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ORIGINS OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

I HAVE BEEN READING Perry Anderson's descriptions of the state we are in, and his efforts to discover the whys and wherefores of that state—its origins, as he unrepentantly puts it—for thirty-five years. I can see the pale yellow cover of the copy of NLR containing his early essay, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', in my mind's eye as I write; the colour plunges me back immediately, vividly, into the mix of feelings that the essay stirred up the first time I read it. The stakes were high then, or so we thought; and the disagreements deep—about how to frame an explanation of the crisis that, in 1964, was unexpectedly upon us; and, above all, about how to frame an effective response. In what follows I want to talk about Anderson's recent work *The Origins of Postmodernity* and its treatment of art—especially, its characterization of modernism and its account of the circumstances in which modernism came to an end.¹ I want to avoid another version of the 'Does post-modernism deserve the name?' debate, which I am sure has been mostly sterile. The fact that it is now fashionable to answer No to the question is no more significant than the fact that five years ago it was hard not to answer Yes. The question may turn out to have been the wrong one all along. Maybe it was the wrong one because it necessarily pointed to too many, too disparate phenomena at once—too many instances and levels—with no stable sense of separations and determinations among them. Or maybe that instability was its strength—the structure of the investigation taking, and giving form to, the special necessities of the matters being grappled with.

I do not know. I want to try to remain an agnostic on this question. All I assume is that we want a set of descriptions that goes some way to accounting for some specific turn—some rearrangement of features, maybe some deeper shift in presuppositions and procedures—in the visual and verbal culture of the past thirty years. And I assume that this turn has to do *with* modernism—with turning it, or turning it against itself, or turning away from it (but even that turning away is not fully conceivable except as something done to a past that tries to prevent its happening, still insists on facing the turning away, still wants the *post-* as its own posterity). So a great deal depends, it follows, on getting modernism right; on pointing to what it is in modernism that postmodernism still has to do with, like it or not; and finally, crucially, what it was about the circumstances of modernism that changed, some time in the 1950s and 1960s—Anderson says ‘[it] was not until the turn of the seventies that the ground for an altogether new configuration was prepared’—*enough* for the older configuration’s hold, its continual facing ahead, to relax.

Here, to remind you, are the lineaments of modernism as Anderson presents them. He has in mind primarily the European modernisms of the *fin de siècle* and the first thirty-or-so years of the last century. They are best understood, he says,

as the outcome of a field of force triangulated by three coordinates: an economy and society still only semi-industrial, in which the ruling order remained to a significant extent agrarian or aristocratic; a technology of dramatic interventions, whose impact was still fresh or incipient; and an open political horizon, in which revolutionary upheavals of one kind or another against the prevailing order were widely expected or feared. In the space so bounded, a wide variety of artistic innovations could explode—symbolism, imagism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism: some quarrying classical memory or patrician styles, others drawn to a poetics of the new machinery, yet others fired by visions of social upheaval; but none at peace with the market as the organizing principle of a modern culture—in that sense, virtually without exception anti-bourgeois.²

Anderson has interesting things to say by way of qualifying this broad characterization. He builds in a sense of geographical differences and

¹ Originally presented as a paper at a symposium of the Centre for Social Theory and Comparative History at UCLA.

² Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso: London 1998, p. 81.

exceptions—notably (as usual) he recognizes the peculiarity of the English. He no longer believes that it was all up with modernism in 1945—the strange career of post-Surrealist, post-Expressionist avant-gardism in New York, and even Paris and Copenhagen, in the 1950s now looks more convincingly a part of modernism (less a last gasp or rote repetition) than it did to him fifteen years ago. But he sticks to the main lines of his picture, particularly of modernism's enabling conditions: a bourgeois industrial order existing cheek-by-jowl with its outmoded but stubborn opposites—the village, the peasant, the dense cultural remains of aristocracy; an arriving world of mechanical wonders still, in its very newness and incompleteness, invested with the 'charisma of technique'; and the presence of revolution, as an actuality or a pervasive myth.

