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POSTMODERNISM
AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY

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Submitted to the faculty of History
of Art and Design and complimentary studies
in candidacy for the B.A. in fine art; Painting
1992

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INTRODUCTION
POSTMODERNISM
AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY

In this thesis I shall be discussing the issue of postmodernism, in relation to the way in which the condition has been described and defined by some of the many theorists who have written on the subject and some of the cultural practices which have become seen as characteristic of the condition of postmodernity.

I must admit that at the outset of researching this thesis I felt that I wanted to refute there being anything behind the concept of postmodernism, or at least that the subject was of no real consequence outside, the somewhat incestuous world of social and cultural theory. It is because of the contradictory nature of postmodernism that the term often appears to mean whatever the user wants it to mean. I have come to see postmodernism not so much as a label with which to discuss various cultural phenomenon, but as a condition of history. In dealing with the way in which history is written and how it is qualitatively evaluated, we must deal with criteria. Throughout this thesis I shall be talking about criteria for judgement, judgement both of history and of culture, for the way in which we evaluate our culture is the way in which we historicize the present.

In chapter one I shall discuss some of the cultural phenomena which are said to be characteristic of the condition of postmodernity, in an attempt to decide whether these symptoms can give us some clue as to the true nature of the condition. Postmodernism, I believe has resulted from a rethinking of how we read, write and use history. Postmodernism is such a slippery subject, it is not defined by any manifesto, it is not governed by any authority, it has no code of practice and has no stated aims. In fact postmodernism is culture with no code of practice, unlike modernism postmodernism feels no compulsion to negate its past, rather it relives, revives and re-examines its past. We must realise that history is not one universal narrative, in fact it is more like fragmented evidence, each fragment with its own bias and its own reasons. History is always written by the dominant force in society, the other elements of society remain in the margins and are never entered into the text. Postmodernism is what is left of the tradition of modernism, we are still in its influence. The only way to know where we really stand is to look at what has gone before us.

Chapter two is mainly concerned with an analysis of some of the characteristics of modernism, establishing some of the major differences between postmodernism and the tradition of modernism although I do not believe that it is possible to identify an individual or an event which marks a chronological break between the two. Modernism was fed on the dreams of technology and of science, of rationality and

order, it represented a world of promise. The goal of modernism was the universal emancipation of Mankind, behind this, of course lay the assumption that Mankind shared both a common past and a common destiny. So modernism was the force of civilised, ordered and rationalised society. Very important in this tradition was its insistence upon the purity and separateness of forms and disciplines. Different disciplines were worlds of knowledge separate and remote from each other, Music, theatre, literature, all with their own inherent strengths and weaknesses, and these separate worlds were ordered or valued within an overall hierarchical structure. At the top of this hierarchy were the fine arts, eternal, remote and timeless.

Chapter three looks at the notion of Avant-Garde and its assumed position in modernist society. Avant-Gardes purpose as the leading force in society set them beyond the criticism of their audience, modern art was specialist and elitist. Postmodern society for many reasons has set out to deconstruct both the hierarchical structure of art and the borders which separate different disciplines. The Marxist view has been that art should be evaluated and discussed in light of its social and political background, Marxist criticism does not see art as being removed from such issues as the class struggle, Feminist criticism also seeks to arts motives into question, the history of art has for centuries been male domain, its practitioners were, with very few exceptions, all male and works of art were judged on male terms. Because we live in a pluralist,

multicultural society we must understand that the male, eurocentric version of history, which has been the one true history can no longer be accepted as being the most obvious and natural way to see things.

CHAPTER ONE
FOR WANT OF BETTER WORDS

When things are at their most confusing definitions abound, and we now live in very confusing times indeed. One of the labels which seems to have stuck to our society is that of postmodernism, and I feel that as someone involved in the practical side of creativity, in the making and doing, it is important to know what these things mean and whether or not they apply to me. The term postmodern does not in itself describe very much, it merely refers to another term which it now seems is out of date.

So how should one enter into this war of words? I'm not even sure it involves me. Ireland, for many reasons, political, economical and geographical was cut off from the developments of modernism on continental Europe and by the time Ireland did begin to tune in what was happening in Europe and America, Modern Art was under attack. If one takes the "post" in postmodernism as a strictly chronological distinction between two periods in history, then Irish culture could hardly be described as postmodern. Terminology is such an obtrusive thing it can so easily take over the subject and cloud the issue, to argue over the terms and the definitions can mean that the core of the subject is never touched upon. Things are always defined for want of a better word. To begin to argue whether or not

the condition of postmodernity and the notion of postmodernism is a false dilemma by arguing the terms would achieve nothing. The condition of society could be referred to by any other name and it would change not a thing, for the question of postmodernism is a question of identity.

Jean-Francoise Lyotard:

Postmodernism wastes itself with the reproduction of the past in an infantile hope of monumentalising a moment outside of its own memory that might somehow trigger its identity, its past and future now.

