

To Go beneath the Surface and to Read the Symbol: Negotiations of Modernity in Western Art

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Abstract

Visual art, like literature, has both shaped and negotiated with the relative norms of modernity at different ages. As the paintings of Renaissance artists like Pieter Bruegel and Rembrandt marked a certain modernity of thought ahead of the general ways of seeing of the period they belonged to, the paintings of such Impressionists as Claude Monet, Henri Matisse and Vincent van Gogh or those of the Surrealists like Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí kept on refashioning and redefining the mores of modernity in the age that concerned itself not only with deciding the relative tenets of modernity as the previous ages did, but with critiquing the more complex cultural discourses of modernism and postmodernism. However, the debates concerning the pertinence of contemporaneity of artistic expression and aesthetic responsibility of the artist remain consistent accompaniments of the considerations of modernity in art, and unlike many a discursive practice that claim to be modern or beyond, the notion of modernity itself evades temporal specification and uniform characterization. Hence, while rethinking about modernity the different axiomatic and ideological constructs of the notion of the modern as evolved through successive periods of history and culture are to be taken into consideration. My paper will study some significant works of western art belonging to different ages of history against their respective cultural and literary contexts to trace and critique their varying expressions and negotiations of modernity in theme and technique.

Keywords: Modernity, Art, Tradition, Perspectivism.

Etymologically the epithet ‘modern’, as derived from Latin words ‘modo’ and ‘modernus’ meaning ‘just now’, entails the notions of newness and contemporaneity, but in critical usage, the term encompasses a wide gamut of ideas and discourses that elude temporal specification. Modernity, the state and attitude of being modern, likewise, is characterized by the essential tenet of present pertinence. However, to be pertinent at the present moment it is not necessary for an attitude or discursive practice to be contemporary. Henri Meschonnic argues,

The contemporary keeps on running after modernity. It does not catch up with it all the same. Modernity is not contemporary. First it seems to be here, then it is gone. . . . Modernity is life, the faculty of the present. It is what makes inventions of thinking, of feeling, of seeing, and of meaning, the invention of forms of life. (404)

Proofs of this statement abound in literature and arts of all cultures, especially the western ones. A style or discourse that renders a work of art or literature relevant to and evocative of the ideological or aesthetic concerns of the time is generally accepted as a modern one. The notion of modernity always randomizes itself against the relative epistemological and chronological specificities that conventional discursive practices continue to impose on it. Modernity is, as Jürgen Habermas observes, an ongoing and unfulfilled “project” beginning from the fifth century, manifesting itself during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods, and moving forth since then seeking to define itself through the varying expressions of the relational problematics of the old and the new, the past and the present (3-4, 7). Because no point in the history of culture can irrespectively and absolutely be marked as the present or the new, the concept of modernity remains essentially relative, and needs to be redefined at every junction of history that encounters shifts in the ideological and technical paradigms.

Each new way of seeing and telling things in the fields of art, architecture, literature, science and technology marks an attitude of modernity in relation to the prevalent or the past ones, and as part of its assertion of modernity, seeks to critique the inaptness and unsuitability of the prevalent mores and attitudes in the present context. As Habermas rightly points out, “Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative. This revolt is one way to neutralize the standards of both, morality and utility” (5).

However, the modern need not necessarily be the binary opposite of tradition though it often seems to be: what modernity requires is rupturing the paralyzing burden of normativity that deters experimentation and invention. Though modernity entails a conflict between the past and the present, the spirit of modernity seeks, as Habermas notes, “to use the past in a different way” by disposing over “those pasts which have been made available by the objectifying scholarship of historicism” and simultaneously opposing the “neutralized history, which is locked up in the museum of historicism” (5). The poetic compositions of T.S. Eliot, for instance, bear testimony to Habermas’s observation: Eliot makes skilful use of certain elements from the poetic traditions of his preference in a strikingly different way in order to prove his “individual talent” as a self-conscious modern poet endeavouring to invent an age-befitting poetic discourse distinct from but born out of the past traditions. Men of letters from Geoffrey Chaucer to Charles Baudelaire, from William Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht, from Lawrence Sterne to James Joyce through the ages of literary history have kept on refashioning in their works the tradition of modernity in varied styles and contexts.

The project of modernity has brought about similar paradigm shifts in the thematic and technical domains of visual arts as well at different stages of history. The experimental works of art composed by craftsmen like Pieter Brueghel, Rembrandt van Rijn, William Blake, J.M.W. Turner, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, to name only a

few, ahead of the norms and tendencies of the periods they belonged to, have kept on modifying the axioms of modernity. Charles Baudelaire notes in his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ that the notion of modernity, especially in terms of art, essentially entails a dialectical relation between the traditional and the experimental, as he says, “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity. . .” (Frascina and Harrison 23). Paradoxical as it may seem, the artworks of these modern painters are not detached from the long tradition of western art though they seek to and do undermine the prevalent norms and stereotypes of arts of different periods for the sake of refreshing and mobilizing the tradition of modernity through the creation of something new and pertinent. As Walter Benjamin rightly notes, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.” (6) Evidently, the “changeable” tradition that Benjamin refers to is the tradition of modernity which stands opposed to the normative conventionalism that Habermas considers a hindrance to modernity. The uniqueness and the authenticity of all the modern artworks need always to be judged in respect of their relation to this living tradition of modernity.

The paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder exhibit the sixteenth-century artist’s negotiation with modernity through a sardonic critique of Renaissance humanism that had so far been upheld in the paintings of Bellini, Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto and others. The deliberately drawn inapt and almost comical human figures underscore the bleakness of human condition which has always been a central concern of modern art and literature. The depiction of the failure of human effort and the drab drudgery of life in the painting titled *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), which belongs to the early Renaissance tradition of ‘Labours of the Months’, is quite modern in terms of technicality and theme. Against the bleak wintry

backdrop, the painting foregrounds the dark figures of weary hunters returning with attenuated dogs and only one small animal killed. The subtle portrayal of the misery and futility of ordinary people renders this painting a modern critique of the human condition. The painting titled *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560s) further accentuates the vanity of human endeavour by marking the figure of Icarus, with only his legs visible on the sea-water, too insignificant amid the surroundings of his fall for either the people in the painting or the spectators to trace him. Taking the traditional myth of Icarus, Brueghel uses it to critique and undermine the axioms of Renaissance humanism by making it an ever-pertinent statement of the oblivion of the world to human achievement and suffering, as W.H. Auden later notes in his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938).

Rembrandt’s famous commissioned painting *The Night Watch* (1642) asserts its modernity through technical novelties in the subtle delineation of the facial expressions and gestures of the characters as expressive of their respective socio-economic conditions, as well as the expectations they lived up to and the roles they played in the context of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. The skilful and unprecedented admixture of the traditional techniques of theatricality, historical painting and portraiture make this artwork a unique one. In *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1647) Rembrandt follows the tradition of painting scenes from the New Testament stories, but what makes this painting unique is the use of light and shades in a nocturnal landscape which is uncommon in the Renaissance paintings. This painting also employs light and darkness in a symbolic way to depict hope and despair in the mythical context of the scene – which again is an uncommon technique in the tradition of painting biblical myths.

Notwithstanding their biblical and mythological source and context, the artworks of William Blake belong to a self-invented singular and radical system of symbolism which makes his art modern enough to be compared with that of Picasso and Van Gogh (Harvey

130-31). While Blake's art is "intensely paradoxical" (Harvey 137) in its entailment and subversion of stylistic standards following Renaissance humanism, it is all the same most evocative of the spirit of revolt against the normative convention of the neoclassical art. In *The Ancient of Days*, a favourite of Blake's and brought out as the frontispiece of his book *Europe: a Prophecy* (1794), featuring the sinister figure of Urizen eclipsing the sun and stooping over the dark void with a stark compass, the deistic myth of creation of the universe is problematized and undermined, and a bleak vision of the present and the future of this creation is conjured up. The figure of Urizen blocking the sun further alludes to Blake's opposition to the Enlightenment ideals that had so far been popular in the continent during the century. Blake's negative critique of the Enlightenment, as well as Renaissance humanism, is more acutely presented in the monotype titled *Newton* (1795-1805) which features a naked Newton sitting on an algae-covered rock, presumably under sea, and attentively drawing diagrams on a scroll of paper with a compass. From the scientific perspective Blake's biased attitude against the Enlightenment, especially against such a great scientist as Isaac Newton, can hardly be regarded as modern; but his style of investing his works of art with "multiplicity of visual allusions" (Harvey 145) destabilizing unitary interpretation, and his strategic subversion of the aesthetic and discursive mores of the time do call for being considered modern and new.

The paintings of J.M.W. Turner exhibit a quantum leap of art techniques ahead of the conventions of the Romantic and the Victorian periods which they are chronologically situated in. Turner's revolutionary use of impressionistic techniques before those came in vogue in the hands of late nineteenth-century French painters like Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne bears testimony to the modernity of his art. His paintings, such as *The Snowstorm* (1842) and *Rain, Stream and Speed – the Great Western Railway* (1844) subvert the prevalent norms of landscape painting by recording violent movements and

consequent blurring effects of the play of light and shade rather than meticulously reproducing in paint a landscape with calm and static objects as his contemporaries like John Constable and John Martin so beautifully and so redundantly did. In *The Snowstorm*, created after Turner's having experienced the storm first hand being tied to the mast of a ship for four hours, the impression of the observer is so truthfully recorded that, as John Berger notes, looking at it, the spectator has a feeling of being at the centre of the scene, as "[i]t is a picture which precludes the outsider spectator" and "[t]here is *nothing* outside it" (155). It is such uniqueness and novelty of the artistic enterprise of Turner that makes John Ruskin count and defend him as a modern painter in the first volume of his seminal book *Modern Painters*.

The art of Claude Monet, like that of several other French Impressionists, was inspired by the techniques of Turner's later paintings. Though, unlike Turner, Monet tries to capture the slow movement of light on the still and tranquil objects in such paintings as *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), *Woman with a Parasol* (1875) and *Water Lilies* (1919), his bold brush-strokes denounce mimetic convention of landscape painting and record the viewer's impressions of the play of light on the local colour of familiar scenes. These paintings are highly individualistic and original in style as they seek to explore and establish new ways of seeing, and initially had to face negative reception from the French public as well as the art critics for their striking deviation from the prevalent norms of mimetic art.