Modernism's end

His account of modernism's *disabling* conditions seems to me to follow rather closely from this previous account. Postmodernism is again a field 'triangulated . . . by three new historical coordinates'. Modernism was the product of a bourgeois society in which a bourgeoisie still struggled for cultural self-definition in face of its feudal, aristocratic other; one in which the sheer extremity of that struggle for self-definition forced the bourgeoisie to declare itself as a specific locus of cultural authority. One thinks of Barthes's great normative definition of the bourgeoisie as 'the class that does not wish to be named', and realizes that Anderson is painting a picture of a necessarily exceptional and transient moment of the bourgeoisie's self-positing. Postmodernism happens when that self-positing comes to an end—when 'the bourgeoisie as Baudelaire or Marx, Ibsen or Rimbaud, Grosz or Brecht—or even Sartre or O'Hara—knew it, is a thing of the past.'³ This begins with a vengeance after 1945—though the way had certainly been prepared by Fascism. And once 'democratization of manners and disinhibition of mores' have really done their work of symbolic pseudo-levelling, once 'a general *encanaillement* of the possessing classes' has overtaken the older, embarrassing, Bourdieu-type signs of distinction, the game, for modernism, is up. It has no adversary. Its endless riffs and deformations of the aristocratic legacy—the very legacy the bourgeoisie was struggling at the same time to turn to its own purposes—came to mean nothing, to have less and less critical force,

³ *Origins*, pp. 85–6.

because the bourgeoisie had abandoned the struggle, and finally settled (as it always wanted to) for purely instrumental reason.

Thus coordinate one. Coordinate two is the routinization of technique, and the saturation—the internal structuring—of the cultural field by ‘perpetual emotion machines, transmitting discourses that are wall-to-wall ideology, in the strong sense of the term.’⁴ Television is the key technology here: and still, curiously, the matrix of the new apparatus of symbol management, and self-management via the symbol. Call this the colonization of everyday life—the arrival of the society of the spectacle. Where once the nature of bourgeois rationality had been congealed into specific pieces or dreams of equipment—specific invasions of the body or the landscape by this or that network or instrument, monstrous or wonderful or most likely a mixture of both—now the new nature was everywhere and nowhere, producing the very forms in which it would be conceivable. There was no outside to the imaginary any more; or rather, no inside—no critical distance possible in the space between its terms. ‘Image’, ‘body’, ‘landscape’, ‘machine’—these (and other) key terms of modernism’s opposing language are robbed of their criticality by the sheer rapidity of their circulation in the new image-circuits, and the ability of those circuits to blur distinctions, to flatten and derealize, to turn every idea or delight or horror into a fifteen-second vignette.

Coordinate one: the new nature of class power. Coordinate two: the new nature of its technical instrumentation. Coordinate three (does this follow from the other two, or is it a coordinate with its own specific history and force?): ‘the cancellation of political alternatives’—the end of the long epoch of revolutionary myths and challenges to bourgeois society on which modernism had fed.

Politics of the spectacle

You will gather from the way I have presented this argument that there is a lot of it I agree with. Some of its stresses—particularly on the necessity of coming to terms with the new forces and relations of symbolic production in bourgeois society, and their implications for a future anti-capitalist politics—have seemed to me essential to thinking again about

⁴ *Origins*, p. 89.

capitalism ever since they were first formulated, and I encountered them, in the mid-1960s. If I may sound, very briefly, a micro-historical note (bringing us back for a moment to the world of ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, etc.), it strikes me as odd that Anderson leans as heavily as he does—and inevitably, rightly so—on the concept of ‘the society of the spectacle’ while never naming its author (in a book where names are named insistently), and choosing to dismiss the particular context of revolutionary theory and practice from which the concept emerged—that is, the later Situationist International—as ‘condemn[ed] to the hazards, and transience, of any overpoliticization.’⁵ This indeed revives the mixed feelings with which I read *New Left Review* in 1964. For the ‘overpoliticization’ struck me then as simply a *politicization*, of a group of people (some of them previously ‘artists’) whose encounter with the conditions of production of the image, and the nature of the changes overtaking that production, had led them to realize that the realm of the image was, increasingly, the social location in which and against which a possible future ‘politics’ would have to be framed. That the politicization resulting from this had its febrile and precarious sides, no one but a fool would deny. But part of the reason for that extremity, I am sure, was isolation—that is, the refusal of most of the rest of the Left at the time to entertain the idea that the ground and form of the ‘political’ was shifting, maybe terminally, in ways that put the Left’s most basic assumptions in doubt.

The origins of postmodernity were a matter of active theory and practice, then—and of active avoidance and choosing not to notice—at the moment of origins. The valedictory, hard-headed, anti-denunciatory, ‘own-up-to-the-power-of-the-image’ tone of much writing on postmodernism—including Jameson’s, at moments—would be easier to warm to if it were not so decidedly a realism after the event.

