

Introduction:

Modernism, Modernity, & the Avant-Garde

Notes &c.

Objectives

1. Be able to summarize the main theories of Modernism and some of the dominant thinkers.
2. Distinguish between Modernism and modernity.
3. Understand the development of Modernism from out of the Avant-Garde and the Victorian Era.
4. Identify characteristic traits of modernist literature and art in the world around you today.
5. Consider how Modernism is an ongoing process today.

Commentary

Modernism is itself an unstable and debated term. Since Modernism is difficult to define with certainty, this Introduction may seem confusing and tentative about definitions. The instability of Modernism historically and aesthetically makes any simple definition or approach to it intrinsically unstable. It also changes meaning and traits depending on the discipline or form of art. This means that each definition of Modernism reveals the interests and perspective of the person offering it (Friedman, "Definitional" 497–8). Historians generally consider the term "modern" in relation to Europe and North America since the Renaissance, or alternatively as history since the Age of Enlightenment circa 1750 and the French Revolution of 1789. In North America, in a loose sense, "we" have been modern since America began, but again, the "we" in this definition reveals its limitations and perspectives. Modernisms is also paired with the more difficult term "modernity" in a social sciences perspective. Modernity (as distinct from "Modernism") 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 had a major impact on British culture by the 1830s. The Industrial Revolution hinged on both technological innovation and the expiration of patents

on these new technologies – the Spinning Jenny for cotton spinning, the steam engine, and innovations in iron making all developed in the 1770s and their patents expired in the 1780s. By the time of the 1850s, this technological innovation took 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 urban areas, the emergence of modern capitalism, significant population growth, rapid urbanization of the rural population, and the development of factories as the standard form of labor 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 terms are obviously general and cover broad periods of time as well as poorly defined social movements.

Definitions

Modernity: the social conditions or circumstances that developed in Western Europe as a response to modern industrial capitalism. Major traits include urbanization, mass transportation, international migrations, mass communication, secularization of society, and an increasing importance in government for economic influences in tandem with a decreasing importance in aristocratic or monarchical traditions.

Modernism: the global artistic, literary, musical, and architectural movements that responded to the circumstances or conditions of modernity. In visual arts this includes a departure from realism, in literature it includes increased experimentation and an “inward turn” to consciousness, in music it is reflected in decreased traditional notions of tonality, and in architecture in the increase in the visual importance of functionality, as in Art Deco.

As a term describing a distinct period of time, “modern” is also already fragmented. With regard to English Literature, the language itself is divided into Old English, Middle English, and Modern English. Old English is unrecognizable to the average English speaker, and its

greatest literary work is the epic poem *Beowulf* (circa 700–1000 CE). Middle English is recognizably English, but it can pose significant challenges for a modern speaker – Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (circa 1390) is the quintessential Middle English text but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* of the same time is written in a more challenging form of the language. Finally, Modern English is associated with the Seventeenth Century and perhaps most famously with William Shakespeare’s plays (circa 1589–1613). In this sense, virtually all of English Literature that a twenty-first century reader can read and recognize as being *in* the English language would be considered “modern.” The majority of literature written in English that a contemporary reader would recognize as “normal” English has followed from the Industrial Revolution (works from roughly the birth of Jane Austen to the present day). In this sense, “modern” English loosely coincides with “modernity.” This, clearly, is too broad a sense of the term, but the modernist authors we will read reached back through this long tradition.

Alternatively, the “modern” period would include the “Early Modern,” which extends from Elizabethan literature through the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the early Eighteenth Century. The Eighteenth Century onward is generally considered “modern” in this sense, but it is again fractured (in specifically English literature) by the Romantic movement. In literary studies, the Eighteenth Century is generally stretched by several decades on both ends of the century. Hence, we refer to the “long Eighteenth Century” meaning 1660–1832. Subsequently, the Victorian Era ran from the mid-Nineteenth Century to the early years of the Twentieth during the reign of Queen Victoria who oversaw the British Empire at its height and during its most remarkable social and technological transformations. She is the longest-reigning monarch in British history. The end of her reign and the following periods in the Twentieth Century saw continued change and globalization as well as fierce European and North American competition that ultimately led to the [First World War](#). The period from 1901 to 1914 is generally named for King Edward V as the “Edwardian Period” in Great Britain. Our readings, however, cover 1890–1937, any clear division of a periodized sense of Modernism is already unstable. Clearly, any single term such as “modern” that encapsulates this breadth will be very general and point to loose traits.

