A scholar's upside down pyramid scheme: Peter Gay's Modernism

Andras Gyorgy
10 March 2008

Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the bourgeoisie had few friends among the artists. In fact, the estrangement of writers, poets and playwrights from the moneyed class is a unique and defining feature of the period of startling artistic innovation to which "Modernism" has come to be attached as a period term.

A court poet of the seventeenth century like Andrew Marvell would speak well of court life and of the hosts who put him up for extended stays, while the Homer type would surely praise heroic warriors to an audience of heroic warriors and "would be" heroic warriors. By the late 1880s, the plutocrat who added to his store of wealth and reputation for supporting the arts did not expect a heroic depiction of his person, mansion or his garden, a specialty of seventeenth-century art.

On the contrary, there came between artists and the bourgeois class ugly reports in the arts rising from the Commune of 1871 and the Dreyfus affair, the First and Second World Wars, the Russian Revolution to which its leading avant-garde artists rallied, the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War, all producing writing, music, drama, painting and architecture, if only to rebuild wrecked cities.

The list of Modernists who took sides in these world-historic conflicts would include—well, virtually everyone. It was a time when every person with a measure of human feeling, most especially artists, "the antennae of the race," as Ezra Pound called them, felt revulsion at the ruling cliques and their representatives. "Did you do that?" asked the German officer visiting Picasso's studio and pointing at "Guernica," a powerful record of the Nazi atrocity. "No," said Picasso, "you did."

Interestingly, the term "Modernist" was never employed by the painters, writers, film-makers, architects and composers who were said to advance art under its banner. The word comes from theology, seeped into architecture and was picked up and made famous by Clement Greenberg's article in the *Partisan Review*, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). Greenberg employed Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to argue that distinctively modern art, like Kantian critical thought, explores the conditions of its own production and the conditions under which we experience and understand the world.

"Modernism," Greenberg tells us, "criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized." He is saying that each art form justifies itself through the experience of its own productions. In his literary criticism, Leon Trotsky had written: "Above all, art must be judged by its own laws, that is to say the laws of art." There is this crucial difference. What for Trotsky is true for artistic production in the last analysis, "above all," is for Greenberg the only criteria. Art is "critical" by criticizing itself and demonstrating its worth purely in artistic terms, not by its effects on society or the influence of great historical events on the work of art.

Greenberg was promoting a particular school of American art: Jackson Pollock, his favorite, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hoffmann, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. This is not the place to go into the New York art scene in the post-Second World War period, but it did not produce anything like the bitter art of, say, the Weimar era, about which Peter Gay has written an excellent pioneering study in 1968.

After the Second World War, art in its various New York circles turned increasingly self-referential and skeptical, aloof from popular movements and the world itself, concerned in painting only by flat surface, properties of the pigment, structural arrangements, and a two-dimensional surface. It was "disaffiliated," to use a term of the period referring to an aloof, detached, alienated style that was found attractive in such Actors' Studio graduates as James Dean and Marlon Brando, the Abstract Expressionists, the hipsters of the bop era in jazz, the underground filmmakers, the Beat and Black Mountain poets, Frank O'Hara's circle of painters and poets, Andy Warhol with his Factory gang, and many others. It was a scene. Artists of every genre clung together, influenced and supported each other through the fifties and into the sixties, to be showered in the end with *Life*magazine features, university positions, State Department sponsoring of major exhibitions, and above all, a very hot art market.

This is the period that came to be known as "high modernism," which gave way smoothly to post-modernism, once again by way of architecture. Like high blood pressure, the New York scene became the silent killer, for the fine galleries, museums and the expensive offices of leading architects turned beneath their glittering surface into stalls in a marketplace; Wall Street types practiced their simple pleasures in enormous and vulgar homes that displayed "their plays" in the art market, works purchased at ever more inflated prices. This is a nasty, parvenu crew which changed the art world, once a measure of the human spirit, into an asset bubble ruled by the aesthetics of hedge fund managers.

Of course, those who amass fortunes find plenty of defenders. Although initially attracted to Marxism, the circle known as the "New York intellectuals," Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv and Dwight Macdonald, Greenberg's *Partisan Review* crowd, developed in the fifties a horror of mass movements and popular culture. The "kitsch" Greenberg initially criticized was the culture of capitalism, but very quickly he suspected all mass culture, which MacDonald named "low brow" in distinction to genuine art which was "high-brow."

Peter Gay in *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (2008) follows these well-worn tracks to explain how Modernism achieves its goals by keeping the production of quality art as far from popular culture as possible. In fact, for Gay, Modernism died with the advent of Pop culture in which the images and techniques of mass production enter fine galleries. This too was Greenberg's position earlier. Gay lays it on the line in an interview: "By and large, Modernists presupposed a cultivated audience. And difficulty meant 'high' art and 'low' art ... Artists like Duchamp split the public into three rankings: the vulgar masses (no real interest in art); the well-to-do middle class ... and the elite," with an ascending level of interest in avant-garde arts, as if the arts were stages of Gnostic enlightenment ever more remote from the grossness of the material world and its "vulgar" masses.

