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Critical Terms - Modernism 2. Modernism and the avant-garde

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.

The two terms 'modernism' and 'avant-garde', often they're used as synonyms, interchangeably, for the same thing. And the usual group of artists held up to constitute the avant-garde are, say, Dada in central Europe. It could be surrealism in France, Russian constructivism, etc.

What I find interesting about this separation between modernism, which is supposedly about form, and the avant-garde, which brings politics and struggle into the equation, is that's not quite so tight, is it? And I'm thinking of, say, works by Picasso, like the collage he produces with Braque, significant moments in cubism, where bits of the everyday world are brought into the canvas. They're put onto the picture plane.

So the idea that modernism and the avant-garde are two mutually exclusive traditions is certainly blurred by some works in early cubism by Picasso and Braque. So, to what extent or how useful is this separation between modernism and the avant-garde for you?

PAUL WOOD: Well again, I think the question about modernism and the avant-garde starts to bring in some of those same difficulties that you raised earlier on when you were talking about modernism and realism, this whole complicated relationship of modern art to the modern world.

Now, the term 'avant-garde' itself has a kind of history that also goes back into the early 19th century. The first formulations of it are about artists joining forces with, essentially kind of managerial figures and scientists, to lead the whole of society forward. So that's the view of Henri Saint-Simon, who was seen as a utopian socialist at the time.

And also, in the early-19th century, that gets set against the development of art for art's sake. You get Théophile Gautier talking about art not having to be utilitarian, not having to have a use. In fact, he says the most useful room in the house is the latrines, and art is something else, as far as he's concerned.

So you get this kind of polarisation developing in the early 19th century between some notion of art for art's sake, on the one hand, and some sense of art serving a kind of purpose beyond art, on the other. And that comes back in the 20th century with a vengeance, with the development of the kinds of things that we've talked about, with Cezanne and on into cubism.

I think one of the things that might be useful to reflect on a bit is cubism itself, because there is a sense, you have to slightly guard against what's being called cubocentrism, that you don't make cubism the sort of fount of everything but at the same time, is a pivotal moment.

You have, on the one hand, this sense of taking forward the kind of work that Cezanne did with the more all over kind of approach to painting so that you have a more unified aesthetic effect, which people like Picasso and Braque drive home with analytical cubism, which - it's a silly thing to say - but it's almost abstract, it's very difficult to pick out the candlestick or the person or something of that kind. The figure and the ground, as I said before, are sort of blended together much more.

But if you think about Impressionism and sort of devising a new language, it's as though developing that kind of language, it's not an easy thing to do. It takes an awful lot of effort, and it takes a long time. And it takes more than one person. But what you tend to find is that by somewhere around about 1910, figures like Picasso and Braque have really driven home this sense of a kind of a sort of independent art, which isn't beholden to making pictures of things in the world.

It's still got those links there. And the works that they make have still got frames around them. It's still art. It's still got these sort of traditional reference points. But if you think of something like the difference between a cubist painting and an academic painting from 100 years before, they're very, very different beasts, indeed.

And because of the social crises, which never really go away from modernity, and particularly round about the time of the First World War, you have a new generation of artists, who once again, want to deploy that language to have references to and interventions in the wider social conflicts of their day.

They don't want art to be in a kind of ivory tower, as they would have seen it. They want to make it - they want to put it to work, basically, in this very complex, very difficult, very fractured kind of modern world. And you get that with things like the development of cubist collage, which leads on into photo montage and a whole range of works, which definitely set out to have an impact on the world outside of art.

So when you're talking about terms like 'modernism' and the 'avant-garde', these are the kind of shifts and changes that those terms are kind of dealing with. I think what you've got to be careful of is dealing in stereotypes and the idea that you've got some kind of revived version of art for art's sake set against something which we might call the avant-garde.

If we look back to the early 20th century, and we look at something like cubism, now that itself has had a kind of complicated history that it's grown out of. And it also has sort of complex repercussions within art practice, modern art practice, in Western Europe.

Different kind of implications come off of that. On the one hand, you have, what with benefit of hindsight, you can see as a sort of logic of purification. This is the kind of thing that Alfred Barr talked about and possibly also Greenberg as well, where the sense of art being threatened by various kinds of political or literary kind of impediments and is seen as needing to shed those. So it just sort of focuses on its own devices in order to carry more of a concentrated kind of aesthetic charge. That's one way of going.

But at the same time, you also have an almost totally categorically kind of different response. It's still coming out of that set of technical devices that Picasso and Braque and others developed with cubism, but instead of focusing it more inwards so that you end up with something like an abstract art, they try and sort of divert it outwards so that that kind of language of art is seen to be addressing the contradictions of the modern world, the wider modern world. You've got to be very careful with labels like 'modernism' and 'avant-garde' and 'realism', not to kind of close off explanations.