The same period saw the rise of the United States of America and the British Commonwealth of Nations. The birth of America is closely tied to the Enlightenment as a political and philosophical movement, and to the French Revolution. The Monroe Doctrine, which declared in 1823 the American sentiment that European powers would no longer

Notes &c.

control the Americas, loosely coincides with the birth of the Victorian era, and the American Civil War marks a division in the nation's history instantiated by the achievement of the implicit Enlightenment rejection of slavery and the introduction of mechanized warfare. It also parallels the period of industrialization in the United States of American and its own Industrial Revolution in what Mark Twain described as the "Gilded Age." Much like the British second Industrial Revolution, the American Gilded Age of the 1870s was a period of rapid economic development, though it came to an end in the 1890s depressions. The Progressive Era followed and is politically aligned with modern Liberalism, which continued to be the dominant form of political activity to the 1970s.

Such temporal "periods" will become impossible to clearly define, especially internationally, yet it remains impossible to avoid periodization. Much of Modernist scholarship is concerned with how one might adequately periodize the Modern and how such periods reflect critical interests, but even this very loose summary shows that any "period" is specific to location, resources, and communities. Whatever we call the modernist period will obviously shift and change based on where and whom we are talking about.

In each of these scenarios, then, we find that the term "modern" applies not only to time periods but also to locations. For obvious reasons, the social and political conditions of Tibet differed significantly in the late Nineteenth Century from North London in the same period, just as today the conditions of Vancouver or New York differ from those of Harare or Caracas. Being modern in those locations, even at the same time, would mean very different things. "Modern" is applied inequitably to different places at different times even today. For this reason, "Modernism" in English literature is often tied to a *style* or type of cultural production unique to [European](#) and [North American](#) society (though it was spread rapidly by imperialism), so not everything produced in a modernist period is modernist in style. This is much like how 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 and as their location migrates from place to place. To use the same examples, "Heavy Metal" music will mean something different (or carry different cultural values) in New Jersey or Vancouver from what it means in Moscow or Beijing – perhaps it will mark or signal lower class status in the Western locations but be very different in Russia or China as a form of revolutionary change or social activism. Modernism is flexible in the same way.

High Modernism: 1914–1928

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. Some limit it further to 1914–1928, although major modernist authors continued writing for quite some time after (and prior to) these dates. This short period of scarcely 31 years, from war to war, saw some of the most profound transformations of human society and expansions to the scope of human possibility, although even this is based on regional perspectives. The First World War signaled the end of all previous notions of heroic pre-industrial war, symbolized in the end of cavalry warfare and the rise of the tank, chemical warfare, and the machine gun. World War I saw the rise of wireless communication, armored vehicles, aircraft, modern artillery, and automatic weapons. This is a profound transformation of humanity's destructive capacities. In many respects, WWI was seen as the culmination of industrialization, imperialism, and capitalism – industry was made profitable again by the war, which helped to end the economic depressions that had created social instability since the 1890s; much of the war was fought in Europe over control (and using the resources) of imperial territories elsewhere; and technological invention brought the now-profitable industry to the battlefield and created an industrial war machine. However, place or location remains vital even at this point – the Chinese Civil War saw more casualties, but it was the war in Europe that marked the shift in *modernity*, which reveals the deeply Eurocentric concerns of Modernism.

