LECTURE NOTES | LESSON PLAN

Modernism

No ideas for opening comments...

Objectives:
- List the main theories of Modernism and some of the dominant thinkers.
- Distinguish between Modernism and modernity.
- Understand the development of Modernism from the Avant Garde and the Victorian Era.
- Identify characteristic traits of Modernist Literature and Art.
- Consider how Modernism is an ongoing process today.

Opening Questions:
- Xxx

Modernism in General:
- Modernism is an unstable and sharply debated term. Many disagreement exist and are still debated today.
- The instability of Modernism historically and aesthetically makes any simple definition or approach to it intrinsically unstable.
  - “Modernism” changes meaning and traits depending on the discipline or form of art.
  - Historians generally consider the term “modern” in relation to European and North American history since the Renaissance, or alternatively as history since the Age of Enlightenment circa 1750 and the French Revolution of 1789.
  - “Modernism” is paired with the more difficult term “modernity” in the Social Sciences as a whole.
  - Modernity is loosely aligned with the types of culture, society, economy, and forms of political organization that emerged in reaction to industrialization and the Industrial Revolution.
  - The first Industrial Revolution arguably began in the latter half of the Eighteenth Century (circa 1770) and was having a major impact on British culture by the 1830s. The Industrial Revolution hinged on both technological innovation and the expiration of patents on said technology – the Spinning Jenny for cotton spinning, the steam engine, and iron making all developed in the 1770s and their patents expired in the 1780s. By the time of the 1850s, this took technological innovation the form of mechanization and reliance on new forms of
energy for industrial production, such as steam from coal, smelting using coke, or water wheels.

- Repercussions included centralization of the population into cities, the emergence of modern capitalism, significant population growth, rapid urbanization of the rural population, and the development of factories as the standard form of labour organization.
- Mass transportation followed with the development of the railways, more elaborate canal systems, and shipping lines to serve the increased economic demands of industrial production and capitalist expansion.
- These all began in Great Britain but spread rapidly to the rest of the world.

In this sense, “Modernism” relates to the cultural activities that arise from “Modernity” as a social condition in Britain, but both are obviously general terms that cover broad periods of time and poorly defined social movements.

**Modernism as a Movement:**

- The term “modern” applies not only to time periods but also to locations.
- For obvious reasons, the social and political conditions Tibet differ significantly in the late Nineteenth Century from North London in the same period. Being “modern” or “modernist” in those two locations, even at the same time, would mean very different things.
- “Modern” is applied *inequitably* to different places at different times even today.
- Hence, “Modernism” is often tied to a style or type of cultural production unique to European and North American society (though spread by imperialism), much like we might create a genre to describe “Romantic Comedy” films or “Heavy Metal” music. All such genres, however, are also subject to some degree of uncertainty and may change over time.

**Modernism per se: Modernism “proper”:**

- The period we now most strongly associate with Modernism, per se, is the 1890s through the 1950s.
- Many modernist scholars will limit this further to 1914 to 1945: the period from the outbreak of the First World War to the end of the Second World War.
- This same very short period of time (scarcely 31 years) saw some of the most profound transformations of human society and expansions to the scope of human possibility, all of which altered the “horizon of possibility” for artistic creation at the time.
The First World War signaled the end of all previous notions of heroic pre-industrial war, symbolized in the end of Calvary warfare and the rise of the tank, chemical warfare, and the machine gun.

World War I saw the rise of wireless communication, armoured vehicles, aircraft, modern artillery, and automatic weapons. This is a profound transformation of humanity’s destructive capacities.

For many, WWI was the culmination of industrialization, imperialism, and capitalism – industry was made profitable again by the war, ending the economic depressions that had created social instability since the 1890s; much of the war was fought in Europe over control of imperial territories; and technological invention brought the now-profitable industry to the battlefield and created an industrial war machine.

The interbellum years, from 1919 to 1939, were marked by major social changes.

Ireland achieved independence in 1922 while Greece lost its war with Turkey and the ancient populations from Smyrna were deported.

In 1917 the Russian Revolution began

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 instantiated British policy to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

Four major empires ended: the Hohenzollerns, the Habsburg, Romanovs and the Ottomans.