(12)

I believe that one of the most important clues to the future is in how we address the past. It would be a very modernist way to treat the whole subject to simply say that modernist values are of no relevance to us, and that we should turn our back on the past and say farewell.

Firstly, I think we should be able to decide whether or not we can think of postmodernism as the descendant of modernism; the overturning; or simply the confusion which follows after a change of heart. The ideas which we now have about postmodernism are very mixed indeed. The term in the context of architecture, for instance, has different connotations to postmodernism when referring to general cultural theory. The definitions of modern architecture and postmodern architecture refer to distinct changes of basic approach, in that preceding the movements of the Bauhaus and De Stijl the aesthetics of architecture were founded on Euclidian geometry. Postmodern architecture has markedly

different values again. The postmodern architect has many more considerations than the purity of form of the structure and truth to his materials. The people who are to inhabit the structures and the effect upon the environment are just as important criteria to be considered in design.

Postmodernist architecture is not intent upon exclusivity and consequence, but is prepared for difficult compromises and proposes daring connections. The 'revolutionaries' who broke completely with history in the name of a new age, are today the 'revisionists' who have the dangerous purpose of reconciliation".

(8, pg 9)

Perhaps one reason why architecture is one particular area that reflects these changes, is that modern architecture had to interact with people, a generation of people had been brought up in tower blocks and worked in impersonal office blocks. With architecture it is possible therefore to discuss both modernism and postmodernism in terms of style. It is not as easy to do so in other forms.

Modernism, or rather modernity, has been an integral part of western society for centuries. The writings of Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century represent an early manifestation of the kind of thinking which was to shape the centuries to come. To date modernism back to the beginnings of what we now call modern art would be a mistake: the roots of modernism are much deeper than that. One of the central elements of modernist thinking was the belief in science and technology and the ultimate

liberation of Mankind through Mankind's own powers of reason and logic. When we now talk about modern art we refer to the art produced through the turn of the twentieth century and on to the perhaps nineteen sixties or seventies, this being the time when the particular cultural condition called modernism had its greatest effect on society. The industrial revolution saw changes take place in society which placed the emphasis upon industrial production in an urban environment. Modernity was an integral part of the attitudes which formed empires, which set as its task the civilising of lesser peoples and the taming of the wild. Rationalism and intellectualism were not simply tools to be used, but were virtues in themselves. Advancement in itself was seen as the saviour of Mankind, not as a means but as an end. Modernism has been described as the discourse of emancipation. I imagine that John Bunyan would have included Modernism as one of the Worldly Wise characters who lead the pilgrim astray; but the belief in the supremacy of the human intellect has its roots in the Christian faith. Man was created in the likeness of God and the universe which God created for Man, Man ruled as Master. It was Man after all, not God, who gave names to all the animals. In the Christian faith, the only powers greater than Man were God and the Devil. Nature as a force was there for the taking, for the understanding and for the controlling. From this point of belief the emancipation of Man begins. But as Jean-Francois Lyotard says:

The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.

(11, pg 37)

The history of modernism is a catholic history, a universal narrative. Modernism was about certainty, Leonardo de Vinci worked in a time of absolute religious and aesthetic certainty, but this kind of certainty simply does not exist today. This does not mean that there are no artists today whose work is governed by either political or religious convictions, but no artist can presuppose that the audience can either fully understand or share in those beliefs.

It could be said that Modern Art was all about style, and to look at the work of the major figures of modernism, Kandinsky, Picasso, Pollock, or Miro, one of the most striking things is the extent to which the image is dominated by the style of the artist. The modernist painter stamps his or her own signature on the work and it would be difficult to think of for instance, the images of Picasso without feeling the presence of the artist himself. It is as if the individual inhabits the work.

If postmodernism means anything it is that we do not consign the past to oblivion, in fact we are now more influenced by the styles and modes of thought of our predecessors than they were by theirs. Our present day society is a virtual museum of the past, we live among the past rather than place it behind us.

Postmodernism is in its own way about style, whereas in modern art style was a characteristic trait of the individual artist. It is to the postmodern mind a tool or a device, something to toy with and manipulate just like subject matter. Now it is quite obvious that one could not identify stylistic works of art as being postmodern, contemporary works are so diverse in intentions and approach that it would be a futile exercise to try and find what tenuous threads might link up all of contemporary cultural practice. What would one find by comparing, Anselm Kiefer, Jeff Koons and Cindy Sherman. In the surface there is nothing in the appearances of, say Cindy Sherman's photographic self portraits which would seem to share anything with Kiefer's lead aeroplanes or his enormous volumes of lead books, or even in Koon's caricature of the heroism of trash, or kitsch art. It is in the willingness of such artists to assume different identities or modes of expression or style that identifies such figures as being in some way different from the artists of the earlier part of this century.

There are certain traits which it has been said are characteristic of postmodernism, pastiche, parody and use of irony among them. These stylistic devices may give the impression that postmodernism means a preference of style over substance, but artifice or contrivance does not mean insincerity. These characteristics represent more an attitude toward history and the different ways of addressing it than mere fashion traits of the art world.