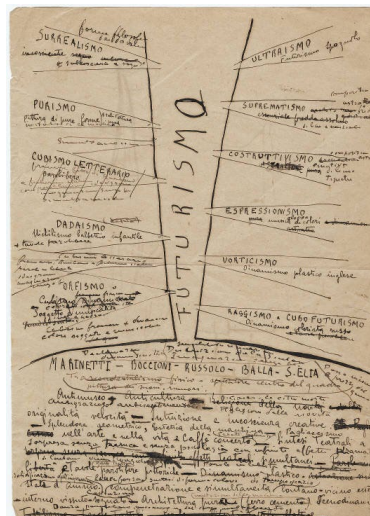
The inter-bellum years, from 1919–1939, were marked by major social changes. Ireland achieved [independence](#) in 1922 while Greece lost its war with Turkey and the ancient populations from Smyrna were deported. In 1917 the [Russian Revolution](#) began and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 instantiated British policy to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Four major empires ended: the Hohenzollerns, the Habsburg, the Romanovs, and the Ottomans. The war also paralleled the spread of infectious disease, including epidemic typhus, the 1918 influenza pandemic that was most deadly to young adults (the Spanish Flu that began in Kansas), malaria, and the terrifying Sleeping Sickness (*Encephalitis lethargica*). Up to 100 million people perished from disease, 16 million 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 perished by 1922 in a world with a population of fewer than 2 billion people – 1922 is the year in which [The Waste Land](#), [Jacob's Room](#), and [Joyce's Ulysses](#) were published, and it is

often seen as the pinnacle of Modernism, what we call the *annus mirabilis* or miracle year. 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 social vision of progress, technology, mass transportation, new forms of industrialization, industrial warfare, and a profound doubt about the merits of being “modern.” At the same time, radio and movies (and cheap industrially produced culture) changed the media-scape of the Western world, including a large shift in the general public from entertainment and culture as things one *did* as opposed to commodities one *consumed*.

In many respects, the modernists we study in this course were a part of the social transformations that responded to this mass disillusionment with modernity. Hence, many branches of what we now call Modernism as an artistic movement express the two faces of discontent with modernity versus enthrallment with industrialization and new media. In some respects, you may compare this to today’s tension between a technophile coveting a new phone or the latest upgrades versus the desire to go camping or back to nature, except that for the modernists this conflict was also deeply caught up in the major political and economic disasters of their times.

In the face of such events, the various modernist [artistic](#) and political groups that shaped World War II were formed. This includes the first meeting of [Fascists](#) in 1919 under the vision of “[Futurism](#),” in contrast to the various Liberal economic groups tied to the Fabians (later British Labour), [Bloomsbury](#), and [Keynesian](#) Economics. Many American modernist authors (and artists of many types) were paid to document American culture as a part of the New Deal that developed in response to the Great Depression. Virginia Woolf, whom we will read, was a close friend (and with her husband Leonard Woolf was an advisor) to John Maynard Keynes, the creator of Keynesian Economics, which many Western nations adopted in order to stem the economic decline of the Great Depression (and which many nations have adopted again since 2007). In other words, Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group of which she was a part included some of the most important economists, artists, and philosophers of the twentieth century among their ranks. James Joyce, [Ezra Pound](#), and T.S. Eliot were all tied to a variety of economic and aesthetic movements that responded to the period’s crises. Nazism and Fascism rose in reaction to the same problems and led to the Second World War, and both were deeply tied to the artistic movement within Modernism that we call Futurism, in many instances

with Fascist leaders and Futurist artists (like [Mussolini](#) and [Marinetti](#)) working collaboratively and forging



close personal bonds. Futurism as a movement influenced a large number of American and British writers, with poets such as [Mina Loy](#) removing its fascistic themes while retaining its adoration of industrialization, but it was most concentrated in Italy and Germany. The Futurists directly supported the Fascist governments in both nations through propaganda, literature, and visual arts. For instance, consider Marinetti's Futurist visual works (above), which rely on mass produced materials, news media, and print. Marinetti celebrated the machine, industry, and new social forms of organization that were "rational" and dedicated to the pairing of nationalism and industrialization. The artistic style of these "rational" art forms and architecture is now seen as fascistic as well as modernist. The bonds

between Futurism and fascism are clear. Italian architecture, particularly its colonial architecture in the territories it controlled at the time in Africa, visually marks the pairing of industry, rationalization, and fascism.

The style of architecture spread widely. The visual style of “[Art Deco](#)” from this period is easy to identify and is related to Futurism. Although the style of Art Deco is associated with the Futurists in Italy, who supported fascism, it became a popular style of architecture (and even design, including furniture design) in many other countries that did not support fascist politics.

