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Critical Terms - Modernism 1. What is Modernism?

WARREN CARTER: I'm Warren Carter. And I'm a lecturer in the History of Art Department with Open University. My research is really concerned with public art in the interwar period in the United States and Mexico. But today, I'm here to talk about the concept of modernism with Paul Wood, who used to be a colleague of mine in the same department.

Paul, for someone who's done extensive work on the concept of modernism in the 20th century or even the late 19th century, today, it's a concept which is generally looked down upon, disregarded, dealt with contemptuously, held up as a straw figure. How do you feel about that?

PAUL WOOD: Well, I obviously don't agree with it. I think it's a fair point, though, that [SIGHS] the situation that we're in now, early 21st century, there is a sense in which modernism is widely seen not just as a thing of the past, but both modernism in the arts and the wider condition of modernity are, so to speak, coded negative. They're both seen as representing various kinds of closure, as distinct from the supposed openness of contemporary art. In fact, that itself is a point of contrast - the notion of the contemporary is contrasted with the modern. And so I think that's something that you have to acknowledge at the beginning of any discussion about modernism.

But at the same time, I think what we should try and do ourselves when we talk about the concept is to probe beneath those kind of stereotypes and try and see some of the complexity, some of the nuances of modernism and the wider condition that it addressed in the 19th and 20th centuries.

WARREN CARTER: So as a concept, certainly in terms of painting, as we say, it goes back to the 19th century. And obviously, one of the significant originary moments is Manet, Edouard Manet, the work of the Impressionists. So the codification of modernism happened later, didn't it? And that codification of 20th century drew out particular elements of painting in the mid- to late-19th century. What were those elements? What were the important constituent parts of that?

PAUL WOOD: It largely depends on which account you want to follow. And as you say, the theorization of modernism tended to be a retrospective. It wasn't fully formulated until, more or less, the time when you could say that modernism was running into some kind of a crisis, maybe as late as the 1960s, the 1950s and '60s, certainly the post-war period.

And those ideas were sort of mapped back across the early 20th century and into the late 19th. And you did tend to have different accounts of what had gone on. If you want to take one figure

who was seen as canonical at that point in the mid-20th century but who has, to put it mildly, slipped from favour now, the American critic Clement Greenberg.

He would have looked at the art of Manet, not for what it was telling you about the social world of the mid-19th century, let's say in Paris, but for the visual effects that his painting had. So that he'd tend to look at it as the sort of first step on a long way that goes through the late 19th century, through people like Cezanne and Picasso, until you ended up with the art of Greenberg's own day, people like Jackson Pollock. So he was looking at Manet for the first steps that he took on a long road.

Whereas at that period, in the late '60s and the '70s, you'd have a different kind of approach, which would often start from Manet and people of a similar kind of disposition, in Paris, in the mid-19th century, engaged in the so-called painting of modern life.

WARREN CARTER: Well, now, I find that quite intriguing, because if we think about French art in the mid-19th century, one of my favourite artists is Courbet. And again, a painter of modern life. Very similar time to the painting of Manet, yet one is referred to as a realist, and one is referred to as a modernist.

Yet both of them take, as subject material, the contemporary part and parcel of everyday life. They talk about class, etc., they talk about stratification of class, everyday life. Why is it that Manet was held up as an exemplar of modernism, whereas Courbet is relegated to the category of realism?

PAUL WOOD: One of the things that's really important to try and bring out is that these categories, like modernism, like realism, they're not absolutely watertight. They're not something that you can... they're not like receptacles that you can pop different artists into and say, he's a realist, she's a modernist, they're avant-gardists, something like that.

There are all kinds of shifts and transitions and ambiguities between them. The main thing, I think, is to be very careful about the use that you put these terms to. And I'm afraid you just can't get away from actually looking at the categories. And I suppose that gets you into the territory of theory and ideas, rather than just art practice.

But you have to accept that all these various terms are... they have variant meanings. They can mean different things. It's a matter of emphasis. It's not a cut-and-dry matter at all.

When modern art begins in the mid-19th century, it's essentially talking about modern life. It's trying to address the experience of modernity, and this is something new.

I guess what I'd say is that modernism, and indeed realism itself, they're not styles. They're something more complex than that. They're responses to a kind of overarching epochal kind of condition, something which is new.

