Modernism and Critical texts

*Ideas and quotes taken from ‘Art of the twentieth century: A Reader’ edited y Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood*

One use of the term Modernism – inclusive – to describe the ‘modern movement’ as a whole running from Impressionism through Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism etc, which tends to stress that there is a shared response of artists to the world beyond art, that is to the condition of modernity. This camp would argue that the specific forms of modern art: vivid colours and of various kinds are related to social alienation or technological advance. (Cite **Meyer Schapiro** who, as a Marxist critic always argues for the essential connection between art and the social circumstances of its production) and **TJ Clark** here.)

The other use of the term Modernism – more exclusive – does the opposite and stresses the autonomy of modern art. In this view, modernist art centres on the production of aesthetic effects for its viewers rather than on communicating information about the world or offering political or ethical exhortations to act of various kinds. This case was argued by **Clement Greenberg** and **Clive Bell** (who used the term “significant form”). They suggested that form predominates over subject-matter and content and that art is to make the spectator feel something, not know something.

It is possible to see too then, that the inclusive use of the term is characterised by additive strategies (collage, montage, construction, hybrid performances or installations) whereas the exclusive use of the term is characterised by the progressive logic of purification, where works are purged of elements in the pursuit of a unitary aesthetic effect.

**Gaiger and Wood** conclude that “the boundaries are distinctly porous, and there are exceptions to every rule.”

On the influence and appeal of ‘Primitive’ sculpture, **Roger Fry** claims that it had “complete plastic freedom”. He also claims that “the emphasis is completely different”: whereas the West has “always been affected by our preferences for… the nobility of man” the African primitive works “gives emphasis to the protuberant parts of the body to underline the three-dimensionalness of his forms”.

**Giedion-Welcker** (Modern Plastic Art) argues that “the problems of statics and dynamics, as of the disintegration of mass and the space-time interrelation of volumes, are bound to become a new plastic medium once their divorce from literary and psychological suggestion allows a return to first principles….. once we discard imitation and illusion, a self-sufficient plastic reality is free to emerge, which is just as real as the reality of nature and human life, if necessarily different to both.” She argues that “painting has abandoned illusory perspective and replaced it with the recognition of surface, colour and light as the true components of a picture.” She says there is a close affinity between contemporary Physics and modern plastic art: “the fundamental transformation of Physics has modified our conceptions of space, time and motion, and has superseded the old ideal of mass, since the ponderosity (solidity) of mass is now considered as a factor conditioned by speed.”

**Robert Goldwater** argues that “Early modern art was Janus-faced. In one direction, its gaze was fixed on contemporary modernity: the city, technology, cars, speed – the future even. Yet in the other, modernists sought to anchor their resistance to the negative aspects of modernity -to the alienation and inauthenticity of bourgeois society – by recourse to the ancient, the unsophisticated, in a word, to the ‘primitive’.”

**TJ Clark** says that Modernity “points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future – of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities or information.” He goes on to say that “Modernity is characterised by “turning from the past to the future, the acceptance of risk, the omnipresence of change, the malleability of time and space.” “One principal impetus behind the historical avant-garde was the call to break down the barriers between art and everyday life.”

**Walter Benjamin** suggests that “Technology is, of course, the pathbreaker here. It is not the person ignorant of writing but the one ignorant of photography who will be the illiterate of the future.”