For instance, in New York City, the most famous Art Deco inspired building is the enormous Rockefeller Center (between 48th and 51st streets) and most especially the GE Building, originally called 30 Rockefeller Center:



You can notice the “family” resemblance among these structures based on their visual style. They all share modern steel and concrete construction, a tendency to angular shapes rather than Gothic or Classical styles (resembling cathedrals or temples), and a smooth regularity of surface texture that differs from the ornate or baroque style of the red brick tradition of the 19th century. For example, see the first example above in which Italian architecture transforms the Classical columns associated with Ancient Rome into a modern steel and concrete girder design. To better notice the contrast, walk around the city to see the contrast. In New York City, notice how Rockefeller Center differs from St. Patrick’s Cathedral nearby on 5th Avenue, which is in a neo-Gothic style.

The political conflicts that are coded into these artistic styles were, however, about to erupt violently: Fascism versus Liberalism. War broke out again in 1935 when Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia (although Japan had already invaded Manchuria in China in 1931 and clashed with Russia, so regionalism is again a way of revealing any given definition's priorities and interests). The [Spanish Civil War](#) followed from 1936–1939, and in many respects it was fought as a proxy war by the emerging powers in Europe. Notably, the fascist government in Spain did not fall at the end of World War II, as did those in Italy and Germany, and it remained a fascist state until 1975. The Nationalists under the Fascist General Francisco Franco were supported by [Adolf Hitler's](#) Nazi Germany and Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy as well as informally by Ireland. The Leftist and Democratic Republicans were supported by the Soviet Union and Mexico. The USA, France, Canada, and Britain maintained non-intervention policies, but many of their citizens volunteered for the Republicans. However, many major American corporations also provided significant financial and material assistance to the fascist Nationalists. Novels [such as Muriel Spark's](#) *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody*, autobiographical accounts like [George Orwell's](#) *Homage to Catalonia*, or Auden's travels to China and Spain document the deep conflicts in liberal states that were made visible in volunteers fighting for opposing sides in Spain. This personal support for the Left Republicans and economic support for the Fascist Nationalists underscored the emerging conflicts that led to World War II.

Japan invaded China in 1937 and the Soviet Union (as well as Mongolia) in 1938 to prevent Soviet interference in China. In the same year, Germany annexed Austria and took territory from Czechoslovakia while Italy invaded Albania and threatened Greece. Lest these conflicts seem far from home, the German American Bund organized several Nazi rallies in the USA culminating in the 1939 rally at Madison Square Gardens, which drew 20,000 participants in support of its racist and fascist views, and the Fascist League of North America was a very active Italian parallel organization across the 1920s. In Britain, Oswald Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists in 1932 as a political party, which was only disbanded in 1940, a year after World War II began. Lest Mosley appear entirely "fringe," it is worth noting that he was married to the second daughter of Lord Curzon, one of the most prominent and important politicians of the interwar period and an architect of the Treaty of Lausanne – we will learn about him in our readings from [Hemingway](#). After his wife's death, Mosley remarried the infamous Diana Mitford in a secret ceremony in Germany with Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler present as guests. This may be distressing for us today (and even more for the general public of the time), but it illustrates how

very deeply these political conflicts infiltrated everyday life of the Western world.

In 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, which led France, Britain, and most of the Commonwealth nations to respond by declaring war on Germany and thereby formally beginning the Second World War. The Soviet Union formally entered the European front when it was invaded by Germany in June 1941, though it had already fought Japan in 1937. In August 1941, the USA and Britain placed an Oil Embargo on Japan, which crippled Japan's war with China and prevented it from flanking the Soviet Union, which had now opened the Eastern Front in Europe. This was considered by Japan an informal declaration of war, in particular when the USA moved its Pacific Fleet to Hawaii from San Diego at the same time. The USA formally entered the Second World War in the final days of 1941, three years after the war had begun, following on Japan's simultaneous surprise attacks on American forces in Pearl Harbor, British and Canadian forces in Hong Kong, British warships in British Malaya (Singapore and other nearby islands), Thailand, and the USA controlled Philippines.

