor likens to ‘finding the world in a grain of sand’. (2001,p.101) Rancierre goes further with this analysis in ‘Sentence, Image, History’ suggesting that in modernity - the sentence-image - is one such ‘grain of sand’. By combining incompatible elements and creating clashes, which then become unique measuring tools instrumental in revealing a disruptive power of community, the sentence-image discloses an ‘absurd’ truth unique to the topsy-turvy terrain of modernity which, in-itself, establishes a further term of measurement. In coupling Rancierre’s analysis with Adorno’s ethical understanding of the Hegelian dialectic, it indicates that by applying this machinery as method, not only to the incommensurability of heterogeneous histories of modernism, but to the incommensurability of modernity’s own socio-political reality and the ‘ruthless forgetting’ attributed to modernism itself - the negative element of the dialectic is exposed; and further, the determinative negativity of the dialectic is reversed.

In the dialectic - which is ‘negative philosophy’ - domination reproduces itself, but the truth or untruth of history is not inherent to the dialectical method itself, it is inherent to the determinative negativity of the dominating history. Thus the dominative, or canonical history, in this case, reappears unrefined every-time and no radical change in this thought is enabled. The sentence-image, however, is indicatively capable of perverting the course of this dialectic. By giving the negative element of the dialectic back its revolutionary power, the sentence-image has the power to transform histories: by exposing one world behind another it reveals the dominated or negative truth of the dialectic - and by recognising the writ of the negative beneath the positive it is conducive to disrupting the dialectical motion of historical determinism by producing a revolutionary truth qualitative of transforming our understanding of that ‘time’. If we look at fig.14 by Art and Language the crux of this proposition seems aptly paved. In their studied pursuit of ‘Genesis’; of the incommensurability of meaning and representation in the art-object, British group Art and Language committed, what they later described as a ‘monstrous stylistic *detente* between the two supposedly antagonistic parts of a mutually reinforcing pair’, which means to say, that by stenciling the supposedly “expressionistic” marks of this painting which looks to be executed in Pollock’s ‘drip-style’, and in a purportedly abstract pattern - but in whose surface can be seen a hidden image of Lenin - with cap and familiar inclined beard: Art and Language contest the premises of modernist painting and do so on painting’s own ground; formidably intending not only the scandalous compatibility of abstract expressionism with soviet socialist realism, but the absurd truth of prohibition surrounding Greenberg’s own aesthetic vision. (Taylor, 2005, p.74) The repressed image of Lenin mirrors the determinative negativity of both Kant’s judgement and the Hegelian dialectic, and by exposing the hidden writ of leftist-ideology Art and Language blast open the central taboo surrounding 1950’s formalist modernism.

What if the machinery of this method were applicable to Robsjohn Gibling’s *Mona Lisa’s Mustache* ? Gibling’s account of modern art and modern life reveals the historical determination of an individual who understood the power of the sentence-image - who understood the power of its distance and collision. What if Gibling’s ‘rubished’ account was actually only *rubished on account* that it was in-itself the distance and collision that revealed the secret of another world - another modernism, whose writ ran behind that of its own triumphalist image: the staging of the new world historical scene in the genuine handed down language of antiquity, and in the venerable disguise of creating ‘something new’: an unconditioned “*pure art*” free from society and history? In truth the

very fact that this publication was ‘rubbished’ egged this author on, but the very fact that it was ‘rubbished’ in 1947, by Greenberg’s schoolmasterly ‘That-is-not-what-I-meant’, also ‘meant’, that it was out of print - Arthur C. Danto recognises in the same orthodoxy the handed down language of the dialectic: ‘purgation’; and in doing so, ascertains in modernism, the true beat of its own dyadic rhythm: *the principle of fatal (fateful) necessity*: ‘the principle of immanence’:

‘The history of modernism is the history of purgation, or generic cleansing, of ridding the art of whatever was inessential to it. It is difficult not to hear the political echoes of purity and purgation, whatever Greenberg’s own politics actually were. These echoes crash back and forth across the tormented fields of nationalist strife, and the notion of ethnic cleansing has become a shuddering imperative of separatist movements the world round. It is not surprising, simply shocking, to recognize that the political analog of modernism in art was totalitarianism, with its ideas of racial purity and its agenda to drive out any perceived contaminant ...’