While it is a large task indeed to sum up all the arts in their collective

image over the most troubled of centuries, Peter Gay's omissions are important: jazz and popular entertainment, for instance. Béla Bartók did not find it beneath his dignity to learn from jazz and commercial jingles while he composed in New York during the war, and Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill would have been poorer without the cabaret. In fact, the deliberate blurring of the lines between high and low art is found everywhere in avant-garde art, in the setting and voices both low and high class in juxtaposition in verse, the use of popular tunes and jazz rhythms, the folding in newspapers and making museum pieces out of ordinary objects in the works of Pablo Picasso, T. S. Eliot, Pound, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, John Dos Passos and many others, for instance, all the Dadaists, Surrealists and Futurists.

Gay has in the past employed his academic reputation to make the middle class feel good about itself. Over the five volumes of *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (1998), he praised the many virtues of the bourgeoisie: patronage of the arts, charitable work, support for the family unit, social responsibility and, despite the belief in the Victorian age as one of sexual repression, a sizzling sexual life, at least by the testament of the diaries of some of the leading ladies. He begins the final, fifth volume of *The Bourgeois Experience* looking ahead to what he then called "the modernist myth" that the bourgeoisie "loved money and hated art." On the contrary, the rich were, as they are now, big buyers to whom artists should be more grateful, he explains.

Gay goes on to note with displeasure the revulsion with which Flaubert had recorded his encounters with the triumphant representatives of the bourgeoisie in his neighborhood after the tragic failure of the Commune of 1871. These gentlefolk were, Gay discovers using historical tools, charitable, socially responsible, good citizens and family men, undeserving of Flaubert's scorn. In*Modernism: The Lure of a Heresy***,** Gay picks up where he left off with a tirade against Flaubert's attitude toward the middle class: "Hatred of the bourgeois is the beginning of virtue."

As far as Peter Gay is concerned, the middle class serves as a bulwark manning the walls of the fort of culture surrounded by vulgar and savage masses, rather like the old film *Beau Geste.* This is pleasing to middle class readers, especially those who have invested in art, except that the supporters of the first modernists, from Baudelaire onwards (Gay begins the modern period with Baudelaire) were red-hot rebels living in considerable poverty, in many instances kept barely alive by fellow artists in Bohemian enclaves.

The close link between the avant-garde and the bourgeois marketplace is of recent vintage in the art world, as in academic life. The great artists of the earlier Modernist era had, to be sure, one or two individuals who promoted their work, often at a loss, publishers of " little magazines" and art dealers who were in no way like the wealthy lords of today's art market. In celebrated instances in the past, Modernist artists mounted their own exhibitions, having found that the established Academies and exhibitions had turned their backs on them. All that changed, of course, with the growth of American prosperity, and the bureaucratic domination of the workers movement, in the post-World War II period when Gay made his career.

Peter Gay is, above all, an academician of our time. Born Peter Fröhlich in Berlin in 1923, Gay fled Nazi Germany with his Jewish but assimilated family in 1939. He made it to the United States in 1941 after his family changed its booking from the ill-fated SS St. Louis to an earlier ship. Once here, the family changed its surname. He gained his PhD at Columbia (1951), where he came under the influence of the historian, Richard Hofstadter. After teaching at Columbia from 1948 to 1969, he moved to Yale, and remains known in retirement as an eminent academician of the "cultural history" school.

In fact, Gay's *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* is an exceptionally good example of a lowering of intellectual standards among the so-called culture-bearers and academicians of our time. The work is an upside down pyramid, a great subject matter resting on very narrow foundations. This is the argument: Modernist art in all its manifestation over a century may be characterized by, first, "the lure of heresy" against "conventional sensibilities," and, second, "a commitment to a principled self-scrutiny." The problem with this thesis statement, noted in nearly every review, is that the definition applies equally to the Byronic hero, Prince Hamlet and that witch Medea of the Greek classics. Again, it allows every artist to be pinned by a one-two punch of the thesis statement, transgression followed/accompanied by self-scrutiny, applied with a deductive thrust, as if a cookie cutter descended upon flattened dough.

Writing about Picasso, Gay gets to both parts of his thesis in just three sentences. Please note that the qualifier highlighted is Gay unwilling to stretch his neck out, even when nothing is at stake. In Picasso, he explains ponderously, "A shift in style *might* reveal—it is imperative not to be more definite than this—that a new woman was occupying his bed. But urges other than erotic cravings or gratifications also roused him into action, above all aesthetic conundrums calling for aesthetic solutions. He often made art quite literally for art's sake."

No kidding? It seems as if the dumbing down of America begins at the top among its more reputable scholars. The work is full of such statements: "*The Waste Land* is a veritable anthology of linguistic bravado." "The conflicts of modernists with traditionalists, fellow revolutionaries, and themselves made for disorderly history, but it was always stimulating, never dull"; and, "Impressionist paintings were reports from the interior," in case you had thought the Impressionists were interested in light falling in Provence, or had any contacts with each other.