The past stays with us in the form of its recorded remains and contemporary works co-exist and so interrelate with works of the past.

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (exhortations of the shaping, ordering imagination). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past events into present historical 'facts'.

(6, pg 89)

The version of history and the interpretations of historical events which we have received from the past are in themselves historical "events" and when seen as such we come to realise that we can never fully know the past, we can only examine its remains and live alongside them. History has become seen as just another narrative or rather as many interrelating narratives. Postmodernism can be seen as the rejection of the possibility of any objective historical truth. This does not mean that postmodernism is a historical, it is in fact more involved with history since the past, instead of being a single universal, metanarrative is now seen as a jumble of different artifacts, arguments, massacres and monuments.

Postmodernism signals the death of such meta narratives whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimise the illusion of a Universal history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and the fetish of the totality.

(3)

Eagleton seems keen on finding some trace of conspiracy in the way in which modernism historicised itself. Although I really do not have the time or the space, it is very important to think about how we are historicising the present. Through the media in the form of television news reporting and news papers we receive the factual information relating to events currently taking place in the outside world, but this narrating of real events is not without its own fetishes and is certainly not free of manipulation. The manipulation of truth is not always simply for political or financial ends but rather narration is always itself, manipulated by its own language. The density of language prescribes that description of events must be guided as much by the nature of language as by the nature of the events. Consider how the all too common event of a murder in the north of Ireland could be related in news terms. Obviously, the actual event cannot be recreated, it can only be described, but it is not possible to describe without bias. Is the use of the word "murder" uninvolved? or for that matter words such as "youth", "sectarian" or "paramilitary"? all of these usages have their own meanings which they bring to bear on how we understand the tragedy.

The novice, Adso in Umberto Eco's "The Name of The Rose", sits in the library and ponders on the nature of fact,

"... learning is not like a coin, which remains physically whole even through the most infamous transactions; it is, rather, like a very handsome dress which is worn out through use and ostentation."

(4, pg 286)

How far apart then are the two worlds of fact (that of recreating real events) and fiction (of creating events), considering that in description one ascribes meaning and therefore alters the nature of what one is describing. Secondly, in terms of semiotics all signs change their meanings with time, one must understand that fact can never remain untouched or immutable. Fact can be as false as it is needed to be, fiction on the other hand, can be as real as it is needed to be.

The line which once separated the practices of historical documentation and that of historical fiction does not exist any more. Consider the work of Kurt Vonnegut, his is writing which at its very heart is quite autobiographical, yet dissolves the facts of his personal life in a literary solution of historical fact, and science fiction.

His novel "Slaughter House 5" was, as he said himself, his own way of addressing the atrocity of the bombing of Dresden during World War Two, to which he was a personal witness. The book does tell of what happened in Dresden, it gives us real dates, real places, real people and real deaths of those people. The fiction is in the author's interpretations and extrapolations of fact. It is in Vonnegut's attempt to express the senselessness of the experiences with nonsense that the story moves beyond being a mere history. The worlds of fiction and fact interact in more ways than most people acknowledge, one fine example being that after the release in 1903 of "The Great Train

Robbery" and the ensuing spate of westerns which popularised the idea of a "wild west" many real life outlaws and cowboys found new careers in the fledgling motion picture industry acting out the myth of the "wild west" which recorded American history and created it. Incidentally the early westerns, of the Tom Mix variety, found their greatest fans in places like Texas.

In Woody Allens "Hannah and her sisters", Mickey, after realising that he can find no meaning in life, decides to kill himself, but gives up on his suicide while watching a Marx Brothers film. For about two whole minutes we too are watching this "other" film. The Marx Brothers invade "Hannah and her sisters", they fill Woody Allen's screen just as the they fill Mickey's memory. As we live in a world where it seems that we are always tuned into some form of the media, whether it is television or radio it would be almost impossible to conceive our lives without this constant input of information, be it as an intrusion or as a background buzz. Woody Allens films deal frequently with cinema (as in "The Purple Rose Of Cairo") and radio ("Radio Days") as cultural events which interact with each other and as real forces and influences which shape and guide peoples lives.

One very important characteristic of postmodernism is the importance it attaches to the interaction of different works of art, of referencing from one to another. "The Name of the Rose" is a novel designed or structured around

Umberto Eco's writing on postmodernism. The fact that the story involves the events which take place in a Benedictine abbey which houses a very important library is no coincidence. William of Baskerville attempts to solve a series of murders which have beset the abbey and which seem to centre on secret books hidden in the library. He and his assistant, Adso, discuss how to find out what the hidden books are.

"... I must think it over. perhaps I'll read other books"

"Why? To know what one book says you must read others?"

"At times this can be so. Often books speak of other books. Often a harmless book is like a seed that will blossom into a dangerous book, or is it the other way around; it is the sweet fruit of a bitter stem."

(4, pg 105)

This is one aspect of postmodernism's involvement with history, where modernism excluded and denied, postmodernism references and co-exists.