Enough. My subject here had better be modernism, not the society of the spectacle. I have various, overlapping things to say about Anderson’s characterization of it, and no very clear sense of the order they should go in—or of whether what seem to me various different things will turn out to be just different ways of saying the same thing. Plenty of previous

⁵ *Origins*, p. 84. For more on these issues see D. Nicholson-Smith and T. J. Clark, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill The Situationist International’, *October*, no. 79, winter 1997.

commentators, including Alex Callinicos, have pointed out that descriptions of postmodernism almost invariably thrive on a kind of blindness to the presence within *modernism* of the very features that are supposed to make postmodernism what it is. ‘Virtually every aesthetic device or feature attributed to postmodernism—*bricolage* of tradition, play with the popular, reflexivity, hybridity, pastiche, figurality, decentering of the subject—could be found’, as Anderson puts it, in the previous regime of representation. ‘No critical break was discernible.’⁶

I want to push this line of analysis further. For of course (as Callinicos realizes) it is no kind of answer to the argument for postmodernism’s specificity simply to list those features it shares with its predecessor. Any new regime of representation will be made out of the debris—the unrealized capacities, the opportunities offered for reinfection and reversal—of the regime it displaces. Again, the example of the bourgeoisie’s long (for a while, it seemed truly interminable) love-hate relationship with the forms of aristocracy comes to mind. It is still open to us to say that finally, or sufficiently, those features borrowed and travestied from the predecessor crystallize into a genuinely new order. They are put to new purposes. Their problems and objects are recognizably different.

So the only sufficient answer to Anderson and Jameson would turn on a demonstration not just that modernism and postmodernism share ‘devices and features’, but that their purposes, problems and objects are essentially the same—they stand in the same central, undecidable relation of ambivalence toward the main forms of modernity, of bourgeois industrial society. I am inclined to think this is true. Remember, as a preliminary orientation, that Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* was not a book that proposed a *periodization* of capitalism. It deliberately did not say when ‘the spectacle’ arrived. The spectacle was a logic and an instrumentation inherent in the commodity economy, and in certain of its social accompaniments, from the very beginning. No doubt that logic became clearer as the instrumentation became more efficient and widespread—why else the peculiar mixture of lucidity and desperation to Debord’s very tone? But the logic had always been relatively clear, and the instrumentation notable—in a sense, pervasive. Why else *The Society of the Spectacle*’s epigraph from Feuerbach? What else did its author think Marx was pointing to in his account of ‘the fetishism of commodities’?

⁶ *Origins*, p. 80.

Modernism, to repeat, was already characterized by a deep, truly undecidable doubleness of mind in the face of the main forms of modernity. And that doubleness was *constitutive*; since modernism is a name not for a stance of Left or Right insurgency or negation, but for a pattern of artistic practice in which modernity's very means of representation—the structure of symbolic production and reproduction within it—are put to the test of exemplification in a particular medium. That is to say, one can never be certain of modernism's 'attitude' to the appearance and logic of modernity because modernism itself was never certain—because it could not have put modernity to the test in the way it did without bracketing overall 'judgement' of what it took on until such judgement *was given in the act (the whole structure) of representation itself*. Certainly Adorno's great 'Teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song' is modernism's motto. But for that very reason it is always the question with modernism whether the process of singing will petrify the singer, or lead (as it were, *at the very moment of petrification*, at the moment when modernism's technicality is about to become the full mirror-image of technical rationality in general) to a discovery of the joints and sutures in the stone. So that the statues—the forms, the fetishes—do finally creak into motion.

Testing representations

Modernism was a form of testing—of modernity and its modes. The modes were put to the test by being materialized, by being reduced to a set of actual, technical manoeuvres; but more than that, by being forced and denatured in the process, in order to see how much of the modes survived the extremes of dispersal and emptying, flattening and abstraction, estrangement and de-skilling—the procedures that strangely, in modernism, *became what materialization was*. Modernism was *forcing*, in other words; and, needless to say, that forcing had its moment of freezing and idealizing—what Adorno called its regressive moment—as the necessary other to the annihilating or abysmal ones. Take the motif of the machine and the mechanized (and beyond it the wider problematic of rationalization and standardization) which Anderson rightly recognizes as central. Is it the case, as he takes it to be, that modernism necessarily posited the machine as an arriving, transforming entity, as opposed to the sign of a wider, previously embedded logic? Did modernism always fall prey to the charisma of technique (even the charisma of its *own* technique)? I wonder. For every Ozenfant there seems to me