A different negotiation with the tradition of modernity begins during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and continues to the next epoch with the wake of expressionist tendencies in art, architecture and literature. As the ground-breaking books like Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *The Antichrist* (1895) effectively invalidated many a shibboleth and necessitated the reshaping of the axiomatic constructs of the Western epistemology, the general worldview as to the perception

of things changed. Artists like Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí and Francis Bacon responded in their paintings to the flux of ideological and perceptual changes around them. Now there is the age that is concerned not only with the notion of modernity but with the self-conscious and self-referential discursive practice of modernism. As Clement Greenberg in his essay “Modernist Painting” argues, “Modernism used art to call attention to art” while “Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else” (Fracina and Harrison 6). He also notes that in the domain of modernist art “[p]urity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance” (6). Such radical though short-lived art movements as Fauvism, Cubism, Vorticism, Surrealism and Futurism under the broader spectrum of Expressionism have produced an array of highly individualistic and original artworks which convey the artists’ novel ways of negotiating the current demands of modernity.

As the art of the modernist period self-consciously tends to be non-representational and non-objective proposing to undermine realistic illusionism of conventional art, it also refuses to be part of the meaning-making practices. Manifesting and intensifying the late nineteenth-century aesthetic trend of “art for art’s sake”, the majority of modernist artists create paintings that affirmatively proclaim to exist solely as the expressions of the artists’ moods having nothing to do with any utility, meaning or symbolic reference beyond the canvas. As Hilla Rebay argues in her article “The Beauty of Non-Objectivity”, this kind of art “has nothing to do with representation of nature, nor interpretation of intellectual meanings”, and therefore, “[n]on-objective art need not be understood or judged” (Fracina and Harrison 145). Such famous paintings as Van Gogh’s *Bedroom in Arles* (1888) and *The Starry Night* (1889), Munch’s *The Scream* (1893), Matisse’s *The Conversation* (1911) and *The Yellow Curtain* (1915), Kandinsky’s *Several Circles* (1926) and *Dominant Curve* (1936) effectively

withstand the critical enterprise of interpretation by their sheer flatness giving the impression of the futility of human endeavour in attributing significance to arbitrary perceptions of incidents and objects and the subjective expressions thereof. As Theodor Adorno in his book *Aesthetic Theory* notes, modern art is abstract as a result of the loss of experience and “the hollowing out of the subject and of reality” in the modern world:

Modern art is as abstract as the relations between people have in truth become. . . . Since the spell of external reality over the subjects and their mode of behaviour has become absolute, the work of art can only oppose it by making itself like that spell. (qtd. in Whitworth 129)

Certain surrealist paintings of Picasso and Dalí, however, respond to the bleak contemporary phenomenon of physical, psychological and spiritual disintegration of the human condition that has been also a central concern of the modernist literary works of Baudelaire, Eliot, Pound, Kafka, Joyce, Woolf, Camus, Sartre, Beckett and Ionesco. Picasso's *Girl with a Mandolin* (1910) and *Girl before a Mirror* (1932) are evocative of the sense of fragmentation and alienation of the self as necessitated by the individual's confrontation with absurdity in the everyday living and working conditions which one can neither change nor escape from. His famous anti-war painting *Guernica* (1937), created in the context of the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, strongly asserts its contemporaneity and socio-political situated-ness through the use of complex but highly suggestive symbolism – a trait uncommon in modernist painting and to be found parallels in Dalí's paintings *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936) and *The Face of War* (1940). Dalí's art characterizes itself by liquid abstraction, but all the same employs rich symbolism evocative of the complex and unintelligible domain of the unconscious psyche of the modern man. Such paintings as *The Persistence of Memory* (1937) and *Sleep* (1937)

present the artist's deeply subjective expression of his perception of the surreal world of the unconscious desires and anxieties of the human psyche.

All these varied instances of the Western art from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century show how the artists have sought, in different periods and in different styles, to be modern and pertinent by inventing themes and techniques that liberate art from the boundaries of conventionalism and normativity. The technical novelties and symbolic profundity of certain works of art make them unique and revolutionary, but all the same retain them as part of the long and living tradition of modernity which continues to refashion and redefine itself beyond the modernist and postmodernist discourses. The aesthetic appeal of art often provokes its admirers to critique it while its autonomy more often than not resists the attempts of interpretation. Oscar Wilde ironically states in the famous Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." (4) The forms, themes and modes of art have always been changing keeping pace with the psychological, spiritual and socio-political changes experienced by the spectators. It is this continual flow of change that is the essence of modernity which cannot be narrowed down to ideological or chronological specificities. To appreciate the nature and extent of the negotiation that art makes with the tradition of modernity at different stages of history it is necessary both to "go beneath the surface" and to "read the symbol" (Wilde 4) so that the norms of critical practice, as well as the ideological preoccupations of the spectator, may perish and an unbiased taste for art may grow.

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