I think that it would be a good idea to consider just what relationship there is between society and culture. A society in its simplest sense is the grouping together of a number of people on the basis of some shared interest. This shared interest may mean a common ancestry, a shared history or religious persuasion. When speaking for instance of western society for instance, one is using an enormous generalisation in grouping together an extremely mixed bag of peoples, religions, classes and sexual persuasions. The

term exists for the sake of argument and those whose distant ancestry dates back to Greco-Roman tradition can be defined in those terms.

A society is also a group who identifies with itself certain moral, ethical or aesthetic values, and by these values rather than by the people the society is recognised. In Kant's philosophy it is recognised that there is a difference between aesthetic feeling and individual feeling, that there is a way in which the greatness of art can have meaning beyond that of mere personal taste, that being that it promises community and consensus of opinion, not that it means. Art nowadays, could not be thought of as promising community, rather it promises diversity, and how could it be any different in a society where values are not universal. In the preceding centuries, the history of art has served to institutionalise what it saw as being the values of society.

In its persistent celebration of great art and great artists, art history plays an important role in the production of cultural values within society. It is taken for granted that certain objects and individuals are implicitly worth studying, and that both express the special significance and values of high culture.

(17)

It is important to think about the way in which communication takes place. If one believes that the meaning of a particular sign or event is not fixed then one is saying that meaning is not inherent in that sign or event but is ascribed to it by the viewer according to when,

where and how it is viewed. This may all seem very obvious and merely a rehashed version of the old "beauty in the eye of the beholder" adage but when one thinks of meaning being the creation of the beholder, then we must reconsider the autonomy of art and the idea of the artist as being in complete control of the work of art. The viewer then, becomes the creator of the meaning, and the artist must understand that his work can say things to people that he did not mean to say. This is the so called death of the author.

As well as being dependant on the viewer, the meaning of a work of art is also dependant on the context in which it appears. We look a painting in the context of being an art object and this dictates the way in which we set about viewing and understanding the work. It may be in a museum context, in a gallery, or in a stately home. Art can never remain neutral or unaffected by the context in which it exists.

When we read a novel we are aware of the way we are expected to react to what we read, we know all along that we are reading a book but suspend our disbelief and allow the story to unfold. It is completely different to the way in which we would read a newspaper, because the context of the written material is different. Symbols and signs do not exist as fixed, eternal vessels of meaning, they are flexible and pliable and always adapt to their surroundings.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE IMAGE OF MAN

The way in which we understand postmodernism depends largely on the way in which we understand the tradition of modernism. I think it would be a mistake to date the beginnings of modernism back to the turn of the twentieth century, to what we would now call modern art. The concept of modernism is both a lot older and more deeply woven into our history than that. The turn of the century saw a time of incredible change, and change of such incredible speed that within one lifetime the world moved up a gear, with the industrial revolution, mechanisation and urbanisation. These great changes did not however come out of nowhere, to a great extent what took place at the beginning of the century was the culmination of the developments of the preceding centuries. It is best to think of modern art as the many and varied responses to this time of great change.

Modern Art was scientific, it was based on the faith in the technological future, on belief in progress and objective truth, it was experimental, the creation of new forms was its task. Ever since Impressionism ventured into optics it shared the method and logic of science. There were the Einsteinian relativities of cubist geometry, the technological visions of Constructivism and Futurism, de Stijl and Bauhaus, the Dadaists diagrammatic machinery, even Surrealist visualisations of Freudian dreamworlds and Abstract Expressionist enactments of psycho-analytical processes were attempts to tame the irrational with rational techniques. Modernism longed for perfection, and demanded purity, clarity and order and it denied everything else especially the past.

(9, pg 4)



There is a difference, I think, between talking about modern art and modernity in its broader sense. The distinction is my own and only for the purposes of discussing differences in motivation. What we can now categorise as modernity is so much more than the progression of "isms" and "ists" that revolutionised and counter-revolutionised twentieth century western culture. The Belief in "Man" as a universal being, in his ability to shape his future, to control and dominate his environment has been an unquestionable truth for centuries, and formed a backdrop to the way in which western culture was to progress. The emphasis placed by western society on progress was due in part to the way in which time was seen. In European minds, time and its movement has had an importance that to other cultures would appear obsessive, in part this may be a religious thing, stemming from Judeo-Christian philosophies. Mankind existed in the time between Creation and the Apocalypse, given him by God in which he was responsible for his own actions. In this march of time Man held supreme power over everything except death and the progression of time. Time was seen as being that which connected all events in a linear progression. This idea of linear motion or progressing in a given direction also had the element of being a qualitative development. The past was always qualitatively superseded by the present, which in turn would give way to the future.

The art of the twentieth century represents in many ways a discussion or a critique of modernism. The function of an

Avant-Garde within modern culture was to lead the way, to fly the banner of progress. However not every artist who has been placed historically within Modern Art necessarily subscribed to all of the goals of Modernism.