As a whole, World War II included events that employed industrialized systems of destruction and technological innovations that resulted in an astonishing loss of human life. These include the Holocaust, in which European Jews, Romani (Gypsies), Poles, Slavs, Communists, homosexuals, and Soviets were exterminated in genocidal plans that took the lives of 6 million Jews and a further 5 million people, or as many as 17 million people if the extermination of Soviet civilians is included. The plans included the intended complete extermination of all European Jews, Poles, Romani, and male homosexuals. The war ended in 1945. The American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt died on April 12th and was succeeded by Harry S. Truman. Italian forces executed Benito Mussolini on April 28th after the American invasion of Italy, and Hitler committed suicide on April 30th after Soviet forces took Berlin and began to shell his bunker. On May 8th, Germany formally surrendered. Two months later, the USA developed its first atomic weapon. On August 6th, the greatest technological advancement in warfare in human history was demonstrated when the USA dropped its uranium atomic bomb on Hiroshima. On August 9th, the Soviet Union honored its promises to Roosevelt and invaded Japanese-held Manchuria, which led to Japan's immediate meeting to settle the terms of its surrender. On the same day, during Japan's discussions of surrender, the USA dropped a second plutonium bomb on Nagasaki. Japan formally surrendered on the 15th of August, ending World War II but also triggering the ongoing conflicts of the Cold War that ran for the next 45 years.

From the formal declaration of war in 1939 until peace in 1945, some 70 million people died due to the war. During the 31-year period from the beginning of World War I to the cessation of World War II (1914–1945), pandemic disease hurried by new mass transportation technologies and globalization, in tandem with warfare rendered more efficient by technology, claimed nearly 200 million lives or nearly 10% of the entire human population of the period. This mass mortality was concentrated among the younger members of human society who had less immunity to disease and who were more likely to serve in the war efforts. This left subsequent generations with a major gap, a missing generation of young men in particular. Much of the population born in the 1890s and the 1920s was simply absent, either permanently or temporarily, or was crippled for life and wounded psychologically. Modernism is the literary response to these conditions, and as you may guess, its approach to nostalgia for a pre-modern past, its desire for a technological future, and its humanist or anti-humanist response to the politics of the period deeply inform both its stories and its style. That is, Modernism responded to these circumstances both through topics or themes as well as in form and structure. Modernism, as the artistic response to modernity, is troubled.

This complex relationship between industrialization, economic instability, warfare, technological advancement, and unprecedented levels of destruction (as well as unprecedented rises in wealth and standards of living) all inform Modernism as a cultural movement. These are the central anxieties and conditions to which Modernism as an artistic movement responds, in large part using the philosophical visions developed in the mid to late Nineteenth Century.

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 endeavor that 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 – the form was part of a tradition, and traditions were to be interrogated and questioned. That *what* and *how* combination most often appeared in literature and art that thought about itself *as* art (self-conscious) in order to worry about its own structure (form) and how it drew upon or broke with existing norms (tradition) – “make it new” is a catch-phrase for modernism from the American poet Ezra Pound, and its origins explain much. He adopted it from Confucian texts he inherited from the widow of the

sinologist Ernest Fenollosa, but he only published a much different translation of the phrase in 1928 in his translation of *Great Learning* (*Daxue*, 大學) – he then revised his translation again to “make it new” in 1935 in his book *Jefferson and/or Mussolini: Fascism as I Have Seen It* in which he made his previous intentions “new again” as a support for fascism (North, *Novelty* 164). These changes in Pound’s translation illustrate three key points for Modernism: (1) Modernism’s deep ties to a long international and multilingual understanding of literary history, (2) Modernism’s attempts to revitalize traditions that no longer suited or had a limited influence on the modern world, and (3) Modernism’s deep political conflicts between liberation and fascism, which saw many modernists change their views over time or fall into deep conflicts with each other. Hence, we see Modernism as a part of women’s rights and anti-racism movements as well as in fascist and racist movements of the same time. Our readings in this course generally orient toward the politics of liberation, but other radical conflicts are always nearby for literature of this period.

Most readers of the time period, or at least those who would read literature, had the strong sense that something was amiss 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, not just *what* they were about. The Imagist movement, also named and begun by Pound, sought to revitalize how the specific image functioned within a text (as well as its language), and in large part this was prompted by Pound’s idiosyncratic understanding of the ideogram in Chinese characters. The Futurists had a sense of the austerity of the artwork and its relationship to the industrialized mode of production – form reflects purpose. Poets such as T.S. Eliot and Pound developed overly-keen attention to how a modernist 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 as sweetly by any other name.