WARREN CARTER: So we're talking about two different registers here, aren't we? We're talking about modernity, as a social, economic, and political phenomena. And then we're talking

about modernism, sometimes with a capital 'M', which refers to a particular type of painting rooted back in Manet, as we've been saying.

I suppose the problem I have with a Greenbergian analysis, or what we know as a formless analysis, is that by focusing upon how the art or the artist strips away, takes away, pares down the picture plane, flattens, etc., and then teleologically read backwards from the mid-20th century in the United States, almost acts to take away or negate or efface the subject matter, which is modernity, which is what you're talking about.

So is there not a contradiction between modernity as a broader world historical concept, obviously defined to the West at this particular moment, and modernism in painting as a formal development from Paris to New York?

PAUL WOOD: Well, I don't know whether it's a contradiction. But there's certainly a lot of complex changes happen. If you think of a figure like Manet or Degas, what we think of typical works by them would be something like paintings of the universal exhibition, even a conventional subject like a nude in the shape of Olympia is actually to do with sort of gender relations and class relations, prostitution in mid-19th century Paris. It's not just a classical nude. I mean, one of the things that Manet is doing is, sort of transgressing those categories of the traditional nude. And the same can be said for things like landscapes and cityscapes, that all the traditional genres of art, that a figure like Manet or Degas and others are dealing with, they're trying to sort of cast them in a new kind of way, in a new kind of light.

Now, there is a big difference between something like that and something like cubist painting in the early 20th century, or an abstract expressionist painting in the mid-20th century. And they don't have railway trains or prostitutes or anything like that in them, not very evidently anyway. So there is a shift which has gone on.

And I think the key period for looking at that kind of shift is not in the mid-19th century, when a figure like Manet is working - and Manet dies in the 1880s - you're looking at a slightly later period, towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, sort of before the First World War, that kind of period.

And the key there would be, say, an artist like Cezanne, perhaps, and very definitely figures like Picasso and Braque and the development of cubism. And the paradoxical thing that you find happening there, and it is a kind of difficult point to grasp, but if you think of Cezanne, who is often referred to as something like the father of modern art, a pioneer of modern art. Those kinds of epithets are applied to him. Now, that is absolutely true. I mean, he is a very generative figure for later modernist painting. But you don't find steam engines, railway stations, and things like that in Cezanne's painting. So you've got to ask yourself the question, why?

And to be absolutely sort of blunt about it, one of the key things that happened, it's that the language that you use to describe things, whether it's describing them with words or whether it's depicting them with paint, the language that you use, the visual, the verbal language, has a very powerfully determining effect on the nature of what it is that you can represent.

There's this sense in which the how, the means that you use, stands before the what. So if you think of something like, as you get in the late 18th century, you get people trying to write sonnets about steam engines. It doesn't work.

And it's something similar that happens in the visual arts, where that set of devices that you've had in play, codified by the Academy for 400 years, of sort of credible objects in a coherent pictorial space, those kinds of things don't seem to be doing the job of representing this new kind of experience, which the poet, Baudelaire, talks about in terms of fluidity and change. He talks about the ephemeral and the contingent, those kinds of things, which aren't really the kind of subjects that you would have had in a Renaissance painting, where you have notions of permanence and sort of eternity and those kinds of things.

So, it's trying to address these new kinds of factors, developing a new kind of language, which, for want of a better way of putting it, is more or less what Impressionism does. All those dabs and splodges and dots and things like that are ways of trying to capture this experience of something which is mobile and new.

And what you have is this slightly odd situation with a figure like Cezanne - that's one of the reasons why he's so important - is that they attempt to stand in front of a motif and do a painting of it. It could be some kind of, let's say, a landscape, or a mountain, like Mont Sainte-Victoire, or it could be a person if you've got a portrait.

That balancing the kind of marks that you have on the canvas, and checking them against the thing you're looking at in the real world, the balance starts to shift. And so the sort of orchestration of the marks on the canvas starts to become of equal importance to the matching of those marks to the thing in the world. That's the kind of key shift. The strange thing that I've been trying to drive at is that the modernness, is this slightly paradoxical thing, is that the modernness migrates from the subject matter of the painting into the painting itself, and that's a real key shift.