There are many examples of artists who, in some ways advocated modernism and in other ways criticised it. Probably the best of these examples is Marcel Duchamp, this elusive anti-hero of modernism was, as the old adage says way ahead of his time, to find the first true "postmodernist" one need look no further. While other individuals and movements were striving toward flattening the picture plane and moving to a purity of form, Duchamp was toying with the principles upon which art was based, such as the relationship between the art object and the viewer and also with the sanctity of the art object. His Ready-mades such as the urinal and the bottle stand remove the attention from the art object, the self contained object and focuses instead on the interaction between the object and the viewer. Duchamp was making Art about peoples expectations of Art. Though he himself painted, he was at times viciously antipainting, proclaiming once that Rembrandt's paintings should be used as ironing boards. Duchamp was quite unique in his attacks upon art itself and its status within our society, Perhaps the one aspect of modernism which brought about its demise was tendency toward self destruction, by this I mean the wish to actively destroy history and the negation of the past. This will to counter tradition was part of the Dadaist movement,

Cubism, the Futurists, de Stijl and the abstract expressionist movement.

The Futurists believed that the way forward was to destroy the past. By burning the museums and flooding the libraries, the slate could be wiped clean. The futurists accepted that when they grew too old to be of any use (thirty) that younger and stronger men would take their place. War was considered a cleansing of society, a purging of what was worthless and stale, to read through Marinnetis writings now one cannot help but see the philosophy of futurism as the first real stirrings of what within the next few years was to tear Europe apart.

Modernism was a tradition which was based upon philosophies of totality and of certainty.

Constant change is essential to true modernity, for modernists like the Futurists there is little to learn from the past. Change becomes the only thing of quality.

Walter Benjamin wrote in his ninth thesis on the Philosophy of History how the idea of progress and history interrelate;

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay , awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no

longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(1, pg 259-260)

How would we now see our postmodern angel of History, perhaps as a librarian, safely indoors among the books, or maybe as an old bag lady rustling through the rubbish heaps for old clothes to wrap herself in to keep out that awful breeze. The storm of progress cleared the way for the future and the fact that storm was viewed as an inevitable and unavoidable force freed all involved for the blame for the destruction.

I have said that this is a self destructive aspect of modernity because if one accepts that everything of the past is irrelevant then one accepts that whatever one does, whatever one makes, is to be of little importance in the future. That is, the present becomes the past and is forgotten.

Each period, it would seem, invents its own concept of historic time and literalises it, comes to read it in the succession of actual events, to experience it as the inexorable narrative dictating the forms of cultural life. Thus the Renaissance, envisaging itself as the rebirth of the Ancient World, created the fiction of the "Middle Ages". the Enlightenment, considering itself the most illuminated that had ever existed, reinventing those "middle Ages" as the "Dark Ages". Modernism has carried its own phantasy of time, its own story in which the past is constantly and qualitatively superseded by the present moment. "Now", according to this version of time is always better than "then. The ethical and aesthetic consequences of this concept have been as we have slowly begun to realise, quite disastrous.

(10)

To do away with history, as so many modernists advocated, means also wiping out the present, as words and deeds move into the past they will not be remembered. The only reason we remember the futurists is that their work is now in our museums, if we were futurists the work of Boccioni and others would long ago have gone on the scrap heap, it has not and in this sense we are postmodern. From the modernist perspective history was of little relevance for this reason was not a subject to be reviewed, rewritten, or reassessed. From this viewpoint, history exists as a mummification of past events, a closed, finalised discussion. This is what Peter Abbs was referring to as "inexorable narrative". Modernist reading and writing of history was a process of recording events, clear and simple. The belief was, that by observing Nature one could recount or even reconstruct it without intruding upon it.

If one considers postmodernism to be a break from the past, it is, paradoxically because postmodernism is very much about finding ways to address the past.

Clement Greenberg wrote that;

Modernism proceeds by discarding inessential conventions in pursuit of a timeless constitutive core.

(9)

One of these " inessential conventions" was art history,

as Barrett Newman said;

We start from scratch as if painting were not only dead but had never existed.

(9)

The universal agenda of modernity was the emancipation of "man". The notion of universal Man rested on the assumption that all people shared in the same story of history and marching together to the glory of the future. Umberto Eco said that postmodernism is born at the moment when we discover that the world has no fixed centre. In his novel "The Name Of The Rose", he constructs his narrative to analogise the particular area of philosophical debate, outside the world of fiction in which he is involved. The characters which he involves in his rewritten history take sides in a debate on the truths of history, semiotics and the stability of ordered belief. The ancient monk, Jorge of Burgos attacks those who would seek, for their own purposes to interpret the holy scriptures

"What a diabolical transfiguration of the Holy Scriptures! and yet as they read it they know that it is evil. But on the day when the Philosophers word would justify the marginal jests of the debauched imagination, what has been marginal would leap to the centre, every trace of the centre would be lost".