The above description of Modernism represents it as a period and as a cultural response to unprecedented global transformations, yet all these definitions are ultimately too broad and too difficult to explain. At the same time, the definition of Modernism as a stylistic trend is equally difficult and improbable. Lawrence Sterne, in the eighteenth century, accomplished much the same stylistically in his novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759), which experimented with type, print production, and a highly self-conscious use of form. In effect, he made the novel “new” by changing what people thought a novel could do. Yet, he isn’t

“modernist” in our context, even though he does some similar things. Hence, even if clear definitions are not possible, most twenty-first century readers notice a difference in some stylistic traits that distinguish modernist works of art and literature. Despite being extraordinarily long, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* are recognized for their enormous compression (they press large ideas into very few words). The same is true of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which alludes broadly to world literatures as a whole. James Joyce’s novels, Virginia Woolf’s novels, and [Lin Yutang](#)’s works all do the same. They seem to bear a family resemblance, even if the family has no single defining trait or a distinctly modernist “DNA,” so to speak. Every clear definition of Modernism as a style encounters the same difficulties as Modernism as a time period: there are always exceptions.

Theories of Modernism

The nineteenth century witnessed the development of 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, and they 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.

As a general concept, Ezra Pound used the phrase “Make it New” to define modernism. By this, he did not mean simply “refreshing” ideas but also a broad sense of devaluation over time, which he also saw in distinctly economic terms. For instance, after changing his translation from “Renovate, dod gast you, renovate” in 1928 to “make it new” in 1935, Pound’s combination of Fascism and Social Credit economics changed the meaning of the concept. He wanted money to devalue over time (the opposite of accumulating interest) in order to force reinvestment and spending. He thought of art and literature in precisely the same term – art should devalue over time, and hence artists would need to reinvest in old art by making it new again, and again, and again. Hence, while his poetry is obsessed with tradition, it is always a transformed or revitalized tradition, such as making Homer into something new, not simply a reference or deference to traditional literature, or making ancient Chinese poetry and literature new again in

English, and so forth. This newness is at the heart of new ways of seeing the world based on new social theories that grow from the old and change it.

The other major traits for the new modernist worldview include urbanization and alienation. While the concepts can be critiqued for their historical accuracy, the general sense was that as the life of the village or small neighborhood becomes less important because of increasing urbanization or migration to cities as part of modernization, so must society and forms of social organization also be “made new.” What works socially for life in a village cannot work for life in a skyscraper. In this view, cultures and societies leave behind old traditions in order to recreate themselves for new social circumstances brought about by modernization. These new ways of living and these new conditions are called “modernity.” For Pound, the religious and familial orders suitable to the nineteenth century must also be made new to suit the new world and new art.

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 Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and to a degree T.S. Eliot (both as a critic and as a poet whom the New Critics examined). The general paradigm of the New Criticism involved close reading of a text without significant reliance on its political or biographical context. The 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. The New Critics 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 – none of which changes what is in the actual text itself. Hence, rather than relying on unreliable authors and what we might imagine about their intentions, the reader should instead attend to what is contained in the actual text and how it functions in the literary tradition. In other words, *how* the text relates to other texts and *how* it goes about creating meaning matters more than anything we might assume about its purpose or who created it. 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 and literary traditions over time. However, they were often blind to the racism of their times and the Civil Rights movement, since these are social, biographical, or extra-textual details outside of the text itself. The most obvious criticism of the New Criticism is that by removing attention to the author or social

context, it excused white critics in the American South from thinking about their own privilege and reliance on racist policies of exclusion.

[The Frankfurt School for Social Research](#) arose from the combination of Sociology and Marxism, and in contrast to the New Criticism it sought to place any artwork in the context of its conditions of production. This is to say, they assumed art arose from the material conditions of daily life and hence reflected those conditions and was ultimately more an expression of those conditions than it was some personal inspiration. 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 be a product of the conditions of that place or time. These social conditions provide a “horizon of possibility” for artwork or for any human labor, 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 other places). The key issue is that the social conditions are seen as determining 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.