to be a Picabia; for every Schröder House an Einstein Tower; for every *Monument to the Third International* a *Merzbau* enfolding its Cathedral of Erotic Misery—or indeed, directly answering Tatlin’s *Monument*, Hausmann’s sardonic-domestic *Tatlin at Home*. That is to say, for every sweet dream of rationality, a nightmare vision of the iron cage. For every smug act of gloating at a decentered, pseudo-mechanical subject in the making (much of mid-period Duchamp comes to mind), a Kafka to give us the actual, syntactical movement—the movement of horror and self-loss—of an ordinary ‘modern’ individual on his or her way to living death. For every De Stijl a Dada; or a De Stijl going Dada (discovering Dada at the heart of De Stijl); or a Dada forced, seemingly by the logic of its own hyper-individualism, toward a weird parody—but in the end is it even a parody?—of Constructivism. I am describing actual trajectories here, actual hybrids at the heart of modernism: Schwitters, for instance, or El Lissitzky, or Van Doesburg.

The invisible bourgeoisie

You see, I hope, where my argument is going. The closer I look at modernism, the more I come to doubt the picture of its relation to the charisma of the machine on which Anderson’s coordinate two depends. On one level this is a matter of empirical disagreement about this or that modernist artifact or frame of belief. And the same kind of factual arguments could be brought to bear on the other two points of Anderson’s triangulation. Maybe the postwar period really did see a specific levelling and dis-identification of the bourgeoisie. Anderson’s language is vivid and persuasive about the detail of that disappearance. But was such a disappearance constitutively new? Did it mean modernism was face to face with a subject—a social formation—it had previously never had in its sights? I doubt it. Again, I go back to Barthes’s definition—to the notion of the bourgeoisie as, by its very nature as a class, a constant flickering in and out of social visibility, a permanent, endlessly inventive *société anonyme*. I would say that Barthes was on to something fundamental here, which theorists of capitalist culture have not yet fully pursued. And the presence or absence of the bourgeoisie—its positivity but deep concealment—is one of modernism’s defining, indeed constitutive, subjects, from *A Burial at Ornans* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* on. For what was modernity except that set of forms in which a certain ruling class attempted to universalize its power, by having that power simply *be* individual freedom, or technical rationality, or the one as condition of the

other? And what else is modernism but a continual encounter with just that effect of representation? Is it even the case—I move on to coordinate three—that the end of effective political opposition to capitalism robbed modernism of one of its necessary supports? Had modernism not constantly (again, constitutively) lived precisely with such an ending? Did it not thrive, in France at the turn of the century, in the face of bourgeois society's most hideous positivity? And did it not feed deep, exactly in its pre-war heyday, on the worst kinds of Rightist vitalism, mysticism and racism? (Far more deeply, as I see it, by 1910–14, than ever it had fed on Kropotkin or Jules Guesde.) In what sense were the years between the two great wars not *already* an ending—a crushing and freezing of revolutionary energies? I know that Anderson and I are never going to agree about whether the Communism of the Third International lives up to that last description. But we can agree that modernism—actual modernists—disagreed about exactly this issue, this sense of modernism's political situation, as the Communism of the Third International went through its various loathsome mutations. For every Léger there was a Jean Vigo, for every El Lissitzky a Malevich, for every Heartfield an Attila József. And is not the point about modernism, once again, that *in practice* even the work of Stalinism's great modernist camp-followers opened the immobility and flatness of the Third International's image of socialism to scrutiny—to possible dismantling and remaking? Do not El Lissitzky's absurd, marmoreal photomontages of the 1930s, or Heartfield's desperate parallel efforts to dislodge Hitler and celebrate the Soviet New Man, or even Frida Kahlo's last mad, pathetic attempts at an overt Stalinist *icon*: do not all of these *speak* to the very crushing and fixing of possibilities they try to negate?

Continuities

Again, I return to the wider logic of the case. It is not an answer to the idea of postmodernism simply to say that the modernist field contained many of the same procedures and proposals. The question is: Were those procedures and proposals formative? Were they already what gave modernism its shape, its dynamic? None of my counterexamples would matter, in other words, if I did not believe they added up, finally, to another account of modernism's whole situation. By 'situation' I mean not just the movement's undecidable social place in relation to a visible-and-invisible bourgeoisie (whose visibility and invisibility it continually chose to recognize and not recognize), but also, more deeply, its sense

of the means at its disposal in the face of modernity—what it had to do, what technical or material logic it had to follow, what political or critical vantage point *it might have to deny itself*, to keep the possibility of representation alive. To put it in a nutshell (to speak to the founding father) I do not see that Warhol's ascesis of 'attitude', or collapse of distance, or atony or impenetrability, does other than continue a tactic—but it is more than a tactic, it is a structural necessity—that had made modernism what it was.