(4, pg 126)

Within the history of modernity it is easy to see the values of rationalism and objective truth as the tools of the universal liberation of Mankind, it is not so easy to find where these Enlightenment values shifted towards the

pursuing of aesthetic experience and the embracing of intuitive and subjective aesthetic judgment. How much distance was crossed between Descartes and Rousseau, between "I think therefore I am" and "I feel therefore I am". For artists of the Renaissance, aesthetic decisions took place on the same level as mathematical, political or moral ones, it was not until the eighteenth century that aesthetics became a subject and in a sense a law unto itself. in this light I would see the Romantics as marking some split in the modernist project. This dichotomy is often spoken of as Classical versus Romantic, the two may seem at odds, like Objective against subjective but both represent sides of a Universal Humanism. The modernist yearning for the scientific ordering of life when seen along side of its need for the intuitive, the emotive response and most importantly for feeling, seems very contradictory, Baudelaire wrote in 1863 that

"Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being eternal and the immutable."

The concept of individualism is very much of this century and is a very important in the development of Modern Art. Words like "self" and "ego" are now household terms. The development of psychoanalysis greatly affected the course of Modern Art. Painters like Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele in Vienna in the early part of this century were deeply influenced by Freud's writing on sexuality. The Surrealists were also hugely influenced by Freud, particularly his

INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS. In America the notion of the "identity crisis" formulated by Erik Erikson struck a chord and the Abstract Expressionist movement in the fifties was very much involved with self identification through the painting process. The act of painting became a heroic gesture, a symbolic act of freedom. The subject matter of painting was painting itself but this was not its only end, one of the objects of Abstract Expressionism was the freeing of the individual.

Ever since painting first emerged as a separate and distinct craft in the middle ages it enjoyed a higher status than that accorded other crafts. It is difficult to try and imagine now how thirteenth century craftsmen viewed their work and its value. Goldsmiths, illuminators, masons, and sculptors, painters all were artists, artisans all would have progressed from apprentices to master within their guild. One possible reason why painting had become a finer art is because painting was the form which depicted God. Lapis lazuli was, to the viewers of these early works, the colour of the heavenly firmament, and the head of Jesus Christ and the heads of all his follower were surrounded by gold leaf. No other form created this divine illusion. The history of western civilisation and the history of the catholic church are inextricably linked and those art forms which served the church most fully are the those which are now the most telling records of that history. The most basic function of the history of art, in the past has been to record and preserve the artistic achievements of a

society, in doing so only some things were preserved while other, possible histories were suppressed. This selectivity of history is almost unavoidable, what is historised is that which seems to have the greatest relevance at the time, history is never without bias. Beyond recording and preserving, the history of art has served to institutionalise and to glorify certain artistic achievements, the implication being that certain works of art are and will always be worth our attention. The hierarchy which exists in the arts, which places painting and sculpture at the top, has been created by art history. The belief that art exists above and beyond such issues as class, race or sex makes the hierarchy all the more unshakeable. Great art has always been seen as completely apolitical and therefore timeless, If one does emphasise the social and political background or worse still motivations, then one would have to admit that the relevance of the work would be short lived. So we have a picture of a hierarchy of disciplines, of separate worlds of knowledge at the top of which sat the fine arts, these being those disciplines which best expressed the timeless and universal in "mankind".

CHAPTER THREE

PLAYING TO THE BALCONY

One of the very important aspects of modernism was its striving toward purity of form. That being that different forms should be treated as separate and distinct disciplines without any interaction. As I have said before, modernists saw greatness as being inherent in the discipline, this aspect when coupled with the long standing hierarchy in the arts leads to a state of affairs where particular forms are accepted as being inherently better than others and will always remain pure breeds so to speak, without any interdisciplinary dilution of that purity. For instance, "Pure Painting", was painting with as little external influence as possible, Clement Greenberg was very keen to establish the formal independence of painting, to detach the act of painting from its obligations toward subject matter specifically to rid it of its literary attachments. In Greenbergs view an art which pandered and played to its audience was kitsch and degenerate. He believed that a culture which was alive was a culture which was developing and the function of the avant-garde was to literally be that part of society which was proving how alive it was.

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

(15)

One reason for the belief that the artist was such a "priestly" figure, was that in the modernist sensibility there is a gap between moral reason and scientific knowledge, between believing and knowing. These, of course were different worlds of knowledge, this gap, Kant pointed out to be the intuitive, the great leap of faith, of the aesthetic experience. Art then represented a higher knowledge and he who is initiated into the aesthetic experience is a leader of feeling.

The avant-garde, by the nature of its leading role strives to be ahead of its time and therefore ahead of its audience. One of the criteria with which Clement Greenberg drew the line between high art and kitsch was the nature of the involvement of the artist with the audience, how he or she responded to the expectations of the audience. Folk art was kitsch because it had no higher aspirations than that of its audience and therefore had no means of radical development.

Throughout history, the story teller has played a vital role in almost every society. In Irish culture the seanachí is a very important figure both as story-teller and historian or folklorist. the story-teller or bard has always functioned as more than an entertainer, the bards role is a very complex one, being at once both teacher, showman and moral instructor. The oral tradition of passing on from generation to generation the knowledge, wisdom and moral beliefs of the society.