Lastly, psychoanalysis arose at the turn of the century, shortly after Sigmund Freud began to publish his works. It spread rapidly. Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* reflects his own feelings after the First World War through the perspective of psychoanalysis as a social science. This is from Freud’s middle period of development, and it shows his rejection of the materialism of the ideas that would coalesce around the Frankfurt School, in particular Freud’s rejection of Marxism. Freud felt that changes to how humans organize their society or labor 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 greater 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 we have noted, each of which emphasizes either (1) the social and material conditions that produce art or (2) the aesthetics of the artwork

itself. In this sense, Freud gives us the third big paradigm for Modernism: the interior mental life of the individual, which we see manifested in the [stream of consciousness](#) technique in James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and later revised by [Lawrence Durrell](#) (or by contrast the absence of such deep interiority in Eliot and Ernest Hemingway).

These three paradigms – the New Criticism, Psychology or Psychoanalysis, and Materialism (one purely aesthetic, one based on the individual mind, and the other primarily social) – are obviously in conflict with each other, yet they are of the same moment. They all want to reconsider society and “make it new.” One is mainly aesthetic in nature while the others are individualist or social/economic. In other words, one is decadent, one is introspective and personal, while the other is social and revolutionary. That conflict reflects the general conflicts within Modernism as a movement, as a period, or as a style of art. Notably, the authors included in this course knew in great detail of these movements and related philosophies. Woolf helped to publish some of the first English translations of Sigmund Freud through the [Hogarth Press](#) (run by her and her husband [Leonard Woolf](#)), Joyce read Marx and Freud extensively, Eliot read widely and knew much work in his role as an editor, and [Wilde](#) wrote on [socialism](#) and [anarchism](#) while anticipating several ideas in psychoanalysis. Hemingway knew Joyce well and writes about revolutionary movements in several of his works, and at the end of the course Durrell contrast “revolution” (in Spain and Greece) against individuals fleeing to a small island outside of modernization (yet with their travels made possible by industrial capitalism). We will see these conflicts play out in all of the works we will read during this course, so even while they are in conflict, we must also see them as a combined set of interests driving Modernism and shaping our understanding of it.

Modernism, *per se*

We are ultimately left with a vision of Modernism that fits several very generalized descriptions:

1. 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 1890–1960. Many “traditionalist” modernists limit this scope to authors whose major works appeared from 1914–1928 or as late as 1914–1939.
2. As a *style*, Modernism emphasizes the [Avant-Garde](#): artworks that are discontent with society or artistic forms as they currently exist and therefore form a “vanguard” to charge into combat first (note

- the military origins of the term). Modernism typically challenges traditional forms while being acutely aware of tradition, and it emphasizes a more social or artistic vision of the artists as opposed to the Romantic *artiste manqué* (the suffering or manic artist – instead, Modernists sought to separate the artist from the products read by others). In this sense, Modernism stands apart from the period as a distinct movement, even as other large-scale social and cultural movements began at the same time.
3. Modernism covers a political range from Fascism to anarchism. That is, Modernism's politics range from profoundly authoritarian forms of rule by a centralized government led by a single cult of personality to deeply decentralized forms of consultation with a disparate and individualist public. The point is less one individual radical political concept and more the profound *conflict* among different political visions that were prevalent in the time. In tandem, Modernism's politics 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 the community. Many other variations and combinations existed, but they were all Modernist in one form or another based on their profound conflict, and they existed in reaction to the conditions of the time period(s). That is, they are all responses (good or bad) to the conditions of modernity.
 4. Philosophically, Modernism also sought to reconcile Enlightenment philosophy (again, the "modern" of the sense of self-determining individuals we see in the concepts behind the American and French Revolutions) with a disillusioned sense of humanity's capacity for destruction via progress. In other words, social and political life was built around ways of understanding people as rational and able to exercise reason, but the reality of two world wars, genocides, and epidemics revealed a profoundly irrational side to humanity and the world we live in. That is, modernity might not actually make logical sense, despite its adoration of industry, rationality, and technological progress. Modernism also refused to accept the decline in Enlightenment even while challenging it in aesthetics, the irrationality of the mind, and the social pressures of society, 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 (it sought to make each “new” for the modern world). 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 and social influence.

5. Lastly, 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*. This is to say, 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

1. Is Modernism a style or a time period? Yes/No and why?
2. Is Modernism a national style or does it reflect a particular nation’s interests?
3. How would you distinguish between Modernism and modernity?
4. Would you say Modernism is or is not an ongoing style or process today?

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