Once or twice in his recent essays Fredric Jameson has turned specifically to *defining* modernism, and not surprisingly he has gone back to Adorno for help—to Adorno and Hegel. 'For us,' he quotes Hegel's great dictum, 'art no longer counts as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.' The task of the critic, Jameson says, is to understand why the prediction about art practice that seemed to follow from the dictum—that art, as a significant form of life, would end, or decline into mere decorative accompaniment—did not prove to be true. Something called modernism happened instead. 'What did not conform to Hegel's prognosis was the supersession of art by philosophy itself: rather, a new and different kind of art appeared to take philosophy's place after the end of the old one, and to usurp all of philosophy's claims to the Absolute, to being "the highest mode in which truth manages to come into being". This was the art we call modernism.'⁷ Or again, in 'Transformations of the Image',

what distinguishes modernism in general is not the experimentation with inherited forms or the invention of new ones . . . Modernism constitutes, above all, the feeling that the aesthetic can only fully be realized and embodied where it is something more than the aesthetic . . . [It is] an art that in its very inner movement seeks to transcend itself as art (as Adorno thought, and without it being particularly important to determine the direction of that self-transcendence, whether religious or political).⁸

These are key episodes in Jameson's text. Very often the moments at which he returns specifically to Adorno are those where the stakes of his whole analysis come clear. And these recent ones are clarifying. They allow me to state my basic disagreement with Jameson's picture of modernism and whatever happened to it in the last thirty years—with

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, London 1998, p. 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101–2.

Jameson's picture, and, I think, Anderson's. For the stress here on modernism as turning on a repeated claim, or effort, to transcend itself as art—its belief, to quote Jameson again, 'that in order to be art at all, art must be something beyond art'⁹—seems to me exactly half the story. It is, if you like, a stress *out of* Adorno's dialectic, which leaves unspoken—and therefore in the end demotes—the other, equally essential moment to Adorno's account. For surely transcendence in modernism can only be achieved—is not this central to our whole sense of the movement's wager?—by way of absolute immanence and contingency, through a deep and ruthless materialism, by a secularization (a 'realization') of transcendence—an absorption in the logic of form. Jameson's modernism, that is to say, seems to me posited as a movement of transcendence always awaiting *another*, a distinct, movement (indeed, moment) at which there will take place, punctually, 'the dissolution of art's vocation to reach the Absolute'.¹⁰ And this great, ultra-Enlightenment imagining of disabusal, of the stars coming down to earth, is of course what gives Jameson's vision its force. But supposing (as I think Adorno supposed) that modernism was *already* that dissolution and disabusal—but exactly a dissolution held in dialectical tension with the idea or urge to totality, which idea or impulsion *alone gave the notion of dissolution* (or emptying, or ascesis, or fragment, or mere manufacture, or reduction, or deadpan, or non-identity) *sense*.

From this picture of modernism there would follow, I feel, a different appraisal of the last thirty years. I guess it would turn on the question of whether, or to what extent, the figures of dissolution and disabusal in art practice—the familiar figures I have just listed—became *themselves* a form of transcendence; and, as always within modernism, a transcendence doomed to collapse. Or rather, not so much 'doomed to collapse' as simply to be confronted again with the pathos lying at the heart of disabusal—disabusal (true secularization) as one more aesthetic mirage among others, always looming ahead of modernism in the commodity desert, as a form of lucidity it never quite reaches. Warhol, inevitably, is for me increasingly the figure of this. How handmade and petty-bourgeois his bright world of consumer durables now looks! How haunted still by a dream of freedom! So that his *Campbell's Soup Can* appears, thirty years on, transparently an amalgam—an unresolved, but naively

⁹ *The Cultural Turn*, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

serious dialectical mapping—of De Stijl-type abstraction onto a founding, consoling, redemptive country-store solidity. How like a Stuart Davis or a Ralston Crawford it looks, or an entry from the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*! ‘History has many cunning passages,’ to quote *Gerontion*, ‘contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions.’ Does Warhol come to seem more and more a modernist because it turns out that what he inaugurated was another of modernism’s cycles? Or because what happened next was truly an ending, an exit, from which we inevitably look back on the pioneers and see them as touching primitives, still half in love with the art they are putting to death? I suspect the former. It could be the latter. Neither conclusion is comforting. Thirty years is not enough time to tell.