From Aesops fables to the parables of Christ, the telling of stories has been one of the most important forms. Myths, legends, parables, fables or fairytales were all imaginative constructions which allowed the story-teller to moralise upon the characters and events, which were all brought to life for the sake of the moral.

To a great extent in the fine arts operated in a different way to other forms in the way it interacted with its audience. Since the function of Avant-Garde is to lead and not to please, the fine arts have never had any obligations to its audience apart from those the artist would have to the patron but then the patron chose the artist and not the other way around. For those artists who worked under the patronage of the Catholic church did have considerable obligations however there were also considerable constraints placed on what the artist was allowed to do. The fine arts through the years never interacted with the public and the fine artist set his or her own brief.

One of the things which marks the difference between the tradition of modernity and the condition of postmodernity is how we establish our criteria for critical judgment, and the way in which we evaluate the arts. The achievements of modernism were measured in a world of fixed values. Probably one of the most disorienting events of this century was Einstein's publication of the Theory of Relativity, for the first time in history an advancement in scientific knowledge questioned the possibility of any kind

of objective observation, which had been for so long the basis of scientific knowledge. There is no such thing as a fixed point in space or in time, therefore no object can be viewed or measured from a fixed position, everything is relative to the viewer. If we can not evaluate from a fixed position, how much worth can be placed in anyones judgement. The loss of objectivity, or rather the shifting of the seat of judgement marked the beginning of the end for modernism. The criteria for judgement were, in the modernist way of things, inherent in the form, that is, that each form had its own truths, painting had its own, inherent strengths and a great painter harnessed those strengths. To judge the greatness of a painter then, one did so against a known quantity, that being the properties of the medium. The same being true of literature or music or in fact any field of human endeavour.

The eighteenth century notion of Romanticism rested on the belief that the world of art functioned separately from everything else. Art was governed only by itself, by its own muses. The autonomy of art was vital to modernism, where modernism advocated exclusively, postmodernism seems to embrace diversity. postmodernism means that art must no longer exist in its own world, and within its own rules, Does postmodernism mean the end of the romantic? I think it could be said that nowadays people would view the worlds of aesthetics and philosophy and politics and all the other areas of human activity as existing on the same level, as being interrelating fields of human knowledge rather than

separate worlds existing without interaction as has been very much the case in the past. The nobility which had placed the high arts at the top of the hierarchical world of art and held it there is now in question. The nobility of art, forms the context in which we view and understand art and it would be very hard to look at a Rembrandt, for instance and not be at all swayed in your opinions of the painting by the prejudging which has already taken place, for this is a man who has been ascribed greatness before any of us were born. It is very difficult not to be affected by the context of greatness into which a work of art is placed.

The breakdown of the hierarchy of forms in the arts is surely either a cause, or is symptomatic of postmodernism, and I think one of the things which will decide what direction the arts will take in the future is how the fine arts function, after being in a sense dethroned. The nobility that was endowed upon painting stayed with it right through the upheavals of modernism. I wonder if Jackson Pollocks work would have had the same impact and sense of cultural importance had he for instance worked in batik or wool, the power of 'Oil on Canvas' and 'The painter' and other fine art terms have a resonance which stem from the associations to another time when greatness was easier defined.

Postmodernism would seem to involve itself with re-examination not just of the past but with questioning the

very nature of historical and critical judgement. On what criteria do we judge greatness? in multiculturalist terms; whose criteria? in historical terms; how long will they last?

Considering the lost concept of individualism (re F. Jameson) what function does art serve? is its role a sociological one ? for the sake of the audience? and in this way, does art now play to the balcony?

At the moment in America certain changes are taking place in many of the universities, in faculties of English Literature and History in particular. in the wake of both the feminist movement, and the recent coming to the fore of many of Black/American movements such as 'Black Consciousness' and the 'Nation of Islam'. The way in which people want to read history, write history and be able to use history has changed. The objections that many people have toward the current presentation of history is that in a multicultural society the predominantly male, eurocentric reading of history disallows the many other elements which make up that society an identity or a voice. When the past is told as a single closed story, one can not, because of that closure avoid implying some degree of moral weight to that history. One also ascribes relative importances to historical events, not merely in the way the events are described but also in the fact that they are described at all. Postmodernism represents a mood of reflection on that part of our history that devoted itself to the search for

objective truth. it is now quite obvious that "Mankind" does not share in a common history and does not aspire toward a common future. Oscar Wilde said that if we owe anything to history it is to rewrite it and this is probably the one area where postmodernism presents itself as a new philosophical structure which has a real social impact

History is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history... by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes."

(2, pg 201)

How then should we proceed to engage ourselves with history, postmodernism must imply more than being beyond denying history, it must point out the way we can pen dialogue with the past.

History is always written by the winners, the losers are either not around to tell their side of the story or because they lost they are not allowed to be heard. One must therefore question both the objectivity and the authority of history as it has been passed down to us, whether or not history can be discussed or for that matter taught in schools and colleges as an objective series of facts, figures and dates, is at the moment a very contentious issue in American universities.