The war also paralleled the spread of infectious disease

epidemic typhus

the 1918 influenza pandemic that was most deadly to young adults (the Spanish Flu that began in Kansas)

a worldwide sudden increase in malaria

the terrifying Sleeping Sickness (Encephalitis lethargica)

The total count and social change

Up to 100 million people perished from disease

16 million died in the war, and 21 million were left wounded

An uncertain number perished in the several related genocides

In all, up to 150 million people alive in 1914 had perished by 1922 in a world with a population of fewer than 2 billion people (1922 is the year in which The Waste Land, Woolf’s Jacob’s Room, and Joyce’s Ulysses were published and it is often seen as the pinnacle of Modernism.

America initially experienced much prosperity and growth during the “Roaring 20s” while Europe was caught in a series of economic depressions and crises
However, the Great Depression in 1929 began in America and spread when the American Stock Market crashed, sending the entire world into the Great Depression.

The result by 1930 was a tremendously altered vision of progress, technology, mass transportation, industrialization, industrial warfare, and a profound doubt about the merits of being “modern.”

Modernism as a Style

- As a style, Modernism encompasses several different techniques, but in a general sense it is concerned with art as a self-conscious endeavour that consciously employs form, tradition, and the general attempt to “make it new.”
- In other words, the difficulties of living during an interwar period or in the face of two World Wars made modernist writers reconsider not just what they said but how they went about saying it.
- Most readers, or at least those who would read literature, had the strong sense that something was wrong in their world — such a conviction could not be appeased by simple propaganda or direct argument, and hence the modernists aimed to revise how such works functioned in the first place.
  - The “Imagist” movement sought to revitalize how the specific image functioned within a text (as well as its language).
  - The Futurists had a sense of the austerity of the art work and its relationship to the industrialized mode of production.
  - Poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound developed overly-keen attention to how a modern poem might draw attention to the extensive tradition on which it is based and out of which it develops: the Futurists might compare a rose to a red rocket, but most readers would still wonder (in remembrance of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet) if the rose would smell sweeter by any other name.

Theories of Modernism

- The Nineteenth Century witnessed the development of the critical paradigms that are now the basis for much of our contemporary Social and Behavioral Sciences.
  - Modern Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Sociology, Economics, and so forth all were born in the Nineteenth Century.
  - Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, all wrote during the Nineteenth Century (Freud at the very end).
As a result, Modernist authors and artists were highly self-aware in a manner that differed from previous artists.

Modernists frequently developed critical paradigms in which they could discuss their work, very often based on the work of these Nineteenth Century thinkers.

A few major schools of critical thought emerged as distinctly modernist.

The “New Criticism” created what we now consider “English” as a discipline within universities.

- The New Critics were largely American and from the South, such as Cleanth Brookes, John Crowe Ransom, and T.S. Eliot.
- Their general paradigm involved close reading of a text without significant reliance on its political or biographical context.
- New Critics felt a series of “interpretive fallacies” would develop if they relied too much on biographies or political interpretations. The most famous is “the intentional fallacy,” in which a reader interprets a work of literature based on his or her assumptions about what the author had meant or intended rather than what the text actually contains.
- They suggested that authors may have changed their minds, may not recall an intention, or might even deliberately mislead a reader or have not intended anything at all – rather than relying on unreliable authors, the reader should instead attend to what is contained in the actual text and how it functions in the literary tradition (i.e., how it relates to other texts and how it goes about creating meaning.
- The New Critics were very good at close reading and giving careful attention to the meaning of words, allusions to other texts, or trends in literary works over time.

The Frankfurt School arose from the combination of Sociology and Marxism.

- It sought to place any artwork in the context of its conditions of production.
- This means, they assumed art arose from the material conditions of daily life and hence reflected those conditions.
- Art that is mass produced or industrially developed would, therefore, be quite different from art produced in folk cultures or within small communities. In the same way, art from one place or time would reflect the conditions of that place or time.
- These social conditions provide a “horizon of possibility” for artwork or for any human labour, such as American escaped slave narratives existing within the “horizon of possibility” provided by such social
conditions, conditions that did not lead to such works in many other places.