(1997, p.170)

And in Marshall Berman’s account - which reins in the power of the great parataxis in the distance and collision of Marx’s sentence-image ‘all that is solid melts into air’ - he contends that orthodox modernists purposefully avoid the irony of Marx’s dialectic for fear that it would profane their a-historical theories of *art pour l’art*; for fear it would desecrate the halo that modernism has fashioned for itself... in place of the one lost in modernity itself. (1983, p. 122) He concedes, further to Gibling, that much of the mystification surrounding modern life actually goes on in the name of ‘progressive modernism’ - and yes, it is indeed ironic - the ‘emperors new clothes’ that destroy much of its most exciting possibilities. (1983, p. 170) Berman recognises a contemporary desire to live-again with incommensurability: to live with the sentence-image; to lose our haloes in the distance and collision and to find ourselves anew in the fissures of heterogeneous histories. He suggests that it is to the alchemical words of the first modernists to whom we should return - Nietzsche, Marx and Baudelaire; and further, that just as the modernisms of the past found themselves by forgetting, so we may forge our way into the future through active remembering.

For Nietzsche such ‘active remembering’ is the paradoxical task that nature has set herself with regard to humankind - it is the possibility to breed an animal with the prerogative to promise - the opposing force, of which, is forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is not simply - as Nietzsche suggests - *vis inertiae*, stationery condition, but rather, it is an active ability to suppress: it is strategic amnesia *per se*. Of course, it goes without saying, we owe a lot to such forgetfulness - it allows us to think, breathe, and function as normal human-beings. There can be no ‘happiness’, no ‘pride’, no ‘cheerfulness’ without it - there can, in fact, be no *immediacy* without such forgetfulness. It is the gate-keeper to our sanity: our rest and etiquette. But, accordingly, within every such ‘robust’ typology is built a counter-device called ‘memory’ or ‘active remembering’ which suspends strategic amnesia in order to fulfill a promise - an ‘ethical duty’ in the Kantian sense. It is not simply a passive inability not to be rid of an impression once it is made, but rather it is an ‘active desire’ not to let go: not to ‘let go’ of what has been desired; it is the desire to keep on desiring what has been desired. It is a promise, not to “time”: to some chronological order, or determinism *per se*, but to humanity itself - it is a promise to ‘actively remember’ what has been in order that mankind may think causally and with a degree of control over its future. So that we may view the future as the present and anticipate it; so that we may be answerable to our own future - like Sisyphus and Oedipus - so that we may make of fate a human matter: to see what it means and what is end. At the same time allowing a world of possibilities - of strange new things to come into play - between the original “I will” “I shall do” and the act of fulfilling the promise itself; Berman ardently agrees, and he concludes that ‘actively remembering’ the modernisms of the nineteenth century could give us the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first. (Nietzsche, 2007, p.35 - 67) (Berman, 1983, *et al*)

conclusion |kən'kloō zh ən|

I hate conclusions, I mean, what's to conclude - I despise holism? As if it wasn't evident already. I don't want to 'forget' Greenberg's formalist account of modernism any more than I want to 'forget' that Auschwitz happened. But, believe me, it is difficult to resist such purgation because the political analog is already present in the question - 'what' is as totalitarian as any system. 'What' preconceives 'true' and 'false'; 'what' dominates the Aporetic dialogues where nihilism is king.

Nietzsche's distinctive contribution to modern philosophy is his absolute contestation of 'true' and 'false'. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche brings the more rigorous notions of 'sense' and 'value' (signification and evaluation) in their place. In his method you always get the truth you deserve according to the sense of what you say, and according to the value you give voice - 'value' is, as it is for Marx, absolutely inseparable from a radical and total critique of society and the world; and 'sense', like the sentence-image, is absolute creation: it is contestation - distance and collision at the origin - that asks not 'what' but 'which' is modernism?



fig. 15



fig.16



fi.17

fig. 18



fig. 19





fig. 20





fig. 22



fig. 23



fig. 24

fig. 25



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