To narrativise the events of the past is already to moralize and to impose closure on a story which did not end and whose constructed end suggests that there is a moral meaning inherent in those events.

To "impose closure" as Hayden White puts it does more than just give moral meaning to an event, it in effect seals up any discussion and thus the event and its implication soon become lost to the present, that is, its meaning far from being a matter of conjecture, becomes purely 'academic'.

Michel Foucault:

To analyze discourses is to hide and reveal contradictions; it is to show the play that they set up within it; it is to manifest how it can express them, or give them a temporary appearance.

(6)

So the subject of history, instead of being about what has happened becomes the analysis of temporary meaning.

The subject involved the teaching of English literature when questions were raised about how the teaching of literature should address the issue of multiculturalism or "P.C". Faculties of English literature have been faced with the criticism of impressing upon students the literary greats, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Dostoyevsky as being the models of greatness that one should learn from, instead of analysing the texts without the objective greatness ascribed to the works in the past.

The critics of the current system say that it is not what is read that is important but how it is read. It is in

this kind of discussion that the long held notions about "great art" have been brought into question.

So we can talk about how we should look at art, how we appraise achievements in the arts, but in the absence of the goal of greatness what function will the arts find for itself?

In a society where there is no shared conception of the communal good there can no longer be any substantial concept of what it is to contribute more or less to that good.

(16, pg 427)

CONCLUSION

I think that the very nature of postmodernism precludes any kind of conclusion, much of the current discussion on the subject seems to suggest that the real debate is well in the future and that what is being argued over now is the terms and limits of that future debate, we must first tackle the many myths and misconceptions that still prevail in the world of art.

But for the moment where do we stand; the principles of Marxist criticism and of feminist theory have now been absorbed into academic systems and coexist with each other and with older views of art. It is because of the seeming flexibility of postmodern theory that it seems untrustworthy. How much of all the clamour and the rhetoric of the postmodern debate is any more than empty words? as I have said before, the whole subject could be seen as either a false dilemma or just intellectualising which has no real effect in practice? well, it is not easy to tell, since all the definitions of postmodernism depict not one single concept but a plethora of often contradictory ideas and opinions. Postmodern society is fragmented and eclectic and naturally enough its opinions of itself are just as disjointed. From discourse analysis, historiographic theory, post avant-garde, all of the various eccentric theories, just what is it that constitutes that postmodern.

Donald Kuspit from his essay "The Contradictory Character of Postmodernism";

The sturm-und-drang debate surrounding postmodernism creates the impression that it represents some extraordinary understanding. The theory of postmodernism is presented as a great critical innovation, fraught with consequences for society and culture. Its incestuous intellectual turmoil suggests that it is conceived in difficult labour; it weighs a great deal at birth. In fact all the conflict about it, like its own contradictory character, indicates that social and cultural theorists are extremely unsure of themselves, and of the power of their theory.

(13)

What power then, does cultural theory have in a society where cultural practice is not guided or lead in any particular direction, theorists can speak of the decentering of art but cannot presume to be able to discuss the margins, for if one does on whose terms does the discussion take place on what criteria would criticism be based. In the past the male, eurocentric view of history was the standard, all stories were told from that fixed and seemingly neutral point of view, after all it was Europeans who discovered the New World and the Dark Continent, or was it?. We now live in a society which has more than one point of view , and more than one set of criteria for judgement. It is not postmodern theorising that is overly complex and convoluted, the confusion is in the nature of the society in which we live. We can no longer trust language to be an innocent messenger of meaning, for as time passes meaning changes and the original message either becomes changed beyond recognition or finds other meanings and other

messages. Marcel Duchamp maintained that a work of art had a life span of about forty years after which time it would become a piece of history; the implication being that after such a length of time the world in which the work of art had its meaning would have changed so much that it could only be seen as a museum piece, out of time and out of context.

So we have a term which is as flexible and polymorphous as the society it is supposed to be defining, it is not surprising then that it is used to tidy up all manner of cultural phenomenon, as the ever helpful Umberto Eco explains;

Unfortunately, 'postmodern' is a term bon á tout faire. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive; first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. and this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer.

(6)

The hierarchy that has existed in the arts for centuries has served to exclude everything which did not seem to conform to the universal conception of high art. The hierarchical structure built and preserved in national galleries, museums, stately homes and art institutions have taken upon themselves to treasure what should be seen as our most valuable and worthwhile artifacts and thereby create a sort of catholic belief in what is great in our

culture. It does not seem possible to consider art now as being completely nonpartisan and autonomous, those who wish to consider art as being apolitical does so to remove art from the everyday and to keep it high, lofty and valuable. The postmodern approach is to constantly reevaluate our ideas of greatness, to question history, both past histories and the history which we are constantly writing for the future. Postmodernism means accepting the heresies and the marginal beliefs and taking apart the catholic history of art.

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