Modernism: The Lure of Heresy demonstrates a severe decline of academic standards in our institutions of higher learning, for Peter Gay was once an excellent scholar who showed in*Voltaire's Politics* (1959) and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1969) how emotionally charged was the fight for secularism in the Enlightenment era and how that passion spread to the masses: "Voltaire delighted in seeing a Geneva workman intent on a book—by him." It was a heroic battle with great political implications. The Enlightenment for Peter Gay was a "recovery of nerve," a radical break in continuity giving human beings a precious legacy, mastery over their destiny by making reason the ruler of human affairs.

In this period, Gay, no post-modernist, stood firmly on the side of the objectivity of historical processes and of its representation in reflection. "The tree of the woods of the past fall in only one way," he wrote, "no matter how fragmentary and contradictory the report of its fall, no matter whether there are no historians, one historian, or several contentious historians in its future to record and debate it."

Of late, it has become axiomatic in post-modernist circles who believe otherwise that, despite all historical evidence of the deep antagonism for the arts promoted by Stalin and Hitler, Modernist artists were "subject, logo and Eurocentric," and therefore grew from the same blighted Enlightenment soil as the totalitarian dictators. Put into plain English, the Modernist artists were engaged in representing, enacting or expressing some truth about the world or themselves as part of a cultural activity of Western Civilization to which they belong.

In those terrifying moments at the close of World War II,Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer looked about a devastated Europe and proclaimed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) that "Enlightenment is totalitarian," leading, they thought, to the rational (or at least, rationalized) slaughter of the Nazi concentration camps. It is but a short step from the anguished and confused proclamation by Adorno that after Auschwitz poetry is no longer possible to the rather odd conclusion that Modernist art, which is the contemporary of the extermination camps, is also an accomplice in some way, as both are heirs to Enlightenment thinking.

One would have thought that an eminent historian, an expert on the Enlightenment era undertaking a major work on Modernism, would

address, “interrogate” if you will, this post-modernist challenge, but no such luck. Staying clear of conflict with colleagues, Gay admits in an interview, is a strategic choice for a peaceful academic life. He refuses to “problematize” or indeed to go up against the folks who dwell, they think, in the “discursive construction” of reality: “Early on, I wrote a chapter on Postmodernism, which particularly worried and incensed the academy. I therefore decided not to get involved in quite another fight,” he explains in an interview. Quite the contrary, he throws in the towel when he writes how Modernism“is not a democratic ideology,” though Gay means by that a separation of high or valuable works from the low art of the plebeians. He still insists, oddly, that Modernism in politics was, outside its few fascist deviations, a bourgeois-liberal impulse.

In Peter Gay’s hands, Freud’s work of making conscious what was unconscious is reversed, so the fascist option of “the anti-modern modernists” becomes a matter of instinctual drive and personal habit, not a rational choice at all. Knut Hamsun’s support of Adolf Hitler was in this way “a response to some elemental habits of mind, untouched ... by his sophisticated psychology.” He was at heart a simple farmer who did not like the modern world.

Similarly, Eliot’s “anti-modern modernism” was not a rational affiliation with the clerical-fascism of Charles Maurras and the *Action Française*, but a personal expression of discomfort in the modern world. Further, while he accepts that certain modernists were inclined to fascism, he ignores the leftist affiliation of many others. Worse, the historical issues that brought artists to commit themselves and their art to political causes, on the left, the right and the bonkers, is unexplained. Peter Gay’s odd view that, except for the fascist inclinations of a few, the essential political engagement of Modernists was “liberal” requires a defense he does not, indeed cannot, provide.

Actually, modernist artists were deeply and most consciously engaged in politics on the most varied fronts—except, in general, the bourgeois liberal one. André Breton, a supporter of Leon Trotsky, led Surrealist demonstrations on the Left Bank in 1934 to rally against Hitler, a year before the Communist Party, which Picasso joined in 1944, reacted with the fatal Popular Front.

Meanwhile, while the fascists were marching outside, Ezra Pound, barely mentioned by Peter Gay, held a seminar in Rappolo, Italy, for those future heroes of the post-modernists, the Jewish poet Louis Zukofsky, then a strong supporter of the American Communist Party, and Basil Bunting, a life-long Quaker Pacifist. Pound published these seminars as *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), dedicated to his two students, an address to an imaginary audience he thought he had as the Dante or Homer of his age. That led to those pro-Mussolini broadcasts (“Rome calling. Pound Speaking”) and his driving in the last days of the war to Mussolini’s last precarious and short lived republic to convince “il Capo,” who had earlier found his modernist epic, *The Cantos*, “divertimenti,” to adapt Major Douglas’ “social-credit” policies. That got him put into the animal cage on an army base in Pisa until the American authorities figured out what to do with him. This is where Pound wrote the beautiful “Pull down thy vanity” of “The Pisan Cantos.” Good advice for professors, that.

Modernism at its height is charged with the passions, the complexity and urgency of a convulsive historical period such as the one we are entering. Someone should write a good book about it.