- The key is that the social conditions determine what is possible in art.
- The Frankfurt School developed at the same time as Modernism, but its ideas have since contributed significantly to how readers interpret modernist texts.
- The Frankfurt School also went into exile from Germany during World War II and took up residence at Columbia University and in the New School in Manhattan where it significantly influenced the nature of work in the Social Sciences and Education.

- **Psychoanalysis** arose at the turn of the century, shortly after Sigmund Freud began to publish his works.
  - Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* reflects his own feelings after the First World War.
  - This is from his middle period of development, and it shows his rejection of the materialism of the ideas that would coalesce around the Frankfurt School, in particular his rejection of Marxism.
  - Freud felt that changes to how humans organize their society or labour would do little to make people happier or more stable. Instead, social problems reflected the neuroses and pathologies of the individual, in particular the trade-off between repressing one’s desires in order to have great comfort and fulfillment of desires.
  - The impossibility of reconciling civilization with the repression of desires that civilization necessitates led Freud to believe that we would always be discontent and prone to expressing that discontent through violence and war.
  - Whether we agree or disagree with Freud, his perspective emphasized the individual psyche or mind in contrast to the two other paradigms above, each of which emphasizes either the social and material conditions or the aesthetics of the artwork itself.

- These three paradigms – the *New Criticism, Psychology or Psychoanalysis, and the Frankfurt School* (one purely aesthetic, one based on the individual mind, and the other primarily social) obviously conflict.
  - One is mainly aesthetic in nature while the others are individualist or primarily social.
  - i.e., one is decadent, one is introspective and personal, while the other is socially revolutionary.
  - That conflict reflects the general conflicts within Modernism as a movement, period, or style of art.
Modernism, per se

- This gives us a vision of Modernism that fits several generalized descriptions:
  - As a time period, Modernism roughly extends from the late Victorian period to the early post-Bellum period. This is to say, it is roughly 1890 to 1960. Many “traditionalist” modernists limit this scope to authors whose major works appeared from 1914 to 1939.
  - As a style, Modernism emphasizes the Avant Garde: artworks that are discontent with society or artistic forms as they currently exists.
  - Modernism typically challenges traditional forms while being acutely aware of them, and it emphasizes a more social or artistic vision of the artists as opposed to the Romantic artiste manqué (the suffering or manic artist). We however often consider the artist this way...
  - Modernism covers a political range from Fascism to Anarchism. That is, from profoundly authoritarian forms of rule by a centralized government to deeply decentralized forms of consultation with a disparate and individualist public.
  - Modernism oscillated between collective or individualist forms of economic organization: the greatest benefit to the community versus the maximum expropriation of value from the many to the individual. Many sought the greatest individual freedom paired with the greatest benefit to the community while others sought the greatest centralization of power with the maximum personal benefit over that of the community.
  - Many other variations and combinations existed, but they were all “Modernist” in one form or another, and they existed in reaction to the conditions of the time period(s).
  - **Philosophically,** Modernism sought to reconcile Enlightenment philosophy with a disillusioned sense of humanity’s capacity for progress.
    - It also refused to accept the decline in Enlightenment, although we now associate Postmodernism with the end of the Enlightenment.
    - At the same time, Modernism abandoned traditional Humanist areas of interest: religion, morality, and tradition for its own sake. Yet, it maintained a complex relationship with/against Humanism.
    - Modernism sought to reconcile a rapidly urbanizing population with increasing secularism and scientific views while at the same time recognizing the continuing importance of tradition.
Modernism is a highly self-conscious style. It invokes artistic traditions and a lineage in artworks as well as social activism and commentary.

In this respect, the form and structure of modernist artworks (paintings as much as literature) reflect experimentation and the Avant Garde.

IN OTHER WORDS: Modernism did not simply want to express new ideas about aesthetics or political economy – it sought to embed these ideas in the very structure of the artwork. Therefore, modernist artists are often formally and stylistically inventive or experimental to a degree uncommon in other time periods.

Questions for Self-Review

- Is Modernism a style or a time period? Yes/No and why?
- Is Modernism a national style or does it reflect a particular nation’s interests?
- How would you distinguish between Modernism and modernity?
- Consider how Modernism is an ongoing process today.